He’s The Captain?

This was not good. This was so not good.

There were theories of course, of what The Captain would look like. Most followed the typical Hollywoodesque belief that he was some version of the Godfather, sitting in a dark room with a cigar, commanding his forces with a flick of his wrist. There were even some that even thought that The Captain was not one person, but a whole network of people with eyes and ears everywhere.

The blonde Adonis in front of him was definitely not what Tony was expecting.

Of course, in the end it didn’t matter.

There was a reason no one knew what The Captain looked like.

Because anyone who saw his face never lived to tell the tale.
Tony sighed, eyes sweeping the room idly, trying not to think of the ropes rubbing along his wrists. The water dripping from ceiling pipe echoed loudly through the silent room. Tony narrowed his eyes at it, as if daring the water to leak out again.

_God, what I would do for a wrench._

Of course, there were more pressing matters at the moment.

Like the fact that he was sitting bound in an old iron chair, staring up at what Tony assumed to be some mob man’s muscle.

The man was huge; if Tony listened closely enough, he could probably hear the clothes straining, trying to contain his bulk. The room was dark; the only light coming from a flickering bulb, but Tony could still make out the steely blue eyes that pierced him from across the room. Tony repressed a shudder. He was an intimidating man, sure, able to bring any business man to his knees in seconds. But Muscles over there did not sit well with Tony. Not that Tony would ever give him the satisfaction of knowing that. This wasn’t the first time Tony had ended up in some dank and smelly room, waiting for some second-rate criminal to try and strike a deal with him.

All that ended with was a migraine for Tony and a body bag for his so-called ‘captor’.

Tony’s not an idiot. Mafias are waiting at every turn in New York, and Tony’s skill set always makes him a target.

_Please, like any one of those assholes could afford me._

Tony would just have to run his mouth for a good twenty minutes while his implanted tracker led Happy right to him. And then Happy would meet his captor of the week. Or, more importantly, Happy’s gun would meet their temple.

It was the same old song and dance; one that Tony had lost too many good suits too. If anything, it was just a hassle, and a waste of a perfectly good afternoon. Sometimes Happy, bless his heart, tried to mix it up once in a while so at least Tony could get some enjoyment out of it.

But it wasn’t that case now. Tony didn’t have a perfect internal clock, but even he knew it had been over an hour.

And no Happy.

Which was not good, because at this point Tony would be running out of things to ramble on about. That is, of course, if the guy had made any demands.

It was usually ‘build this’ or ‘hack that’, the same old spiel that Tony almost had memorized himself. Whatever asshole he was dealing with at the time would make his demands, threaten him with torture. If Tony was lucky, sometimes they would throw the word ‘murder’ around. And then Tony would laugh, crack his jokes, maybe get punched once or twice - life isn’t perfect - and then, cue Happy.

But there hadn’t been any demands. The man had said nothing, just stared coldly at Tony as he went on and on about how good his blood will accent the tie he’s wearing. Which, frankly, was just plain insulting. Tony really doesn’t do the whole silence thing, but he wasn’t about to let some
nobody show him up. Which, of course, is how Tony found himself stewing silently, counting the blood splatters left on the wall.

At some point in time later, after at least an uncomfortable and silent fifteen minutes, the man had asked him something, but Tony, being the adult he is, had blatantly ignored him. *See how you like it, asshole.*

But now even that was boring him.

“I’m sorry, did you say something?”

Tony heard the man scoff. “I asked if you were ready to have a serious conversation with me yet.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Are you kidding me? I’ve wasted all my small talk on you.”

“Yes, all those empty threats really had me quivering in my boots,” he replied with a smirk.

“Empty threats my ass. Do you even know who I am? Listen, there’s still time to save you from the oncoming and definitely fatal embarrassment. How about we just part ways now and I’ll let you walk out of this alive; I’ll even give you the added bonus of minimal maiming. See? I’m nice like that.”

“I know exactly who you are, Mr. Stark.” The man walked towards Tony, stopping under the overhead light.

Well hot damn.

The man almost looked like an avenging angel, the light landing behind his head like a dim halo, accenting his sandy blonde locks. His cold, blue eyes flashed over Tony like he was fresh meat. Hell, this guy good give the statue David a run for his money.

*I could probably bake cookies on his abs.*

Tony flashed him a smile. “Well, sweet cheeks, it seems I’m at a disadvantage because I don’t know who you are.”

The blonde pulled up the second chair and sidled down in front of Tony. “And why does that matter?”

Tony shrugged. “I guess you make a good point. You’ll be dead soon anyway, learning your name would probably just waste my brain cells.”

“I don’t plan on dying today.”

Tony sighed. *They never do.* This idiot has no idea what he’s gotten himself into. “You said you know who I am, yes? Then you should know that I’m a very powerful man with very powerful friends. This isn’t my first rodeo, kid. I know how this plays out. Spoiler alert, you end up at the bottom of the Hudson.”

The man let out a hollow laugh, the corners of his lips curling into a small smile. *Of course it made him look even better.* “Well it’s a good thing it’s not my first rodeo either.” With that, he reached into his pocket, pulling out a small tube.

Tony’s tracker.

Uh oh.
The man sucked in a breath through his teeth. “Oh, you’re counting on this, weren’t you?”

Tony opened his mouth before the blonde put up a large hand to stop him. “And before you ask, yes, we disabled it before we moved you, so there is no way your security can track you here. Your man Hogan’s probably wetting himself right now.”

Tony narrowed his eyes. Apparently that was enough for the blonde to break out into a larger grin, thinking he’d finally cornered Tony. “Who do you work for?”

“Oh, now you wanna talk.”

“Listen, I don’t have time for this bullshit-”

“Well that’s good, because I don’t have time for yours. So this is how it’s going to go. We’re gonna have a little chat, and you’re going to cooperate. Do as I say and you’ll save yourself from an oncoming and definitely fatal embarrassment. I might let us part ways and let you walk out of this alive, even give you the added bonus of minimal maiming. See? I’m nice like that too.”

“You were listening! And here I thought you didn’t care,” Tony answered sardonically.

“Mr. Stark-”

“Listen, pal. No name, no deal. Well, I won’t deal with you anyway, but I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt.”

The man sighed, looking up towards the ceiling. Tony smiled to himself, enjoying both the man’s frustration and the pale skin that adorned his neck. If he thought Tony was just going to roll over without his security team, he was even more stupid than Tony thought.

“It’s always the pretty ones.”

“The Captain.”

Tony sputtered, unable to stop the laugh that escaped his lips. “The Captain. Are you kidding me?”

“Is that so hard to believe?”

“Uh, yeah. The Captain and his mutts have never shown an interest in me or my business. In fact, I’m not even sure he lets his men off their leash; they’ve probably never seen what’s on the other side of Brooklyn’s borders. We don’t exactly roll with the same crowd, so don’t even bother trying to slander his name.”

Tony knew The Captain and his Howling Commandos were no laughing matter. Tony had never personally run into them, and he hoped to keep it that way. When The Captain first showed up on the radar, no one took him seriously. B-list mobsters are always popping up, trying to make a name for themselves, only to land behind bars. But somehow, he and his ragtag groupies had risen through the ranks, claiming Brooklyn for their own.

There wasn’t even a rival gang in Brooklyn because The Captain’s forces swoop in as soon as someone even thinks about mentioning the word ‘rebellion’. Tony still remembered what had happened to Schmidt’s gang. HYDRA came from an old family, its name ran deep in New York. They had been established long before the other mob even blinked into existence, but one run in with the Captain, and boom, they were gone. Destroyed. Eradicated.

Tony had seen the pictures. It was almost an art form, and Tony was, needless to say, impressed.

The cops couldn’t touch this guy, hell, half of them didn’t even want too. The Captain had sort of
this Robin Hood thing going on, protecting Brooklyn from other gangs, corrupt officials; cleaning the streets without the law getting in the way.

What makes The Captain so terrifying is that with everything people have heard about the guy, no one knows anything about him. No one has any clue what he looks like, no idea how many Commandos are out there.

He’s the Big Brother of Brooklyn; he’s everywhere and he’s nowhere. He moves so quick that by the time someone catches wind of a potential heist, The Captain and his crew have come and gone, and probably half way through two other jobs. It was because of all this uncertainty that Tony tried to distance himself as much as possible. Tony thrived on information - it was his main currency. He didn't give The Commandos more than a second glance when they first showed up, and then, not even a month later, he was waking up to a morning without the looming threat of HYDRA. Since then, he tried valiantly, collecting any scrap of information that he could on the illusive team, trying to slap together their story. But he's never gotten a full picture. So until then, they remain a threat. One that Tony plans onto continue to avoid.

“Slander his name?”

“If I don’t end up killing you, he probably will for using his name in vain.”

The man let out another quiet chuckle, rubbing his eyes with his fingers.

“Laugh it up now, buddy. Just tell me who you work for. Is it Hammer? Killian? It's Hammer, isn’t it? Look, I know your boss is an embarrassment to the human race, but you’re among friends here, you can tell me. I promise not to laugh,” Tony drawled. Now Hammer? Hammer he could deal with. Hammer can't manufacture a reliable weapon, let alone find reliable henchmen. The only threat Hammer posed was the potential of someone getting a picture of the two of them out in public together. He wasn't about to have another debacle with the local rag magazines, insinuating that he and Hammer were secret lovers. He already had to deal with it every time he went into Pepper’s office, his assistant taking continued pleasure in his pain by having it framed on her desk.

“No, I can promise you I don’t work for Hammer.”

“Oh, thank God. Seriously, a hot piece of ass like you, wasted on Hammer? It would have been a tragedy.”

Tony didn’t miss the faint flush that appeared on the blonde’s cheeks. A worthy sight, indeed.

“You are right, though, I don’t work for The Captain,” the man continued.

“I knew it,” Tony breathed. Thank God. "Come on, spill the beans.”

“I don’t work for anyone; they work for me.”

Tony groaned. “Oh, great, just what I needed. I get stuck with the new kid on the block. What luck. Tell me, good sir, how long do you think you’ll make it out there?”

“Well, I’ve actually been around for a while- ”

“Really.”

“Yes. I’m sorry it took us so long to meet, but you’ll have to forgive me, I’m not from around these parts.”
“What the- listen. You’re young. You’re fresh meat. The mobs in this town will eat you alive, spit you out, and leave you for the dogs. You’re not going to be able to hang with them. I get the whole angsty rebellion phase, trust me, I’ve been there, but there are other ways to deal with your feelings that won’t end with you six feet under. Have you ever tried pottery? I hear it does wonders for the temperament.”

The man put his hands on his knees and stared straight at Tony. “Well, it’s a good thing I have a few dogs of my own,” he replied, ignoring Tony's quips. "Of course, it could be a problem that I won’t let them off the leash. You’re right; they’ve probably never even been outside of Brooklyn.”

Tony froze.

*I don’t work for anyone; they work for me.*

*I’ve been around for a while.*

*I’m not from around these parts.*

*I have a few dogs of my own.*

Tony’s mind raced, gears churning at top speed. His captor grinned at him when he saw Tony click all the pieces together.

“And we have a winner.”

*Well shit.*

So much for keeping his cool. Tony felt his heart rate skyrocket, blood chilling in his veins.

*He’s The Captain?*

This was not good. This was *so* not good.

There were theories of course, of what The Captain would look like. Most followed the typical Hollywoodesque belief that he was some version of the Godfather, sitting in a dark room with a cigar, commanding his forces with a flick of his wrist. There were even some that even thought that The Captain was not one person, but a whole network of people with eyes and ears everywhere.

The blonde Adonis in front of him was definitely not what Tony was expecting.

Of course, in the end it didn’t matter.

There was a reason no one knew what The Captain looked like.

Because anyone who saw his face never lived to tell the tale.
This was bad.
This was very bad.

Tony always knew he wouldn’t make it to an old age. While Tony had never made a full on commitment to any mob, he had done a few ‘consultations’ here and there. The whole, ‘I scratch your back if your scratch mine’ kind of deal. Tony makes a few improvements on weapons or even gives away a few whispers of information in exchange for street protection for him and his people.

Tony picks and chooses the mobs he deals with, which of course always lands him some enemies. Tony only deals with the mobs that still have scraps of humanity, like Xavier’s people, Danvers, and sometimes even Quill’s crew. He picks them based on trust, which of course, seems ridiculous when dealing with a mob, but apparently trust is a very big deal with these people. Getting the Tony Stark seal of approval was a huge advantage.

Of course, Tony may be a sick bastard, but he’s not insane. He never deals with the mobs like Hammer or the Ten Rings. If those criminals ever got their hands on Tony’s tech, it would be bad news for a lot of people. Which is now he ended up becoming ‘Most Likely to Be Kidnapped’.

But being caught by The Captain?

Tony could only assume that he wanted his weapons, or maybe even his information. Sure, The Captain and his Commandos had done the city a service by getting rid of Schmidt’s people, but Tony wasn’t about to throw the man a parade.

The whole monopoly situation he has going on in Brooklyn can be seen as a potential threat. How long before The Captain decides that Brooklyn isn’t big enough, and stretches his reach farther? Into Queens, hell, maybe even Manhattan? The last thing Tony needs is to be responsible for handing over his precious tech to what looked like a crazed super soldier.

“Are you ready to listen now?” The Captain asked with a slight tilt of his head.

“No, not really. Whatever you’re selling, Boy Scout, I’m not buying.”

The Captain sighed. “Mr. Stark, be reasonable- ”

“Says the man who dragged me all the way out to this hellhole to ask a question he already knows the answer too.”

“You have no idea what I- ”

“Uhh, yes. Yes, I do. And unfortunately for you, I am almost a law abiding citizen, which means I don’t do any underage dealing. Sorry kid, you must be twenty-one years or older to- ”

Tony was cut off by a swift punch to his gut followed by a gun pressed to his temple.

“Don’t test me,” hissed The Captain.

Tony groaned. That man could pack a punch. Still, he wasn’t getting off that easy. “So, it’s true what they say. You do have a temper. Let me be the first to tell you that flustered looks good on you,” he said with a wink.
“I would hold my tongue if I were you.”

Tony scoffed. “Or what, you’re gonna kill me? Please. If you wanted me dead, all you had to do was snap your fingers. You wouldn’t go through all this trouble.”

“What’s not to say I wanted to be the one to take your life,” shrugged the Captain.

“Because you can’t shoot a gun with the safety on.”

The Captain stared at Tony, and for a few tense moments Tony thought he was done for. But with a flash, The Captain’s cool demeanor returned and he brought his gun down, tucking it back in the hem of his pants.

Tony smirked. *Hook, line and sinker.*

“So tell me, why does The Captain want to meet with me?” Tony watched as the blonde rubbed a hand through his hair, before sitting back down in front of Tony.

“It can’t be for weapons; you wouldn’t have made it very far if you didn’t have a steady dealer. Maybe you need information. What, Romanoff not bringing home the bacon? Or is Barnes just not pulling his weight anymore?”

Tony couldn’t help the laugh that escaped as he saw The Captain’s eyes widen fractionally. He might not know the everything about The Commandos, but he was still Tony Stark. The Captain was not the only dangerous man in the room. “Uh oh. I wasn’t supposed to know about them, was I? You forget Captain; your crew is not as secretive as you are. You’re not the only one with eyes everywhere.”

When he was met with even more silence, Tony continued. “Nothing to say? You were all about talking just a minute ago. Unless of course-”

Tony froze when realization hit. There was no reason for The Captain to take any interest in him, because he didn't have anything to offer. The Commandos have had a steady stream of weapons come in for years. Tony was never able to confirm which arms dealer they were working with. If that had fallen through that The Captain was in the market for new digs, Tony had a feeling he was the type of man that would raid Tony's shipping warehouses before snatching the CEO and asking for permission. It shouldn't be for information either. Even if The Captain was looking into someone in Manhattan, Tony had heard more than enough about his fearsome crew to prove that he didn't need any help in that regard. He had once heard that Romanoff broke a man only using a single nail file. So, unless The Captain has gone rogue and left his team in the dust, it shouldn't be either of those things, and no reason for Tony to be wasting away in some basement.

Unless it was a little above their pay grade. The Commandos might have weapons and secrets, but Tony still had more. And that was because of wealth. Money can go a long way in this type of business, and Tony was more than thriving.

The Captain was here for a loan.

“You need me.”

The Captain glared at him. “I beg your pardon?”

Tony laughed again, relishing in the way it bounced off the walls of the small room. “You need me. You need me for something. I deal with two things: information and tech. Up until now, you’ve managed to get both just fine without me. But something’s changed, hasn’t it? Something’s
different now; you can’t handle it, and now you’ve had to come all this way because you need *me.*”

Tony broke off with one final laugh. By the look on The Captain’s face, Tony knew he was spot on. “Am I right, or am I right?”

The Captain rolled his eyes. “What I need, is for you to stop talking.”

“Oh, wow. Very original—”

A punch along Tony’s jaw sent him reeling. The Captain grabbed him by the lapels of his suit and dragged Tony close to his face. “This is bigger than you, than *me.* And it needs to be dealt with.”

The Captain pushed Tony away, the metal chair he was tied to rocking unsteadily from the force.

This time it was Tony who eyed The Captain.

“You’re worried.”

The blonde raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“I can see it in your face. Something’s wrong, isn’t it?”

Tony’s mind was in overdrive. It was one thing to be in a one-on-one with The Captain, but this was something else entirely. The Captain doesn’t get nervous; he’s one of the most powerful mob bosses in New York. He doesn’t get nervous. He *shouldn’t* be nervous. Whatever’s happening cannot be good.

The Captain huffed out a breath. “We’ve heard a few rumors. Not a lot, just a tip here and there, but it was enough to… catch my curiosity.”

Tony narrowed his eyes. “Rumors about what?”

“HYDRA.”

Tony stared back at the blonde, looking for any sort of tells that the man was lying. “HYDRA’s gone. You got rid of them. Quite tastefully, I might add. I don’t usually leave a review but you get a full five stars from me.”

Tony picked up on a hint of a smile from The Captain. “It’s always nice to meet a fan.”

Tony scoffed, but added a quiet, “You did get rid of them, right?”

HYDRA was bad news. Part of the reason The Captain was not on the Most Wanted list was because he managed to take the mob out, making a lot of people happy. Schmidt and his thugs had run rampant for years; their control of Brooklyn was both astounding and horrifying. Killing of innocents, maimings, disastrous fires, you name it. When The Captain came along, it was a blessing.

“We did,” the blonde confirmed.

“But.”

“But.”

“You heard rumors that they’re back in Brooklyn,” Tony pushed.

“I heard that they were back. But in Manhattan.”
Tony gaped at the man. “Manhattan.”

The Captain ran his hand through his hair again. *It must be a nervous habit.* “I’m just telling you what I’ve heard. There are whispers going around that they’re not all gone and that they’re hiding out in the city.”

“And what, you need me to find them?”

“I need you to tell me that I’m wrong. I need you to make sure that HYDRA didn’t survive.”

“By using my sources?” By using my money.

“I know you have contacts with some of the other mobs in the city. If HYDRA is hiding out with one of them, you can find out and-”

“Yeah, I’m gonna say no on this one.”

“I’m sorry?” The Captain blanched.

“The answer’s no, buddy. If you think for one second that I’m sticking my neck out for what seems to be your own problem, then you’ve got another thing coming.”

The Captain’s eyes hardened. “Maybe I wasn’t asking.”

Tony groaned dramatically. “What are you gonna do, make me? We’ve already established you won’t shoot me. I don’t think you understand what you’re asking me to do.”

“It seems pretty clear to me.”

“Listen. This isn’t Brooklyn. There isn’t just one mob you have to worry about. *This is Manhattan.* They’re everywhere. You should stop while you’re ahead, before you get too deep. Quit poking around the different groups here, because every friend you make in this city will give you three more enemies. There is no way I’m going to get myself involved over something like this just based on your paranoia. You know what they say; curiosity killed the cat.”

“But satisfaction brought it back,” retorted The Captain. “I need to make sure me and my people are safe. And if the rumors are true, then we won’t be the only ones in danger.”

“Yeah, the answer is still no. Rumors aren’t always true.”

“Well it seems the rumors about you were right. You’re nothing but an egotistical narcissist.”

Tony shrugged. “That may be true; I’m a loose cannon, but I’m one of the most dangerous people you’ll ever meet, so you should watch your tone.”

“Oh yeah, they warned me about you,” The Captain snorted sarcastically. "Is that why you went down like a sack of potatoes when I snatched you from the street?”

“You’re cute, but you’re stupid,” Tony hissed. "You want to know what else they should have warned you about?" Tony whispered, getting the blonde to lean in towards him.

“What’s that?”

“When you snatch an engineer from the street, make sure you can always see their hands.”

With that, Tony thrust his head forward, catching The Captain off guard with a strong head butt.
The huge man fell backwards, tipping over the chair he had been sitting in. Wobbling forward, Tony didn’t hesitate to bring his hands around in front of him, freed minutes ago by his deft fingers. Taking The Captain’s surprise to his advantage, Tony hopped up, jumping over him to the door, bringing his iron chair with him. The blonde tried to grab his ankles, but a well-timed kick to The Captain’s groin had the man doubling over in pain.

Tony swung the door open, quickly bringing him and his chair to the other side. He could see The Captain pushing himself up to chase him, but Tony hastily slammed the door shut, jamming his chair under the doorknob to prevent his captor from opening it.

Tony laughed as he took off down the hallway, listening to the pounds and shouts of The Captain trapped in the other room.

_The Captain ain’t got nothing on iron._

Continuing down the hall, Tony found that he was in some abandoned warehouse; very easy to maneuver.

_How cliché, Captain._

Tony bounded up the steps to the main floor and out the nearest door. He couldn’t pick up on any familiarities, but was that? Yep. The Captain had been so nice as to leave the car he took Tony from out front. _A model citizen, really._

He didn’t have the keys anymore, but Tony had all his cars coded to him anyway His brain had more important things to worry about that where he last put his car keys. Tony started up the car and began pulling away when he saw The Captain tear out of the building after him.

Tony pulled up alongside him. “Don’t test me,” he said with a smirk.

And with that, Tony veered away, racing out of the warehouse and onto the road, leaving The Captain and his problems in the dust.
This was bad.

This was very bad.

Steve Rogers stared down the road, Tony Stark and his ride long gone.

_What the hell just happened?_

He groaned, rubbing a hand across his forehead. Turns out there was much more to Tony Stark than meets the eye.

Steve had no one to blame but himself, really. He knew how dangerous Stark was, but Steve being Steve, had rushed in head first with dripping confidence that The Captain could take on one measly business man.

How wrong he was.

Now, because of his stupidity, Tony Stark was on his merry way back to the city, knowing _way_ more than he ever should have. Including the knowledge of what Steve looked like.

_Dammit._

Steve sighed before slowly starting to trudge down the road. He could call for a ride, but given his current predicament, he opted against it.

Bucky was going to kill him.

The benefit of having his identify unknown was that when he did actually make an appearance, it usually scares the living daylights out of whomever they were dealing with at the time. Steve puts in a few threats here and a few glares there, and boom: Steve gets everything and anything he wants from them.

His meeting with Stark was anything but normal. If anything, Stark had managed to get more of a rise out of him. And now that Stark knew what he looked like? Steve was in big trouble. Of course, Steve could just call it in and have Stark dead by dinner time, but that wouldn’t solve anything.

Stark was right; Steve needed him.

These HYDRA rumors were putting him on edge. The first couple times he had heard them, it was during their ‘interrogations’. Steve had never paid any mind to it; people would say anything if it meant getting out of a session with Natasha.

But it kept happening. Just whispers, warnings to The Captain and The Commandos. HYDRA was coming back for them. Steve never blinked an eye. Until last week.

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_Steve walked down the long stretch of hallway, his footsteps echoing loudly._
He reached his destination, smiling easily at his right hand man who was sitting quietly, cleaning his gun.

“You called?”

Bucky’s eyes shot up, returning Steve’s smile with a smirk of his own. “Yeah. Some punk wants to meet with you.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Since when do we hand out last rights to people? You gettin’ soft on me, Buck?” he asked mockingly, earning him a quick jab to his gut.

“If anyone is getting soft, it’s you. You might wanna lay of the burgers, big man,” Bucky retorted, patting Steve’s stomach one more time.

Steve huffed out a laugh, pushing Bucky off his chair. “Shouldn’t you be out scouting for our next deal?” He watched in amusement as Bucky pushed himself up with a small groan, wiping the dirt from his shirt.

“Yes, mom. I’ll take care of it later.”

Steve raised an eyebrow.

“Okay, fine! Jesus, I’ll go now.”

“Thank you, dear,” Steve replied with a smirk.

“Don’t push it.” Bucky reached down and grabbed his gun before waltzing down the hallway. “Nat’s in there waiting with our latest guest. Try not to make too much of a mess this time!” Bucky added, before disappearing completely.

Steve turned around and opened the door, his traces of amusement wiped away by a cold stare. He walked into the room, giving a small nod to Natasha before focusing on his newest house guest.

“Officer Sitwell, I presume.”

The man’s head snapped up, his eyes wide with fear. Well, as wide as they could get given the current situation of his face. He was strapped down in a chair, wrists tied to the arm rests, ankles held tight against the front legs. What remained of his uniform was absolutely wrecked, torn to shreds and every inch covered in blood. The red stains matched nicely with dark bruises covering his ashen skin.

Natasha does some beautiful work.

“Are-are you?” Sitwell tried to stammer out, but Steve held up a hand.

“I am. And I must say, it’s a pleasure to finally meet you,” Steve replied evenly.

Sitwell elicited a hoarse laugh. “You have a lot of nerve messing with the police for-”

“Save it,” Steve cut in. “You and I both know that I don’t mess New York’s Finest. I only deal with criminals. Which is why you, Officer Sitwell, are joining us today.”

Sitwell narrowed his eyes. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Steve rolled his eyes before sticking an open hand out, which was quickly filled by a file supplied by Natasha. He flipped idly through the pages, humming softly. “That’s quite an impressive
amount of drug busts you’ve made over the past couple months, Officer. I can’t help but wonder, however, where all those confiscated goods go. It sure as hell isn’t in storage where it’s supposed to be. Dealing under the table are we? Need some extra cash? And let’s not get started on that incident last month. I mean, really. A hit and run that happened to leave your CI dead? Seems a little too convenient.”

“Yeah, well the poor kid was at the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Steve handed the file back to Natasha. “Are you always this bad of a liar? Because it’s doing you no justice here. You’re a crooked cop, Sitwell. You need to be taken care of.”

Sitwell lurched back against his chair. “You can’t be serious! Like you don’t have your own informants running around the NYPD. I don’t see them getting- ”

Sitwell was cut off by a fist crashing into his jaw, the force tipping the chair and sending him to the ground. He barely had time to groan before Steve pulled him upright, his blue eyes boring into Sitwell’s. “Your dirty police work has cost this city money, time, and even lives. You can’t be allowed to continue. Good day, Officer.”

Steve backed away, giving another small nod to Natasha. He made his way back towards the door before Sitwell called out.

“Wait! Listen, I can help you! You need information? I can get you anything- no, everything you need!”

Steve sighed, not even faltering in his steps. Same old sob story. “Sorry, you don’t have anything I want.”

“I can tell you about HYDRA!”

Steve froze. It was one thing if some random criminal mentioned HYDRA, but a police officer? Steve turned back to face Sitwell. “What do you know about HYDRA?”

Sitwell laughed again. “I thought I didn’t have anything you want?”

“I don’t have time for this,” replied Steve, his hands balling into fists.

Sitwell started to reply, but was stopped by Natasha pulling her gun out. Without a moment’s hesitation, she shot a bullet off into Sitwell’s right kneecap, the small room quickly filled with the man’s screams.

Steve waited until Sitwell gained some control, silently relishing in the new sheen of sweat collecting on his brow. “Tasha, you shouldn’t waste bullets on scum like him,” he chided.

She gave a short hum. “You’re right, Cap. After all, ammo is so hard to come across nowadays,” she drawled. She flipped out a pocket knife and proceeded to dig the bullet out of Sitwell’s leg. Sitwell howled, tugging at his bonds, but to no avail. When Natasha finally pulled out the spent bullet, she looked back up at Sitwell. “I’ll go clean this off; hold this for me, will you?” With that she plunged her knife into Sitwell’s open palm.

“Okay! Okay, please, PLEASE! I’ll tell you, I’ll tell you everything! Just stop, please,” Sitwell managed to croak out.

Steve bent down again, watching as Sitwell’s whole body trembled. “Now that wasn’t so hard, was it?” When he didn’t get an answer, he continued. “What do you know about HYDRA?”
Sitwell took a couple of deep breaths. “They’re back. I don’t know how many, but they’re still out there.”

Steve gave a huff of annoyance. “I’ve already heard this. Don’t be a disappointment,” he added, before pulling out his own gun.

“Wait, wait, wait! That’s not all. HYDRA’s getting in with another mob.”

Natasha furrowed her brow. “There isn’t another mob in Brooklyn. We would have heard about it.”

Sitwell shook his head. “I never said Brooklyn. They’re in Manhattan.”

Steve took a step back. “Why?”

“I-I don’t know! It doesn’t matter anyway; they’re going to kill me for telling you.”

“Have you seen them? Do you know who they are?” Natasha asked.

But Sitwell didn’t answer, babbling nonsense under his breath.

Steve grabbed him by his shirt and pulled him close. “Where are they? How did they survive?!”

Sitwell looked up at him. “They will always survive. Cut off one head and two more shall take its place.”

Steve saw red, not even hesitating to put a bullet between Sitwell’s eyes, watching as the chair tipped back and hit the ground with a final thud.

“What the hell, Steve,” Natasha hissed, glaring over at Sitwell’s body. “We could have gotten more from him.”

Steve looked down at the gun in his hands. “Schmidt.”

“What?”

“Schmidt. He said that to me before I killed him. There was no one else there; how could Sitwell know that?”

Natasha’s eyes widened. “You don’t think that HYDRA is actually still out there, do you?”

A familiar chill started to seep into his bones. The threat of HYDRA looming over New York was a plague that they hadn’t seen in years. As well they shouldn’t have. They were all dead. They had to be. Their last encounters were housed in the deepest caverns of his nightmares. So much death.

“That was the fifth time someone has brought them up. We need to look into this,” he answered hollowly.

Natasha nodded. “Okay. I’ll start canvassing, and- ”

“No,” Steve cut her off. So much death. “I don’t want any of our people looking into it just yet. It’s not safe. I’ll get some outside help.”

“You sure?”

Steve nodded. “Yeah, I’ll find someone.”
Which is how Steve found Tony Stark.

And hadn’t that gone just swimmingly?

Thank God he wasn’t too far away from their main hideout.

Steve walked through a few back alleys, checking his surroundings as he finally reached base. He tapped his knuckles against the door, waving slightly to the camera that aimed towards his face. The door swung open, revealing a smirking Clint Barton.

“Where the hell have you been, man?”

He ignored Clint’s question, pushing past him. “Grab everyone who’s around. We need to talk.”

Clint’s expression hardened, nodding quickly before scampering off to find the rest of his team.

Steve walked into the kitchen before plopping down in the nearest chair, pushing his head into his hands.

“You look like shit. Who’d we accidently kill today?” Bucky’s amused voice trailed in to the kitchen.

Steve looked up to see the brunette smirking down at him in the entrance way, before followed by Natasha and Clint. Steve glanced at Clint. “That everyone?”

Clint nodded. “Everyone else is working.”

Steve sighed. “Okay. We may have a problem.”

“Is this about HYDRA? Did you hear anything else? I thought you were going to find an outside source,” alleged Natasha.

“I did find one. That’s the problem.”

“Who did you meet with?” asked Bucky.

“Tony Stark.”

Clint choked on his coffee. “I’m sorry, did you say Tony Stark? The Tony Stark? Do you have a fucking death wish?”

Steve rubbed his hands over his face. “I thought I could handle it.”

“Did you kill him?”

“No, I asked him to help. He’s good; I thought if anyone could find HYDRA, it would be him.”

“You want to know why he’s so good?” Clint nearly shouted. “It’s because he’s on the good side of over half the mobs in Manhattan. You’re playing with fire, Steve. He’s too dangerous.”

Natasha shushed him. “Is he going to help?”
Steve shook his head. “He refused. And then,” Steve broke off with another sigh.

“And then, what?” goaded Bucky.

“And then he escaped.”

Silence echoed throughout the room. “I’m sorry, what did you say?” asked Clint.

“I said that he got the jump on me, and managed to escape.”

Steve finally looked up to be met with three dumbstruck faces.

“He got away.”

“Yep.”

“He saw your face.”

“Yep.”

“He knows who you are.”

“Yep.”

“He knows about HYDRA.”

“Yep.”

“You fucking idiot.” Steve tried to respond again, but Bucky cut him off. “What the hell were you thinking, Steve? Your face is probably going to be plastered all over the news by tomorrow!”

“Bucky, I-”

“No. We’ll handle this. Come on, Barton; grab the rifle.”

“Wait, don’t kill him! We could still use him.”

“You cannot be serious, Steve.” Bucky deadpanned.

“Listen, he never hinted once that he would turn me in. I don’t think he’s gonna do it. If you go back over there and provoke him, he’ll turn on us.”

“You’re gonna trust that asshole?!”

“Steve’s right,” interjected Natasha. “Stark has made his living through information. He won’t turn Steve in. Having that knowledge on his side is perfect for leverage.”

Somehow knowing that he was now another puppet on Stark’s strings had the blonde shuddering. The man was already dangerous, but after today, Steve could consider him as lethal.

Bucky groaned, before sitting down next to Steve. “Well, how the hell are we gonna get out of this?”

“I’ll find a way to deal with Stark,” replied Steve. *I have too, for everyone’s sake. Until then, we still have to worry about HYDRA. I hate to ask, but Clint?”*

“No. You said it was too dangerous. You said you didn’t want our people involved in this.”
Steve's chest lurched at Clint's tone. He didn't want to ask; he'd promised Clint when he'd first learned about them that he'd stay out of it. But this was above them all. HYDRA was above them all.

So much death.

“Clint, I wouldn’t be asking if it wasn’t serious. When I mentioned them to Stark, even he seemed worried. All I need you to do is ask if he’s heard anything.”

Clint heaved a sigh. “Fine. But that’s it. I don’t want him caught up in this.”

“You have my word.”

Clint paced behind an abandoned factory, humming a broken tune.

“Hands in the air!”

Clint couldn’t help but smile, raising his hands slowly before turning around to meet a familiar face. “What seems to be the problem, Officer?”

“I got a call about some suspicious activity. That wouldn’t have anything to do with you, now would it?”

“Me, suspicious? I’m just you’re average, law abiding citizen,” Clint replied with a smirk.

Kind eyes crinkled in amusement. “I’m sure you are.”

Clint let out a small chuckle before grabbing the officer, pulling him into a slow kiss. He pulled away reluctantly, smiling when he felt strong arms wrap around him.

“Clint.”

“Phil.”

“Is something wrong? You usually don’t call during work.”

“Maybe I just wanted an excuse to see you in your uniform,” Clint quipped.

Phil rolled his eyes. “You are insatiable.”

“What can I say? With a hot piece of ass like you as a boyfriend, you can’t expect me to behave.”

Phil huffed before pulling Clint into another kiss. “What’s wrong?” he pressed again.

“The Boss Man has a question for you.”

“Oh?”

“We’ve been hearing some rumors. About HYDRA.”

Clint felt Phil stiffen in his arms. “HYDRA? I thought that-”
Clint ran his hands down Phil's arms, trying to soothe the man. If HYDRA was back, like hell he would let them reach Phil. “I know, it doesn’t make any sense. There have been whispers. Hell, even Sitwell mentioned it. Cap just wants to know if you’ve heard anything around the precinct.”

Phil shook his head. “I haven’t, but I’ll keep my ears open, see what I find.”

Clint gave him a small smile. “Thanks.”

Phil pushed his face into Clint’s neck. “They’re still looking for Sitwell.”

“They won’t find him.”

*Good riddance.*

“Clint, you didn’t-”

“Phil. He was a dirty cop. He needed to go.”

Phil pulled back to look up at Clint. “If we’re getting technical, I’m pretty sure I’m a dirty cop too.”

“No. You do what you do to keep people safe. He had people killed, Phil. You saw what happened to that CI! I wasn’t about to risk that happening to you.”

“You know, that’s kind of sweet, in a really twisted way.”

Clint shrugged. “What can I say, I’m a hopeless romantic.”

Phil gave Clint one last peck before pulling away. “I should go before someone gets suspicious. You know how Fury gets.”

“Your boss is a lunatic. When are you gonna come work with me?”

Phil raised an eyebrow. “Maybe one day. Alright, I’m off. I’ll start to dig around for HYDRA, let you know if I hear anything.” He gave a small salute before walking back towards his squad car.

“Stay safe,” whispered Clint. After waiting for Phil to take off, he trekked slowly back to base.
A man came tearing through two steel doors, panting loudly as he sprinted down the hallway. He ignored the looks of the armed guards, focusing only on the entrance to the back office.

“Hey, you can’t-”

The man pushed the last guard away and thrust the office door open.

“What is the meaning of this?!?”

The man stared into the office, met with a pair of hard glances, one with anger, the other with confusion.

“Rumlow, what the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Rumlow tried to catch his breath while simultaneously trying to make himself more presentable in front of his boss. “Sir, you’re not going to believe what I just saw.”

His boss, sitting across the desk narrowed his eyes. However, the other man in the room began to protest. “Well, whatever it was, it can wait,” he snapped. “Pierce, you need to get a better handle on-”

“Enough,” Pierce cut the man off. He gestured to Rumlow. “Go on.”

Rumlow took a deep breath. “You know how you asked me to keep an eye on him, Sir? The Captain? Well I have, and believe me Sir, I’m doing my very best, and-”

“Spit it out, Rumlow. I don’t have all day.”

“Right, of course. Sorry, Sir. Well, it’s just that I saw him. Today.”

Pierce rolled his eyes. “If that’s what you came in here to tell me, I swear to God, Rumlow, I’ll be the one to put a bullet in your brain.”

“Wait, wait! Let me finish. I’m telling you that I saw him. Here.”

“Here?”

“In Manhattan, Sir.”

Rumlow saw Pierce freeze. *Told you it was worth it, old man,* he wanted to yell at his hardened employer. “In Manhattan? What the hell was he doing here?” Pierce looked back at the other man. “Surely he couldn’t have caught wind of our plans.”

Rumlow shook his head. “No. Or at least, I don’t think so. He was here for something else.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I saw The Captain take off with Tony Stark.”
The other man whipped around in his chair. “Tony Stark. The Tony Stark.”

Rumlow nodded. He watched as the other man got up and started to pace around the office while Pierce put his face in his hands.

“He’s talking with Stark. That cannot mean good things,” Pierce stated.

“You don’t think I know that?” the other man hissed. “If The Captain hasn’t gotten a hold of our plans yet, how long before he gets them with Stark on his ally list?!?”

“Why are you looking at me?” Pierce shouted back at him. “If you had ever done your job correctly, Stark would have been finished off years ago.”

“Stark is an asset. Get him on our side, and- ”

“Well, obviously he’s chosen the other side!”

The two men stared at each other long and hard. Pierce sighed, looking down at his hands. “This needs to be dealt with. Hammer,” he nodded to the other man, “call The Monger. He needs to know about this.” Hammer nodded before rushing out of the office.

“And me, Sir?” Rumlow asked.

“Keep on The Captain. Report to me if anything happens.”

“What about Stark?”

Pierce’s dead stare bored into Rumlow’s. “If you cross paths, kill him.”

“Where the hell have you been?!”

Tony flinched at Pepper’s shrill tone before pressing his face farther onto the bag of frozen peas.

Finding his way back to Manhattan took a little more effort than he thought. After getting back on a main road, Tony found himself somewhere in the backwoods of Brooklyn. Of course, having lived in Manhattan all his life, he had no inclination of which direction he was going. This ended with Tony driving in circles and having to resort to ask some old broad for directions.

But he had managed to eventually find a familiar tower in the skyline, The Captain and his problems slipping farther away.

“Not so loud, Pep.” Tony grabbed the sides of his head, still pounding for his encounter with the Brooklyn madman; he could already feel the bruise blossoming on his cheek.

“Are you hungover? Seriously, Tony? You’ve got a huge business deal in less than an hour, what the hell were you thinking?” Pepper snapped.

“Pep, I’m not- ”

Tony was cut off by Pepper dumping a cup on cold water on him.
“Jesus Christ! I’m not drunk!”

“Oh. Um. Oops?” Pepper gave a small laugh followed by a sharp gasp. “What happened to your face?!”

“I’d rather not talk about it,” Tony groaned.

“Come on, let me see.” Tony removed the bag of peas, wincing as he felt Pepper’s dainty fingers skim over the tender skin. “Happy has been looking everywhere for you. We couldn’t locate you through the tracker, so I just assumed you turned it off to go on a bender.”

“Your faith in me is astounding,” Tony grumbled. He made a mental note to talk to Happy later about adding more trackers. One’s that couldn’t be found by blue-eyed mob men.

“Well, come on,” Pepper continued, blatantly ignoring Tony’s statement. “Tell me. Who’d we piss off this time?” Pepper reached in her handbag, pulling out some concealer and began dabbing it over Tony’s face.

Tony snorted. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Try me.”

Tony started to respond when he was cut off by someone opening the door. “Tony, my boy!”

Tony straightened up immediately, flashing a quick smile to the man that just walked in. “Obie! What are you doing here?”

Obadiah Stane walked over to Tony and squeezed his shoulders. “The business meeting? Tell me you didn’t forget.” Stane gripped the bottom of Tony’s chin, looking questionably at his face.

Tony quickly slipped out of Obie’s grip. “It’s nothing, I promise. And about this meeting. I just thought I’d let you handle it. You’re better with dealing with those bureaucratic asshats anyway.”

Obie rolled his eyes. “Tony. These are military contracts. They don’t take deals like this lightly. They want to see the man who designs their weapons, not the guy who does the paperwork. I already told them you were coming, so I suggest you make yourself presentable,” he finished, frowning down at Tony’s sopping wet suit.

Tony shot another harsh glance at Pepper. “Fine. I’ll be ready in ten.” He started to walk towards his suite, catching Obie grimace down at his phone.

“What did you say you did today, Tony?”

Tony looked back to Obie. “I didn’t.” Catching his business partner raise an eyebrow, Tony sighed. “Boxing lesson with Happy. Didn’t end well for me,” Tony said as he gestured to his face.

Obie nodded, but didn’t say anything in return, watching as Tony retreated to his room to change for the meeting.

The meeting of course, went spectacularly.

Tony’s newest shipment of arms should keep the military boys happy for a while. It was ingenious, honestly. The law couldn’t touch him. No one in their right mind would have the balls to go after Tony Stark. Not when he was one of the military’s main weapons contractor. They needed him.

Tony snorted. A lot of people seem to need him these days.
Although the meeting had ended, Tony had to entertain the commanding officers while Stane finalized the paperwork. Tony threw in a few fake smiles as he circled the room, nursing a scotch.

“Mr. Stark. That was quite a demonstration today.”

“Why, thank you,” Tony said as he spun around. “You know, nothing but the best for my- oh fuck.”

Of course.

Of fucking course.

Turning completely, Tony was met with a pair of familiar steely blue eyes along with a small smirk, the man completely as ease in full military dress.

The Captain.

And of course he looks even better in a uniform. I should’ve guessed.

Tony’s eyes roamed all over the uniform, letting out a hollow laugh when he saw his rank. “What can I do for you… Captain?”

The Captain smiled widely. “I’d like to finish our conversation.”

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I don’t have anything more to say on the matter.” Tony started to walk away, but The Captain grabbed his arm in a tight grip.

“I’m not nearly finished.”

Tony pulled away. “You know, last time you laid hands on me, it didn’t end well for you. How’s your head?”

“How’s your face?” The Captain retorted.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Listen, asshole. I have nothing else to say to you. I don’t want any part of your superstitions.” Tony gestured across the room to Happy, and then pointed to the door. His bodyguard nodded, getting ready to start the car.

The Captain stepped in front of him. “HYDRA is not a superstition; it is real and it is a problem. I need- “

“What you need is to get out of my way before I stop playing nice and expose you to everyone in this room.”

The Captain laughed. “If you were going to do that, you would have done it already. Besides, my bullets are faster than your words.”

Tony huffed before stepping around The Captain and out the door. He saw Happy waiting outside with his car, ready to hand him his keys.

“Mr. Stark. You really should reconsider- “

“Why?” Tony snapped, glaring back at The Captain. “Even if HYDRA is still out there, why is that my issue? They never made a move against me once. You, on the other hand, are in big trouble. This is your problem, not mine.”
Tony stomped away towards his car, before The Captain pulled him back again. “I already told you, they’re not in Brooklyn. They’re in Manhattan. Which makes it your problem. If HYDRA is still out there, it could be devastating, for both you and me. Listen, I want to deal with you just as much as you want to deal with me, but I am running out of options.” The Captain’s blue eyes stared at him earnestly, basically screaming *I’m telling the truth! Believe me!*”

**No. Don’t get involved.**

Tony shook out of his grip. “Sorry, Cap. I’m not your guy.”

He turned around for the final time, walking back towards-

**BOOM!**

Tony felt himself getting thrust back, a huge force knocking him off his feet. A searing heat wave washed over him, Tony quickly covering his face when he felt debris land around him. Ears ringing and head pounding, Tony felt someone grab at his suit, pulling him back up.

Tony cracked his eyes open, seeing The Captain looking at him, his face covered with dirt and grime along with a small cut on his cheek.

Looking past The Captain, Tony looked at his car.

*A bomb.*

What remained of his car looked more like an empty steel shell, covered with remains of melted plastic and bright flames. Right to the left Tony could see the still form of Happy.

*God, is he dead?*

Tony couldn’t catch his breath. He could hear people shouting from inside the building but nothing comprehend. He looked into the flames again, eyes getting impossibly wider.

*That was supposed to be me.*

Tony came back to himself when he felt someone pulling at his suit. He turned to face The Captain once more.

“No do you believe me?” he whispered.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, this one is a little bit shorter than the others, but it sets everything else up so nicely.

Keep the comments coming, I’m loving them!

Side note, (and of course I thought of this when I have like a billion other things I need to finish first, but that’s my brain for you) I am thinking about making a Stony Mad Max AU. Thoughts?
Tony tore his gaze back to his car. What remained of it, anyway. The charred and melted shell of his vehicle stained the once clear street. A small fire still blazed within it, the smoke emitted reaching high into the sky.

His head was pounding, overwhelmed by the sound of the blast, accompanied by the screams of people around him. His body throbbed in pain, the threat of dark bruises already presenting itself. The blast had been big; even at the distance Tony was at was enough to do some damage.

Mere seconds.

Just a small spark, accompanied after by a few kilojoules of force and heat.

That's all it took for Tony Stark's world to be turned upside down.

The Captain was right. He had to be.

Sure, Tony had enemies, but no one had ever done this. No one had ever dared too. They knew who Tony was, what he would do if they tried to attack him. No one would be crazy enough to do it.

Unless.

HYDRA.

This can't be happening.

No; there still was a chance that The Captain was wrong. Wasn't there?

But none of that mattered now. Tony glanced back over to the wreck.

Happy.

He needed to get to Happy; he needed to help. He had been standing next to the car when the blast happened.

Please don't be dead, please don't be dead.

Ignoring the sharp pains coursing around his body, Tony forced himself to stand. He tried to make his way over to Happy, only to have a sharp tug force him back. Tony barely had time to shout his disapproval before he was thrown over a broad shoulder like a rag doll.

The Captain took off down the street, moving at an unreal pace. He flew through the back alleys, seemingly unfazed by Tony's struggling. He finally stopped when he reached aged building, a business long forgotten about. Kicking down the door easily, The Captain moved quickly inside, moving through the tight hallway and to the main floor. Apparently pleased with his surroundings, he deposited Tony roughly on the floor.

"What the hell was that?!" Tony groaned, shifting around to feel for anything broken.

"You're welcome."

"Excuse me?" Tony scoffed.
The Captain rolled his eyes. "HYDRA probably had someone planted there ready to take action if
the bomb didn't kill you. We should be safe here. For now."

Tony groaned, pushing himself to his feet. "There you go, blabbing on about HYDRA again."

The Captain narrowed his eyes. "You can't seriously still be denying it."

He couldn't, not really. But the shock of an attack in broad daylight, let alone an attack had all, had
Tony's hackles rising. The thought of The Captain being right and Tony brushing him off did not
sit well with him. He didn't like to be wrong; he was never wrong. But here he was on the floor of
another dirty warehouse, a bombed out car, and an injured bodyguard. Please don't be dead.

"That could have been anyone," Tony babbled, mostly to comfort himself. "A lot of people would
like to see me dead."

"But no one has made a move on you before. I'm telling you; its HYDRA."

"HYDRA was never a threat to me!"

"Well, it seems they are now!"

Tony sighed, looking around the room. What would HYDRA gain from going after him? He never
got in there way. They shouldn't even be on the same radar. They shouldn't see him as an enemy.

Unless they thought he was.

Oh, God. This isn't good.

Tony flared his nostrils before looking back at The Captain.

"Your cheek." Tony pointed at his face, looking at the sluggish trail of blood that was slipping
down.

The Captain shook his head. "It's nothing. It doesn't even hurt."

"Oh, it doesn't hurt? Well in that case- " Tony reeled back and landed a right hook straight over the
wound. The Captain went crashing to the ground.

"What the hell," he hissed, cupping the irritated flesh.

"Oh, I'm sorry. It hurts now doesn't it, Princess? Good." He pushed forward, aiming a sharp kick to
The Captain's gut. At least he tried to. He had to hand it to the guy, he had great reflexes.

The Captain caught his foot mid swing, easily using the momentum to flip Tony over and onto the
ground next to him. With the air knocked out of him, Tony had no time to recover before The
Captain was back on his feet and dragging Tony along with him. He grabbed fistfuls of Tony's
shirt, pulled him up like he was a sack of flour, and forced him against the wall.

"You know, you're really starting to piss me off."

Tony blinked at him. "Well, if it's taken this long, I obviously haven't been trying hard enough."

The Captain huffed, but tightened his hold on Tony's suit. "Now you listen to- "

"No. You listen to me," Tony cut him off. "Do you realize what you've just done?"
"Yeah, I saved your life, you ungrateful ass."

Tony gave a hollow laugh. "Quite the opposite, you idiot. You've killed me."

"I'm not following."

"Why am I not surprised? Sure, you might be right. HYDRA is probably still out there. But what you've forgotten is that I didn't care the first time they were around, and I sure didn't want to care now. It was never my problem! But you've just made it my problem." Tony broke off, thinking of Happy's still form. The Captain just stared back at him. "What, nothing to say? HYDRA never once came after me, but now all of a sudden they're attacking me and my people. And why is that? Maybe because some fucking airhead decided that I could help dismantle them a second time. Someone knew you met with me, Captain. And now they think I'm working with you. They should be after you, but no. I'd be surprised if I last the month. So thanks a lot, fucker, for- " Tony stopped himself, his gaze turning lethal.

There was only one way HYDRA could have known he met with The Captain.

"What?" The Captain choked out.

"Did you spill?"

The Captain furrowed his brow. "What are you talking about?"

"Did. You. Spill." When The Captain didn't answer, Tony fumed. "You did, didn't you? Why, you piece of shit. Who did you blab to? There was no one else around when you met with me; HYDRA shouldn't have known. Unless of course, you went around and ran your mouth all over town. What'd you say? Trying scare tactics? Send HYDRA running to the hills, telling them that I was already working with you?!"

The Captain's eyes widened. "I didn't squeal."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Oh, bullshit. You just had to make yourself the bigger threat, didn't you?"

The Captain thrust Tony harder against the wall. "I didn't squeal. I don't squeal. You have my word."

Tony laughed. "Your word means jack shit to me."

The Captain finally let his grip lax before pacing away. "Well, what about you? How do I know that you didn't go running to your lackeys about me? How many people know my face now? Maybe I'm the one who won't last the month."

Tony narrowed his eyes. "I haven't said anything."

"I'm sorry to say that your word doesn't mean anything to me either."

"Well, it seems that we're at an impasse."

"So it seems." The Captain's eyes looked almost black in the dim lighting of the dank room, his large body strung tight with tension. "What are you going to do now?"

"I'll do what I always do. I'm a business man, Captain. I'm gonna fake it till I make it; get my way out of this with a deal. In fact," Tony eyed the Captain, "I'm sure HYDRA would get off my tail if I brought them you."
The Captain's jaw tightened. "You wouldn't dare."

"I think I would," Tony sneered.

The Captain gave a small smile. "What makes you think that I won't kill you right here? You got the jump on me once, but I don't make the same mistake twice."

Tony returned the smile easily. "You won't kill me."

"Oh?"

"You may not make the same mistake twice, but that doesn't mean that you didn't make a different one." Tony reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. "Tracker's built in."

"I don't think Hogan is up for chasing you right now."

"If you think Happy was the only one on guard duty, then you've sorely underestimated me."

The Captain's eyes snapped to the south entrance where a loud bang reverberated through the room, as if it happened on cue, before landing back on Tony. "Oops," the brunette smiled.

The Captain scanned the room, eyeing a small service entrance. "This isn't over," he hissed, already heading towards the door.

"If you say so, dear Captain." Another bang, much closer this time, followed by a muffled 'Tony!' got The Captain moving faster. "Oh, and Captain?" He spun around to face Tony again. "Happy Hogan was innocent and a good man; he's worth at least ten of your Commandos on their best day. If he dies today because of you, I won't hesitate to return the favor." From the look on The Captain's face, Tony knew he understood.

And with that, The Captain fled.

"Tony!" A final door opened, revealing a very flustered James Rhodes.

Tony smiled. "Rhodey."

The taller man just sighed in response, his expression falling into a familiar one of fond exasperation, one that he usually wore when dealing with Tony.

Tony had met Colonel James Rhodes back in his college days; he was the only one who could handle Tony's shit, as well as fight back with some of his own. Sure, Tony had been a little devastated when Rhodey decided to choose to go to the military instead of coming to work for him. But turned out having an in with the military was always a plus. That and, Tony may or may not have pulled a few strings to make Rhodey the official military liaison for Stark Industries.

So of course Rhodey was at the meeting, winning over the last few skeptical parties for today's deal. He was always better at sweet talking the brass than Tony was.

Rhodey rushed over and grabbed at Tony. "What the hell are you doing in here? Everyone's been going crazy, man; We all thought you got kidnapped again!"

Tony laughed. "Again? If you think today's incidents constituent as kidnapping, then you've got pretty low standards, buddy."

Rhodey rolled his eyes. "Seriously. You good?" His dark eyes looked all over Tony, scanning for potential injuries.
"Yeah, yeah. We're all good here." Tony looked over at Rhodey carefully. "Happy?"

Rhodey looked solemn. "He's not dead, but it doesn't look good."

Tony closed his eyes. "How bad?"

"Pepper went with him in the ambulance. She called me on my way over. He's stable right now, but he's isn't responding."

Tony shuddered. If The Captain was right, and this was HYDRA? It took them one day to take out one of his own. How long before the rest of them start dropping like flies? Not on my watch. "I need to head over there. Obie?"

"He's fine," Rhodey assured him. "Nobody else was anywhere near the blast radius. You sure you're okay? Nothing like this has ever happened before."

Tony shook his head. "There's a first time for everything."

Rhodey looked around the warehouse. "What are you thinking? Hammer?"

Tony scoffed. "That would imply that Hammer could build a bomb that works."

Rhodey laughed in response. "Yeah, you're right. But this is some serious stuff. I can call my superiors, ask for an extended leave? I'm not sure if-"

"No," Tony cut him off. Unwanted images of Rhodey's prone form bleeding out on the sidewalk filtered through his head. "I don't want you caught in the crossfire."

Rhodey's eyes softened, placing a strong hand on Tony's shoulder. "I can handle it."

"And so can I. Don't worry about it Rhodey, I'll deal with it."

"If you say so. Who are they anyway?"

"No one good, buddy. No one good."

Tony gave one final look around the warehouse before following Rhodey outside. Rhodey hopped in his car, staring the engine to drive to the hospital with Tony.

"Hold on, I need to make a call."

Tony pulled out his slim phone, entering a small code before setting it against his ear.

"JARVIS?"

"Yes, Sir?"

"Wanna do me a favor?"

"For you, Sir? Anything."

Tony smiled softly. "Thanks, buddy."

"What do you require, Sir?"

Tony sighed. "I need you to look into something."
Steve Rogers hunkered down in far part of an alley, watching as Tony Stark escaped from him for a second time. His large hands cradled his head that was still pounding from the explosion and the added bonus of Stark's fist.

*God dammit.*

Steve kicked at a trash can, sending it spinning down the alley. Today was enough to confirm his suspicions about HYDRA, and now everything was already going to shit. Stark never denied his logic about HYDRA, meaning he probably thought Steve was right. No one was stupid enough to attack Tony Stark in broad daylight without a death wish.

Unless they were something that Tony Stark was afraid of.

But Stark was also right. Steve didn't tell anyone but his crew; no one should have known about them meeting.

Steve should have known better. Should have taken bigger precautions with Stark. Now one of his men was down. Steve never meant for that to happen. He just hoped to God that Hogan survived the blast. A threat for Tony Stark was nothing to be trifled with. Steve would have his crew pull back for a few days, just in case. If HYDRA was rising into power again, the last thing he needed was his crew fighting a battle on both sides, trying to hold the line against the nefarious crew and Stark as well.

Finally standing up, Steve scanned his surroundings. It seemed that Stark had taken off, with no inclination to chase after Steve. Deciding it was safe to move, Steve slowly trekked his way back to the car he drove to Stark's meeting with. He needed to get out of his uniform; attracting unwanted attention was the last thing he needed.

Steve had barely shut the car door before he was tearing back towards Brooklyn. If HYDRA was there today to make a move against Stark, who knew how many other eyes were still watching in the shadows. No one of HYDRA had ever seen his face and survived, but he wasn't taking any chances. If HYDRA was already willing to take on Stark, it probably wouldn't be long before he made a move on his own crew.

By the time Steve had made it back to base, he found himself with an even worse headache. But the peace and quiet he was looking forward too quickly stepped out of reach when he entered through the door. Inside, his crew was bustling.

It wasn't often that Steve had the entire family at base at the same time, due to different jobs and schedules, but it seemed like everyone and their mother was crammed in their small headquarters. Steve was met with respectable nods and smiles to anyone who met his eyes, but no one stopped their movement completely, shoving past and around Steve to continue their duties.

Steve scanned their main room, before locking eyes with Clint. Seeing that his voice wouldn't carry over the boisterous room, he deferred to his hands, thinking back to when he'd learned the other language.
When Steve had first found Clint Barton, he was trying to rob Bucky.

While his skills would have worked on any unsuspecting citizen, Clint got more than he bargained for by taking on Steve's second in command. The fact that Steve was nearby definitely didn't help Clint's cause either.

What had surprised Steve was the amount of hits Clint got on both him and Bucky. Clint was fast; Steve even found himself struggling to keep up. What shocked Steve even more, was that Clint managed to disable Bucky's trusty knife with a few quick moves, and then move to throw it at Steve's arm, effectively catching his jacket sleeve, stopping Steve's charge. *From across the alleyway.*

Bucky, of course, moved to help Steve, giving Clint the time to escape down the street.

While Steve had thought that would be the end of it, he found himself face to face with Clint three days later.

Steve was on his way back to base, when he stumbled upon a curled up figure in a back alley. Steve found himself stopping when he recognized a familiar sweatshirt.

"Hey. You."

Nothing.

Steve narrowed his eyes before raising his voice.

"Hey! I'm talking to you!"

Still nothing.

Steve bristled, getting ready to lay one out on the asshole. He reached forward and grabbed the man's shoulder. What Steve didn't expect was the sharp gasp that the man emitted, followed by a terrified gaze.

"Oh, I have your attention now? Listen, you tried robbing my friend a couple days ago. Maybe you don't realize who you decided to mess- " Steve stopped himself when he looked at the scared man. He was looking at Steve's lips.

"You couldn't hear me," he whispered. "You can't hear me."

The man, still watching Steve's lips, shook his head. "No, not really."

Steve startled at his calm tone. The man rolled his eyes. "I wasn't born deaf, asshole. I know how to speak. Unfortunately, a child's ears can only take so many beatings before they stop working."

Child abuse.

Steve's insides churned, a fire blazing behind his eyes. "I-I'm sorry," he managed to stammer out.

The man rolled his eyes again. "Well, I guess I'm sorry I tried to rob your friend. So there, we're even."

Steve couldn't help but smile. "Pickpocket often?"

The smaller man returned a grin easily. "Gotta pay the bills somehow. Believe it or not, there
aren't a lot of opportunities for people of my condition."

And then Steve wasn't seeing the man. He was seeing himself. He saw the frail boy from Brooklyn, unable to land a job to help his mother; his sickly body wearing him down day to day. No one wanted anything to do with a kid who couldn't support his own weight. Just like no one wanted anything to do with a deaf man from a broken home.

Steve could almost hear Bucky in the back of his head, screaming at him to 'stop bringing home strays' as he put it. But Steve had already made up his mind. He wouldn't have made it to where he was today without someone giving him a chance. Who was he to deny anyone else that same chance?

"How good are your eyes?" he asked, already knowing the answer. He had been thinking about that knife toss all week.

The man shot him an unimpressed look. "Killer."

Steve grinned. "Good enough for me. You're hired."

"What?"

"You said you needed a job. Well, today's your lucky day."

"I can't imagine how much use I could be with my ears-"

"I'm not hiring you for your ears, I'm hiring you for your eyes. I need you to look into some people for me. Think you can manage? I can pay you anything you see fit."

The man narrowed his eyes. "Isn't this a little shady?"

"What do you have to lose?" Steve retorted. He'd been in this business long enough to pick out the type of men that had no qualms doing the same same type of work. This man was definitely one of them.

The man sighed. "I guess you're right.," Of course I was, Steve thought to himself. "Fine," the deaf man continued. "Who do you need me to stalk?"

"First things first." He held a strong hand out. "I'm Steve."

The man met his hand with a firm grip. "Clint."

Steve had Clint spy on potential problems all over Brooklyn, which he did with near perfection. Each of his reports to Steve were filled with overwhelming data. And when Steve found out he knew how to handle a weapon? Steve knew he needed this man for the Commandos. Steve will never forget the day Clint pulled out a bow and arrow and hit a bulls-eye at each target at the range.

Weeks passed; Steve gave Clint more jobs, Clint returning with more information, not even stumbling in his work when he found out more about Steve's background.

It wasn't until Bucky caught him trying to teach himself ASL that Steve finally revealed Clint to the rest of the team.

He was a hit, of course. His Midwestern snark and easy smile were addicting, getting him a permanent spot in the family. It was Bucky who had finally approached Steve about putting Clint
in the field, doing more dangerous ops. Before Steve could object, Bucky pulled out two slim hearing aids.

It was a wonder that Steve ever forgot that out of everyone, Bucky was the one who always cared the most. And of course, seeing the look on Clint's face when he could hear clearly for the first time in years made Steve's heart swell. So Clint found himself on the top roster, tagging along with Nat and Bucky, never looking back.

Steve pulled himself out of his head, looking back at Clint. "What the hell?" He signed, gesturing to the mess of people at base.

Clint smirked at Steve. "I could ask the same thing of you," he replied quickly, looking down at Steve's uniform.

Steve rolled his eyes, before gesturing to his office. Clint nodded, but moved in the opposite direction. Probably to find Bucky.

Steve stepped into his office, relishing in the quiet before the door reopened for Clint and Bucky.

"Where the hell did you find that thi- you're bleeding." Bucky stated.

Steve ignored him. "What's going on?"

Clint beamed at Steve. "Nat caught wind of a huge score. Word on the street is that Hammer is trying to drive a huge weapons deal with some other mob. Her sources said that they're still working out the kinks of the deal, so the weapons are just sitting around in some storage facility."

"So?"

Clint pouted. "So we're gonna steal them, Steve!"

Steve pinched his nose with his fingers. "Seems risky."

Bucky huffed. "Come on, Steve. We haven't pulled a job in weeks. People are starting to get antsy! Let us have this one."

"Fine," Steve sighed. "But first, we need to talk about Stark."

Tony rubbed his temple, groaning softly. Seeing Happy hooked up to God knows how many hospital tubes did no favors for him. After triple checking that he would be receiving the best medical care and that Pepper was fine, Tony let himself return home.

He had been ignoring calls from Obie; Tony didn't need to deal with that right now. He needed to deal with this.

He poured himself a generous glass of scotch. "J? What'd you find?"
"As per requested, I searched for CCTV footage in Brooklyn for facial recognition. I was able to track your movements back to inner Brooklyn, but not much farther than that."

"What do you mean?"

"I could not pinpoint your exact location of meeting with The Captain because you kept traveling past the last available footage. The Captain picked his spot wisely, Sir."

Tony ignored the last comment. "Pull it up."

A bright screen flashed in front of him, showing Tony pull out from behind a building, and continue off through Brooklyn. "I remember this," Tony mumbled to himself. "The building I came out of wasn't that much farther back." Tony studied the clips before an idea hit him. "J, can you rewind a couple hours? When we first got there?"

JARVIS obliged, playing back the footage, until the car was pulling in to the street, Tony able to make out the fuzzy face of The Captain in the driver's seat. "There," Tony pointed to his face. "Can you get facial recognition off that face?"

"I'll give it the old college try, Sir," JARVIS responded dryly.

Tony rolled his eyes, before staring back at the screen. "Alright. Time to find out who you are, dear Cap- " Tony found himself breaking off when he spotted something else on the cameras.

Another person.

"Someone else was there," he whispered. "J, zoom and enhance."

The man was mostly hidden by the shadows of the buildings, but Tony could still see that his entire focus was on The Captain and the car. "Do a scan on him as well."

"Of course, Sir."

Tony eyed the close up of the mystery man. "Who the hell are you?"

Tony shuddered when the Captain's voice drifted through his head.

"HYDRA."
"Anything?"

Tony had tried to distract himself in his lab while JARVIS ran facial scans on both The Captain and the mystery man. Usually Tony could lose himself in his work for hours, sometimes even days, but right now he found himself asking JARVIS for an update every few minutes.

"I have made the same amount of progress since the last time you have asked, Sir."

Tony sighed. "JARVIS, if I wanted to just fuck around, I would have asked DUM-E to handle this."

"I'm sorry, Sir, but I cannot match The Captain to any known male in New York. I have even taken the liberty to extend the search to neighboring states, as well as adding in your additional parameters. The Captain simply does not exist."

"He has to be out there, J. There's no way he was able to wipe himself from the system- unless of course, that person is me. But something tells me that the Captain and I are not on the same educational level."

"Humble as always, Sir."

Tony paced around his lab. "He must have had help; it probably took him years to disappear completely."

"I shall keep trying, Sir."

"What about the other one?"

"Given the poor clarity of the CCTV cameras, the shadows from the building, and the man’s distance from the cameras, I have been unable to construct a complete subject for facial recognition."

Tony sat back down behind a lab table, dropping his head down on top of the cool metal. This was not going as planned.

"So, you're telling me we have nothing."

"Indubitably."

This is ridiculous.

Tony shouldn't have even found himself in this situation. But thanks to a certain self-righteous prick of a mob boss, Tony can't exactly back out now. It didn't matter if it was HYDRA or not. That third man knew Tony met with The Captain. And because of that, he had already resulted to bombs. How long of a time frame did he have before they came back to finish the job?

Whoever that man is, Tony needed him taken care of. Now.

With a completed scan, Tony could send the face out to Quill or Danvers and have the job finished within the hour. But when is life ever that simple?

Besides, Tony didn't want to involve anyone else in this mess. Getting others caught up in this
potential HYDRA mess is a one way ticket to losing allies. Allies that Tony cannot afford to lose. Tony grinned. Well, it's a good thing he knows someone that would be oh so willing to help.

"J, pull up the CCTV footage again."

JARVIS obliged, showing when The Captain initially pulled up to the warehouse with Tony. "Now fast forward to when I leave." The video changed, showing a laughing Tony drive off.

"Ok, normal speed. Keep playing the footage." Tony watched the cameras minutes after he had already driven off when finally a hulking figure stepped out onto the road. "There. Can we follow him through other cameras?"

"Of course, Sir." JARVIS dutifully followed The Captain, switching cameras every time he fell out of frame. It wasn't long before The Captain slipped out of view completely. "This is the last of the available footage for the area."

Tony hummed. "What kind of buildings are over there?"

"A few empty shipping warehouses and abandoned factory used back in World War II to melt down scrap metal."

"What a patriot," laughed Tony. Mind made up, he grabbed his keys and sidearm and head to the door. "Don't wait up for me, dear. Daddy's got a little work to do."

"I knew I should’ve gone with you to Stark's meeting. Sounds like it was a blast," smirked Clint.

Steve, who had taken a seat behind his desk, reached for the gun that lay atop it, turning it to aim at Clint. The smile vanished instantly from Barton's face, the man quickly scrambling to take cover behind Bucky.

"See anyone?" asked Bucky.

"No," sighed Steve. "But then again I wasn't looking. And even if I was, I wouldn't even know where to look; I was the one that wasn't supposed to be there."

"And we're sure it was HYDRA?"

"Who else could it be? Anyone who made a move against Stark would basically be on a suicide mission," Clint retorted.

Steve groaned, rubbing his hands over his face. “I have no idea. Who knows what Stark will do now that someone has made a- wait,” Steve stopped himself. “Do you hear that?”

Both Bucky and Clint shook their heads, but their bodies seemed to already be filling with tension.

"Exactly." Steve stood up and grabbed his gun, making sure it was loaded. His whole crew was in today; there was no reason for it to be so quiet. Steve checked and made sure that both Bucky and Clint were ready in case he needed back up. Getting a nod from both men, Steve burst from his office, gun raised and ready to -
Oh, fuck.

There, sitting in the middle of the room with the biggest shit-eating grin known to man, was Tony Stark.

Around him, the rest of his crew had their guns trained on the smirking brunette, but it didn't seem to faze Stark in the least. He simply picked at an invisible spec on his perfectly tailored suit, sighing quietly to himself, like he hadn't a single care in the world. Or that he clearly wasn't threatened even while being surrounded by the entirely of Brooklyn's largest mob. *This man is insane*, Steve thought to himself.

"Holy shit," Steve heard Clint whisper behind him.

Steve clenched his jaw. "How the hell did you get in here?" He asked, tightening his grip on his gun.

"Same way as you," chided Stark. "I used the door."

Steve rolled his eyes, but didn't push further. Tony Stark had unbelievable resources; if he wanted to find The Commandos base, he would with no problem. Hell, Stark was probably about three steps away from finding out Steve's name, if he hadn't already.

"Darling, you should really do something about that cheek. It would be a shame if I caused some permanent damage to that pretty face of yours."

Steve heard Bucky growl behind him, cocking his gun. Steve shot his hand out, with an unspoken 'don't' to his friend. If anything, that caused Stark to grin wider. "That's right, Barnes; a whipped dog like you wouldn't want to upset the Master, would you?"

This time, Steve stepped forward, his hackles rising. Stark was too cocky, and too smart. Steve needed to get him out of here, away from his family. Every minute that Stark sat in here was another minute he was putting them at risk. "You've crossed too many lines today. I tried to be civil, but you're in Brooklyn now; I won't hesitate to kill you if you continue to piss me off," he snarled.

Stark's chestnut eyes pierced Steve's, but eventually he looked away. "You started it," Stark mumbled.

"And you pushed it with a threat to my crew," retorted Steve. "You can't expect me to be in a very cooperative mood."

Stark waved a hand. "Happy's clinging to life; your crew will live to see another day. For now." Stark stood up, idly walking around the room, still blatantly ignoring the many guns pointed his direction. He stopped in front of Sam Wilson, glaring down at the younger man.

"Ooh, is that coffee? Thank you," he said as he hastily swiped the hot drink right out of Sam's hand.

"Hey- " Sam tried to protest, but was cut off by Stark swiftly reaching behind him, only to jam a side arm into Sam’s neck.

Everyone in the room tensed, guns cocking all around. Steve's breath caught in his throat; Tony Stark was a loose cannon. One wrong move and the whole thing goes south.

"I said," Stark hissed down at Sam, "thank you."
Sam sat back in his chair, eyes trained at Steve. Stark took a long swig of the coffee, moaning obscenely as he swallowed. Finally taking in the rest of the room, he rolled his eyes at Steve. "Oh, relax. Take this as a gesture of good faith," he said, revealing the chamber of his gun, which was completely empty.

Steve didn't move, as did the rest of his crew. "Gesture means nothing to me when I know all the trouble you can cause without a weapon."

Stark grinned. "See? You're learning!"

Steve glared at him. "What do you want?"

"It's not what I want; it's what you want."

Steve rushed forward, pushing Stark against the hard table, pressing his gun against the hard plane of his chest. "I'm done playing your games. What I want right now, is for you to give me a reason not to stop your heart right here."

Stark's poker face remained unfazed, but Steve could feel his heart rate skyrocket through the muzzle of the gun pressed against his chest. "You didn't squeal."

"What?" That wasn't what he was expecting.

"You told me you didn't squeal. I'm... inclined to believe you."

Steve felt himself drop his weapon, staring at Stark at disbelief. "Enough to believe me about my little problem?"

"Our little problem."

"Our?" Steve gaped at him. Just earlier this morning Stark was telling him to take a hike. Something had changed, and Steve was willing to bet that it wasn't anything good. Stark may be crazy, but he surely wasn't stupid. Whatever he had on HYDRA was worth the risk of entering The Commandos den.

Stark huffed. "Consider me invested. Whether I like it or not, you've dragged me into this mess. I don't have the time or patience for you and your people to blunder about. This needs to be taken care of."

Steve didn't respond. His head was whirling, waiting for the moment for Stark to laugh in his face, call off his bluff and blow the building to pieces.

But it never came.

"You gonna invite me in?" Stark asked, gesturing to Steve's office behind them.

Steve nodded slightly, watching as Stark sauntered past him. "Get back to it," he said to the rest of his crew. Not waiting to be told twice, everyone around him startled, pushing around each other to get back to work. Steve called Clint over. "Stay alert. If anything goes wrong, take care of him." Clint gave a terse nod, perching himself over in the corner of the room, giving him a perfect angle of Steve's office.

Steve took a deep breath before entering his office, a very pissed Bucky following close behind. Walking in, he wasn't surprised to see Stark had already taken the seat behind his desk. Steve's fists tightened against his sides, but he decided against instigating another argument.
"Alright, Stark; cut the shit. What changed your mind?"

But Stark didn't answer. He looked past Steve and right at Bucky, who was leaning against the door. "Nope. No info until you call your guard dog off."

Bucky narrowed his eyes, but refused to budge, causing Stark to chuckle. "You don't even speak, do you? I mean, I know that all dogs have different levels of intelligence, but I'm surprised you haven't made it this far in your training yet."

"Cap," Bucky hissed.

Steve sighed. "Go wait outside, Buck."

"If you think for one second that I'm leaving you in here alone with him-" "I wasn't asking."

Bucky huffed, but loyally stomped out of the office with one final glare at Stark.

Finally alone, Steve turned back to Stark. "Talk."

"I did some digging; came across something you might find interesting." Stark pulled out his phone, before looking around the office. "You got a TV in here?"

Steve shook his head.

"Computer? Tablet? Anything?"

With one final head shake, Stark scoffed. "Figures." Steve watched him press a couple buttons on his phone, before he held it up. Steve watched in awe as an image was projected from his phone and onto the far wall in front of them. On the screen, Steve saw what looked like camera footage by the warehouse where he brought Stark to that morning.

"What am I supposed to be looking at?"

Stark pointed to the corner of the projection. "That look fishy to you?" Sure enough, there was another figure that appeared on the photo. The quality was grainy, and with the added shadows from the buildings, Steve could barely make out his face.

"Who is that?"

"I was hoping you would be able to tell me."

"Photo quality?"

"The best I can do. But if I’m right, and I usually am, he’s our problem."

Steve nodded. "Makes sense. No one else knew about us meeting except for some of my crew and- don’t even think about it."

Stark held his hands up in surrender, but Steve had seen the side-eye he was giving. "I didn’t say anything."

"You didn't have too. If you even think to insinuate that my people are behind this-"

"Alright, alright. Jesus, you made your point." An awkward silence fell over the two, the pair
pointedly staring at the photo, avoiding eye contact.

“That could just be anyone,” Steve said softly. He knew it wasn’t. That man was the only explanation for what happened today. But he trusted Stark as far as he could throw him, probably even less than that. Steve wasn’t going to blindly lead his crew into a trap to deal with Stark - *not after what happened last time*. Since he obviously couldn’t cooperate with Stark by telling him what he wanted to hear, he’d have to settle for leading him on, goading him to agreeing with the inevitability of HYDRA.

Stark snorted. “It could. Or.”

“Or.”

“If, and this is a big if, that guy is a surviving member of HYDRA, we're both in a shit storm. Especially you. You’re going to find yourself in a very dangerous situation.”

Steve puffed up his chest. “I handled them once; I think I can do it again.”

Stark shook his head. “You’re not listening. Let’s say that man is HYDRA. And he saw us meeting, which led to my car exploding.”

“Okay?”

Stark rolled his eyes. “Keyword here: *us*. He saw *us* meeting; he saw me and you. Everyone knows who I am, but no one should know who you are. If anyone saw us, they would have assumed I was hanging out with a low rate hooker,” he said, ignoring Steve's glare. "But somehow, somebody managed to pick up on the fact that I was meeting with The Captain. He saw your face. Which means he knows who you are.”

Steve felt his blood turn icy. This was not good. Anonymity was one of his greatest assets; it protected both him and his team. Unmasking Steve Rogers could be disastrous.

“By the look on your face, no one from HYDRA was supposed to know who you were.”

Steve shook his head. “Anyone who ever did see me never got the chance to tell anyone.”

“Well, someone did,” Stark retorted, pointing back to the screen. “He needs to go.”

Steve nodded before heading back to his office door. He opened it and leaned out, hollering a loud “Barton!” into the other room. Clint quickly entered, gun still ready.

Steve pointed to the projection. “What can you see?”

Clint shrugged, staring at the still image. “Not much to go on. Male, dark brunette. Heavily built, most likely hired muscle, but definitely skilled. The way he’s using the shadows of the buildings; he probably knew the cameras were there. The way he holds himself, I’m guessing ex-military. Probably a gun for hire now.”

Steve nodded, silently preening when he caught Stark’s impressed gaze. “I know it’s not a lot, but I need you to hit the streets. Start at the warehouse and make your usual perimeter; take people with if you need. Talk to your sources, bribe people, I don’t care. Find this man.”

Clint nodded, already heading out the door.

“Wait.” Stark stopped him.
When the two blondes looked back to him, he continued. “Why go looking for the man, when we can bring him to us?”

“What are you saying?” asked Steve.

“Well, he popped up when we had our first meeting. What do you say about having another little rendezvous?”
Tony sighed, eyes sweeping the room idly, trying not to think of the ropes rubbing along his wrists.

The water dripping from the ceiling pipe echoed loudly through the silent room. Tony narrowed his eyes at it, as is daring the water to leak out again.

*God, what I would do for a wrench.*

Of course, there were more pressing matters at the moment.

“So. Crazy weather we’re having.”

He watched The Captain roll his eyes dramatically before running a strong hand through his gold locks.

“Small talk. Really?”

Tony shrugged. To be honest, he just needed something to keep his mind off everything that had happened.

It had been three days since Tony had last met with The Captain in his overcrowded Brooklyn hideout. They had both agreed that the best way to find their mystery HYDRA man out of hiding was by drawing him out; orchestrating another ‘meeting’ between the two of them seemed like their best option. Of course, this time, The Captain brought his lackeys; The Commandos hiding within the shadows of the alleyways, waiting for action.

The Captain decided that they needed to keep everything the same; if HYDRA had been canvassing them, having routine would probably increase their chances. Same building. Same dark room. Same time. Same old iron chair that Tony found himself tied to yet again.

*Keep everything the same, my ass.*

Tony was sure The Captain just wanted an excuse to tie him up again.

“Anything?” Tony asked when he saw The Captain check his phone again.

The blonde shook his head. “It’s still early though.”

Tony felt himself nodding, but didn’t warrant any other response. For the past half hour, the two men had been dancing around small and awkward conversations. Turns out, it had been so much easier when the two were just being hostile to each other. Now that they were working towards a common goal, there wasn’t a lot to say.

Tony sighed for what was probably the millionth time.

“I’m sorry, am I boring you?”

Tony glared back at the mob boss. “Well, you aren’t exactly easy to talk to.”

“I could say the same for you.” the blonde barked back at him.
The two broke off their conversation again, the room falling into silence except for the water dripping from the pipe.

“How’s Hogan?”

Tony snapped his eyes to meet The Captain's gaze. “Umm, there- there hasn’t been any change.” Tony cleared his throat, ignoring how it constricted. Happy’s coma was still a tough subject for Tony to grasp. It had been a shattering jolt back to reality, a terrifying reminder that not even he was untouchable.

He shouldn't even be here. He should be puttering away in his lab, drinking the finest scotch in his penthouse, having empty sex in his suite. He dabbled in the crime world, sure, everyone needs a hobby. But the past three days had opened up a world that Tony wasn't sure he wanted to be a part of. There was a time that he thought it was all he wanted - but that was a lifetime ago. Back when his parents were still breathing and he gave a shit about what they thought about him. But now, he was different. The life he had was one that he painstakingly built himself. He was happy - and he sure as hell wasn't going to let HYDRA or The Captain take it away from him.

“I’m sorry, you know.”

Tony jolted from his thoughts and gaped at the mob boss.

The Captain looked down at his hands. “I know you don’t think much of me, but this… I never intended for- ” he broke off with a huff. “I posted two men at the hospital, just in case HYDRA came back to try and finish the job.”

What? What angle is he playing here?

“Oh. Um, that was, uh. Thank you, I guess,” Tony stuttered out.

“Least I could do,” the blonde shrugged.

Tony looked around the room again, giving a soft chuckle. “This is ridiculous,” he whispered to himself, bringing his hands around to his front, throwing the now useless rope in between the men’s feet. “You gotta learn how to tie better knots,” he said, smirking at The Captain.

“You gonna head butt me again?” The Captain returned with a small smile of his own.

“You were the one who decided we needed to have a repeat performance. I’d usually be game to show how a real New Yorker throws down, but I’m gonna tap out this time. Can’t afford to lose any more brain cells.”

“Excuses, excuses,” The Captain mumbled.

Tony grinned, moving to change the subject. “So, you’ve got some pretty cramped quarters over in Brooklyn. Guys have a heist coming up?”

The Captain eyed him warily, but Tony held his hands up innocently. “Relax. I’m not interested in stealing your business; just color me curious.”

The Captain furrowed his brows, staring long at Tony before nodding his head. “Yeah, yeah we do. Nat caught wind of some weapons just sitting around in a holding facility. It’s time we went shopping. And no,” The Captain added, taking in Tony’s face. “They’re not yours. We’re not that stupid. The guns are Hammer's.”
Tony couldn’t help the laugh that escaped him that time, hands resting against his abdomen. “Oh, that’s rich. What a stupid asshole, leaving his weapons just lying around. Do me a favor; don’t be afraid to get creative. Nothing paints a more beautiful picture that a well-timed explosion. And of course I’ll get the added pleasure of seeing a few priceless looks on his prick face. Honestly, it’s a win-win for everyone.”

The Captain rolled his eyes, but Tony could see the underlying smile. “Bombs aren’t really our style.”

“Ah, yes, Captain Incognito. But maybe that’s what you’re missing: a flair for the dramatic. You need to strut.”

“And you need to focus on the current problem, Mr. Stark. HYDRA now, Hammer later.”

“Just putting in my two cents, is all. What are you gonna do with those guns once you have them?”

The Captain narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“You gonna use them?” When The Captain remained silent, Tony continued. “It’s just, Hammer weapons aren’t reliable; in the end, they’ll probably end up causing more problems than solutions. To be blunt, your men are going to end up with a jammed gun in the middle of a firefight. Do you only use Hammer weapons?”

“No.”

“Well, do you have a dealer?”

The Captain’s poker face remained unfazed. “Maybe.”

“Alright, easy. I was just asking. All I’m saying, from a business standpoint, you should reconsider your options.”

“You just told me to torch Hammer’s warehouse and now you don’t want me going near his weapons?”

“I didn’t say that,” Tony argued. ”All I mean, is that there are better options.”

“Such as?”

“Selling.”

“You want me to sell most-likely defective guns to other mobs?”

Tony nodded. “It’s better than taking a chance with your crew. Not to mention the early Christmas bonus you’d be getting.”

The Captain hummed, but didn’t say more on the matter, most likely mulling it over in his head.

Tony groaned inwardly. What the hell was he doing? Four days ago the man sitting in front of him could have potentially ended his life, and now Tony was giving away business advice? He rubbed at his temples, trying to get a handle on the raging storm in his head.

He needed to stay focused on his goal. Tony didn’t give a shit, couldn’t give a shit, to what might happen to The Captain and The Howling Commandos. In the end, there was only one thing that mattered: getting himself out of this alive.
Tony Stark was a business shark. He had gotten to where he was today all on his own. Relying on other people was a weakness, *caring* was a weakness, and just another way for him to get killed.

Tony shuddered as he heard his father’s voice drift through his head.

*“Don’t get involved.”*

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Bucky elbowed Clint in the side when he felt him shift next to him again. “Will you quit squirming?”

“I can’t,” whined Clint. “I have to pee and we’ve been sitting here for like, *hours.*”

Bucky rolled his eyes, but didn’t give an answer. He couldn’t really blame Clint; they had been sitting out there for a while, and even Bucky was starting to get restless.

“It looks like our guy is a no show,” Bucky said with a grimace. He had really hoped this would have worked out. For as much as an ass that Stark was, the idea he had wasn’t half bad. It was their only chance to finally get a lead on HYDRA, but now it seemed like they were back to square one. “I’ll text Cap,” he continued. “This isn’t working.”

Bucky made a move to stand up, when Clint pulled him back down harshly. “What?” he hissed at the smaller man.

Clint didn’t verbally respond, just gave a small point across the street. There, Bucky saw a man step out of the shadows, and head over to the car Steve and Stark had driven to the warehouse. Bucky watched as the man approached slowly, a hand pressed firmly at his flank, no doubt resting on a side arm.

“That him?” Bucky asked quietly.

“Yes.”

That was all the confirmation Bucky needed. Even if it was hailing out in the middle of the night, Bucky would trust Clint’s eyes. “He’s heading for the car.”

“No doubt to place another bomb.”

Bucky nodded, agreeing, before turning to face Clint. “You got this?”

“Yeah. What are you thinking?”

“The area’s still populated, and the last thing we need is the sound of bullets attracting unwanted police attention.”

“Bow it is,” Clint nodded, already setting up the large recurve bow.

Bucky watched as the man moved meticulously over the weapon, checking to make sure everything was set before he nocked an arrow against the taut string, drawing his toned arm back. Clint’s breathing slowed, the hunter emerging, stalking his prey.

“Cap wants him delivered alive.” Clint didn’t answer, but Bucky knew he was listening.
“However,” Bucky continued, “I’m sure he won’t mind a few packaging errors.”

Bucky watched as Clint grinned, almost feral, before letting an arrow fly. The choked shout that followed was all the proof Bucky needed. Not that he actually need any; Clint never missed. Bucky turned and saw the man twitching helplessly on the ground, long arrow piercing out of his upper left shoulder.

“Ooh, what a beauty.”

Clint smirked, already disassembling his bow. “I’d like to see that asshole be able to fire a gun after that.”

“You never cease to amaze me, Clint Barton,” Bucky retorted, pulling out his phone. He dialed Steve’s number, the man picking up on the first ring.

“What?”

Bucky grinned. “I got good news, Cap. Christmas came early, and we got you one hell of a present.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the shorter chapter, but what can I say? Writing is hard, especially with someone with the same amount of writing prowess as a goldfish.

As per usual, I LOVE COMMENTS.

Seriously. The best thing about doing a work in progress is that I can take in to consideration any ideas/comments/concerns you guys have. Tell me what you think! What you like, what you think I can do better, anything to make this story the best it can be.

And again; thank you, thank you. Serious kudos to you guys for keeping along with the story; hope it will live up to your expectations!
“So. How are we gonna do this? Your way, or my way?”

Tony stood next to The Captain in the depths of his base, staring at the man Barnes and Barton brought in. The man was still unconscious, so The Captain wasted no time in making sure he was properly restrained in the chair.

Tony had been pleasantly surprised at Barton’s work. Of course, Tony knew how talented each of The Commandos were; he had compiled files on each and every one of them he knew about, but Tony still found himself impressed. Barton’s initial description of the guy was spot on, the large man in front of him screamed ex-military and gun-for-hire. On top of that, Barton’s shot with his bow, yes, that’s right, a bow and arrow, was a better shot than Tony could probably make with a gun and a scope all while standing right in front of the man. The wound was clean and downright perfect; minimum blood loss, but maximum damage.

After the man had gone down, a quick knock to the head and he was out cold. Which seemed nice at the time, but Tony was anything but patient. Waiting for the man to regain consciousness was like watching ice melt. This man could provide the answers both he and The Captain were desperate for. If this was just some antsy mob that got too cocksure, or if HYDRA really had returned from the grave. Tony hoped for the former.

“You have an interrogation technique?” Tony could hear the amusement in The Captain’s voice.

Tony turned to face him, frowning. “Is that such a big shock?”

“You just don’t seem like the person to get your hands dirty, that’s all,” shrugged The Captain.

Tony picked at his already impeccably clean suit. “That’s true. Why do it myself when I could just pay someone to do it for me?”

The Captain scoffed at him. “What are you gonna do? Throw money at the guy until he talks?”

“Just because I don’t resort to a gun doesn’t mean I can’t hold my own. If information is what we need, I can get it no problem.”

The Captain crossed his arms defensively. “What, by doing it your way?”

“It’s a hell of a lot more effective than your way,” Tony snorted.

“Oh really? I have a lot of bodies that might disagree with you.”

“Key word: bodies. How many of those people actually talked before you blew their brains out? Your way is too primitive; the whole ‘let’s just beat the shit out of them until they talk’ thing is old fashioned, and it doesn’t always work. I mean, look at this guy,” Tony said, gesturing to their unconscious guest. “You really think he’ll start spilling the beans if you slap him around a couple times? You’ll just waste time and ruin some clothes. Let me take care of this.”

The Captain scoffed at him. “What are you gonna do? Throw money at the guy until he talks?”
"Please, I only bribe people with class," Tony said with a wave of his hand. "No, I prefer to use technological warfare."

The Captain shot him an unimpressed look.

"Listen, you need to wake up. This is the 21st century, not some cheesy 1940’s Al Capone reenactment! You can’t rely on just your fists anymore. You see, it’s not about having the bigger guns, it’s about having the best guns."

"Oh, and I suppose you have the best guns?"

"Let me run a trace on this guy. Give me an hour and I’ll know everything down to what elementary school he went to."

"I have yet to see how that helps," The Captain drawled.

Tony shot another glare towards the hulking blonde. "You'll have everything on this guy! Five minutes and I can have him posted as a top sexual predator. Hell, buy me a coffee, and I’ll have him up on the FBI Most Wanted list before you get back. I can send everyone on this guy, both government and criminals with just a few taps on my keyboard. What about the secrets this guy is hiding? Release those to the public and HYDRA thinks he’s gonna rogue. No matter now we spin it, we’ll get what we need from him, he’ll be a dead man, and you wouldn’t even have to lift a finger."

Silence echoed through the small room, broken sporadically by their prisoner’s raspy breaths, still unconscious. Tony stared at The Captain, starting to think that he had won him over. That was until The Captain gave a sharp laugh. "That’s the worst idea I’ve ever heard."

Tony startled. "Are you kidding me?"

"What the hell do you think will happen if information starts pouring out about this guy? HYDRA will know we’ve got him, and they’ll come after us!"

"The fact that you think that I can’t fake some files is just plain insulting," Tony hissed. Who the hell did this guy think he is?

"And what about digging through the rest of his info? You’ll leave a paper trail. How long until HYDRA tracks it back to us? How long until they find my hideouts, take out the rest of my crew? No, we’re doing it my way."

"Your way will just give us another dead body!"

"Exactly!" The Captain shouted, throwing his hands in the air. "You said that you can get him on the FBI’s Most Wanted, right? Let his fear drive him to give us info. What makes you think he’ll believe you? Besides, for all of this to work in the end, we’d have to let him go. Have him go back out into the wild, and just hope that some cop will pick him up? Yeah, I don’t think so. He’ll know what I look like and know that we’re working together! What’s to say HYDRA won’t get to him first? Then we’ll all be screwed. No, this man doesn’t leave this room alive."

Tony wanted to strangle the man. Who does The Captain think he is, talking to Tony like he was some amateur? Like he has no idea what he’s getting himself into. It made his blood boil. It had been a long time since anyone had talked to him like that. Even when he was young, gangly limbs still filling out his awkward body Tony had stood head tall and teeth bared in both the classroom and the boardroom. In the public eye, even the private. Everyone always praised how much he was
like Howard in that regard. Little did they know, he'd gotten that way not because of Howard teaching him, but from the man leading the attack against Tony himself. Maybe that had been his plan all along. That was his parenting style, survival of the fittest.

But it didn't matter how often Tony tried; in Howard's eyes, he was never fit enough. And here he was, years later, staring up at a man, wearing the same face he'd seen his father wear too many times. I'm not a child, anymore. You will not beat me.

"If you kill him now, you won't get all of his information," Tony pushed back. "Look at him! That man over there is not gonna squeal when you start throwing punches; he'll just bring it to the grave. Throw in some threats, rough him up a little bit, and I'll do the rest. Let him go and I'll have every government organization on him from the CIA to the National Park Conservation Association. He won't last a day out there, and he'll have no choice but to come crawling back to me. He'll spill everything he knows, and I'll make everything go away with a snap of my fingers. And then you can put a bullet in his brain. We're doing it my way."

The Captain stomped over to Tony, puffing up his chest. Any weaker man probably would have wet his pants but Tony wasn't buying it. "I don't take orders from you," hissed The Captain.

Tony just sneered back. "Likewise, sweetheart."

"If you think you can just come in here, and tell me how to interrogate my prisoners- "

"My? What happened to being a team player?"

"Maybe I don't want some pompous asshole like you on my team anymore."

Tony gave a hollow chuckle. "Well that's too bad for you, honeybuns. You dragged me into this, so it looks like you're stuck with my pompous asshole. Now step aside, and let me work my magic."

The Captain refused to budge. "You're not going anywhere. How about I put you in another chair like our guest here?"

"How about I push some buttons and reveal your face to the world?" Tony asked, pulling out his phone.

"How about the next time either of you talk, you both get a bullet in your brain?"

Both men whipped around, Tony startling with an added jump. Across the room sat Natasha Romanoff, idly picking at her nails.

When did she get here?

The fiery redhead walked over to the two men with grace, but her face spoke volumes of harsh annoyance. "If I have to sit through any more of this pissing contest, someone will die. And, oddly enough, it probably won't be the guy we brought here to kill."

Tony looked at the ground before glancing over at The Captain. Tony saw as he rubbed a hand at the back of his neck, a faint blush dusting across his cheeks. Tony smirked at The Captain, seeing as he looked like someone who got in trouble at school. When he looked back at Romanoff, the smile fell quickly from his face when he was met with another icy stare.

God, this woman is terrifying.
Romanoff looked between the two of them, giving a small smile when both men kept their mouths shut. “I’m glad we had this talk. Now that that’s out of the way, let’s deal with this.” She pointed back to the man in the chair, but shot her arms out when the other two men stepped towards the chair. “Oh no. We’re doing it my way.”

Tony decided that it was in his better judgement that he not argue with that. He stepped off to the side of the room, leaning against a cold wall to watch the show while The Captain remained at attention in the center of the room, waiting to be the first thing their prisoner sees when he wakes up.

Tony watched as Romanoff sidled over to the man, pulling a small bottle of smelling salts out of her back pocket. A quick whiff under the man’s nose, and he shot into consciousness, gasping for breath. He barely had time to take in his surroundings before Romanoff landed a sharp slap to the man’s face.

“What the- Where am I?” the man managed to choke out.

“Immaterial,” replied Romanoff. “Who are you? Who do you work for?”

“What are you talking abo- ”

The man doubled over when Romanoff pressed a finger against his shoulder wound. “I asked you a question. I expect an answer.”

Romanoff pulled away, waiting for the man to respond. Tony shifted uneasily against the wall. Maybe it would be better if he waited outside. It seemed that Romanoff’s interrogation style was not that much different than The Captain’s. However, Tony thought that she could probably get much more creative. Tony never really had the stomach for all that. Sure he could handle a lot, but even he had his limits. Another hit and muffled grunt got Tony’s attention.

The man in the chair still ignored Romanoff, opting to take a look around the room. His gaze met The Captain’s, and then Tony’s. Tony couldn’t help but smile when he saw the man give a small flinch. “So it’s true then. You guys are working together?”

The Captain pulled out his gun. “That’s not the question she asked you.”

The bound man gave a small smile. “Sorry, Captain. I don’t feel much like talking today.”

Tony shot forward. “Yeah, let’s back up. How do you know who he is?” he asked, waving to the Captain’s face.

“If I wasn’t going to talk to him, I sure as hell am not saying anything to you, Stark.”

Tony’s jaw clenched. He opened his mouth his give a snarky retort, but Romanoff stepped in. “Then you can talk to me. The way I see it, you have a few options. Option A,” she said nodding to The Captain, “is I let The Captain beat you to a pulp, until you’re begging for a bullet in your brain. Or, Option B,” she continued, pointing at Tony, “where Stark here gets you on the wanted list of every known government, putting you on the run until you find yourself screaming for mercy in some shitty Russian gulag. And of course, just because I’m feeling generous, you can have Option C, which is me. You tell me everything I need to know, and I’ll make sure Bonnie and Clyde over here won’t become a problem for you.”

Tony could see the fear in the man’s eyes, hell, Tony was even sweating from that exchange. But when it looked like the man would finally answer, he just started laughing.
“I fail to see how this is funny, son,” sneered The Captain.

“Don’t you see? It doesn’t matter, nothing matters. It’s too late; they probably already know you snatched me,” the man continued in between his laughs.

“Who’s they?” Tony demanded. Please, let it be anyone but them.

“I think you already know the answer to that question, Stark.”

The Captain reached forward and grabbed the man by his shoulders. It seemed as if he was just as distressed as Tony about hearing the confirmation of HYDRA, if not more so. “Who the hell are you?”

“The first of many,” the man hissed. “Cut off one head and two more shall take its place.” Tony watched as the man’s tongue traced the inside of his mouth, before Tony heard a crack as the man bit down on something. “Hail HYDRA.”

The man’s mouth started foaming, seizures racking his body. Before the three of them even had time to react, the man was dead, lying slumped in the chair, eyes dull and vacant.

Cyanide pill, Tony thought, eyes wide with shock. That wasn’t supposed to happen. Tony looked back over at The Captain whose surprise mirrored his own.

“What the hell do we do now?”

Chapter End Notes

Comments/feedback are always wanted!
Steve was pacing. He felt the weight of Stark’s gaze on him, but continued to ignore him. He knew what he wanted, but Steve was just as much in the dark as he was. It's nothing he had seen before either. Even when facing HYDRA the first time, they’d never resorted to something like this. This did not bode well. “How?”

Natasha, who was still mulling over the body, stood back with a small sigh. “Fake tooth. Very inconspicuous; no one would even think to look.”

Steve rubbed his hands over his face. “This could not have gone worse.”

Stark shrugged. “He could have had a grenade instead of cyanide.”

Steve stared at his new business partner. For just watching a man kill himself, Stark looked remarkably calm. However, Steve could still see some uneasiness hidden behind his brown eyes. Steve knew he had the same look in his own. “Any thoughts?” Steve prompted.

Stark looked back at man in the chair. “Well, dead man tells no tales,” he quipped, stepping over to him. “So I guess I’ll just do the talking for him.” Steve watched as Stark pulled out his phone before snapping a few close ups of the man’s face.

“You sure?” Stark had boasted all about how he could bring weaker men to their knees without so much as taking a swing. And while Steve would be foolish not to believe him, there was a heavy layer of uneasiness that sat with him. He didn't doubt Stark's skills, but who was really to gain here? What he said he could do to their prisoner with only a computer - how long before he does the same to Steve? To the crew? Stark's full skill set was unknown to him; the man himself was a ticking time bomb. Trying to keep any control of the situation with his methods was the only way he could think of to potentially keep the mouthy brunette in line.

Of course, all their arguing didn't really seem to matter in the end. All that bickering and all they had to show for it was another dead body. And no answers.

Stark turned back to him. “Captain, the man had a tooth full of cyanide. He was prepared for if we ever caught up with him. Why go through all this trouble unless you have something to hide? We can’t leave empty handed. I’ll be able to easily get facial recognition off him with these new photos. Let me dig into him.”

“Let me run a trace on this guy. Give me an hour and I’ll know everything down to what elementary school he went to.”

Steve knew that Stark was right. What other choice did they have? Honestly, he would take any kind of answers at this point. Even if that meant doing it Stark’s way. All he could do know is pray that this gesture of good faith keeps Stark on their side. “Do it.”

Stark nodded, slipping his phone into tailored suit. “Well then. This was fun, but I’ll, uh, just leave you to it,” he said, gesturing to the dead body.

Steve stopped him before he could leave. “Wait. When you find anything, don’t come back here. It was risky enough that you’ve showed up a few times already. But now we know that people are
watching us, and I’m not gonna let you lead them straight to me and my people.”

*I will not let you risk my family.*

“How am I supposed to get in touch with you?”

Steve snorted. “It took you a few hours to find my home base. Surely Tony Stark could figure out a measly phone number.”

“Touché, Captain,” Stark responded with a smirk. “I’ll be in touch,” he added before sauntering out of the room, giving a small salute.

Steve watched him go before turning back to the dead body.

*This is only the beginning,* he thought. And they were already behind. He'd been so naïve, *again,* thinking that he wouldn't be blindsided this time. And yet, HYDRA still managed to be three steps ahead. It was almost as if he'd learned nothing.

But today wasn't a compete victory for them. Last time, Steve hadn't seen the full picture until it was too late. He hadn't seen what HYDRA was truly capable of until it was too late. But this time, they'd shown their hand too early. If this is what they're willing to resort to, then the storm coming is far worse than what he'd imagined. But at least he's seen it coming, this time. He could protect them, this time.

“I’ll take care of this,” Natasha said, moving to stand next to him.

“Later,” interjected Steve. “Call a family meeting.”

“Of course. Steve, I-”

“Don’t,” Steve started, turning to face her. “I know what you’re gonna say. This wasn’t your fault.”

“I should have known that-”

“You said it yourself that no one would have thought to look there. You couldn’t have known.”

“It’s my job to know,” she said softly.

He put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “Stark will find something. We’ll have a break through, and then we’ll get the job done. Just like we always do. And besides, it wouldn’t be fun if it wasn’t a challenge, would it?”

Steve counted it as a win when he saw a small smile grace Natasha’s face. “I’ll go get everyone. Ten minutes.”

Steve heard Natasha exit the room, but his eyes never left the HYDRA man in the chair. *I will be better, this time,* he thought to himself. *For them.*

There was a little part of Steve that just wanted to run. Take the crew and leave; find a new life, new city, far away from HYDRA and the impending doom that stood before them.

But Steve knew he could never leave. He had worked so hard to get here; he wasn’t going to sit idly by and let HYDRA terrorize Brooklyn, terrorize New York. He owed everyone that much.

“You have something against running away?”
“If you start running, they’ll never let you stop.”

Steve groaned as he rubbed his forehead, wishing for ancient memories to stop swirling around in his head. This wasn’t the time get nostalgic; his team needed him.

He left the room, walking back upstairs and towards their meeting room only to run into Bucky.

“Hey, Nat just filled me in. A cyanide tooth?” This isn’t good, Bucky had meant. What do we do now? was the real question.

Steve just nodded. “Everyone in there?”

“Yes, we got them all.”

Steve walked into the overcrowded room, the bustling conversations coming to a halt. As The Commandos stared at him, Steve noted how to compensate for the small room, his team ended up sharing seats, leaning against each other to make sure everyone had a place in the cramped space. It was moments like this where Steve couldn’t help but smile, the scene before him reminding Steve that they were more than a team. They were a family. One that Steve was not willing to lose.

Not again.

His men pulled back as he walked through, making space so Steve could sit at his usual chair at the head of the room. He sat down, immediately resting his head in his hand, waiting for Bucky to shut the door and squeeze through the room to sit at Steve’s right.

“Alright. No doubt you’ve heard by now that our interrogation with the man downstairs was… less than stellar.” A few murmured chuckles resounded in the room. “However. Stark is gonna pull some strings and get us the information we need.”

“We really gonna trust this guy?” Bucky asked.

“Trust? No. Deal with? Yes. Besides we don’t really have a choice now. He’s our only lead to getting any information about HYDRA.”

“So it’s true then? They’re back?” Dugan asked.

“Looks like it.” Steve answered. The room exploded in noise, The Commandos desperate voices filing the space. Steve’s head was pounding; he really didn’t need this right now. He flicked hand in Clint’s direction, and a sharp whistle pulled his men out of their side conversations.

“That being said,” Steve continued patiently. “We’re going to have to take some precautions in the future until this problem is resolved.”

“Like what?” a voice called out.

“Well, for one, we can’t go through with this job.” Steve ignored the resounding groans he got from the other occupants in the room.

“If we wait around, we’ll lose our window of opportunity,” argued Natasha.

“I don’t care; it’s too risky. Until we have a better handle on our current situation, we need to lay low. That means,” Steve continued, looking at Dugan, “no more bar fights. No more flirting with government officials or disasters like in Budapest,” he said, flicking an eye from Sam, to Clint and Nat. “And that definitely means no drunken displays at Coney Island.”
“That was one time,” Bucky tried to interject, but Steve held up a hand.

“All I’m saying is that we need to stay on the right side of the law for now; don’t go around attracting attention. Always check your six, and never find yourself alone. You don’t know who could be watching.”

The room sat tense, but Steve didn’t have time to sugarcoat anything for The Commandos. HYDRA was back; he needed to protect his people at all cost. He had to.

_It won’t be like last time. I won’t let that happen again._

“All right then,” he said, drawing eyes back to him. “We need to figure out how-”

Steve was cut off when the door banged open and a police officer raced into the room. Sam was the first to react; he saw the uniform and had his gun drawn before the officer could even respond.

Clint jumped up. “Hey! Put your goddamn gun down,” he shouted at Sam, racing across the room to grab the gun from the man’s hand, quickly disassembling it. “Fuckin’ newbie,” he added, landing a sharp slap to the back of Sam’s head.

Steve watched as Clint then slid over to the officer, smiling softly. “Phil?” Clint tried to get the man’s attention, but Coulson only had eyes for Steve. He was out of breath; who knows how far Coulson ran to get here. He looked flustered, putting Steve on edge. Coulson doesn’t get flustered. And he sure as hell wouldn’t be caught walking around the base of The Commandos in broad daylight. Something wasn’t right.

“What’s wrong?” Steve questioned.

“I’m sorry; I wouldn’t even think to come here unless I knew it was serious,” Coulson managed to stammer out.

“Coulson,” Steve prompted.

“Right, sorry. Clint’s told me what’s been going on the past few days- which I’ve elected to ignore,” he cut in when Steve shot a hardened gaze at Clint. “It’s just, you told me to keep an eye out. For anything HYDRA related.”

Steve’s gaze snapped back to Coulson. “You find them?”

Coulson shook his head. “Not exactly. I heard Fury mention the name a few times.”

“What did he say?”

“Not much. All I know is that he just left the station a little while ago. He’s going to make a move.”

“Against HYDRA?”

“No. That’s the problem.”

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Tony uploaded another picture of the now dead HYDRA goon. There was no way that he couldn’t
find out who the man was now. The crystal clear pictures Tony had taken before he left The Captain with the body would give him answers in a matter of minutes.

“Alright, JARVIS. Let’s try this again. You know the drill; I want everything.”

“Of course, Sir. Scanning now.”

Tony paced in his office, pondering over everything that had happened. Even he couldn’t deny it anymore; HYDRA was out there. And they meant business. The real question now was how far Tony was willing to go to get rid of them. The Captain took care of them once; surely he could do it again. But he’d seen his face down in the basement. The Captain obviously wasn't the most forthcoming about what had happened the first time he'd faced off with HYDRA, but seeing him so distraught already didn't sit well with Tony. If anything, it bolstered the fact that they needed to care of this problem as soon as possible.

But could he work with The Commandos? Tony could probably have an easier time talking to a brick wall than The Captain. Their relationship was already wobbling on the shaky foundation built of a mutual distrust and wariness. The argument at the base was mostly likely the first of many. How much longer before one snide comment becomes a tipping point, and Tony is gunned down by one of The Captain's trigger-happy hounds.

Was Tony really willing to lay down on the wire for these people?

*Caring is a weakness.*

*Why lay down on the wire when you can just cut it?*

“Sir?”

“What? You got him?” Tony startled out of his own head.

“No, Sir. My protocols are being overwritten.”

“Wait, what?”

“There is a security breach.”

Tony reacted immediately, jumping over his deck and reaching to an extra handgun he taped to the underside. This sure as hell wasn't The Captain's work. If he'd decided he was done with their partnership, Tony knew the man had no qualms sending Barnes to pop him in the street. And if it wasn't The Commandos, it had to be the looming doom of HYDRA, coming back to finish the job. He looked at the door, bracing for action.

When the door finally opened, Tony was not met with mobsters, but with what looked like a very pissed off policeman with- *wait, is that an eyepatch?*

“What the-”

“Mr. Stark.”

“Maybe,” he asked, hiding the hand holding his firearm under the desk. The last thing he needed to be slapped with was a public arrest for endangering a cop. "Who the hell are you?"

“Commissioner Nicolas Fury. If you’re not too busy, I’m going to need you to come down to the station with me.”
Tony narrowed his eyes. “Why?”

Fury almost sneered back at him. “I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“Well, sorry, Blackbeard. You’re going to have to schedule an appointment.”

Fury gave a hollow chuckle before reaching into his uniform. Tony tensed, his hand still lying over his gun. He couldn’t help but give a small curse when Fury pulled out not a gun, but a warrant.

“Maybe I wasn’t asking.”

Chapter End Notes

As you've probably noticed, I've been hinting at both Tony and Steve's past. As the story continues, expect more about Howard's parenting style as well as Steve's first encounter with HYDRA. And of course I'll be throwing in the added bonus of how Howard connects with Steve. So be prepared.

Just a head's up: it's not gonna be pretty.

As usual, I live for comments/feedback!
Thank you for keeping up with the story, I hope you're enjoying it!
“Sir?”

“What?” Pierce didn’t even bother turning around to face who was addressing him. His worker’s nervousness screamed bad news.

“Well, it’s Rumlow. He hasn’t checked in since he left on a lead for The Captain.”

Pierce let out a small sigh, but didn’t respond. He knew this was going to happen, hell, he'd wanted it to happen. But Rumlow was a good soldier. *Maybe I should have sent someone else.*

“Should we send some- ”

“No,” Pierce cut him off. “Don’t bother. If he hasn’t checked in by now, you know what’s happened.”

“Of course, Sir. What should we- ”

“Leave. I’ll take care of it.” The squirrelly man dipped out of Pierce’s office, no doubt relieved that he survived being the bringer of bad news. Unknowingly, the man had actually brought the best news he's heard all day. Assuming that everything had gone according to plan.

Pierce smiled as he punched a number into his phone.

“Is it done?”

“Yes, it’s just been confirmed.”

A static laugh came through the phone. *“I knew they wouldn’t be able to resist. We basically handed them Rumlow on a silver platter.”*

Pierce furrowed his brow. “Well, I hope you know what you’re doing because this has already cost me a man.”

“Relax, Pierce. Rumlow was an idiot if he thought he could spy on Stark and The Captain without them catching wind. At least this way we have the upper hand again.”

“Well how do we now it even worked?”

“You forget who you’re talking to; it worked. Now that the signal’s dead, I’ll retrieve the transmissions and have answers for you by the end of the hour.”

“Alright; keep me updated.”

"Monger, out."

Pierce hung up the phone and leaned back in his chair. *This better work,* he thought to himself. He cursed when he saw the clock, quickly grabbing his briefcase before heading out the door for work.
After Rumlow’s initial failure at Stark’s meeting with the military, Pierce knew he had to step up his game. There was no use ignoring it now; Stark was working with The Captain. This was bad news. Sure, The Captain was a huge threat to them already, but with Stark? The two of them together could tear apart what Pierce had spent months rebuilding.

Yes, Stark had to be taken care of. Immediately. Normally Pierce would just result to Hammer for these sorts of things, but Stark was a wily one. He had been dodging Hammer for years; Pierce needed him dealt with now.

Which left The Monger. If The Captain was willing to resort to unlikely allies, than he would do the same. It was a game, after all, and he was here for the long haul. Every move The Captain would make would be met with one twice as powerful. Stark was a threat, sure, there were enough whispers about The Monger that even had he, the head of HYDRA, turning his head. Their current arrangement was rocky, of course, but they had a common enemy.

This situation with Rumlow was a test run, to see how his new business partner operated. Pierce had been a little skeptical with The Monger’s plan, but so far, it had wielded nothing but results. Rumlow was dead, a definite inconvenience, but the upcoming profit would be so much sweeter than the losses.

It was simple really; The Monger knows how Stark operates. With him working with The Captain, they knew that it was only a matter of time before they caught up with Rumlow.

*Why not just give him to them?* The Monger had asked, showing Pierce a fake tooth.

Pierce had implanted the use of the cyanide pills not too long ago. With such sensitive information him and his men were working with, there was no way they could let anyone get their hands on it. It was quick and easy, not to mention a perfect way to test loyalties.

So of course Rumlow would use it when he got caught. What he didn’t know, however, that he had been given an updated version. Made by The Monger.

It was all too easy to call Rumlow in for some “routine inspection” on his fake tooth. Take the tooth off, inspect and replace the cyanide. But, instead of giving him back the old one, Pierce gave Rumlow The Mongers version. Same fake tooth, same cyanide, but with a small addition. A small transmitter, a bug, easily hidden within the poison.

The Monger knew that The Captain was always careful, destroying phones, and checking for trackers. It was part of the reason no one had been able to catch him.

But no one ever thinks to look at the teeth.

The plan was beautiful in it's simplicity. Pierce sent Rumlow out to look for Stark and The Captain to “place another bomb” all the while The Monger traced the electromagnetic waves of the transmitter. Rumlow gets caught by The Captain’s men, and dragged back to one of their hideouts. Rumlow refuses to cooperate, biting on the tooth, which of course crushes the transmitter along with the cyanide, making it impossible for Stark to trace it back to them.

It was ingenious.

If everything worked as planned, The Monger should be able to come up with a location. And then? It would be time for their next move.

Pierce smiled again, walking at a brisker pace. Today was a good day.
“I’m sorry; I don’t want to get off on the wrong foot. Do I look at the patch or the eye?”

“Mr. Stark, please- ”

“It’s a legitimate question!”

Fury sighed deeply, glaring back at Tony. It was a gaze that made Tony uneasy. One that knew too much. This one was going to be a problem, Tony thought to himself. He was already on edge, his body coiled tense as a coil, charge reverberating through his body, the current looking for an outlet to expel the energy. He had been brought into the station plenty times before, sure. He was never worried though; it wasn't like they could pin him with anything. Any evidence of his less-than legal hobbies that could ever be considered incriminating were constantly screened and destroyed by his eye in the cyber sky, JARVIS. But being here, right in the wake of everything that was happening with HYDRA? It couldn't be a coincidence.

Not that Tony showed an ounce of this stress. No, instead he wore his usual mask, one of cool indifference, staring back at the Commissioner with bored eyes. He was leaned back at an angle, legs propped up on the table in front of him, displaying himself completely at ease as he sat in the uncomfortable chair in one of many interrogation rooms of the NYPD. He wasn't sure how many men Fury had broken it here, in this very chair, but Tony wasn't going to be another name on that list.

“Mr. Stark. I just need to ask you a few questions,” Fury continued.

Tony shrugged. “You answer mine, I answer yours. Let’s start. Why am I here?”

“As I said before, I just need to ask a few questions.”

“Is that what it said on the warrant? Correct me if I’m wrong, Commissioner, but don’t you only give out warrants to people you’re going to arrest?”


“Please, Stark. You’re as crooked as they come.”

“And yet, no one’s been able to charge me.”

“The only reason you don’t find yourself in a cell is because of your powerful friends.”

“I’d like to think it was my own spunk that got me where I am today,” Tony drawled.

“So you admit to being a crook?”

“Of course not. I’m just admitting that I’m smarter than you.” Tony silently preened when he saw Fury clench his jaw.

"Being the smartest person in the room, doesn't mean that you always actually are. It means you know how to act like it. How do you think I survived working with your father all these years?"
“Mr. Stark,” Fury continued after a moment. “My men have been trying for days to get your statement on what happened at your last business deal.”

Tony balled his fists. He didn't have time for this, nor did he much care for it. The lengthy statements, the half-assed condolences. The ’we have our best men on it’ spiel. Tony wondered what it would be like to be a law-abiding citizen. To put so much blatant trust in the government, in the system. To be so oblivious to agendas, hidden beneath pompous propaganda and plastic smiles. To think everything was black and white.

Happy had been attacked and Tony knew who did it. He wasn't going to sit around and wait for the system to decide whether or not its in their best interest of pursuing. HE wasn't going to waste time figuring out if Fury was the type to just write some shit down and send him on his merry way, or be in the minority that actually put on the blue uniform to help people. Fury probably wasn't one of them; those poor blokes get themselves killed too young. “I can’t imagine how much more light I could shed on the situation,” he finally grit out.

“Well, I’d like to think that the bomb was meant for you. Know anyone that would want you dead?”

Tony couldn’t help but fall into a laughing fit. “You really want me to answer that?”

“Well, whoever it is, they seem to be pretty serious. We know about your involvement with some of New York’s gangs- ”

“Alleged involvement.”

Fury sighed again. “Fine. Alleged involvement. And somewhere along the line, you’ve managed to piss someone off.”

“You’ll have to be more specific, I do that all the time. It’s a hobby,” Tony chided.

“Well, you’re going to have to sit down long and hard to think, then. The fact that they’re targeting you means serious business. Now, I could give a rat’s ass about what happens to you, but if there’s a potential for a mob war, I need to know about that. I have a city to protect.”

Case and point. When did the policemen become the politicians? “And I am a citizen of said city. Doesn’t that mean you have to protect me to?”

Fury raised an eyebrow. “You asking for protection, Stark?”

“Please,” Tony smiled. “Don’t make me laugh.” When Fury didn’t respond, Tony continued. “We done here? You can’t detain me without a charge.”

“We’re done. For now. I’ll escort you- ”

“I can do that, Sir.”

Tony nearly jumped out of his skin; he hadn’t even heard the other man come in.

Fury gave a small nod. “Thanks, Coulson.”

“Uh, no. I can find my own way home, thank you very- ”

Tony stopped when Coulson reached out and grabbed his arm. “I insist, Mr. Stark. Don’t test me.”

Tony’s eyes widened slightly, not missing the way Coulson’s lip twitched in a small smile as he
saw that Tony realized where he’d heard that before. There’s no way, he thought to himself. Is there?

“Right then,” Tony replied slowly. “Commissioner,” he said, heading to the door after giving Fury a small wave.

“Stark.”

Tony froze, glancing carefully over his shoulder to where Fury had gotten out of his chair.

“One day you’re going to realize that you’re in over your head, Stark. There’s a storm coming, and I think you know it. Don’t even bother trying to lie; I know you haven’t told me everything you know. We could have been allies in this, you and I. I think you know who bombed you; you know who’s coming after you. But you’re protecting someone, and now you’re standing in my way. That makes you a threat. A threat that I won’t hesitate to take down if you continue to be a hindrance. You better tread lightly, Stark. There’s a new player on the battlefield, now. And it’s me.”

Tony stood as tall as he could. It seemed that his initial conclusion of the man had been right. This one knows too much. And his threats were not to be trifled with. “Guess I better go and get my armor.” And with that, Tony slid out of the interrogation room, following dutifully behind Coulson.

It wasn’t long before he was slipping in the passenger seat of Coulson’s police cruiser, still eyeing the officer warily. Coulson didn’t seem to notice Tony’s staring, just starting up the car instead, heading back towards Midtown.

After about five minutes of uncomfortable silence, Tony blurted out, “I’m sorry, should I be saying something? Because you’re very cryptic and I’m not exactly sure what’s going on here.”

“A thank you would be nice.”

Tony slammed his knee on the underside of the dash when he jumped straight off his seat. “Fuck!” he shouted, moving his hands to cup his leg, while his head snapped around to the back of the car. “You need to stop doing that; my heart literally can’t take it.”

The Captain leaned forward from the rear seat, giving a small smile. “Maybe it’s just age.”

“You bite your tongue,” Tony snapped back, causing The Captain to grin wider. Tony rolled his eyes, before looking back to Coulson. And then to The Captain. And then back to Coulson. “No way,” Tony continued, his mouth gaping open. “You’re in with the police? Bribing the good and honest men of the NYPD, are we now? Didn’t seem to peg you as one of those guys, Cap.” Tony couldn’t help but notice a faint flush breeze over The Captain’s face after the use of the nickname.

“He doesn’t pay me,” Coulson retorted, still staring out at the road ahead of them.

“What, does he bring you cookies? Oh, wait; that’s Girl Scouts.”

“Stark,” Tony heard The Captain groan from the backseat.

“Yes, dear?”

“What did Fury want?”

“Nothing to do with you, sweet cheeks.”
The Captain huffed before glaring at Tony. “He wanted to know who bombed Stark. My guess is that he already knows it was HYDRA; he just wanted to see if he could get Stark on his side, use him for information,” answered Coulson.

Tony narrowed his eyes at the driver. “Which I declined, whole heartedly! Fury would just use me until I ended up with a one way ticket to prison.”

“So he didn’t get anything from you?” asked The Captain.

“Not a word. He’s no closer to HYDRA, let alone even know you’re involved with me. You and your crew are in the clear, Cap.”

Tony smiled softly when he heard a small, “Thank you,” emitted from behind him.

“Don’t thank me yet,” Tony continued. “He knows I’m hiding something, which means he’ll have people watching me. We’re going to have to be more careful about our meetings.”

The Captain nodded in agreement. “You get anywhere with our latest guest?”

Tony scrambled for his phone; he had completely forgotten about the search he sent JARVIS on. Quickly connecting to JARVIS, he asked, “What do you got for me, J?”

“We have a match for facial recognition, Sir. Your mystery man is Brock Rumlow.”

Tony jolted forward as the car came to a screeching halt. “What the hell,” Tony hissed.


“You know him?” The Captain questioned.

“He used to be a police officer. Got thrown out of the force a few years back for assaulting his witnesses.”

Tony shared a look with The Captain. “A police officer,” uttered the blonde.

“Maybe you aren’t the only one with their hands in the NYPD.”

Yeah,” Pierce sat behind his work desk, idly holding his phone between his fingers.

“The transmitter pulled through. We have a location.” The Monger’s voice carried through the phone.

“What now?”

“Here’s what I’m thinking. No one’s ever been able to find where The Captain works, right? Where he stores his weapons, where he lives, or where he does his interrogations.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that what if they aren’t different places, but just one, singular place.”

“You think he operates from one location?”
“How else would he have such control over everything? Sure, it’s risky, but there would be no way that anything could happen without him knowing. It’s clean, efficient. He’s able to keep hold on all his reins and keep everyone in line, all under one roof.”

“So this location that we have. It might be The Captain’s actual hideout?”

“Only one way to find out.”

Pierce grinned. “Get another bomb ready.” He hung up the phone and leaned back comfortably in his chair.

A sharp knock on the door pulled him from his thoughts. “Ah, Commissioner,” he said as Fury slipped through his door.

“Chief. You called?”

“Take a seat, Nick. I heard you had a meeting with Stark today. How’d that go?”

Chapter End Notes

Just a side note: School has started up again, and believe it or not, but Tony Stark may have misled everyone:

Engineering is hard.

I will try keep up with my 10 day spectrum for posting a new chapter, but if I go over a few days don't worry! I either just have writer's block, or I'm stuck trying to optimize modern control systems. Or both. It's probably both.

So just bear with me!

As always, comments/concerns/requests are most welcome! Thanks for reading!
Chapter 12

The steady beat of the heart monitor pierced through Steve’s ears. He looked across the bed, watching as Tony Stark flipped through the channels on the small hospital TV.

“Ah, here we go,” Stark said finally. “He loves Downton Abbey.”

Steve smiled softly, looking back at Happy Hogan, Tony’s main bodyguard, still and quiet on his bed. “Have the doctors said anything?”

Stark shrugged. “His body is healing fine; it’s just up to him if he wants to get up or not. If you ask me, he’s taking this nap just to get out of work,” Stark responded with a smile, before looking down at his employee. “What an asshole,” he deadpanned, Steve hearing the underlying affection.

The two had been meeting up in Hogan’s room for over two weeks, deeming it the safest place given their current situation. No one looked twice when they saw Tony Stark slip in to see his friend, and with his resources, Stark faked Steve an ID making him look like any other hospital volunteer. Just in case HYDRA was still watching, the two never came or left at the same time, choosing inconspicuous routes to avoid detection.

Steve had been pretty happy with the calm, a nice reprieve from all of the hectic events that had happened. But it had been two weeks. Two weeks and just, nothing.

No threats, no bombs, no bodies, no HYDRA. It was like they had just dropped off the face off the planet again. While Steve and The Commandos were glad to have the break, each passing day they just sat around waiting was pushing Steve’s paranoia through the roof.

Coulson hadn’t managed to find any files on Officer Rumlow, thus cementing the idea that HYDRA had someone working with them within the precinct. What held Steve on edge more was the fact that Stark hadn’t been digging up anymore dirt either. It seemed that all of Rumlow’s files had been redacted or completely destroyed.

But Steve knew HYDRA. They weren’t in hiding, they were biding their time. Waiting for the right moment to strike. And without any further leads from Rumlow, it seemed they were back to the beginning, left floundering while HYDRA slowly cornered them against a wall. The real question was whether or not they were planning their next move against Stark or against himself.

Steve leaned back in his chair, biting his nail. HYDRA had the upper hand, and they definitely knew it. It was wearing on Steve’s nerves. He liked to be in control, needed to be in control. How much longer before they strike? How much longer until he wouldn’t be staring at a hospital bed, but a grave?

No.

Steve was stronger now, he was better now. He wouldn’t sit idly by and let HYDRA destroy the family he had left.

He looked across to Stark, who was typing furiously on his phone. Even after these weeks of working together, Steve was nowhere closer to understanding the enigma that was Tony Stark. It seemed that, besides his initial hesitation, Stark was fully invested now. He always seemed to be working, exhausting his resources to get a lead on HYDRA. Steve could see the faint dark rings that lay under the brunette’s eyes, the chestnut orbs going a little dull themselves. Each passing day, Stark seemed to look more and more grim. Not that Steve could blame him; he didn’t doubt he
looked exactly the same.

“Are you even listening to me?”

Steve startled, Stark’s voice piercing his inner thoughts. “No, sorry. I- what?”

Stark gave a small smile. “Not sleeping, dear Captain?”

Steve shook his head. “Can’t. Probably won’t until this is over. I mean, it’s been weeks, and nothing has happened.”

“Sounds like we should count our blessings,” Stark replied, frowning as he said it, like he didn’t believe the words coming out of his mouth either.

“I don’t consider it to be a blessing when I know what's to come. I think you know that too. Whatever’s on it's way; it can’t be good.”

Stark nodded, placing his head in his hands. “I know. This waiting around isn’t doing me any favors either. We could try and draw them out again?”

“Probably not a good move. I mean, the one bargaining chip we had killed himself, so I wouldn’t even know where to start. Besides, now that we now HYDRA is in with the police, God only know where else they have their claws. We draw them out and we could soon find ourselves over our heads.”

“You’re right,” agreed Stark. “God,” he continued, “this is too fucked up. Life was so much easier when you stayed on your side of New York, and I stayed on mine.”

Steve smiled back at the smaller man. “Look at the bright side. My life surely wouldn’t be as interesting.”

Stark gave a hollow laugh. “You’re really just a Hallmark card aren’t you? Actually, no. You’re more like one of those motivational posters. You know, the ones with the cat hanging in the tree? Except ‘hanging in there’ for you is defeating a rival mob instead of staying in school.”

Steve shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. Education is important.”

He ignored the glare that Stark shot over to him, knowing that it was fake. He had been around the man enough to read his faces like a book. How his eyes would light up when he talked about the latest project he was working on, his calloused hands flying around animatedly, bringing out the Italian in him. How he unconsciously worried his bottom lip between his teeth as he tapped away on his computers, eyes darting around the screen. How his face would go blank whenever he talked to his business partner on the phone, or when he adorned his face with plastic smiles when he had to go out in public, quite unlike the few small ones Steve had managed to pull from the man. His eyes always looked curious, whenever he looked at Steve, it was like he was trying to take him apart like a machine.

But it’s not like he thought too much about it. Steve had a taste for the arts, and being an artist, of course he could appreciate the different contours of the human face. That was all that was. Right.

“Anyway,” Stark continued with a flourish of his hand, standing up gracefully. “Rumlow had a military background. I’m gonna meet with one of my informants and see if we can dig anything up there. Even if HYDRA has pull in the NYPD, their power can only go so far.”

“Unless they’ve got plants hidden there as well,” Steve responded solemnly.
“God, let’s hope not.” Stark checked the clock on the wall. “I’d give it about a half hour before you can take off, just to be safe. Catch some shut eye,” he said kindly, walking towards the door.

“You worried about me, Mr. Stark?”

Stark shot him an unimpressed glance. “Someone’s got to watch out for you, ya big lug. Can’t have you dozing off when the real battle begins.” He smirked, gaze Steve his customary salute, and slipped out the door.

It was odd, having pleasant conversation with the man. One could say they were almost friendly. Steve could see the extra effort Stark was putting in, and Steve was more than happy to meet him halfway. Although it was never discussed, he and Stark seemed to be on the same page that their first join operation was a complete disaster. With Rumlow dead, and the trail predictably going cold again, the pair made an unspoken agreement to learn from their mistakes and do better. Although he was never vocal about it, Steve was starting to realize that Stark had a lot to risk in this venture against HYDRA; just like he knew Steve does.

They couldn't let HYDRA get the jump on them again. Neither of them could afford the loss.

Steve watched as the door closed, listening to Stark’s footsteps fade away. He scooted lower in the plastic chair; the small furniture never letting Steve get comfortable. Steve glanced at the clock before letting his eyes drift shut. Stark was right; a small cat nap would probably help.

Steve was running, his chest burning from his nonathletic body. He didn’t dare stop however, ignoring the pain from his chest and his legs. He pushed through the thick crowds of the New York streets, wiggling through the brief open spaces. Cars honked furiously at him as Steve darted across the street, but he paid them no mind. He pulled away from the crowded streets before heading through a few alleys, running over dumpsters and through clotheslines full of fresh laundry.

When he finally reached his destination, Steve threw the door of the shop open, running past the owner, ignoring the old woman’s protests. He ran into the back room, opened the secret door and flew down the stairs.

Of course, gangly as he was, Steve tripped, falling face first down the law few steps.

“Steve!” a familiar voice shouted as Steve felt soft hands pull him up. “Are you alright?”

Steve, right on the urge of an asthma attack, looked up into the comforting chocolate orbs. “I- ” he tried to start, but was soon cut off by a coughing attack. Soothing hands rubbed along his back paired with small comforts whispered into his ear.

Steve felt his heart rate slow, lifting his head to finally look back at the friendly face. “There we go. All better now.” she said softly.

He nodded, easily getting lost in the peaceful tone of her accented voice. Remembering why he was there, Steve lurched forward, scrambling to get up. “Steve! Steve, wait!” she shouted, trying to pull Steve back from continuing down the hallway.

“No! I need to know!”
“Steve, sweetheart, please. Stay with me, don’t go down there!”

“So it’s true then!” Steve whipped around, his blue eyes ablaze. “Tell me, Peggy!”

Her eyes widened from the tone of his voice. She placed his hands gingerly on his shoulders, her mouth opening, trying to form words. “Steve, come on, let’s go grab a bite. I’m famished, I could go for- ”

“Peggy. Please,” he whispered. Steve’s heart throbbed when he saw her head bob up and down slowly.

Steve tore himself from her warm embrace and took off down the hallway. Reaching the main office, he burst through the door, the occupants startling from his sudden entrance.

“Rogers, what the hell are you doing here?” Phillips snapped. “You told him about this, didn’t you?” The older man yelled as he spun around, pointing a large finger at Bucky.

“He has a right to know!” retorted Bucky, immediately flanking Steve’s side as if to protect his weak friend from the potential threat.

“Phillips. Tell me it’s not true.”

Steve watched as his boss sighed, sitting back behind his desk chair and laying his head in his hands. “It is. Erskine’s death was no accident.”

Steve probably would have doubled over if it wasn’t from Bucky’s strong arms holding him up. “Who was it?” he managed to choke out.

“HYDRA,” Phillips responded. Autopsy report came back. There was cyanide in his system.”

Steve felt Bucky tighten his grip. “But, how is that even possible? Schmidt wouldn’t dare, would he?” Steve continued to press.

“He would,” Phillips sighed. “And he did. Again.”

“What do you mean, again?” Bucky asked, pushing in front of Steve. “What happened?”

Phillips looked up at the two younger men. “Howard’s dead.”

Steve startled from his dream, almost falling right out of the hospital chair. His chest tightened, the throbbing as painful as if he was still stuck in his scrawny body, unable to protect himself.

Unable to protect them.

Steve shuddered before standing up, scanning the room. Nothing out of the ordinary; just a bleached white room filled with the soft breathing of Tony’s bodyguard.

Pull it together, soldier.

Steve looked to the clock. Close enough. He stepped out the small room, heading down the stairs and outside to breathe in the familiar New York air.
He needed to get back to work.

He would fix it, this time.

He would save them, this time.

He would win, this time.

And then, he would finally get some sleep.
Chapter 13

“Tony.”

“No.”

“Tony-”

“No, Obie. Stop pushing this.” Tony sat glaring at his business partner from behind his desk. His head was pounding, his body flip flopping between exhaustion and hunger. These past two weeks had been nothing but hell; the last thing Tony wanted to deal with was Obie.

“I’m sorry, Tony, but I have no choice but to push this. We need to keep moving forward.”

Tony sighed, standing up on tired legs. “We are, Obie. We just finished that huge deal with the military!”

Obie walked around Tony’s desk to clasp his shoulder, his large head leaning in close. “But it’s not enough anymore. Our stock points are still dropping, Tony. We need to do something about this.”

Tony slipped out of Obie’s grasp, walking over to his personal bar. Is it too early to start drinking?

Tony shook his head, pouring a generous helping anyway. Tony couldn’t even tell what day it was, let alone the time. Besides, he needed something to keep him grounded.

HYDRA was nowhere to be found. It was driving Tony insane.

He was Tony Stark. He could find anyone and their mother with a flick of his wrist. He could dismantle government agencies if he wanted, hell, even a small nation if he put his mind to it.

But it had been over two weeks, and Tony was nowhere closer to finding any more about Rumlow or HYDRA. While Tony had first admired the challenge, he was now about two seconds from ripping his hair out. Tony could tell The Captain was just as anxious. Their meetings at the hospital were getting more and more repetitive, the two of them just trying to fool each other into thinking they still had the upper hand against HYDRA. And now Obie was breathing down his neck. Perfect.

“Tony, are you even listening to me?”

Tony spun around to face the older man. “Well, I’m just assuming you were yelling at me for something.”

Obie rolled his eyes. “Be serious, Tony.”

“I am being serious, Obie. The stock market isn't always going to be in our favor. Get that stick out of your ass and relax.”

“Tony, Tony, Tony. You’re not looking at the big picture. We can’t keep relying on military contracts to get by. If you want Stark Industries to stay on top, you need to do more.”

Tony raised an eyebrow, shooting Obie his most unimpressed stare. “And that something more is dealing under the table with Manhattan mobs?”

Obie shrugged. “Tony, it’s just another transaction with a different kind of business.”
“No, Obie. I’m not getting involved.”

“Oh, really? How are you not involved already?” Obie scoffed.

“I don’t deal with those mobs, Obie, I just consult. Just some adjustments here, some info there. I never sell full sets of Stark weapons to these people. I mean, they’re criminals, Obie! Do you really want these people running around with the best weapons on the market?”

Obie ran a large hand over his bald head. “And you think selling to the government is any better? You need to get your head out of the clouds, Tony. This is the real world; sometimes you are going to have to get your hands a little dirty to win.”

“This isn’t the way to do it, Obie. I won’t do it.”

Tony liked to think he still had some part of a moral compass left. Sure, he dealt with some mobs, but he’s never made the full leap to dealer. It was too risky. Tony had his government contracts to protect him, but they could only do so much. Fury was already poking around; if Tony starts dealing with the other half of New York, how long until he finds himself behind a cell? All that extra money he would make would do him no good when he finds himself posted with no bail.

Obie makes it sound like the company is headed for the shitter. But they're thriving by living off the military contracts. Key word, contracts. Legal, binding contracts that had enough gusto in it to keep the board happy. Speaking of the board, how happy did Obie think they would be if they found out they were selling there overstock to the gutter rats in New York? There were too many unknown variables, too high of a chance that it would go south. Forgetting morally, it didn't even seem worth it monetarily wise. Sure, New York was littered with different mobs, but compared to the armed forces of the United States? They're no more than a bug on windshield.

“But, Tony,” Obie’s voice filtered into his head. “Your father-”

“Oh, let’s not start this again,” Tony snapped.

“Your father,” Obie began again, “went above and beyond to do what was needed.”

“Look what happened! He spent years drilling me, ‘Don’t get involved, Tony. Don’t get involved.’ What a hypocrite. You know what that got him? A bullet in his brain and a half-assed car accident cover up. He was in over his head, and frankly? He got what was coming to him. So don’t ask me again, Obie. I won’t do it.”

Tony snatched his jacket up before storming out of his office and into the nearest elevator. Part of him felt bad; Obie was his mentor, basically his second father. Sometimes Tony would go as far as considering Obie his real father. Howard was nothing more than another reason for Tony to drink.

Maybe Obie was just trying to help, trying to bring Stark Industries to the next stage. But there seemed to be no payoff, and it would put thousands, if not millions at risk. Tony knew that Obie and his father had pulled some daring stunts back in the day to take control of the market, but this was just bat-shit insane. Even with Obie’s comments - he couldn't see his dad doing this. His dad had been like him, a consultant, an informant. Unlike Tony, however, he stayed loyal, settling down with one of the old mobs in New York City.

And look where that got him. Rotting six feet under with the rest of them.

No, this whole thing didn't sit well with Tony. He was sure Obie would bring it up, the bastard was nothing if not persistant, but he wouldn't win this one. There's only been a few times that he'd have to put his foot down against Obie, but Tony was sure the other man would understand. He always
Tony stepped off the elevator and through the front door, breathing in the fresh air. God, he needed Rhodey; someone to sit and think with him, someone to keep him grounded. But Rhodey was redeployed, and although Tony had got in contact with him yesterday about digging up dirt on Rumlow, Tony’s heart ached for his old friend. Pepper of course was still dealing with Happy and the car bomb, not to mention trying to keep Obie off his back as much as possible. Besides, he could only get so far when talking to an AI he created.

Tony sighed, looking down both sides of the street. He took off to the left, hoping to find some solace.

Tony stared at the circuit in front of him. Child’s play, really.

His nimble fingers danced over the tech, mind racing a thousand miles a minute. He couldn’t remember how long he had been sitting there. Not like it mattered; he often lost himself in his work, locking himself away in his endless mind.

He was free there. He was safe.

The door banging open had Tony scrambling from his seat. He watched as his father stomped over to the bar, and downing the closest alcohol, straight from the bottle. Tony had never seen him like this. His father was usually the epitome of class: smart quips, dashing smile, cool demeanor. And of course the raging tempers and cold shoulders that he showed only behind closed doors.

But this man that stood before Tony was nothing like he’d ever seen. Howard was pale, covered in a sheen of sweat, his hollow eyes darting across the room as if expecting someone to jump out at him. When his eyes finally landed on Tony, he jumped.

“Where the hell did you come from?” Howard snapped.

“I’ve been here the whole time,” Tony retorted, with a roll of his eyes.

“You watch your tone with me, boy.”

Tony rolled his eyes again, electing to ignore his father and go back to his circuit. He hears the shrill tone of his father’s phone echo in the large room, Howard fumbling to answer it quickly.

“Well?” his father nearly shouted. “It doesn’t matter how they know, Phillips, they just do. I need you to take care of this!”

Tony watched as his father paced angrily across the room, his face contorting as he continued his phone call. “Yeah, well I didn’t sign up for this, Phillips. This could ruin me. I don’t care how, but you will fix this.” Howard stopped, setting his hand down to lean against his desk. “Please,” he added softly. Tony froze. His father never said please. "I'm counting on you.”

Howard snapped the phone shut, heaving a long sigh. Tony watched as his father stood still in the room, staring blankly at the desk below him. Tony’s mind whirled in confusion, his brain screaming at the familiarity of the name Phillips.
Suddenly, Howard gave a shout of anger, before throwing his phone across the room, the small device smashing to pieces when it came in contact with the wall. Tony jumped to his feet to reply, but Howard charging him had Tony cringing away. Howard knocked his circuit out of his hand before grabbing him by the front of his shirt, pulling Tony close enough for him to smell the alcohol on his breath.

“Now you listen to me. There might be some people that you run into; they’ll want to ask you some questions. I want you to answer them just like the paparazzi: no comment. You got that?”

Tony furrowed his brow. “What kind of questions?”

“Questions about you, about me. You don’t say a goddamn thing, you understand? You don’t know anything, you haven’t seen anything, you have never heard of the SSR-”

“The SSR?”

“Cut the shit, kid. I know you’ve been poking around my desk; you’ve seen some things you weren’t supposed to. Just keep your head to the ground and your mouth shut and maybe, just maybe, this will just blow over.”

Tony cocked his head. “Who’s after you? Why do you want me to lie? What’s going on?”

Howard growled. “It doesn’t matter. I tell you to do something, I expect you to do it.”

Tony pushed away from Howard. “I don’t take orders from you,” he hissed.

“No, no you don’t. Apparently that’s too much for a father to ask his son.”

“Oh, well excuse me for not living up to your expectations!”

“How dare you raise your voice to me! You know, Steve wouldn’t-”

Tony threw his hands up in the air. “Don’t you bring him into this! It’s always Steve this, or Steve that. What does one of your simple pages have on your own flesh and blood?!”

“He’s everything that you’re not!”

“Oh, please. Who even knows if this kid is real?”

“He’s the realest person you’d ever meet. He’s honorable, respectful, the perfect soldier, and someone who I would love to call son.”

Tony flinched at Howard’s vile tone. Most of their arguments ended up this way, but it didn’t sting any less each time it happened. Tony knew he was a disappointment to his father, Howard always comparing him to one of his employees, the perfect Steve Rogers.

Tony hated him.

He had never even met the man and he was ruining Tony’s life. If and when he came to face Steve Rogers, it would be at the end of Tony’s gun.
Tony didn’t realize how far he walked until he hit Central Park. Turns out that even years after his death, Howard still managed to plague his thoughts. Not to mention his fight with Obie. And Happy’s coma. And Rumlow’s background. And Fury’s threats. And The Captain and his merry men. And the constant threat of HYDRA.

Tony sighed. *One problem at a time, Stark. Just take one at a time.*

He checked his watch before changing his route to enter Central Park looking for a familiar face. It wasn’t too long before he found himself in front of a park bench.

Tony couldn’t help but smile. “Wow, you really weren’t joking.”

The Captain jostled against the hard bench, the book he was sketching in sent flying to the ground. “What the hell are you doing here?” he asked, his shining blue eyes opened wide, glistening in the sunlight.

Tony bent down to pick up the sketch book, idling flipping through the pages. “I was in the neighborhood, thought I’d walk through the park. I remember you mentioned at the hospital once that you like to draw here.”

The Captain flushed, breaking eye contact with Tony. “I was talking with Happy. The doctor said that it helps if you talk with him, that he might hear everything.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “You know he doesn’t even know who you are.”

The Captain shrugged. “Doesn’t mean I can’t be friendly.”

Tony gave a small laugh. “This seat taken?” he asked, pointing to the bench.

The Captain shook his head, shifting farther to the left to give Tony more room to sit. “Haven’t seen you in a few days. Any luck with Rumlow?”

Tony rubbed at his temple. “No. I’m trying- it’s just, there’s nothing! I’ll keep digging, but I think we’re going to need to step out of our comfort zones.”

The Captain eyes him warily. “What are you suggesting?”

“I think we should run a job.”
“I’m sorry. You want us to what?” Clint Barton sat in the back of a nearly vacant hospital’s cafeteria, flanked by Bucky and Nat, staring incredulously at a smirking Tony Stark.

Stark rolled his eyes. “What don’t you understand, Barton? It’s not rocket science.”

Clint heard Nat give a small scoff next to him. “The only understanding that’s escaping me right now is why you think I’m going to cooperate with you.”

His response only caused Stark to grin wider. “Ooh, I like you. Can I keep him?” Stark looked to his left, staring at Steve, who had been failing to hide his annoyed face in his hands. Clint frowned, narrowing his eyes at the outsider. Being his first real conversation with the man, it was going just as well as he thought it would. In the weeks since the birth of their tentative work relationship, Steve had handled most of the interactions with Stark. It was difficult letting Steve walk about and about with HYDRA’s ranks rising, but Clint knew that the only reason Steve agreed to keep having these outside meetings was to keep Stark away from the family. Considering the last two times Stark visited ended with him pointing a gun at Wilson and a dead body, Clint agreed with him. Meeting outside the base, of course. Meeting and dealing with Stark in general? Now that, Clint had a few opinions on.

It was clear that Stark’s flippancy and overall attitude was taking a toll on Steve. He shouldn’t have to deal with this alone. He shouldn’t have to deal with it at all. Not with HYDRA nipping at our heels. Ignoring Stark’s comment, Steve looked up at Clint. “You’re going to cooperate because I say so.”

But alas, the stubborn old mule is going to deal with it anyway.

“Cap,” Bucky hissed, obviously thinking along the same lines as Clint.

“Not now, Bucky.” Steve held out a hand to stop his complaints, rubbing at his temple. Clint frowned at Steve’s appearance. It had been a rough month on everyone, Steve especially.

Clint had always looked up to Steve, thinking of him as the brother he never had. Well, Clint had actually had an older brother at one point, but Clint wouldn’t hesitate to choose Steve every time. They were a family: Clint, Steve, and the rest of The Commandos, each of them easily filling up the holes in the others’ hearts.

HYDRA coming back was enough to put everyone on edge. Clint still had no idea how they managed to get rid of them the first time. They were so young at the time; a mob half-hazardly thrown together, a team consisting of every single clashing personality on the planet.

They should have killed each other.

But they didn’t. They won. The Captain saved the day, Clint got the girl - well, the man - and HYDRA was gone.

But they weren’t gone; HYDRA was still running through the streets of New York. And Clint could see it was killing Steve. Sure, everyone in their right mind was nervous, but Clint hadn’t seen Steve like this since that one time everyone thought he and Nat were dead after agreeing to help
Sam with a ‘little family problem’ in Budapest, Georgia. What a disaster that had been.

Steve wouldn’t let the two of them out of his sight for weeks. *Weeks.* Seriously, that man could put a mother bear in its place. Of course, he was exactly the same when the team was dealing with HYDRA the first time. Sure, Steve hadn’t known half of the people for more than a week before their final showdown with HYDRA, but Steve had never faltered in treating everyone like family. That’s what Clint loved most about Steve. He was so genuine, so loyal; everyone had a place in The Commandos. Clint couldn’t hear, Dernier struggled with English, hell, Nat probably wasn’t a US citizen at the time, but Steve didn’t care. *He doesn’t care.* Steve saw worth, saw what counted. He didn’t ask about their past, just like they didn’t ask about his. They just *fit,* always working effortlessly together. Clint owed Steve everything; he knew he would spend the rest of his life trying to give as much back to the man who had saved him.

That’s why, sitting in the empty cafeteria, Clint tightened his grip on the knife he smuggled in. Tony Stark was bad news. Clint knew it, Steve knew it, everyone knew it. Why Steve was even bothering to put up with the man had Clint’s head reeling. Dealing with Tony Stark was basically asking for a one way ticket to hell. *It would be easier to just shoot myself,* thought Clint.

“Cap, I don’t like this,” Clint finally responded.

“I’m not asking you to like it, I’m just asking you to trust me.” And wasn’t that a knife in the gut. Clint was convinced Steve was destined to be a superhero with the very useful powers of constant puppy dog eyes and the ability to make anyone feel guilty for anything. Clint hadn’t been to church in decades, but talks like this with Steve had always ended up with him wanting to go to confession. Seriously, dealing with a priest might be easier than facing a disappointed Steve Rogers. And Steve’s strength? Clint would be entirely convinced the man was on steroids if he didn’t know Steve personally. Clint had once seen him rip a log in half. *In half.* In all honesty, if Clint hadn’t been a taken and committed man, he’s pretty sure his pants would have been on the ground.

Clint sighed. “Fine.”

“Good to see we’re finally on the same page,” quipped Stark. “Let’s try this again, shall we? I want you to tell me about the job you were planning on running.”

Clint opened his mouth, but then closed it. Tony Stark lived on information; Clint was *not* going to be the one to feed him more. This was highly sensitive stuff. How long before Stark turns on them? Who’s to say he wasn’t already working with HYDRA? *Now wouldn’t that be a story.* Tony Stark dismantling The Commandos from the inside, playing the victim card. Plant one bomb and suddenly you’re just an innocent. Stark had connections, and Lord knows how dramatic that man was when he wanted to be. He inserts his way into Steve’s side, and soon HYDRA would know anything and everything about them.

But that wasn’t the case. Right?

Clint shook his head. There were too many ambiguities in their situation. What if Stark was HYDRA? What if telling him could hurt the team? Could kill them?

It didn’t sit well with Clint. Best not to deal with it.

Clint turned his head to Natasha. “Well, if we’re being technical, it’s *your* job.”

He heard Bucky snort next to him, knowing his friend probably followed along on the same train of thought.
And hadn’t they been an unlikely duo, Bucky and Clint. Their first meeting had been less than stellar, what with Clint trying to rob Bucky. And then, even after Steve had introduced him to the rest of the team, Bucky was wary of him, always on constant alert whenever Clint had stood too close to Nat or Steve. Of course, they just laugh about it now. Bucky had been worried about him. Clint had the better aim, the better shot, the better jokes. Bucky spent weeks thinking that Clint would replace him, while Clint was worried Bucky was going to kill him in his sleep. After a therapeutic session (which was not so much of a session as much as Nat locking the two of them in the gym until they got their heads out of their asses) of talking, or in their case, beating the shit out of each other, the two left on different terms, being the closest of friends since.

Natasha rolled her eyes at the two of them. “Children,” she whispered under her breath. “What do you need to know?” she asked, not missing a beat. She was always Steve's model student. “Some of my valued sources picked up on a weapons cache, that’s all.”

Stark steeped his head in his hands. “They’re Hammer’s right?” When Natasha nodded, he continued. “Was he buying or selling?”

“Selling to some mob. And no, I don’t know which one.”

Stark frowned at that.

“You think he would sell to HYDRA?” Steve asked, leaning closer to Stark.

Stark shrugged. “Hammer’s an idiot; he’ll do anything to make a quick buck. Besides, HYDRA is probably looking to build itself back up. If I were them, the first thing I would do is get some my hands on some weapons.”

Maybe you are them, Clint thought.

“That shipment has been here for weeks now. Wouldn’t Hammer have struck a deal already?” Steve continued.

Nat shook her head. “I haven’t heard anything from my sources. Maybe they haven’t reached a deal yet.”

“Or it’s a trap,” Bucky cut in.

“A trap?” Steve asked.

“Think about it,” Bucky continued. “HYDRA was always one for playing dirty. Assuming Hammer is working for them, they tell him to leave a tip that a whole new shipment of his weapons is just sitting around for the taking. We catch wind of it, unable to resist free guns, they catch us in the act and boom. We’re all dead.”

“Grumpy does have a point,” said Stark, looking back over at Steve.

“So how does any of this help us?” Clint questioned.

“Well, we need to find out if Hammer really is working with HYDRA. Get some of his men talking, and they might help us onto another lead,” answered Stark.

“And how do you suppose we do that?”

“You,” Stark retorted, pointing at Nat, “are going to go back out to your sources. Tell them you caught wind of some Stark weapons that didn't get loaded for shipment at this location.” The
brunette dipped a hand in his suit before slipping a piece of paper across the table to Natasha.

Natasha narrowed her eyes, picking up the paper. “Why?”

“Are you kidding me? One Stark weapon is worth more than a whole warehouse of Hammer’s shit. He hears that I ‘forgot’ about some boxes, he’ll be racing to snatch them up. That man would probably sell his soul to get five minutes alone to tinker with my guns. We’ll use their own plan against them. Hammer will send some people to pick it up, and-”

“We’ll be waiting for them,” finished Steve. The blonde turned to look at Nat. “Go; spread the word. We’ll meet up with you later.”

She nodded, gracefully standing up from the table. Clint felt Bucky reach behind him and grab her slim wrist. Without turning around, Clint knew the look Bucky was giving her. The whole ‘stay safe and if you get hurt I’ll kill you myself’ kind of thing. He wasn't exactly sure the full extent of their relationship, despite being best friends with both of them. It wasn't surprising; Clint was sure their secrets had secrets. It took him three years for Natasha to tell him her middle name. But now that he thinks about it, she probably gave him a fake.

Clint barely felt Natasha leave the room, the redhead already moving so quietly that even his hearing aids weren’t strong enough to pick up on her footfalls.

“No what?” Steve asked.

“But, that went awesome.” Clint saw a small smile break onto Steve’s face, so Clint considered it a win.

“Now what?” Steve asked.

“Now,” Stark said, standing up from the table, “we wait. It won’t be more than a few days before Hammer decides to move, if your girl is convincing enough. I’ve got eyes on the place, you just place a few men there and we’ll be right as rain.” Clint watched as Stark tapped idly away at his phone. “Well, my work here is done; time to do more important things.” He waved a hand carelessly at Steve, not even bothering to look up from his phone. “You know how to contact me if there are any problems. See you around, Cap and mutts.”

Clint glared as the man sauntered out of the room. When he heard Steve sigh, Clint looked back to his boss. “Well, that went awesome.” Clint saw a small smile break onto Steve’s face, so Clint considered it a win.

“So this is what we’re going to do, huh? Just sit back and let Stark come in here and take over?” Bucky snapped. Clint flinched slightly at Bucky’s tone, knowing that he and Steve have been pretty tense the last few weeks because of Stark’s involvement.

“No. But that’s what he thinks he can do. Time to change his mind.”

Clint perked up. “What are you thinking?”

“I need you to do something for me.”

Bucky groaned. “Oh, thank god. I’ve been waiting weeks for you to ask me. Don’t worry, I’ll go finish Stark off.”

Steve huffed fondly, smiling at the brunette sitting across from him. “Not what I was thinking, but I’ll keep that one of the back burner, okay?”

Bucky rolled his eyes, but Clint could see the warmth in them. “Fine, but if my finger slips on the trigger one day, I will not be held responsible.” Clint jabbed the man in the stomach to get him back on track, which resulted with Clint getting a sharp slap to the back of the head. “What do you need, Stevie?”
“You’re right. Stark getting involved in all of this could be… troubling. The way he's running things right now has him helping us against HYDRA, but let’s be honest. I don’t see the man lying down on the wire for us any time soon. He needs to be the smartest guy in the room: find a way to help, but also have an escape route.”

“What do you suggest?” responded Clint.

“Make him not the smartest guy in the room. He needs to know he’s not the only person with powerful friends.”

Clint felt himself grinning, already knowing where this was heading.

“I need you to call Thor.”

Chapter End Notes

Yay for POV changes. As the story carries on, I’ll most likely continue mixing up the POV’s (stemming away from just Steve and Tony) to keep you on your toes. (AKA, if you want me to write about someone in particular/you don’t want me to write from a certain person's eyes, now is your time to shine.)

Enjoy!
(Please comment; it makes me happy.)
“Don’t even think about it.”

Steve felt Bucky’s firm hand grip the collar of his shirt, dragging Steve away from his current path to his office and to the stairs, leading him down.

“Buck, come on,” Steve tried to interject, slapping at his friend's firm grip. I don't have time for this.

“Nope. I don’t wanna hear it. You’re coming with me.”

Steve sighed, but obliged Bucky, knowing him to be even more stubborn than Steve himself. The pair stomped down the wrought iron steps of their base, mostly abandoned because of the hour. Almost everyone had returned home, returned to normal life, if only for an moment. Part of Steve wanted to protest, to keep them here, out of sight and out of HYDRA's reach. But he knew that he couldn't. His desire to keep them safe was the same desire that pushed them to pack up and leave each night, to get home to their real families. People he'd never met, only seen through shared photographs or heard through a phone call. It didn't matter, though; the weight of his responsibility included them as well.

Bucky tugged on his shirt again, dragging him from his head to focus on the walk through their home. Their base, just some old abandoned warehouse from World War II, wasn’t much, but it was home. It was way too old, the walls and foundation creaking every once in a while, and way to cramped for the size of Steve’s crew.

The main floor of the warehouse had been repurposed to a makeshift gym and training area for the mob, filled with hand-me-down workout equipment and overused practice targets. Sand littered the floor from when Steve went a little too hard with the punching bag, broken windows from a bad throw or two during knife practice, and the air was more than a little stale from the poor ventilation throughout the floor.

A few old offices filled up the rest of the space of the main floor, minus the locker room sized bathroom, which The Commandos had changed into a few bedrooms. They weren’t anyone’s in particular; most of the crew had homes of their own, so the few beds at base were just claimed by whoever ended up there a little too late to be walking home. The bedrooms were cramped and sparse, looking like they belonged more in the Great Depression than in the current century. There were no bed frames, just a few hard mattresses strewn across the ground, covered in nonmatching quilts and old pillows. Alongside the beds was a simple lamp of two, maybe a book or a pair of socks left behind from a previous inhabitant. There was either a dresser of wardrobe, filled with extra clothing of the team. It didn’t matter who it originally belonged too; they all ended up sharing clothes at one point. Natasha once bought a few cheesy pictures in hopes to brighten up the rooms, but they just ended up being used as dartboards.

On the far wall of the main floor, there was a rusty iron staircase, going both up and down. Going down, the steps led to a shady hallway lit by a single flickering bulb, branching off to a few poorly constructed rooms, most likely used for storage during the war. Steve now had the used for their own interrogations, filling the room with one simple chair, the dark rooms made for holding the last breaths of its prisoners.

Following the steps up carried into what used to be an old telegram office. The boys had torn the place apart, taking out everything expect the long sturdy table where the old machines used to sit.
Mismatching chairs and stools were pulled around it, making the perfect meeting place for the whole crew. The back wall was nothing more than a makeshift kitchen, Bucky stealing from the main electric lines to keep an always crammed full refrigerator and small oven running. Walking all the way to the back of the room led to the small door for Steve’s office.

Steve’s office, despite only made for The Captain himself, was probably the most used room in the whole building. It was the perfect escape for both Steve and the team. Despite having an apartment with Bucky, Steve found himself crashing in his office each night, never fully able to pull himself away from the job. On top of that usage, everyone on his team had sought out his office every once in a while, usually looking for a place to relax in peace, listening to the quiet sounds of Steve working. A heavy wooden desk with a dusty armchair adorned the back wall, always littered in papers and random notes left for Steve. Ancient rugs covered the floor, always giving off a warm vibe, complementing the awful floral print couch, snatched from the curbside by an extremely intoxicated Dugan and Falsworth, that was so well used that there were permanent indents in it. A bookshelf, haphazardly put together by Bucky, held every type of book imaginable, slowly filled up by different members of the crew. A small dresser sat next to it where Steve always stored extra clothes for when he got too cold in the old warehouse. The best part was the left wall that was covered in different papers. Most were newspaper clippings that Clint started to bring in, articles about the press trying to get a better handle on the mysterious Captain and his Commandos. Clint had laughed as he hung them up, saying it was great that his hard work was appreciated. Other spots were filled with pictures: a passed out Sam Wilson on his birthday covered in toilet paper, Thor clinking glasses with Steve and Natasha in the midst of a drinking contest, a few of The Commandos standing with their families, trying to look normal despite their day jobs. There were also a few snapshots of the past, like failed undercover looks, a few ugly prom pictures, and even one of young Bucky and a scrawny Steve. Whatever wall space that was left was covered in Steve’s doodles. It hadn’t been long before the crew figured out one of Steve’s hobbies. They were, after all, great at their jobs, and well, Steve had never been a great liar. Steve had managed to catch them all at one point: Clint and Bucky mid fight, Natasha curled up with a good book, Dugan laughing jovially over dinner, a few of Howard, Erskine, Peggy.

Overall, the place was too small, overcrowded, old fashioned, and out of place.

It was home.

And Steve loved it.

Right now, Steve would have loved nothing more than to curl up on the couch in his office, trying to trick his body into getting some sleep, but Steve knew how it would play out. He would lie on the lumpy cushions until the unwanted energy thrumming through his body would make him too restless, until Steve found himself sitting behind his desk yet again, pouring every piece of information they had for the millionth time.

Bucky, it seemed, had other plans. He dragged Steve down the stairs and into the gym, ignoring Steve’s halfhearted protests. Bucky finally stopped once the two were in the center of the room, inside a well-used boxing ring, reaching out to grab Steve by the shoulders.

“What you listen to me, punk. You gotta get a grip, Stevie. You’re starting to slip; people are getting worried.”

Steve pulled out of Bucky’s grasp. “I really don’t have time for you to play mom, Buck. I have work to do.”

“See! There you go again. What work could you possibly have right now? We have no leads, no raids, nothing. Steve, you’re running on fumes. Go home and take a day.”
Steve growled. “I don’t have time to take a day. You damn well know that.”

Bucky chuckled. “Ooh, you really must be worked up if you’re resulting to swearing.”

“I don’t have time for your snark, Bucky. Get the hell out of my way,” Steve retorted with a small shove to Bucky.

Bucky smirked and narrowed his eyes. “No.”

“Quit playing around.”

“The only one playing here, Steve, is you.”


"You gonna make me, old man?"

Steve didn’t think, his fist pulling back before throwing a solid punch towards his friend. Bucky dodged easily before twisting around Steve and pushing him down to the mat. “God, you’re rusty. No wonder you’re so grumpy. With technique like that, I’d be mad too.”

Steve let out an angry shout before pushing back off the mat, and into Bucky. Steve and Bucky have been sparring together for years, their similar builds and familiarity of the other usually proved for an even match, but not tonight. Each punch and kick thrown by Steve was fueled by his rage, but Bucky slipped away from each one.

“You’re not focusing. Come on, you’re making this too easy,” chided Bucky, throwing Steve to the mat yet again. Each time his body thudded against the ground, Steve stood up with that much more anger, trying harder and harder to hit Bucky. His large muscles were straining, sweat stinging as it dripped into his eyes. Bucky kept throwing around a few more snarky comments, never hitting back, just using enough force to throw Steve back down to the mat.

“You’re slowing down, Stevie,” soothed Bucky. No matter how much Steve yelled as he fought back, Bucky kept his voice calm, never yelling back.

“Shut up,” hissed Steve, throwing another jab. Now, his punches weren’t hitting close to Bucky, the brunette not even having to step out of the way for some of them.

“Just stop fighting, kiddo.” Another miss.

“Take it easy, Steve.” Air punch.

“You’re slipping.” Steve ran through Bucky and into the ropes.

“Relax.” Bucky swiped a leg until Steve ended up on the ground.

“Slow down, Steve.”

“I CAN’T!” Steve finally shouted. “Can’t you see that?!" Steve was gasping for breath, his whole body trembling, but he couldn’t discern if it was from the spar or just his overwhelming emotions. “I can’t sleep, Buck. I won’t sleep. The last time I went to sleep with the threat of HYDRA around, Bucky, I woke up and everyone was dead! Why won’t I slow down? Because we were too slow last time. I can’t do it again, I can’t! How long, Bucky? How long do I have to wait before it happens again? How long before I have to go home to someone’s family and tell them that they won’t be home for dinner? How many more graves will I have to dig? I have to be stronger, be better. I just-
Steve broke off when strong arms swooped him into a huge hug. “There it is,” he heard Bucky whisper, but Steve could barely hear it over his gasps and shudders.

Steve wasn’t sure how long he stood there, collapsed in Bucky’s arms, while his friend hummed an old tune his mom used to sing to him when he was sick. It was so achingly familiar, Bucky always there to save him, to protect him. Even from himself.

“Come on,” Bucky said into his ear, pulling Steve gently towards one of the bedrooms. “Something tells me you won’t have trouble sleeping tonight.” Steve went without hesitation, still too caught up in his friend’s warmth. Steve should have realized what Bucky was doing; he did it all the time when Steve was nothing more than a twig. Steve was too passionate, too head strong and stubborn. He would bottle everything up until he just about exploded, getting Steve caught up in way too many fights. Bucky would take him home and clean him up each time, pestering Steve to take better care of himself. It wasn’t too long before Bucky started to provoke him, getting Steve to fight him, let the weaker man get in a few punches, both tiring Steve out as well as keeping him safe from picking a fight with a stranger. Turns out some things never change.

“Out,” Bucky snapped. Steve lifted his head to see a poor Commando waking up from his slumber, seeing Steve and Bucky, and making a hasty retreat.

“Buck,” Steve tried to complain. “I could have gone upstairs.”

“Shut up, he can go somewhere else. Let me take care of you, ya jerk.”

A small smile tugged on Steve’s lips. “Punk.”

Bucky pushed Steve in front of one of the beds, before spinning Steve around to face him. “Are you gonna listen to me now? Or am I gonna have to beat your ass again?”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Technically, I don’t think you managed to throw a punch.”

Bucky shrugged. “Did you see you out there? You were doing enough damage yourself. Now listen up, Cap. This isn’t then. This is now. I don’t care if you think this is God’s punishment, or another second chance; just accept that it’s happening. It’s time to get your head out of your ass. You’re not alone, Stevie. I’m still here, we’re all still here. And, well, I don’t know about the rest of the team, but I don’t plan on going anywhere, anytime soon. We are faster, we are stronger. We’re gonna beat this, you’ll see. Have I ever lied to you?”

Steve huffed affectionately. “I can think of a few instances at Coney Island that ended up with my head in a trashcan.”

Bucky smacked him on the side of the head. “You’re not alone, Steve. Don’t ever feel like you have to be. I’m with you till the end of the line.”

Steve let his head fall forward onto Bucky’s shoulder. Even when he had nothing, he still had Bucky. “Thank you, Buck. Really.”

Bucky patted his back before pushing him back up. “Yeah, well someone’s gotta keep you in line. Now come on, in the bed. Time for us to get some shut eye, before I grow a conscience and decide you’re too smelly to sleep next too.”

Steve laughed softly before collapsing on the bed, smelling in the acquainted smells of his team, his eyes already drifting shut. He could vaguely hear Bucky push another bed next to him before
clambering on top.

Steve smiled behind closed eyes as the sounds of Bucky’s familiar snores lulled him off to a well-deserved sleep.
Chapter 16

“It's been almost a month. I’m sure you can understand why I’m not too happy.” Pierce tapped his fingers in annoyance against the dark wood of his desk. His tired eyes swiveled across the room, barely furnished and impersonal. Of course, that was what he was going for. While usually he found it ironically the safest to direct HYDRA proceedings within the walls of the NYPD precinct, Pierce had often, perhaps too often, ended up at other discrete locations in order to safely conduct business. He wasn’t sure which one he was at now, not like it mattered. His men were outside, guarding the door. There were no wiretaps, no bugs, no threats. He was safe here; HYDRA was safe.

Unfortunately, that didn’t make Alexander Pierce feel any better. Weeks ago, Pierce thought they had finally won; they had finally hit the jackpot. They had a potential location on The Captain’s hideout. Hook had cornered Peter Pan and the Lost Boys. For good this time.

Which is why, almost a month later, Pierce found himself losing it. They had done nothing. Nothing. The Captain and Stark have continued to flaunt about the city without a single care in the world. While Pierce had initially agreed with The Monger to wait on their information, Pierce found himself about two minutes from putting a bullet in the man’s head.

“Relax. You’re getting cabin fever.” Over the phone, The Monger managed to sound even more menacing than usual. However, his calm and controlling voice was doing Pierce no favors today. He was in charge of this. Him. There was no reason why they were waiting on this. They were all there for the taking! With the chance of wiping out both The Commandos and Tony Stark, there was no time to dawdle.

“I’m done relaxing,” hissed Pierce. “We’ve waited too long; The Captain and his crew are probably long gone by now.”

“You know that isn’t true; you know The Captain far too well to know that he won’t pack up shop until the job is done. You just want to go in there guns blazing, as usual.”

Pierce narrowed his eyes. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

An empty chuckle reverberated through the phone. “Well, I seem to recall that didn’t work to well the last time you tried it.”

How could I forget? He'd seen the bodies - what was left of them. When Schmidt had initially approached him, he'd thought the man out of his mind. What he knew, what he was planning on doing; it all seemed like it came right out of a book. But he owed that man everything. He'd pulled back the curtain for Pierce, showed him a world far more sophisticated and powerful than he could have ever imagined.

"Let me guide you," he told Pierce one night, his accent like a calming lullaby. "Let me show you your full potential."

With his ideas, Schmidt could have had everything. He should have had everything. And he would have made Pierce his number two. Pierce remembered waiting, pacing by the phone all night to hear the good news. The news of a successful mission. But instead, he wasted away in the night, dropping off to sleep, only to wake up to a very different story. He could barely believe what he heard on the news: 'The End of HYDRA?' flashed on the scrolling ribbon beneath the newscaster, as he rambled on about the bodies found. He had sprinted all the way down to the precinct, a fool's
errand, praying that the program had been wrong.

But it wasn't. All that preparation, all that hard work. Gone, in a blink of an eye. Or in Schmidt's case, in the firing of a gun.

“Schmidt was in over his head, was too power hungry," Pierce replied. "But his ideals were enough to survive. We’re better this time, we’ll win this time.”

“That we will. If we wait.”

“For whatever reason?” snapped Pierce.

“You ever been hunting? What happens when you catch the buck's attention? Do you charge in for the kill? No. You freeze, and wait in the bushes. You wait and you wait and you wait, and then it happens. The perfect moment. That moment, that slip up, when the buck looks away, and returns to his grazing. And then? You put a bullet in its heart. You and I both know how smart The Captain is. And with Stark at his side, their combined paranoia will have The Commandos on their toes for ages. The stress will get to be too much; The Captain will slip. That's when we move in.”

Pierce sighed, knowing that yet again, The Monger was right. He had put more men out recently after the Rumlow debacle to try and keep up with The Captain and Stark again, even to try and look into the other members, but to no avail. The Captain was keeping them close. “For how long?” he asked, rubbing at his aching temple.

“You’ll know when the time is right.”

Pierce breathed in deeply. He had to keep his cool, had to keep in control. Usually Pierce wouldn’t reach out to outside parties for assistance, but the revival of HYDRA had not been easy, what with The Captain and now Tony Stark standing in the way. Getting Hammer and The Monger on board was pretty easy, with the end of The Captain and his crew being a common goal they all shared. And now, with the added bonus of offing Tony Stark as well, Pierce seemed to have his hands full of allies. Of course, Pierce still wanted to run the show, keeping his cards close to give him slight leverage. Pierce and his closest HYDRA companions were the only ones who knew about The Captain’s true identity.

Steve Rogers.

While most would think of it as any ordinary name, in the mob world, it was anything but. If Hammer or The Monger caught wind of who The Captain really was, it would mean bad news for Pierce. It wouldn’t be long before one or both of them went to just snatch Rogers off the street before Pierce even had time to think about making a move. No, Steve Roger’s name was the only thing keeping Pierce in the game, the only thing keeping him in charge.

Steve Rogers was an old name, whispered around the streets of New York. By all accounts, he was supposed to be dead, buried deep after his history with the SSR. How he survived was a miracle by itself. He had always just assumed that he'd died after his run-in with Schmidt. Pierce still remembered how long it took him to actually believe that Steve Rogers was still alive and walking around New York.

Steve Rogers was a prize crop. He knew people, he knew things. The SSR held records on probably every different mob that was running through New York, probably even other major cities. And that’s not even getting started on their connections. The SSR had people all over the
country, all over the globe. Pierce had once heard that the SSR had managed to infiltrate the Pentagon. They were everywhere and nowhere, always ready.

And then Schmidt happened. And the secrets of the SSR were lost forever. Well, thought to have been lost forever. Steve Rogers held the key to the SSR. He held the key to running New York.

And Alexander Pierce wanted it.

So Steve Roger’s identity will stay with him. Hammer and The Monger will take care of Stark and the rest of The Commandos, and then they will deliver The Captain to him. And finally, Schmidt’s vision would be realized. About damn time.

Pierce sighed again with a small nod of his head. “If you say so.”

The Monger began to reply but Pierce didn’t hear it on account of Hammer bursting through the door.

“What the hell?” hissed Pierce.

“How is it?” demanded The Monger.

“It’s Hammer,” continued Pierce as he put The Monger on speaker phone. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Hammer tried to catch his breath, collapsing in the chair across Pierce’s desk. “I’ve got news. My people caught wind of some Stark weapons that missed its shipment. And I know where they are.”

The man grinned wildly, obviously proud of his work.

“So?”

Hammer rolled his eyes. “Did you hear me? Stark weapons. Stark. I get my hands on just one of those babies and we’re in business. I reverse engineer the thing, and boom. We’re walking around with the best weapons on the market.”

“If you believe that rumor, then your people are dumber than I thought.”

Hammer glared at the phone. “Excuse me?”

“There are no misplaced weapons. Stark doesn’t misplace weapons. Not to mention that he hasn’t had any contracts since the military one last month. He’s drawing you out Hammer. The Captain and his boys want another toy to play with.”

Pierce narrowed his eyes. “What makes you so certain?”

A deep sigh echoed over the speaker. “I know Tony. He’s smart and slippery, but his arrogance will be the death of him. He spreads a fake rumor expecting you to show up with one of two guys, hardly a problem for The Captain’s men. My suggestion? Turn the tables. Bring a force, take them by surprise, and lay waste to the joint.”

Hammer scoffed. “Oh, and you’re a resident expert on Anthony Stark?”

The door opened again, startling the other two men. Through the door walked Obadiah Stane. He shut his cell phone and grinned sharply. “I’d like to think so. Gentlemen? Let’s talk.”
Steve Rogers knew that with each passing day, he learned more about Tony Stark. But if there was one thing that he knew for certain, was that the man loved to talk. Steve had seen him both start and finish a conversation himself before he could even get a single word in. It seemed to be his go-to no matter what mood he was in. A happy stream of babble when he was happy, awkward rambling when he was nervous, viscous barbs when he was angry.

So, the fact that it had been over ten minutes and hadn’t said a single word didn’t sit well with Steve.

Clint had done as Steve asked, and called Thor. Thor, luckily enough, was in the states on business with his family anyway, and was more than happy to pay The Commandos a visit.

Thor Odinson was the heir to probably one of the biggest energy companies in the world, Asgard. Thor’s family, who started the company in some small town in Norway, had managed to transform it into one of the largest the world had ever seen. Their tech brought the world into a new era of cheap and efficient electricity, not to mention the groundbreaking work they've started on green energy.

Asgard was one of the top in the business, and a huge rival of Stark Industries. While the company’s concentrations were completely separate things, the two had still managed to bump heads. Although making billions in weapons, Stark tinkered in tech and energy, revolutionizing the use of arc reactor technology. And, of course, while Asgard usually just dealt with electricity, Thor’s father had dabbled into weaponry, making quite a pretty penny over in Europe.

So, of course the two companies were constantly at each other’s throats. They were both monopolies in their division; no company stood a chance in taking them out. What else was there to do besides go after each other? Stark keeps trying to convert the world to solely his tech, while Asgard constantly tries to steal Stark’s weapon contracts.

Now that he found himself sitting between the two and their staring contest, Steve itched for his gun. There was a high probability that this turns bloody very quickly.

After what seemed like an eternity, Stark turned to face Steve with a grim expression. “Weapons dealer?” he asked in a strained voice, pointing over at Thor.

Steve nodded. And wouldn’t that be a knife to the gut. Steve and his men turning to an energy company for guns rather than an actual weapons dealer. But Steve and Thor go way back. Steve had first run into the hulking blonde years ago, when Asgardian tech started making its way across the pond. Asgard usually did business over on the eastern hemisphere, so when Steve heard that Thor and his father were coming over to globalize their market, Steve thought he had hit the jackpot. Not being a native to the area, Asgard’s security were no match for Steve and Bucky, the two easily breaking in to their storage. Steve and Bucky planned on stealing the weapons and tech they had brought across with them. What they hadn’t planned on was running into Thor as they were leaving.

Now Steve and Bucky were both in pretty good shape, but Thor basically had a body of a god. After making a quick distraction, Steve forced Bucky out with whatever he could carry while he tried to fend off Thor. The fight that ensued was probably one of the worst one Steve had been in, both of the men almost killing each other several times.

How the stalemate of a fight had led Steve to another friendship still boggles his mind. Bucky, of course, had come back for Steve, stopping Thor from placing a deadly blow to Steve’s skull. And
Bucky, with his silver tongue, managed to calm Thor down enough to turn the table. Bucky convinced Thor that since it was so easy for just two guys to break in and steal their stuff, Asgard wouldn’t last a week against the rest of the mobs in New York, knowing that half of them were connected to his rival, Tony Stark. Which is how, instead of leaving with two bullets in their brains, Steve and Bucky left with a security job for The Commandos and more tech than they could carry. And so began the deal between Asgard and The Captain. Steve and his men would provide heavy security and protection for Thor and his company whenever needed, while in return, The Commandos got tech, weapons, basically anything they could ever want. And of course, the lasting friendship with Thor was a nice bonus.


“What, are you jealous, Stark?” Thor retorted with a smirk and a raised eyebrow.

“Don’t start,” interjected Steve.

“You get your weapons from Asgard? Asgard? Do you know who these people are, Cap? These people are the lowliest scum of the Earth. Honestly, I’d be less insulted if you worked with Hammer.”

Steve shrugged, not letting himself back down against Stark. “I don’t know, I like him.”

Thor looked at Steve with an easy grin. “I find your company most pleasant as well, Captain.”

Stark scoffed at Thor before glaring back at Steve. “You know the last time we saw each other he tried to kill me with a hammer?”

Thor crinkled his brow. “You were asking for it.”

Steve couldn’t help the laugh that escaped his lips, but he quickly muffled it when he saw Stark’s jaw tighten.

“Why did you think this was a good idea?” snapped Stark.

Steve rolled his eyes. “I didn’t think it was a good idea, but it was a necessary one. You need to fall in line and realize you aren’t in charge here. I am. You aren’t the only one with friends in high places; you aren’t the only one with connections. I run the show around here, and it’s time for you to play your part, not mine. If my regular intimidation won’t work on the infamous Tony Stark, I’ll just have to try a little harder. You keep getting my dirt on HYDRA and I’ll keep Thor from dismantling Stark Industries until there’s nothing left but ash.”

And there it was again. The silence. Steve could see the range of emotions flashing across Stark’s eyes until there was nothing left. Emptiness. Just the hollow face that Steve had seen the first time he met Stark. The one that he hadn’t seen in weeks.

“Fine,” Stark said softly.

Steve wasn’t expecting that. It wasn’t supposed to be this easy. Tony Stark was never one to walk away from a fight. He’d once seen the man bicker with a hotdog vendor over the quantity of napkins he was given. “Fine?”

Stark nodded his head once. “Yep,” he said with a pop of his mouth. “We’re done here.”

Steve stepped in front of him before he could reach the door. “What do you mean, we’re done?”
Stark shrugged. “You said it yourself, Captain. You’ve got Asgard on your side.”

“So?” Steve tried to prompt Stark in the right direction.

“So you don’t need me.”

Steve froze.

_Uh oh._

That wasn’t supposed to happen. “I never said that,” Steve said quickly.

“Then I’ll say it. Was any of it real? Or was I just an added bonus for blondie over there?” Stark snapped.

Steve flinched at the harsh tone. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“You didn’t need me. You _used_ me. Hoping to take down two birds with one stone? Why stop with HYDRA when Tony Stark was just sitting a couple blocks down the road?”

Steve shook his head trying to reach out for the man. “Stark, calm down- ”

Stark slapped his hands away, moving past Steve and to the door. “No. You wanted me to fall in line? I’ll do you one better. I’ll fall out of your way completely. Good luck with your HYDRA infestation. Make sure to send me a postcard from prison. That is, if you’re not already dead first.”

“Stark, wait! Tony!” Steve’s pleas were cut off as Stark slammed the door behind him.

Steve stared at the closed door as Thor walked up behind him to place a comforting hand on his shoulder. “I take it that was not supposed to have happened?”

Steve sighed. “No, Thor. No it was not.”
“Son of a bitch!”  Tony stomped through his office, slamming the door with a large bang. Not even stopping to take off his jacket, Tony made a beeline to his personal bar. His hands shook with anger as he poured himself a large portion, only to opt to drink straight from the bottle.

Who the fuck does he think he is?

Tony growled as he took another swig. Honestly, Tony had seen The Captain do some stupid shit over the last month, but this takes the cake.

I mean, Asgard. Really?

Tony closed his eyes, trying to regulate his heartbeat. Somewhere inside, the rational part of his brain was trying to calm the raging storm in his head. The Captain had only known Tony for less than a month; obviously he would have needed a dealer before this shit storm. Tony had never thought twice about it. Maybe it wasn’t even the fact that The Captain and his crew dealt with Asgard, it was just the point of rubbing it in Tony’s face.

While Tony saw his work in very high regard, he held himself to a pretty low standard. Tony knew he was nothing special; his dad has spent plenty of years drilling that into his brain. Living as he was, it was easy to forget that he wasn’t unique, that he wasn’t one of a kind. He wasn’t the only big guy walking around that had weight to their name. Leave it to The Captain to get a few words in to remind Tony that he isn’t any better than the homeless than sift through his trash.

See, Tony may have liked Thor at one point, with his huge smile and innocent foreign thing he had going on. But it was just politics, your typical Shakespeare scenario. Their parents hated each other so it only made sense that Romeo and Tybalt wouldn’t get along. And yes, of course Tony was Romeo in this situation. I mean, look at me. Honestly.

What really got under Tony’s skin was how successful Asgard was. It wasn’t like their products were compete shit like Hammer’s, but it was just average. There was no way they should have made it as far as they did, no way they should be breathing the same air as Tony. But despite all of that, Asgard managed to skyrocket in profit over the last few years, what with Thor’s easy charm and his brother’s silver tongue. It’s just a scam. They take average equipment and magic it into top of the line products. It’s like that shit with Ikea. Call a hunk of wood some fancy Swedish name, throw in an allen wrench and boom: you think you’re dealing with the Picasso of furniture. It’s just a fucking table. There was no skill behind what they did, just some smoke and mirrors and posh words.

Tony was very adamant about his position on Asgard, one that he lectured on immensely. Hell, even Thor knew what he thought of them. Tony shuddered at the memory, how years ago him and Thor almost brought both of their companies toppling down to the ground.

It was in New Mexico, both Asgard and Stark Industries both one of the many companies that attended a large expo. Tony was still at MIT, his young gawky body still trying to fill out, but his mind already carrying as much arrogance and venom as his father, who he attended the expo with. It was the first time he had ever met Thor, the already huge teen bulking besides his own father, screaming with pride and foolishness.
While their fathers went off to conduct business at the expo, Tony and Thor had managed to come to blows. Well, if Tony remembered correctly, it started with a comment from his asshole brother. Regardless, it ended with Thor trying to brain Tony with an industrial hammer and Tony trying to run the foreigner down with his father’s latest roadster, both men causing the near destruction of a small town. The aftermath that ensued landed both Tony and Thor with another red mark on their already stained police records and with a horrendous shaming from the business world for years. Howard unleashed a fury Tony had never seen before, leaving him to crawl back to MIT to lick his wounds, not returning home until after his graduation. From what Tony heard, Thor got cut off from Asgard for months until he returned with some sense of ‘honor’ or some shit.

So, yeah, their first and only meeting had been less than stellar. But from what Tony had seen with The Captain today, it was like staring him down in New Mexico again. Tony didn’t want any part of it.

Fine. Whatever. The Captain can just go on his merry way with his friends. He’s going to get them all killed. Not that it’s any sweat of Tony’s back. He didn’t need The Captain. He didn’t need them. Tony would do it himself.

Stark men are made of iron, boy.

If The Captain wanted to play dirty, then so be it. The only person worth protecting is me. The Captain could just go toe to toe against HYDRA without him, and Tony would do as he’s always done: survive.

Tony slumped against the closet wall, letting his weight slide him down to the floor, his hands still white-knuckling his scotch.

“Sir?”

Tony sighed. “Not now, JARVIS.”

“Of course, Sir. I just thought you might like to know that all of the heat sensors have been triggered at your old warehouse.”

Well, whoop-de-fucking-do. “Don’t care, J. The Captain’s thugs will take care of them.”

“As you say, Sir.”

Yet again, silence engulfed Tony as he sat alone on the floor. He took another long drag of alcohol. There was just too much in his head, too much clutter, too much pain. Would it be too much to ask to just stop thinking for a while? But that was Tony’s brain; the price of having a genius mind was that it never sleeps. It’s always running, always calculating, looking for- wait.

Tony lifted his head. “Hey, J?”

“Sir?”

“Did you say all the heat sensors?” When Tony had told Romanov what warehouse to use, he spent the rest of the day rigging up the place. Each entrance was wired with heat sensors and top of the line cameras, able to spot anyone and anything that tries to get into the joint. Connecting the system to JARVIS and their phones, Tony and The Captain would know whenever someone laid their first steps on the property.

“Yes, Sir. It seems that there are signatures coming from each of the entrances to the warehouse.”
Well that doesn’t sound right. Tony stood up and reached for his tablet that sat upon his desk. “Pull it up, J.” JARVIS brought up security footage, giving Tony video from every angle of the building.

Uh oh.

Unless Romanov spread a half ass lie, there should be no more than three guys breaking into Tony’s place. “Give me a count.”

“Fifteen, Sir.” Why the hell were fifteen of Hammer’s men breaching the warehouse? This shouldn’t be happening. Tony had made sure the warehouse he chose was free of security or and shipping employees. The trail of bread crumbs he left Hammer was almost embarrassingly easy. There would have been no reason for that extra firepower.

Unless they knew it was a rouse.

“Fuck,” Tony whispered to himself. He only cursed himself again as he watched The Captain, along with Barnes and Barton, slip over the metal fence against the back of the property. This wasn’t good. The Captain must have gotten the notification, assuming that he and his men should be able to take on Hammer’s mediocre firepower. Keyword: should. Tony had told him it would be safe. Tony had told The Captain not to worry. Now he and his right hand men were about to walk into a blood bath.

Why do I care?

Tony was done with them. The Captain certainly hadn’t done any favors for Tony; he didn’t owe them anything.

If you don’t do anything, they’ll die.

Tony rubbed at his temple. “Numbers?”

“Running a simulation, The Captain and his men have an 11.7% success rate.”

“Fuck,” Tony hissed again, immediately going for his phone. He had The Captain’s number halfway dialed before he tossed the phone away.

Don’t call; it will give away their position.

Don’t call; who gives a shit what happens to them.

Tony groaned, and started to pace the length of his office. “I need to do something.”

You don’t need to do anything.

“They’ll die.”

“They were asking for it.” Thor’s voice asked in Tony’s ears.

“I should warn them.”

Why? You owe them nothing.

“The Captain can’t stop HYDRA if he’s dead.”

Caring is a weakness.
“I don’t care; I’m just thinking about it from a business standpoint!”

*Stop pretending to be a hero. You’re a coward.*

“Sometimes cowardice is key.”

*Don’t get involved.*

“I’m not! I just- ”

*Don’t get involved.*

“But- ”

*Don’t get involved.*

“Get out of my head!” Tony shouted, picking up the scotch bottle and throwing it against the wall. He watched as the glass shattered into millions of pieces, the amber liquid splashing all over the walls and carpet as Howard Stark laughed inside Tony’s head.

Tony gasped for breath as he squeezed his head. He glanced up to look at his tired and crazed eyes at the mirror adorning the far wall. Tony took one last deep breath before making up his mind.

Tony Stark was many things, but there was one thing that he wasn’t.

Tony Stark was not his father.

Tony raced to his desk, snatched up his phone and his sidearm. He raced down to his car, jumping over the door and into the driver’s seat through the open top. Tony found himself stopping however, when he looked down at his phone. *Who the hell am I supposed to call?* Rhodey was redeployed, Happy was in a coma, and Tony certainly wasn’t going in there by himself. *Now would really be a good time to have access to some expendable red shirts.*

Tony froze. *Oh, fuck me.* Tony started typing a few commands to JARVIS, searching for a phone number. Tony might not have any friends at the moment, but that didn’t mean The Captain didn’t. Number secured, Tony pushed the phone to his ear.

“*Who is this?*”

“Where are you, Odinson?”

“*Stark, what the hell is- *”

“Why aren’t you with The Captain?”

“*Why, have some unfinished business you- *”

“I don’t have time for your shit. Why aren’t you with them?”

Tony ignored the long sigh on the phone. *“The Captain said he had business to attend to, and cut our meeting short.”*

“And you didn’t think you should have gone with him to that business?!”

“*Stark, what are you on about?*”
“Where are you? I’m coming to get you. Find some lackeys and find some guns.”

“Why would I do anything you ask?”

“Don’t do it for me. Do it for The Captain,” snapped Tony. “He’s about ten minutes from getting his head blown off, so cut the shit and give me a location.”

There was a short silence over the phone before Thor gave his response. “I’m at our office. I’ll meet you out there as quickly as I can.”

Tony hung up, throwing the phone into the passenger seat and tore out of the driveway towards Asgard’s New York office.

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“If we ever get out of this alive, I’m going to kill you,” Bucky hissed next to him.

“Sounds good to me,” Steve retorted, ducking down at the last second as bullets flew over their heads. Even though he couldn’t see Clint, Steve could hear the occasional swear or taunt from above them.

_This shouldn’t be happening._

Steve was in his office when he got the notification that Hammer’s men had activated the sensors. He thought about calling Stark, but Steve’s foolishness probably burned the bridge with that relationship. The least he could do was stick to the plan and protect the man’s warehouse and weapons. Later, when they’d brought home a few of Hammer’s men, maybe Steve could use them as an enticing apology. _Sorry I pissed you off but hey, look, I brought you a present!_ As planned, be grabbed Clint and Bucky, both overly proficient in the field, which should have made this job a cake walk. Instead, the three men walked into the warehouse to be met with a small army of Hammer’s men.

There was a still moment in the building, unspoken ’_What the hell are you doing here?’” asked by both parties before the warehouse exploded in gunfire. The math was simple; the cover they’d been lucky enough to be by was nice, but it wouldn’t last. Not with the numbers that Hammer had. And of course, no one thought to bring their phone in case they dropped it, not wanting to leave any evidence. (“_You kidding me?” Bucky said, throwing his phone on the table. “I’m not giving Stark any other chances to build a case against me. If I piss him off, I don’t want to end up in jail the next day.”) Of course no one thought to bring extra ammo. (“_Why would I need any?” Clint asked. “Maybe you do, your aim is terrible,” he laughed at Steve.) Why would they? Turn the tables. _Use their plan against them,_ Stark had said. _It’ll be easy,_ Stark had said.

If Steve lived long enough to see Stark again, he’d kill him.

Another bullet flew past the two men taking cover behind some shipping boxes.

“Any ideas?” Bucky shouted over the gunfire.

_No._

Steve had nothing. He was on his last clip, their cover was being blown to smithereens, and there was no possible way to get the any of the exits without getting a few rounds pumped into them.
“Yeah, sure,” Steve lied. “Give me a minute.”

“We don’t have a minute, Steve!”

A pained shout from above got both of their attention. Bucky moved automatically, trying to make a break for the stairs to reach Clint.

“Wait!” Steve grabbed his friend and pulled him close against him as another spray of bullets landed where he should have been standing.

“We have to get to Clint,” snapped Bucky, writhing against Steve.

“Okay, okay.” Bullets rained over them, glass shattering and boxes exploding all around. Steve could vaguely hear the shouts of Hammer’s men over the pounding of blood in his own ears.

*Think, think. You’re running out of time. Your men are going to die. Think. It’s going to happen again. Think. Don’t think. There’s no time.*

Steve grabbed Bucky by his shoulders. “Count to five and then run.”

Without waiting for a response, Steve gripped his gun tightly, took a deep breath and jumped from cover. He raced blindly over to the right, drawing fire away from Bucky as he sprinted to another set of crates. His muscles burned as he ran across the last few steps, diving behind the wooden barricades.

Not even waiting to catch his breath, Steve hopped up behind the crates, the new angle giving him a clean shot on two men that were still after Bucky, who was charging up the far stairway to get to Clint. He took them down easily, watching as Bucky made the last few steps up to the upper catwalk where Clint was. Listening in, Steve could hear a few familiar sounding rounds go off from above, Bucky attempting to clean out the rest of the threats from the second level. Luckily for his men, the catwalk was too covered for anyone to get a clean shot from the main floor, while Steve’s position was less than stellar. Trapping himself downstairs with upwards of seven armed men left may not have been his best plan. *Your men are safe. It was worth it.*

Steve would like to think that Bucky would just take off through the second story exit with Clint and flee, but he already knew that wasn’t going to be the case. Those two would be flying back down the stair any minute now, regardless of Clint’s injury, to help their boss out. They were loyal like that. They were stupid like that.

Running back down those steps would be a kamikaze mission; Steve needed to keep the shooting aimed at him. Which of course would be easy. If he had any bullets left. Steve stared down at the useless gun in his hands. He could hear Hammer’s men moving around the warehouse, most likely getting ready to flank him. Their heavy steps drew closer and Steve found himself out of time, out of options. Steve looked frantically around, looking for anything that could help, when something caught his eye.

Steve needed to get his men out of there, regardless of the cost. Who says he needs a gun to do that? Leaning to the left, he snatched up the lid of an industrial barrel, holding it against his chest.

*Close enough.*

He closed his eyes, waiting for the first man to step behind his cover. When he heard a guy to his left, Steve sprung up using the added weight of his makeshift shield to throw the other man to the ground. Not waiting another breath, Steve spun the lid in his hand, bringing it down hard on the man’s skull. He reached for the gun left behind, snapping it up to face the open warehouse, shield
raised and ready in his other hand.

What Steve wasn’t expecting was the empty warehouse when he spun around. *Where did they go?* his mind raced. Did they rush upstairs? Did they flee? There should be more, there was definitely-

A gun cocked behind him.

*Shit.*

Steve froze. Instinctively, he wanted to turn around, but knew that any single movement could lead to his death. He couldn’t help the flinch that he gave when he felt the butt of the gun against his back. Steve closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

**Bang!**

Steve flinched again at the sound, but felt no pain. He blinked his eyes open as he felt the weight on his back leave him and fall to the ground, making a solid thud sound. Steve spun around again, cocking his gun, only to be met with-

“*Stark?*”

Sure enough, Tony Stark stood on the other side of the body, gun in his hand. The other man rushed forward, pushing Steve back and pulling him down to his original cover. “What the hell are you doing?” Stark hissed.

Steve barely found it in him to answer, his mouth still wide in shock. “I could ask you the same thing.”

“Not the time, Cap. The rest of Hammer’s men ran upstairs. We need to move.” Steve watched as Stark expertly changed clips, reloading both his and Steve’s gun with practiced ease. When Stark caught him watching, he responded. “What, didn’t think I knew how to hold a gun? My family company manufactures weapons; my father didn’t exactly give me Legos to play with growing up. Now, can we go?” Stark gestured to the stairway where gunfire had picked up again.

Steve nodded, grabbing his gun back and taking off after Stark. “We need a plan. Bucky and Clint are outnumbered out there.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” responded Stark. Steve looked at him questioningly, but stopped when he heard a familiar jovial laugh carried over the gunfire.

Steve whipped around to face Stark. “Thor?”

“Yep.”

“But I thought-”

“I do.”

“But then why-”

“*Because.* Now, chop-chop, let’s go!” Stark pushed Steve up the stairs and back into the action.

Reaching the top of the stairs, Steve saw Thor and some of his men flank the rest of Hammer’s men, getting them away from Bucky, who was leaning over Clint. Steve tried to run to them, but Stark pulled him back. “Barton’s fine. Finish this first.” Steve glared at the other man, but found himself shooting alongside Stark anyway.
“How did this happen?” shouted Stark.

Steve rolled his eyes. “How would I know? You said this was going to be easy!”

“Oh, so this is my fault?”

“Well it certainly isn’t mine!”

“So bringing your fancy foreign friend overseas to rub in my face wasn’t your fault?”

Steve groaned. “That has nothing to do with this! How was I supposed to know that you would react that way?”

Stark spun around to look at him. “A decent person would.”

“Oh, I forgot that you were such a decent person yourself.”

“Well, I came here to save your ass, didn’t I?” scoffed Stark.

“My ass didn’t need saving. I was doing perfectly fine thank you very much!”

“You’re kidding me, right?” snapped Stark, as he threw Steve another clip. “You were using a barrel lid for cover, Cap. A barrel lid. Sheet metal doesn’t stop bullets, Cap! You are either the dumbest motherfucker around, or you’re just plain crazy.”

“I was handling it just fine,” Steve retorted, loading in the new bullets. “Maybe you came back because you knew it was your fault. Guilt’s a bitch, isn’t it?”

Steve saw Stark roll his eyes. “Here we go again, with this being my fault.”

“It was your plan!”

“It was your problem!”

“REALLY?! You’re gonna do this now?!” Bucky’s voice carried over the boxes, stopping the two men from arguing.

Steve turned back to Stark, not really knowing what to say, when he saw the other man’s eyes widen, quickly jumping to knock Steve to the side just as a spray of bullets hit where Steve was standing. Stark collapsed on top of him, both men breathing heavily while Thor took out the assailant.

“Well, usually, I’d make you take me to dinner first,” chided Steve, looking down at how they were positioned.

Stark huffed out a laugh, but Steve managed to see a faint blush. “You’re welcome, asshole,” he groaned.

Steve stood back up, reaching down a hand to yank Stark up as well. Looking around the carnage in the room, Steve knew they had managed to pull out a victory.

“We got a runner,” whispered Stark, still breathing severely.

Sure enough, the last of Hammer’s men was taking off down the stairs to the exit.

“Thor, bring him back. Alive.” The blonde man grinned, nodding before giving chase to the other
“Clint?” Steve called out across the room.

He breathed a sigh of relief when he heard a familiar voice. “Fine, Cap. Just a graze.” Steve nodded to himself, bringing a hand to run through his hair. He stopped, however, when he felt something sticky on his fingers. Steve pulled back quickly, eyeing the red that now stained his hand.

Heart stopping, Steve dragged his hands all over his body, looking for any sort of wound, only to come back clean. Then where did- oh. Steve spun back around to face the man who was now leaning against the tall crates for support.

It wasn’t his blood.

*It was Stark’s.*
“For the last time; I am fine,” Stark hissed as he tried to dodge out of Steve’s grip, only to end up stumbling forward towards the ground again. Steve reached out immediately, catching the falling man for about the tenth time that night.

“You are not fine,” Steve grit out. He yanked Stark against him again, his temper getting the best of him. When he felt Stark flinch roughly under him, guilt poured through Steve's veins, his harsh grasp instantly yielding. He spun Stark around, Steve’s head dipping down so he was eye level with Stark’s.

Steve would be lying if he said he hadn’t seen any worse wounds, but that did nothing to quell the tight fear and crushing guilt that sat in his chest. Stark had been lucky, that’s for damn sure. By pushing Steve to the side, the bullet had just managed to clip him on his left arm; just a simple through-and-through. But it still landed Stark with a lot less blood then Steve would’ve liked; a sickly sheen of sweat covered the smaller man, his eyes getting more unfocused by the minute.

Once he saw the blood pouring for Stark’s arm, The Captain truly came out. He barked at Thor to restrain Hammer’s fleeing man, all while sending Bucky to tend for Clint. Steve raced over to Stark, doing a quick body search to look for the man’s phone. Of course, that got another snarky comment, but Steve could hardly hear it over the blood pounding in his ears. After a quick call to Natasha, he all but dragged Stark out of the warehouse, the rest of his crew stumbling behind them. The drive back to base was tense; Steve couldn’t help but looking over at Stark every minute to ensure that the brunette was still breathing. Stark caught on pretty quickly, his smart mouth still able to chastise Steve even with an open wound.

Now, trying to drag Stark into base to get his wound checked out was like trying to pull teeth. With chopsticks. Steve had thought Stark was stubborn before, but this was just plain ridiculous.

Steve brought a hand up and tapped lightly against Stark’s cheeks. “You still with me, Stark?”

Stark batted Steve’s hand away. Or, at least he tried to, the hand moving slowly and missing Steve’s by a mile. “Fine, Cap. Bring me back to my car; I need to go home.”

Steve scoffed. “Absolutely not. You’re going to see the doctor.”

Stark yanked in Steve’s grip again. “You can’t take me to a hospital, are you nuts-”

“I didn’t say that; you’ll see our guy. Now come on, we’re almost there.”

“Cap, listen. This isn’t the first time, and probably not the last, that metal’s torn through my body. I got this.”

Steve forced Stark to meet to gaze. “No. You listen to me. I am not going to sit here and let you bleed out on my front steps. You go out and take a job with us? That makes you a Commando, and whether you like it or not, that makes you one of my people. So buck up, soldier, shut your goddamned mouth, and let your Captain help you.”

The air between the two men was tense; Stark looked up at Steve with wide eyes, Steve just glaring back at him, as if daring Stark to argue back.

“Yeah, I don’t really do the whole ‘adhering to authority’ thing.”
Screw the bullet; Steve Rogers was going to kill this man. “Fuck it,” Steve swore. “I don’t have time for this.” Without another moment of hesitation, Steve brought his arms around Stark’s waist and under his knees, carrying the man bridal style.

“Hey, watch your- what the hell are you doing?!?”

Steve ignored him, kicking the door open and stomping up the stairs to the meeting room. Bucky was already in there with Clint, the brunette holding his now ruined jacket up against Clint’s side, stopping the still flowing blood.

Steve heard Clint snicker when he saw Stark’s position, although it was cut off with another gasp of pain. Bucky stepped closer, pushing harder against the wound to try and comfort his friend.

Steve walked over the left, dumping Stark into an available chair. “Sit. Stay,” Steve snapped while pointing at the chair.

Stark rolled his eyes. “Will I get a treat?”

Steve shot him an unimpressed glare. “I won’t put another bullet in you.”

Stark huffed, but Steve ignored it, moving over towards Clint and Bucky. Another pang of guilt swept through him; Steve had spent all that time trying to get Stark in the building, he had all but forgotten about Clint’s injury. Steve’s hands joined Bucky against Clint’s would, his blue eyes darting all over Clint’s face, taking in his friend’s pained state.

“Thor is sitting downstairs with our newest guest and Nat went to go get the doc. Oh, and I called Phil.”

Stark rolled his eyes. “What?! Nooooo, Buck, come on! I’m fine, it’s just- ”

“Shut up,” Bucky hissed, slapping the back of Clint’s head. “You really think you could hide this from him? If I didn’t tell him he’d have all our asses. Forgive me for wanting to keep my ass intact.”

Clint huffed affectionately. “He’s still gonna kill me.”

Bucky moved to put a hand on his shoulder. “Yeah, buddy, you’re a dead man. Should’a left you in the warehouse.”

Clint laughed softly, ending in another groan. Steve stepped closer to the man, trying to bracket him, finding any way to lessen his pain. Any response Steve was going to give was cut off by Natasha entering the room, followed by the doc.

While Steve’s crew was made up of almost every type of person, it was still a wonder that someone like Bruce Banner had ever ended up with a crew like them.

Meeting Bruce Banner, like most other members of his crew, had been by complete chance. Bruce had been a teacher at a university, a brilliant man with a bright future. He had a sweetheart, Betty,
the two of them diving into new research for their field of science. From what Bruce had ever shared with the crew, Betty’s father, General Ross, had never approved of him. Unfortunately for him, it was a two way street; Bruce always knew the military father was a bad egg. Digging into confidential files, Bruce found out way to much about a dangerous military program. Bruce, in spite of his calm disposition, blew up in front of Ross publicly, effectively ending the man’s illegal planning and military career. However, Bruce’s anger, along with the added bonus of hit squad from Ross, cost him his job, Betty, and the life he once knew. Lucky for Bruce, he had a few tricks up his sleeves.

“Steve, it’s probably nothing.” Steve ignored his friend and continued to push through the freshly lock-picked door. Nothing, Steve thought to himself. Yeah, right. That was what he thought HYDRA was the first time he’d ever heard the name. And look what happened because of it.

“A transmission came from a computer at their base, Buck. HYDRA’s base. You think I’m just gonna let that one slide?”

He felt Bucky sigh next to him, the annoyed sound echoing through the seemingly abandoned building. “Steve, they’re gone. There’s no one left; we made sure of it. It’s probably just some computer glitch.”

“Yep. Just like that Patriot Missile Failure was just a computer glitch.”

Bucky groaned. “You gotta stop watching those war documentaries, man.”

“The fact that you know exactly what I’m talking about means you like them just as much as me. Now go around the back and meet me in the middle,” Steve replied with a firm tone.

“Fine. Bossy.” Steve waited until he saw Bucky safely make back out and towards the building rear before continuing.

The air was stale; dust mites flew across the random strips of light that filtered through the broken windows. No one had been inside this building for years, but Steve could still hear the crackling gunfire and hoarse screams as if he was still in the middle of the firefight with HYDRA.

Steve edged to the back office slowly, his eyes constantly scanning, looking for any threat. Approaching cautiously, Steve could see the glow of the computer from the doorway, the quiet whir of the technology. He pulled his gun out from the back of his pants, his heartbeat escalating in his chest. Taking on last deep breath, Steve jumped through the door frame, raising he gun towards the computer, waiting for the assailant.

What he wasn’t expecting was a small, gawky man sitting quietly in the office chair. He looked tired; his clothes rumpled, extenuating the dark circles under his eyes framed by large glasses. When Steve raced into the room, the man looked completely unfazed, even smiling a little towards Steve.

“Hello,” he said politely, offering a small wave.

Steve didn’t respond, just narrowed his eyes and raised his gun up higher.

“Oh. Right. Um. Well, before we start, I guess I’d like to say that I’m not HYDRA, I’m just, um,
me. It’s just—well, I needed to talk to you. I know, I know, I kind of went through some extreme measures, but you’re a hard man to find, Captain.”

Steve flinched at his name. “How the hell do you know me?”

The smaller man looked almost embarrassed. “Well, uh, I don’t— or, didn’t, I should say. You kind of just confirmed it for me.” When Steve cocked his gun, the man continued. “Listen, there really isn’t a need for the gun. I’m not a threat to you.”

“Why don’t you let me make that decision.”

The man sighed. “I just want to talk.”

“Then talk. Why don’t you start with who you are?”

“Bruce Banner,” the man said, extending a hand.

Bruce Banner. The name was everywhere; the news constantly played stories of the scientist’s battle with the military. “Banner? You’re a pretty popular guy right now; the TV never shuts up about you,” Steve said, ignoring the hand.

Banner gave a small smile, bringing his arm back down to his side. “Yeah, they never manage to get my good side.”

“What do you want?”

“Like I said, I need to talk to you.”

“About?”

Bruce ran a hand thought his dark locks. “I need your help.”

Steve tilted his head to the side. “What could you possibly want from The Commandos?”

“You said it yourself; I’m everywhere. I need you to kill me.”

Steve raised an eyebrow. “Not a very common request.”

“Well, not actually kill,” the man stumbled. “I need to disappear. You did it before, so you can do it for me.”

Steve scoffed. “Why would I help you?”

Banner’s eyes narrowed. “Maybe I wasn’t asking.”

Steve tightened his grip on his gun. “Is that a threat? I saw what you did to Ross. What’s to stop you from doing that to me? What’s to stop me from killing you right here?”

Banner rubbed his temples. “I didn’t— God, I’m doing this all wrong. Besides, you seem more of a threat than—”

“Me?” Steve gaped. “You sent that transmission. How am I supposed to trust you when you’re proving yourself a very capable enemy.”

“Or ally. And please, you’re just as trustworthy as me. As if the great Captain trekked out here alone.”
Steve’s heartbeat escalated. “You see anyone else in this-”

“STOP LYING TO ME!” Banner’s voice boomed through the room, startling even Steve back a few steps. Bucky charged through the room, gun drawn and eyes blazing.

Banner looked from Bucky and back to Steve, flashing a small smirk. “Just you and me, huh?”

Steve sighed and finally lowered his gun, gesturing for Bucky to do the same. “You make a valid point. Why do you need my help? You seemed to be hiding just fine before.”

“I can hide when I need to,” retorted Banner. “But Ross’s men...they’re trying to find me through Betty. I can’t- it’s not,” the man broke off with a sigh. “I can’t let her get hurt for what I’ve done. I don’t have your resources to clean myself from the system. I figured if there was anyone that could make me disappear, it was you.”

Banner looked at Steve with pleading eyes, his voice dripping in sincerity. “Please,” he continued. “I can’t offer you much, but I’ll give you it all to save Betty. I have some cash saved, even some notes on the government, whatever you want.”

Steve stared at the man, before looking at Bucky. He could see the distrust in his friend’s eyes, but Steve was a sucker for a sob story. “Fine,” he said, ignoring Bucky’s load groan. “As for payment...the news says you’re a doctor?”

Steve gave Bruce a warm smile, one that was happily returned. Despite their first meeting, Bruce had proven himself more than enough ways to be in the crew. He was quirky, an odd duck, but wove perfectly in with the patchwork of The Commandos. *The Swiss Army Knife,* Dugan calls him, much to Bruce's chagrin. Steve couldn't help but agree; it seemed that every time he ran into Bruce in their home, the man was in the middle of a different task, grumbling the occasional complain, but doing it all the same. It had been over a year since their first meeting, and while Steve had talked with him multiple times about sending him somewhere else, Bruce always just laughed him off.

"You know you don’t actually have to do this stuff, right?” Steve asked.

Bruce shrugged, not looking up from where he was looking over the busted coffee machine. "I know I gripe, but I don't mind it, really."

Steve frowned. "There are other ways I can help you disappear," he continued. "I know this isn't what you envisioned for your life. But you know that I'll help you make the best of it. It's been a while; things have started to calm down. I can set you up in West Virginia, get you closer to Betty, and- "

"No," Bruce snapped, finally looking up at Steve. "I won't risk her."

Steve smiled. "I know you won't. It's just, you don't owe me anything. Not anymore. You're my friend, Bruce. You're our friend. We take care of our own."

Bruce stood, clapping a hand on Steve's shoulder. "And that's why I stay. I take care of my own, as well. Besides," he chuckled softly. "I'm quite surprised how much being a criminal suits me, let alone one that's supposed to be dead. If only Betty could see me now!"
Steve nodded over to Bruce, meeting the man in a firm hand shake. He guided Bruce over to Stark, but the man brushed the doctor off.

“Barton first,” Stark grumbled. “I can’t take any more of his bitching,” he continued. Steve stared in disbelief back down at the brunette, but let Bruce head over to Barton. He could hear Bruce’s disappointed huff as he dressed Clint’s wound, but Steve only had eyes for Stark.

*He came back for them, for me.*

*He took a bullet for me.*

“Why?” Steve felt himself whispering to the injured man.

Stark met his gaze slowly, but understanding shown in his eyes. “Job’s not done. Besides, I didn’t want you to get your blood all over my warehouse floor. You know how long it takes for that to get out? It’s not good for business.”

Despite everything, Steve found himself smiling at the man. “I’m still mad at you,” Stark mumbled.

Steve huffed. “I know. I’m not exactly happy with you either.”

“I know,” Stark replied, finally returning Steve’s smile. Steve just snorted and moved to sit next to the man.

Bruce finally walked over to Stark, taking a look at his arm. He wiped down the wound and started on the stitches when he said, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Stark.”

Stark gaped at the man. “Wow, what serv- holy shit. You’re Bruce Banner.”

Bruce, as always, just gave an embarrassed smile while readjusting his glasses. Stark, mouth still gaping open, turned back to Steve. “Bruce Banner? *The Bruce Banner?* He’s supposed to be dead! I should’ve known this was your work, Cap. Who else do you have running around in here, Elvis?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Johnny Cash on the other hand,” Steve started with a grin, but Stark wasn’t listening anymore, already pestering Bruce.

“Doctor. It is an honor. Your work on gamma radiation is unparalleled. Also, I’m a huge fan on how you basically turned into a rage monster and singlehandedly dismantled Ross’s military network.”

“Um, thanks. I think.” Bruce answered, starting to poke at Stark’s wound as the engineer continued to bombard him with questions. Bruce answered each one politely, working with steady hands, only stopping to gently readjust Stark's position as the man blabbed animatedly about something Steve could never hope to understand. He could see the excitement reflected in Bruce's own eyes as he worked a neat row of stitches into Stark's arm. *Finally, someone that can keep up with him.* Steve scoffed at his own thought. He could barely go a day without pissing Stark off; it's not like he was going to stick around after this mess with HYDRA was cleaned up. Steve watched as Bruce wound a tight bandage over the wound, the doctor, nodding at Steve. *He'll be fine,* it meant. Steve couldn't help but slump in relief knowing both Clint, even Stark, would pull through. Bruce started to pack up his med kit, but Stark kept on talking, with no end in sight. Steve rolled his eyes, shoving pain killers in Stark’s face.

“All right, show’s over,” Steve said as he pulled Stark up and brought him into his office. He helped Stark lay down on his couch, ignoring the man's whining. “I promise Bruce will be here
“When you wake up,” Steve huffed.

“I don’t need to sleep,” pouted Stark.

“Of course you don’t. I’ll be back later.”

Stark’s eyes blinked up at him slowly, the drugs already pulling him under. “Where goin’?” he managed to slur out.

“I’m gonna go have a chat with our friend downstairs. He has some injuries to answer for.”
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Steve walked slowly down the wrought iron stairs, his head thrumming with today’s events. He had waited until Stark had passed out, adjusting the injured man’s position so he wouldn’t wake up later with a crick in his neck. With the man unconscious underneath him, Steve had plenty of time to truly study the engineer. He looked at peace; the usual stress lines that adorned his face gone, leaving an almost innocent expression. Even in a dead sleep, the smaller man let out some unintelligible murmurs, as if his brain continued to power on when the rest of the body was resting. *The price of an advanced mind, I suppose*, Steve thought to himself.

Despite Stark’s reasoning, Steve had no idea why Stark had come back for them. After everything that had gone down before, Stark should have left Steve and his crew to die. But he didn’t. While Steve yearned to believe that it was the shreds of humanity that still encircled Stark’s heart that brought him back to save Steve, he knew it wouldn’t be that simple. It’s the world they live in. The only way to survive out there is through connections and favors. And Stark? Stark just charged in guns a blazing, saving Steve and his men, all while apprehending one of Hammer’s men. Steve owed Stark. That’s what scared him the most.

Trying to clear his head, Steve stomped down the last few steps, walking down the dark hallway to one of their ‘interrogation rooms’. Steve had left Thor in charge of Hammer’s last survivor while he catered to the injured with Bruce, so with the two of them together, Steve didn’t think it would take much for the guy to break.

His suspicions were confirmed when he entered the room to find Hammer’s goon already whimpering, throwing in a few body thrashes when he noticed Steve enter the room. Steve smirked. While Steve’s Captain visage was terrifying to most, being on the other side of an interrogation with Thor is absolutely hellish. Thor had that confidence, border lining on cockiness; a dominant power no matter what room he walks in. Hell, Thor hasn’t even touched this guy yet and he already looked like he was five seconds away from soiling himself. Then again, Hammer and his men are as cowardly as they come.

“Anything?” Steve asked, walking up to the hulking blonde.

“I was waiting on you, Captain,” answered Thor. “I have been told there is power in numbers,” he said with a beaming smile.

Steve returned with a small smile of his own. “By all means,” he said, gesturing to the blubbery mess tied to the chair in front of them.

Thor gave a forceful nod, walking over to a table placed on the far wall. When Thor sidled on back over, Steve chuckled when he saw Thor wielding an industrial hammer. “It’s my favorite,” Thor answered with a laugh of his own.

"You know the last time we saw each other he tried to kill me with a hammer?" Tony's voice filtered through his head.

Steve watched as Thor walked up to Hammer’s man. “Now, I’ve been told that in your country, the saying is ‘do first, ask questions later’ is very popular. With that in mind, which one of your fingers do you like least?”
The man yanked against his bonds, his screams muffled by the gag placed securely over his mouth. “Oh, of course, the gag. Well, unfortunately, we have wounded upstairs and we shouldn’t disturb them, so if you could just wiggle which one for me, that would—oh. Captain, would you look at this? He’s moving them all. A brave man, this one. Braver than I, I think,” Thor chuckled. “Are you sure?” he asked again to the man, who was shaking his head wildly, trying his best to stop the tremors wracking through his hands. Thor smirked. “As you wish.”

With unyielding force, Thor brought the hammer down on the poor man’s fingers, the blow crushing each one before moving on to the next one. It was brutal; the man’s screams barely were barely muffled by the gag, but Steve never flinched once. This was just the beginning.

By the time Thor was finished, Steve could see the man struggle to hold on to consciousness, his head, moving to each side before flopping down into his chest. Steve gave Thor a nod when the other man looked at him, giving him the go ahead to remove the gag.

Once the rough cloth was out of his mouth, the man gasped for air like he’d been drowning, his harsh breaths accompanied by pained groans. “Ple-ple-please! No more, I can’t, I-I’ll tell you anything!”

Steve gave a hollow laugh. “That’s too bad. We don’t want anything from you.”

The man looked up at Steve with bleary eyes. “Well, th-then what-”

“You work for Hammer. Hammer works for HYDRA. Do the math, it’s not that hard.”

Their prisoner’s eyes bugged out of their sockets, his head snapping towards Thor as his pleas increased. “Oh no, my friend. You attacked The Captain’s men today. You answer to him.”

“No, wait, please! I didn’t know it was The Captain’s men, I was just doing as The Monger asked, I swear!”

Steve stared down at the man, his body radiating pure fury. Without a single word, he stuck his hand out towards Thor, one that was quickly filled with the hammer. Not waiting for the man to try and bargain again, Steve swung the hammer around, hitting him square in his right shin. The man howled, the force from his shout almost tipping his chair over. “Huh,” said Steve, looking down at the hammer.

“Terribly well balanced, isn’t it? It’s all in the swing,” he heard Thor say next to him. Steve swung a few more times, clipping his collarbone and ribs, each thudding noise satisfying Steve’s rage. It wasn’t long before Steve dropped the hammer and resorted to his fists, his eyes closing as he blindly hit the helpless man beneath him, the only thing running through his mind was the way his hands looked in Stark and Clint’s blood. With one final knee to the ribs, Steve stepped back, running a hand through his hair, trying to get a handle on his racing pulse and pounding heart.

Steve let the man recover, well, as much as he could with shattered bones, before walking back up to him. Steve grabbed his chin, forcing him to make eye contact. “Now that I have your attention, listen very carefully. You and the rest of your posse had the audacity to attack me today. And because of your actions, two of my people are injured. My people. I would love nothing more than to jam this hammer into your skull and watch the light leave your eyes, but I’ve got a better idea. You’re going to go back to Hammer and tell him everything that happened today; tell him how you failed. And then tell him this: back off. The next time that your boss comes anywhere near my people, I will end him. You think it’s bad now? You haven’t even seen bad. Now do as I say before I change my mind and I choke the life right out of you. Do you understand?”
The man, who at this point was a few deep breaths from choking on his own blood managed to give a slight jerk for a nod.

“I’m glad we were able to reach an understanding,” sneered Steve. “Wrap him up, Thor, and drop him in a street. I don’t care which one; just get this filth out of here.”

Thor obeyed immediately, throwing a bag over the man’s head before fireman carrying him out of the room.

Steve paused, looking at the blood stained floor. *The Monger*, Hammer’s man had said. That was a new one. Their prisoner hadn't denied his knowledge of Hammer’s working with HYDRA, but who was *The Monger*? How was he involved? Maybe he was the new face of HYDRA; they had to have picked someone after Schmidt died. Whoever *The Monger* was, he was the next piece of the puzzle that they needed.

Steve sighed and headed out the door, only stopping when he ran into Bucky. “Go with Thor and dump that trash in the street,” he commanded, nodding to where Thor was carrying Hammer’s half-dead man up the stairs.

“You gonna let him go?” Bucky asked.

“That’s one way to put it,” Steve responded. “Follow him after the drop off; let him stumble around until he finds an ally.”

“And?”

“And as soon as he so as much opens his mouth, put a bullet through his brain. That will send a message.”

Bucky nodded before taking off to catch Thor. Steve stood around on the main floor and watched them go, his body still thrumming with adrenaline. He sighed again, heading for the gym, hoping a few rounds with the punching bag will calm him down. He rounded the corner, trying to wipe the blood on his knuckles off when he ran into Phil Coulson.

“Oh, Phil! I’m sorry, I, uh- ” Steve broke off when he looked down at the state of his clothing, the dirty outfit covered in blood from the job as well as his latest art project with Thor.

Phil just shrugged. “Not like I haven’t seen Clint look any better,” he said with a small smile. But Steve could see the small cracks in it, the slight tugging of the lips more a grim line than a smile at all, really.

Steve nodded, gesturing to one of the side bedrooms. “Is he?”

“Yes,” answered Phil. “I’m just out to find another blanket. Clint passed out before I even got here.”

Steve smirked. “Lucky bastard.”

“For now,” Phil snorted. “That man is going to be in a world of hurt when he wakes up.”

Steve returned the laugh hollowly, before looking down at his hands. “Phil, I-”

“Don’t,” he interrupted. “I know what you’re going to say. It wasn’t your fault; you couldn’t have known that would happen.”
“But I should’ve.”

Phil sighed. “We’ve had this conversation a hundred times before, and something tells me we’ll be having it again one day. I know you love Clint as much as I do; you’ll do anything and everything to bring him home to me every night. That’s all I can ask for.”

“You know, for as often as we have this talk, it doesn’t seem to be getting any easier,” retorted Steve.

Phil’s lips tugged into a smile. “It’s hard. I mean, I know what you guys do. I hear it when the reports come through the precinct. It’s tough not knowing when I wake up every morning if that will be the last one I have with him. Sometimes I just want to lock him in the house, but that man is just too damn stubborn. I just have to trust that he knows what he’s doing.”

Steve grabbed Phil’s shoulder. “It’s funny. I heard the exact same thing from Clint last week. You know he keeps a police scanner running upstairs all the time just in case? He’s just as worried about you, Phil.”

“What a match we are,” Phil said wryly.

“You know,” Steve continued. “If you ever wanted to leave. With Clint, of course. Take off somewhere, start a new life? I can make that happen.”

Phil shot Steve an unimpressed look. “We’re not going anywhere.”

“I’m just saying, if it gets to be too much, I can-”

“Let me tell you something. Clint’s never leaving; you know that, I know that. He doesn’t know anything outside of this life. And where he goes, I go. I mean, the man can barely find his shoes in the morning; can you imagine him trying to survive a week without me? Besides, domestic live wouldn’t suit us. That’s a one way ticket for us to sit in recliners and get fat.”

Steve smiled. “Well, just know the option is always there.”

“The fact that it’s even an option is more reason for us to stay,” Phil replied easily.

“You’re a good man, Phil Coulson.”

The smaller man patted Steve’s shoulder before continuing on his way to find blankets. “Someone’s gotta keep you guys in line.”

Matthew Drumm tapped a broken melody on the side of the van he was leaning against. He had been waiting hours for Hammer’s field men to come back from the job, hopefully with The Captain and Stark in tow.

He was about to call it quits when a man came stumbling out of the back alley, his right leg dragging behind him, both arms wrapped securely around his chest. The man began to limp towards Drumm, a small line of blood followed behind him, like a trail of bread crumbs.

Drumm squinted. “Carl, that you?”
His crew mate blinked up at him, gasping for breath as he tried to form words. “Jesus. What the hell happened to you? Where are the others?” Drumm continued, running up to his injured friend.

“Th-the Captain,” Carl managed to choke out before a gun shot rang out, and Matthew Drumm found himself covered in his friend’s blood, the man falling limp in his arms.

Heart pounding, he took a step back, Carl falling out of his arms and onto the ground. “Oh my god,” he whispered, already reaching for his phone. He scrambled to type in the number, before remembering that he should run to cover, in case another shot rings out.

“What is it? Do you have them?” Hammer’s voice filtered through the phone.

“Boss,” Drumm gasped, still looking at Carl’s motionless body. “We’ve got a problem.”

Chapter End Notes

Progress Check!
How are we doing? You all still with me?

I sure hope so. One million thanks again to everyone reading; you the real MVP. Remember, I'm always a sucker for comments! I'd love to hear what you think/want.

Peace out.
Tony woke slowly, his mind muddled by whatever drugs he had been given. *Wait, drugs?*

Tony sprung up, only to have a sharp pain course over his arm. *Oh, that’s right. I’ve been shot.* Tony glanced down at his injured arm, the previous events flashing through his mind. He smiled, however, when he looked at the neat row of stitches, thinking of the quirky Bruce Banner. Tony had remembered the news plastering the doctor's face all over New York and the world, while the man duked in out with General Ross. What he’d down was incredible, his inner self whooping for joy as the seemingly timid man did what Tony couldn't manage with his own father. Tony had actually planned on reaching out to the man, only to be devastated when the news reported him deceased. Finding him alive and well was the Holy Grail that Tony didn't know he needed. He couldn’t wait to pick his brain later.

*How the hell does someone like him end up with The Captain?* It seemed like The Captain and his crew had a spot for every-

*No.*

Tony shook his head, rubbing at his eyes with his hand. It was that kind of thinking that got him in that situation in the first place. How the hell did he end up like this? Tony used to pay people to go out and get shot for him. Now here he is, sitting on some ratty couch in the boondocks of Brooklyn, nursing his own bullet wound. *How the hell am I gonna get this past Pepper? Past Obie?*

Tony flopped back down on the couch, groaning. He always did well under stress, always able to keep control. Hell, he had a whole childhood with Howard to prove that. But right now, Tony could almost feel the runaway train he was on. Honestly, if he had told himself a month ago that this was where he was gonna end up, Tony probably would have brushed it off as his usual drunken rants. *How the mighty have fallen,* he thought to himself. *I’m digging my own grave at this point.*

It was all The Captain’s fault.

Tony had tried to convince himself that it was a business move. It was strategic; show up as The Captain’s knight in shining armor, and the man would be begging to give Tony favors.

But who was he kidding? Tony knew there was no way that he could dismantle HYDRA by himself.

Having his own narcissistic tendencies, Tony could convince anyone that he could move mountains with his bare hands, maybe even build a weaponized metal flight suit. Who knows, he probably could if he had the time. Tony was never one to admit that he was only human, but even he had his limits. Not that he would tell anyone.

While Tony had gone around jabbing at The Captain’s apparent ‘need’ for him, it was really Tony covering up his need for The Captain. And then Thor had shown up, and it had all gone to shit.

So no, Tony did not go back for them as a business move. Tony had to show The Captain that he still *needed* Tony. He felt like he was back at boarding school, all of the kids lining up, trying to prove their worth to the team’s captain, trying not to be the last one picked for dodgeball.

Falling out of the loop with The Captain and his crew could have devastating results, especially
this far in the game. Power in numbers, right? With HYDRA on their tails, Tony couldn’t afford to be left in the dust. They were already steps behind HYDRA, if Tony fell out now, he’d find himself cornered. Because believe it or not, The Captain had resources that he didn’t. Sure, Tony could hack any mainframe, get a digital copy of almost anything, but every brain needs its brawn. This was HYDRA. The fact that they had already managed to survive their first massacre was enough proof that they wouldn’t be one to disappear again with a key simple stokes of a keyboard.

No, Tony couldn’t get any closer to HYDRA by himself, just like The Captain wouldn’t get anywhere without Tony. Or, at least, that’s what Tony had thought. It was Thor’s arrival that tipped him over; the influx of a new variable in an already unstable equation, making Tony nothing more than a constant: so small that he became obsolete. Thor had resources, had the money to do whatever Tony could do.

Tony had to be better.

Tony thrived on being needed, on being wanted. It was his own sick and twisted version of love, a way of proving to himself that he wasn’t the worthless piece of scrap his father told him he was. He’s a moth drawn to the flame; his publicity the oxygen, his desirable skill set the dry heat that keeps the fire going.

Who was Tony Stark if he wasn’t needed?

Nobody.

A brilliant star gone supernova, until there’s nothing left but the empty and unforgiving void of space.

So if getting shot was what it takes to get back in the game, why not? It’s not like he hadn’t done anything worse to get less, and Tony’s always been one for the dramatic flair. Tony couldn’t help but silently preen whenever The Captain shot him some guilt ridden faces as he helped him back to their base. It was almost comical how wide his eyes were, the poor man twitching at every small groan Tony made. Plus, Tony was almost positive that he would have gotten a hard on when the man picked him up like he weighed nothing. That is, if it weren’t from the blood loss that he was experiencing at the time.

Tony took a deep breath and sat up again, slowly this time, trying to keep from jostling his arm. He eyes started to scan the room curiously, taking in his new surroundings. It was nothing much; at any other point in his life, Tony might call it fit for derelicts. But now, he could only seem to describe it as homey. Everything was so worn down and overused that it seemed to give off a certain warmth. It was like a glimpse behind the curtain, the idea of a simple domesticity hidden in the lives of hardened criminals. The desk, presumably The Captain’s, was overflowing with files, notes, and scraps. Books of every genre were crammed into a crooked bookshelf, looking like it was one nudge away from falling over. Tony smiled, imagining members of the team curling into the armchair to read, the room silent except for the scratching of paper, the hulking Captain hunching over the desk, scribbling in a tight scrawl.

What immediately caught his gaze, leaving him frozen on the couch, was the huge collage that sat across from him. Pictures for every occasion filled Tony’s eye line; some taken recently while others showed the signs of age. Newspaper clippings were tacked alongside them, telling the tales of the Captain and his men. It was so domestic; almost as if a proud dad had taken their A+ reports and put them on the refrigerator for everyone else to see. The rest of the wall was covered in artwork, obviously the work of The Captain. The scenes took many mediums, ranging from thick sketch pads to scraps of paper to napkins from a random diner, as if Cap had grabbed whatever was around to catch the perfect moment. It was so real, so normal. Like walking into a house and seeing
all the family photos adorn the walls, hanging happy memories to remember in years to come.

Tony hated it.

It shouldn’t be there. They shouldn’t have this. Tony knew The Captain was close to his crew, but this just screamed family bond. Why did they get to have this? How? Tony had files compiled on most of The Commandos. They’re all so different; each thinking, each moving in their own unique way. They shouldn’t work. They shouldn’t be them. How could they, a mob much less, manage to find a chuck of happiness in the world they live in? How could they have that when Ton-people could never grasp it with their real family?

Tony started to push off the couch to get a closer look when he heard a gun cock to his right.

He spun suddenly, ignoring the searing pain from his arm, to face Barnes, who was sitting comfortably bin a chair crammed in the far corner. Tony let himself sidle back down to the couch, the apparent ‘don’t move’ from Barnes enough to send him back down to the furniture.

“Bedside manner not really your forte, is it?” Tony tried to joke.

Which of course only got him a colder glare from Barnes. The Captain’s lap dog did not sit well with Tony. Well, none of The Commandos did; they were trained killers after all. Barnes, however, definitely takes the cake. His fierce protectiveness over his boss could be clearly seen on any day, but his hatred for Tony? Well that could be seen for miles.

“Isn’t this the part where you ask me if I want some water?”

Barnes rolled his eyes. “How about we skip that and we just get to the part where you shut your mouth?”

Tony glared at the other brunette. “Don’t you have a job to do?”

“I don’t take orders from you,” snapped Barnes.

“Well, I don’t take orders from anyone. So why don’t you put the gun down and tell me what you want?”

Barnes tilted his head minutely, before standing up, slowly stalking up to Tony, a menacing force towering over him. “I wanted to talk to you.”

“Oh, well. The gun’s a bit much, but I know you don’t really know how to socialize as a normal-”

“Cut the shit,” Barnes interrupted him. “You’re not fooling anyone, you know.”

Tony narrowed his eyes. “I don’t follow.”

Barnes placed the gun on the desk, still facing Tony, and crossed his arms over his chest. “That stunt you pulled at the warehouse.”

“Well,” Tony retorted. “Most people would say thank you.”

Barnes snorted. “You didn’t come back there to save our asses; you’d probably be happier if some of us got killed off.”

Tony hummed. “Well, I’m not gonna lie, Barnes. You would look spectacular splattered out on my warehouse floor. Another time, maybe?”
Barnes reached forward and grabbed Tony’s arm, squeezing over his stitches. Tony tried to remain unfazed, but even he couldn’t help the flinch he gave as he was grabbed roughly. “Listen to me very closely. The only reason you are still breathing is because Cap still wants to milk you a bit more before he leaves you dried up and broken in the streets. And when that day comes? When The Captain finally realizes how useless you are? You can be damn sure that I’ll be the one behind the rifle pulling the trigger. It would be quite a site to watch you splatter, wouldn’t it? And through it all, I’ll do it with a smile.”

Tony tried to stay nonplussed, but he knew he was failing miserably, his frantic heartbeat a dead giveaway. He always saw Barnes as a threat, but Jesus, the man was almost as terrifying as Romanoff. Which, of course, shouldn’t have been a surprise considering how Tony already knew how dangerous Barnes was. But he was always a terror, The Captain’s right hand man.

When The Commandos first started popping up, Barnes had acquired the name The Winter Soldier, a deadly whisper on the streets. Whenever dealing with some of their more gruesome foes, The Captain would always send Barnes in to… eradicate the problem. People said that if you ever managed to survive an encounter with The Captain’s top dog, you ended up feeling like death anyway. They say facing off against him is like facing the Grim Reaper himself; his cold, empty eyes and threatening words enough to turn your veins to ice from fear alone.

Tony had always been skeptical of the name, but being on the other side of James Barnes right now was enough for him to pray out a silent Hail Mary.

“Because I know you, Stark,” continued Barnes. “You’re nothing but a sleazy businessman, and a threat to my family. I’m sorry to say that we’re not your typical cliental, however. We’re not swayed by your fancy words and your smart mouth. You’re not fooling any of us, so you can quit it with the knight and shining armor bullcrap vibe you’re trying to send out.”

Tony smirked at him. “Why? You worried you aren’t Daddy’s favorite anymore?”

Barnes’s nose flared, his arm snapping out to grab his gun again, having it pointed back at Tony before he could get another word in. “You think you have Cap wrapped around your little finger don’t you? But let me tell you something. You’re nothing. You don’t belong here; we don’t even want you here. One word from me and you’ll be done for. So you better tread lightly, Stark, because I’m not one to be- “

“Bucky.”

Both men startled at the voice, The Captain managing to sneak up on both of them, blue eyes blazing with fury.

Barnes faltered with the gun. “Cap, I- ”

“Get. Out. I’ll deal with you later.”

Tony watched Barnes slump, defeated, before moving to head out of the room. When he got to the door, he shot Tony one last final glare, which Tony responded with a winning smile. Sucker.

Once Barnes was gone, Tony turned back to The Captain, looking him over. The blonde looked exhausted to the bone, not to mention infuriated, covered in blood, grime, and sweat. The Captain ran a hand through his already greasy locks, looking idly around the room.

Trying to break the awkward silence, Tony said, “So. He’s a real keeper, that Barnes.”

A harsh laugh escaped The Captain’s lips, the man trying to give a weak smile to cover up his
obvious pain. “Yeah, he’s, uh. He’s somethin’ else.”

“Just, try to keep him from killing me, yeah? I think one bullet is enough for today.”

The Captain’s eyes immediately hardened, walking over to Tony, grabbing the man’s arm with a tenderness that Tony didn’t think him capable of. “How are you feeling? Should I get Bruce?”


Tony watched The Captain roll his eyes, a small smile gracing his face. “Have a crush already, do we, Stark?”

“Jealous?” asked Tony with a raised eyebrow, glancing down to where The Captain was still holding his arm. The Captain blushed furiously, dropping Tony’s arm as if it were fire, and taking a few steps back.

Mission accomplished, Tony changed the subject. “You have a nice little chat with that Hammer drone?”

The Captain seemed relieved at the change of subject. “Yeah, I think I got something out of him.”

“And?”

“Don’t worry. I had Thor and Buck take care of him already. None of this should reach back to you.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” drawled Tony. “Now. What’d the man spill?”


Tony shook his head, his mind coming up blank. “HYDRA?”

“Could be. Whoever it is, they’re the closest thing we have to a lead right now. You sure you’re feeling alright?”

“I’ll be fine,” Tony said proudly, blatantly ignoring how his arm still felt like fire from when Barnes grabbed him.

“Alright then,” The Captain said with a nod, walking back towards the office door. “Time to call a family meeting.”
“How did this happen?” Hammer snapped, looking at his lackey’s lifeless body.

The other man shifted uneasily on his legs- Drumm, his mind supplied- twisting his worn hat between his hands. “Well, boss. I don’t really know. I was waiting at the rendezvous point as planned and then Carl stumbled over, looking, well, looking like that,” the man stuttered out, gesturing to the dead body in front of them.

Hammer glared at him, urging him to continue. “He tried to tell me something and then- boom. Bullet in the head. All he managed to get out was ‘The Captain’.”

Hammer balled his hands in his fists, repressing the urge to kill the frightened man in front of him. Dammit. This shouldn’t have happened. They had them! They were so damn close to finally getting their hands on The Captain and his new business partner. But, no. Anthony Stark had to, yet again, go ahead and ruin everything they’d worked for.

Hammer should have been used to it by now; Stark had always been one step ahead. Better ideas, better weapons, better hair. Tony Stark had everything. And Justin Hammer would be the one to take it away from him.

Since Pierce had been adamant to finally capturing The Captain, it was easy for Hammer to fall on board once he found out that he had the bonus of dealing with Tony Stark as he saw fit. With the arrival of their new associate, The Monger- Obadiah Stane- Hammer had felt nothing but unease. While he should have been happy that Stark’s own business partner was out for him, Hammer knew that Stane would just be another road block on his journey to be the top weapon’s dealer in New York.

Whatever, he said to himself. We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.

Hammer turned to face Drumm again when the doors burst open to reveal a flustered Alexander Pierce. He took one look at the body and his face hardened.

“It seems Stane’s plan didn’t have the ending we were hoping for,” mused Hammer. Maybe if he pushed Pierce in the right direction, he would just drop Stane and kill both him and Stark.

“Just a little bump,” retorted Pierce.

“A bump?! Do you know how many men I lost today?!” shouted Hammer. After Drumm had brought in the first body, Hammer had immediately sent him back out in search of the rest of the men he sent to deal with The Commandos. It had ended the same; Tony Stark still out of reach and more dead bodies laying at his feet. How that rag-tag group of imbeciles managed to mow down some of his best guns had Hammer seething in anger. This wasn’t supposed to happen. This wasn’t what I signed up for.

Pierce rolled his eyes, scoffing. “If you thought you were leaving that warehouse with all of your men intact, then you really are naïve. I’ll reimburse your loses; it’s not like these nobody’s are hard to replace,” Pierce drawled, eyeing Drumm, who was still trying to make himself disappear in the corner.
Hammer watched as Pierce approached the body slowly, taking in all the apparent injuries. “They
did do a number on this one,” he said. “The Captain has quite the temper, it seems. We must have
him flustered then,” Pierce continued with a small smile.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if The Captain and his men had been prepared for you, they would have just sprayed your
boys down like they were nothing. The fact that they sent one of them back like this? That means
they weren’t ready. We got a little too close for them. See this, my friend, is not just a body. It’s a
message. The Captain is getting worried. He’s close to slipping.”

Hammer nodded in agreement. “What do you suggest we do to finally push him over the edge?”

Pierce idly picked at one of his fingernails. “Oh, Stane’s already taking care of that.”

Hammer sniffed. “Oh, yeah? What’s he got in his arsenal that can scare The Captain?”

Pierce turned to look at his associate, staring at him with a feral grin. “I didn’t say anything about
scaring The Captain.”

Tony sat down in the chair carefully, groaning softly to himself. Although his arm was a constant
throbbing, Barnes’s threats were the only thing plaguing him right now. Tony had been lucky that
Cap was right there; he knew that Barnes could be a loose cannon if he wanted to. Tony would
have to keep a closer eye on him; there was no way he would be able to win the war if he was
fighting battles on both sides.

He closed his eyes, trying to get comfortable. He could feel the weight of The Captain’s gaze on
him, but Tony never opened his eyes. There were more pressing matters at hand; the last thing
Tony needed was another mother henning from the mob boss.

Another door opened, Tony hearing the steps of The Commando’s fill the room, finding their
places for their ‘family meeting’, as Cap had put it. Gag me with a spoon, Tony thought to himself.
Seriously, who would have thought that the mob man would have been this wholesome? It was
sickening. Tony wasn’t really tracking their conversations, but he did hear a few questionable
murmurs, most likely due to his presence. He wasn’t sure how long he sat there, but soon his flanks
were warmed by the appearance of other bodies, everyone trying to squeeze into the same room.

“Everyone here?” The Captain’s voice caused Tony to stir, finally taking in the rest of the room.
He was happy to find out that Bruce Banner had been one to sit next to Tony, offering him a small
smile when their eyes met. Spread around them were the rest of The Commandos, each in a
different state of disarray; no doubt they had already heard what had happened. Odinson was
leaning against the back wall with a stern face that Tony had never seen before. Barnes was seated
next to The Captain, but was leaning away, most likely still licking his wounds from their earlier
encounter. The brunette seemed to be blatantly ignoring the heavy looks he was being sent from
Romanoff, but Tony couldn’t blame him. He didn’t think he could survive a look like that.
Someone must have roused Barton, because he was there, sitting quietly with a lot more color than
the last time Tony had seen him. The officer, Coulson, was there, and seriously, who let him in?
The man was still in full uniform, gun and everything, and no one even looked at him twice. He
was squished next to Barton, a blank look adorning his face, and an arm thrown protectively over
the- ah. Now wasn’t that just a Shakespearean tragedy: The Copper and the Crook. How cliché were these people?

“Alright then,” The Captain sighed. “Let’s get started.” He was seated at the head of the table, looking just as tired as Tony felt. “I’m sure everyone’s been briefed on what happened at the warehouse,” he said. “You’ll all be happy to know that we pulled away with a win,” The Captain added with a brief glance at Tony.

“However, I think this job was a reminder that we aren’t as invulnerable as we like to think. It’s been a while since we faced a threat such as HYDRA. We can’t keep running around with our heads in the sand.”

“Did you get anything from Hammer’s man?” one of the men asked.

The Captain shook his head. “Not much, just a name. He calls himself ‘The Monger’. Ring any bells with anyone?”

It wasn’t surprising that Romanoff was the one to speak up. That woman knew everything. “I’ve heard whispers. Just a shadow that deals with the Ten Rings.”

A few resounding groans echoed through the room. “That’s just great,” drawled Barton. “HYDRA has their hooks in everyone.”

The Captain hummed. “It makes sense. They need a way to build up their numbers somewhere. What do you think?”

It took Tony an alarmingly long amount of time to figure out The Captain was talking to him. “Ahh-what?” he asked eloquently. Since when was he a part of this meeting?

The Captain didn’t budge. “I know you have files compiled on every big time mob in New York. That makes you the expert here, so I’m gonna ask again. What do you think?”

A pleasant flutter passed through his chest, like a giddy school boy realizing that the teacher had chosen him to lead the class. It made him want to puff up his chest at Barnes as if to say ‘I’m worth more to him than you think!’ That thought made his pause for a moment, looking down at his hands. Did he want this? Here he was, sitting with the people that had, last month, aimed loaded guns at him at the very same table. Was he ready to break bread with them?

He knew it was impossible to avoid working with The Commandos in this fight against HYDRA, but The Captain had usually distanced himself from the rest of the crew. And Tony had been more than fine with it; he stayed on his side, they stayed on theirs. But this, sitting at their table, sleeping under their roof? No wonder Barnes is getting volatile. To them, Tony was still an outsider, an unknown variable that was yet to be determined as friend or foe. It seemed that they were only going on the word of The Captain - which, to be honest, could mean anything, as Tony wasn't exactly sure where they stood either.

He could still feel heat of his anger smoldering in his veins. Cap bringing in Odinson in the way he did was a mistake, but Tony didn't exactly handle it with grace either. This game that they were playing with each other was childish, and after the consequences of today, Tony knew he had to change his tune. Maybe that's why The Captain invited him here, to finally sit with his family. An extension of an olive branch. It was the start of something more meaningful between the two of them; he knew it, Cap knew it. Barnes sure as hell did.

It was impossible to avoid his fathers voice through his head. "Don't get involved."
"Tony?" Tony startled, head snapping to the mob boss. The blonde smiled slightly, nodding encouragingly.

An olive branch, indeed.

"Don't get involved."

No. Screw you, Howard.

Tony ran a hand over his goatee, his fingers scraping through the coarse hair. “The Ten Rings? Definitely one of the more seedier groups you'll meet on the street. More of a hit squad than a mob. You have a problem and they'll take care out it, as long as you make it worth their while. The only loyalty they have is to money. Maybe The Monger is HYDRA’s bank; assuming that he had enough influence, he could get the Ten Rings to act as their personal hit squad.”

“A hit squad shouldn’t be too much of an issue. We’ve got the numbers, we can probably take them out,” someone responded. Dugan, was it?

“And a good idea,” Tony continued. “Given the right price, these people would do anything. That’s what makes them so dangerous. Provoking them while we’re in the middle of this shit storm probably wouldn’t be your finest move.”

“So, we shouldn’t engage?” inquired The Captain.

“Not until I can give you a solid number on how many there are. Taking one of their men to find The Monger won’t be worth it when the rest of the pack starts butchering New York with a craving for your blood.”

The Captain ran a hand through his hair, sighing. “Alright, we’ll find The Monger another way.” He looked back to the rest of his men. “Get your feelers out. The Monger may be our next link to the man puppeteering HYDRA.”

People made a move to stand, but a hand from The Captain had them instantly back in their seats. “I’m not finished. As we get deeper into this, you have to understand that there will be a lot of dangerous times ahead of us. Now, I have had the pleasure of working many years with each and every one of you. Everyone here has earned my respect and friendship tenfold; you are the bravest and best people that I’ve ever known.” Tony slunk back in his chair, feeling embarrassed. Like he was walking in on an intimate family moment.

“HYDRA was and still is the greatest threat we’ve ever faced. We lost a lot the last time. Now, I will spend each and every breath that I have left in me to make sure that it won’t be like last time. But I can’t play God; there will be things that even I won’t be able to stop no matter how hard I try. That being said,” The Captain continued, “if anyone, and I mean anyone, does not want any part of this, you have every right to leave. I can get you some cash, get you somewhere safe, get you out. No one here, especially not me, will think any less of you for wanting to leave; you have each proven yourselves more than enough. Any takers?”

Tony’s eyes swiveled across the room, looking for a hand.

But it never came.

Tony sat in awe at the sight in front of him. When Tony had first met The Howling Commandos he had expected one thing: a group of stone cold killers from all the stories whispered on the streets. But this? It was just like his initial interaction with The Captain himself; they were able to throw him through such a loop, that his mind couldn’t process what was happening.
This was a mob.

That old-timey Capone mob. A band of brothers, putting the mob before their own blood. Tony saw it now. He saw why The Commandos were never taken down. It was almost impossible; the group before him shared such a bond, that with each hit, they get nothing but stronger. It was Sparta; King Leonidas and his three hundred men standing guard, not letting a single man get past to their home. It was Arminius and his men, defending their Germanic homeland from invasion. It was William Wallace and his Scots battling for freedom on The Stirling Bridge. It was Davey Crocket and his fellow Texans standing tall in the Alamo’s last stand. It was Paul Revere and the Minutemen leading a revolution on the fields of Lexington and Concord. It was the Allies with one final push against a final Blitzkrieg in the British skies.

No.

It was The Captain and his Commandos.

Tony himself could even see the proud gaze The Captain gave all of his men. “Alright then, moment’s over. But, before anyone- ”

The Captain was cut off by a shrill tone of Tony’s phone. He jumped, immediately scrambling to get it, pointedly ignoring the glares he was receiving from everyone. Pulling the phone out, he saw it was Pepper.

Shit.

Tony had just spent countless hours with these people. He didn’t even know what day it was. Well, he wouldn’t know that anyway, but that wasn’t the point. The point was, was that Tony had gone off grid for a large amount of time. Pepper would be pissed. And that’s not even getting started on Obie.

Tony clicked decline, however, quickly turning his phone’s sound off. The real world could wait a few more minutes. He shot The Captain an embarrassed look, trying to push himself farther in the cushions of his chair. The Captain gave him nothing but an odd glance, causing Tony to flush harder.

“Alright, as I was saying. I may or may not have gotten a little too rough with Hammer’s man.” A few snorts and quiet laughs answered the blonde. “Just a head’s up that he probably won’t be happy with what I left him. If everyone is staying, then you should now that it’s gonna get heavy real fast. I would apologize for my rash decision but no one spills a Commando’s blood without hearing from me.”

Tony could feel his phone vibrate within his hands. Dammit. Pepper was really pissed.

The Captain nodded. “That should be it. Go on; do your jobs and get me some info. But remember, stay close to home and always have someone watching your six. If there was ever a time- ”

“All units, respond. We’ve got a 10-55 in eastern Manhattan.”

This time, everyone jumped at the sound of Coulson’s radio going off.

“10-55?” Tony found himself asking.

“Dead body,” responded The Captain.

“Do you think they found Hammer’s guy?” asked Barton.
“No,” retorted Barnes, opening his mouth for the first time. “He was going to meet with another one of Hammer’s lackeys. They took care of the body already.”

“- I repeat. All units, we have a 10-55, now confirmed at Stark Industries-”

Tony’s blood ran cold.

The Captain turned to look at him with wide eyes. “Did they just say-”

But Tony didn’t listen for the rest. He was out of his seat, pushing through the crowd with renewed vigor, running for the door. Racing outside he found himself lost as to what to do, heart pounding but frozen like a deer in headlights.

“Hey!” Tony spun around to catch the car keys that were being thrown at him. Tony saw The Captain point to his car that he drove over to the warehouse with Odinson. Tony sprinted over to the car, not even commenting when The Captain sidled in to the passenger seat.

Tony didn’t remember the drive to SI, his speeding car echoing the thoughts that were racing through his head. There were already cops at the scene when they pulled up, but Tony didn’t even slow his movements. Killing the engines, he got out and began pushing through the crowds. A few policemen tried to stop him, but Tony snapped at them until they let them through.

The sight that was waiting for them, however, was one that Tony wished he never had to see.

Two bodies, slumped against each other lay right in front of the main doors. Their pristine clothing and white lab coats were almost indistinguishable underneath the river of blood that surrounded them. A flash of plastic against the sun had Tony noticing the SI badges the two currently wore. The damage that was done was immeasurable; Tony wouldn’t be able to figure out who they were if he tried. In between the two lay a sign, hand written in blood. Tony felt his knees buckle, The Captain’s strong arms barely catching him in time as he read the sign.

_You send us a message, we send you two back._

_Your move._

Chapter End Notes

Man, they just can't catch a break.
“They were married, you know.”

Steve almost jumped, Tony’s harsh voice breaking the long silence. It was the first thing Steve had heard from him in days; the attack on Stark Industries still fresh in his mind. Steve himself still saw their blood every time he shut his eyes.

You send us a message, we send you two back.

Your move.

Steve’s eyes read the sign quickly, barely able to refocus before Tony wavered, his body collapsing towards the ground. Steve easily caught him, trying to drag him away even as Stark was trying to push closer.

“Get off me,” Stark hissed, continuing to pull back to the carnage.

“Stark! Tony, stop!” Steve grabbed at Tony’s face, forcing the brunette to meet his eyes. “They’re dead, Tony.”

“No,” Tony shook his head. “It’s fine; I can help them. I can fix this!”

“Tony, listen to me. They’re gone; there’s nothing you can do.”

Steve watched as Tony’s wide eyes flickered back to the bodies before taking in their surroundings. It was loud; police were shouting at spectators to get back, the pedestrians trying to push their way forward to get a glimpse at the crime scene. Cameras and police lights were flashing, someone was screaming, the ambulance wailing.

But out of everything, Steve only had eyes for one man. He watched Tony’s demeanor, the emotions flashing across his face at a million miles per minute before it settled on an empty one. It was one Steve had seen before when a frail man broke in the streets of Brooklyn; Atlas finally collapsing from the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Steve pulled Stark close to him. “No, don’t do it here. Don’t give them the benefit; don’t let them see you break.”

Steve felt Tony’s body shudder, followed by a gasping breath. He watched as the engineer stood back up, chin tall as he looked back at the bodies. Steve could see his hands balled into fists, so he reached out to grab Tony’s shoulder. “We’ll find whoever did this,” he promised. “Don’t do anything stupid; we need a plan.”

Tony had given a small nod, before his head snapped back into the crowd, his brown orbs darting
wildly throughout the throng of people. Quickly, he turned back to face Steve before pushing him away. “Leave.”

Steve startled, looking at the man with wide eyes. “Wait, what?”

“Cap,” Tony almost pleaded. “Remember last time they attacked SI? You told me that HYDRA could be waiting in the crowd to finish the job. There could be someone out there now! You need to leave; it’s not safe for you here.”

Steve took a step towards Tony. “I’m not leaving you here. You’re already injured, and—”

“Not an option, Cap,” Tony interjected. “I’ll be fine. I can deal with this.”

Steve shook his head. “It’s not safe for you either.” Steve tried to pull Tony away from the crowd again. “Come with me, we can regroup and figure something out.”

Tony drew himself away. “I need to keep the rest of my people safe, Cap; you should go back and do the same,” Tony said with an earnest look. “Go. Come back when it’s safe.”

Regardless of how much he hated it, Steve found himself nodding, already tracking back into the shadows. He’d wait until the commotion died down. And then he’d come back for Tony. The two of them would figure out a solution. They had to.

Which is how Steve found himself in Tony’s office three days later. When Tony never called him after the incident, Steve took it upon himself to reach back out. Using his old disguise from the weapons demonstration, Steve had walked back into SI donning a fake military uniform, claiming to have a meeting with Tony Stark. A few lies and innocent smiles at a blushing receptionist, and Steve was in.

Steve knew that Tony had seen him come in, but the man hadn’t said anything for a while. He just stared out at his window overlooking Manhattan, nursing a drink.

“Who?” Steve found himself asking.

“You know who.” Images of blood stained lab coats flashed through Steve’s head.

“Tony—”

“They had a kid,” Tony continued, the man staring down into his whiskey glass. “A boy.”

Steve hung his head. Steve was no stranger to losing parents pretty early in life, but this? Steve’s heart broke for the kid that lost his parents in such a brutal way. The kid didn’t deserve this, his family didn’t.

“Is he?”

“They sent the kid to live with his aunt I think. I don’t know.” Steve highly doubted that. Steve knew for a fact that Tony would have made sure that the child would be taken care of and set for the rest of his life.

“Tony, come on. You can’t keep hiding in your office like a— oh. I didn’t realize you had
Steve spun around to be met with two new faces. One was a gorgeous redhead, with a polite face and kind eyes. Her posture spoke volumes of headmistress, while her aura brought forth a feeling of a loving caretaker. Pepper, Steve’s mind supplied, remembering all the times Tony blabbed on about the accomplished woman.

The other newcomer, Steve was not familiar with. The man was large, his dead eyes seemingly fixed on Steve since he walked into the room. He had a grim frown and a hardened face that had Steve’s insides churning.

Tony jumped, immediately flustering. “Oh, right. Um, this is, Captain, um-”

“Grant,” Steve interjected with a poster boy smile. “Joseph Grant.”

Pepper returned with an equally charming grin. “A pleasure, Captain. I’m terribly sorry for interrupting. I wasn’t aware Ton-Mr. Stark had a business meeting.”

“Neither did I,” the other man ground out.

“It’s not a problem, ma’am,” Steve returned to Pepper, completely ignoring the other man.

“Oh, please, Pep. You know I wouldn’t ever schedule a meeting myself,” Tony laughed, finally catching up with their current situation. “Nothing more than a social visit, right Grant?” Steve gave the group another smile as Tony continued. “Well then, Grant. This is the lovely Virginia Potts, my PA, and probably the only reason he head is still screwed on straight. And this,” Tony gestured to the man, “is my business partner, Obadiah Stane.”

So, this is Stane. Tony didn’t mention him much, but Steve had a feeling his first impression was enough to go on. Stane did not sit well with Steve. With the tight grip he shook Steve’s hand and the glares he shot him, Steve knew the feeling was mutual.

“Captain Joseph Grant, you said?” questioned Stane. “I’ve never heard of you.”

Tony came up behind Steve and clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Oh, Joe here- well, he’s a-” Tony paused, looking at Steve.

“-friend.”

“Colleague,” Steve said at the same time.

Steve couldn’t help but startle. Friend? Steve’s eyes tracked over Tony’s face, finding a questioning look. No turning back now, Rogers, he thought to himself. Steve gave Tony a small, private smile before turning back to the newcomers. “Friend,” he agreed, with a nod of his head.

“What are you doing here?” Tony asked.

“You haven’t been yourself since the incident,” replied Stane.

Steve frowned at the balding man. How the hell was Tony supposed to act after something like this had happened? In fact, Stane looked as if he was the only one out of character here, acting almost distant and unbothered by the fact that two of his employees were just found butchered in the street.

“It wasn’t an incident, Obie. Our employees were murdered in cold blood. Innocent people died
because they worked for me.”

Steve let out a hum in agreement, Stane snapping his attention over to him. Go ahead and look, Steve thought viciously, staring right back.

“Tony,” Pepper said gently. “You can’t do this to yourself. Go take a day off and rest; we’ll hold down the fort.”

Steve smiled at Pepper again. When Tony had first mentioned Pepper, back in one of their meetings in Hogan's hospital room, Tony confessed to Steve that it took only moments to know that he needed Pepper.

"To be honest, I didn't put much stock into here when she first came in," Tony uttered over the steady beat of the EKG. "I went through a personal assistant every week; there was no reason for me to think she was anything special."

"What changed your mind?" Steve asked, curious.

"She came stomping over to me with a pile of contracts. 'These need to be signed,' she said. I told her I would get to it when I get it. She threw those papers down on my desk and snapped, 'You'll do them now,'" Tony laughed, lost in the memory. "'I looked her and said, 'Do you know who I am? I'm the CEO of this company, I can do what I want, when I want.' She just took a pen out of my desk and handed it to me. 'Do you know who I am?' she asked. 'I'm the PA for the CEO. I make his schedules. That means you do what I want, when I want.'"

Steve chuckled, his head bowing in laughter. "She sounds terrifying."

"Oh, she is," Tony smiled back. "But I love her anyway."

Now, meeting Pepper for the first time, seeing her place a comforting hand on Tony's arm, he could see how Tony knew right away that she was something special. She wore a comforting smile, but her eyes remained sharp, like a mother bear, fully prepared for any threat against her cub. Tony was lucky to have her. Such a strong woman; so caring and loyal but fierce all at the same time. She was just like- no, not now.

“This was a professional hit. The attack was aimed at me, and they’re using my people to get to me. I’m not going to sit idly by and let that happen,” Tony snapped.

“Tony, my boy, Pepper’s right. Take a vacation; get out of New York for a while. It isn’t safe for you here,” Stane tried to argue.

“Whoever it was, they know my address. If they want me, they can very well come get me.”

Steve’s lips couldn’t help but tug into yet another smile. While it should have been considered reckless, Steve admired the fact that Tony stood fearless while staring down at the barrel of HYDRA’s gun. Must run in the family, he mused.

“Tony- ” Stane tried again, but was quickly cut off.

“Don’t, Obie. Not now.” Tony went back and downed the rest of his drink. “We’ll deal with this later,” he said, clearly issuing a dismissal to Stane and Pepper.

Pepper nodded, and started to usher Stane out of the room. “It was nice to meet you,” She said passing Steve. Steve returned the pleasantry before turning back to Stane.
“Captain,” the man hissed out, before leaving the room, slamming the door behind him.

Silence once again filled the room, leaving just Steve with Tony again.

"I like her," Steve blurted out.

Tony snorted, looking out of his office window. "Told you."

Steve walked around the desk, standing to Tony's right. “Joseph Grant, huh?” Tony continued.

Steve shrugged. “Who knows? Could be my real name. I’ll leave you to your deductions.”

Steve saw a small smile grace Tony’s face, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Steve had seen how worn the man looked from before, but this last attack seemed to be eating Tony alive.

“You, know, maybe they’re right. Maybe you should take a day,” Steve suggested.

Tony shook his head. “Not while they’re still out there.”

Steve sighed, plucking Tony’s empty glass out of his hand. Instead of putting the glass back, he found himself refilling the tumbler, as well as pouring another for himself. Steve gave the glass back to Tony, the two of them leaning against Tony’s desk as they stared out the window. “You’re right. This can’t happen again; we need to keep our people safe. HYDRA needs to be dealt with.”

“Hear, hear,” Tony agreed, quietly clinking his glass against Steve’s before taking a long swig.

“So, friend,” Steve continued. “You got a plan?”

Tony nodded distantly, his brain no doubt already locking the beginnings of a solution locking into place.

“You gonna share with the class?” Steve asked with a raised eyebrow.

Tony rolled his eyes dramatically. “Come on, Cap. Trust me on this one,” he said with a smile.

Steve snorted, but found himself smiling back. “What could possibly go wrong?”

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Two Weeks Later

Steve made a sharp turn right, darting down a back alley, hoping to cut off his target. He dodged the littered garbage cans and scaled a fence, heart pounding tight in his chest. Steve urged his legs faster as he ignored protests from his muscles. He had a late start; he needed to catch up with his slippery foe as quickly as possible.

Cutting the next corner, Steve saw him. Adrenaline pumped through his veins as his much larger stride pulled him closer. Steve pushed through the crowd the man was trying use as an escape and when he found a clear path, Steve took a leap and tackled his victim to the ground. Not wasting any time, Steve grabbed the man as he tried to stand back up, pushing him against a brick wall.
“Stark,” he growled.

The other man struggled against Steve’s hold. “Ah, long time no see, friend. How’s it going?” Stark smirked.

Steve pushed him harder against the wall. “I don’t have time for your shit. Not after what you’ve done.”

Stark gave a hollow laugh. “I could say the same for you.” With that, Tony’s leg jutted forward, giving Steve a sharp knee to the groin.

Steve relinquished his hold on Stark immediately, the other man darting away from his grip. Steve turned to face Stark opposite him, giving him the same death stare he was receiving. He could see people looking at the two of them; they weren’t exactly in private. But it didn’t matter, none of it mattered. Not with what was at stake.

“It didn’t have to be this way,” Steve said.

Stark gave a snort. “Please. If you didn’t think that this was how it was going to end, then you were fooling yourself.”

Steve’s jaw tightened, but didn’t bother responding. Instead, he surged toward Stark, swinging a fist towards his face. It hit the target perfectly, but Stark managed to roll with the blow, the shorter man’s elbow coming up to catch Steve along the side.

Ignoring the sharp pain, Steve tore back at Stark, blood pumping fiercely through his veins. While Stark managed to clip him here and there, the man was no match for someone like Steve. Steve could see the man slowing down, his moves becoming sluggish as Steve tore more and more pained groans from Stark with each hit he landed.

It wasn’t until Steve was able to sweep his legs, causing Stark to collapse in the street, that Steve finally got a full look at him. Stark looked up at him with wide eyes, chest heaving. His suit was in disarray; rips had formed from tearing through obstacles, mud and blood splatters littered the fine cloth from their scuffle. The brunette locked eyes with Steve, his face hardening to give a stone-cold glare. “Well, go on. Finish it,” he snarled.

Steve reached behind him and pulled out his weapon from his waistband. He cocked his gun and leveled it with Stark’s temple. “Tell me, Stark. Was it worth it?”

Chapter End Notes

I may or may not have added a new character in this chapter that I might revisit later on in this fic; I’m not too sure yet. Did you catch them?

Still currently trying to process all the feels from the new Civil War trailer. It's fine. (It's not fine.)

Happy Thanksgiving to all those celebrating! (I'm uber thankful for all of you guys!)
Chapter 23

Tony’s heart was leaping out of his chest as he stared down the barrel of The Captain’s gun. His eyes darted around, trying to find a way out.

“Don’t bother,” The Captain sneered. Tony shivered - he’d never heard the man sound that way, even when they first met. “There’s nowhere for you to run anymore.”

“Captain,” Tony pleaded. “Listen to me; it needed to be done.”

“Don’t try and defend yourself,” retorted The Captain, his grip tightening on his gun. Tony’s eyes were glued to the finger resting on the trigger; one wrong word and it’s all over.

“I had to protect my people!” argued Tony. “You can’t tell me you wouldn’t have done the same thing in my position.”

“Stop lying,” hissed The Captain. “You did what you did to protect your own ass. Lucky for you, you get to die with the rest of us now.”

Tony’s blood froze in his veins as he watched the gun shift to aim at his head. “Wait, wait, please.”

“Hey! What the hell are you doing?”

Both men jumped when they heard the voice. People had gathered watching the scene - the ones that hadn’t run screaming at the first sight on the gun - drawn to it like a moth to a flame, but an older gentleman had stepped forward courageously towards the two fighting men.

Tony almost sobbed in relief. Thank God for innocent bystanders.

Using the distraction to his advantage, Tony pushed The Captain towards the crowd while running the opposite direction. People were screaming; whether they were yelling at The Captain or him, Tony didn’t stop to find out. I need to get away, Tony thought, as he tried to lose The Captain in the crowd. How the hell had this happened? Things had been going so well; it wasn’t supposed to happen this way!

The Captain’s voice echoed loudly behind him. “Barton!”

Immediately, a searing pain tore up his arm.

Shit, shit, shit, Tony’s mind raced as he felt warm blood slide down his arm. Tony spun around, trying to locate Barton, but it was no luck. The streets were crowded, the buildings pressed close together. Tony would have an easier time finding a needle in a haystack than finding the sniper. He darted to the left suddenly, hoping that the awnings branching from the buildings would supply cover from the sharpshooter.

Diving into an alley, Tony slipped in between two dumpsters, trying to catch his breath. Because they were traversing through Manhattan, Tony had some edge on The Captain and his men, knowing these streets a lot better than they did. But that could only get him so far. Besides, if Barton was there, Tony already knew he was screwed.
Because if Barton was there, Barnes wouldn’t be far behind.

There was no one without the other. The Captain’s dynamic duo; one to draw the prey out while the other waits patiently to slit their throat in a dark corner. If Barton’s hiding somewhere up above, Tony knew there was only a matter of time before Barnes had him pinned. For all Tony knew, the brunette was probably in this alleyway with him right now.

*I need my vehicle.*

Tony had been meeting a potential investor for a business lunch when The Captain decided to attack. In a fight or flight response, Tony had immediately darted into the crowds, hoping that The Captain wouldn’t want to fight him around innocents. But, no. The Captain was beyond pissed; he was positively murderous. The only way he could ditch the crew was through motor transport, which Tony had left back at the restaurant. And since he didn’t have time to find a car that he could steal, his car was his only option. No cab driver was going to stop for him. But therein lies a problem. The Captain had attacked when Tony was getting out of his car. Meaning that The Captain’s car was right next to his, not giving Tony much of an advantage. But seeing as running all the way back to safety was out of the question, it was a risk Tony was going to have to take.

*Or is it?*

Across the street, Tony eyed a general store. He was working his day job, so he hadn't brought his own gun to defend himself - which given the threat of HYDRA out there (and now apparently The Captain), it probably wasn't the smartest move. But hey, Tony was a law abiding citizen; or at least trying to convince people that he was. That meant that he would have to get creative if he wanted to escape. The convenience store would be his ticket out of there. Tony took a deep breath before shooting out across the street, sprinting to make it in the shop before he was gunned down by The Captain’s eye in the sky. He burst inside, barely giving him time to relish in the fact that he hadn't been shot again before quickly ducking down a side aisle, looking for ideas.

The store was small, and although it was luckily uncrowded, Tony pulled his arm close to his chest, hoping no one would notice the blood staining his jacket. His eyes darted around the room, not wanting to waste another precious minute, looking for tools. It wasn’t long before he found what he was looking for: a bag of sugar and some water bottles. Tony smiled, bundling the products in his arms. Just like college all over again. *God, I wish Rhodey were here.*

Looking down in his arms, Tony found himself frowning. This was going to be a problem. Sure, Tony had the cash on him to pay for the items but there was no way he could get out of there without raising suspicion. Especially with his arm drenched in blood. *Stealing it is.* He stuffed the items in his suit jacket, trying to think of a way out of the store when he saw it.

*WD 40.*

Tony found himself grinning. *Oh, it is on.*

He snatched a bottle of that as well, jamming the spray can in his back pocket. *That should be enough,* he thought to himself. It wasn't as if he could carry anything more. Now, he just had to make it out of the store and back to where the cars were. Luckily, while Tony had been running through the street to keep away from The Captain and his mutts, he tried to force them around in a loop, so Tony was only a few measly blocks away from his car. All Tony had to do was make it back without getting another bullet shot into him and he would be golden.

*But how to get out of the store?*
There was only one teller working today, looking extremely disinterested in the store - like any teenager would - flipping through a trash magazine with a bored expression on her face. Tony could just make a run for it, but he was still a celebrity. One quick glance from the teenage girl and he knew it would be mere seconds before he was trending on Twitter for petty theft. And wouldn’t that be the real kicker - he’d dodged the cops for years, staying a few moves ahead to never get caught. But with one tweet, he could lose his entire empire and end up behind bars, all for stealing some sugar. How very Capone.

He slipped down the produce aisle, looking around. Down at the other end, there was a mother with her young child, looking at the canned items. Bingo. Tony quickly snatched an orange from the shelf and lobbed it towards the family. The fruit was right on target; it crashed right into a display of canned green beans, the cans going flying in each direction.

The mother spun around quickly as Tony ducked behind the fruit, the woman only seeing the ruined display and the child. The mother started to scold the child instantly as the cashier made his way back to the ruckus. Seeing his window, Tony waited for the employee to pass him before dashing out of the store, stolen goods in hand.

Back on the street, Tony immediately dashed back in the direction of the restaurant, cursing when he heard a shout. Turns out The Captain’s men were a lot closer to him then he originally thought. Tony ignored them, his mind focused purely on reaching the cars. As he was running, he uncapped the water bottles, letting the liquid flow down onto the street. He also tore open the sugar bag, dumping most of it off to the side of the road, hoping that the trail he left wouldn’t be noticed by the men chasing him.

His muscles burned but he pressed forward, gasping in relief when he saw the cars. Instead of heading straight to his, Tony ran up alongside The Captain’s, dropping the unfilled water bottles and near empty sugar bag to the ground and opened the gas tank.

That should do it.

Tony turned to run back to his car when he found himself flung down to the pavement. Searing pain coursed through his body as Tony looked up at his attacker. James Barnes looked down at him, a malicious grin donning his face. “I gotta hand it to you, Stark. You’re a wily one,” he sneered as he pulled out his gun.

Tony’s brain flew into overdrive, the smaller man scrambling back up and away from Barnes. Barnes rushed forward instantly, his hands a flurry of movement as he tried to subdue Tony again. Tony knew there was no way that he could out power Barnes, but it was a good thing that he still had a final trick up his sleeve.

He scuffled with Barnes as long as he could before the sound of his gun cocking pulled Tony away. “Barnes, you don’t have to do this,” Tony tried to reason.

The other brunette rolled his eyes. “You can’t be serious.”

Tony slowly brought one of his hands behind him. “I’m just saying, there are better options.”

“Are you really trying to buy me right now?” Barnes looked at him incredulously.

Tony shrugged. “Is it working?”

“Not even close,” Barnes chuckled as he raised his gun higher. “You know, I almost feel sorry I gotta do this. Almost.”
Tony narrowed his eyes. “Well, I’m almost sorry too.” Tony rushed forward, pulling the WD 40 out from his back pocket aiming right at Barnes’s gun. The oil spray coated the gun and Barnes’s hand quickly, the other man cursing as he tried to pull his gun away.

Not waiting another second, Tony swept a leg under Barnes, causing the other man to crumple to the ground. He hopped over him easily, racing back towards his car when he saw The Captain pull out from the shadows, eyes locking onto Tony’s immediately. Tony ran faster, trying to beat the mob boss to his car. He scrambled for his keys in his pockets, sobbing in relief when he saw that he hadn’t dropped them. Throwing the door open, Tony jumped in, narrowing missing the bullets that sprayed over his head and broke his windows.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Tony whispered to himself as he jammed the key into the ignition. He could hear The Captain yelling at Barnes to get in the car. Tony saw the two men run towards their own car in his side mirror as he started to pull away.

Still looking at the two men, Tony could see the exact moment The Captain saw the treat he left for them. The Captain stared at the empty sugar bag and water bottles, and then back to the car. Tony could barely hear him shout, “He’s ruined the gas tank! Get another car!”

Tony laughed. Idiots. He slammed down on the gas pedal, leaving the men behind.

He drove wildly, ignoring the amount of traffic laws he broke in order to reach the office. The pain in his arm was getting worse, the adrenaline finally leaving his system. Tony’s hand twitched on the steering wheel, his eyes constantly checking behind him for a tail.

Reaching SI was a bit of a blur, his body exhausted and trembling as he stumbled through his private entrance and elevator.

“JARVIS, Pepper,” he groaned, hoping the AI would understand to get him to the familiar face. When the lift stopped, Tony found himself tripping out of the door and straight into Obie.

“Tony, what the hell?”

Tony tried to stand back up, but stumbled again, this time heading right to the floor. “Tony, where the hell have you- is that blood?” Pepper almost screeched.

“Call an ambulance,” snapped Obie, his hands firmly gripping Tony’s shoulders. Tony watched as Pepper obeyed immediately, her face pale and drawn. “What the hell happened to you, boy?”

Tony sighed, looking up at the other two. “I may have fucked up.”

Obadiah Stane burst through the doors, excitement getting the best of him. He watched at Justin Hammer skyrocketed up from his chair, Pierce himself even taken aback.

“You better have a good reason for calling us in, Stane,” snapped Pierce.

Stane found himself grinning. “Oh, I think it’s worth your time.”

“What is it?” asked Hammer. “Did you catch them?”

“No,” Stane retorted. “We might not have to.”
Pierce looked at him suspiciously. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Stane continued, “that The Captain just put a hit out on Tony Stark.”

Hammer startled. “What?”

“How did this happen?” added Pierce in disbelief.

“Because Tony Stark plastered The Captain’s identity all over the internet.”

Chapter End Notes

So, if I remember my thermodynamics class correctly, water in the gas tank disrupts the combustion process, and with the added sugar, I believe it can cause an engine to stall.

WD 40 is a multi-use oil and water-displacing spray. I’ve heard that when leaving it on a firearm, however, the spray will dry, leaving a gluey residue that could glue up the action of a gun.

I think.

Basically this chapter was just me trying to think like how Tony could get himself out of a situation using science instead of resulting to a gun.
“You’re going to pull out your stitches,” chided Pepper.

Tony scowled at her, but dutifully stopped fidgeting with his arm. It had been a few days since The Captain’s attack, the tension seemingly increasing each day. Obie had fought with him about increasing Tony’s security, but Tony had shot it down; there was no way he was going to let himself go on house arrest. Pepper was absolutely flustered, like a mother hen constantly fretting over her baby chick. She checked in with Tony at all hours of the day, making it impossible for him to be anywhere else besides where he was supposed to be.

*It’s for your own safety,* she had said. *This way, you’re here and I can keep an eye on you.* Which of course, at the time, Tony thought was sickeningly sweet. Until Pepper had dragged him to God knows how many meetings. Apparently it was ‘his job’. Who knew? What Tony did know, was that he was about two more meetings away from standing in the middle of the street until he gets shot again.

Pepper, the traitor, had even got in touch with Rhodey when he was getting stitched up over at the hospital. Nothing makes a nightmarish trip to the emergency room better than getting an earful from his friend who was still halfway across the globe. It had taken Tony a full twenty minutes to talk Rhodey down from flying back to New York. Even now, Tony wasn’t sure that he even listened.

“I think I’m gonna take a few days,” drawled Tony.

Pepper gaped at him. “Take a few days?”

“You know,” Tony continued. “Like a vacation. These past few months have been pretty exhausting; I think I deserve it.”

“Exhausting!” Pepper almost shouted. “Tony, you were almost killed! The Captain is tearing apart Manhattan looking for you, and you’re just *tired?* How are you so calm about this?”

*Ah, there it is.* Yes, everyone in New York knows about Tony’s little scuffle with The Captain and his men. Then again, there was no way Tony could hide it when they basically had a battle royal in the middle of the streets just three days ago. Turns out, despite how hard he had tried, he still ended up trending on Twitter anyway.

The *Avengers Assembly* is what people are calling it. Word on the street was that The Captain had been found linked to the injuries and deaths of Stark Industries, so Tony retaliated by revealing the mob man’s name. Others say that Tony was the one to start the fighting, The Captain forced into action. Regardless of who threw the first punch, the effect was instantaneous. Mobs were gearing up, ready to choose sides in this Civil War if asked. Tony had already been on the phone with Quill about it; his forces were already rallying, no doubt The Captain’s allies doing the exact same thing. New York was thick with tension, no want wanting to stay out past dark, no one wanting to go out at all.

It was the modern day Cold War; each side was just waiting for the other to make a move before striking themselves.
“Pep, relax,” Tony interjected. “This isn’t the first tome someone’s tried to kill me.”

“But this is *The Captain*, Tony! He’s a serious threat and you know it,” responded Pepper. “I think we should call the authorities.”

Tony groaned. “No. Absolutely not. What the hell are they gonna do, Pep? They’re just gonna get in the way. Quit worrying; We’ll do what we always do. Lay low for a little while and then pay the big man off. See? Problem solved.”

Pepper furrowed her brow. “Something tells me that you can’t buy The Captain off.”

*You’re telling me,* Tony thought. “Please. Every man has their price. Now, I’m gonna go relax at the safe house for a few days, and you’ve got a flight to catch.”

“A flight?”

Tony checked his watch. “Yeah, the jet leaves for England within the hour, I believe.”

“England?” Pepper blinked at him. He relished in the quick face of uncertainty she pulled, memory tracing through her schedule to see what she had missed. It wasn't every day that Tony was able to pull one over on his scrupulous assistant, but it was worth it every time. "What are you talking about?"

Tony rolled his eyes. “The potential merger deal? Don’t tell me you didn’t read the schedule,” he said with false dramatics.

Pepper scoffed, insulted. “I’m the one who writes the schedule, Tony. We don’t have any business in England.”

“Well, we do now! Or might, I’m not sure. This is why I need you to scope it out for me, see if there’s anything there," Tony answered. "Shouldn’t take any more than a week. Come on, when’s the last time you’ve had decent fish and chips?"

Pepper shot him an unimpressed gaze. “And why can’t you go to the business meeting for your own company?”

“I’m a wanted man, Pep, I can’t go outside. Besides, Obie and I got to hold down the fort here. Please, Pep. I need someone I trust on this.”

Pepper sighed, placing her hands in her lap like a teacher would after holding back one of her kids after class. “Are you sure you’re not sending me to a meeting that’s a complete and utter waste of my time?” she asked, a perfectly manicured eyebrow raised that indicated that she already knew the answer.

“Yep.” Suddenly the pens on his desk - seriously who put these here, he doesn't even *use* pens - seemed a lot more interesting than they were before. He started to bat at one between his fingers, listening to it roll across his desk. He could feel the heat of Pepper's stare.

A manicured hand grabbed him by the chin, forcing him to make eye contact. “And this has nothing to do with that fact that this business meeting lines up just after a mob man put a hit out on you?”

“Purely coincidental,” he smiled.

Pepper huffed, patting his cheek lightly. “You’re a terrible liar.” Tony shot her his best wounded
stare until her shoulders finally sagged. “Fine,” she sighed. "I’ll go. You," she added, pointing at Tony as she stood up. "Don’t antagonize anyone until I get back; I wanna watch it happen."

Tony grinned. “A woman after my own heart.”

Pepper smirked in response. “Will that be all, Mr. Stark?”

“That will be all, Ms. Potts.”

Tony watched as she left, as graceful as ever, hopefully to pack. The meeting, of course, was absolute bullshit, but it was the best way to keep Pepper out of the line of fire. Tony had a feeling that things were going to escalate pretty quickly; the last thing he wanted was another innocent’s blood on his hands. Especially Pepper’s.

Going back behind his desk, he grabbed his phone, keys, as well as his handgun. He left a note with the secretary to tell Obie he was leaving even though the man was already aware that Tony would be hunkering down for a few days. If he had other plans, well, it was nobody's business. He hopped into his personal elevator, heading straight to the garage.

The ride back home was uneventful, Tony barely noticing his surroundings as he was too lost inside his own thoughts. He bid his driver a good night, watching as the man got back in the car to drive back to SI. Instead of heading into his building, however, Tony walked back out and around the corner.

He zipped up the sweatshirt he was wearing, added a pair of shades and donned a baseball cap as he sauntered across the New York streets. Some might all it overkill, but Tony wasn’t taking any chances. No one could figure out who he was or where he was going. Tony had been dropped off at his residence by his driver, his car would never leave the property, and JARVIS would confirm that he was still at home should anyone ask. For all intensive purposes, Tony was and will remain at home, not skulking through the New York streets. He scanned the crowd, but no one paid him a second glance. He walked a couple of blocks east, staying low on the radar.

After walking for a while, Tony finally found himself in the midst of Hell's Kitchen. He passed easily through streets crowded with hungry tourists, cutting through back alleys. It wasn't long until the crowds had thinned out, leaving only the occasional resident passing by. A few more blocks and Tony strolled up to his final destination. He pulled out the keys he had grabbed from his office, unlocking a car on a small side street. Tony had, over the course of some years and with the help of Happy, deposited cars over different parts of New York if he ever found himself unprotected and in need of a fast get away. Or, in this case, a discrete way to get around the city.

He drove south first, than farther east, crossing a bridge and taking the most inconspicuous way he knew, zigzagging and making loops to throw off any tails. Once he was satisfied, Tony found a small parking lot and ditched the car; he would come back to get it later.

With that, Tony hit the streets again, moving quickly and as quietly as possible. He doubled back a few times, taking the same persuasions as when he was driving, making sure he wasn’t followed. The last thing he needed was a mob’s lackeys cornering him. By the time he reached his destination, the sun had sunk way behind the cityscape, the buildings’ lights flickering on in the distance. Tony cursed to himself, wishing he brought a flashlight. He was so disconnected from the main civilization that the pale moonlight was the only viable source of light. It was strange, as Tony didn't think there would be places like this left in the never sleeping New York.

Tony found himself trekking by the East River, the waves from the water echoing loudly as they pushed to shore. Tony pulled his hat down farther, drawing farther off the main road. Not that it
mattered; there was virtually no one out there, but Tony wouldn’t dare let his guard down. It
seemed like forever, but he finally managed to find what he was looking for. There, hidden among
the shoreline and littered beach was an old storm drain, rusted out and filled with litter that it had
managed to catch from the river. With the recent surge of environmental protections, storm sewers
like this hadn’t been used to push sewage into the river for years, but even still, no one thought
twice when passing it by.

Getting a closer look, Tony tried to carefully step around the rotting garbage and unmentionables
that had washed up from the shore, and what looked like a decomposing seagull. Tony gagged, but
pushed on, safe haven the only goal in mind. The drain was enormous, leaving ample room for
Tony to stand up straight as well as avoid the grimy walls. Walking a little way in, Tony was met
with a rusted steel grate, most likely to stop any large debris from falling into the river. Tony
bypassed it easily; part of it had been broken off, Tony able to lift it up enough for him to slip
inside before it fell back into place before continuing on. The walk inside the drain, to say the least,
was dreadful. The air was stale and rotten, making Tony’s eyes water, the tunnel nearly pitch black,
but he pushed on none the less.

After an eternity of walking down the long tunnel, Tony saw a service ladder, leading to a large
iron door. Tony breathed a sigh of relief, quickly climbing to the door. Slamming his fist against
the cold metal, Tony issued three sharp bangs against the door. Tony could hear a small shuffle on
the other side of the door before it gave a large creak, opening to Tony.

“You’re late,” a familiar voice called out to him.

Tony rolled his eyes fondly. “Fashionably.”

A large man stepped out of the shadows and up to Tony, a smirk adorning his face. “It’s good to
see you again, Mr. Stark.”

Tony huffed, easily returning the smile. “Likewise, Captain.”

Time to get to work.

Pierce shifted uneasily in his seat. Stane had come bursting in just days ago with what he had
thought was the best news possible. Tony Stark and The Captain had turned on each other, leaving
Stark with a price on his head, and The Captain with a name to his face.

Stane and Hammer had been over the moon. With the two of them divided, there was no way they
could withstand another push from HYDRA. Tony Stark and The Howling Commandos would be
brought to their knees, for good this time.

But that left Pierce with a problem. He had been the only one to know of The Captain’s real
identity: Steve Rogers. With that public knowledge, not only to Stane and Hammer, but to other
mobs as well, it wouldn’t be long before every mob in New York would be gunning for the man
and all the secrets he held. Steve Rogers and his knowledge were worth starting a mob war over.
Sure, Pierce and HYDRA were a devastating force, but trying to get to Steve Rogers before the rest
of New York could prove difficult. That’s not even getting started on the backlash he is going to
get now that Hammer and Stane know why he wanted The Captain for himself, leaving the two of
them to deal with Stark.
Pierce groaned, rubbing a large hand over his tired face. This is not what he needed. He had no edge now, no way to ensure that he had the upper hand on the other mobs. Pierce had been preparing ever since Stane’s relay, just in case he needed to make a move on The Captain a little ahead of schedule.

He could still salvage this mission.

A sharp knock on the door pulled Pierce from his thoughts. “Yeah?” The door opened and one of his analysts breezed through. “Did you find it?” Pierce continued.

The man nodded his head. “Yeah. Not like it was hard; Stark left the information floating around for basically anyone to find it.”

Pierce groaned again. “Any way we can see who else accessed the info? See who else found the name?”

The man shrugged. “Maybe. I’ll run some back traces and see what I find,” he said as he handed Pierce the file.

Pierce nodded. “Go. Keep me updated.”

Pierce flopped back down behind his desk, idly flipping through the file. His man was right; Stark had left The Captain’s name right in the open. While he didn’t straight up go and tweet the name to the internet, anyone with two opposable thumbs could delve through the web and find his name easily. Tony Stark had really outdone himself. It wouldn’t be long before everyone knew the name of-

What?

Pierce could hardly believe his eyes as he stared down at the files before him.

A name stared right back at him.

*Joseph Grant.*

Who the hell was Joseph Grant?

Chapter End Notes

Sorry Civil War, I know which direction you wanted me to go, but I refuse to acknowledge your existence.

Sorry to throw you guys through some loops; just got to keep you on your toes and pretend that I'm a legit and fancy author. Don't worry, many explanations are coming in the next chapter, so hang in there!

Keep the comments coming; any feedback I get as the story progresses makes my day.
Chapter 25

“Wait, what?”

Hammer stared incredulously at Obadiah Stane. Of course, he was still in shock that the man had wanted to meet with him in the first place. Sure, they were all in cahoots with Pierce and HYDRA, but it was an enemy of my enemy kind of thing. Because technically, he and Stane were competitors; they both wanted Stark gone, but at the end of the day, they’re doing it for their own reasons, and one would eventually turn on the other. With Stark gone, Stane got control of SI, and Hammer had a chance to finally get out from the shadow cast by Stark’s brilliance.

“All I’m saying is to just consider it,” Stane soothed.

“But-”

“Hammer, you’re overthinking it. The only reason we held a connection with Pierce was because he was the only one who knew The Captain’s real identity. But now we do too!” he laughed excitedly. "I’ve actually met the man, so I can confirm Stark’s files as true. We don’t need Pierce anymore. You didn’t honestly think that he was our ally, did you?”

Justin furrowed his brow. “He isn’t?”

“Oh, Hammer,” sighed Stane, clapping a hand on his shoulder. “Pierce and HYDRA are only out for The Captain. Once they got their hands on him, you didn’t think they would keep us around, did you? We would be loose ends, Hammer. HYDRA doesn’t do loose ends.”

Hammer opened his mouth, but Stane cut him off again. “Besides, why is The Captain so important to Pierce? A name like Joseph Grant doesn’t mean anything. Or anything we know of. I’m telling you, Hammer. We have The Captain’s name now; we don’t need to wait for Pierce to stab us in the back. Just think about it, alright?”

Hammer nodded, watching as Stane walked away from him, mulling his options. On one side, Pierce, who has the entire backing of HYDRA. Very helpful in the current situation as the number of people that feared HYDRA basically made him untouchable. However, it came with a lot of baggage - too many enemies. Sure, Justin had dabbled with the criminal side of New York plenty of times, but mostly as a third party. Approving things, but staying out of the way until the dirty jobs were done. Working with Pierce, however, had put him much more in the spotlight than he wanted too. Powerful people definitely had their eyes on him. The other, Stane, who has the entire backing of the military. But they had been a loyal customer to Stark Industries for years. Working with Stane would benefit him financially, there’s no question, but there’s no way he’d ever give up his golden egg. No, both Stark and Stane would have to be out of the picture if he wanted the military to turn its head to Hammer Industries.

Unfortunately, he was going to have to choose one or the other. While they're partnership was in its early phases, Justin was more than happy to sit on the sidelines, only providing the occasional mercenary or bank deposit when asked. They had all been on the same side - sure, they each wanted something specific, but in order to accomplish them, they shared a common goal: the end of Tony Stark and The Commandos. But now, after this discussion with Stane, Justin could see the bridge that they'd built had collapsed; unfortunately for him, he'd let Stane and Pierce hold on to the reins for too long that he didn't see the rifts that were forming. His other partners were playing a different game, one with a more dangerous stake, and for the first time, Justin wasn't sure he wanted to participate. But something told him that he wasn't going to be able to bow out of this
Tony flopped down on the musty couch in The Captain’s office, groaning softly as he closed in eyes. The stress of the past few days had definitely taken its toll; it felt good to finally take the weight off his feet. He heard The Captain follow him in, the small creaks against the floor and rustle of The Captain’s clothing a comfort to Tony’s ears.

“Here,” a soft voice said.

Tony peeled his eyes open to see The Captain leaning over him with some pain killers and water in his hands. Tony took them gratefully, flicking a small smile to the blonde in thanks. The Captain smiled back easily, leaving Tony to fall into his desk chair, sighing heavily.

“Everything go okay?” he asked Tony.

Tony nodded through another gulp of water. “Swimmingly; I should be good to go for a couple of days.”

“Good, that’s good,” replied The Captain. “Nothing unexpected on our end either; this might actually be working.”

“Yeah,” Tony answered flatly, shooting the other man a glare. "Let’s back track a little. You wanna explain what ‘unexpected’ shit you pulled a few days ago?"

The Captain stared back at him innocently. “I’m sorry?”

“You had a plan,” The Captain corrected. “I liked my plan better.”

Tony grumbled under his breath, pressing himself farther into the comfy couch. “Well, I’m so glad that it worked out for you,” Tony hissed.

The plan, or the one that Tony thought they were going with, was a typical call and response. Back in his office last week, Tony and The Commando’s boss stayed late into the night, perfecting it. They knew they needed to get the spotlight off of them so they could plan their next moves against HYDRA. Of course, given their rival’s recent motives of massacring two of Tony’s employees, they knew that both HYDRA and the police would be circling Tony's activities.

"We're not going to be able to get them off our backs," The Captain had sighed. "Not any time
“Then let’s give them a show right back,” Tony had countered. “Right now, HYDRA knows that they will be able to find you through me. Well, why don't we cut the link? They’ll be back to square one if they think we aren’t working together.”

So hatched their plan. Romanoff had leaked some rumors onto the street that The Captain had been the one behind the car bomb at SI as well as the dead scientists. The public, of course, ate it all up, always looking for the next big rivalry. Tony, in response, ‘leaked’ precious information on the internet. It took a lot of convincing of course; The Captain wasn’t too eager to release one of his rock solid aliases. But in the end, Joseph Grant was born. Tony faked a few police reports to falsify Grant into existence. Then, Tony hid the files within the web, not wanting all of New York to stumble on the information. Sure, Tony made sure to tell everyone that he leaked The Captain’s identity on the internet, but unfortunately for them, not everyone could get access to it.

Tony had spread the word that he released the unredacted police files to reveal The Captain’s identity, putting the man in the system. But, since new photos are added to the criminal database every day, no one would be able to figure out which of the new records were the one of The Captain’s. Unless they knew what he looked like. And HYDRA knew. What Tony didn’t tell everyone was that he hid a back tracer within the files that he released. That way, whoever accessed the files of Joseph Grant could be tracked by JARVIS.

And everything had gone right on track. The public bought the bullshit, Tony successfully leaking the files. The actual ‘response’ to the plan? Not so much.

It retaliation to Tony’s file leakage, The Captain and his men were supposed to attack one of his warehouses, Stark Industries having recently purchased a few new ones for manufacturing storage. While the warehouse itself wasn’t operational yet, Tony had a meeting last week with some contractors to see the progress. The Captain would, or so he had promised, show up, shoot some bullets, break some windows, throw around some threats. The usual. The contractors would see The Captain’s response, more rumors would spread, and boom. Tony Stark and The Hollowing Commandos would be at war.

But, Tony had stood through the entire meeting. And The Captain was a no show. Tony, of course, received no messages from the man for an explanation. Not that he was expecting one anyway; the blonde had told Tony that they couldn’t risk any forms of communication until their public stunt was over. Tony was worried, sure, but he trusted that The Captain would hold up his end of the bargain.

Until the rumors got back to Tony. Pepper had come in all flustered, telling him about what she heard from her secretaries.

Apparently, Tony was working with HYDRA.

Which, of course, was absolutely ridiculous. But, the more Tony thought about it, the more worried he got. Whispers of HYDRA had already been slipping through the streets, more so ever since Tony and The Captain got involved. Although the group had not gone out of their way blatantly declare their return, almost everyone knew they were back now.

The fact that people were now relating Tony to HYDRA was not good. That all these months Tony was just cozying up to The Captain, gathering intel for HYDRA. That everything was one big show. Tony knew it was complete bullshit.

But did The Captain?
Tony working with HYDRA would explain the whole Hammer situation. Tony had no idea that HYDRA would know about The Captain showing up to raid Hammer’s warehouse. Unless The Captain thought that Tony would know. Unless The Captain thought that he was the one that told HYDRA.

It wasn’t long after that that Tony went into full-fledged panic mode. He had known how angry The Captain had been at the Hammer fiasco. And while originally it was hot, The Captain’s anger focused mainly on Hammer and his men. But if The Captain somehow got it into his head that Tony was behind it?

Tony would be a dead man. The Captain’s Commandos came first; there would be no way the man could be swayed if his family was in danger.

Out of fear, Tony had skipped a few more business meetings and public appearances, trying to avoid from stepping outside his office (which he promised The Captain he wouldn’t do; the blonde wanted Tony to keep his routine the same to make everything appear normal).

So when The Captain decided to attack Tony in the middle of a rescheduled business lunch, he was about ready to shit his pants. None of it had been scripted; for a little while, Tony had been entirely convinced The Captain was actually going to kill him.

Tony had thought The Captain was screaming at him in the streets for the Hammer situation, while Tony tried to plead with the man as to why he was hiding from going out in public. Who knew that they were shouting about two completely different things? Tony sure didn’t.

It was only when Tony faced off with Barnes that he figured out it was still for show. Tony knew that there was no way that Barnes would let him live if given the option to put a bullet in his brain. It was sheer relief; Tony almost dropped the act right then and there as the weight of the world was lifted from his shoulders. But no, he continued, retreating back to SI.

Even after waiting a few days, Tony was still filled with trepidation as he walked through the sewer to meet The Captain. As soon as he saw the man’s smile, however, Tony knew he was safe.

“Oh come on,” Tony argued back, pulling back from his thoughts. “That plan was foolproof. We went over it a million times!”

“That’s the problem, Tony. It was rehearsed. I didn’t think people would have fallen for our act, that’s all. Catching you with real surprise seemed to have worked much better.”

Tony raised his eyebrow. “It wasn’t surprise, Cap. I thought you were gonna massacre me.”

The Captain sent him a shit-eating grain. “See? Convincing.”

Tony had already filled The Captain in on the extra rumors he had heard as soon as he got there. Tony had explained to the man about how terrified he was, as well as conveyed in every way possible that he wasn’t actually HYDRA. The Captain, the asshole, just laughed at him. “No, Tony. Believe it or not, you’re not that subtle.” The Captain had sighed. “I think I would know if you were working with HYDRA.” It was good to know that the man was getting a kick out of Tony almost having a heart attack.

“It doesn’t matter now,” The Captain continued. “All that matters is that it worked.”

Tony hummed in agreement as he downed the rest of the water, placing the cup of the side table before he got a whiff of his clothes. “Jesus,” he whispered, taking another smell. “You know, that sewer was rank. Why the hell do you even use it?”
“We have to get rid of the bodies somehow,” a voice answered.

Tony turned his head to see a leering Romanoff slip into the office.

Tony groaned. “Well, that’s just great. You owe me a new pair of shoes,” Tony snapped, jabbing a finger at the smirking Captain.

“And you owe me a new gun.”

Tony flinched at the sound of Barnes’s voice. Without even thinking about it, he pulled his gun out and tossed it to the other man. “Consider it on the house.”

Barnes caught it easily, inspecting the weapon right away. While Tony didn’t get a smile from the man, the nod of approval was more than Tony ever thought he was ever going to get. It must be Christmas.

“You’re back! Come on, let me see.”

_Seriously, how many people are going to fit in this office?_ Tony thought as Barton raced over to the couch.

Tony rolled his eyes, but held up his arm dutifully. “Bullseye,” Barton murmured, looking at the bullet wound.

Tony had to hand it to the blonde, the shot was perfect. Tony always considered Barton a deadly shot; everyone on the street knew that Clint Barton never missed. The wound on his arm was just another proof of that. While Tony had originally thought that he had gotten lucky and dodged a disastrous bullet, him getting shot was just another part of The Captain’s plan. The bullet that Barton delivered went straight through his previous set of stitches; none of the doctors at the hospital, Pepper, or Obie discovered that he had already been shot there just weeks before, and Tony had the added bonus of not marring any other skin.

“Ten out of ten, would shoot again,” Barton responded with a smirk.

Tony scowled, pulling his hand from Barton’s grasp, resulting in a sharp pain and a wince. The Captain was over at his side in an instant. “Is it okay? Should I get Bruce?”

Tony shook his head. “No, just sore is all.”

The Captain nodded, but didn’t go back to his desk, just continuing to hover over Tony.

“So what now?” Romanoff cut in. “What’s our play?”

“Now,” Tony said as he sat up from the couch. “We wait.”

He stood up slowly, leading the group from The Captain’s office back out to the main meeting room where over half of the table was covered in computers that Tony had dropped off almost two weeks ago. Tony sat down behind one the computers, the screen flickering to life. “I put a tracker in the files I leaked. That way we can trace the computer being used to access the files.”

The Captain nodded, moving around Tony to lean over his shoulder. “We find a computer, we find a location. And then we find HYDRA.”
“Don’t you ever sleep?”

Steve jolted in his chair, pencil going flying across the sketch he was touching up, and onto the floor. He looked up to see Tony leaning casually against his door frame, arms crossed loosely, slight smirk adorning his own tired face.

“I could ask the same for you,” responded Steve, leaning down to search for the lost pencil. Steve shot Tony a final glare over the desk before sinking down to the ground for more reach.

“Need some help there, Cap?” Tony teased lightly. Steve dutifully ignored him, cursing inwardly as he knocked his head against the inside of his desk. Maybe he was more tired than he thought.

He froze when he heard Tony step behind him and clear his throat. Sighing softly, Steve pushed back from under the desk, leaning back on his knees. There, standing above him, was Tony, snickering as he twirled the pencil between his fingers.

Brown eyes trailed down the length of his body, before dragging back up to catch Steve’s gaze. Tony whistled. “What a view,” he leered down at Steve.

Steve could feel the heat rising in his cheeks as his brain caught up to how he looked at Tony’s feet. Steve huffed before yanking on Tony’s arm to help him stand up straight, trying to tower over Tony as much as possible. “Please,” Steve replied, eyes giving Tony the same treatment. “I think we both know who’d really be on their knees.”

Steve smiled innocently as he watched Tony stutter over his reply, chuckling lightly as he plucked his pencil out of the brunette’s hand. Tony scowled at him, stepping in front of Steve to collapse in his desk chair, flopping his feet up on top of the desk. “In your dreams, Cap,” Tony retorted before reaching out to grab his sketch. “Now, what do we have here?”

Steve leaned forward to snatch the drawing out of his hand, but it was futile as Tony’s quick hands kept it out of Steve’s reach. He watched as Tony’s teasing glance turn soft as he looked down at the sketch. “Well, I’m not sure how you did it, but somehow you’ve managed to make me look even better.”

Steve huffed but elected to ignore Tony’s comment. The last thing he needed to do was stroke the man’s ego any further.

At some point yesterday, Steve exited his office to slip in a few hours in the gym. The sight that he was met with, however, was one that Steve would remember forever. Tony was passed out in front of his computers, the blueish tint playing out over his tanned skin. Ever since Tony had been bunking at their base, he had forgone his usual suits for old t-shirts and track pants, all with an almost constant state of bedhead, somehow making him look even more appealing. The smaller man was hunched over the desk in an almost impossible position, deep and even breaths a comfort to Steve’s ears. Steve had never seen Tony so relaxed, his face loose, calm, and wrinkle free. Steve was also pleased to see outlines of defined muscles that were usually hidden under the man’s suits, even eyeing a patch of skin than shown in the computer light from where Tony’s shirt had ridden.
up. The best part, however, was seeing Tony’s face smashed against the papers he was working
with, drool dripping down onto them slowly. Steve couldn’t resist getting his sketch book right
then and there.

“Any hits from the name?” Steve asked, trying to draw the conversation away from the sketch,
finally managing to pull it from Tony’s grasp.

Tony nodded. “Sure, there have been hits, but I’m not sure if they’re who we’re looking for. I have
JARVIS running a decryption on the people accessing the name, weeding out all the regular nosy
hackers. Hopefully we’ll get a location on Hammer or HYDRA in the next few hours.”

“Good, that’s good,” Steve agreed, rubbing at his eyes.

“Come on, Cap. You look dead on your feet. Go get some sleep.”

“I can’t,” Steve said, pacing around his office. “I still have work to do.”

“Oh, really?” Tony scoffed. “Punching the hell out of a sand filled bag doesn’t constitute as work.
There’s nothing else that needs to be done. JARVIS and I are manning the computer and your boys
have the whole place on lock down. All of our bases are covered. I’ve even got a few people of my
own out and about, just in case.”

Steve whirled around to face the shorter man, narrowing his eyes. “People? You mean other mobs?
How much have you told them?”

Tony put his hands up defensively. “Easy, killer. They don’t know anything more than the general
public knows. I may be reckless but I’m not a complete idiot. I’m not bringing anyone else in
unless we agree on it, pinky promise.”

Steve ignored the pinky finger that Tony extended. “I wasn’t aware you still kept in touch with
your other associates,” he said with a frown.

“I can have more than one friend,” Tony replied, crossing his arms. “Jealous, much?”

Steve snorted. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? No, I just don’t like that fact you’re keeping
secrets.”

“You know, that’s pretty rich coming from the guy whose name I don’t even know,” Tony
snapped.

Steve looked away, his chest constricting painfully. Tony was right; he had no room to criticize the
man for keeping in touch with some of his own people. Hell, Steve did that with Thor. At least
Tony had the decency to keep them at arm’s length; a decency that Steve never afforded him. A
part of Steve just wanted to run to Tony and spill everything; after all the man had done for The
Commandos, Steve owed him at least that courtesy. Tony had proved himself enough.

But he couldn’t. Not after everything with the SSR, with Howard. Steve’s name had enough weight
in the mob community for a man to do some dangerous things. That alone was a good enough
reason to-

No.

No, it wasn’t a good reason.

Because there was no good reason.
Steve was just a coward.

Tony learning his name could be disastrous. Steve had just barely been able to regain the ground he had lost after his misstep with Thor. Dropping another bomb like that on Tony would probably send the man out the door for good. Steve wouldn’t risk that; not after everything they’ve been through.

See, Tony not knowing Steve’s name opened a world that Steve never thought possible. He was, even despite the current situation, almost happy.

Steve hated his name. Uttering ‘Steve Rogers’ could lead down two paths, but it always brought him back to the same place: trouble. Back when he was growing up, Steve Rogers got laughed at, beat up in alleys. Sometimes even ignored completely. No one wanted the scrawny street rat that was Steve. But after the SSR? Everybody wanted him. Everyone wanted Steve Rogers and all of his little secrets. Mobs all over were gunning to use him until he finally broke down.

Who would have guessed that the blessing of being Steve Rogers was actually nothing more than a curse?

But Tony? Tony wasn’t any of them.

He was just Tony.

And Steve was just Cap.

He didn’t see Steve as a cash cow, as a dancing monkey. He saw the real Steve and didn’t even know it. He could forget who he was with Tony. Where he’s been, what he’s seen. What he knew.

He could be normal.

And maybe that was being selfish, but Steve wasn’t ready to give that up. He couldn’t lose Tony to the name ‘Steve Rogers’. He wasn’t ready.

“I’m sorry.” Tony’s voice jolted Steve from his thoughts. “That came out harsher than intended.”

Steve shook his head. “No, it’s fine. It’s understandable.”

Tony nodded his head. “No, it’s fine. It’s understandable.”

Tony nodded, but forced his eyes away from Steve. Acting on impulse, Steve reached over and grabbed Tony’s shoulder. “It’s not that I don’t wanna tell you, Tony. It’s just. It’s…it’s-”

“Complicated?” Tony finished.

Steve sighed heavily and closed his eyes. “Yeah, it’s complicated.” Opening his eyes, he met Tony’s gaze while tightening the grip on his shoulder. “I do trust you, you know.”

Tony snorted. “Oh, yeah? Why is that?”

Another pain hit hard in Steve’s chest. After all that he’d already done, it still hurt Steve every time that Tony didn’t expect anything in return. Like he didn’t deserve it. That somewhere out there, someone had told Tony that he wasn’t good enough. That he wasn’t worth it. Steve was going to change that.

He stood up abruptly, finally grabbing the sketch from Tony’s hands. Making sure Tony was watching, Steve walked over to the far wall after grabbing a pin from his desk, and tacked Tony’s picture up along all the other art. “Because,” Steve said, turning to face Tony again. “You’re one of
us now, a Commando. Like it or not, you’re stuck with us.”

“Pretty sure there are a lot of people out in the other room that wouldn’t agree with that decision, Cap,” Tony retorted, still looking unconvinced.

“Well, it’s a good thing none of them are in charge,” Steve joked. “Besides, they act like that whenever someone new shows up. Bucky burnt holes in all of Sam’s pants once just to try and get him to leave.”

Tony huffed out a laugh. “Well, it’s nice to know all the good things I can look forward too.”

Steve chuckled, suddenly feeling nervous. The last thing Steve wanted was for Tony to up and run again. Adding the pressure of forcing a full time mob position might not get the results he wanted. Steve already made a mistake with Thor; he wouldn’t dare try the power play again. “Unless, of course, you-you, uh, don’t want to. It’s up to you, I mean. If you wanna join. Because, let’s face it, you’re you, and we’re, uh, us, and-”

“Oh my god, you’re adorable. Is this how you asked everyone else to join your super-secret boy band?”

Steve blushed furiously.

“Besides, I didn’t think I qualified. Apparently I’m volatile, self-obsessed, and don’t play well with others,” Tony said with a smirk.

Steve gave the brunette a small smile. “Well, I’d be lying if I didn’t think you didn’t have a rocky start. But yet, here I am asking you anyway.”

Tony gaped at him before breaking into a smile of his own. “How are you even real?”

“I’m not exactly sure how to answer that,” replied Steve.

“That’s because you’ve been awake too long.” Tony stood up before manhandling Steve over to the couch. He snapped his fingers and pointed down at the cushions. “Sleep,” he said firmly.

Steve rolled his eyes affectionately. “You know we’re not actually dogs, right?” he asked as he lay down on the couch.

“Stop throwing those sad puppy eyes around and I might actually believe you,” Tony quipped as he threw a blanket on top of him. “You need to relax, Cap. I’ll let you know the second the computer finds something, deal?”

“As long as you get some sleep too, yeah?” Steve slurred, eyes already shutting.

Tony gave some sort of response, but Steve was already drifting. He felt a warm weight push through his hair, leaving too soon for his liking. Steve made some sort of noise and tried to follow the warmth, but it never came again.

Steve drifted for a while until his brain managed to catch up with him again. It occurred to Steve that Tony had never given him an answer about coming on board to The Commandos.

It hurt, of course. Having Tony Stark on board for good would be a huge game changer for Steve and the crew. But Tony had never gone monogamous with a single mob before; Steve knew it was a lot to ask.
But, Tony also hadn’t said no; Steve would cling to that as long as he could.

Steve rubbed his hand over his face, exhaling loudly. They’d come so far; there was too much at stake now. It was so much easier when they were on their own sides, when they were on their own. The jumbled mess that they made together kept Steve’s brain spinning, even getting him to question his own allegiances.

Tony Stark should have remained a stranger.

But isn’t that what he was? Tony was an associate, nothing more than a business partner. Complete the transaction and each would go on their merry way, never to cross paths again.

Tony Stark wasn’t anybody special.

Right?

Steve tensed as his heart fluttered otherwise.

_Uh oh._

Chapter End Notes

Happy Holidays, everyone! Wishing you and your families all the very best! Times like these always remind me how blessed I am, especially to have you guys.

Enjoy your gift; you guys definitely deserved a nice mellow chapter after all the craziness I’ve already dragged you through.

But be warned; this is your calm before the storm. The next three/four chapters, the shit’s going to hit the fan, so be prepared.
Steve’s vision dragged in and out of focus, black dots dancing in front of his eyes. He could feel himself take shuddering breaths, but couldn’t hear them over the ringing in his ears. He squeezed his eyes shut as tears started to form from the plumes of smoke around him.

Steve opened his eyes long enough to see the red that dripped down onto the charred ground below him. Taking a shaking and already cut up hand, Steve dragged it across his head only for it to come back more bloody. Trying to move his aching body was futile as well; the jarring movement shot pain coursing through his body, almost causing him to lose consciousness again. Steve looked around, but saw nothing but endless walls of fire and smoke, threatening to close in around him.

This is all my fault.

4 hours earlier

Hammer sat quietly as he faced Alexander Pierce. They were holed up in one of Pierce’s many meeting spots, a safe harbor for HYDRA. Pierce was looking down at his hands, deep in thought. Hammer tried to steady his heartbeat, hoping that he had made the right decision.

“So, you’re telling me that Stane has gone AWOL?”

Pierce’s voice was hard, cold even. Of course, that was to be expected considering he just found out that one of his partners was going to stab him in the back.

When Hammer had been approached by Stane to ditch Pierce now that they could find The Captain’s identity, Hammer had found himself between a rock and a hard place. Regardless of Tony Stark, Stane was still a competitor in the world of weapons manufacturing. In the end game, they would still be enemies. Also, with the backing of both HYDRA and the NYPD, Pierce was someone Hammer was not ready to make an enemy. But, Stane had the US military wrapped around his finger; messing around with Army’s main benefactor probably wouldn’t play out in his favor either.

If Hammer was good at anything in his life, it was surviving. Why choose one side when he could play them both? Stay loyal to both sides and turn the two against each other. Then, when it came to blows, Hammer would step back, let them duke it out, and reap the rewards with the winner. He had told Stane he was in on backstabbing Pierce on the phone as he was walking to meet with Pierce about Stane’s betrayal. Hammer only hoped that this wouldn’t end with a bullet in his brain.

“Yes, Sir,” Justin answered, voice dripping with false sympathy. ”With us knowing The Captain’s real identity, he said we didn’t need you anymore. Cut you out of the picture. I trust Stane as far as I can throw him. How long before he deems me unnecessary? I’m not willing to take that risk.”

Pierce nodded, rubbing his chin slowly. “What’s he got planned?”
Justin shrugged. “Who knows, but he’ll probably move fast. He’s already got the name Joseph Grant, so he’s probably already searching for him.”

“Well, then we need to move faster. It’s a good thing I already have a plan.”

Hammer raised an eyebrow. “You do?”

“You remember Rumlow? Well, when The Captain and his boys picked him up, Stane had installed a tracker into his tooth; we’ve already got a potential lock on where The Captain’s base is stationed. I say we go and light up the place.”

Justin blanched. That couldn't be possible, could it? “Rumlow’s abduction was over a month ago!” he exclaimed. "Why didn’t we move sooner?"

There was no reason they should have sat on this. They knew that Tony Stark and The Captain had been working together - if they knew where The Commandos were holed up at, they could have been taken out months ago. Justin could be sitting in the Bahamas with a margarita in one hand and a hooker in the other right now. By waiting this long, they may have missed their window of taking Stark out with the rest of them. Everyone knew that Stark had managed to piss off his only ally; trying to kill both birds with one stone seemed like a pipe dream now.

Pierce snorted. “Stane convinced me to wait. Probably just an excuse to hold us off until he could take care of them on his own. Well, screw him; I run this show. I’ll take a few of my boys down there, wait till it’s night and torch the joint. You in?”

Hammer stuck his hand out immediately to shake with Pierce’s. Sure, Tony Stark may be out of their reach due to his recent break with Grant, but The Commandos were still a force to be reckoned with. Passing up an opportunity to eradicate them would be foolish. And who knows, maybe Stark will come out of his hole with The Commandos out of the way, thinking himself safe. Nothing a simple sniper round couldn't handle, and that stain would be out of his life for good. Regardless of what happened, attacking this base will end up with Stane furious with Pierce. From then, it would only be a matter of time before one kills the other. And wouldn't that just solve the rest of his problems? Time to sit back and watch the show.

“I’m in.”

The room was silent besides the nervous tapping of Tony’s foot against the hard floor of The Commando’s base. He couldn’t remember how long he had been sitting in front of his computers, screening for people accessing his hidden virus. JARVIS was running the back trace now; it shouldn’t be too much longer before Tony had a location.

But, Tony’s incessant tapping wasn’t coming from impatience. The brunette glanced over to The Captain’s closed office door again, thinking of the man inside. Tony would be lying if he didn’t stop to admire the man as he walked in on him sketching just earlier. The man looked almost happy; his face calm as he tracked his pencil with slow, sure movements. The man’s eyes, so determined and focused, almost caring; like his entire world was zoned in on the sketch alone. It was enough to have Tony quivering in his boots.

Of course, it hadn’t helped when The Captain started flirting. Tony had taken it upon himself to try and get the man to blush at every instance he could. It was pretty easy; for a mob boss, The
Captain seemed to turn beet red at almost anything Tony said. Who knew that one lewd response from the blonde would send Tony about two seconds from bending over the man’s desk. If The Captain’s voice had dropped any lower, Tony was sure that he would have creamed his jeans right then and there.

Tony would have been lying if he said he hadn’t been gunning for a quick fuck through all of this. It’s not like it hadn’t happened before; Tony ending up in bed with some of his business partners was not a rare occurrence. Just a final service for the two parties: a quick merger leaving both sides satisfied before going their separate ways. Besides, The Captain’s body was basically a sin. The man was just asking for it with the way he tried to cram his sculpted frame into those thin clothes. Whether he ended up over or under it, Tony wasn’t going to complain.

What Tony wasn’t expecting was for him to be sitting beside the man as he drifted off, pushing a hand through his dirty blond locks. Watching as The Captain try and follow his hand like a lost kitten almost broke the heart Tony wasn’t supposed to have.

But he would have to deal with that later; there were other notions that had started to plague his mind, starting right as he shut the door of the blonde’s office, his mind finally breaking away from thoughts of The Captain's mouth, only to focus instead on the words the mouth had formed. It was like a flick of a switch. One second, Tony found himself more content than he had ever been in his life, and now he was nervously twitching in his chair, biting off all his nails.

The Captain had popped the question.

“I do trust you, you know.”

“You’re one of us now, a Commando. Like it or not, you’re stuck with us.”

Tony could almost hear his father rolling over in his grave. Don’t get involved. Don’t get involved. Of course, while Tony had thought he was staying away from the shallow parts of the pool in case he waded farther in, he was actually getting close to the deep end to dive right in.

His relationship with the gang leader was getting too deep, too involved; Tony was in over his head. But it wasn’t just him. Tony had almost called Barton by his first name today. And that’s not even getting started on his quick formed bond with Bruce. The whole team was becoming to familiar to him.

Tony needed to ditch the group before it got any worse.

But could he? They were so far into the game, he couldn’t leave them now. Not with HYDRA so close. It was too dangerous.

Yeah. Let’s go with that reason.

It’s not like he wanted to stay.

No, of course not. These people didn’t mean anything to him. They weren’t his friends. Especially not their boss.

The Captain wasn’t anybody special.

Right?

Tony tensed as his heart fluttered otherwise.
A beep from Tony’s computer almost had the man jolting out of his chair. The engineer scrambled over to the monitors, eyeing the new information.

*Thank God for JARVIS.*

They finally had a location.

Without even thinking, Tony burst from his chair and into The Captain’s office. The man sprang awake instantly, aiming his hidden gun towards Tony immediately. Upon seeing Tony however, his face crumpled in embarrassment, the gun falling away quickly. “Sorry,” he forced out, still breathless with adrenaline. “What’s up?”

“We got a lock,” Tony responded. His inner battle with his status with The Commandos will have to wait for another day.

The Captain snapped into action. A quick text to his phone, which Tony assumed was to collect the rest of his mutts, and the man was on the move, looking completely opposite to how he was just moments ago. He trailed Tony into the meeting room, heading straight to the computers.

“It’s some storage facility,” he explained, pointedly not thinking about how the larger man seemed to fit perfectly behind him, the scent of fresh laundry filling Tony's nose as a head leaned over his shoulder. "JARVIS found other access points, and is still working on them, but this one doesn’t fit. There shouldn’t be a computer that could hack the Joseph Grant file in some run down facility like that.”

“You think it’s HYDRA?” questioned The Captain.

Tony shrugged. “Better be safe than sorry, right?”

The Captain nodded, looking towards the door as Barnes stepped in. “Grab everyone else and get ready to move,” snapped the blonde. Barnes simply nodded and slipped out as quickly as he left. “Alright,” he said, turning back towards Tony. “Tell me about this place.”

Pierce walked towards an unmarked van, approaching his workers. “Everything ready?”

The men nodded. “We’ve got enough explosives to start a third world war,” one answered. “With the blast radius, we won’t even have to get inside. Just load up the perimeter, and boom.”

Pierce nodded, gesturing for the two to get in the car.

Hammer coming to him about Stane’s betrayal gave him the edge he was looking for. With Stane chasing a faulty name, it gave Pierce ample room to swoop in and get The Captain before anyone else got too close. Unfortunately for Hammer, he wouldn’t be keeping Stark. While Pierce was glad that Hammer had chosen his side, it didn’t change his end game. Hammer was joking himself if he thought himself as anything but a pawn. Stark was too favorable for HYDRA’s cause for Pierce to just hand him over for Hammer to play with.

But he could deal with that all in good time. Right now, it was time for Pierce to step back in the
game. Word on the street was that The Captain and Stark were still enemies. While Stark had
released the wrong name, Pierce deduced that the man still wouldn’t let his guard down, still
letting Stark think he had the upper hand.

All Pierce needed to do was stir the pot a little more. His men would wait for The Captain to leave
base, and then Pierce would blow it to smithereens. Some Commandos would be lost, of course,
but all for a good cause. The Captain would blame it on Stark, bringing the two back to blows
again. Then, all Pierce had to do was to sit back, let the two trade punches until they both slipped
up, and he would come in for the kill.

Pierce walked up to his man in the driver seat. “Wait for an opening and then finish them.”

Steve watched his men ready up, the sounds of guns loading and boots lacing up a familiar sound.
One that he hadn’t heard in too long.

This was it. They had found HYDRA. And just like the time before, Steve would lay them to
waste.

This ends today.

“Load the cars,” he said to Clint, watching over the final preparations for leaving. The plan was
fairly simple; it basically had Tony written all over it. But, for once, Steve found himself in
complete compliance.

“We need a plan of attack.” Bucky had said.

“I have a plan. Attack.”

There was no time to sit idly by. HYDRA wouldn’t escape his grasp again.

Turning his head, he watched Tony throw a loose sweatshirt over his tank, getting his own gun
ready. Steve sighed. This wasn’t going to be pretty. “What do you think you’re doing?” he asked,
walking over to the other man.

Tony shot him a look he had become quite familiar with. The whole ‘don’t ask stupid questions
unless you want stupid answers’ kind of face.

Steve took a deep breath. “You’re not coming with us.”

“Excuse me?” Tony snapped his eyes up to meet Steve’s.

“You’re not coming with. You’re staying here.”

Tony snorted. “Yeah, nice try, Cap. Now, get out of my way.”

“I’m serious, Tony.”

“Well, good, because I am too. Get out of my way.”

Steve grabbed at Tony’s shoulders as the man tried to push past his again. “You can’t come; you
aren’t combat trained. Remember the last time you went out? Hammer’s men shot you.”
“Yeah, I was protecting your dumb ass,” Tony snapped, jamming a finger into Steve's chest.

“Tony,” Steve tried to placate. “You’re just a civilian. The Commandos fight as a single unit. We can’t have you out there to- ”

“To what? Get in your way?” Tony’s eyes lit up angrily, his chestnut orbs looking almost like molten amber as he fumed at Steve.

“You know I wasn’t going to say that,” Steve responded quickly. “I’m not willing to take the risk of you getting hurt again. Tony, you’ve been shot twice in the past month; you should be resting!”

Tony pulled away from Steve’s grip. “I’m not some wilting flower, Cap. I don’t need a keeper; I can handle myself just fine.”

“Yeah, yeah, Stark men are made of iron,” Steve quoted. “That’s not my point, Tony. I just- ”

He stopped when he found Tony looking at him oddly. “What?” Steve snapped.

“Stark men are made of iron. Where’d you hear that one?”

Steve’s blood froze over. He knew exactly where he had heard it from.

Howard.

Not Tony.

“You mentioned it once,” Steve lied. “When you were all drugged up.”

Tony hummed but continued to eye him warily. “Whatever,” the brunette replied. “You can’t keep me here, Cap.”

Steve puffed his chest out. “I can, and I will.”

Tony crossed his arms. “What the hell is this? You don’t own me, Captain. If you remember correctly I didn’t accept your job offer,” he sneered.

Steve could feel the heat of some of The Commando’s gaze on him from across the room. This is not how he pictured this conversation going. “Look, even Bruce gets to go!” Tony shouted, gesturing to where the doctor was packing up his things.

“I’m only going in case of a code green, Tony,” the man answered, almost apologetic. “You never know when you might need a doctor.”

“Besides, we need you here,” Steve tried to reason. “This might just be one big bust. You’ll need to keep looking for other locations, just in case. HYDRA could be hiding somewhere else, too. You’re the only one that can find them. Everyone has their job, Tony. I need you to do yours.”

Steve could see the man ball his hands into fists, glaring daggers at Steve. Steve’s chest tightened; it had been a long time since he had gotten a look like that. But despite how he felt, Steve knew he was right. He wouldn’t risk Tony again. The man talked big game, but Steve wasn’t going to let him go out to the field unprepared. Tony had his world, and Steve had his. Steve wasn’t about to drag Tony into the hell hole of violence and blood that Steve and his men saw. Tony wasn’t meant for it.

“This isn’t over,” Tony hissed before stomping into Steve’s office and slamming the door.
Steve sighed again, turning to have all The Commandos staring at him. “Grab your gear. We leave now.” Everyone scrambled to comply, not daring to talk back.

Steve reached out and grab Bucky’s arm. _Time to do even more damage._ “I need you to do something for me and I need you to not hate me for it.”

Bucky looked at him questionably, but after a quick glance at Steve’s office, the man deflated. “No. Absolutely not. You cannot be serious.”

“Buck, you heard him,” Steve replied. “As soon as we leave, he’s gonna follow. He’ll do something stupid, you _know_ that. He’ll jeopardize this whole mission and get someone killed.”

“I’m not a babysitter, Steve!” his friend growled. “If you think for one second that I’m staying here and letting you go off on your own, you’ve got another thing coming.”

“Buck, please,” Steve pleaded. “You’re the only one who won’t fall for his shit. As much as you hate him, Tony Stark is a valuable asset, and we can’t risk him. And we can’t let him risk our family. Please. I need you to do this for me.”

“Steve,” Bucky almost whispered, pain evident in his voice. “I’m not risking you. I’m not sitting on the sidelines for this; not this time.”

“I know I’m asking too much. But I need to ask it anyway, because I know that somewhere in that thick head of yours, you know I’m right. I’ll be as safe as I can be with The Commandos. Letting Tony Stark go on a rampage could ruin us all.”

Bucky looked down, looking as empty as Steve had ever seen him. For the second time, a good friend tore out of his grasp coldly, and stomped away. Steve could only pray that they would forgive him.

Walking down to the front door, Steve could already hear the harsh thuds of Bucky’s fists hitting the punching bag. He sighed, finally walking outside to one of their vans, sliding in the passenger side. Clint was driving, but thankfully the man had enough sense than to ask him about what went down.

The drive to the storage facility was in dead silence. Natasha checked over her guns one last time, Clint looking back in the review mirrors to make sure they hadn’t lost one of the following vans. Upon arrival, the entire crew piled out of the vans, getting into their usual positions, ready to swarm the building on Steve’s call.

The building itself was small, almost completely unprotected in its location. Steve had no doubt that he and his men could overpower it in mere minutes.

Steve pulled a walkie-talkie up to his mouth. “Go.”

Almost immediately, the building was alight with gunfire, a few shouts barely heard over the crackle of bullets. Steve himself jumped into the fray, following right behind Thor as the hulking blonde kicked down a door.

He could already see some men dispatched on the floor from Clint, but Steve kept pushing forward. From the look of the place, Steve already knew it was too small to hide all of HYDRA, but there would be enough to hold answers that he and the team were desperately needing.

It wasn’t long before the facility was encased in silence again. The few men that were charged with guarding the building were no match for the onslaught from The Commandos.
“That was easy,” smirked Thor.

“Too easy,” Steve replied.

“Cap!”

Clint’s voice carried through the hallway, Steve and Thor immediately chasing after it. Running into the back room, he saw Natasha holding Justin Hammer in a choke hold.

“Look what I found,” she hummed, sounding completely unperturbed by the struggling man in her grip.

“Justin Hammer,” Steve smiled. *Finally.* This was what they needed. Hammer would have the answers they were looking for; he could get them HYDRA. And maybe letting Tony have at the man for a few hours would out Steve back in his good graces.

Steve smiled wider as Hammer paled slightly. “Captain,” he whispered hoarsely.

“That’s right,” Steve replied. “I’ve been looking for you. Should’ve known you would be hiding like the coward you really are.”

“Just following orders,” Hammer gasped around Natasha’s hands. “You can appreciate that.”

Steve gave a hollow laugh. “Well, now you’re gonna follow my orders and answer some questions. I know you’re not the ring leader. Where’s your boss?”

With that, Hammer just laughed. “You just missed him.”

Steve raised an eyebrow. “He was here?” He turned toward Clint. “Grab some people and search the perimeter. He couldn’t have gotten far.”

“No,” Hammer said, catching their attention. “He wasn’t here. He was going to see you, last I talked to him.”

“See me?”

“Yeah, thought he’d drop by for a quick visit.”

Steve froze.

“What?”

Clint snorted. “Like you’d even know where to look.”

Hammer laughed again, his eyes wild. “Oh, but we did look. *And we found.* It’s a shame you aren’t there. Oh well. I guess whoever you left at home will just have to take a message.”

*Oh my God.*

Steve was out of the room in an instant, sprinting towards the car as he heard Hammer cackle behind him. Steve jumped into the driver seat, seeing that Thor and Clint had sidled in with him.

His blood was pounding as he sped down the streets, swerving through cars, willing himself to go faster. Hammer was lying, right? No one had ever been able to find where the base was.

*Except Tony.*
If Tony could find it, how long before someone else could have done the same thing? Steve’s heart jumped in his throat as he pushed the gas petal harder. He could hear Clint curse into his phone, no doubt calling Bucky.

Why wasn’t he answering?

Soon, Steve found himself pulling up to base. Almost falling out of the car, Steve breathed deep when he found the building just as they left it.

“Hammer’s a little shit,” snarled Clint. “He’s just trying to get in our heads.”

Steve nodded, finally feeling his heartbeat slow down. He walked towards the front door, pulling out his phone to call Nat, when-

**BOOM!**

Steve felt heat and light encompass him quickly, sending him flying back into the air. He felt his body tumble around the asphalt, until his head collided with the solid ground, knocking him out. He must have only been out momentarily, because soon Steve was waking with a gasp, fire and smoke dancing around him.

Steve’s vision dragged in and out of focus, black dots dancing in front of his eyes. He could feel himself take shuddering breaths, but couldn’t hear them over the ringing in his ears. He squeezed his eyes shut as tears started to form from the plumes of smoke around him.

Steve opened his eyes long enough to see the red that dripped down onto the charred ground below him. Taking a shaking and already cut up hand, Steve dragged it across his head only for it to come back more bloody. Trying to move his aching body was futile as well; the jarring movement shot pain coursing through his body, almost causing him to lose consciousness again. Steve looked around, but saw nothing but endless walls of fire and smoke, threatening to close in around him.

**This is all my fault.**

He tore his eyes back to the remnants of his base.

“BUCKY!” he tried to shout, smoke inhalation causing him to break off into a coughing fit. Steve tried to stumble towards the flames when arms pulled him back again.

He could vaguely hear Clint yell at him, but Steve continued to pull forward. Bucky was in there. **Tony** was in there. He needed to get them out.

“-you nuts? You’re going to get yourself killed!”

Steve tried to pull away when another blast knocked the men back off their feet. Steve was drifting again, the pain in his head too much. He couldn’t see anything but fire. There was no base, there was only fire. Someone was screaming again, and Steve wanted nothing more than to tell them to stop, that they needed to help. It wasn’t long until he found it was him, crying hoarsely into Clint’s shoulder as he willed himself to stand back up.

There was nothing but sirens of the incoming firetrucks, the crackling off flames, the crumbling of once solid walls.

**What have I done?**

“Bucky,” Steve pleaded.
Tony.

Chapter End Notes

Oops.
Chapter 28

I hour earlier

“Everyone has their job, Tony. I need you to do yours.”

Tony slammed the door to The Captain’s office harshly, some of the sketches flying off the wall from the force of it. Tony glared at the papers drifting through the air as his temper continued to rise. In another grunt of frustration, Tony ran over to the wall of pictures and let loose, arms moving in a whirlwind until every sketch, photo, and memory were torn off the wall and strewn onto the floor at his feet.

“I do trust you, you know.”

“You’re one of us now, a Commando. Like it or not, you’re stuck with us.”

Tony snorted.

What a load of bullshit.

He did not come all this way just to be pushed aside like some damsel in distress. He’s Tony Goddamned Stark. And the only person who can control Tony Stark was Tony Stark himself.

He walked over to The Captain’s desk, tearing out drawer after drawer until Tony found an extra side arm. He could hear yelling from the other side of the office door, but Tony paid it no mind. With any luck, someone out there was giving The Captain all the shit he deserves right now.

Tony didn’t care what The Captain said. There was no way he was going to sit idly by while there took out HYDRA. He could handle himself, no problem. The shit storm that happened at his own warehouse should have proved that. He’d come in - rather heroically, he thought to himself - and held his own with The Commandos just fine, thank you very much. He even managed to save The Captain's distracted ass. Maybe he should have been the one left behind.

No, Tony Stark was definitely not a cheerleader on the sidelines. Not this time. HYDRA had gone after his people as well; Tony had every right to see them burn alongside The Commandos.

And that he would. Screw this. Tony would just have to wait until The Captain and his men left, and Tony would leave right behind them. The Captain would forgive him. Probably.

Tony walked over to the office door, pressing his ear against the old wood. When he didn’t hear anything, Tony opened the door slowly, the creaking echoing in the silent room.

The room was cleared out; The Captain and his men had already left. They really don't waste any time, that's for sure. Of course, being able to stay three steps ahead of any other rival gang, as well as the entire NYPD, didn't exactly come from luck. Of course, with some of the stupid ass decisions their man-in-charge was delegating, maybe there was more luck involved than he thought.

Tony chuckled to himself as he slipped over to his computer, tapping away to bring up the location. JARVIS brought it up without a single command, and as he reached below the desk, Tony pulled out his padded suitcase that he originally brought the computer in, and slipped the tech and the acquired location inside. He grabbed the suitcase and dragged it back into the office, rummaging through the desk until he found some spare clips from his new, borrowed, sidearm, throwing them
He looked down when he heard paper crinkle under his feet. There, under his heel, was a crumpled photo of Barton, laughing as he leaned into Coulson.

Tony sighed, picking the photo up, trying to unfurl the edges. Even while holding the photograph in his hand, Tony still had some doubts that the scene printed on it could be real. Not real in the sense that he still hadn't manage to figure out exactly how Barton and Coulson worked - they were both reserved, sure, but Tony had a file on Barton large enough to know the kind of shenanigans he got himself into, while Coulson seemed to be the type of guy that organized his staples - but the reality of their expressions. They looked so happy, so carefree, like the photo was snapped at a suburban barbecue. How they were able to carve out a piece of happiness and carry it through the lives they led was... intangible for him.

Looking around, Tony took in the state of the rest of the office. Scraps of paper, their memories, their happiness, was strewn haphazardly throughout the floor.

Goddamn sentiment.

Tony rubbed at his forehead, before leaning down to pick up the rest of the photos. For as angry as he was, the last thing he needed was another kicked puppy look from The Captain. Especially if the man would already be furious when Tony showed up for the fight with HYDRA.

Gathering all the pictures together, Tony froze when he heard a dull rhythmic thumping. He dropped the sketches, not stopping to see where they fell, and slipped back into the meeting room. Tony crept down the stairs, movements silent as the thumping got louder.

He stepped down onto the main floor, heading straight for the noise and pulling his gun out as he walked. Tony expected to find an old pipe or rusting piece of machinery reacting to the harsh cold of the New York winter, but he wasn’t about to let his guard down. Not with the threat of HYDRA.

What Tony wasn’t expecting was a potentially murderous James Barnes whacking the shit out of a punching bag.

“Barnes?” Tony questioned, looking around the rest of the room for the rest of The Captain’s men as he slipped his gun back in his pants. He caught Barnes falter slightly in his beating when Tony called his name, but when straight back to attacking the sandbag.

Frowning, Tony stepped closer to the man. “What the hell are you doing here?” Barnes still didn’t answer, his punches seemingly getting harder at Tony’s inquiry. Tony walked around and grabbed the back of the sandbag to cease its swinging, staring at the other brunette. “Shouldn’t you be, oh. I don’t know, on a murder spree right now?” Tony pushed more. That finally broke a grunt from Barnes, the man missing the bag and aiming straight for Tony.

Tony ducked on autopilot, narrowly missing the man’s fist. He scrambled away quickly, arms going up defensively, but Tony could see that despite the outburst, Barnes didn’t really want to fight him. Tony looked around the room once more. Clearly, he and Barnes were the only ones left in the building, but if The Commandos were gone, why the hell was Barnes even here?

Tony sighed in realization. “You’re on babysitting duty, aren’t you?”

The way Barnes locked his jaw was answer enough for Tony. Goddammit. Of course The Captain would know that he wouldn't sit quietly. I trust you, he had said. Trust me, my ass, Tony thought, venomously.
Barnes looked at Tony, eyes dropping to where he was still gripping the gun. “You going after them?”

“You gonna stop me?” Tony retorted.

Barnes sighed, rubbing a hand over his tired face and walked over to one of the benches as he began to unwrap the tape from his hands.

“Come on, Barnes,” continued Tony. “You can’t think this was a good idea.”

“Doesn’t matter what I think.”

Tony scoffed. “Oh, really. You’re gonna pull the ‘I’m just a grunt soldier’ card now? Everyone knows now much pull you have here. I’m surprised The Captain is able to tie his shoes without asking you what kind of knots he should go with.”

“Well, I obviously don’t have too much say if I’m stuck here with you,” Barnes snapped.

“So, you agree with me,” said Tony. “You don’t think you should be here. You don’t think I should be here.”

Barnes finished unwrapping his hands and sighed again, looking up at the lofty ceiling. “Come on, Barnes. Your best friend could be could there getting killed right now, and- ”

“Don’t,” Barnes hissed.

Tony put his arms up apologetically. “Alright, that was shitty. But, I know you’re with me on this one, Barnes. I can help; we can help. This is HYDRA we’re talking about here. I know I don’t know what happened the first time, but something tells me it wasn’t pretty. I don’t think we can risk underestimating them again. Please.”

Barnes sat down on the bench, laying his head in his hands. It was a long time before he spoke again. “No.”

Tony gaped at the other man. “What?” he asked in disbelief.

Barnes stood up again, staring Tony down. “Cap said to stay here, so we’re staying here.”

“What the hell, Barnes?” Tony snarled. “You obviously don’t agree with the man!”

“It’s not about whether I agree with- ”

“Oh, so you’re just a kiss ass then, are you?”

“Stark, you gotta understand- ”

“They could be in danger!”

“Cap will keep them safe, you know- ”

“Well who’s gonna keep him safe?!”

Despite Barnes’s calm demeanor, Tony broke off with a shout, his face almost bright red from exertion. He knew Barnes had it out for him, but this was just insane. They were on the same side here; why the hell were they still fighting?
“When we were little,” Barnes started, ignoring Tony’s outburst. “The Captain was… different, in a way. He wasn’t always like how he is now, you know; he used to be smaller. We didn’t have too much either, growing up. I remember we used to share shoes to save money. Hell, the poor kid had to stick newspapers in them so they could stay on.” Barnes chuckled, showing the rare and private smile that was usually preserved for those in the inner circle of The Commandos. “But he was always stubborn; he wouldn’t back down from a brick wall. He always said that ‘someone’s gotta look out for the little guys’. The bastard got into more fights than I did.

“When we got out of school, we were lucky enough to afford an apartment. It wasn’t much, definitely on the shadier side of Brooklyn, but it was home. It wasn’t long before I started coming home to find Cap going at it with another tenant. I tried to step in, more than once, but he stopped me. Every damn time. Said he knew what he was doing. ‘I can handle it, Buck. Just trust me,’ he said. God only knows why I listened to him; it killed me every time he’d come back in like he’d walked through hell himself. It wasn’t until a few months later when the guy chased Cap into the street and started wailing on him right out in the open. But then the cops showed up, arrested the man. Turns out, the guy was a felon on house arrest. As soon as he stepped outside, he broke through the radius on his ankle bracelet and that got him sent to jail. I remember asking him why he did it, how he knew. Captain said he wasn’t good to his family. The guy beat his wife. Kids too. The cops didn’t know that when they put him on house arrest. But Cap found out. He let the guy beat the shit out of him for months to keep him away from his family, egging him on until he got angry enough to step outside and break his parole. I never questioned him again. Because it doesn’t matter if I agree with him, or I think his plan is stupid. It doesn’t matter. Because I trust him. I trust that he knows what the hell he’s doing, and that he’ll get the job done. He hasn’t let any of us down yet; I know he never will. So, no. We’re not going. Because no matter how mad he makes me, or how I feel about his stupid ass decisions, I’m gonna stand by that man to the end of the line. Even you should be able to respect that.”

Tony didn’t know what he was expecting, but it sure as hell wasn’t that. A surge of jealousy coursed through him. The bond that Barnes had with The Captain was almost one you hear in in story books. Tony would never have that; has never had that. He’d like to think he had that with Rhodey at least, but he’s been known for fabricating his reality for something he’d always wanted. “Sure, I can respect it. But that doesn’t mean I understand it,” Tony replied, heading back for the stairs.

He heard Barnes huff. “You’re one crazy son of a bitch, Stark.”

“Why, because I’m not like you?” Tony snapped, spinning back around. “I’m not a soldier, Barnes. I don’t exactly do the whole chain of command thing. Hell, the entire concept of the words ‘team player’ are completely foreign to me. But I’m not going to sit around here and twiddle my thumbs. Screw that,” he hissed, trying to stomp away again.

“You won’t make a very good Commando, then.”

Tony stopped, sighing. “Well, I’m sure your boss will retract his offer when I show up. This works out better if you let me go alone, actually. Cap will be pissed, HYDRA will be dead, and then I’ll be gone. You’ll have to find someone else to hate.”

“I don’t hate you, Stark,” Barnes answered, almost quietly. “I just hate what you stand for. Regardless of who you see us as now, The Captain, as well as the rest of us, have had a pretty shitty life. We’ve all had to sacrifice a lot to get where we are today. But, I know people like you. You’re all flash and show, a bright meteor shining across the sky. What people forget about meteors, is that no matter how brilliant they are, they leave nothing but a wake of destruction. And Cap? He’s latched onto you for the ride. You come in with your thousand watt smile and new ideas
and suddenly Cap is no better than a kid in a candy shop. See, I know people like you; I know you. Guys like you can bitch to Cap all day long about how ‘we’re on the same side’, but I know better. I mean, you just said it yourself. You’re not on the same side; you’re on your side. There’s only one guy you gotta look out for, and that's yourself. You throw an arm around The Captain, bring him some new toys, even toss the word ‘friend’ in every now and then. You wait until you have The Captain wrapped around your little finger. How long until you start to use him? Start asking for favors in return? Money, people, information. You’ll ask for it all, eventually. And he’ll give it to you. Because you’re friends, right? And then? And then you’ll ditch. Where do you think that’ll leave him?"

Tony looked away, not able to meet the piercing gaze. Tony had thought he and The Captain had come a long way. Sure, what Barnes was saying may have been the original plan, but that wasn’t his end game now, right? Tony bit his lip. Who was he kidding. The fact that he wasn’t convincing Barnes was enough to show Tony that he was no better than the original piece of sh*t he started out as. And with The Captain making empty promises of trust, maybe they were both just trying to fool themselves. Like they both didn't know what was going to happen in the end, once HYDRA was out of the picture. “It seems like you speak from experience,” Tony managed to grit out.

Barnes huffed. “Yeah; guy was just like you. He came in with his suits and fancy words, and well, the rest is history.”

Tony nodded. “I’m still gonna go.”

Barnes actually smiled. “I know.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “So, how we gonna do this?”

“Well, I thought I’d give you a head start. Handicap, you know?” Barnes shrugged.

“A true gentlemen,” Tony huffed, running back to the stairs. “When you catch up with me, try and avoid hitting the face, yeah? It’s my best feature.”

“No promises!” Tony heard Barnes yell at him, but he was already on the move. He raced back up to the office, slamming the suitcase shut and grabbed his jacket. Regardless of the head start, Tony knew that it would be almost impossible to outrun Barnes. It didn't matter. He needed to try; he needed to help. Seeing that he had everything, Tony spun around back towards the door, when-

**BOOM!**

The last thing he remembered was slamming his head onto the desk.

When Tony regained consciousness, he groaned at the heady throbbing in the back of his skull, eyes blinking through foggy vision. *Concussion.* The heat that came with the fog, however, had him changing his mind. It was smoke. Tony jolted upright, seeing thick clouds of it billow into the room. Without thinking twice, Tony stumbled to his feet, ripping off his jacket. Wrapping it around his hand, Tony fumbled for the handle, throwing the door open.

Another blast of heat almost knocked him off his feet again, bright flames already trying to lick their way into the new found space. Not waiting for an invitation, Tony stepped into what was once the meeting room, upholstered chairs already aflame and turning to ash around him. He tried to shield himself with his suitcase and jacket as the ceiling crumbled down to the ground, fire and smoke danced within the once solid building.

Tony raced down the iron steps, jacket pressed firmly against his mouth as he tried to breathe
through the smoke filled air. He could hear the support beams creak under the stress from the explosion, Adonis getting ready to finally give out from under the weight. Tony cursed; there wasn’t a lot of time before the whole building was coming down.

Searing flames licked along his sides as Tony traversed farther down the stairs. Large chunks of debris sat collapsed in front of the main door, but Tony wasn’t heading there anyway. Tony just prayed to every god that he knew of that the sewage passageway hadn’t caved in from the blast.

Tony started to run down the second set of stairs when he stopped, whipping back around to face the wall of flames. It was hard to hear anything over the roaring of the fire and his own heart thudding in his chest, but Tony knew there was something else.

A scream.

_Barnes._

_Shit,_ Tony cursed to himself. Barnes was still in there. Tony looked down the stairs, the underground passageway looking cool and extremely inviting, then back at the burning remains of The Commandos base.

_Keep going._

_Go back._

_You’ll die._

_Barnes will die._

_You’re not a hero._

_No, I’m a Commando._

“Fuck,” Tony hissed, dropping the suitcase and charging straight into the raging fire. “Barnes?! Barnes, where are you?!”

A loud groaning sounded above him, and Tony only had a few seconds before more ceiling crashed down to where he had just been standing. He gasped in pain as fresh embers splattered against exposed skin, his head still pounding, lungs constricting for a fresh breath.

But, Tony got up and pushed on. “BARNES! JAMES BARNES!” he shouted, breaking off into hacking coughs. Tony tried to follow the clearest path to where he Barnes was last, crying out in relief when he finally saw a familiar body through the haze.

Tony rushed over to him, faltering slightly when he saw part of his body covered by a huge pile of fallen ceiling. That wasn’t good. Definitely not good.

Tony crouched down next to him, pressing fingers into the man’s neck to be met with a faint pulse. _How the hell am I gonna get him out of here?_ Tony leaned over and shook his shoulder. “Barnes, you with me?”

Barnes blinked up at him sluggishly, his eyes barely focused enough to lock onto Tony’s. “Steve?”

Tony furrowed his brows. “Wha-Steve? No, you idiot, it’s Tony.”

Barnes didn’t seem to hear him. The other brunette’s eyes fluttered shut again with another moaned ‘Steve’, his face still crinkled in pain. Tony cursed, looking back to the huge pile of rubble that lay
on Barnes. The only way for him to get Barnes out of there was to remove the debris. Which, for Tony, was asking him to lift a train car. Tony’s eyes flashed around the room, looking for anything to use as a fulcrum. They were running out of time. It wouldn’t be long before both he and Barnes were crushed by the collapsing building.

He could see Barnes’s head loll to the side, Tony immediately grabbing at his shirt and shaking him. “Don’t you dare fall asleep, Barnes! Your lazy ass has to help me.”

When Barnes didn’t respond, Tony yanked on him harder. Surprisingly, the extra force pulled Barnes from the rubble and on top of Tony.

**What the hell?**

Tony groaned, pushing Barnes away. Maybe Barnes wasn’t stuck after all. After all, even with the extra adrenaline, there was no way that Tony could have been able to pull the injured man from-

**Oh god.**

Tony gagged violently, quickly losing whatever had sat in his stomach. Upon seeing the state of his clothes, Tony’s stomach threatened a second round.

**Blood.**

Turns out there was a reason that Barnes gave way so easily.

Because not all of him made it back out.

Tony stared at the bloody stump that was once Barnes’ arm.

Looking back toward the smoking pile of rubble, Tony could see the faint glint of sharp and bloodied metal shine in the flames. A fan rotor. The ceiling had been covered in huge industrial fans to keep the warehouse cool. Part of the ceiling caves in, and boom: the falling blades are one patent away from being called a human cleaver.

**What the fuck do I do?!!**

Tony had patched himself up numerous times but this was an entire fucking limb. Tony wasn’t a doctor but even he could tell that blood loss would start to be an issue soon, if it wasn’t already.

*Where’s the arm? Can they sew it back on? Or is that just for fingers-WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?! It won’t matter if the doctors can fix Barnes if you’re both dead!*  

Tony’s thoughts zoomed through him, his brain working overdrive as shock set in. Screw the arm; Tony needed to get the out of there now. Leaning down and grabbing at Barnes’s only arm, Tony pulled him up into a fireman’s carry. “Come on now, Barnes. You need to stay alive for me to blackmail you about this later.”

Tony stumbled back the way had come, much more slowly as the added weight of Barnes and oxygen deprivation caught up with him. When Tony finally managed to find the stairs again, he barely had time to reach for the suitcase when a second blast rippled through the building. Tony immediately brought Barnes under him, using his body as a shield as a few more chunks of scrap came falling down. Groaning, Tony looked up only to gasp. Another huge groan echoed through the building, Tony watching in horror as the rest of the ceiling started to collapse, the stress too much from the second blast.
Tony reached forward, grabbing on to Barnes and the suitcase, throwing the three of them down the steps. Collapsing onto the hard ground, Tony moaned in agony, back arching as his vision whitened out. At the top of the stairs, the ceiling had completely caved in. Large slabs of the destroyed building now blocked the entrance. While it solved the problem of burning to death, it posed the new threat of trapping them down there if the other end had already collapsed as well.

Tony crawled over to Barnes, happy enough to find a faint pulse. He took a few deep breaths before standing back up. *We’re not home free yet.* He reached back down for Barnes, swallowing past the nausea that tried to make another appearance, and began to trek in the direction of their only salvation.

Progress, to say the least, was almost nonexistent. Tony could only manage a few steps with Barnes before he’d have to lean against the wall, pain radiating all over his body. Tony had thought the sewage path was long before, but he knew he’d been across an entire country faster than the time it took from them to traverse the passage.

Seeing the literal light at the end of the tunnel would have had Tony laughing if it not for his desert dry throat. He dragged Barnes out of the sewer, laying his as gently as he could against it. Looking back, he could see the base, what was left of it really, fully engulfed now by the orange of the fire and the red and blue of sirens, both flashing brightly in the night sky.

None of that mattered now. Tony needed to find help.

Leaving Barnes at the sewer, Tony staggered along the river walk, thanking every deity when he ran into a jogger.

“Holy shit, man. You alright?”

“Phone,” Tony managed to grate out.

The man jumped, desperately searching for the device. “Of course. I’ll call the police, and-”

“No” Tony cut him off. “No police.”

The man gaped at Tony. “Dude, let me help you, I just-”

“Give me the phone.”

“-need to call the police. They can get you-“

“Give me the phone.”

“-to safety. I just want to make sure-”

The man was cut off by Tony swinging the suitcase around, clipping the man on the side of the head. He crumpled to the ground, Tony easily snatching the phone from him. Through his blurry vision, Tony managed to type in a number he was loathe to call again.

"Sanctum Sanctorum, how may I direct your call?" a cheery voice answered.

“This is Tony Stark. I’m calling in a Hail Mary. Get me Strange.”

"I’m sorry, we’re getting ready to close to the public, as museum visiting hours end at 8 P.M. I know of some local options that stay open 24/7."

Tony clenched his jaw. "No, I can't go to a local hospital, hence why I'm calling you."
"Oh, of course we do acquisitions. Would you like to tell me a little about the piece and I can get a meeting scheduled for you with one of our many experts?"

"Amputation," Tony replied hoarsely. "Emergency surgery required, as far off the books as you can get me. I need Strange; I need a miracle."

"Sounds very intriguing," the voice quipped, not missing a beat. "I'll make sure this gets put at the top of our list. When do you have some free time to make it to the museum for a meeting?"

"Negative, I have no transport. I need a pick up," Tony answered, eyes darting around his surroundings to make sure no one came upon him and the downed jogger.

A brief silence. "Oh, I see. Because of the size of the piece, a house call will be no problem. Do you have an address I can write down?"

"We’re on the right side of the East River. By the docks. Hurry. Please."

"Don't worry, I'll get this set up for you. I'm sure you'll be hearing from our expert very soon."

"I better," Tony snapped.

A laugh rang out from the other side of the phone. "Of course, Sir. You have a wonderful evening as well. Thank you for calling the Sanctum Sanctorum!"

"And thank you, for making everything as difficult as possible," Tony snarked back, hanging up the phone before he could get another response.

Tony sighed, tossing the phone back to its unconscious owner. With any luck, the man wouldn’t remember their interaction at all. Even if he did, Tony knew that he and Barnes would be long gone by the time that he came too. For as much of a pain it was to deal with Strange's people, Tony knew that he had heard nothing but the best about them. After all, they ran a monopoly in a market that they created themselves. New York was teeming with criminals, and criminals were teeming with chaos. And even criminals need doctors.

He raced back over to Barnes, leaning down immediately to wake the other man up.

“Barnes, wake up,” Tony barked, slapping at his face. “Come on, James, work with me here.”

Barnes gave a pitiful moan. “-eve?”

“Goddammit, Barnes, Steve isn’t here!”

“Where-” Bucky tailed off, eyes slowly tracking around them. It was a miracle that he was even awake right now, alive even. The man probably didn’t even register that it was Tony was talking with him. “Need Steve,” the man whispered, eyes drifting shut again.

“No, no, no,” Tony started, shaking at Barnes’s shoulders. “What you need is to stay awake, okay? Help is coming I promise, just stay with me a little longer.”

Tony didn’t hear the man respond, but saw blue eyes crack open again. He could do this. Tony could keep them safe. He scanned the road, praying that help would be there soon. He wasn’t sure how much longer Barnes had before he went delirious again or just plain bled out. Feeling his heartbeat slow down, Tony’s brain caught up with him, finally begging the million dollar question.

Who the fuck is Steve?
Bright flames seared into his memory, his sharp eyes taking in every blaze. But he didn’t look away; Clint refused to look away.

Steve was still pushed into his shoulder, simultaneously trying to pull away and burrow closer into the familiar body. Clint could barely hear, as both hearing aids had flown out from the brunt of the explosion. Even without them, however, he still managed to hear Steve’s screams.


*This can’t be happening.*

Clint felt Steve try and head for the flames again, but Clint pulled him back down. It was sickening how easily he managed to overpower the man, Steve too lost in his grief and agony to put up a huge fight. He knew that he shouldn’t just be sitting there - his mind was screaming at him, *"Get up! Do something!"*, but it was if his body had refused the order. A block of ice in a sea of flames, unaccepting of the fate that lay before him. The flames were taunting him, almost laughing as they danced through the open crevices that he used to call his home.

It was when the fire started to show colors of red and blue that Clint managed to panic even more. Head snapping to the left, he could see trucks with siren lights approach the group. Clint jumped up, trying to pull Steve with him. “Steve! Come on, Steve, we gotta go! Get up, get up!” It was instinctive, his body finally accepting the command to attempt something as familiar as running from the cops. Anything to do, *anything*, so he wouldn’t have to look back as his world literally burned around him.

But Steve was wailing again. “No, no, please! I gotta get in there, I gotta- *Bucky!*”

“Steve, you can’t go in there! Come on, the cops are coming!” Clint yanked and yanked at Steve, but the man kept managing to pull back away. "*Focus on the job,*" Steve’s voice filtered in his head. *"With the job we have, we’re going to have to make hard decisions, and it’s not always going to fall in our favor. It’s the price we pay, a guess. The easiest way to survive is to compartmentalize and focus on the job."* He never thought he’d ever be in a position that he’d have to use Steve’s own words against him - then again, he’d never seen Steve like this, and then again, he’d never seen *anything* like this. He knew he couldn't head into the flames - as much as he wanted to yell fuck it and do it anyway. What good would that do? It would only just end up killing him. Although, given the current predicament, he might as well be dead anyway. It had taken him so long to find his family; there was no life worth living without them.

No, all he could focus on the job. And right now, his job was protecting the family that he could. He was too late for Bucky - *God, Bucky, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry* - but he could still save Steve. His boss was out of his mind, blinded by grief and pain. If Steve sat around here, it wouldn’t be hard for the cops to piece things together.

He felt Steve trying to pull out of his grip again. “Thor!” Clint shouted, finally having enough.

Thankfully, the hulking blonde appeared, looking just as pale as they did against the fire. “Take him,” Clint snapped, Thor quickly hastening to respond. “I need you to get him out of here,” Clint continued, watching as Steve flailed uselessly in Thor’s arms.

“Where?”
“I don’t know, I don’t care!” Clint responded, getting hysterical. “He can’t be here. The cops are coming and they’re going to ask questions. He’s gonna do something stupid like get himself killed, or worse, get himself arrested.”

Thor nodded gravely, eyes shooting back to the incoming sirens. “I shall take him,” he said, already pulling away the squirming Captain. “I will call as soon as we’re safe.”

And with that, Thor took off, running down the alleyway with a still shouting Steve in his arms.

This can’t be happening.

Clint stumbled over the same way, just making it out of sight of the incoming police cars for him to collapse to the ground, entire body trembling.

Losing Stark was already a hit that The Commandos couldn’t afford. Clint was actually starting to like the guy. But Bucky?

Jesus, Bucky.

Clint put his head in his hands as he lost control of his breathing again.

This can’t be happening.

“Barton!”

The sharp bang jolted Clint out of his restless slumber, the man trying to curl himself farther into a ball.

“I know you’re up there!” Another bang.

Clint tried to shift around, but choosing the vent system as a hiding place left little room to get comfortable. Clint took his hearing aids out, trying to ignore the noise. Which, of course, was a horrible mistake as he wasn’t prepared for a strong hand to grab at his ankle through where the grate used to lay, and pull him out of the vent, sending him crashing to the ground.

He felt the same hands jam the hearing aids back in his ears, but Clint kept on staring at the ground.

“- told you about taking these out. One day, you’re going to miss a call because you were too busy sulking.”

Clint finally peered up to be met with the furious face of Bucky Barnes yielding none other than a kitchen broom. If Clint wasn’t so upset, he would have found the sight hilarious.

“Hey, Bucky,” he said weakly.

“Don’t you, ‘Hey, Bucky’ me! Do you know what time it is?” Not waiting for an answer, Bucky tugged him up by his shirt collar and through the base to Steve’s office.

“Buck, what the hell?!” he tried to protest, hoping Steve would jump in to his defense. He did not, the asshole.
Bucky ignored him, pushing Clint into a chair, ripping off his shirt. Clint wide eyed, looked over to Steve with another pleading look, who was quietly doing paperwork when Bucky stormed in. Steve only snorted at the two of them before looking at Bucky. Asshole. "Vents?"

Bucky hummed, digging through the drawers before pulling out a clean shirt. "Put this on," he snapped, throwing it at Clint. Clint obliged, still shooting the two confused looks.

"God, you reek, Clint. When was the last time you showered?"

Clint bit his lip and focused only on putting the shirt on. Honestly, he couldn’t remember. He couldn't seem to remember anything besides the fight.

"This is just plain sad," Bucky said, shaking his head.

"Wanna tell me what this is about?" Clint finally asked.

"What day is it?" asked Bucky.

"Friday."

"Okay, what time is it?"

"Seven," Clint answered, voice getting smaller. He knew were this was going.

"Glad we’re on the same page. Why are you here?"

Clint pouted. "He doesn’t wanna see me, Buck!"

Bucky shot him an unimpressed look. "Just like you don’t wanna see him, right?" When Clint didn’t respond, he continued. "Come on, Clint. This isn’t healthy! We haven’t seen you for days! You haven’t showered, you haven’t eaten. God only knows when the last time you've slept. Steve is losing his goddamned mind over here!"

Clint refused to look over at Steve, but could feel the weight of the heavy stare he was getting. Nothing pissed Steve off more than when his cubs weren’t taking care of themselves. "I’m fine, guys."

"No, you’re not," snapped Bucky. "Don’t even," he added as Clint tried to chime back in. "I don’t want to hear whatever reason you think you and Coulson shouldn’t be together, because you’re just going to be wasting your time. He’s an idiot, you’re an idiot. You’re both idiots! You both said stuff you didn’t mean, and now you’re both sulking in the corner and licking your wounds. Don’t be a bitch, Barton. Fix it."

"He’s so much better without me! He shouldn’t be wasting his time, honestly. He can find someone he really wants, you know? Get married, have a kid or two, get a white picket fence. The whole shebang!" Clint tried to argue. Being met with glares from both Steve and Bucky was not something he expected.

"Alright, I’m calling an audible." Bucky went over, pulling Clint up from the chair. "Scale from one to ten?" he shot back at Steve.

Steve hummed. "Nothing higher than a two and a half, but you can probably play the pity card."

"Good call," Bucky nodded, pushing Clint towards the door. "Let’s go, loverboy."

Clint wasn’t sure how they made it to Phil’s apartment; the man was too locked inside his own
head about what he could possibly say to him to fix what he’d broken. All that got him was a fat load of nothing and Bucky throwing rocks at Phil’s window. What was worse, was that when Phil heard them, he walked all the way down to meet them in the street instead of staying inside. Seeing Phil after a few weeks was enough for Clint to want nothing more than to hide behind Bucky. He was so screwed.

“Barnes.” Phil stood with his arms crossed; trying to give the brunette a blank look with a signature raised eyebrow, but Clint could see a small smile threatening to form on his lips.

Bucky, completely unaffected by the awkwardness, shot Phil a blinding smile. “Officer,” he said with a salute.

“Is there a reason you’re standing outside my building throwing rocks at my window?”

“Well, I was gonna bring my boom box, but party pooper over here wouldn’t let me.”

“That’s not a very good answer, Barnes.”

“Geez, stop it with the cop looks, would you? I’m gonna start confessing something soon. We’re here because it’s date night. Friday night is always date night, where the two of you schmucks forget where you work, sit down and have a home cooked meal, and watch some cheesy rom-com that I know Barton here cries during even though he won’t admit it. I know you two fall asleep on the couch, until Barton wakes up early Saturday morning to run to your favorite bakery to get you doughnuts and coffee. Because even though you don’t wanna be a cliché cop, you’re still a slut for jelly filled pastries. I know you two eat your breakfast while you read a fucking newspaper, and grumpy over here tries to clean his guns like it’s a completely normal thing to do on a Saturday morning. And I know you yell at him every week, saying ‘It’s uncivilized, Clint. The kitchen table is only for eating.’ And then you two bicker, like you always do. Which ends up with you guys doing things I really do not have the stomach to get into. And I know you two spend the rest of the weekend doing gross couple things that really only belong inside a Hallmark card,” Bucky finished, running out of breath.

“You wanna know why I know? Because this asshole,” he continued, jabbing at Clint, “comes strolling in every Monday morning walking on Cloud Nine, with that stupid dopey grin on his face. And me, poor, poor me, has to listen to him go on and on about his amazing weekend. Every goddamn week. You get used to a certain lifestyle, after a while. So, you can imagine my surprise that for the past two Monday mornings, I have had to brood over my morning coffee in silence, and not with some annoying bird in my ear,” Bucky finally finished, almost red in the face.

Clint watched as Phil clearly mulled over Bucky’s monologue. “And you’re here because?”

“The status quo is messed up, Sir. I don’t like it, you probably don’t like it. Hell, Clint over here is miserable. I mean, look at him. He looks like one of those puppies out of those animal shelter videos. You know, with the sad song? It makes me sick. So now, here I am, trying to get your heads out of your asses instead of watching the game like I should.”

Phil’s eyes darted between the two men, before locking back with Bucky. “Will you be joining us tonight too?”

Bucky barked out a laugh. “I knew you had the hots for me, Sir,” he jested, ignoring Phil’s unimpressed gaze. “But, no, I’ll have to pass. Just a drop off tonight,” he continued, gesturing to Clint. “Found this suspicious looking package hiding in the vents that needs to be checked over by an upstanding officer such as yourself. Especially the head region,” Bucky snapped, looking back at Clint, delivering a sharp slap to the back of his head. “Dumbass.”
This time, Phil actually did smile, finally looking at Clint, twinkling eyes tracking up and down his disheveled appearance with a soft hum. “I guess I can look him over for you.”

“That’s the spirit,” Bucky responded, clapping a hand on Phil’s shoulder, before leaning in close. “Now, when I say examine, I mean, like, thoroughly. Like, you really might have to get down deep in there, to- ”

“Bucky!” Clint hissed.

Bucky laughed again, patting Clint’s cheek before finally moving away. “Alright, alright. I’m out of here. You two lovebirds have fun.”

“Move your car!” Phil shouted at Bucky. “You can’t park here!”

“Oh, that?” Bucky answered, turning back to them with a smile. “That’s not mine.” With that, Bucky winked at the two, sauntering down the empty street. “Make sure you have him back by Monday morning, Coulson. You know how The Captain feels about tardiness!”

Phil looked back to a slightly embarrassed Clint. “Did he just leave a stolen car in front of my apartment?”

Clint blushed. “Oops?” The blush deepened at Phil’s snort. “Listen, Phil, I- ”

Phil cut him off with a chaste kiss. “Come on. I made tacos.”

Clint smiled gratefully, easily slipping his hand into Phil’s as they entered the building. He really was the luckiest man alive.

Clint finally let a sob loose, Bucky’s laughter still ringing in his ears.

This was all his fault.

He should have made Steve bring Bucky with. He shouldn’t have let him leave Bucky there. He should’ve convinced Steve. Clint should’ve stayed. He should have known, he should have known, he should have-

A large chunk of roof came tumbling to the ground just feet from where Clint was sitting. Clint jumped, trying to retract further into the alley where he sat, looking up at his former home.

The flames were definitely smaller, what little hearing he had able to pick up on the shouts of the firemen fighting what was left of the inferno.

How long have I been sitting here?

He should find Steve, he should find Nat, find anybody. But Clint couldn’t pull himself away. He sat, staring at the flames, wishing that it was him that was in there instead of his friend.

Finally, under shaky legs, Clint managed to stand. He kept to whatever shadows he could find, trying to get as close to the police as possible. Clint swore, wishing he still had his aids in, knowing that’ll he’ll have to resort to lip reading to get any potential information from the boys in blue.
Clint peeked around the corner, glancing through his options. The firemen were all still attached to the large hoses, spraying every inch of the building that they could. He could see the cops already trying to set up a perimeter, most likely getting ready to search for clues. Clint swept once more over the faces until-

Oh shit.

Phil.

There, standing in the middle of the chaos, was Phil, looking the worst Clint had ever seen him. The man was staring at the blaze, horror etched on his face as he ignored the men around him.

Clint cursed again, desperately searching for his phone. Phil must think that he was in there. Clint got more frantic, searching every pocket he could.

Where the hell was it?

Clint shot another look at Phil and froze. Clint didn’t have his phone because he dropped it in the explosion. Clint didn’t have it because Phil was currently holding it in his hands.

Fuck.

Without thinking twice, Clint brought his hands up to his mouth and blew, a broken bird call sounding through the alleyway.

Phil’s head snapped up immediately, eyes darting around the wreckage until they landed on the alleyway where Clint was. Phil’s eyes swept around once more before taking off towards Clint.

When the two finally locked eyes, Clint could barely get a word out before he was crushed into Phil’s chest. Clint could only hold on, shaking fingers grabbing at the front of his uniform as he pushed his face into Phil’s neck. His ears didn’t catch anything from Phil’s mouth, but the feeling of hot tears that stung across his neck had Clint grasping Phil tighter.

It felt like forever before Phil pulled away, Clint immediately locking his eyes with the other’s lips. “Jesus, Clint, what the hell happened?! Look at you; I’ll get you a doctor, you need help, you need- ”

Clint shook his head, leaning his head back down to Phil’s. Phil was stammering. Phil was crying. Phil doesn’t do that. This was wrong. This was wrong. This was wrong.

Strong hands brought his head back up. “Clint, sweetheart. Are you okay?”

Clint felt his lower lip tremble, watching as Phil paled even further. “Clint,” he whispered. “Who was in there?”

Clint looked away, stinging tears starting to drip down his face again. “Stark,” he bit out before adding a wobbly, “Bucky.”

“Jesus, Clint.”

And then Phil’s arms were around him again, arms that Clint welcomed. He burrowed further into Phil’s warmth, losing himself in the security of the familiar embrace.

But then Phil was pulling away. Clint tried to protest, but Phil ignored him, looking back up the street.
“Clint. Clint,” Phil snapped at the disheveled man. “Where’s Steve?”

Clint shrugged, movements sluggish. “Thor took him.”

“Everyone else?”

“Not here.”

“Good. Clint, you need to leave.”

Clint looked back up at Phil’s eyes. “Wha- no. No, I need to be here. What if you find- ”

“Clint. We’re going to do a sweep. If they see you, I’m going to have to bring you in. You need to leave.”

Clint started shaking again. “But, but Phil, I- ”

“I know, I know,” Phil said, his hands moving to wipe away the tears from Clint’s face. “I just need you to stay strong a little while longer, okay? Because this,” he said, pointing back to the flames, “was done by bad people. Bad people that, once they figure out you’re not all dead, will continue to hunt you down. Clint, you need to run. They’re still out there and I can’t protect you right now, hell, you can’t even protect yourself. You need to run.”

Clint found himself nodding, Phil’s words shaking his core. He was right. HYDRA was still out there. He needed to get to safety. He needed to get his family to safety.

*Focus on the job.*

Phil pressed forward one final time to give Clint a lasting kiss. “I love you,” he whispered, calming voice sending a shiver down Clint’s spine. “Now go, get out of here,” he said, pushing Clint’s phone back into his hands. “And when I call you later, you sure as hell better answer. Got it?”

Clint nodded again. “Yes, Sir.”

“Good. Now, go. Run.”

And Clint ran.
“Whatever happens tomorrow you must promise me one thing. That you will stay who you are. Not a perfect soldier, but a good man.”

When Steve was little, he would wake up every morning, rising with the sun, and crawl out his bedroom window. The fire escape was rusty and old, but that didn’t stop the small blonde from scurrying up to the roof of the apartment complex each day.

He’d curl up in the little nook he’d made for himself, leaning over the tall structure and watched. Looking down, Steve could see everything. Men in suits sprinting down the street to try and catch the bus. Mothers pulling their small children along the street to get to school. A man with a guitar singing broken notes to get enough money for a hot meal. A couple laughing as they entered the coffee shop down the road. A tired policeman waltzing along the curb as he scoped the road for parking violations.

Steve liked to try and guess who they were, making up stories about their lives. Like the man with the guitar, saving his earned quarters for a personal recording, one that would lead him to a record deal. Or the couple, getting coffee before leaving on their mission as international spies. Maybe the police officer was so tired because he’d stayed up late practicing his lines for a play he was in.

Steve liked the idea of not knowing, the ambiguity. The fact that he would never know if he was ever right about these people. Steve liked to think that he was always was. That they weren’t just average. That they were heroes, each in their own way.

In his little rooftop canopy, Steve hid a shoebox under a worn tarp. In the shoebox were his most prized possessions: a handful of toy soldiers. Not so much as soldiers, per say, as regular people. A few men in suits. A police officer, a fireman. There was a pilot, a few vacationers, some with clothes that were mismatched. There were even some that were clad in bright colors, like the superheroes from the comic books.

They all came from a mold that his dad inherited from his own father, dating back to World War II. The mold had survived through the depression, Steve's grandfather scraping by to provide and entertain his children. While his dad didn't seem to follow the same sentiment, Steve's mother was adamant that they hold onto the small slice of history, taking the tradition into her own hands. Even after his dad died, Steve’s mom would continue to save their milk cartons and melt them down, carefully filling the molds for Steve. She couldn’t afford to get many toys for him, not with the singular pay check - even though their finances increased after Dad died. There wasn't any more need to buy alcohol for him to drown in. Steve paid it no mind. He always thought he got the better end of the bargain by being able to create his own toys. His mom would gather some paint, and they’d spend an afternoon together. She’d sit and paint them with him, listening carefully to his instruction, always adding on more intricate parts with steady hands. Nurse hands.

Steve liked them because even though they came from the same mold, each of them were different. Unique. Special.

It all depended on what Steve wanted them to be, whatever he was in the mood for. His imagination ran wild, generating stories and adventures for each of the molds, always ready in that old shoe box for when Steve needed an escape.

But no matter how different they were, they were all the same. They were good. They were heroes. They were what Steve wanted to be when he grew up.
His Ma used to tell him that life was like a painting. A fresh canvas that slowly worked its way into a beautiful image. That the colors were remnants of memories; warm and cold, happy and sad. Sometimes, the experiences mixed together to create a brand new color. She said that as the painter, Steve could choose whatever colors he wanted, chose whatever life he wanted. That every painting was just a little bit different than the rest, so Steve was the only one who could choose what would make him happy. And that even though it might not look like much at some points, one day he’d realize that he had been creating a masterpiece the entire time.

Maybe that’s why he enjoyed sketching so much. The control it gave him, knowing that only he got to dictate what kind of stroke he laid down next. That no matter how messy it got in the middle, there would always be a clear picture at the end. Or that if things weren’t going his way, Steve could just chuck it and start from a completely clean slate.

But then Ma died.

And Steve was forced to realize she was wrong. There was no eraser, there were no do overs. There was no clear picture or happy ending.

Life wasn’t like that.

Life was messy, stringing the painter along to think they can easily blend their colors together flawlessly, only to blindside them with splashing turmoil and pain across their hard work. Life was cruel, unforgiving, and left stains so dark that they would always show on canvas, for the whole world to see.

Steve learned that there was only one way to get that clean canvas again. To paint over his old life and pretend that no one would be able to chip back through. To make a shield.

At least he still had Bucky. The stubborn, bold shades that refused to be covered up completely, no matter how many new layers you tacked on. Not that Steve would ever want to, anyway.

He picked Steve up, and well, saved him really. Said that if Steve was going to start over, he would as well. Picked up odd jobs when they weren’t at school. Anything to keep them afloat until their new life changed forever.

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Steve didn’t notice someone had been watching him until the man came and sat across from him at the table he was sitting at.

Steve was at a homeless shelter again, waiting for the volunteers to serve dinner. Usually Steve waited for everyone to else to go first, letting the older get access to the hot food, while Steve stayed more towards the portable items. It wasn’t as if these people needed the food any less than he did. If anything, they needed it more, and who was he to take more than what they shared with him. And they did share, happily. The ones with the least in the world, still willing to give even that up to share.

The man just sat and stared at Steve. He was dressed in a suit, somewhat dusty and old fashioned, but still a sore thumb for a shelter such as this. Wiry glasses adorned his face, with wispy, graying hair, laying atop. Steve was just able to make out the beginning of laugh lines along the pale skin. “Can I help you?” Steve asked warily.
“I don’t know, can you?” Steve picked up on the faint German accent immediately. It wasn’t strange to hear around these parts. New York was a shared home to millions from all over the globe. It was as if the city was a world of its own, immigrants being bits and pieces of their own culture to help build one of the largest cities in the United States. “You see,” the man continued, smiling wryly, “I’ve been calling your name for the last five minutes, and you have yet to respond.”

Steve’s heart rate skyrocketed, the blonde only praying that the man didn’t see him reacting. “I’m sorry,” Steve stammered out. “Guess I just didn’t hear you.”

The man’s eyes narrowed. “I see,” he answered, voice flat. As if he already saw straight through Steve. “Roger Stevens. That is you, isn’t it?”

Steve bit his lower lip and nodded slowly. Was this man the head of the shelter? Or worse, a government official? Steve didn’t exactly know if what he was doing was illegal, but it was definitely frowned upon. The last thing Steve needed was to start something and get kicked out for good. That had already happened too many times to count - for being involved with fights that were decidedly not his fault - and Bucky would kill him if he added another name to the ever growing list. They were running out of places to shop.

“Are you sure?” the man persisted. “Because,” he continued, pulling out some papers from his jacket pocket, “I could have sworn you were Joseph Grant. Or maybe Steve Rogers. What about Brett Hendrick? This one I believe just says Uncle Sam in atrocious handwriting.”

Steve could feel his heart pounding in his chest, the signs of an asthma attack imminent. “I-I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

What the hell was he going to do? He didn’t have a contingency plan for this - the closest thing he ever got to a back up plan was to immediately start throwing punches. And he couldn’t exactly start a tussle with this guy. As per earlier reasoning.

The man gave a small sigh. “If you’re going to lie to me, you might as well make it convincing.”

Steve looked away, unable to come up with a response. This was going downhill, fast. Would he end up in prison? They wouldn’t arrest a minor, would they? Bucky was going to kill him.

“What I’ve been doing,” Steve started. “It’s illegal, isn’t it?”

The man just shrugged. “I don’t know, possibly. I’m not a police officer.”

Steve frowned. "Well then what are you doing here?" Citizens arrest wasn’t a real thing, was it?

“I was going to ask you the same thing,” the man smiled. “I always thought it weird that shelters keep records like this. Who the regulars are, who goes in and out every day. I guess they just want to keep tabs on their people, try to help them as much as they can. You can imagine my surprise when I found that you have records in five different shelters, each with a different name. Stealing food, are we?”

“Not for me!” Steve immediately confessed. He might go down for this, but he sure as hell wasn’t going down letting everyone think he was hoarding food for himself.

The man raised a single eyebrow. “Oh?”

Steve sighed. There was no hiding it now. “It’s our landlord. He cheats the residents out a lot. Charges extra for ridiculous things like scuffs on the floor or dust in the air. He’s a tyrant, but what can we do? Where I live, we don’t really have a lot. I mean, the families there can hardly
afford rent. But they have kids! They can’t go out and live on the street! For us, food is just a luxury. I stop by the shelters every so often after work and try and grab some sandwiches. Nothing too big, I mean, these people need it too. Just enough for some of kids. I asked some of the people here if it’s alright, and they’re more than happy to share! Listen, I’m sorry if I’m breaking the law, I just needed to help! I never take too much, I swear! Please, don’t tell the owner- ”

The man held up his hands in surrender. “Woah, easy, easy. I’m not going to turn you in.”

Steve eyes him suspiciously. “You’re not?”

“No one ever turns a hero in."

Steve’s head snapped up, meeting the man’s kind eyes. A hero?

The man put the paper back in his jacket pocket, before brushing nonexistent dust of his sleeve. “Tell me more about this landlord.”

Steve eyed the man, but dutifully agreed. He said he wasn’t a cop, so what harm could it be? “He’s a real piece of work, basically a slumlord. I’ve tried to go to the police a few times, but- ” Steve broke off with a hollow laugh. “You can imagine how that went.”

The man hummed in agreement. “Yes, the police are not always the best option. You see, this city is filled with the corrupt, the evil. Criminals, landlords, business men, politicians. The police swore an oath to protect and serve. Not many people realize that they protect and serve the criminals too, just depends on who gives the bigger pay check. It’s left to people like us to help. Be the hero for the little guy, I suppose. Bring justice.”

Steve gaped at the man. “I don’t understand. Who are you?”

“Abraham Erskine. I’m a friend.”

“Sorry,” said Steve, stepping away from the table. Ending up in prison was one thing, getting caught in a pyramid scheme is something else entirely. "I don’t have a friend by that name.”

The man reached out and grabbed Steve’s arm, the grip surprising loose, as if the man was already taking Steve’s stature into consideration. “I’d like to be. It’s not often a man such as myself meets someone special. Someone like yourself.” When Steve didn’t respond, the man continued. “You come out here every day to risk yourself for others. Help in any way that you can. What if I told you that you could do so much more for them. Be so much more for them.”

“Like a job?”

The man chuckled lightly. “Something like that, yes.”

“Why are you telling me this? What’s going on?” Steve snapped.

“Do you want to kill them?”

Steve startled. “What?”

Erskine shrugged. “The corrupt people in this city. If you could. Would you kill them?”

Steve furrowed his brow, thinking it over. “Is this a test?”

“Yes.”
Steve looked back up from his hands, locking eyes with Erskine. “I don’t want to kill anyone. I don’t like bullies. I don’t care where they’re from.”

Erskine just smiled.

Steve still couldn’t fathom how much that conversation changed his life.

The SSR was not something he could ever envision himself being a part of growing up. But it was only a matter of weeks before Steve realized that he couldn’t envision his life with it. Without them.

But then HYDRA took them all away.

So, Steve took out his paint and laid a fresh coat over his canvas. Start again.

It was Bucky, yet again, that stopped Steve from drowning. Pulled him back out, gave him new hope.

“Put a new team together,” he had said. “Be stronger, this time. Be better.”

And Steve did. He threw together the shadiest looking team that could have possibly ever existed. A team that was so different, but one in the same. A family. A bunch of toy soldiers in an old shoe box, all from the same mold.

Steve stared down at his hands. Still shaking. The tears had stopped, along with the screams. Steve was sure it was just because his body couldn’t produce any more. That it shut down, like the rest of him.

He didn’t know where he was, he didn’t care.

Thor was there. Maybe. Were there others? No. They were gone.

Tony was gone.

Bucky was gone.


Steve shuddered, thinking back to those toy soldiers. Happier times. Steve had always thought, ‘third time’s the charm’. He’d started his life over for a third time, taken a chance with The Commandos. He thought’s he’d finally found it. The colors that made him happy; the ones that made him a masterpiece.

But he was wrong. The colors were wrong, the colors were gone. Gone like the toy soldiers, that he kept safely in his desk. Nothing more than a blackened, melted pile of plastic now.

Steve felt a comforting hand on his shoulder. Thor. Steve didn’t dare meet his eyes. “Where?” Steve whispered, shuddering at the sound of his voice.

Even with his short question, Thor seemed to understand. “I am not positive of everyone; we’ve all seemed to scatter after… what happened. Clint hasn’t come back yet. Natasha… she’s gone off
grid. Dugan and a few more haven’t come back from where they took off in the woods. Wilson is still here, standing with whoever else is left to guard the survivors.”

“Survivors?”

“Hammer,” Thor answered with disdain. “And a few other men we found on the grounds, cowering in fear like their boss.”

Steve’s jaw clenched, sticking a hand out which Thor immediately took to help him up. He glared at the back door, no doubt to lead Steve to wherever Hammer and his men were being kept.

“What are you going to do?” he heard Thor ask.

There was a time for patience. A time for waiting, for planning the next move. To gather information, build a case. There was a time for justice. There was a time for a good man.

But there was no time now. There was no time for that good man, that Steve Rogers.

That Steve Rogers died in the fire alongside his friends.

“I’m going to kill them. I’m going to kill them all.”

A light flickered somewhere above him but Tony paid it no mind. He sat there, like he had for the past few hours, picking idly at the blood caked on his hands.

He wasn’t exactly sure where he was; he wasn't exactly sure he cared. What felt like years since he had spoken to an aid on the phone, a vehicle rolled up to where Tony was huddled over Barnes, doing everything in his power to keep him breathing. Hands reached out and loaded them both in. The same hands that pushed him out of the way to start working on Barnes. He didn't fight them, opting to collapse into a seat and drift, pretending he still couldn't hear the other injured passenger's screams in his ears. And then he'd somehow ended up here - wherever here was. He figured it was better not to ask - Tony had asked for off the book, and he got off the book. All Tony knew was that he would call, and then somehow, some way, Strange would create a sterile location for him to do his work. Tony had seen him save a life in the back of a school bus once.

Barnes had lost consciousness again, but Tony wasn’t surprised. For as stubborn as that man was, no one could outlast blood loss forever. Tony had been impressed that the man had managed to make it that long. Strange's men worked on him throughout the whole ride. Once at their final destination, Barnes was offloaded and rushed inside before he could even blink. Which leads to now, with Barnes in the middle of surgery, and Tony, still frozen in shock in the hallway, staring at his hands. This place was cold and dark, but quiet. It was almost nice - that was until Tony shut his eyes and was met with the screams and the roar of flames.

“You really should let us tend to you.”

Tony cracked his eyes open, locking in on one of the many assistants that Strange used. She was strangely clean; her scrubs looking as pristine as they would when they came from the package. Not looking like they had just been locked in a room with a one armed man who was bleeding buckets.
Tony’s stomach churned again. “How’s it going in there?”

The nurse ignored him. “You’re still bleeding. Let us help.”

Tony shook his head, gesturing back to the other room. “Fix him first. I’ll be fine.” God only knows what will happen to me if that man dies.

She sighed, and started to walk away. To Tony’s surprise, she came back, gently placing a first aid kit at his feet. “Just in case you change your mind.”

Tony shot an arm out and grabbed at her scrubs. “Is he… Will he be- ” Tony broke himself off with a sigh. He couldn’t even get through the words. Tony had prided himself on how he’d created an armor over the years. A way to protect himself for others. Their feelings, reactions, problems. But Tony knew, deep down, that there would be no way to save himself from the burden of Barnes’ death. That after everything they’d just been through, Tony would still have to go back to The Captain and his men, and tell them that he hadn’t been quick enough. That he hadn’t been good enough. He could almost see The Captain’s face now. And Tony knew that it would kill him.

The assistant pulled away. “Your friend is strong. He will pull through.”

“He’s not my friend,” Tony said on impulse. “Do you have a phone?” he asked, but the nurse had already walked back into the other room.

Tony sighed, letting his head fall back against the cold wall with a small thud. She had just come from surgery; she wouldn’t have had a phone anyway.

Tony leaned forward, reaching for the suitcase that had survived the whole journey, now blackened and dented from recent events. With shaking fingers, Tony carefully unlocked the clasps, sighing in relief when he saw the computer inside with a light blinking, indicating it still operational. Even if Tony didn’t have a phone, he might be still able to reach out to The Captain through the computer.

He reached down, pulling the laptop out, when he when a crinkle of paper. What the?

Tony froze. He put the computer to the side, reaching back down into the briefcase.

And pulled out the sketches from The Captain’s office.

They had survived.

Tony, upon hearing Barnes in the gym, just dropped the sketches, not realizing they must have fallen in the briefcase. When he was getting ready to run, he didn’t even have time to check when he snapped the briefcase shut. He was in too much of a hurry.

Tony smiled softly at the still pristine memories. At least he could use this as an ‘I’m sorry I got your house blown up and maimed your best friend’ present for The Captain.

Checking to make sure that all the blood on his hands had dried, Tony delicately picked up the sketches, idly sifting through them. He silently preened when he stumbled on his own sketch, the brunette making sure to put that one on the top of the pile. Maybe he did mean something to The Captain if he’d made the infamous wall of memories. Tony had seen the sketches many times, but this was the first time he could sit and sift through each one. He couldn't let Cap think that he was getting attached.

What Tony wasn’t expecting, as he continued to shuffle through, was a picture, almost yellow in
age, to freeze the blood in his veins.

Howard.

It had to be Howard. There was no way it wasn’t. Tony looked enough like Howard, but there was no way that signature facial hair and beady eyes belonged to anyone else.

What the hell?

This didn’t make any sense. Why would The Captain know his father? The Commandos weren’t even around when his father was alive.

This was wrong.

“Steve? Need Steve.”

Barnes’s broken voice bounced around in Tony’s head. Steve had been nagging at Tony’s brain the entire night. After going over each of the Commando members, Steve could have been one of two people. A lover, because the only other family Barnes had was in the mob. But that couldn’t be right; if the looks the man had been sending Natasha were any indication, Tony could see that Barnes was gone over her.

Which left only one option.

The Captain was Steve. Which, of course, made more sense. Who else would Barnes cry out to when he thought he was dying?

Now Steve was just another name, but this? Tony looked back down at the sketch of his father. A simple name of Steve wasn’t just any other name anymore. Tony’s heartbeat escalated once again, feeling his brain take off in a torrent, processing the new information.

“I know exactly who you are, Mr. Stark.”

“Don’t test me.”

“That’s true. Why do it myself when I could just pay someone to do it for me?”

“Why am I not surprised?”

“Joseph Grant, huh?”

“Who knows? Could be my real name. I’ll leave you to your deductions.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you? No, I just don’t like the fact you’re keeping secrets.”

“You know, that’s pretty rich coming from the guy whose name I don’t even know.”
“Yeah, yeah, Stark men are made of iron. That’s not my point, Tony. I just- ”

“Stark men are made of iron. Where’d you here that one?”

“You mentioned it once. When you were drugged up.”

Steve.
Steve.
Steve.
Steve.
Steve.
Steve.

Steve Rogers.
Tony crept down the steps slowly, his feet easily skipping over the creaky sections of the grand wooden stairs that he knew so well. It was like he was a kid again, sneaking down from his room to try and catch a glimpse of Santa Claus. Except there was no Santa Claus; there was just his dad dumping his homemade cookies in the trash, half empty glass of whiskey sloshing around in this other hand.

Tony remembered how he had laughed. “You didn’t actually believe that bullshit, did you?” the man had said before tipping back the rest of his drink. He had crouched down, grabbing at Tony’s shoulder roughly, like he was also using the small boy as support. “You know where the word ‘lies’ come from? Love, imagination, entrustment, and security. Lies. It’s all nothing but lies, Anthony.”

Tony couldn’t really recall how crushed he had been. As a child, he had been forced to sit through countless lectures by his father. That had just been another lesson. Honestly, Tony should have just known better than to put faith in a man with a big red suit. “There are only two things that won’t lie to you, Anthony,” his father had continued. “Mentality and engineering. What does that stand for?”

“Me,” Tony had mumbled, biting down on his lip to keep the tears from streaming down his face.

“That’s right, boy. No one will ever know you like yourself. The only way you’ll be able to thrive and excel is by protecting yourself; keep yourself away from all the lies. Don’t get involved, Anthony. Never get involved.”

Tony shuddered at the memory.

He had only been six.

Of course, Tony tried to stay positive. At least his dad had been there for that Christmas.

But he was older now, smarter now. He’d spent his childhood soaking in Howard’s lectures, adhering to them like Velcro. Tony pushed away the lies of the outside world, focusing on only himself. It had paid off, of course, his mind and abilities bringing Tony to lengths that he had only dreamed of. Just like Howard had said.

But today was the day. The day that his dad would finally know of the triumph that was his son.

It had taken Tony forever, but he had finally managed it. A first draft of an AI robot. It didn’t look like much, with its simple treads and singular and cumbersome robot arm, but Tony had slaved over the coding and manufacturing for months on end. Every piece was bought from his own pocket and crafted by his own hands. That wasn’t even getting started on the escapade of dragging the thing up from the lab and into the main entry hall. It was brutal, frustrating work, but upon finally sitting back and looking upon the finished product - Tony could finally understand why it was worth having kids. Pride bubbled up in his chest - and it hadn’t even done anything yet! Time to watch it take its first steps.

Tony had originally designed it as a helping bot for Jarvis. His parents often entertained, what with his mother’s charity work and dad’s endless business partners, usually leading to extended
trips. Jarvis, being the old fashioned butler that he been taught to be, still grabbed all their belongings, having it packed away in their rooms by dinner. But Jarvis wasn’t getting any younger, and Tony had been struck with the inspiration to help the closest thing he had to family— a friend.

The bots claw was designed to pick up heavy loads, the guest’s suitcases that Jarvis wouldn’t have to lug around anymore. Of course, Tony still hadn’t figure out how to get the robot to manage stairs yet, but he bet that his dad could help him work out the final kinks.

It would be perfect.

Tony had been sitting up in bed for hours, staring out his window, waiting for his father’s return. Some business meeting, Tony had overheard him telling his mother. Tony had always thought it odd that his father would schedule these meetings in the middle of the night, but dad had always said that ‘business waits for no one’. When he saw the familiar set of headlights pull up along the winding gravel driveway, the small boy had darted out of his bed, and slowly down the stairs. While he had promised himself to approach his father in the morning, nothing could keep Tony away from the initial reaction his robot would get.

Tony sucked in a breath as he heard the front door open, wanting to dart down the rest of the stairs, but another door opening, the parlor, stopped him.

“Howard?” His mother’s voice floated into the darkened hall, cool and collected as always. Like a spring breeze. Light flooded the hallway as she cracked the parlor door open completely, walking towards the front door.

“Maria,” his father’s gruff voice answered. He reached out and grabbed her, pulling her into a long kiss.

Pulling away, Tony saw her raise an eyebrow. “What’s gotten into you?”

Howard beamed. “Today, Maria. Today was a big day.”

Tony’s heart pounded. Did his dad already know? He squirmed on the stair he was sitting on, excitement getting the best of him.

“Oh? Meeting go well?”

Howard hummed. Ah, Tony thought. So his dad didn’t know yet. It didn’t matter. The element of surprise made it so much better.

“First day with the new recruits, today. I guess Erskine finally managed to convince Phillips that we needed some new blood.”

“Get some good choices?” His mother started to lead his dad farther into the entry way.

Howard let out a small chuckle. “You have no idea, Maria.” Tony felt a small frown form on his lips. He’d never heard his dad laugh like that. Maybe since he was in such a good mood, he would be even more impressed with Tony’s invention. “I mean, you should have seen him, Maria.”

Tony’s heard, listening back into the conversation. “He just jumped right on top of the dummy grenade! I’ve never seen a kid do something incredible like that.”

Uh, how about me, when I built my first circuit at the age of four, Tony thought.

“It was unbelievable,” his dad continued. “Hearing him argue strategy with Phillips, my God. I wish I had a camera. I mean, hell, Maria. I didn’t even think about half the things he thought of.
And it’s me, we’re talking about here; that never happens.”

Tony was pretty sure that he was the one that suggested his dad use different engine configuration for a smoother ride in his car just a few months earlier.

“I have never seen anyone like this kid. He’s the real deal; something special.”

Tony bit his lip. Who was his dad talking about? The last thing he needed was competition for his dad’s affections; he had been working too hard and too long for it already. Tony deserved it.

He watched as his father finally stepped over into the main entryway, already heading in the direction of the bot. Tony felt his heart catch in his throat. This is it. He knew his parents were still talking, but Tony couldn’t hear them over the pounding of his own heart. Just a few more steps. Howard was taking off his coat jacket, briefcase switching between hands as he did so.

Tony grinned. Showtime.

Tony watched as his dad made the final steps of his journey over to the bot, ready for when he would put the briefcase down. Tony could only imagine his face when the robot would lean down and pick the case back up, waiting for instructions. His dad reached his hand out, finally, and—threw his jacket over the bot.

Tony watched in horror as his father idly walk by, eyes not even looking back to the bot as he and his mother made their way back to the parlor. This wasn’t right. This shouldn’t be happening. Why was this happening?

Tony raced down the rest of the stairs, hoping to catch up with his parents. Maybe it was too dark? Maybe his dad didn’t realize what it was? Tony ran up to the bot, quickly throwing the coat off. The bulky claw and base shone dully against the light from the parlor. What else could the hunk of metal have been?

Tony smacked his head down against the cold frame.

He had failed. Again.

“What’s his name?” The pounding in his head had stopped long enough to hear his mother’s voice once again.

“Rogers. Steve Rogers.”

Tony clenched his fists. Who the heck was this Rogers kid? Why was he special? What did he have that Tony didn’t? Tony didn’t understand; he had everything. He was smart, he always looked his best for their guests, even put on his ‘press face’ and behaved when his father had asked. What was he missing?

Tony’s head zoomed through possibilities, his mind looking for the missing variable to connect the two equations.

Why wasn’t Tony good enough?

Tony was once again encased in darkness as he heard the parlor door shut again. He flopped down the ground, head still resting against the robot. Above him, he could hear the bot give a few curious chirps, obviously waiting for his order.
“Don’t bother,” Tony snapped, ignoring the way his voice cracked. “He obviously wasn’t impressed. You’re not special. We’re not special.”

The bot made a few more noises, not understanding Tony’s words. Not that it could, of course. It was only meant for simple tasks. Simple wasn’t extraordinary. Simple wasn’t good enough. Simple wouldn’t get his father’s love. Tony looked back up at the large claw.

“We’re both just a couple of dummies, aren’t we?”

Tony laced his hands together, trying to stop them from shaking as the memory coursed through his head. He remembered when Jarvis woke him up the next morning, having fallen asleep on the large robot as his brain tried to contemplate the previous night.

He ended up locking the robot down in the lab, his father not even caring about it then.

Jarvis had liked it. Tony remembered that he used to go down to the lab to bring Tony some lunch, staying just to have DUM-E fetch things for him, as if he was playing with a dog. "I'm so proud of you," Jarvis had said. Tony never appreciated the sentiment; Jarvis could - and would - tell him that every day and it still didn't matter. It didn't matter as long as Howard never said it as well.

That night could be seen as both an ending and a beginning. The beginning of Steve Rogers, and the end of Anthony, Howard’s perfect little boy.

Howard had been right about one thing. The only one that he could protect himself was to keep away from the lies. All the slander.

And you can’t spell Howard Anthony Walter Stark without spelling slander.

Tony bit his lip hard, tasting the coppery bitterness of blood on his tongue. He should leave. Barnes would survive; Tony couldn’t do anything more to help him. If anything, this way his only chance to run. He knew who Steve was now. Tony felt another wave of betrayal course through him.

How could The Captain - Steve - lie about this to him? There was no way the man didn’t know his father. What his father did to him. But he had chosen to say nothing. Why?

Are you really that surprised? his thoughts asked him cruelly. They were never really on the same side. Just working the same angle to get the job done. That's how it started, and that's how it should have finished. But no, it was like he was a child again, listening to his father yell into his ear - "Don't get involved!"

After all these years, Howard still plagued his thoughts, his actions. And after years and years of defying the man - even after he was long dead in the ground - he still managed to be right. Tony had gotten involved. He had fallen for The Captain's smooth words and bright smiles. He had fallen for "I do trust you." He should have known better, honestly. It was the same tactic that he had started with as well. But he’d relaxed, and let himself drift down a new path, following the tantalizing bread crumbs The Commandos left as they trailed ahead of him. The slightest glimmer of a different life, a new beginning. A chance of being part of something bigger.

Look where that had gotten them.
“You know where the word ‘lies’ come from? Love, imagination, entrustment, and security. Lies. It’s all nothing but lies, Anthony.”

He really should leave. The Captain didn’t know where they were. Tony could just slip out of their lives forever, building up the walls he had so carelessly let down to work with The Commandos. He could move on.

He could be safe again. Away from the lies.

Mind made up, Tony stomped away towards the door and back outside. Where the fuck are we?

It was pitch dark out, the grassy area that Tony stepped out into not having almost no lighting. He walked a bit further, only to trip over a huge rock. Pain flared up his entire side, his injuries from the fire remaking themselves known. Tony stood up, grumbling, and turned around to be met with a gravestone.

Tony’s head snapped around, finally catching the shadows from the other similar tombstones. We’re in a fucking graveyard. Turning back around, Tony could see the building where he had just stomped from. If Tony had to guess, it was probably the maintenance building. It every way, the site was perfect: quiet and out of the way. No one would expect to find them there. But it was sure as hell not a place Tony expected for Strange to try and safe a life. What a sick fuck.

Seeing a street light in the distance, Tony walked to the exit, away from Barnes, away from his problems. Tony shivered as he walked; the adrenaline gone from his body and the harsh temperature freezing Tony’s sore bones.

Finally reaching the main gate, Tony was happy to find that Strange’s people had left the gate unlocked from when they entered. Tony walked back onto pavement, turning around to read the sign. First Calvary Cemetery.

Tony groaned. Strange had driven them all the way out to Queens. Fucking figures.

The brunette tightened his grip around his ripped sweatshirt. With his luck, Tony would probably die of hypothermia before he found a way home. Regardless, Tony listened for the sound of cars, and headed off to the right. He didn’t make it too far before he found himself stopping again.

Them.

Strange had brought them all the way out to Queens.

Tony snapped his head back to the cemetery where Barnes was still being housed. Tony, of course, owed the man nothing; he had already saved his life.

But did The Cap-Steve know that?

Tony never got a way to contact them. For all the blonde knew, Tony and Barnes were supposed to be back at base.

The base that had just blown up.

Ah, shit.

What the hell would The Commandos think when they come back to find their home destroyed, Tony and Barnes nowhere to be found?
You don’t owe them anything, he thought. No, Tony really didn’t. And after today, he was done with The Commandos.

But this?

This was a man’s life, The Captain’s best friend. Tony knew he would be tearing up the entire state looking for Rhodey. He could do the man one final decency. Besides, with The Commandos so focused on Barnes, it would be the perfect opportunity for Tony to slip right through his fingers for good.

Tony spun in a circle, looking for anything that – perfect. He sprinted to the nearest corner, pay phone in sight. He didn’t have any change on him, but that didn’t matter because he didn’t know any of The Commando’s numbers by heart anyway. That didn’t mean he didn’t know where he could find help, however. Tony quickly picked up the receiver and smashed 0.

“Hi, listen, I need you to patch me through to the NYPD,” Tony responded once he was greeted with the operator. “No, no. If it was an emergency I would have called 911. I’m not looking for a whole squad, I’m just looking for one guy. Phil Coulson.”

The last few flames were finally being quenched. Phil had heard talk of some of the men getting ready to go inside.

Phil’s stomach churned, glad he wouldn’t be one of them. He could still remember the way Clint had shaken in his arms, so distant and lost. Phil had never seen him like that.

He knew, of course, how close The Commandos were to one another. While the thought of losing Stark would burn enough, Phil knew the loss of Bucky would be much worse. He knew that Clint would have thought that losing his eyes would hurt less than losing Barnes.

Phil knew he was being selfish, and was probably going to hell for even thinking like this in the current situation, but he thanked God that it was Barnes in the fire and not Clint. If Clint had been in there, Christ. Phil’s heart throbbed painfully at the thought of how he felt as he saw Clint’s phone on the ground, flames shining against the darkened screen.

Phil had almost charged in there himself, flames be damned.

But even though he’d escaped the flames now, Clint was nowhere out of the fire yet. It must have been HYDRA that did this; there was no doubt about it. They were still out there. What if they came back to finish the job?

Phil should have taken Steve up on his offer. Taken Clint away to some small town and started over. Leave this life and finally be safe. But he knows they’d never be safe. They’d always be running.

And besides, running wasn’t exactly his style. And it sure as hell wasn’t Clint’s. They’d get through this, like they always had. Phil had seen Clint and The Commando’s deal with HYDRA once. They could do it again. They would do it again.

Phil startled as his phone started to buzz, looking at the bright screen. It wasn’t a number he recognized, but that didn’t stop him from answering the call.
“Clint?” he asked immediately, disregarding how hoarse his voice sounded.

How wrong Phil was.

It wasn’t Clint.

*It was Stark.*

Phil found himself standing frozen, mouth gaping open for the second time that night. The call wasn’t long, but Phil soaked up every detail; the man didn’t even have time to respond before the man had hung up the phone.

*Alive. They were both alive.*

Phil stumbled with his phone again, this time calling Clint’s cell.

*Pick up, pick up, pick up.*

“Phil?” a small whisper came over the phone.

“Clint!” he exclaimed, adrenaline reentering his bloodstream. “Where are you?”

“I, um, I’m not sure. I’m safe I-I think.”

“Clint, listen to me. I found them.”

“Wha- Jesus, Phil. Please, I don’t wanna know, please- ”

Phil cursed. “No, no, sweetheart, calm down. They’re not dead. Do you hear me? They’re not dead. Bucky’s alive!”

“What? Phil you can’t do this to me, not now.”

“Clint, I swear to you. They’re alive. I just got off the phone with Stark.”

“But-but how?”

“I don’t know, but you’ve got to tell them. You’ve gotta tell Steve before he does something stupid.”

Phil heard Clint suck in a deep breath, no doubt agreeing with Phil’s statement. “Where?”

Phil shivered at the dark tone. That wasn’t Clint. That was Hawkeye, The Captain’s deadly eye in the sky. It always managed to surprise Phil that Clint could change like that, like a flip of a switch. Gone was the easy going farm boy, replaced with a deadly threat that stalked through alleyways. “First Calvary Church. Queens. Find Steve. Bring your boys home.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, a few things:
First, continued thanks and gratitude for keeping with the story. You guys are amazing and I love you all. I'm glad to see you guys are still hanging on even even as this story gets more climactic. Hopefully we'll get all these boys reunited soon!

Secondly, I'm slowly going back through the story, doing some editing. Nothing major is changing, just some grammar errors I find, maybe a sentence restructure here and there. Nothing from the story line is being disrupted, it's just me trying to clean up my word vomit. With each chapter, I'll also be reading over the comments as well, going over old feedback. The story still has a way to go, and I'm still always on the look out for what you guys think the story still needs. I'm also going to be putting in a better effort to answer comments, because I've already stumbled on some instances where I haven't been answering some questions/thoughts you guys are having that I should have. (AKA, I'm gonna be less of an ass). So definitely keep the feedback coming! Know that I read it, and I love every bit of it.

Thirdly, as both a reader and writer, I understand how frustrating it could be waiting for the next chapter to come out. So, as of today, I'm going to start trying to upload on the same day, every Sunday. That way, you guys know when to expect it, instead of constantly hitting the refresh button on the Ao3 feed, wondering when the next installment will come out. School has started up again, however, so if I ever stumble across a chapter that I know will be a big one, I will let you guys know in the notes that the next chapter will be taking two weeks instead of one.

S'alright? S'alright.
The first shot rang out before the door had opened completely.

The resounding thud that filled the now silent room was loud, but nowhere near as satisfying as it should have been. Blood pooled around the grimy floor, the bright red accenting the off white tiles. The occupants inside barely had time to react before Steve was stepping through the threshold, shooting another one of Hammer’s men straight between the eyes. Maybe there were shouts. Maybe there wasn’t. Steve couldn’t hear anything besides the blood rushing in his ears, the red staining his vision.

Hammer was currently cowered in the far corner of the small room, trying to effectively hide behind his three remaining henchmen, all of which looked about two seconds from keeling over themselves.

Steve raised his gun again, ignoring the pleas before shooting another one down, humming slightly when the other men cowered as blood sprayed over them. Without another second of hesitation, Steve moved to the next target, stopping only when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Cap?”

Steve whipped around, throwing the body against the wall, quickly covering it with his own.

“Cap, calm down. It’s just me,” a steady voice filtered through his ears. Steve’s vision, still swimming, managed to lock in on Sam, the man seemingly unaffected by his violence, even as Steve had his gun aimed at his chest.

Sam reached his hand out slowly. “Cap, give me the gun.”

Steve stepped back abruptly, darting out of Sam’s reach. “Get out of here, Wilson.”

Sam walked towards him slowly, hands up in the air. “Cap, you’re not in the right mind. Give me the gun.”

“I’m not gonna ask again, Sam.”

“Cap, please. You don’t know what you’re-”

Steve’s hand shot up, gun raising, and fired a bullet just to the right of Sam’s head. “Get. Out.”

Steve could see Sam tense, but it didn’t matter. None of it mattered anymore. His mind was a runaway steam engine, plowing full speed ahead towards tracks that weren’t there anymore. There was no plan, there wasn’t anything - only the hot, boiling anger that fueled the engine to keep racing forward. Steve didn’t even turn to look back as Sam scurried out of the room, finally leaving him alone with the remaining prisoners.

Steve stepped over the other bodies with disinterest, looking at the other men standing in front of Hammer. “If you tell me who you work for, I’ll let you leave.”

The two men looked at each other, ignoring the protests of Hammer. “Uh, w-we were just
contracted by Hammer,” one of them stammered out, the whites of his eyes shining in bright contrast to the darkened room. “We don’t know anything, I swear,” he confirmed.

Steve hummed, looking to the other one. “And you?”

The other man shook his head quickly, his eyes darting between Steve and the floor.

“Well, I can’t hold being hired muscle against you. You may leave.” Steve stepped aside, watching as the two men sprinted out of the room.

“Wait, what?” Hammer nearly screeched, but then Steve was there, forcing a large hand over his mouth. “Shh,” Steve hissed. “Listen.”

Sure enough, the silence was once again filled by a few shouts, followed by what Steve was sure was Thor gunning the running men down.

Steve ripped his hand away from Hammer’s mouth, pushing the man towards the wall. “I-I don’t-”

“I said they could leave. I didn’t say they could leave alive,” Steve responded, stepping closer to Hammer.

Steve saw Hammer gulp. “You know, you should listen to your friend,” he said. “You aren’t in the right mindset.”

“On the contrary,” Steve interjected. “I’ve never been more sure of what I have to do.” He walked up to Hammer, placing the gun’s muzzle against the man’s shaking chest. “Now, I’m going to give you the same option. You can tell me who you’re working for and I’ll grant you the luxury of my men gunning you down as you leave, quick and painless.”

Hammer eyed him warily. “And if I don’t?”

“Well,” Steve continued. “Then you can spend the rest of your miserable life in here with me as I carve you into nothing. I don’t know about you, but I’m really hoping you choose the latter.”

“Captain,” Hammer started. “I’m a powerful man. I can help you, let’s sit down and talk about this.”

Steve scoffed. “There’s nothing you can give me except the satisfaction of hearing your last breath. And even then, it’ll probably be as disappointing as you are.”

“You need money? I can get you funds! What about weapons; you need a new haul?”

Steve pulled out a small knife, tailing it up Hammer’s arm. “Time’s ticking, Hammer.”

“Alright, alright!” The man shouted, already caving as he flinched away from the knife. “It was HYDRA! HYDRA contacted me. They’re the ones who set the bombs off.”

“How did they know where I live?”

“I-I don’t know-”

“Lies,” Steve snapped, flicking the blade across Hammer’s cheek. He looked good in red.

“No, I swear! I only know what they tell me, man!”
“Who do you work for?”

“I already told you, HYDRA!”

“I need a name, Hammer.”

“I don’t have a name! I was only contacted over email.”

“Stop lying,” Steve roared, watching as his hand twisted the knife into the other man's arm.

The man whimpered. “I don’t know anything, I swear! I can give you the email address, but I’m telling you, that’s all I know. Please, it was basically blackmail! You gotta help me.”

Steve sighed. “That’s all you know.”

“Yes,” Hammer breathed out. “I’m just a pawn.”

Steve snorted. “Well, there’s no arguing that.” Steve stepped back, letting the man breathe before charging forward and thrusting the knife into the meat of his thigh.

Hammer cried out, instantly collapsing on the ground. “What the hell?!”

Steve kicked the man, relishing in the pained grunt. “I know you’re lying to me. That’s okay, though. You see, I was lying too. You don’t get to leave. You don’t get the pleasure of a coward’s death. Sorry, Justin. Looks like you’re stuck in here with me.”

“You can’t do this! You’re sick!”

“Sick? You know what’s sick?” Steve hissed. “Watching your home burn to the ground knowing that your family is on the inside burning with it. Do you think they screamed? Can you imagine how they felt? Trapped in a burning inferno as the skin melted from their bones. Do you know their pain? I do. I feel it,” Steve continued, pointing at his chest. “I can feel the flames in my body, the pains in my chest. I can hear their screams sounding in my head. So no, you don’t get to leave. You don’t get to run. They didn’t to run. They only felt pain. And that’s the only thing you’ll feel as well.”

“You can’t do this; you won’t do this. You don’t have that kind of dark side.” Hammer almost taunted.

“I’m sorry to say that you just haven’t seen it yet.” Steve paused. “Would you like to?”

Clint stumbled across the alleyway, cursing into his phone as he was greeted with another voicemail. His hands shook as he typed in Steve’s number again, newfound adrenaline pulsing through his body.

“They’re alive.”

Phil’s voice continued to resound in his ears even after hanging up with the man minutes ago. Clint heard himself laugh, almost hysterically, feeling a few more fresh tears spill down his cheeks. He didn't know how it was possible, he didn't care. Somehow, someone upstairs had smiled down on him and his family.
Clint wasn’t exactly sure how he ended up where he was, only guided by his grief and guilt. Now, with the news of a lifetime, Clint had never been more desperate to reach out to his team. Which, of course, was seemingly futile as no one was answering.

Definitely not a good sign.

While most of The Commandos strength came from being such a close knit bunch, it was also their downfall. They didn’t do the whole grief thing well. Even a simple injury could lead to a spiral of murderous rage from a fellow Commando. But this was a completely different monster. It was strange, considering wasn’t as if their job description didn’t include death. But after defeating HYDRA the first time, it was if they were riding an elongated high. They were untouchable, invincible to both crime and the law. And all it had taken was one night, one push of a simple button, and their entire world had been decimated. And while the blinding horror and rage had been replaced with giddy relief - the foundations of their life as they knew it still stubbornly standing - the threat was still there. This bomb was only the beginning - and while they wouldn’t be burying anyone tonight, no one will come out of it unscathed. The veil had been pulled back, the glass shattered around them. Tonight was the first glimpse of a potential and very harrowing future. His friends near death was one thing, but it had only been mere hours and Clint was lost in the city, unable to reach the rest of his team, unable to figure out what step is next.

Maybe that was the plan all along. HYDRA just lighting a single match and then sitting back, watching as The Commandos tear each other apart with grief and anger.

And they would. He'd only caught a glimpse of it while he watched the fire burn, but the broken screams of his Captain would haunt him for the rest of his life. There was no telling what Steve would have done when the tears dried. There's no telling what he would have done if Phil never called him. There's no telling how long before the rest of the city was burning with them. But those were thoughts for a different night. Right now, he needed to find the rest of his family.

Think, you idiot.

Thor had taken Steve. If you were Thor, where would you go?

Thor, being as powerful as he was, had access to many locations across the entire city. It would take Clint weeks to check them all. And that was time that Clint didn’t have. But, having to deal with a delirious Steve drastically changed the options. Thor would have had no choice but to choose the closest location to get Steve somewhere safe.

Which left nothing viable except for the Asgard facility closest to base. It was out of the way, but not too far. Besides, no one would question if they saw Thor Odinson walking into one of his own factories.

Clint took off down the alleyway, charging straight into the street. Horns blared, but the man refused to move, standing his ground as a car came to a screeching halt in front of him.

Clint charged over to the driver window. “Please, lady, you gotta help me. I saw a man with a gun in the alleyway!”

A middle aged woman gaped at Clint. “What?!” Her head snapped towards the alleyway. “I don’t see anyone. Who?”

Clint pulled out his weapon, aiming it at the woman. “It’s me. Get out of the car.”

The woman scrambled to obey, jumping out of the car quickly. “Thanks, sweet cheeks,” Clint
winked, hopping in her place, taking off down the street. Normally, grand theft auto wasn’t really his thing, but Clint had to find The Commandos. He had to find Steve.

The drive to the factory was quick; Clint was still around the area of their base when Phil had called him, his mournful stumbling not getting him too far. He almost cried in relief when he saw some familiar vehicles in the parking lot. Not even bothering to turn off the car, Clint leapt out, sprinting towards the building.

He threw open the door, almost tripping over a pair of bodies. For a moment, Clint saw red, thinking them to be bodies of other Commandos. Looking back down, Clint was relieved to see that they were Hammer’s men.

*Wait, Hammer’s men?*

Clint cursed. If Hammer’s men were here, that could only mean that Steve had already started his grieving process. Clint could only hope that he hadn’t killed them all yet.

“Barton?”

Clint’s head snapped up to see Thor approaching him the hallway. The huge blonde swept Clint up in a crushing embrace. “Where the hell have you been? I was starting to fear the worst, my friend.”

Clint sent him a smile. “You can’t get rid of me that easy, buddy. Where’s Steve?”

Thor’s face turned grave. “I do not think you should interrupt him. He’s having a chat with Hammer.”

Clint tried to walk past Thor. “No, we can’t let Steve kill him. We can use him for information!”

“I fear there is no stopping the man. I myself am having a hard time not going in there to finish the job.”

Clint shook his head. “Thor, I need to see him. They’re not dead! Bucky and Stark! They’re alive!”

“What?”

Clint beamed again, charging past Thor. “Tell everyone! I know where to find them!”

Not even waiting for an answer, Clint charged through the back room. While he didn’t know exactly where Steve was, the screams that were coming from the rear door was clue enough for him. Clint burst through the door, watching as Steve’s hands were just curling around Hammer’s throat.

“Cap!”

Clint raced forward, trying to pull the man off Hammer.

Steve shouted, fighting against Clint, trying to reach back for the already sobbing prisoner. With another growl, Steve flipped around, grabbing Clint by his own throat and pushing him up the wall, Clint’s feet barely touching the ground.

“You better have a good reason for coming in here, Barton,” Steve sneered.

Clint tried to gasp around Steve’s crushing grip. “Alive,” he managed to spit out. “They’re alive.”

Steve let go of him immediately, dragging the man up again by his shirt collars. “What did you
say?”

“They survived, Cap,” Clint smiled. “Do you hear me? They’re alive!”

Steve voice echoed brokenly in the room. “Where?”

Goddammit.

Tony raced along the street, charging back to the cemetery as quickly as possible.

Of course. Of fucking course.

Tony, after hanging up on Coulson, continued on his venture of getting the hell out of dodge. The Commandos knew where to go, and Tony was given the perfect window to slip out of their lives for good. And, of course, the lying Captain got the added benefit of knowing that his just as deceitful best friend had survived. Honestly, if I don’t get into heaven after today’s snafu, I’m suing.

But, it turns out God just liked to continue to fuck him over, as Tony was about five blocks downwind when he realized he’d left his briefcase back in the cemetery.

Normally, Tony would just say screw it. It would probably be less hassle for him to just snag another computer from his place than head back into that shit storm. But that computer had all the locations that JARVIS managed to weed out as potential HYDRA locations. And even though Tony was saying sayonara to The Commandos, there was no way that he was stepping out of the game.

HYDRA still had come after his people. So HYDRA would still have to pay. This time with a little more Tony.

Which was why Tony was currently running full speed back to the cemetery. Knowing The Captain, he’d unleash his full pack of blood hounds once he knew Barnes was alive; Tony knew he wouldn’t have much of a window to escape unnoticed.

Sprinting back up the large iron gates of the cemetery, Tony breathed a sigh of relief when he was met with a lack of cars and commotion. He crossed the grassy field, blatantly ignoring the graves he was running over, dipping inside the maintenance hut.

Tony could hear Strange murmuring to the nurses in the other room, no doubt checking over Barnes one final time, but Tony paid them no mind. His eyes zeroed in on the briefcase, Tony moving quickly to snatch it up.

Tony opened it, checking over to make sure that the laptop was still inside, disregarding the sketches it also still housed. Satisfied, Tony turned to leave back through the door when it burst open, The Captain almost falling through the door from the force with which he opened it.

The blonde’s hair was disheveled, eyes wide and red-rimmed, covered in- wait, is that blood?

Tony didn’t even have time to hide before the mob boss had locked eyes with him. “Tony,” he whispered in a rough voice. Before Tony could respond, the mob boss was crossing the room in
large steps, engulfing Tony in a hug.

The briefcase went clattering the floor as Tony was surrounded, arms pinned by the blonde. God, was he crying? Tony felt wetness form along his collarbone as The Captain burrowed his face into his shoulder. Tony almost groaned. He did not sign up for this.

“Uh,” Tony tried to start, cut off by The Captain squeezing him harder.

“God, Tony. I-I don’t even know- ”

“Cap,” Tony tried to breathe around the larger mass. The other man ignored him, however, blubbering into his shoulder, Tony only catching half of what he was saying.

“-just so happy that you’re okay. You’re okay, right? I swear to God- ”

“Cap.”

“-don’t know what I would have done if- ”

“Steve.”

That did it.

Tony felt the man stiffen, his arms almost locking around the brunette. Tony could feel his heartbeat quicken against his own chest, almost hearing the gears churn in The Captain’s head as he tried to comprehend what Tony had said. He finally pulled away from Tony, his wide eyes locking instantly with Tony, mouth opening before snapping shut again.

“That’s your name, isn’t it?” Tony prodded. “Steve. Steve Rogers.”

The way The Captain looked away was answer enough. “H-how did you- ”

“It’s a yes or no question, Captain,” Tony snapped.

Tony saw the man flinch but continued to hold his ground. He wasn’t about to sit idly by anymore; Tony had been lied too enough. “Answer me,” Tony hissed. “Is your name Steve Rogers?”

The blonde sighed before nodding slightly. “Yes,” he answered in a small voice.

Tony felt his eyes close, jaw clenching. There. That was it. One simple word to send his world crashing to the ground. One simple word, that’s all it took. That’s all it ever took.

“Was I a mistake?”

“Yes.”

“Do you wish Steve was your son?”

“Yes.”

“Are my parents dead?”

“Yes.”

“Is Jarvis gone?”

“Yes.”
“Is Odinson your weapons dealer?”

“Yes.”

“Is your name Steve Rogers?”

“Yes.”

Tony looked back at The Cap-Steve. “We need to talk.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh my God we finally made it; the boys are back together.

I don't know about you, but I'm definitely looking forward to the fact that I won't have to write 'The Captain' every other sentence anymore. It's the little things in life.

Enjoy!
They didn’t talk right away.

No, Strange had come bursting through the door, telling Tony that he had finished with Barnes. Which of course meant that Rogers, no different than a lost puppy, raced in to see the other man. Unfortunately, he didn’t give Tony a chance to run off again, as he grabbed the smaller brunette and dragged him along.

Seeing Barnes was tough. It didn’t even look like the man Tony knew. He looked small, breakable. His skin was red and blotchy, burns from flames that Tony couldn’t save him from. There were cuts and bruises forming along his side, no doubt from the debris. And the missing arm? Even after finally being removed of the blood and gore that had covered it before, Tony still wanted to run to the nearest trash can.

Tony almost lost it again when he heard the wounded sound that came from his left. Rogers bolted from his side and straight to the bedside, arms reached out for the fallen man. Right before he got to the bed, the blonde froze, his hands hovering slightly over the other form, as if he thought that even the slightest touch could hurt him. That if he got too close Barnes would just disappear again.

Tony knew he had seen the missing arm; there was no way he could've missed it. But Rogers wouldn’t take his eyes away the screens, staring straight into the constant jump on the EKG machine. “You saved him,” Rogers whispered, finally able to pull his eyes away from his best friend. He was crying again.

Tony shrugged. “Didn’t do a very good job.”

Rogers snapped his eyes to the missing limb. “He would be dead,” he croaked out, almost choking on his words. “He wouldn’t be here, if it wasn’t for you. You saved him.”

“Yes, we’ve established that.”

Rogers bit out a watery chuckle. “Only you could sound so impervious to being a hero.”

“And you. You sound pretty unconcerned for being a liar.”

Rogers sucked in a tight breath. “Tony, I-”

“Don’t you ‘Tony’ me, Steve Rogers.”

“I just don’t think that this is the right time to talk about this.”

Tony scoffed. “Oh, of course. You’re so right. When is a good time for you? Because apparently, you were too busy to mention it in the months that we spent working together!”

“Tony, please,” Rogers pleaded. “You’re still injured. Get some rest; I will gladly talk about this with you later.”

“Absolutely not. There is not later, there is only right now. Why the hell didn’t you tell me?”

Rogers deflated, rubbing a hand through his hair. “Tony, I- I didn’t know how to tell you. I thought it would bring up bad memories, what with your strained relationship with your father.”

“Strained?” Tony laughed harshly. “There was no strained relationship. That’s because there was
no relationship. Surprised your best buddy Howard didn’t mention that.”

Rogers looked at the floor. “He, uh, he didn’t talk about you much.”

It was a slap to the face. When he was young, with the name Steve Rogers still fresh in his mind, Tony wasted countless hours haunted by the unknown. He pictured Steve alongside his dad in every way shape or form: working with him, laughing with him, being loved by him. And every damn day, he watched when his dad return home, a smile plastered on his face until he saw Tony. The man would berate him in every way imaginable, Howard loving nothing more than listing all of his flaws, showcasing how he always managed to fall short to the unattainable Steve Rogers. And when he was alone again, crawling back in his lab to lick his wounds in private, he would be right back where he started - with his mind wandering to the relationship his father had with the unknown man. He always wondered what his dad ever said about him to his work colleagues - the man always made it clear enough to Tony why he was never worthy to see that side of the business. But what spite did he spew for the SSR? Was it the same, or did Howard save the worst of it for his chums? Did they agree with him? They must have, if no one ever trusted him to be involved in that world. But to hear that from Steve, to hear that he was so unwanted that he wasn't even a single thought in his Howard's mind? That he wasn't even worth his own father's disappointment?

“Well isn’t that just great,” Tony mocked. “Because he never shut up about you!”

“You’re getting worked up, Tony,” the blonde tried to placate. "I’m sorry for what happened between you and your father, but how could I have known? How is it- ”

“What?” Tony interrupted. “How is it your fault? Was that what you were going to say?”

“Tony,” Rogers breathed.

“Do they know?” he asked harshly.

“What?”

“Your band of misfits! Do they know who you are?”

Rogers clenched his jaw. “They’re aware of where I came from.”

“I didn’t ask that,” Tony snapped. “I asked if they knew who you were. If they know what you did.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Do they know that you killed them all?” Tony sneered.

Rogers paled, freezing at Tony’s words. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yes, you do. Because you know you did it. Steve Rogers killed the SSR.”

“Shut up,” Rogers snapped. “You and I both know it was HYDRA.”

“Are you sure?” Tony asked, stepping closer to the quickly retreating man. “Do you know that for a fact?” Tony broke off with a laugh. “Of course you don’t. You don’t know anything; you didn't know anything. The SSR’s precious little intel boy. The perfect tactics, the perfect information. It’s a shame you never saw HYDRA coming.”
“There was a mole! How could any of us-”

“Oh, the boy who cried mole! You really expect me to believe that?”

“It’s true!” Rogers cried. “Information was being leaked, and I didn’t know-”

“It was your job to know! Funny how you’re the only one who survived. Maybe you were the mole. Got sick of taking orders, didn’t you? You wanted to be in charge; decided to take out the SSR yourself.”

Tony would never forget the day he’d figured it all out, the day he’d traced everything back. His parents were dead, Jarvis was dead. Each day was a blur of alcohol, each night nothing more than a faint whiff of smoke and blinding lights. It wasn't until the day of the funeral that everything had changed. Obie had found him passed out in some coke den, dragged him into the shower to spray him with a icy spray to sober him up. Tony sat idly, face blank as he was dressed, carted off in a car, and pulled to the cemetery. He didn't want to be there - he'd made his position very clear. He said that he'd only attend if Jarvis would be laid to rest the same day. It was then that they told him that Jarvis was already taken care of, already laying in the ground. They didn't even bother to hold a ceremony for him. To say Tony took that well was a lie - he did, after all, end up in a coke den.

Obie hadn't seem to care much as he ended up at their funeral anyway. He didn't really remember the service, who came, or even the caskets being lowered into the ground. What he did remember was a comment, as he was finally leaving. Usually, Tony filtered everything out; it was usually the same anyway: "So sorry for your loss", "Can't even imagine", "He doesn't even look sad", "How much will the stock drop?" . But this one, Tony would never forget. "Such a tragedy. Can you believe the driver was drunk? Makes me think twice about the help I hire."

Tony gaped at older woman, plump with wealth and finery, false sympathy barely seen through the layers of makeup, jewelry, and designer clothes. Tony would have charged right at here if Obie hadn't intercepted him. How dare she?

Jarvis didn't drink. He never drank. Tony had asked him once, and watched as the man got quiet, hands slowly from where he was washing Howard's crystal tumblers. "I used to," Jarvis had admitted softly. "I was quite fond of a nice brandy. Got me into a lot of trouble in my youth," he had admitted with mischievous eyes.

"Why did you stop?" Tony had asked.

"I saw firsthand that it wasn't just a drink. It was a poison in the wrong hands. One that can turn anyone into the worst of monsters," he had replied softly, hand trailing gently over Tony's freshest bruises. That one had had the shape of his father's class ring. "Didn't seem to interest me anymore, after that."

And Tony knew it was true. Jarvis never touched a drink again. But after the funeral, it was all anyone could talk about. The drunk driver that had killed the Stark family. Tony became obsessed, trying to find any evidence that would clear his butler's name. He knew it would be true, so then what had killed them? It wasn't until he had managed to steal the coroner's report that he knew something was wrong.

Bullet wounds shouldn't show up in car accidents.

He had confronted Obie, of course. And Obie had just smiled softly - "Clever, curious boy" he had called him - before sitting down and telling him about everything. Filling in his gaps of knowledge on the what his had did behind closed doors, on the SSR, on Steve Rogers. On how they really
died.

"We can't tell everyone what really happened," Obie had said. "What your father was doing was illegal."

"But we have too! Jarvis is innocent! He didn't do anything wrong," Tony had cried in return.

"I'm sorry, my boy. That's the way it has to be."

That day had changed everything. Tony had planned to confront what was left of the SSR. It wasn't until he got close that he found out the rest of the them were dead. Except for Steve Rogers.

Rogers grabbed him by his shirt, pulling him from his thoughts. "I didn’t do anything!"

“Exactly,” Tony hissed. “You just sat back and let my family die.”

“They were my family too!”

“NO!” Tony cried, yanking his body away from Rogers. “They weren’t your family! They were mine! It was my family, my friends, my life. And you just came in and you took it all. My dad was supposed to pick me! Me! But no, you come waltzing in one day and suddenly I’m nothing more than an accessory. Why did he pick you?! What made you so goddamn special?! I sat every single goddamned day of my life, just waiting for my dad to come home one day and tell me I finally made it. That I could finally come work with him. But he gave it to you. He gave it all to you. And you failed. I could have protected them; I could have done what you couldn’t. But he chose you. And you took them all away.”

Rogers looked wrecked, fresh tears spilling over his paled cheeks. “Tony, I- ”

“Save it for someone who cares. Because this,” Tony said, gesturing between the two of them, “is over. I’m done with you. I’m done with your lies and your secrets. I know what happens to people who get caught in your web, Steve Rogers. Because I don’t know if you remember, but I almost died yesterday. I almost died because of you and your lies. Well I’m done. I’m out.”

Trembling with anger, Tony stomped towards the door, pleased when Rogers didn’t try to reply. “I’d wish you luck,” Tony added, sending one final glance at Rogers, “but there have already been too many lies between us.”

And with that, Tony walked out the door and out of The Captain’s life.

Bucky was floating. Or maybe he was drowning. In the end, he didn’t really care. Anything to get him far away from the flames.

It was hard to even tell if he was still burning or not. The air on his face felt cool, but he could feel the fire still dancing in his veins, sizzling under his skin and shooting down his arm.

Am I dead?

In his profession, it wasn’t the first time he had asked himself that, but Bucky was almost certain that he had been a goner. Bucky tried to force his eyes open, but the slight movement drained the energy he already didn’t have, the bright lights that crept through his eyelids scorching his pupils.
He heard voices, but he was unable to make out what they were saying. Someone was touching him, hands gently dragging over his chest. Bucky wanted to squirm away, say fuck off, anything, but he couldn’t.

*How did I get here? Where is here?*

All he could remember was fire and smoke.

Time passed. Maybe. Maybe time doesn’t pass for the dead.

There were voices again.

But they were different. Angry.

*Why are they yelling?* Bucky listened closer. It was hard, his ears struggling to work, his brain sluggish as it tried to comprehend the noises. They were familiar tones; he’d heard them too many times before.

*Howard?*

When did Howard get there? Why was he yelling at Steve?

Howard never yelled at Steve. Steve was the one person who never got the tail end of the man’s temper.

That wasn’t right. Howard was dead. But he was dead, right? But Steve? God, Steve can’t be dead. Was Steve in the fire?

Howard got louder, voice frantic and heated, the severe tone pounding into Bucky’s head.

And then there was nothing. Wait, there was something. Was there crying? Who was crying?

Another hand pressed against his forehead, shaking as it brushed lightly through his hair. “Buck?” he heard.

Steve.

Bucky tried to open his eyes again, following the voice he had for so many years. “Buck, you with me?”

Bucky groaned Steve’s name. Or, at least he tried too; even in his disheveled state, Bucky knew that what came out of him were definitely not words. A cool pressure rested against his lips, Bucky humming softly as he let the ice chip slip between his teeth.

Taking one last deep breath, Bucky pried his eyes open, ignoring the pain from the lights to find his friend. His movements were slow, his eyes listless as he tried to find the familiar face. When he finally saw Steve, Bucky couldn’t help but try and smile.

Dear God, did the man look horrible. His face was tight and drawn, a white pallor fixed behind red rimmed eyes. His clothes were rumpled, covered in blood and God know what else.

“You look like shit,” Bucky grated, his voice harsh from the fire.

Steve burst out laughing, leaning down to press his head into Bucky’s side. The shaking from Steve’s shoulders seemed to rock the whole bed, the quaking increase as time went on. It was then when Bucky realized that Steve was crying, not laughing.
“Steve,” Bucky tried again.

“I thought you were dead,” he heard Steve whisper. “I thought you were gone.”

Bucky frowned. “Hey, look at me.” Bucky tried not to wince when Steve finally did look up, his face ruined even more. “You can’t get rid of me that easy.”

Steve closed his eyes, nodding slowly. “Just-just don’t do that again. It’s not good for my heart.”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Oh, your heart hurt? Well how do think I feel, asshole? My God, I’ve been awake for two seconds and we’re already talking about you, you conceited little- ”

And then Steve was laughing again, a much better sound than the first time, Bucky easily joining in. It was like they were young again, bantering easily as they patched themselves up in their shithole apartment.

Bucky laughed harder, breaking off into a couching fit. Steve reached for water, Bucky accepting it gratefully as the other man helped pour it down his throat.

“How are you feeling?” Steve asked. “Be honest.”

“Itches. Burns.”

“Where does it burn? T-there’s some cream here I can put on,” Steve managed to stammer out.

Bucky stared at the man. Steve doesn’t stammer. Well, minus the occasional woman of course, but Steve always spoke his mind, and he did it with pride.

Something’s wrong.

“Arm,” Bucky croaked out.

Steve didn’t answer, just grabbed his arm, his other hand reaching for the cream. He stopped when he heard Bucky’s groan. “Other one,” the brunette said.

Steve froze.

“Steve, please. It hurts.”

“Um. Buck, I- ”

But Bucky didn’t hear him finish as he found himself staring down at his left arm. Or where his left arm should have been.

But there was nothing. No arm, no fingers.

Just a stump.

And then suddenly, everything was coming back to him.

The thump of his fist hitting the sandbag.

The boom of the first explosion.

The cracking of the fire.

The creaking of the ceiling.
**The snapping of the support beams.**

**The slicing of the fan rotor.**

**The feeling of the pain.**

“Steve,” Bucky forced out, his heart rate accelerating.

No, this was wrong. This didn’t happen. This can’t have happened. That’s his arm. He can’t lose his arm. This wasn’t real. This *isn’t* real.

“Bucky. Buck, calm down.”

Hands grabbed at his face but Bucky couldn’t pull his face away.

Away from the nothing.

No. This wasn’t right, this wasn’t *fair*.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Steve was babbling but Bucky didn’t hear him over the roaring of his own ears.

*No no no no no no no.*

He didn’t know how he got there, but Bucky found himself pushed into Steve, his face smashed in the familiar shoulder, strong arms bracketed around him.

Someone was screaming.

It was him.

_________

“What now?”

Steve dropped his hands away from his face to look at Thor. He hadn’t even heard the other man come in. Who knows long he had sat there.

Bucky had drifted off again, body exhausted from the tears and the screaming. Steve just sat there and took it all; he deserved it.

Clint and Thor had shown up, finally extracting Steve from his friend’s side. No one asked about Tony. Maybe they already knew.

He had failed. Just like he always did.

Tony had every right to blame him for what happened to his family. Phillips knew there was a mole, there had to have been. Information that only the SSR were privy to was broadcasted all over New York, and no one could figure out how it was being done. And then, one by one, the SSR had fallen. Steve had tried so hard, did everything he could to save them. And he couldn’t.

And what does he do now? He almost kills his best friend, as well as ending a friendship that had just started to flourish. Hell, half of his crew is MIA, the rest probably ready to quit after recent
Tony was right.

Steve Rogers was bad news. He'd always been.

“I’m sorry?” Steve asked, finally answering Thor.

“What do we do? Stark’s flown the coop, Barnes is out of commission. We don’t even know where half of our own legion is. Friend, I will never be one to doubt your leadership, but we cannot sit idle. Not while those monsters still roam the streets.”

Steve nodded slowly. “When The Commandos first faced HYDRA as a team, we were woefully unprepared. We lost a lot; we didn’t understand the things they were capable of. We barely able to scrape through a with a win. This time, we thought ourselves so much better. We thought that taking care of them would be no more work than dealing with the common pest. I was too headstrong to realize that we’re in the exact same boat as we were before.”

Thor clapped a hand on his shoulder comfortingly. “We managed to pull a victory before. I have no doubt that we shall triumph again.”

“But at what cost?” Steve snapped back. “We can’t just hope to have more guns than them. I won’t do that to them, Thor. They may be soldiers, but I’m not about to send them to the front lines of Omaha Beach.”

“So we run instead?”

“I didn’t say that. It’s just,” Steve sighed, “nothing’s working. I can’t sit around and wait while HYDRA continues to destroy New York. I’m getting desperate; I need to protect the family I have left.”

“You carry the weight of the world on your shoulders,” Thor soothed. “You need to let us help you.”

“Fine. Then this is me, asking you for help.”

“Anything.” Thor replied.

“You ever hear the phrase, ‘an enemy of my enemy is my friend’?”

“Of course. What are you asking me to do?” Thor asked warily.

“I want to talk to Loki.”
“What the hell were you thinking?!”

Alexander Pierce sighed softly as he slowly closed the file he had been reading. He knew this moment would come; it was inevitable. Honestly, how it had taken this long was a blessing. Finally dragging his eyes away from his desk, Pierce looked up at a fuming Obadiah Stane.

“I’m sorry?”

Stane snorted. “Don’t play dumb with me. It was you, wasn’t it?”

“You’ll have to be a tad more specific. I do lots of things.”

Stane rounded Pierce’s desk and grabbed him by the lapels of his jacket. “The explosion at The Captain’s base. It was you.”

Pierce tugged away, hands gently pressing down at his now wrinkled suit. “Well, I’m not going to say no.”

Stane hissed out a sharp breath. “You’re an idiot. I told you to wait, to sit back on the information. Let The Captain and his merry men drop their guard. But no, you just couldn’t resist. Just had to prove that you had the bigger guns.”

“We do have the bigger guns,” Pierce protested.

“And what good did that do us?”

“Are you really making this out to be a bad thing? Their home is gone! There isn’t anywhere for them to hide anymore. They’re wounded now; it’s the perfect time to attack.”

“There was too much risk involved! What if you managed to get The Captain in the blast? We need him alive.”

“My men waited until he left. I took precautions; I’m not an idiot,” Pierce hissed. “Besides, it's better this way. The best way to get to The Captain is through his crew.”

Stane shook his head. “It’s been days since the blast and there hasn’t been a single word from The Captain. I know he’s a skilled tactician, but there is no way that that man would just sit by and do nothing if some of his clan was in the blast. You fucked up. We had one chance to make it count and you’ve ruined it.”

“You’re just not thinking positively.”

“How can I? The explosion was a bust; The Commandos lived to see another day. That’s not even getting started on the fact that my two business partners went behind my back.”

Pierce rolled his eyes. “Oh, don’t be so dramatic. It’s not like you don’t have your own personal agenda.”

“And what’s your personal agenda? Tanking this whole operation?” Stane snapped.

“It’s just a minor setback. Regardless of anyone dying in that explosion or not, The Captain is still vulnerable and you know that. Yes, I regret not informing you of my plan, but action needed to be
stane eyed him warily. “Desperate men are capable of many things.”

“Yes,” Pierce agreed. “Things like failure. The age of The Commandos is over. HYDRA will reign once again.”

Stane sighed, pacing the length of the office. “What about Hammer? I know you weren’t alone in this.”

“I haven’t heard from Hammer since the explosion. Dumbass probably got himself killed.” Stane shot Pierce another glare. “Oh, come on,” Pierce continued. “If anything I did you a favor. Hammer wanted you out of the way just as much as Stark. Besides, I’d already gotten all the information I needed from him anyway.”

Stane raised an eyebrow in question. “That’s right,” Pierce started again. “He told me about your little chat with him. Turns out I wasn’t the only one keeping secrets from my business partners. You try and double cross me, I double cross you. That’s business. You want this to work? Then we need to work together so we both get what we want.”

Stane clenched his jaw. “Fine.”

Pierce gave a sharp grin. “Glad we settled that.” He gestured to the chair across from his desk. “Please, sit. Let’s talk about our next move.”

Tony glared at the jumbled mess that lay in front of him. What had started as a new design had steadily cascaded into nothing more than angry lines and drunken doodles. He sighed, crumpling the paper into a tight ball, not even looking as he tossed it towards the trash can. Tony heard the paper hit the floor, but he didn’t look up. It’s not like there was any room in the trashcan anyway, as it was already overflowed with failed ideas.

“JARVIS, messages,” he groaned, rubbing a hand over his tired face. *When was the last time I slept?*

“You have one from Mr. Stane regarding a business deal,” JARVIS started. Tony rubbed at his temples. Back to work for only a few days and Obie was already breathing down his throat to get him to start dealing to the mobs in New York. If anything, he was more adamant to decline. The last thing he needed was to get involved with another mob. For all Tony knew, he’d probably end up working for another one of Howard’s prodigies.

“Delete,” Tony responded. He could deal with this. All he had to do was distract Obie with a new design and the man would back off for at least a couple of months.

“There is another one here from a Dr. Strange. It appears Mr. Barnes is on the mend and he wants to know if–”

“Delete,” Tony snapped. He didn’t want to hear about that. He *couldn’t* hear about that.

After leaving the cemetery, Tony had managed to stumble to a main street. It wasn’t long before
Tony found himself in a cab, on his way home. Tony had been thankful the driver didn’t comment on how he looked. Knowing that they lived in New York City, the driver probably saw shit like that daily. While Tony could only think about nothing except for a warm shower and his soft bed on the ride home, he found himself in the lab. *Which was how many days ago?*

He had showered at one point, probably even eaten. Tony didn’t really know; the hours started blending together after the first day. Anger still coursed through his veins, betrayal clawing up the sides of his throat every time he took a breath.

He would be fine. He was always fine. *Stark mean are- no.* Tony was made of iron. His father was weak; Tony was a survivor. He’d had an entire life of people trying to take him down. And Tony always rose from the ashes. This was no different.

*I’ll survive.*

*No. I’ll do more than that.*

*I’ll thrive.*

“Anything else, JARVIS?”

“Nothing other than your usual harassment from Ms. Potts, Sir.”

Tony closed his eyes. There was yet another problem he had to deal with. Pepper had come back from the ‘potential business merger’ in England, and it left Tony out of ideas again. He couldn’t exactly send her of to another country; he’d already tried to go the vacation route, but got nothing but an unimpressed gaze. She was starting to get suspicious. Part of Tony just wanted to run and tell her everything, wanting, needing the comfort of his friend. But he couldn’t. The Captain wasn’t going to be a problem now anyway; the less she knew about the entire matter, the better. Tony just had to keep Pepper out of the spotlight until he took care of HYDRA.

“I’ll deal with those later. You got anything on those locations for me?”

Before the explosion, JARVIS had been running tracers on devices that accessed the fake Joseph Grant information. Now back in the safety of his own home, Tony had managed to access the data and pull up two more potential HYDRA locations.

JARVIS had been scouting the locations for the past few days, collecting data from the cameras and online sources. Tony had to be smart about this. If the explosion taught him one thing, it was that HYDRA was a much bigger threat than he had anticipated. And, with the lack of muscle on his side, Tony had to try less than conventional routes to ensure a victory. Not that he was worried. Tony had won more with less. Besides, he got to do things his way now; there was no doubt in his mind that he could find the heart of HYDRA by the end of the week.

“Still gathering and processing, Sir.”

“Good,” Tony retorted. “Keep me updated.”

“Of course, Sir. Might I suggest you lay down for a while?”

“Nice try, J. I’ll sleep later; Daddy’s got work to do.”
“Do you have something to say, or you just gonna stand there all day?”

He saw Sam flinch a little, although he wasn’t sure if it was from being caught staring, or the rough sound that was his voice.

Sam cleared his throat. “I didn’t realize you knew I was in here. You’ve just been staring at a wall for like ten minutes.”

Steve finally peeled his eyes away from the wall, glancing over at the other man. He looked tired, but then again, they all were.

Even days after the attack, Steve and his men were still left picking up the pieces. Clint had been out trying to round everyone up, slowly trying to knit The Commandos back together. It wasn’t going smoothly, however, as it seemed over half of their organization was still missing. Even Natasha. Normally, Steve wouldn’t worry; it wasn't as if they didn't know how to take care of themselves. But with the threat of HYDRA, Steve wanted nothing more than all of his people under one roof again. He needed to make sure he wasn't responsible for any more deaths; he couldn't bear the thought of more of his family's blood on his hands.

"Steve Rogers killed the SSR!" Tony's voice venomously cut through his head. Steve shuddered.

Focus on the job, he thought to himself. He had people out searching the streets; it was out of his hands now. He could only hope that all his ducks would manage to stumble their way home.

Home.

That was another problem, wasn't it? Thor had offered up his sprawling loft for the people that needed it, but it was still a tight fit, even minus the men who went home to their families, and the ones that were still missing. It was incredibly generous, but Steve knew he and his men couldn’t stay there forever. They needed to regroup, they needed a plan, they needed-

Steve broke off with a sigh. He didn’t know what they needed anymore.

“You wanted something?”

“Just wanted to see if you needed anything,” Sam answered defensively. “When was the last time you ate? Slept?”

Steve didn’t answer. He didn’t have an answer for that either.

He heard Sam move closer to him, feeling a reassuring grip on his shoulder. “Steve. We’re worried about you, man.”

“Drop it, Sam.”

“I mean, it’s been a stressful week for us all. You don’t have to go through this alone. I just think that maybe you should take a day, and-”

“Drop it,” Steve hissed.

The hand dropped away from his shoulder. “Fine, then. What’s our next move?”

I don’t know, Steve wanted to say. He was just so damn tired. He couldn’t think anymore; he didn’t want to think. “Got any ideas?” Steve asked back.
“Well, Stark ran off with the computer holding all of the other potential HYDRA locations,” Sam sighed. “Looks like we’re back to square one.”

“That’s not true,” countered Steve. “We still have Hammer; we’ll be able to pull info from him.”

Sam shot him an unimpressed look. “Well, we may have to wait on Hammer, considering you basically beat him within an inch of his life.”

Steve didn’t respond. Honestly, if given the choice, Steve would go right back and finish the job. Anything to try and distract him from the fact that he was the one to blame. That it was his fault that everything had happened.

*I should have been in that fire.*

“Steve?”

Steve looked back at Sam. “What?”

“You drifted off again, man. Maybe you should go to sleep.”

Steve shook his head. “I have work to do. I have to get ready for Loki.”

Sam grabbed at him again. “Yeah, about that. Are you sure about this? Loki, he’s bad news.”

Steve looked back. “We’re all bad news, Sam.”
“Are you fucking kidding me?”

Clint could feel wood dig into his hand as it clenched around the now open door. Natasha just stared back at him as unfazed as always.

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic,” she replied, rolling her eyes like nothing was wrong. Like she hadn’t been gone for an entire month.

*One fucking month.*

One month since the explosion. One month since Stark left. One month since Clint saw Phil in person. One month since he heard Bucky laugh. One month since he saw Steve smile.

Clint wasn’t big on history, but he knew for a fact that the Roman Empire didn’t even collapse this hard. The crew, if he could even call that even more, was in shambles. Some had left, making Clint’s insides burn with anger. Of course, Steve always left the option open for people to leave if it got too much, but no one ever took him up on it. Until the explosion happened, and people’s loyalties started dropping like flies. Some of them - ones that Clint would never think in a million years would walk away from this life - didn't even have the courage to say it to their faces, opting to drop off the face of the map without so much of a trace. Steve, as always, let them go, welcomed it even. But Clint was furious. The fact that as soon as things went wrong, they just slipped away was enraging. More than ever, the family needed to stay together, to draw strength from each other.

But it hadn’t happened. Steve had given each of them so much. A new job, a new house, a new life. And when he needed them? They ran.

Not all of them, of course, but the damage had already been done, to all of them. Steve was nothing more than what was left of their home: a strong sanctuary reduced to nothing but ash. Clint barely saw the man, but when he did it was as if seeing a ghost. The Commandos that stayed by Steve’s side were forced to stay there; the man never let anyone out from wherever they were staying.

As for where they were staying, Clint couldn’t tell anymore. They had stayed at Thor’s for a while, but Steve’s paranoia kicked in; the mother hen trying to protect the chicks he had left. From there, they’d been moved to wherever they could find: old warehouses, abandoned houses, anything to keep them hidden for a few days. Then something would tip Steve off again and process would repeat.

Bucky wasn’t much different. He was closed off; didn’t talk too much, and when he did, he would ask for someone to pass the liquor. Clint couldn’t blame the man, he couldn’t blame Steve either. Their world had been ripped from them so many times, it was only a matter of time before it became too much.

Clint had been trying, they all were. Trying, doing anything to keep them all from drowning. Sam was a constant presence by Steve’s side, Bruce always making sure that Bucky was taking the meds that Dr. Strange had given him, or that everyone was eating. Clint always had men on watch, even had Thor reach out in his own networks to keep them in the loop.
But it wasn’t working; nothing was working. Once a well-oiled machine, The Commandos had collapsed into a rusted over relic. Clint couldn’t remember the last time he got any sleep. Bucky was definitely thinner, Steve doesn’t draw anymore - doesn’t do much, really. It was wrong; everything was wrong.

“Are you going to let me in?” Natasha’s voice filtered into his head.

Clint frowned. “Are you going to run off again?”

Natasha ignored him, stepping around him gracefully. Her eyes tracked the small building, the redhead offering a small hum. “Nice place.”

Clint balled his hands into fists. “Why do you care?” he hissed venomously. “You obviously didn’t before.”

Natasha spun around, but Clint wasn’t met with anger. Just a curious stare, which of course pissed him off further. Natasha cocked her head to the side. “You’re upset; you should go see Phil.”

“Upset doesn’t even begin to cover it,” Clint snapped. “And yeah,” he continued, “it would be great to see Phil, but I can’t. You want to know why? Because I’m here, doing my fucking job. A job that apparently everyone else seemed to forget about! Including you. Where the hell have you been? What a convenient time for you to run off and play spy, don’t you think?”

His friend walked up to him slowly, trying to put a comforting arm on his shoulder, until Clint jerked away. “Clint, you need to-”

“No,” Clint interrupted. “I don’t want to hear any of your excuses. You should have been here. That’s final. There was no other job, no other reason for you to be anywhere else. You should have been here. Do you even know? Do you even know that’s he’s alive?” Clint nearly cried.

Natasha scoffed. “Of course I know that James is still alive.”

“Oh, well I’m glad that you stopped by. Because, you know, he didn’t know if you were alive. None of us did. You know he calls for you in his sleep still? It’s weird because that’s the only time he talks now. What’s even weirder is that he still ends up being chattier than Steve,” Clint bit out. “You know that Dino’s gone? Yeah, looks like he ran off with Pinkerton and God knows who else. Couldn’t handle the heat, I suppose. And that’s not even starting on Stark. Yeah, that asshole that you hated? Well he’s the only reason Bucky is still alive. But save your thank you’s, because he’s gone AWOL as well. Steve’s taking it great, if you wanted to know.”

Natasha shot him an unimpressed gaze. “You going to tell me anything I don’t know, or are you just going to whine?”

Clint saw red, immediately charging his friend. He wasn’t sure what his plan was, maybe his anger just needed some for of an outlet. They’d spared plenty of times in the past; maybe Natasha would let him blow off the steam and frustration that was consuming him. How he ended up crying into her arms, he’d never know. They were on the ground, Natasha’s arms wrapping around his shaking figure, drawing him into a comforting embrace. Gentle fingers pushed through his dirty hair as Natasha shushed him softly. “Where were you?” Clint sobbed into her neck. “We needed you. I needed you and you weren’t there. I-I can’t do this. I’m trying and nothing is working, and I can’t fix this. Everyone’s leaving, Nat. I don’t know what to do; I-I can’t be alone again.”

Natasha shushed him again. “You did so well, ptichka. It’s alright, I’m here now,” she said, rocking him slightly. She grabbed his face, forcing him to look at her. “This wasn’t your fault,
Clint. Those that left were weak. They are no use to us anymore. You need to remember that you can’t save everybody.”

Clint closed his eyes. “I’m so tired, Tasha.”

He missed Phil, he missed their home. Missed all of them cramping around that dumb table, should to shoulder. He missed falling asleep to the sounds of his family around him: the thump of a sandbag, footsteps on a metal staircase, muffled laughter, and the clanging of dishes. He missed catching curled up in a corner, eyes focused on the pencil scratching against the paper. He missed Bucky digging through the fridge, throwing utensils at anyone who got close to his cooking. He missed watching Thor hilariously trying to teach Bruce how to punch, he missed Sam trying to flirt with anything that had two legs. Hell, he even missed Stark.

“It’s alright, I’m here now,” Natasha’s voice filtered through his head. "You’ve held them all up for the past month. It’s my turn to help now.”

Clint let himself be pulled up and dragged into the next room. He watched as Natasha walked over to a sleeping Bucky, swaddled in blankets on an old couch, whiskey bottle in his one hand. She pushed her fingers through his hair softly, brushing a small kiss across his forehead. “How is he?”

Clint shrugged. “Same as everyone else. Broken.”

She nodded once. “Where’s Steve?”

“Where have you been?” Clint ignored her.

“Looking for answers.” She looked around the room, most likely for Steve, but lucked out as the man came stomping in.

“Natasha?”

She smiled softly. “Steve.”

The large blonde crossed the room, not even hesitating to engulf her into a strong hug. “Where the hell have you been? Jesus, I’ve been going out of my mind trying to find you.”

Natasha pulled away, finally taking in Steve’s appearance. “I can see that,” she replied.

Steve’s gaze hardened. “Nat, it’s not safe out there. You can’t pull that stunt again; I need to keep you all safe. I can’t do that if you decide to go radio silent for a month.”

“Relax, Rogers,” Natasha chided. “I think you’ll forgive me when I show you the presents I brought you.”

Steve raised an eyebrow. “What?”

She didn’t reply, already sauntering out of the room, both Clint and Steve on her tail. Stepping back outside, Clint saw an old car, no doubt brought in by Natasha. They kept walking until she opened the trunk, the three of them peering at the cargo down below.

“Who are they?” asked Steve, curiously gazing at the two men tied up, thrashing against their tight bonds as Clint frowned. He didn’t like where this was heading.

“Hey, Cap,” Clint interrupted. “Why don’t you go check on Bucky?”

Steve ignored him, his eyes only on Natasha. “These,” she said, gesturing down to the two men,
“are the guys that planted the bombs.”

Clint froze. *Uh oh.*

“Well,” he said loudly. “Great find, Nat. Don’t worry, Cap, we’ll take care of them. How about-”

“You’re sure?” Steve asked at Natasha, stiffening as she nodded.

Clint bit his lip, trying to step between the man and the car again. “Cap, let’s think about this. We don’t want to do anything rash.”

“How is this rash?” countered Natasha. “What the hell is wrong with you, Clint? This is a good thing. You guys didn’t get anything for Hammer, right?”

“They won’t tell me where Hammer is,” Steve interjected, glaring at Clint.

“It’s for your own good, Steve,” reasoned Clint. “You’re not well, none of us are. We just need to take a few steps back for a while and-”

Clint was cut off my Steve pulling his gun out and shooting the two prisoners between the eyes.

“What the hell, Steve,” snapped Natasha. “We could have used them for information!”

Steve shook his head. “Not them. They didn’t deserve that luxury,” he answered coldly, staring at the limp bodies before looking at Clint. “Pack up. We need to move again.”

Clint deflated. “Come on, Cap. We just got here, surely we can-”

“No,” Steve interrupted. “Natasha brought these men here. Someone could have seen. We’re not safe anymore. After I finish with Loki today I want us gone.”

“Steve-”

“I said, *pack up.*”

“Yes, Sir,” Clint said with a sigh. He watched as Steve retreated, no doubt back to the back room, anyway from everyone.

“Did he say Loki? What the hell is wrong with him?” Natasha hissed.

Clint gave her an empty stare. “The same thing that’s wrong with all of us, Nat. We’re broken.”

“Fuck!” Tony shouted. “Are you sure?”

He heard Carol sigh over the phone. “*Yes, Tony, I’m sure. My men and I were all over the place. There’s no one here. If there ever was, they’re long gone by now.*”

Tony groaned, putting his head into his hands. That was it. The last location that JARVIS was able to get for him. And just like all of the other locations, he had nothing. Absolutely nothing. HYDRA had fallen off the map yet again, and Tony had nothing else left to find them.

“If you want, I can have them sweep it again.”
“No, that’s alright, Carol. You guys should get out of there, take a few days. Thanks for the help.”

“No problem. Keep me updated.”

“Will do. Stay safe out there.”

Tony ended the call, before throwing his phone across his office. What the hell was he supposed to do now? He had nothing. Absolutely nothing.

“Tony?”

His head jerked up at the sound of Pepper’s voice. He tried to plaster on a smile. “Pep, what can I do for you?”

Pepper frowned, ignoring the question. “Are you alright?”

Tony smiled harder. “Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

She gave a gentle sigh, the one she always gave when she knew he was lying. “It’s just, it’s been a tough couple of months for you. First there was those bodies, then you were shot, and then The Captain-”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Tony tried to soothe her. “The Captain isn’t a problem anymore. I sorted it out.” By finding out his real name, saving his best friend, and then dumping his ass.

Pepper sighed again. “If you’re sure.”

“One hundred percent, Pep. The Captain and his men aren’t going to be a problem anymore. Now what’s up?”

“There’s an army man out there for you. You didn’t tell me that you’re setting up another contract with the military. Does Obadiah know about this?”

Tony didn’t answer, the man already out of his chair. If it wasn’t Rhodey, there was only one other army man that would come to his office. “Get rid of him, Pep. You can very go well and tell Captain Grant to go and fuck himself. Who does he think he-”

Tony froze after yanking the door open.

“I didn’t say it was Captain Grant,” Pepper replied, trying to peer over Tony’s shoulder.

No. It wasn’t Captain Grant. Because it wasn’t Steve Rogers standing in his waiting room.

It was James Barnes.

Pepper walked around Tony standing in between the two. “A Sergeant Proctor, correct?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Barnes drawled. And oh look, turns out The Captain’s best friend just oozed the same amount of charm and power in military dress. Well as much as one could with one arm.

“Leave us, won’t you, Pep?”

“Of course. Call if you need anything.”

Tony waited until she was long gone before speaking again. “Well if it isn’t the one arm wonder, himself.”
Barnes scowled. “Cute,” he grit out, barging in past Tony and into his office.

“Sure, come on in,” Tony responded, closing the door behind him. He watched as Barnes stepped around his office, no doubt taking in every detail that he could. Or looking for all the different ways he could kill me, Tony thought. “What are you doing here, Barnes?”

Barnes sighed, before looking back at Tony. He had to admit, the mob man looked like he had seen better days. Not that Tony could really blame him; the guy just lost an arm. Dark rings sat on pale skin, accentuating his usually set of bright eyes, now looking dull and lifeless. The uniform he was wearing didn’t fit correctly, as if Barnes didn’t fill it out like he used to. The man shrugged. “Honestly, I’m not really sure. To talk, probably.”

“Did Rogers send you? Because you can go and fuck off, and-”

“No,” Barnes interrupted. “Steve doesn’t know I’m here. How I even got out without him knowing is a miracle actually.”

Tony frowned. “You on house arrest?”

“No just me,” Barnes retorted.

“Well, I can’t exactly help that your boss has kind of a possessive streak.”

“How’s the HYDRA hunt coming?”

Tony froze at the subject change. Barnes snorted. “Please, like you would stop looking for them even after you left. I’m not stupid. Let me guess, you’ve found jack shit.” At Tony’s scowl, the man continued. “That’s alright, we haven’t gotten too far either. Stevie usually kills them before they step through the door.”

Tony furrowed his brow; that didn’t sound like The Captain at all. Oh please, a voice hissed in his head. It’s not like you knew the real him anyway.

“He’s going to meet with Loki today.”

Tony said nothing, but Barnes must have seen the shock on his face. He didn’t actually think that Rogers would ever go through with that.

Barnes tried to smile. “He’s changing tactics. ‘Enemy of my enemy is my friend’ kind of thing.”

Tony sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. He didn’t care. He absolutely did not care that Rogers was basically taking on a suicide mission. Nope. Not at all. “Good for him.”

Barnes clenched his jaw. “Really? That’s all you’re going to say? I know for a fact that you hate the man more than any of us, and that’s what you’re going to go with?”

Tony tried to shrug indifferently. “What did you expect? I’m done with you people. What Rogers does in his spare time is no concern to me.”

Barnes reached out and grabbed his arm, squeezing hard. “I already told you, I’m not an idiot, Stark. I know you care. You can pretend all you like, but you’re not fooling me.”

“Oh, really?” Tony couldn’t help but laugh, tugging away from him. “I could have sworn that you said that I couldn’t fool you into thinking that I did care! Tell me, Barnes, which on is it?”

Barnes looked away, shifting on his feet like he was embarrassed. “I know I haven’t exactly been
the most welcoming,” Barnes tried to placate.

Tony scoffed, cutting him off. “What more do you want from me?! You’re the one who made it blatantly clear that you wanted me gone!”

“And you’re the one who told me I should do something! That I should do what I think is right, not what Steve tells me; especially when that fucker is about to do something dumb. Well, this is me, doing something.”

Tony eyes him warily. “What are you talking about?”

“Loki’s bad news. You know it, I know it.”

“Glad we’ve established what we already know.”

“Will you just-,” Barnes broke off with a sigh, the man obviously trying to calm himself down. “We... no. I need your help.”

Tony stared at the man. How the mighty have fallen. Tony chastised himself; it’s not like he was much better. If anything, he had still fallen way father than Barnes. Tony looked down at the stub of his arm closed his eyes. Fuck my life. “Fine,” he almost whispered. “Have a seat, Barnes. Let’s talk.”

Chapter End Notes

ptichka - 'little bird' in Russian

Alright folks, I know it doesn't look like it now but we are almost there! I pinky promise you that romance is on the way in the next few chapters. You guys have been so patient and stuck with this ridiculously slow build, so good news! We’re almost there, so just hang in there just for a little longer.

Enjoy!
“Anything yet?”

Sam shook his head. “Relax, Steve. He probably just went out for a walk. He’s got a lot on his mind right now.”

“He’s not the only one,” Steve breathed. “I want everyone available looking for him.” Steve groaned, rubbing at his forehead. “This wouldn’t have happened if I-”

“What, took a nap? Cap, that’s the first time I’ve seen you crash in days; you needed it.”

“What I need is to keep Bucky safe. Or did you forget what happened the last time I let him out of my sight?”

Sam sighed sadly. “Come on, Steve. You can’t keep doing this to yourself, man,” he said, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Nobody here blames you. Why? Because we know whose fault it was. It was HYDRA’s. Did you place the bomb? Did you start the timer? No, Steve. It was them; you couldn’t have known.”

“It was my job to know,” Steve hissed pulling away from Sam. “Go. Find him,” he snapped. “Bring him home.”

Steve thumped his head against the wall before charging down the stairs. He couldn’t deal with this right now; he needed to meet Loki. Knowing that the rest of his team was in search of Bucky, Steve slipped out the back and into one of their cars, driving to the location Thor had given him. He knew how wary everyone was of Loki. Steve would be lying if he said he didn’t feel the same way, but there was else nothing he could do. HYDRA had them backed against the wall. He couldn’t sit idle again. He won’t sit back and watch his family get slaughtered again.

Steve stepped out of the car after the short drive, and into a closed down gas station. While Steve had originally thought that he would be meeting Loki at one of Asgard’s locations, he was surprised when Thor presented him with such a discrete spot. Apparently, Loki wasn’t in a very good standing with Thor’s father at the moment. He wasn’t in a very good standing with anyone, really. But right now that didn’t matter. If there was one thing Loki could get, it was results. And at this point, Steve would do just about anything to protect his crew.

He walked into the dusty room, already finding Loki leaning against the far wall skinning an apple with a knife. Even in such a casual state, the man looked almost regal, with a perfectly tailored suit, lanky body and slicked back hair.

“Captain,” the man drawled, not even looking up from his apple.

“Loki,” Steve responded, reaching behind him slightly just to make sure that he’d brought his gun.

“Now, now, dear Captain, let’s try and be civil about this.”

Steve froze, as if a kid caught stealing candy. “A man can’t be too careful,” Steve replied slowly.

Loki looked up, finally looking up at him with mild disinterest. “Guns won’t help you here. Now
then. Let’s get down to it, shall we? I haven’t got all day.”

Steve nodded, his body still tense. “Of course. I need you to do something for me.”

Loki uttered a hollow laugh, showing off a viscous smile. “Watch your tone, Captain. I don’t work for you, so I don’t need to do anything. I do as I please. It’s all on you whether I grace you with my services.”

Steve clenched his jaw. “And what exactly do you need from me in order to get your services?”

Loki laughed louder this time, his condescending tones echoing through the small room. “Like you have anything I could want. No, no, Captain. I need you to convince me.”

This was wrong; Steve could see why no one liked this man. He could see why people had told him to stay clear. Everything about him was slimy, leaving behind a rotten taste. He oozed a kind of danger that even Steve wasn’t a fan of. But he was too far now, he had too much to lose. A whole house full of people that HYDRA was waiting to snatch away from him. “Convince you? Well, no doubt you’ve seen what HYDRA did last month. That not good enough for you?”

Loki shrugged, peeling another portion of the apple. “Wasn’t my building that blew up; not my problem.”

Steve grit his teeth. That was his home, his everything, and to have it thrown to the side like it was just a mild inconvenience disgusted him. “HYDRA is everyone’s problem,” he seethed. “They’re not going to stop with The Commandos. It won’t be long until they start attacking other businesses. Businesses like Asgard.”

Loki hummed. “I see. Just like they’ve gone after Stark?” Hearing Tony's voice sent shivers down his spine, their last argument still fresh in the forefront in his mind. He could barely think of little else these days. “Tell me, Captain, why don’t you just ask Anthony for help? If it’s information you seek, I’m sure he’d be more than willing.” The chilling smile Loki sent Steve his way was enough to prove that Loki knew what had happened already between them.

“You leave him out of this,” Steve hissed. He knew he was already selling his soul to the devil by agreeing to work with Loki, but damn if he was going to let the Norwegian drag other through the mud with him. Tony was gone, Steve had seen to that. Lately, Steve had been trying to convince himself that it was better this way. He was out of the line of fire for now, hopefully. Sticking around Steve would probably prove fatal - it already had, once - and Steve wasn't ready to face another reality of thinking Tony dead.

“Did I hit a nerve?” Loki chided. "Besides, you’ve brought him so far into this that it’s impossible to leave him out, don’t you think?”

Steve furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

Loki rolled his eyes. “The bomb at his business meeting, the bodies at his front door. You didn’t think they would stop now that your dear Anthony has left you, did you? HYDRA wants him dead as well.”

“I’m not gonna let that happen,” Steve shot back confidently. Just because Tony didn't want anything to do with them anymore didn't mean that they were going to cast him to the side. Steve was serious about the job he offered Tony - back when what seemed almost a lifetime ago. And after what he'd done for Bucky, Steve would always be indebted to him. The least he could do was ensure that he always had someone watching his six, even if from the shadows.
Loki sighed again. “That’s the thing, Captain. You don’t get to choose. It’s either Option A, or B. You don’t get both.”

“I don’t follow.”

Loki pushed away from the wall, stalking over to Steve. “HYDRA has you between a rock and a hard place. They’ve scattered your warriors and removed your allies. Why do you think they haven’t struck yet? You’re weak, vulnerable, but yet they haven’t made another move. Want to know why? Because they’re waiting for you to choose.”

“Waiting for me to choose what?” Steve asked.

“They want you to choose between Stark and your crew.”

Steve’s blood ran cold. “I don’t understand,” he managed to stammer out.

“It’s simple. You’ve brought both Stark and your crew so far into your own mess, that there’s no way they can both make it out alive. You leave your crew to chase after Stark, and HYDRA will have the rest of your family dead by the time the sun sets. But if you run away with your crew? Then Stark will probably end up face down in a ditch just like his father. Either way, you lose.”

No. Please, no.

Steve shook his head. “You can’t know for sure.”

“Are you willing to take that risk?” When Steve didn’t answer, Loki continued. “You wanted my advice? Well, here it is. Give them Stark.”

Steve gaped at the man. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am. Anthony is no better than his drunk of a father; regardless of whether or not he had found out your little secret, he would have still left you and your crew out to dry as soon as your usefulness had run out. This whole time you thought you were using him, when it turns out, it was the other way around. Stark’s are taught to care for one thing: themselves. He wasn’t your friend, Captain, he never was. He was just using you as a human shield, sending his puppets out to do his bidding while he stays safe at home.”

“No,” Steve gasped. “You’re wrong about him.”

That’s not the man he knows. Steve may have thought that once, may have believed the rumors, but he knew the truth now. He saw Tony Stark. The real one.

“Am I? You know how Stark has operated in the past. How is now any different? Understand this, Captain. Sometimes you must lose a battle to win the war. You always knew you needed Stark, you just didn’t know in what way.”

Steve walked away from Loki, stepping away to look out the broken front window. This was wrong. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. Wasn’t it?

“Do you wish to keep your family safe? How much are you willing to sacrifice to ensure their safety?”

“Anything,” Steve answered immediately.

“Then give them Stark; use him as bait. HYDRA was going to kill him regardless, you might as
well use him to your advantage. Draw them back out and then finish them once and for all. You want to find peace, Captain? This is how.”

Tony had been in a lot of awkward situations before. Most of them, of course, were along the lines of Pepper finding him in bed with his latest conquest, ranging from potential business partners to the waitress who served him his coffee. There was that one time when Tony was younger, that Howard had found his internet history before Tony was smart enough to cover his tracks completely. That’s not even getting started on the time Jarvis had walked in Tony trying to clean up a failed experiment that had cost the man most of his clothes and covered the lab with thick goo. Needless to say, when it came to awkward encounters, Tony Stark was your man.

This one, however? This one took the cake.

Tony sat, taking another generous sip from his tumbler, wishing it was something way stronger as Barnes stared at him from the other side of his desk. Tony gestured with the glass, a silent invitation, but Barnes shook his head. “Doesn’t go with pain meds,” he bit out.

Tony hummed. “Didn’t except you to be such a brown nose.”

“I’m not,” Barnes said. “I just value the remaining limbs I have left. Natasha probably won’t be too kind if I come back smelling like scotch.”

“Smart move,” Tony replied, smiling into his glass. Another silence fell over the two men. Tony sighed. “Alright, Barnes. You have my attention. Why are you really here?”

Barnes shrugged. “Got nothing else to do. Can’t shoot a gun anymore; can’t do my job anymore.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “I didn’t sign on to be your therapist, Barnes. Yes, you lost an arm. Yes, it sucks. But if any of the stories are true about you, then you and I both know that you don’t need both of your hands to kill someone. Besides, you shouldn’t be saying shit like that anyway; your other half might wring your neck.”

Bucky snorted. “Yeah, well that’s Stevie for you.” The other man continued when he saw Tony wince at the name. “You’ve got quite a lot of beef with Cap, don’t you?”

Tony frowned. “I don’t have beef with The Captain, I just have beef with Steve Rogers.”

“Same person.”

“Are they?” Tony hissed.

Barnes sighed. “Listen, I can understand that you’re pissed. But you can’t blame Steve for what your father did or didn’t do.”

“Why can’t I? He’s not exactly innocent in all of this.”

“Yeah, but is he guilty?”

“What are you trying to do here, Barnes,” snapped Tony. “Is this the part where you play my shrink? Because I didn’t sign up for this either.”
“The only reason you’re blaming Steve is because your father isn’t here for you to blame.”

“You don’t know me,” Tony snapped.

Barnes sighed, getting up from his chair and walking over to Tony’s bar, reaching for a water pitcher also laid out. Tony saw as the other man fumbled with the glass and liquid, clumsy with only having the use of one hand. Barnes poured himself an ample amount before sauntering back to Tony. “You’re right, I don’t. Because I was wrong about you. I told you what kind of man I thought you were, but I was wrong.”

Tony furrowed his brow, before standing up from his desk to intercept Barnes. “Back in the gym, you said you’ve seen men like that before. You were talking about my father, weren’t you?”

Barnes nodded. “Your father was an asshole.”

Tony snorted, clinking their glasses together. “Well I’ll be damned, Barnes, but it looks like we finally found something we can agree on.”

The other brunette offered something almost resembling an agreeable smile. “But you’re not like him, are you?”

Tony took another swig of his drink. “I think a lot of people out there would disagree with you, Barnes.”

“Yes, but they don’t know you,” responded Barnes. “Howard would have left me in that fire.”

Tony stopped to look at the other man. “You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do. But you didn’t. You came back for me.”

“I never wanted to be him,” whispered Tony. “Maybe that’s why I was such a disappointment to him.”

Barnes hummed. “Maybe. But who gives a shit now? Howard’s been dead for years and it’s like you’re still trying to impress the man.”

“Force of habit, I guess. Why do you care? Didn’t realize my father was such a sore spot for you as well.”

Barnes’ lips formed a grim line. “Steve always saw the best in people; that’s why I don’t think he ever said anything, let alone even notice. But Howard…he always talked about Steve as his. His idea, his find. Like Steve working for the SSR was his own triumph. I saw right past his bullshit; he was just using Steve for his own advances. Phillips gave Howard everything and anything he wanted as long as Steve did his job. As long as Steve was his dancing little monkey.”

Tony’s heart clenched unwillingly. Always the business man, his father was constantly looking for the neck rung to help him climb up the ladder. How many times had he dragged Tony to show him and his genius off to the world. But did Tony get any of the credit? Of course not. The man had been dead for years now and people were still talking about his legacy. Howard’s legacy.


Bucky huffed out a small laugh. “Well, turns out you’re not the only Stark I never got along with. Besides, I was never technically a member of the SSR. Erskine picked up Steve, not me. I just
came along with him for the road. They tried to scare me off a couple times, but they gave up eventually and started putting me to use. Didn’t really make my top list for jobs, but oh well. I go where Steve goes.”

“You really are the faithful guard dog, aren’t you?”

“Everyone needs a hobby,” Barnes quipped.

“It’s amazing that you two made it out,” Tony continued. He knew what he’d said, what he’d shouted and screamed at Rogers. That it was his fault the SSR was dead. But he knew it wasn’t; maybe it was just another thing Tony tried to blame the blonde for. When he’d backtracked through to find the SSR, he caught the whiff of the mole, but he couldn't figure out who it was. Sure, Rogers - and apparently Barnes - were the only ones that survived, but Tony couldn't imagine it being them. It was strange to have such blind faith in the men that had lied and deceived him. He was so convinced throughout his life that it would have been Rogers that was the mole; but now, having a face to the face, seeing him and his number two interact, see the devotion and pride with their current mob, it was if he couldn't fit the final piece of the puzzle in. There was no way either of them were the mole.

“It was nice, until history started to repeat itself,” retorted Barnes with a shake of his head. “He’s not cut out to handle another loss like that. Steve’s strong, but this thing is killing him.”

Tony frowned. “And what about you?”

Barnes shrugged. “I’ll be fine if he’s fine. But I can’t protect a man who doesn’t want to be protected.”

Tony leaned back against his desk. “I still fail to see what this has to do with me.”

“Yes, you do,” Barnes said with a roll of his eyes. “You just want to do what you always do and avoid talking about it. The Commandos are falling apart; people have already made off for the hill already! Steve’s got the whole place on lockdown and won’t let anyone out of his site. I had to have Barton squeeze me through air vents to get out. We’ve got no leads, no info, nothing. We’re all just sitting around waiting to die at this point!”

Tony eyed him warily. “And I fit into this how?”

Barnes huffed out a harsh breath. “Steve isn’t listening to us. Any lead we bring in, he kills straight on the spot. And now he’s going to meet with Loki? We are so far up shit creek; Steve is going to get himself killed.”

“Rogers won’t listen to me,” Tony scoffed.

“Yes, he will,” Barnes countered. “Whenever Steve pushed in one direction you pushed harder in the other. You two could find a reason to argue about anything. I need you to go back there and tell him that he’s wrong and he’s being stupid. Because even though he doesn’t always see it your way, he’ll always stopped and listened.”

Tony sighed. “Look, Barnes. That man always has a plan. If he’s meeting with Loki, who am I to stop him? For as sleazy as the guy is, he has a high success rate for private jobs, and if Rogers wants to take that risk, then-”

“But those are risks we never took before!” Barnes shouted. “I know you agree with me; there is no way in hell that Steve would have even considered this a month ago.”
Tony tried to shrug nonchalantly. “Maybe he’s putting a new spin on things. Why should I do anything about it?”

Barnes’ eyes burned into his skull. “Will you quit it?” he hissed, grabbing at Tony’s arm harshly. “This whole lone gunslinger act. Because let me tell you, it’s not working. I know you care. If not for us, but for him. I know you care for Steve.”

Tony narrowed his eyes, trying to escape the iron grip. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You think I don’t know?” Barnes continued. “About your men guarding our safe houses? Or that there has been a distinct lack of police activity after something as huge as a bomb going off in Brooklyn? Or how about the fact that JARVIS is still monitoring our phones?”

Tony’s heart was pounding in his chest. There was no way he could have known these things. Maybe he was bluffing?

“You know,” Barnes continued. “I may only have one arm but that doesn’t mean my eyes don’t work. You don’t rotate the men watching us, so I see the same faces on the street regardless of where we set up camp. Coulson called and he knows that someone in the force has been paid off, because no one is investigating the bomb further. And, last but not least,” he added, gesturing to Tony’s monitor, “those are Steve’s messages to Thor to set up a meeting with Loki. You didn’t minimize your screen,” Bucky finished with a smirk. “So you can tell yourself whatever will help you sleep at night, but you can’t lie to me.”

Tony stared at the other man, completely in shock, trying to find any angle to spin the conversation away from the current collision it was heading for. “Well you’re shit out of luck, I’m afraid. It doesn’t matter what I feel; I can’t help you. I don’t have anything on HYDRA either. They’re gone. I can’t even find them.”

“No,” Barnes agreed. “And you probably won’t by yourself. But you and Steve managed to find them once. You found them together.”

“So is that why you’re here? To give me a pep talk?”

Barnes put down his glass and turned to face Tony. “I’m here offering an olive branch, Stark. I know you’re a proud man; hell, you might be just as stubborn as Steve. But I know you’re smart, and you and I both know that we’re not going to get anywhere divided like this. I’m here because I’m returning a favor to the man who saved my life. Because you can talk game all day, but I think you know that you need us too. It’s my turn to help you now.”

“I didn’t ask for help,” Tony whispered.

“Neither did I,” Barnes shrugged. “But you dragged me out of that building anyway. So what do you say? You back in?”
Clint breathed in a sigh of relief when he saw Bucky slip back through the back door. Of course, his lightened mood was quickly suppressed when he saw that his friend had come in alone.

“Still nothing?”

Bucky shook his head, dropping down into an old chair. For the past week, Bucky had been slipping out each day to head over to Stark's, trying desperately to get the man to come back and work with the crew, but to no avail. He wasn’t coming back.

Clint tightened his hands into fists. “Does he really hate Steve that much?”

“I don’t think it’s that. I mean, hell, the guy may have more issues than all of us. He’s had a whole life of people using him and then leaving him out to dry; I’m pretty sure he’s just worried that we’ll do the same.”

Clint groaned. “We really do not have time for this self-loathing bullshit.”

It’s not that he didn't get it. From the pieces of relayed information he got from Bucky, the situation between Stark and Steve was a hell of a lot more complicated than what he first thought. Hell, if he were Stark, he probably wouldn't want anything to do with them either. Clint just had to hope that Stark was a better man than the rest of them, and would fly a white flag with his head held high. They definitely couldn't fight a war on both sides - they obviously couldn't even fight one on the one side. Bucky was right; they we're going to need Stark. Steve was out of control, the whole family was breaking apart. They'd all agreed that they could swallow their pride and crawl back to Stark - now, they were just hoping that he could do the same.

“You don’t think I know that?” Bucky hissed. “Dealing with him is like dealing with Steve; it’s like trying to compromise with a brick wall.”

“I have a feeling that dealing with Steve today is gonna be worse,” a new voice said. Both Clint and Bucky turned to find Sam filter in the room, pulling up another chair to sit with them. “Steve’s pissed, man. Which, usually would be a good thing, considering that means he’s doing something other than moping, but it’s pretty bad.”

Bucky brushed Sam off. “I’ll deal with him later, Sam.”

“You can’t keep putting this off, Barnes,” pleaded Sam. “The man’s going crazy that you keep slipping out and you won’t tell him where you’re going. We’re running out of ways to keep him distracted when you leave. Steve’s a smart guy, Buck, he’s gonna catch on. Or worse, he’s gonna follow you one day and then we’re all gonna be done for. Something tells me that he won’t be too happy when he finds out that we’ve been meeting with Stark behind his back.”

“We can’t do this without Stark, you know that,” Clint replied.

“I’m not arguing that, but Steve’s not himself. How do you think he’s gonna take it?”

“Well, we can’t exactly go and straight up tell him what we’ve been doing,” countered Clint. “He’d take off for Stark first chance he’d get, and who knows how many men HYDRA have waiting just
for him to show his face back in Manhattan."

“Well, are we just going to keep doing what we’re doing right now? Because it doesn’t seem to be working,” retorted Sam.

“It’s working,” argued Bucky. “Stark’s not his father. He cares.”

“Well it doesn’t seem that way,” snapped Sam. Clint bit his lip, looking between Sam and Bucky. *Shit, we can’t do this,* Clint thought to himself. Figures that a rag-tag bunch of criminals couldn’t muster together a sincere ‘sorry we lied to you and treated you like shit’ package for Stark. They all knew it wouldn’t be easy, but with HYDRA still out there, they were desperate and frustrated - it was definitely showing now, as Sam, the most level-headed guy in their group is now heading straight for the jugular.

“I said he wasn’t coming, I didn’t say he wasn’t helping.” Bucky reached into his pocket and pulled out some folded photographs. “You said Steve’s been here all week?”

Clint nodded. “He hasn’t really been leaving his room. When he does come out, its to check and make sure that everyone is still here.”

Bucky laid the photos out on the table. “Stark got these from CCTV footage from the city. Steve’s been meeting with Loki.”

Sam shrugged. “But we knew that. Steve met with Loki the first time you went to go see Stark. This isn’t exactly anything new.”

Bucky shook his head. “This footage is from two days ago. Steve met with Loki again.”

“Again?” Clint reached forward and snatched the photos, looking in disbelief at a very familiar blonde standing next to the Norwegian. “But we asked him about what happened with Loki; he said nothing was going to come of it!”

Bucky pursed his lips. “We haven’t been the only ones lying.”

“I don’t get it,” Sam said. “Why doesn’t he wasn’t us to know he’s meeting with Loki?”

“Because he knows how much we don’t trust the guy,” answered Bucky. “Because he’s actually considering something Loki has to offer.”

“What could Loki possibly have to offer Steve?”

“Steve’s desperate,” Clint responded. “I’m sure he’d take anything that would get him HYDRA.”

“We need to talk to Steve,” Sam sighed.

“We can’t,” Bucky disagreed. “We show him these photos and he’s gonna know immediately who we got them from.”

“Well we can’t just sit back and do nothing!” Sam shouted. “The reason he isn’t telling us is because he’s thinking about doing something stupid. We’ve been sitting on this too long; we need to act now.”

“What about Thor?” Bucky suggested. “Loki’s his brother, maybe he can talk Steve out of this!”

“Dude, Thor hasn’t been here in days,” Sam sighed, rubbing at his temples. “While you’ve been off playing negotiator, Clint and I tried the Thor angle. He knows Steve shouldn’t trust his brother;
Loki’s been out of Asgard's favor for months now. But as soon as he tried to bring it up to Steve, shit went south fast. Good thing Clint was dumb enough to get between the two of them, or we might have been down another man. And honestly, not even sure who would have won. Regardless, Thor took off, pissed out of his mind, so we're back to square one."

“Well, what do you suggest?” asked Clint. “Because Stark is our only ally left and he doesn’t seem to be much of a team player right now.”

“He is,” Bucky replied.

Sam scoffed. “How do you know he'll be willing to play ball with us again? Since when are you and Stark all buddy-buddy?”

“Because that’s not all the photos he gave me,” Bucky said tersely. He pushed aside the photos of Steve and Loki. “Because Loki has been meeting with someone other than Steve.”

All three men leaned forward, looking at a blurry Loki talking with a hooded figure in an alley. Clint squinted, his eyes failing to try and get a face from the shadowed figure. “Stark get a face from this guy?”

Bucky shook his head again. “He doesn’t know who he is, but we’re willing to bet any money that Steve doesn’t know about Loki’s other rendezvous.”

“You think Loki is planning a double cross?”

“It’s Loki,” Bucky grit out. “Of course he’s scheming. Loki doesn’t hold allegiances with anyone. He’ll work for whoever can sign the biggest check or who can give him the most power.”

“We have to give this to Steve. He could be in danger,” Sam replied, already standing up.

“No,” Bucky countered. “We’re not going to tell Steve. Stark is.”

Clint furrowed his brow. “But you just said he wasn’t coming.”

“Clint, the man has been monitoring us for weeks, mostly Steve. You should have seen him when he shoved the pictures in my face. Despite everything, Stark’s worried for Steve. I told him the only way Steve is going to find out about Loki’s double cross is if he tells the man himself.”

“You sly dog,” whispered Clint. “You’re forcing Stark out of his hole.”

“He needs the push,” argued Bucky. “He wants to help, he’s just letting himself get too conflicted. He’s terrified about what could happen to Steve, and I know he won’t be able to deal with the guilt if anything happened to him. He’ll come back.”

“Are you sure he'll go through with it? After everything you told us about their past, you're sure Stark will push through his daddy issues to get to Steve before Loki does? I'm all for getting Stark back on our side, but I don't know the man well enough to trust that he'll follow suit. I don't want to risk Steve on your gut feeling.”

“I’m not saying that,” soothed Bucky. “We’re not gonna leave Steve to fend for himself; we can’t let him meet with Loki anymore. We don’t know what the bastard’s planning, so it’ll just be easier if we take precautions and just keep Steve away from him. All we gotta do is keep Steve occupied until Stark gets here; if the man isn’t here by the end of the week we’ll just go on without him.”

“You really think Stark’s gonna come?” Clint prodded.
Bucky nodded. “Yeah, I really think he will.”

Well isn’t this a complete turnaround, thought Clint. Bucky was never a fan of Stark; even when the other man had started to warm up to the rest of the crew, him and Bucky were always at each other’s throats. It was like watching Animal Planet, with the two of them constantly trying to prove their dominance to Steve. But Clint could understand how Bucky could go through a minor reevaluation after his apparent enemy drags him from a burning building and becomes the main reason he’s still living.

Clint couldn’t find himself to disagree with the man either. If there was anyone who could crack through Steve’s brain when Bucky couldn’t, it’d be Stark. Getting Stark back on board probably came with the added bonus of Steve getting his head back on straight.

Bucky was right. Stark was their only hope. Clint could only pray that the man would come through.

“You eat yet?”

Steve clenched his jaw, not even bother turning around.

“Come on, Stevie,” Bucky sighed. “Sam says he hasn’t seen you eat since yesterday.” He walked up to the other man, laying a sandwich down at the man’s elbow.

Steve still refused to answer, still staring at the papers in front of him. “Really, the silent treatment? What are you, seven?”

Steve shot him a glare, finally looking up at his friend. “Maybe I’m just surprised you’re actually here and are gracing me with your presence.”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Don’t be an ass. I just take walks, Steve. I’ve got to come to terms with my disability.”

Steve’s eyes shot to his stump. “It’s not a disability,” he hissed. “You shouldn’t say that.”

“Oh, should I say that I should be happy? That I’m lucky to be alive?”

“You are lucky! God, Bucky, what the hell is wrong with you? You telling me you’d rather be dead?!”

Bucky stormed to the other side of the room. “Well, it sounds a lot more interesting that living in this prison!” he shot back at Steve. “You need to cool your jets, Steve. Just because I don’t want to hole myself up in some room all damn day doesn’t give you the right to be pissed at me.”

“It’s not that, Buck! Maybe I’m just pissed that you leaving is giving HYDRA plenty of opportunities to finish the job! I almost lost you once, Bucky. I can’t take that risk again, on any of you.”

“So we’re just locked up here until the end of time? Steve, look at you. You’re falling apart. Let us help you.”

“How?” Steve snapped. “How can you help? You know where HYDRA is? You know how we
can stop them?"

Bucky looked down. “Do you?”

Steve scoffed, walking over to Bucky. “At least I’m trying. I gotta do whatever I can to keep you guys safe.”

“Well what about you?!” countered Bucky. “Why is it always us, Steve? Who’s gonna keep you safe?!”

“Don’t worry about me,” Steve said gruffly.

“No,” Bucky snapped. “You don’t get to do that. You don’t get to sit back and yell at me for doing stupid shit when you’re doing the exact same thing! People keep looking at me for answers, Steve, but I don’t know what to tell them! I don’t know how to handle you because you were never like this last time. You want to know why? Because everyone was already dead. Now that we’re all still here and kicking, you’re worried that you can still fuck it up.”

Steve looked down at his hands. “I know this isn’t last time,” he whispered.

“Do you?” Bucky continued. “Because you’re walking around here like a ghost. This isn’t the SSR, Steve. You’re not alone anymore. You’ve still got your family here.”

“Then you know why I’m acting this way!” shouted Steve. “I can’t lose them! I can’t lose you!”

“You already are by sitting locked up in this room, Steve. Let us help. This is not different than any other job. We trust you, Steve, but you gotta trust us.”

“I do trust you,” sighed Steve. “It’s me I don’t trust. Look at all the shit I’ve caused already. I didn’t tell Tony who I was, I left you in that warehouse. How long before I make the wrong decision again?”

Bucky reached a hand out, placing it on Steve’s shoulder. “Then we’ll make it together. There are always other options, Steve.”

*There are always other options.*

*There are always other options.*

“Steve?” Bucky asked.

The man closed his eyes, before nodding slowly. “You’re right, Buck. There are always other options.”

Bucky smiled. “That’s right, Stevie,” he said, but Steve wasn’t listening.

*They want you to choose between Stark and your crew.*

*There are always other options.*

They don’t want the crew or Tony. That’s not their endgame.

They only want one thing.

*Me.*
“All they want is me.”

“We gotta do everything to keep our family safe, right?” asked Steve.

“You got it, kid. We can think of a way to do it together.”

Steve gave the man a small smile. “Don’t worry, Buck. You already helped in more ways than you know.”

Bucky’s brow furrowed, and Steve could already see the questions forming in his head. “Don’t worry, I’ll explain later. Go get some sleep. We’ll talk in the morning, punk.”

“You sure?”

Steve rolled his eyes, trying to play himself off as carefree. “Yes. Now go on, get your beauty rest.” Bucky patted him on the shoulder before walking out, finally leaving Steve alone.

Steve sighed, sitting back down in his chair and began to wait until everyone would fall asleep. Then he would make his move. Then he’d finally save his family.

Chapter End Notes

Steve, why you do this.
Chapter 38

We need to talk.

Bucky stared down at his phone, still leaning against Steve’s door. Who knew how long he’d been since trying to reason with his friend. Although Steve had promised to get some sleep, Bucky found himself perched on guard in front of his door, protecting Steve from any threats. Protecting Steve from himself. He was halfway through a response to Stark when his phone chimed again. Now.

Bucky frowned. Stark was never the one to initiate their meetings. It was usually just Bucky showing up, desperately trying to bring the other man back with him. If Stark was the one reaching out to him, it probably wasn’t good.

He slunk away from the door, footsteps quiet in their temporary home. Bucky rounded the corner, reaching for the door when he was stopped by Clint.

“Where you off to?”

Bucky showed Clint the messages. “I need you to watch Steve for a bit. Hopefully I won’t be gone long.”

Clint frowned as he stared into the phone. “That doesn’t sound good.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Bucky agreed. “Make sure Steve doesn’t leave,” he continued, pushing the door open and walking outside.

He heard Clint utter a “yes, Mother,” but Bucky didn’t turn back. His shoes trumped through the snow as the harsh New York wind nipped at his neck. Bucky could only hope that Steve didn’t look out the window to see the tracks he left through the snow. It was already tense enough between the two of them; the last thing Bucky needed was for Steve to tear him a new one yet again because he left the building. Hell, it was frustrating enough he couldn’t call Steve out for doing the same thing.

Bucky wanted nothing more than to run back inside, grab his friend by the shoulders and try to shake some sense into him. But he couldn’t. Telling Steve that they all knew about his secret meetings with Loki would only lead to bad news. They had the upper hand; they could keep Steve safe as well as keeping Steve from feeling betrayed that he was meeting with Stark.

Did he feel bad? Of course. Nothing stings worse than having to go behind the back of your brother. It hurts almost as much as knowing that Steve was doing the same thing. But, of course, Bucky had to keep reminding himself that they weren’t good people. They weren’t the ones people rooted for; they definitely weren’t heroes.

This was the only life they knew, secrets and lies their only comforts. That’s why complete trust was hard to come by. Each of The Commandos had had a lifetime of constantly watching their backs because they half expected their coworkers to stab them in the back. You couldn’t get mad at the guy next to you for lying when you were doing the same thing; because of it, however, trust was never an option. It wasn’t until The Commandos were formed that Bucky found how wrong he was.

He still couldn’t figure out how Steve did it; how he brought them all together. They were all so
The drive to Stark’s was agony. Bucky’s head pounded as he tried to think of his best move. He knew, of course, how bad of a person he was. How bad they all were. Steve was always their moral compass, always being the lighthouse to show them the small slivers of humanity they had left. But now? Now they were all so far off the reservation that there was no way to tell between right and wrong. Who was he kidding? There was no right anymore. There were only bad choices left now.

Bucky rubbed a freezing hand over his face as he stomped into the building and up the elevator. It wasn’t long before he found himself parked once again in front of Stark’s door.

“What, did you stop for drive thru? Where the hell have you been?!” The door was barely open before Bucky was dragged inside by a frazzled Stark.

Bucky pushed the man’s hands away. “I came as fast as I could. It’s not easy sneaking out, not with Steve starting to ask questions.”

“We can deal with that later. Right now, we need to- ”

“No,” Bucky disagreed. “I don’t think we can put it off any longer. He’s getting worse, Stark. I mean, I just had a conversation with him, but the man that I talked with was not Steve. He’s gonna do something dumb. Like, Loki dumb. Now look, the boys and I were talking. I know we should tell Steve about Loki, but I’m not. I want you to come back and tell Steve about Loki, because we haven’t yet. I know it’s a shitty move and you can hate me later, but we need you, Stark. The others… the others don’t believe that you’ll come back. Not after everything that’s happened. I know you would’ve, eventually, but we just don’t have that kind of time anymore. We just… we’re desperate. And desperate people will do the worst of things if it means protecting your family.”

Bucky broke off, sucking in a deep breath. Lord, help me. “But I also know that I can’t make you do that. I can’t do that to you; I can’t use Steve against you. I won’t. If you won’t tell Steve, I swear to you that I’ll go back and tell him myself. You won’t have to get involved, hell, you don’t have to see me or any one of us ever again. So I’ll let you decide. It’s your choice.”

Bucky could see the emotions flash across the other man’s face as he waited for the outburst. Hell, Stark might even just kill him right there. But he wasn’t going to lie to Stark. The man’s been through enough shit already; the least Bucky could do is offer something that Stark had probably never had before: a choice.

But Stark just nodded. “Okay.”

Bucky startled. “What?”

“You’re right, you need me. Let’s go.”

Bucky reached out and grabbed his arm. “I’m sorry, did you just miss what I just said? My friends I were planning to coerce you into coming back to work with us.”

Stark shrugged. “If you need to tell them that you needed to blackmail me into coming back, that’s fine. I don’t care.”
Bucky forced the other man to meet his eyes. “Why the hell would you help us,” he whispered. “You’ve got every right to run off into the sunset after all the crap we’ve put you through.”

Stark let out a small sigh. “It’s not like I’ve put you through the same hell. You just didn’t realize it. I used your crew to get to HYDRA; I didn’t really care who made it out or not. I just wanted them gone; you guys were dispensable to me. But...things got complicated. You lost your arm, half your mob just up and left, Steve’s crazy. Part of that’s on me. Gotta clear the conscience somehow.”

“This is on all of us, not just you.”

God, this was such a mess. How the hell could one single bomb be the ruin of them all? With all of them plagued with their own guilt, there was no way they stood a chance against HYDRA. The more he thought about it, maybe it just wasn't worth it. Maybe Bucky should just convince everyone to cut and make a run for it. Was there even a point to keep fighting?

Stark nodded, pulling out of his grip. “Besides, it doesn’t matter. Regardless of everyone sabotaging each other, Steve was still right. We do have a common goal; we can work together. Except this time, it’s not about HYDRA. It’s about saving The Captain.”

Bucky sighed, his remaining hand rubbing absently at his left shoulder. “He’s in deep shit, isn’t he?”

Stark shot him a grave look. “That’s why I needed you to meet with you. JARVIS got me a different angle on who Loki was meeting.”

“That bad?”

“Very bad. Very very bad.”

He frowned, reaching for the picture that Stark was handing him.

Bucky froze.

“That’s not possible,” he whispered, staring down at the photo in disbelief.

“This is camera footage,” Stark said in a soothing tone. “I had JARVIS run every test on it; it hasn’t been tampered with.”

Bucky shook his head. “But...but Steve said.”

“I know what he said. But this,” Tony said, pointing back at the picture. “This makes him wrong. And this makes him very much in danger. Come on, we’re leaving.”

Bucky nodded, already heading to the door. He pulled his out of his jacket, phoning Clint. “What’s up?”

“Where’s Steve?”

“He hasn’t come out yet. The man’s probably still sleeping.”

“Go check.”

“Buck, what’s wrong?”

“Just go check.”
“Alright, Jesus.”

Bucky heard Clint open the door, listening as the man sucked in a breath.

“Shit.”

“What?”

“He’s gone.”

“What do you mean, he’s gone?”

“I mean he’s gone, as in, he’s not here!”

“Goddammit, Clint!”

“Don’t get snappy at me, I’ve been outside the door this whole damn time! He must’ve slipped through the window!”

“Fuck!” Bucky shouted, throwing his phone against the wall in anger.

Steve was gone.

“He’s gone, isn’t he?”

Bucky whirled around, looking at a pale Stark. “Can you track his phone?”

The other man nodded, already dashing back to his computer. “As long as it’s still on, we should be in business.”

“We better pray that it is. Because if you can’t track Steve, then he’s a dead man.”

HYDRA is looking to bring in weapons from Brooklyn to Manhattan. Quickest way to do so is over the river. You’ll find your answers out there.

Steve stared down at his phone, rechecking what Loki had sent him.

It had been a little harder sneaking out this time, what with Bucky and the rest of his crew hovering over his shoulder. He could only hope that they could forgive him one day. Keeping this from them nearly killed him, but if he had let this opportunity pass, then it would have actually killed them. If there was one thing Steve knew he could still do, it was protect his family one last time.

Loki, of course, thought he was a mad man for offering up himself, but Steve paid him no mind. A few idle threats and Loki was texting him the best possible location for where he could find the current head of HYDRA. It was disconcerting how much the man knew, but Steve knew Loki’s business was information. This would be the best chance he had to finally ending this. Steve sucked in another breath and continued through the sand.

For years, the East River has served as a mode for transportation, regardless of the season. In the summer, boats flooded through, offering multiple options for transport. The cold winters on New York could always create ice bridges for people to cross. For a while, it even served as a highway
for smuggling in booze during the prohibition era. Now, it only made sense that HYDRA would be using the same route, most likely using it to smuggle in weapons. No way anyone would run into cops out on a body of water.

Steve trudged further along the bank, pulling his coat farther up against his neck. He scanned the shore line and out into the frozen waters, looking for any movement.

There was. Out, towards the middle of the river, stood a single man. Warning bells shot up in Steve’s mind, but he ignored them as he carefully stepped onto the ice. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered until his family was safe.

Steve couldn’t tell if the man had seen him or not; the figure remained in one place as Steve walked carefully out to him. Each step was painstakingly slow; the ice made no protest, but Steve wasn’t taking any chances.

The man looked unarmed, but that didn’t mean anything in Steve’s book. It looked as if blood matted his face, his stance threatening and stoic. It wasn’t until Steve got closer until he realized it wasn’t blood at all. It was a mask.

No. No, it can’t be.

“You,” Steve whispered, eyes widening as he closed the rest of the gap between them.

The mask of the Red Skull stared right on back, the connecting head tilting to the side slightly.

Steve’s hand trembled as he pointed at the other man. “How…,” he faltered, shaking his head. “You’re not here. You’re not real. I killed you.”

The rough voice that answered him sent chills down his spine. Just like it used to. “Did you?”

“Yes,” Steve hissed. “You’re not really here.”

“Are you sure?” The skull chuckled. “You can’t even trust your own head anymore; you’ve gone too far off the rails. Am I real? Or am I the thing that plagues your head every night? Or am I both?”

Steve’s heart pounded, blood rushing through his veins. This wasn’t right. Skull was dead; Schmidt was dead. He’d seen it with his own eyes. Right? Was there anyone else that could have brought HYDRA back from the grave? Who better to do it than a man who was also supposed to be dead?

“Come now, Captain. We have business to discuss.”

“What do you want? You already have me.” snapped Steve.

“How naive of you,” murmured The Skull. “Surely by now you would have figured out that why you’ve survived as long as you have.”

“You need what I know,” answered Steve. “You need the SSR’s secrets.”

“Yes,” The Skull sneered. “All those little secrets, locked inside that head of yours. Or so everyone thought.”

Steve furrowed his brows. “What are you on about? Stop stalling. You want to do business? Fine. You call your men off of my family, and I will go with you and tell you anything you want to know. Simple as that. As long as you stay away from my crew I will keep feeding you
information.”

“Simple as that, you say,” Skull snorted. “I’m sorry, but no deal.”

“No deal? You said yourself you need those secrets, and I’m giving you me! What more could you want?”

“I do need those secrets, but now I know that I don’t need you,” The Skull responded, edging closer to Steve. “The SSR had been around since World War II. That’s a lot of information to have collected over the years, don’t you think? And you remember it all?”

Steve clenched his jaw. “I’ve got a good memory.”

“You don’t have to lie to me, Steven Rogers. Because it is a lie, isn’t it? You don’t know any of their secrets. You just know where to find them.” When Steve didn’t answer, The Skull continued. “I’m right, aren’t I? They’re not inside your head; they’re in a bunch of file cabinets. And the SSR chose you to be the keeper, didn’t they?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Steve answered back fiercely. “Only I know where the files are. Any physical copies of the locations were destroyed in the fire you made. Doesn’t matter which way you spin it, you still need me.”

“You think you’re so clever, don’t you?” mocked The Skull. “You waltzing up here like you still have all the power? I’m sorry to disappoint you, but you don’t; you never have. Even while you’ve been running amuck in this city with your hounds, I’ve been here. Even when you’ve cut new deals and made new allies, I’ve been here. Waiting, waiting for the right moment to strike.”

“You need better monologues.”

“And you need better friends,” retorted The Skull. “A little birdie told you that you could find me here? Well, the little birdie told me the same thing.”

Steve’s cold ran cold. “Loki?”

The Skull chuckled, the sinister laugh echoing around his mask. “How do you think he knew so much? How do you think I knew so much? Oh, you didn’t trust him, did you? But you did! And you told him the location of the files, just in case your crew needed to catch up. Trying to cover all of our bases, were we? Well, guess what? He told me too.”

No no no no no. Loki was on his side. Loki needed HYDRA gone as much as he did. He told Steve, he promised Steve. Betrayal coursed through Steve’s body. He should’ve known better; he did know better. Everyone tried to stop him, but did he listen? No. He’d failed again.

“Did you really think Loki was on your side?” Skull chuckled, pulling out a gun. “That he would keep your secrets? The game is over, Captain.”

“Fine,” Steve whispered in defeat. “Kill me, take the files, I don’t care. Just spare my crew.”

The Red Skull sighed. “You really aren’t in the position to be making demands, are you?”

“Please.” It slipped out of his mouth before he could stop himself. A final plea from a broken man. He had nothing else to say, nothing else to give, but he couldn’t not try anyway. They were everything to him. He wasn’t afraid of dying - he was only afraid of dying knowing that others would follow.
The Skull laughed again, aiming his gun at Steve. “Pathetic,” he sneered. “No. I won’t spare your crew, I won’t spare Mr. Stark. I won’t spare anyone who has ever muttered your name or seen your face. But don’t worry. I’ll make sure to tell each and every one of them that it was your fault, so when they take their last breaths, they’ll know you failed them.”

“They’ll stop you,” Steve uttered. “They’re stronger than you, stronger than me. I have faith.”

The Skull cocked his gun. “Faith isn’t going to save you.”

Steve shut his eyes, waiting. The sound of the gun firing pierced his ears, splitting right through the wind. Steve’s body automatically flinched, the man waiting for the void to take him.

But it didn’t come.

Steve’s eyes snapped open, looking back at The Skull and the muzzle of the gun, which was aimed at him feet.

He heard it before he saw it. The cracking of ice.

By the time Steve’s gaze fell to his feet, a whole network of spider web cracks had emanated from the bullet hold, the ice lurching and groaning under the stress of Steve’s weight. Steve tried to move back, but the fast shift caused the ice to split right down the middle, the blonde forcing himself to freeze before he caused any more disruptions.

He could hear The Skull saying something to him, but he could hear nothing over the roaring of his own ears as he watched the other man aim up another shot.

*There needs to be a way out. There’s always a way out.*

Nothing answered Steve but the harsh wind. There was no way out.

*This is it.*

“Goodbye, Captain.”

Another shot rang out.

The last thing Steve heard was a scream of his name before the ice gave way completely, the frozen water of the East River swallowing him, dragging him into the depths.
“He’s where?”

“Did I stutter?” Tony snapped. “He’s in the East River!”

“It doesn’t make any sense,” Barnes said, even as the car jolted forward with increase speed, the driver changing lanes to adjust to their new course. “What the hell could he be doing there?”

“Something stupid, that’s what.”

Tony lurched as Barnes took another sharp turn. Why he decided that it was alright for a one armed man to drive was beyond him. “Am I going the right way?”

“Yeah,” Tony responded, looking back down at his phone. “JARVIS has his location locked in, so unless Steve decided to throw this phone into the river, then Steve will definitely be there.”

“Since when is he ‘Steve’ again?”

Tony glared at the other man. “Really? You’re gonna do this now?”

“Just trying to make conversation,” Barnes replied, a small smirk adorning his face.

“I liked it better when you hated me.”

Barnes laughed before pressing down farther on the gas pedal. “Turn off here. He should be straight ahead!”

Barnes obliged, quickly stopping the car along a beachfront lot. The two men scurried out, their eyes already looking out at the river. Tony looked down at the ice with concern. “You think he’s out there?”

Barnes surveyed the frozen wasteland. “There!” he shouted, pointing in the distance. Sure enough, Steve’s familiar figure stood out against the white ice, standing with who Tony assumed to be The Red Skull.

The two took off towards the other pair. Until a shot rang out. Tony stumbled, heart seizing, while Barnes roared. They skid to a halt, waiting to see which figure fell. But nothing happened. Tony was about to open his mouth when another shot sounded, the two men watched in horror as Steve went down.

“Steve!” The two men cried out in unison as they watched The Captain fall to the depths of the river. They took off immediately, keeping their feet light as they dashed across the dangerous ice.

The Red Skull snapped his head towards the two, quickly taking off in the other direction. Without a moment of hesitation, Tony pulled out his hand gun, firing at the retreating man, but to no avail. Tony wanted nothing more than to chase after the man and pump all his rounds into him, but Steve was the priority. The pair raced up to the now gaping hole in the river, the ice floating almost innocently atop the deep abyss.

“What the hell are you doing?” asked Tony, turning to watch Barnes strip off his winter coat.
“Steve never learned how to swim.”

Tony’s heart lurched as his eyes snapped down at the dark water below them. Oh God, Steve. Tony heard Barnes struggling to take off his shoes, so he spun back around to the other man, trying to stop him. “Barnes, you’ve got one arm! How are you going to drag him back up? Stay here; I’ll go.”

Barnes snatched his arm. “You can’t go in there! It’s too dangerous.”

“Does it look like I care?” Tony hissed, eyes darting back down to the black hole that had engulfed The Captain. They were wasting precious time that they already didn't have.

“Well, I do,” Barnes snapped back, throwing his jacket at Tony. “Steve isn’t the only one who can’t swim.” And with that, the other man jumped into the water. Tony blinked in shock, unable to come up with a retort as the other brunette leapt in. Some of the water from Barnes’ wave slashed onto Tony’s bare skin; the man shuddered, the freezing droplets turning his veins to ice. Steve was in that.

Tony groaned as he began to pace. This was all his fault. Barnes had tried, begged, that he come back. That they needed them. That Steve needed them. And Tony had ignored him. He had refused to take the bait, unable to work himself up to take that final step again. He had been terrified, haunted even, by the idea of what other secrets they were keeping from him, and what else they could use against him. So he had pushed them all away, like the rest of his problems. And now, Steve was paying the price for it.

Tony looked back at the water again. Where the hell was Barnes? Shouldn’t he have found Steve by now? If Steve couldn’t swim, God only knows how long he could hold his breath. What if there was a current? What if hypothermia kicked in?

Tony was about five seconds from jumping in himself when Barnes broke the surface again, chest heaving as he gulped down huge gasps of air. Before Tony could ask him anything, the man disappeared again, only to push Steve’s limp body above him. Tony reached out instantly, pulling The Captain up onto solid ground. He placed Steve under him, a shaking hand pressing against the blonde’s clammy neck. If Barnes heard the ghastly sob that left Tony’s throat when he was met with a weak pulse, he didn’t comment.

Tony spun around quickly after accepting that Steve was still alright, and reached back down to help heft Barnes out of the water. The man was almost as pale as Steve, his breath coming in harsh pants. How he was able to drag over two hundred pounds of a wet Steve with one arm, Tony would never know. Tony threw the man’s jacket back around his shoulders, checking he was okay. The man was shaking with violent tremors, but he grunted out a short confirmation before shooing Tony back towards Rogers.

Tony ripped off his own jacket, placing it over the mob boss. “Steve?” he tried. “Steve? Can you hear me?”

“Don’t bother, he’s out,” Barnes grit out. “We need to get him dry. Now.”

Tony nodded, pulling Barnes to his feet. “You alright to do this?”

“Of course. Come on, grab his other arm.” Both Tony and Barnes reached down, grabbing Steve by each of his arms.

Dragging Steve back to the car was painstakingly slow, what with Steve’s weight and Barnes’ own
stumbling. When they finally reached the vehicle, they laid Steve in the back, Tony tucking his jacket over him again before crawling in behind him.

“Get us to your people. Bruce will know what to do.” The car lurched as Barnes threw the car into drive, the three men finally leaving the frozen river behind.

Tony leaned back towards Steve, patting the cold cheek gently. “Steve? Come on, Steve, up and at ‘em.” When the blonde refused to answer, Tony got more frantic. He pressed his body against the sleeping man, praying that his body heat was enough to keep Steve breathing.

The car door was ripped open. “What the hell happened?” Tony snapped his head up to be met with the face of Clint Barton. Tony had been so distraught over Steve that he hadn’t even realized that they’d reached The Commandos current hideout.

“They’ve both been in the river,” answered Tony, not missing a step. “Get them to Bruce.” Tony was surprised when Barton just nodded, stepping back as a plethora of hands finally pulled Steve away from him and into the old building, Barton himself going around to the front to help Barnes out of the car. Tony followed them in, not wanting any distance between him and Steve.

Tony sighed in relief as Bruce burst through the door, already snapping orders at the men. He watched as both Barnes and Steve were torn away from their sopping wet clothes, towels already running over their damp skin. Wilson was laying out thick blankets while Bruce knelt over Steve, checking the man for other injuries. Tony stepped forward, wanting to help, needing to help, when an arm reached out and pulled him back.

“Bruce will take care of them now,” Barton’s voice filled his ears. “Follow me.”

Numbly, Tony found himself following the other man, not without a final glance towards a still silent Steve. Barton led him to a smaller room, towards the back, and for a hot second, Tony thought Barton was bringing him back here to kill him. That was, until clothes were thrust into his hands.

“Here,” the man said quietly.

Tony stared down at them until realization hit. “Oh, of course. I’ll bring these back for Steve, and—”

“Relax, Stark. Bruce can take care of them. These are for you.”

Tony stared at the other man quizzically until he finally glanced down at his clothes. Turns out cuddling a freezing mob boss in the backseat of a car can leave some lasting damage on clothes. “I’ll be fine,” Tony replied. “I’m not that wet.”

Barton rolled his eyes. “Humor me.”

“I’m really fine, Barton,” Tony continued to argue, even as he stripped to put on the new clothes. “After all, I didn’t take an unscheduled bath in the river today.”

“You’re shaking.”

Damn his sniper eyes.

Tony frowned, looking down at his hands. They were shaking. “Maybe that’s not from the cold,” he found himself whispering.
A warm hand fell onto his shoulder. Tony barely managed to meet Barton’s gaze. “You saved him. You saved Steve.”

Tony shrugged. “Last time I checked, Barnes was the one who jumped in after him.”

“And you pulled him from a burning building. That means you saved them both in my book.”

“Well you’ve got a really strange way of showing gratitude, buddy,” Tony drawled.

Barton was silent for a long moment, the arched tearing his eyes away from Tony. “I understand, you know. Why you can’t trust us. Hell, I never thought I could ever trust anyone like I do with them. Growing up in the circus, there was no trust. You were always on your own. I was only eight when I started sleeping with a dagger under my pillow because I didn’t want people to come and steal my things.”

Tony narrowed his eyes. “What is this?”

“I’m just saying that I get that we’re asking a lot from a guy who’s been through a lot of shit.”

“I’m still not following,” Tony answered. “Is this the part where you kill me?”

Barton sighed, his shoulders slumping in defeat. “This is why Nat should have taken care of this. I’m saying I was wrong, dickhead. That we were wrong. About you.”

Tony cocked his head to the side. “You didn’t think I’d come back?”

Barton shrugged. “None of us did, besides Bucky. You didn’t trust us, we didn’t trust you. Our life has taught us nothing but to see the worst in people.”

Tony bit his lip. “Do you trust me now?”

“No,” Barton responded. “But I’m willing to learn how.”

Tony knew a peace offering when he saw one. He reached his hand out, sighing in relief when Barton met him halfway for a firm handshake. “But why? Bucky said you all just wanted to use me to get Steve back. Steve’s here now; why do you still need me?”

Barton shook his head, frowning slightly. “You ever read Peter Pan?”

Tony stared at the man, confused at the topic change. “I’m familiar with it, yes.”

“It was my favorite story when I was growing up.”

“Is this really the time to be talking about a flying kid?”

“I don’t want to talk about him. I wanna talk about Wendy.”

Tony shot him a curious gaze. “Wendy?”

Barton nodded. “You see,” he started. “None of the Lost Boys liked it when Wendy showed up. In some of the older stories, they actually shot Wendy out of the sky when she went flying into Neverland. They were so afraid that Wendy would take Peter away. That they’d wake up one morning and they’d be alone again.”

“I get it, Wendy wasn’t popular,” Tony grit out.
“It wasn’t until she decided to leave that they realized that they didn’t want her to go. That it wasn’t just Peter they needed.”

Tony scowled at the man. “You need me to be your mother?”

“I need you to be here. You kept Steve safe, kept my family safe, while the rest of us tried to throw you out like yesterday’s trash. You stood by our side, through everything. Lord knows why; I know I sure as hell wouldn’t have. Just shows that you’re the best one of us here; it shows what Steve saw in you. I don’t know why it took so long for me to see that.”

Tony bit his lip, feeling a small flush form against his cheeks. It felt wonderful on his frigid skin. He definitely wasn't planning for this type of reunion of The Commandos, if any type at all, but any scenario that he predicted in his head never ended up being welcomed back with open arms. Could Barton really mean it?

He was correct that the lack of trust was detrimental to them all—they'd been so bust trying to stay on opposite sides, they didn't realize that they needed each other to keep the other from drowning. Turns out literally, Tony thought with another shudder.

Barton was making amends, assuming Tony was here to stick around. Was he? When he jumped in the car with Barnes to go and save Steve - there was no hesitation. It was if all of their problems had evaporated, and his brain couldn't focus on anything besides Steve and danger. Was this was what it was like, to be part of a group like this? Did Tony want this? Steve would probably pull through, and now that all the dust had settled, was it time for him to go back to square one and head home alone, or should he stay?

There was no way to say which would be the best route. Sure, the original partnership he had with The Captain and The Commandos had been devastating, almost lethal. But Barnes was right; he wasn't making any progress on his own, and he was miserable. Rogers and his ragtag group of criminals were a constant in his head. They frustrated him, even infuriated him to no end, but they were still there. Stubbornly staying in the forefront in his mind, like an itch he couldn't scratch.

After today, he was starting to think that maybe they couldn't move past him either.

So, who knows what the hell he was supposed to do. He's almost sure what he wants to do, so that will have to do for now. He always did have a shit preservation instinct anyway.

Tony smirked, eyeing a clearly nervous Barton. “And you’re supposed to have the best eyes around here. That’s embarrassing.”

Barton barked out a laugh. “Yeah, well, I’m just some kid from Iowa. Definitely not the brightest bulb there is.”

“I guess I’ll forgive you,” chuckled Tony.

“Have you?” Barton asked in a serious tone.

“No,” Tony answered. “But I’m willing to learn how.”

Barton grinned, clapping Tony on the shoulder. “That’s the spirit,” he smiled. “Now, go check on your boy,” he said, pushing Tony back through the door. Walking back towards the front of the building, Tony felt a weight lift from his chest. I guess I just made my decision. No going back now.

By the time he returned to Steve’s room, Bruce and the others had cleared out, leaving only a scowling Barnes on the floor next to his friend. Of course, wrapped up in blankets like a burrito made Barnes look more like a sad, wet puppy than a pissed gangster. Since Barnes didn’t respond
when he entered the room, Tony broke the silence.

“How did you know?”

“How?” Bucky looked up from where he was sitting with Steve.

“How did you know I can’t swim?”

Barnes snorted softly. “You ramble when you’re nervous.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You don’t shut up. I’ve been going into your office every day. And every day you sit there, looking like you’re just waiting for me to kill you. I make you nervous. So you prattle on and on about God knows what. You not knowing how to swim slipped out. You said something about how Howard never bothered to have you learn, that he thought it was a waste of time. Said that it was just simple buoyancy and momentum; that if you couldn’t figure it out if you were stuck in water, then you deserved to drown.”

This time it was Tony who snorted. “That was Howard, for you.” He turned to look at the other man. “You remembered that?”

Barnes shrugged.

For the first time in a very long time, Tony found himself smiling. “Thank you.”

Barnes groaned softly as he forced himself up, walking towards the door, blankets trailing along the floor with each step. “No,” he retorted. “Thank you.”

Tony watched as the other brunette slipped away, the door closing gently behind him. Finally alone, Tony turned his attention back towards Steve. He was still very pale, almost fragile looking huddled in the blankets. Tony could almost see the faint resemblance of that small broken boy that he’d seen in the photos from The Captain’s old office. He looked young like this. Without his eyes open, there was no way to see the weariness and heartbreak he carries in his stormy orbs.

Hesitantly, Tony laid a hand on Steve’s forehead, happy to find some warmth finally reach back at him. Without thinking, he slowly pushed his hand farther back, pushing through the barely damp stands of Steve’s soft hair. He sighed, before leaning against the wall, letting gravity do the rest as he slipped down to the floor, making sure his hand still rest in Steve’s hair. After staring for long moments at the steady rise and fall of Steve’s chest, Tony finally felt his eyes slip shut.

Chapter End Notes

Readers,

Terribly sorry about the missed update last Sunday. I was in the hospital for a few days and I wasn't able to get to my computer. When I did get home, I just figured that it would be easier to just wait until Sunday rather than throwing up a chapter willy-nilly.

So. Sorry for the delay, but we're back on schedule! Enjoy!
It was warm.

No, not that kind of warm. Not the kind where he had to roll up his sleeves to stay cool in a sweltering summer. Not the kind where his legs always stuck to the backs of leather seats. Not where he tasted the salt from his brow, or felt the dampness of his clothes.

No.

It was a different warmth.

Like when he felt the sun trickling in through his blinds in the morning. It was that first sip of tea pushed gently to him by careful hands, the soothing liquid gliding easily down his throat. It was a soft Russian lullaby, keeping his nightmares at bay. It was a pair of comforting hands on his shoulders; whispers reaching his ears, one offering guidance, the other cracking jokes. It was a laugh, so merry and contagious, that it put Santa Claus to shame. It was a constant presence to his left; a strong force to hold him up whenever he felt like crumbling. It was a soft smile and bright, crinkled eyes, white teeth flashing brightly against a computer’s glow.

Maybe this was what death felt like.

He had been so cold; it was as if the ice was in his veins. It was all encompassing, like Death’s stony hand had been the one to catch his fall instead of the frigid waters. He didn’t remember screaming; the shock had been too much, his reaction time freezing like the rest of his extremities. But it had been anything but quick. The cold was misleading; nothing more than a spider trapping him instantly in its web, only to play with him before finishing the job. It seeped into him; first the skin, then the bones, finally to the soul. It taunted him, laughing as it took everything from him as he lay paralyzed. There was no white light, there was no fade to black. No virgins came to take him away, no man stood waiting for him at a pearly gate. There was just the cold. Nothing but the cold.

But it was gone now, almost as if it was never there to begin with. But he knew it was still in there. Somewhere, hiding behind the current warm glow. The cold had claimed him. Who knows how much of himself he’d gotten back. Who knows how long it’ll be before the cold comes to take him back again. He couldn’t go back. He couldn’t. The frozen depths the hell he never knew existed; the calm, dark waters an endless pit of despair, as the silence drove him insane. He jolted, trying to latch on to the warmth, the comfort, praying, willing, for it not to go away. It was coming for him again. The cold. It was reaching out, its grip tight around his throat, and he can’t, he can’t, he can’t-

“Shhhhh.”

He froze.

The sound echoed again. A small whisper of a breeze.

“It’s alright,” it lulled. “You’re safe, now.”

He turned, drawn like a cat to the sun, stretching to get closer to the soothing tones. A hand
pushed through his hair, fingers tracing his head almost as gently as the voice had. “Relax, Capsicle.” Warm breath puffed into his neck. “Take a breather; we’ve got you. I’ve got you.”

He sighed, feeling his body going limp. The tension was gone, the ice retreating from his veins. He drifted, finally floating instead of sinking. He wasn’t cold.

He was warm.

Steve woke to the sound of rustling. His body was pushed slightly from side to side as a hand tucked a blanket tight around his chest. He groaned; well, at least he tried too. The wheeze that broke from his throat sounding more like a rusty car engine trying to start.

“Steve? You with me, pal?”

Bucky.

Steve cracked his eyes open, grateful when he was met with a muted light instead of a blinding one. His vision was soon blocked off by his friend, Steve blinking rapidly until the concerned face drew into focus.

“You look like shit,” Steve ground out, breaking off into a few pathetic coughs.

Bucky laughed softly, reaching for a glass of water. “Well, it’s a good thing you haven’t seen yourself, Princess.” The brunette leaned back towards Steve, gripping the back of his neck gently as he guided Steve’s mouth to the cup.

Water poured down his throat, Steve’s eyes snapping wide open. He sputtered yanking himself away, and it was too cold, too cold, too cold-

“Hey, hey, hey! Calm down; I’ve got you, Stevie.” Bucky’s arms were around him, holding him through his tremors. Steve sucked in quick breaths, hoping the air would quell the freezing burn in his throat.

“I’m sorry,” he choked out, his hands gripping Bucky so tight that he was sure he’d leave bruises.

“It’s alright,” Bucky responded, letting his body be squished, even leaning closer. “Probably shouldn’t have led with the water, hmm?” Steve didn’t respond, just opting to press closer to his friend. “You should probably lie back down; Bruce says you’re going to have quite a fever to deal with.”

Steve let Bucky push him back down onto the bed. “What happened?” he asked.

Bucky frowned, looking away. “You fell. Through the ice.”

Steve shuddered. “I know. There was… it was cold. But how am I here?” Steve broke off, looking back at his friend. Bucky was pale, his dark hair looking more black against the pastiness of his skin. He was in a sweatshirt, one of Steve’s, with a blanket thrown across his own back. Oh God. Steve’s heart clenched as he put two and two together.

He opened his mouth to speak, but Bucky through his hand up, effectively stopping him. “I’m gonna stop you right there. Because that lecture that’s on the tip of your tongue right now? I don’t
wanna hear it.”

Steve’s lips curled into a frown. “Bucky, you could have gotten yourself killed. You’ve already lost an arm on my account; I can’t have you losing your life over- ”

“I can’t believe you,” Bucky hissed. “I mean, who am I kidding? I should’ve known those would have been the first words out of your goddamn mouth. That’s so classic you!” Bucky broke off with a huff as he began to pace around the room. “Because you’re right. You’re so right. It was such a better option for me to let you drown.”

“Buck, I didn’t mean- ”

“But you did! And here’s what I don’t get. I don’t understand why you get to sit there and yell at me, when I know you would’ve done the exact same thing. Are you telling me that if you were there as our home burned to the ground, you would’ve took off running? That you would’ve ran to safety and left me to die?”

Steve sighed. “Bucky, you know what I’ve done to you all this past month. I wasn’t worth- ”

“Don’t you dare finish that fucking sentence. You need to listen good and hard, Steve. I lose another arm? Fine. I go blind or lose my voice? Who cares? I lose all my memories? Who needs them? I’ll lose them, Steve, and I won’t even blink an eye. Because I don’t need ‘em. Because there is only one thing on this planet that I absolutely cannot lose, and that’s you.”

“Buck,” Steve’s voice wobbled.

“Is this what it felt like?” Bucky continued, not even hearing him. “When you saw me after the fire? Because I can’t- ” Bucky sighed, voice breaking off with a croak. “I tried, Stevie. I tried so damn hard. I tried to help, I did, but it wasn’t enough. I’ve never been enough. Not when your Ma died, not when you lost Peggy, not with any of them. But this time, I really thought I could. I thought I knew what I was doing; I thought I could fix all the things I’d broken, and I…. I couldn’t.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Bucky looked back over at him, his eyes wild and red rimmed. “Wanna know why we were there when the bombs went off? Because I wouldn’t let us leave. Wanna know why Stark knows your name? Because I called out for you. Wanna know why you almost drowned? Because I let you. I let it happen. I could’ve stopped you, but I was just trying so damn hard. Trying so hard to fix things that I couldn’t see I was breaking them even more.”

“No, Buck,” Steve moaned. “You can’t do this to yourself; I won’t let you.”

But Bucky was already shaking his head. “I’m sorry, Steve. I’m so sorry,” he whispered.

“Bucky, listen to me. There is- ”

Bucky sucked in a sharp breath, no doubt trying to regulate his heart rate. “Don’t defend me, Steve. God, what am I doing? You’re still recovering. I’ll go get Bruce, and- ”

“Bucky, wait!”

But the other man was already gone, slipping quickly through the open door.

Steve flopped his head on the pillows. What have I done?
Steve knew he had been falling apart the last month, but not once had he stopped to take a look at what he was doing to his own crew. Bucky was his rock, his foundation. He never faltered; always there to pick Steve back up after he lost his footing.

But now? Steve had broken him. He could see it in Bucky’s eyes. No doubt the rest of the crew had that same haunted look about them.

Bucky was right. He had tried. They all had. Steve was on a slippery slope, and they all tried to pull him back to safety. But did he listen? Of course not. He thought that he was helping, that he was protecting them. And look what happened to him. Look what happened to them. If Bucky had looked that haunted, there was no doubt in his mind that the rest of his family was carrying the same weight.

This was all his fault.

“Well, that was dramatic.”

Steve’s head whipped to the door, mouth gaping open as he saw Tony Stark leaning casually against the door frame. At first glance, he looked eons better than the last time they interacted. The red, irritated skin covering in bruises and cuts had returned to its natural olive. Gone was the soot and sweat soaked hair, replaced now by soft, tousled locks. Even the anger in his face was gone, a soft smile and warm eyes in its place. Well, at least my actions put someone back together, he couldn't help but think. Even though, Steve could see the other man wringing his hands with worry, his lips bruised from biting, his eyes weighed down by dark bags.

None of this explained why he was here. “…Tony?” he asked, not sure if the man was a hallucination.

“You’ll have to forgive him,” Tony continued. “He hasn’t had breakfast yet. He tends to get cranky if he hasn’t eaten. Well, more cranky than usual.” Steve continued to stare at the man as he kept talking. “Of course, who knows if food could’ve stopped that soap opera moment, am I right? I mean, that was pretty intense. You know what? I think it’s the hair. It adds that extra touch to the whole self-loathing thing he’s got going- ”

“Tony.”

Tony whirled around to face him. “Yeah, that’s still me. What’s with the face? Do I have something in my teeth? You know, I just ate with Bruce and he said I was good, but that man is such a troll.”

Steve glanced around the room again. What the hell was happening? Maybe he was really dead.

“Hey,” Tony’s voice filtered in again. “You okay? You look pale; you need another blanket?”

“What are you doing here?” Steve uttered in a small voice.

“Ah,” Tony responded. “Yeah, you might have missed a few things when you were doing time as a Capsicle.”

“I-I don’t,” Steve started, but yet again, found himself lost for words. Tony couldn't be here, he shouldn't be here. Not after what he had done. He should be home, safe, typing away on a computer to - Steve froze when the realization hit. “You found me, didn’t you?” he started again.

“Only because Barnes asked so nicely,” Tony smiled.
Steve took a deep breath. “Tony, I-”

“Don’t,” Tony cut him off. “There’s a time for that conversation, but it’s not now. Not gonna lie, Cap, but we’re not doing so good right now. We’ve made some pretty bad decisions recently; all of us have. We need a leader.”

Steve looked up at him, trying to keep his face neutral. “We?” he whispered.

Tony snorted. “Yeah, asshole. We. As in you, me, and all those mutts out there,” he said, nodding to the open door. At Steve’s shocked face, Tony continued. “Square deal?” he asked, putting a hand out.

Steve reached for it immediately, not caring how desperate it may have made him look. “You sure about this?” he replied. After what I did? was left unspoken.

“No,” Tony laughed in honestly. ”But I don’t really have time to sit back and think about it. It’s time to buck up, soldier, shut your goddamned mouth, and let your engineer help you.”

“Yeah, I don’t know if I can do the whole ‘adhering to authority’ thing,” Steve smiled, reciting from memory.

“Well, that’s too bad, because I’ve already called a family meeting.”

Tony uttering the word family had his heart skipping a beat, giving him a glimpse of a future that he saw back in their now demolished home when he offered Tony a job as a Commando. He’d thought that hope had burned in the flames, died as Tony ran, leaving him in that cemetery. But here it was; a beaten, bruised, and thread of a chance. Hope that the bridge may not have burned completely after all.

Steve’s smile lessened, pulling on the hand he still had in his own, bringing his other one to encircle the wrist gently. He looked up at Tony, letting his vulnerability show. “Will you stay?”

Will you give me another chance?

Tony’s eyes softened, leaning into Steve’s touch. “Yeah, Steve. I’m not going anywhere. Not this time.” Steve would have been lying if he hadn’t shuddered when Tony used his real name. “Besides, there’s only one way we’re gonna beat these guys.”

Steve nodded, following Tony’s train of thought.

“Together.”

Chapter End Notes

First of all, thank you to everyone for such kind thoughts; they really meant a lot to me and always managed to put a smile on my face as I read them through the week. I am happy to report that I am in tip-top shape and ready for action! And when I say action, I mean doing what I always do, which is curl up in my snuggie and waste away on the internet.

Secondly, I will be out of town this coming weekend, so the next update might not be in on Sunday. However, I don't want to push it off and make you guys wait a whole
extra week. So, the next update will probably be that Monday or Tuesday. That way you won't have to wait two whole weeks for the next chapter. Hopefully that's cool beans with everyone.
Steve moved slowly, his feet shuffling loudly against the floor. Even with the thick layers piled around him, Steve could still feel the heat from Tony’s hand on his back as the smaller man guided him into the next room. Tony led him over to a herd of chairs, carefully ushering Steve into the most padded one. A sharp throb coursed in his chest, reminded of their gathering table at their old house, now only ash and dust. Steve let out a soft groan as he all but collapsed into the furniture, wanting nothing more than to be back in bed, ignoring the world for a little while longer.

But he couldn’t. He made this mess; it was about damn time he go clean it up.

Steve watched as the rest of his closest confidants filled the empty seats around him, offering nothing but soothing smiles. Steve’s chest panged in guilt as his team, as always, came to him with open arms. That after everything he’d done, they could still sit next to him. He didn’t deserve it.

He heard Tony flop next to him, the man’s presence still a complete shock. Steve held him in sight, afraid that if he looked away for too long, the engineer would disappear again. It wasn’t long before the seats were filled; all but one. Steve frowned, looking to the vacant seat at his right. His heart rate skyrocketed unconsciously, his body tensing as he tried to jump into action.

“Relax,” Tony’s voice filtered into his left ear, a soft grip appearing on his shoulder. “Barnes is fine. He’s just sulking. Don’t worry; he’s not going anywhere.”

Steve slumped with relief, just barely able to cover the rotten taste he felt in his mouth. God, Bucky. How could he have let this happen? How could he just sit there while his friend wasted away? Bucky had spent his entire life supporting Steve, always making sure that the other man was taken care of. But the one time Bucky needed him, Steve had left him to suffer. His obsession with keeping him safe only managed to result in neglect. Steve could only thank God that Tony had been there to keep Bucky sane while Steve fell off the deep end. It was almost unreal how Bucky had managed to find his footing again with probably his least favorite person. But again, that only shows how desperate the man had been in searching for a purpose, having to reach into no man’s land to find comfort that his own allies couldn’t give him.

*One problem at a time.*

Steve nodded slightly, returning his focus to the scarcely filled room. The silence was deafening, everyone seemingly curling around themselves, leaving open spaces between them nothing more than unseen barriers, closing each one off from the others. The room was lifeless, as if he was viewing the scene before him in black and white. Gone, it seemed, were the days of camaraderie, of trust, of faith. He found himself closing his eyes, fingers scrubbing harshly against his closed lids. “Where’s everyone else?” he asked quietly, opening his eyes to look at Clint.

The other man looked away. “This is everyone,” he whispered.

Steve found himself nodding again, unable to process the numb feeling beginning to engulf his body. Of course. Of course it wasn’t just Bucky that he’d broken. It wasn’t just Tony. It was everyone. Steve had left every last member of his crew out to dry. He’d promised them, promised *all* of them. He’d promised to protect them, to stand with them as their brother in arms. There was once a time where whispering ‘The Commandos’ on the street had people running for cover. If
only they could see them now. If only they could see the blank stares, the dull bodies. Powerful defenders and heroes, forgotten and left to rot, like marble statues crumbling in a desolate garden.

Steve surveyed the people that were left: Tony, Clint, Bruce, Thor, Natasha, and Sam. Maybe Bucky.

“I’m sorry, Cap,” Clint continued. “I tried, but with everything that’s happened, people just…. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t,” Steve stopped him. “You did everything you could to keep this family afloat. I’ll forever be in your debt for doing what I couldn’t. This is on me, Clint. Everything that’s happened; it’s all on me.”

“Now is not the time for us to be paying the blame game,” Tony interjected. “I mean, we could probably sit here for days talking about all of the mistakes we’ve made. But we’ve got bigger fish to fry right now.”

Sam nodded. “Stark’s right. The Red Skull’s still out there.”

“So it is true then,” said Bruce. “He’s not really dead?”

“There’s no way. Steve killed him,” Clint interjected. Steve shuddered, picturing the menacing red mask staring at him on the other side of ice, laughing as he slipped further and further away from the surface.

“But he was there at the river,” Tony argued. “Barnes and I saw him!”

“Was it really him, Steve? What did he sound like? What kind of mannerisms did he have?” Natasha asked.

Steve rubbed at his forehead. How the hell was he supposed to answer that. It’s not like he had really been focusing on anything, except for the gun, and the cold, the cold, the cold-

“It doesn’t matter,” Tony swooped in, as if feeling Steve’s discomfort. “It could be Schmidt or it could be just some random guy on the street; it doesn’t matter. The Red Skull is a symbol. As soon as he starts popping up around town again, the whole city’s going to be in a panic. We need a plan.”

“Well, we don’t exactly have a lot going for us,” mused Clint, looking to Thor. “He works with your brother. Any chance you could call him up so I can shoot him between the eyes?”

Thor frowned, looking over at Steve. He could feel the lingering tension in the stare, the unsaid “I told you so,” blaring in his ears. Steve looked away, ashamed. Thor had warned him - they all had - about Loki. About what he was capable of. But he hadn't listened. And then Thor had left, and Steve watched him go, feeling another supporting strut be knocked out from underneath him. Steve wasn't sure when he'd returned - after watching him leave, Steve wasn't sure if he would return. But here he was, still sitting at Steve's table, returning to help clean up his mess anyway. “My brother is wilder than all of us combined,” Thor spoke. “I cannot begin to fathom the acts that he’s done,” he added, nodding at Steve, ”but believe me when I tell you that I’m nowhere closer to getting my hands on him than you are.”

“I don't think we should be focusing on Loki. That guy's brain is a bag full of cats. You can smell crazy on him,” Bruce added. “Besides, we do have something. ‘The Monger’, right? We’ve still got Hammer locked away; maybe he knows the guy. It could definitely fill in some blanks.”
“I knew there was a reason you were my favorite,” Tony chided.

“Are we all in agreement then? We bring Hammer back in to go a few rounds?” Clint piped in.

All faces turned to face Steve. “Can you promise not to kill him?” he heard Tony ask.

Steve faced the other man, raising a single eyebrow. “Can you promise?”

Tony smiled. “There’s that dry wit. I was afraid you’d left it at the bottom of the river.”

“So it’s decided then,” Thor responded. “We bring Hammer for another talk. He is weak; it will not take long to break him.”

“You bring up a good point,” said Clint. “I don’t think we should bring him here, per say.”

“What do you mean?” Steve questioned.

“Well, no offense, Steve, but we’ve all been slumming it for the past couple of months. With everything that’s happened, I think we should take extra precautions. It’s not safe for us to be squatting in whatever’s available.”

I agree,” said Steve, pulling the blankets around his shoulder closer to him. “Does anyone have a suggestion?”

“I know a place,” Tony replied.

“We should move now,” Steve added. “The Red Skull is out there; we should automatically assume that he knows I survived, which means it probably won’t take long before he strikes again.”

“Are you sure? We can take a few more days and let you rest- ”

“No, Tony. I’ll be fine once I know that everyone’s safe. Come on,” he continued, looking to the rest of the team. “Grab everything you can; we’ll come back for the rest later.”

The team got instantly, scrambling to get whatever they could get their hands on. Clint had even managed to push Bucky into the fray as well, grabbing him from wherever he had been hiding. Steve stood to try and help, but rough hands dragged him out the door and into the passenger seat of a car. “No heavy lifting for you, Cap,” said Tony, buckling his seatbelt. “You’re still on bedrest.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “I’m not an invalid, Tony.”

“Humor me.” The look in Tony’s eyes had Steve shutting up and relaxing against the seat, watching as his team filled the rest of the cars. Tony slipped in the driver’s seat next to Steve, taking point as he led the rest of the team further into Brooklyn.

The drive was quiet, but it was pleasant. Steve let himself drift; Clint and Natasha’s soft conversation in the back seat, as well as Tony’s tapping against the steering wheel lulling him to sleep. It seemed like no time had passed when he felt Tony’s hand shake his shoulder gently. “Rise and shine, buttercup,” he teased. He let Tony manhandle him out of the car, staring blankly at the building in front of him.

“Are we stopping for lunch?” he asked. There, sitting innocently between two bricked up buildings, sat a small restaurant.
“Shawarma?” Clint added, examining the sign. “What the hell is that?”

“Don’t knock it till you try it,” Tony replied, leading Steve and the others into the small store. The restaurant was empty, but it was still pretty early in the day. A singular man stood behind the counter, wiping it down with a cloth. Seeing the other enter his shop, the man stopped, greeting them all with kind eyes hidden behind wired glasses.

“Mr. Stark,” he smiled softly.

“Good to see you, buddy,” Tony returned, shooting a smile back easily. “Everyone, this is Yinsen,” said Tony. “He runs the shop.”

Steve stepped forward immediately. “Nice to meet you. My name is-”

“This is The Captain,” Tony interjected. “But I’m sure you already knew that.” Tony turned to face the group again. “I’ve given Yinsen all of your files, redacted, of course. It’s just so he sees your face as a friendly.”

“Why?” asked Sam. “Got a lot of unwanted business in a meat shop?”

“More than you’d think,” Yinsen answered with another smile, his eyes gleaming mischievously.

“Tony,” Steve murmured, pulling the man off to the side. “You don’t have to do this. We’re working together now; I’m not going to lose that chance again. I trust you, which means I trust your people. Yinsen can know my name.”

“Please, Captain,” Yinsen interrupted. "It’s alright; it is of no consequence to me that I do not know your birth name. In fact, it is probably better that I do not. After all, you have your family to take care of, and I have mine.”

“If you’re sure,” Steve responded.

“Of course,” soothed Yinsen. “I can do my job without it. Mr. Stark has assured me that you are all good people. That is good enough for me.”

“Good man,” Tony beamed. “Come on, gang,” he continued, pulling on Steve’s arm as he led the group past Yinsen to the back of the shop. “The real fun’s through here.”

Tony led them further in, through the kitchen and past the freezers, and into a cramped storage area. The team stepped lightly, trying to walk over cleaning supplies and other storage items. “I suppose there’s a reason we’re all crammed back here?” Clint sighed.

Tony held up a finger. “Patience is a virtue.” He walked against the far wall, towards an old metal cabinet. Without even pausing, Tony grabbed the edge of the cabinet, swinging it open with practiced ease, the cabinet disguising that fact that it was nothing more than a hidden entryway,” Tony babbled. He placed his thumb on the screen, a green light appearing followed by the sound of the door being unlocked. “This is a new addition, of course,” Tony continued as he opened the door. “But this is the 21st century; can’t just trust a lock and key anymore.”

Tony swung the door open, revealing a darkened staircase. The Commandos followed dutifully, like baby ducks traveling behind their mother as they trekked new territory. It was a short flight down, but it was slow. No light emanated in the stair case, so Steve and the rest of the team had stuck their arms out to keep their balance. Tony, unlike the rest of them, walked down the stairs confidently, as if he’d trodden down them thousands of times before. Finally reaching the bottom, Tony opened a final creaking gate, and led the group into the landing. It was just as dark as the
staircase, and cool; they were underground. Tony walked back behind them, only to flick on the overhead lights.

Steve would have been lying if he hadn’t let out a sharp intake of breath. Warm light flooded the room, showing it to be much larger than expected. Dark wood floors covered the ground, peeking out between worn rugs. The walls, colored surprisingly light, were tastefully decorated with sparse and simple paintings and black and white photos. Off to the right, a huge bar sprawled, the large alcohol bottles sitting behind twinkling in the light. The left wing of the room housed plush armchairs and large couches, facing a darkened flatscreen that hung on the wall. But in the middle of the room, encompassed down on depressed flooring, sat a huge, ornate table with probably enough seating for an entire football team.

“What is this place?” Thor asked.

Steve couldn’t help but grin as he looked around the large room. “It’s a speakeasy.”

“You own a speakeasy? Of course. Of course you own a speakeasy,” Clint said, rolling his eyes.

Tony grinned. “Well, if we’re being technical, it belonged to dear old dad. The SSR gave it to him back in the day. I guess this building was an old clothing shop that was a front for the bar, but was abandoned not long after the prohibition ended. The SSR found the building and used it for secret meetings with the government during World War II, hence the Kind Arthur set up over there. But, ever since dad’s kicked the bucket, I’ve swooped in and made a few adjustments of my own; advancements if you will. I use it a lot for when I need to go on a work binge, or if I need to lay low for a few days.”

“This place is huge,” mused Sam.

“Oh, please,” Tony snorted. “You haven’t seen anything yet.”

“Didn’t really see this as your style,” Natasha said, walking past a few of the old photographs.

“Oh, it’s not,” Tony continued. “But, the design is all original from the prohibition. Seemed like a waste to get rid of history. Besides, old fashioned can be classic.”

“I like it,” Steve whispered.

“I thought you would,” laughed Tony.

“Huh,” Clint remarked, looking at a small frame hanging over by the bar. “Old fashioned is right; I don’t even know what this means,” he said, pointing at the sign. “‘Go Ugly Early’? What the hell kind of an insult is that?”

“It’s because it’s a code,” answered Tony, walking over to the sign. “Back during the prohibition, discretion was key. People relied on codes and passwords to figure out where the speakeasies were located and when to go.”

“And they landed on ‘Go Ugly Early’? Definitely not what I would’ve gone with.”

Steve snorted. “The meaning is in its opposite. ‘Go Ugly Early’ means ‘Come Pretty Late’. Workers would whisper it in during store hours, and the customers that recognized the code would know that the bar would be open that night.”

“People sure did go through a lot of trouble to get a drink,” Clint responded.
“Trust me when I tell you’ve that I’ve done a whole lot more to get a whole lot less,” joked Tony. “Come on; let me finish giving you the nickel tour.” Behind the double doors of the bar was a spacious and up to date kitchen, stocked with every food imaginable. Beyond that, Tony led Steve and the others down another hallway, the wood floors creaking underneath their steps.

“Okay, so all the way the down there will lead you back up some steps and to the bedrooms. Apparently the owners of the speakeasy bought the next building over just for rooms so their customers can spent the night with some of their lady friends,” Tony joked, pointing further down the hallway. “But don’t worry, they’ve all been refurnished and modernized; there’s more than enough rooms for everybody. There’s also a door that leads down another level, most likely used for beer storage. Right now, I’ve got a lab down there for weapons testing. I’m also currently finishing up a gym down there because apparently you all have a hankering for hitting things for fun.”

“What is all this?” Steve found himself asking.

“Well, I thought I was pretty obvious. We’re back in this together; we’re going to need somewhere to stay, don’t you think?”

“You’d let us stay here?” added Sam.

Tony shrugged. “Why not? It’s kind of big to just be staying here all by myself. Besides, there is no way I’m staying in the shitholes you guys have been rolling in recently. Sorry, but this fine-tuned machine only goes between Egyptian cotton sheets; take it or leave it.”

“Tony,” Steve interjected, grabbing the smaller man’s arm. “This is too much; we couldn’t possibly- ”

“You can, and you will,” Tony finished, pulling away and leading everyone back into the main room. “It’s the safest place we could be right now, and you know it. There’s a sewer entrance as well, most likely used for smuggling in beer, if you don’t want to walk through the store. I’ve outfitted every entrance with fingerprint scans as well; there is no way anyone can get in who doesn’t belong. Oh, and JARVIS will keep an eye on things.”

“Of course,” a British voice said as it filled the room, causing Steve to jump.

“Who said that?” asked Thor, reaching for his gun. “Show yourself.”

“Relax, big guy,” Tony quipped. “JARVIS is an AI. I had him outfitted into the mainframe a while back; he runs the place.”

“AI?”

“Artificial Intelligence,” answered Bruce. “You built him?” he continued, looking at Tony with interest.

“Yes,” Tony answered proudly.

“Of course you did,” smiled Steve.

“JARVIS will watch over the whole place. Trust me; we’re as safe as can be. So what do ya say, Cap? Good enough for you?”

Steve looked around the room, meeting everyone’s expectant faces. “I think this just might work.”
Fun fact: 'Go Ugly Early' was actually used at the speakeasy that I live by.

Cheers to over 100K!
“So. What now?”

Steve took a deep breath, reveling in how he was able to fill his lungs completely. All seven members that remained on The Commandos, Tony now included, sat around the large meeting table in their new base. It had been a few days since their initial move in, the crew scattering to get everything they could moved in, while Steve and Bucky were still on bed rest.

Steve, for the first time in a long time, felt back in the game. His fever had gone down, as well as Bucky’s, both men almost back to full health. While Steve hadn’t managed to corner Bucky about their last encounter, Steve clung to any interaction the two had within the group. As for the rest of them, they seemed to be fitting in nicely, getting back into the swing of things easily.

It was almost serene. He was alive; his team, the ones that had stayed, were all accounted for and (mostly) well. Tony had let him back in. It reminded him much of the time when Steve and Bucky had first established The Commandos. They were in the thick of trying to eradicate HYDRA the first time, and while Steve was still quietly mourning the deaths of the SSR, he lost himself in the thrill of a new team, a new mission. It was like he was a kid again, sitting with his mother, nearly bouncing with excitement in his seat while they painted newly molded plastic soldiers - new people, new stories, new futures to unlock. And while this time in the speakeasy, the characters surrounding him were the same, they each got a fresh coat of paint, rejuvenated for the next battle to come. It most more ironic, really, that Steve was finally able to find peace and when they were in the midst of a mob war.

“Cap? What’s next?” Steve heard Sam prod again. Steve jostled himself, looking back at six expectant faces.

“Well, we’ve got two options: Loki or Hammer.”

“Hammer is obviously the weaker of the two,” answered Thor. “We could get information out of him in minutes.”

“Yeah, but will it be any good?” countered Tony. “Hammer’s like a startled deer. As soon as he sees the headlights coming, he freezes up and spurs anything and everything that comes to mind. How much of what we get will be actually helpful?”

“You’re both right,” agreed Steve. “Hammer’s weak, but we can spin it to our advantage without even touching him. Keep him locked up for a little while longer; cut all communication. Let’s see what happens when a man who likes to talk doesn’t have anyone who wants to listen.”

“So we’re going to go after Loki then?” asked Bruce. “How the hell are we gonna find him?”

“Shouldn’t be too hard considering I know where he’s gonna be,” Steve responded, hearing everyone shift in their seats.

“Steve, you didn’t contact him again, did you?” Bucky asked, eyeing him warily.

“No, of course not,” Steve replied easily, quelling his team's nerve. "But when I was in contact with him the first time, I might have done something dumb. I know, shocking.”

Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
“What’d you tell him?” Natasha questioned, not missing a single beat.

Steve looked at Bucky. “I told Loki something in exchange for where I could find the head of HYDRA. I told him a location of a file drop.”

Bucky’s reaction was instantaneous. “You what?” he hissed, eyes darting around the room in fear at Steve’s abrupt admission, unconsciously gauging everyone else’s reaction, tensing for a fight. Just like he had been taught in the SSR. After all this time, his friend was still so loyal, ready to protect him and the SSR’s secrets, as he vowed to do on day one. If only Steve could have been as strong as him.

Steve deflated. “I don’t know, Buck. I wasn’t thinking! I was just so desperate to try and put a stop to everything that I just told him!”

“Hey, relax,” Tony interjected. “What are you talking about?”

“You know who I am. You know who I worked for.” Everyone in the room nodded. “The reason I was such a high commodity in the mob world because I was supposed to know every little secret of the SSR. Names, locations, heists, you name it. Everyone wanted a piece of me, but the SSR kept me hidden. They just dropped enough hints of the magnitude of what I knew, an ongoing threat to keep people in line.” Steve sighed, pausing. He wasn’t supposed to tell anyone the full story. Sure, Bucky was mostly aware of his secrets as he was privy to them as well, but this was something that he should have brought to his grave. Phillips had made that abundantly clear. Loki had known about them, somehow; he just didn’t know where. When Loki asked for an exchange, Steve had hastily agreed. Phillips and the rest of the SSR was dead in the ground, and Loki already knew of their existence, so he wasn’t technically breaking the rules, right?

And hadn’t that turned out spectacularly. It didn’t matter now. The cat’s been long out of the bag - besides, this was his family. The people that promised to share his burdens, to help shoulder the weight. There would be no more lies between them. The SSR was only lies, and it eventually caught up with them. No more. “But I never did,” Steve admitted, feeling a weight lift off his chest. “I didn’t know anything. I just knew the locations on where they kept the information.”


“The SSR had information on anyone and anything,” Bucky responded. “I never got to see any of the locations myself, but I saw what happened to people who didn’t believe in them. The drops were everything to them: their power, their currency, their bargaining chips. The SSR had been gathering since World War II; the extent of knowledge that they knew was enough to strike fear into any other mob. After what happened to them,” Bucky added quietly, ”and after HYDRA was seemingly gone, everything changed. We killed Steve Rogers in every way that we could, helping him disappear until people assumed that he died with the rest of the SSR. After that, the world just seemed to forget about the files and the lingering threat of the SSR.”

“And you told Loki where one of them was? One of these file drops?” Tony prodded.

Steve nodded. “He doesn’t know that there’s more than one. Besides, after losing our old base I probably won’t be able to remember on hand where they all are. But, the fact that he knows where one of them is is bad enough.”

“Aye,” responded Thor. “My brother won’t be able to resist taking a look, whether or not he’s working with HYDRA.”

“That’s what I’m counting on,” Steve replied. “We stake it out and hope we catch him.”
“Doesn’t sound like a very solid plan,” Clint drawled.

“You got a better one?”

“Hey, that’s not my job. You just pay me to shoot my gun,” he smiled. “Alright, I’m in. Give me the location; I’ll get him for you.”

Steve nodded, writing down an address in his cramped scrawl. “It’s settled then. Bruce, stay here with Tony but keep your phone on. Tony, I’m going to need any surveillance on the place you can give me. The rest of you, go pack the vans. We leave immediately.”

Clint and Natasha were off in a dash, quick to obey. Thor looked grave, but started to ready his own weapon. Steve stood, turning in time to see Bucky having a silent conversation with Tony. Bucky flushed when he saw that Steve had seen the exchange, dropping eye contact and walking out of the room, no doubt to wait in the vans.

It wasn’t long before the rest of the team were hauling huge duffel bags up the stairs and out through the store, loading each of the cars. Steve reached for his jacket to follow when a hand shot out and grabbed him, pulling him away from the door. “Don’t. You aren’t going with them.”

Steve turned, frowning at Tony. “Like hell I’m not,” he snapped.

While Steve’s tone was harsh and brittle, Tony kept his calm, trying to soothe Steve’s anger. “Do you trust them?”

Steve didn’t hesitate. “With my life.”

“That let them take care of this,” Tony placated. “They’ve been holed up for a few months, Cap. Go let the kids out to have a little fun.” Steve sighed, looking back towards the door before Tony continued. “They’ll be fine. They trust you; it’s time for you to trust them. Take them off the leash and let them go raise a little hell.”

That had been two days ago. And still nothing. Steve was driving himself crazy thinking that something might go wrong, The team kept in contact, of course, but it did little to soothe Steve’s nerves. Loki was dangerous. He still doesn’t know how Tony had managed to talk him down from chasing after them as they left.

"Steve, you're going to wear a hole through the floor." Steve looked up, mid pace, to see Tony smirking at him, the man casually draped against a wall.

"I'm worried."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Have a little faith. Calm down; they'll be fine."

Steve sighed, running a hand through his hair. "You know, for as many times as you tell me that, I still don't think it's working."

Tony laughed, walking up to him. "Alright, easy, mama bear. What you need is a distraction."

Steve shot the other man an unimpressed look. "And I'm assuming you've got one for me?"
“Bingo,” Tony chided, pulling him down the hallway towards the stairs that led to the bedrooms. The two of them walked down the hallway in a comfortable silence, shoulders brushing occasionally. To Steve's surprise, after walking to the top of the stairs, Tony opted to take a right instead of a left towards the rooms.

“Where are we going?”

Tony smirked back at him, his eyes gleaming. “Patience, dear Captain.”

Tony dragged him to a door, one that Steve had originally thought to be a closet. However, when Tony opened it, it revealed another slim hallway. The two walked down back across the new level reaching yet another door. Tony nodded to Steve, gesturing for the other man to open it.

Steve obliged, swinging the door open, breath immediately getting caught in his throat. Past the wooden entryway was a surprisingly spacious room, walls adorned it a rich blue, accented by bright scones. A large desk, probably mahogany knowing Tony, lay facing the pair, lush chair sitting behind it. A personal bar sat atop plush rugs, nestled nicely between a long couch and matching armchair. The wall along the left side was left oddly bare, while the back was consisted of one giant bookshelf, the wall to Steve’s right made entirely out of glass.

“Thought you could use an office,” he heard Tony say. Steve tried to respond, feeling his mouth open and close a few times, but no words managed to come out, instead opting to explore the new room.

Steve walked over to the window, finding himself staring down at the main room of the speakeasy. The windows were high enough up that it got overlooked from the ground floor, but still managed to give a vantage point for the entire bar. “I guess whoever was in charge back in the day wanted to keep an eye on the guests,” said Tony, walking up alongside him. “I thought you’d appreciate being able to do the same.”

Although there was no one in it now, Steve could already see the signs of his crew moving in. There were already extra combat boots thrown in the corner by the door, a few scattered guns on the table left to be cleaned, snacks littering the bar. Steve couldn’t help but smile. Although it may have looked like just another mess to someone, Steve knew the true meaning. When they were on the run, his crew always kept their bags packed, ready to move at the drop of a hat. But here, it was the exact opposite. Because they knew it wasn’t temporary. Because they knew they were home.

“Thank you,” he responded, sincerity dripping in his tone.

How could this man keep on giving? Steve had heard about Tony Stark for years. About the Merchant of Death, the man with no heart. But he had never heard anything about the man standing next to him. How had everyone overlooked this? How had no one seen the true Tony Stark? How had Howard missed that his son was so special?

“Tony, I don’t know what to say,” Steve whispered.

“Well, don’t say anything yet, because we’re not done yet.”

Steve raised an eyebrow as Tony pulled him over to his new desk. There, atop the dark mahogany was Tony’s suitcase, the one that Steve had seen house a few of his computers while they were first tracking HYDRA.

“Open it,” Tony said.

Confused, Steve reached forward, releasing the tabs and pulling the top back.
It was his pictures. The ones from his wall in his old office. Every newspaper clipping, every candid photo, every scribbled doodle. Everything.

Steve found himself scrambling to find the right words. “How?” he whispered, hands shaking as he picked up the first one, depicting a sleeping Tony in front of his computer.

“It’s a long story,” Tony responded sheepishly, rubbing a hand along the back side of his neck. “But consider it a peace offering. We had a couple of rocky starts, but third time’s the charm, right?”

Steve shook his head in disbelief. “You don’t owe me anything,” he said, still looking at the pictures in awe.

Tony shrugged nonchalantly. “Maybe I just wanted to see you smile again.”

Steve snapped his head towards Tony, blue eyes piercing into brown. Tony stared right on back, his eyes soft, a shy smile gracing his lips. Without thinking twice, Steve rushed to the other man, sweeping him in a tight hug. It was so easy to just wrap his arms around the smaller frame and bury his face into Tony’s neck, the man smelling of overpriced shampoo with a feint undertone of metal. All words that he could have thought of were thrown out the window when he felt Tony’s hands hesitantly grasp him back, Steve making sure to squeeze him tighter in reassurance.

“Well, Cap.” Tony started, his warm voice tickling Steve’s ear. “If I would’ve known I’d get that reaction, I would have done this days ago,” he chuckled.

Steve huffed out a laugh of his own, pulling back slightly to meet Tony’s eyes again. “You are unbelievable,” he gasped.

Tony flashed him another smile and then suddenly it was if all of the air had been sucked form the room. Steve was vaguely aware that they were still wrapped around each other, but he paid it no mind. He just stared down at the smaller man, Tony’s eyes swirling like molten amber, his eyelashes curled like sunflowers towards the sun, his lips chapped and warm from where he’d bitten them. “I-I, uh…,” Steve began, eyes flashing down to his lips again.

“Yeah?” Tony breathed, flushing slightly.

Mind pumping into overdrive, Steve leaned forward. His eyes fluttered shut as he felt Tony’s warm pants against his lips. One of Steve’s hands drifted up to hold Tony’s neck, pulling him the final few inches to-

Sam burst through the door, both men jumping feet away from each other. Steve could feel his face burning as his hands frantically tried to find something to do, settling on straightening out his shirt. Thankfully, Sam, if he even did notice, didn’t mention it. “We got him,” he said breathlessly.

“Loki?” asked Tony, voice a little hoarse.

Sam nodded. “He was just where you said he’d be. Bastard couldn’t resist not going after the SSR’s secrets. And don’t worry,” he added, looking to Steve. "He didn't get a single thing."

Steve shot one last glance at Tony. There was time for that later; right now, it was time to work. “Where is he?”

“Downstairs.”

“You brought him here?” Steve questioned. “Isn’t that a little bit risky?”
Sam shrugged, leading Steve and Tony down the stairs towards the cellars downstairs. “Clint suggested it. Said it was a perfect time to break in the new interrogation room.”

Steve frowned. “I don’t know. Maybe we should move him.”

Tony placed a hand on his shoulder, the blonde shivering faintly at the touch. “Relax, Cap. No one knows where this place is but us. We’re perfectly safe; there’s no way HYDRA can find out we have him. Now come on; let’s go see our latest guest.”

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I hour later

Clint Barton slammed through the door, taking the steps two at a time. His breath was shallow, but he could barely hear them over the harsh pants coming from behind him.

“Get me out of here,” the voice behind him snapped, scoffing when Clint forced them to a stop instead. Perching the two of them around the corner, Clint pulled out his gun, peeking back out ever so slightly. “What are you waiting for?” the other man hissed.

“A distraction,” Clint whispered, pulling out his gun.

Lo and behold, it was mere seconds before Bucky Barnes came charging around the corner they’d just come from, other steps sounding not far behind him. Seeing his window, Clint jumped from cover, aiming straight at the brunette.

Barnes stuttered to a halt, his eyes comically wide as he stared back at the marksman. “Clint?” he almost whimpered, raw betrayal crossing over his features.

“Hail HYDRA.”

A shot rang out.

Barnes hit the floor.

Clint turned to face Loki. “Let’s go.”

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Chapter End Notes

Will be changing be handle to just_another_cliffhanger. (Just trying to lighten the mood with the dad jokes. Don't hate me.)
"Are we sure about this?"

Steve stood in the lower bowels of the speakeasy, staring at an unconscious Loki. The man had a nasty head wound, blood dripping down his pale skin. He had been bound to a chair, positioned directly under the singular hanging light bulb.

“We don’t have a choice now,” Tony said next to him.

Steve nodded to Natasha. “Wake him up.”

The redhead walked over, drawing out her smelling salts. One whiff under his nose and the other man was gasping awake, his pale eyes darting around his new surroundings. Once he saw Steve, he started to laugh. “What a twist,” he said, voice gruff. “The Captain survived the ice.”

Steve clenched his jaw. It was the only confirmation that he needed that Loki was in on his demise with the Red Skull. “You know why you’re here,” he said, steering the conversation away from him.

Loki rolled his eyes. “You and your lackeys are to punch a confession out of me.”

“This can be avoided,” Thor cut in. “You can help us.”

Loki laughed again. “Oh, brother. You are as naïve as you are dull.” The dark brunette turned back to Steve. “You can save your energy; you won’t be getting anything out of me.”

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Steve grit out.

“Oh, here comes the threats. Trying to get me to quiver in my boots? Maybe let my brother throw me around a few minutes; that will definitely mess with my head. And then, of course, you send in Romanoff, the saving grace. After whatever tortures you can concoct, she’ll come as a friend. And then I would cooperate,” he said with a sneer. “You’re all too predictable; don’t waste my time.”

“You just really like hearing yourself talk, don’t you?” Steve almost jumped at the harsh tone, forgetting Tony was standing beside him.

Loki’s eyes swiveled over to Tony, Steve stepping forward slightly, as if unconsciously trying to stop the threatening gaze. “Ah, Anthony. It’s been a while, hasn’t it? Now this,” he jeered, nodding towards Steve. “This I didn’t except. Since when did you join back up with this motley crew? Offer you something you didn’t have yet?” he drawled.


“Stop, stalling,” Steve interjected. “What are you doing working with HYDRA?”

“You see, Stark,” Loki continued, completely ignoring Steve. “You had us all fooled. Everyone believed that you and The Captain were done. But you couldn’t stay away, could you? They saw, Stark. They saw you and Barnes pull The Captain out of the river. They know you’re still with them. They’re going to kill you, Stark.”
“Shut your mouth,” Steve hissed. He'd heard this threat from Loki before; and after this nearly fatal meeting with the Red Skull, it was clear that Tony definitely wasn't safe. But any remember of that fact set fire through his veins.

Loki mocked surprise. “Hit a nerve, did I? And what about you, Captain? They know you’re not dead. How long before they come back to finish the job? How long before they cart you back into that river. Maybe they’ll do it like they used to, and tie you to some cinderblocks. Just let it take you all the way to the bottom and let you drown, the last thing you’ll ever know is how cold—”

A fist shot out, clocking Loki dead center. The man went spilling to the ground, gasping at the force of it. Steve turned to look at Tony, the man now rubbing at his knuckles. “Fucker,” he spat, eyes blazing.

Steve opened his mouth to respond, but Natasha grabbed them both by the collar, dragging them out of the room, Thor not far behind. She pulled them up the stairs where everyone else was waiting and sat them down.

“What the hell?” Tony asked, still rubbing at his hand.

Natasha shot him a dirty look. “You two can’t be in there. You’re letting him get to your head; we’re not gonna get anywhere like this.”

“He’s in all of our heads,” replied Thor. “This is what I was trying to tell you. We can’t win against his mind. He’ll see everything that’s coming and just prepare for it.”

“So, how are we gonna go about this then?” asked Sam. “There has to be something we haven’t thought of.”

“Give me a gun,” snapped Tony. “Bet he wouldn’t see that coming.”

“Tony,” Steve sighed.

“No, Cap. That man deserves what’s coming to him.”

“Absolutely not,” Thor roared. “I won’t let you go in there and kill my brother.”

Tony gaped at the large blonde. “I’m sorry, but whose side are you on? Did you forget how he lined Steve up for slaughter? Your brother probably had a hand in the bomb as well. That scumbag needs to die.”

“Take care how you speak,” hissed Thor stepping closer to Tony.

Steve stepped between the two of them. “Alright, let’s calm down.” He turned towards Tony. “You know he’s more valuable to us alive,” he said calmly, trying to soothe Tony’s bristling anger. “He’s not exactly my favorite person in the world either, but we can still use him. Besides, someone once told me that blowing people’s brains out isn’t always the answer. I reckon he was right.”

Tony narrowed his eyes. “You’re playing dirty.”

Steve shrugged. “Is it working?”

Tony sighed, shoulders deflating. “Well, then what do you suggest? Not gonna lie, I wouldn’t exactly object to your boys tossing him around in there like a chopped salad.”
“You won’t get anywhere,” replied Thor. “Throwing a few fists at him will not get him to show his weaknesses.”

“Maybe he just hasn’t been punched hard enough,” Tony bit out.

“This isn’t working,” sighed Steve. Maybe they should have just stuck with trying to get something out of Hammer. It wouldn't be like they wouldn't get anything out of him. But Tony had made a good point - how much of that information would actually be useful? Even if Hammer was working with HYDRA, there was no way they didn't view him as something dispensable. Considering the fact that no effort had been made by HYDRA to try and get him back, Steve guessed that the rival mob was confident that he didn't know anything worth saving. With that in mind, it had him and the rest of the group desperate to try and get something out of Loki.

“Well, we can’t sit around and do nothing!”

“What can we do?”

“This was a mistake.”

“What if HYDRA already knows?”

“Do you think they’re coming?”

“We need to focus on Loki!”

“It won’t matter once we’re all dead!”

“I’ll do it.”

All voices stopped, eyes turning to Clint.

“You?” Steve asked. Clint never did interrogations. Never. He always said he was more of a delivery boy, both him and Bucky running rampant through the streets of New York to find their next package, bringing them back for usually Nat to take them apart. While Clint had always joked about being the errand boy, Steve knew he wouldn’t have it any other way. Steve could always catch a glimpse of it; the uneasiness that sat in his stormy eyes whenever he walked in during one of their sessions. That, and once while in a drunken stupor, Clint had admitted that he didn’t like the noises. The dull thuds of flesh hitting flesh, the chair scrapping, the pleading moans. He said it reminded him too much of his time in the circus. That was all Steve needed to know to try and keep the man as far away from interrogations as possible.

This time, Clint just shrugged nonchalantly. “You said Loki’s smart. He’ll be prepared for our usual techniques. He won’t expect me, though.”

Natasha nodded. “He’s right. Throwing a curveball like this is the best chance to catch Loki off guard.”

“Clint, you don’t have to do this,” Steve pleaded, walking up to the other man. “We can find another way.”

“Trust me on this one,” he drawled with an easy smile.
The door slammed behind the pair as they walked into the dimly lit room.

Loki looked up at them, one eye already swelling shut from Stark’s right hook. “Ah,” he said. “I was starting to think you had forgotten about me. Tell me, Captain, which one of your lovely mutts will be taking care of me?”

A mop of dirty blonde hair stepped around The Captain, leveling Loki with an icy glare. “That would be me.”

Even with his eyes, Loki was sure that the marksman caught the look of uncertainty shoot across Loki’s face before the bored and blank mask returned. “The archer? Really, Captain, I would have thought I warranted someone a little more capable than him.”

The Captain frowned, turning back towards Barton. “I’ll give you twenty minutes. Try not to kill him.” And with that, The Captain stormed out, leaving the two alone.

Loki opened his mouth again, but Barton held up a finger, looking over towards the door, leaning close. “He should be out of hearing distance,” he whispered, almost to himself. He turned back towards Loki. “We should be good,” he nodded.

“What?”

“Alright, then. Let’s get started.” Barton bounded over to him. Loki prepared himself for another punch, but nothing came. He looked up to meet Barton’s eyes, only to find the man staring angrily down at him.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” hissed Barton.

Loki blinked, caught off guard by the question.

Barton scoffed, walking behind the man and, untying his hands? “You just couldn’t resist, could you? You knew that The Captain would have eyes on the file drop, but you just had to go and look anyway. Goddammit; do you realize what you’ve done?”

Noting his now freed hands, Loki brought them back around the chair, rubbing at his sore wrists. What the hell is happening? “I’m sorry?”

“Do you even know anything?” Barton sneered. “We had everything set up and you had to go and ruin it all. We were still planning on saving this operation! The Captain was all paranoid because he’d spilled the beans, sending a few of us over to watch the file drop. It was the perfect opportunity for me to finish the rest and take the files, but no. you just had to waltz in there like you owned the joint. What the hell were you thinking?”

Loki continued to stare blankly at the other man. “You’re HYDRA?” Could it be true?

“You really don’t know anything,” he sighed, sounding unimpressed. “Just my luck. Yes, I’m HYDRA, you asshole. Someone’s gotta keep an eye on this place. How the hell do you think they get all of their info?”

A mole.

Pierce had let something slip about a mole, hadn’t he? He knew that there had been one planted in the SSR. If it had been so easy to fit someone in there, how hard would it have been to slip another one into the ranks of The Commandos? Especially since, after the fall of The SSR, The Captain was desperate to fill his ranks to help fight the war against HYDRA. He would have taken
anybody; even accept a double agent by accident.

Loki started to get up, but stopped himself. “Why should I believe you,” he asked, eyes narrowing.

Barton sighed. “I really don’t have time for this.” The man reached into his mouth, pulling out a white false tooth. HYDRA’s failsafe. “That proof enough for you?”

“But how?” Loki found himself whispering. He prided himself on being able to stay one step ahead of the rest; its how he was able to thrive on his own. But nothing - none of his contacts or his own notes - had even hinted at a rat within The Commandos.

“Please,” Barton replied. “If you didn’t know about me then you’re not as important to HYDRA as you thought you were. I’m not about to spill everything to you. Just like I’m not going to let you ruin my op. It’s taken me years to get where I am today; I’m not gonna let some nosy foreigner destroy my success.”

Barton pulled him up from the chair and over to the door. “I don’t understand. They never mentioned you,” Loki continued. He and Pierce were no where close to friends, but they had a mutual respect for one another. But where Loki was illusive and vague, Pierce was narcissistic and proud. He couldn't help but boast about his achievements. How he had been the one to rise HYDRA back from its grave, and how he would be the one to finish Rogers off for good. But yet he hadn't mention anything about Barton. Something like this would have been their crown jewel.

“Why would they? You didn’t think you were that high up on the totem pole, did you?” Barton responded. “It doesn’t matter. We need to get you out of here; my boss isn’t done with you.”

“How do you plan on accomplishing that?”

Barton opened the door, peeking around each side. “I slip you out the back, tell everyone you got the jump on me. It’s not fool proof, but it’s the best we can do. I let you land a few punches and hopefully Cap will be too worried about my health to figure it out.”

Loki rolled his eyes. It sounded like a disastrous idea. One that ended with him dead. “Do all of The Commandos share your brains?”

“You got a better idea? I’m trying to save your life, asshole. Now, come on.” Barton grabbed him, pulling him out of the room. The hallway was empty, but Loki could still hear the sounds of the other mob members in the distance. He watched as Clint Barton slammed through the door, taking the steps two at a time.

“Get me out of here,” Loki snapped, scoffing when Barton forced them to a stop instead. Perching the two of them around the corner, Loki watched as Barton pulled out his gun, peeking back out ever so slightly. “What are you waiting for?” he hissed.

“A distraction,” Barton whispered, pulling out his gun.

Lo and behold, it was mere seconds before Barnes came charging around the corner they’d just come from, other steps sounding not far behind him. Without a moment’s hesitation, Barton charged around the corner pointing the barrel down at Barnes.

Barnes stuttered to a halt, his eyes comically wide as he stared back at the marksman. “Clint?” he almost whimpered, raw betrayal crossing over his features.

“Hail HYDRA.”
A shot rang out.

Barnes hit the floor.

Barton turned to face Loki. “Let’s go.”

Barton dragged him down another hallway. “That won’t hold them,” Barton panted. “With Barnes dead, it won’t be long before The Captain comes to finish us.”

“I thought you were going to let me go quietly? You just blew your cover!”

“No,” Barton snapped. “You blew my cover. Besides, there’s too many of them here. I should have known that sneaking you out wouldn’t have been an option. All we have to do is reach the door and we’ll be golden.”

Barton made a move to start again, but stuttered to a halt when Thor came looming down their path. “Shit,” Barton whispered. “Follow me.”

He grabbed at Loki again, pulling the man back from where they came. Looking back down the previous hallway, Loki could see The Captain leaning over Barnes’ body, but luckily, not looking up to see them. “We’re heading back down the stairs,” Barton said. “There are tunnels that they used in The Prohibition. The ones to sneak the booze in. We’ll escape through there.”

Loki just found himself nodding, following Barton’s lead. They took the long way around to avoid Barnes and the over men, but soon the stairs were back in sight. The two men raced back down, Barton leading Loki into the dark caverns underneath the base.

“So, tell me,” Barton snapped, jogging next to him. “Why the hell were you looking at those files? I could’ve gotten hands on them.”

“Well, I didn’t exactly know about you! Besides, I don’t actually work for your boss. I just scratch his back and he scratches mine.”

Barton shot him an unimpressed look, leading them left. “What can my boss offer you?”

“Protection. However, his word might not be enough anymore. Your boss is getting in way over his head, if you ask me.”

Barton shrugged, picking up the pace a little when dull sounds echoed behind them. “That’s the only way he knows how to work. He like the challenge.”

Loki wheezed out a laugh. “He’s involving too many people. It won’t be long until Pierce finds himself dead by his so called friends.”

“You think The Monger is going to turn on him?”

Loki panted, his mind working slowly as exhaustion caught up with him. The tunnels that Barton led him through were twisted, the man seemingly taking random turns as if to throw off their tails. “Eventually,” Loki finally answered. “They all want the same thing, but for different reasons. How long before they realize they don’t need the other?”

Barton nodded. “Sounds like a good time to jump ship.”

Loki snorted. “You get me out of here, Barton, and I’ll ensure you can disappear.”

Barton made to answer but a sharp bang sounded behind them. Barton stopped, grabbing Loki with
him. “They’re catching up,” he whispered, turning back towards Loki. “Listen, we’re almost there. Go straight and turn right at the junction and you’ll get to a door similar to the one we left through. Go in, and it will lead you out towards the sewer. I’ll catch up.”

Not trying to convince the man otherwise, Loki flew down the hall, turning right to find the door, just as Barton promised. He flew it open, ready to run into the sewers-

Only to crash into The Captain’s chest.

Loki looked up, trying to flee, but another body closed around him. Barnes?

The Captain smiled down at him. “Did he talk?”

Barton’s voice trickled out behind him. “Oh, yeah,” he said, huffing out a laugh. “Couldn’t get the bastard to shut up.”

“I-I don’t… what’s happening?”

“You just got interrogated by Clint Barton,” Barnes replied, clapping a hand on Loki’s shoulder. “You played your part so well. Seriously, Oscar worthy. It was almost as if you really believed you were getting out of here.”

Loki’s blood froze.

He had been played. How?

Barton turned to face him, lazy smirk adorning his face. “You didn’t see that coming?” he drawled.

Before Loki could respond, Barton’s fist snapped out, connecting with Loki’s head, and then everything was black.

Chapter End Notes

Did you see that coming?
“How bad is it?”

Tony lounged in his seat, feigning relaxation while he really sat tense as a coil. Odinson had gone to put Loki back into his cell, while the rest of the team filtered back into the main room, following Barton. While the team was expecting answers, Barton had rushed past them all, mumbling something about Coulson before leaving to no doubt make a call to the man. When Barton returned, however, he was paler than when he left, pacing around the room with shaking hands. Whatever he had learned while talking with Loki, it couldn’t be good.

“I’ll do it.”

Who would have thought that those three words would have been enough to stop the arguing? While everyone had turned to look at Barton, Tony stopped and watched Steve. It was obvious the man was uncomfortable; it was understandable, of course, considering Tony knew that the marksman wasn’t usually the first option for interrogating by torture.

“You?” Steve asked.

“You said Loki’s smart. He’ll be prepared for our usual techniques. He won’t expect me, though.”

It was a good point. If Steve kept Barton away from this type of work, Loki wouldn’t have any previous intel to rely upon. If anything, it would keep the Norwegian off his A game long enough for him to let something slip. But Loki was good - he’d been creating chaos when Tony had first met him when we was younger. From what tabs he get on him as they grew older, it seemed that Loki had perfected his craft and was seemingly skipping through more and more sinister activities, coming out unharmed every time. The only thing that may have worked in their favor was his estrangement from Asgard and his family. But it seemed Thor was as lost as they were.

Romanoff nodded. “He’s right. Throwing a curve ball like this is the best chance to catch Loki off guard.”

“Trust me on this one,” Barton drawled with an easy smile.

“No offence, Clint, but you really don’t- ”

“What are you thinking?” Barnes interrupted.

Barton smirked at the other man. “You know exactly what I’m thinking.”

Barnes frowned. “You sure it’ll work on him? He isn’t exactly a prime contestant.”

“You got a better idea?” Barton responded.

Tony leaned over to Steve. “Am I the only one who has no idea what’s happening?”
Thankfully, Steve turned to him, looking just as lost. “It’s best just to not ask questions.”

Tony snorted, looking back at the other two hitmen. “You two gonna share with the class?”

Barton walked over to the fridge, opening it to dig around. “Just sit back and enjoy the show,” his muffled voice came out. After finding what he was looking for Barton darted over to Barnes, holding up a ketchup packet.

Barnes looked unimpressed until the dirty blonde started to pout. “It’s for effect, Buck,” Barton whined. Barnes sighed, but grabbed the packet, strapping it under his shirt with tape from a nearby med kit. “Don’t miss,” he grumbled.

“Oh, please,” Barton drawled.

“I’m not sure I wanna sit through whatever half-ass show you two can scrape together,” teased Tony.

“I was in the circus,” Barton responded, rolling his eyes. “I’m a natural performer.”

“If you say so,” Tony answered, still unconvinced.

“You sure about this?” Steve asked.

“Absolutely. Come on, Cap. I can do this.”

Steve bit his lip, but nodded. “I trust you.”

Barton whooped, leading a less enthused Barnes over to the door. “Shake and bake?” the smaller man laughed, holding out a fist.

Barnes let out a long sigh, but dutifully fist bumped back. “Shake and bake.”

And by God, it worked. Tony only wished he was down in the sewers just to see the look on Loki’s face. From what Steve had told him, it was pretty priceless.

Turns out the deadly duo of Barnes and Barton run that play all the time. Whenever Steve needs info on another mob, the two pounce, relying on the weaker minds of their enemies. Barnes scouts ahead, cornering and killing one of the easy targets. Then Barton swoops in, cleans the body of anything useful, like a handkerchief, a ring, or in this case, a fake tooth that they had kept from Rumlow. Anything to use as proof for the opposite gang. See, Barton, being raised in the circus, was taught that “seeing is believing.” A pair of deft hands and some slippery language was all Barton needs to convince anyone he was a double agent. Barnes and Barton let themselves get caught in the middle of a firefight, Barton guns the other down, and begins his interrogation process. Turns out that Barton supposedly belongs to over twelve different mobs, and Barnes has died a lot more times that anyone knew about.

Something told Tony, however, that usually these interviews yield better results. Barton was pacing up and down the room, biting at his fingernails with a tight face.

“Clint?” Steve prompted again. “How bad is it? What did Loki say?”
Barton scratched at his head before finally coming to a halt. “It’s really bad. Like really, really bad.”

“Well, that’s always good to hear,” Sam sighed, rubbing at his face.

“Did he tell you The Monger is?” Tony asked.

Barton shook his head. “No. The Monger isn’t HYDRA, he’s only working with him. Some sort of criminal consultant. No, Loki didn’t mention him much. Instead, he let another name slip. I think it’s the guy running HYDRA now.”

“Who is it?”

Barton took a breath. “Pierce.”

Tony could almost feel the tension skyrocket in the room, everyone in it freezing, no one daring to say a word. “Pierce, you said? I can have JARVIS run a trace. I mean, there’s probably hundreds of options in New York, but we can probably narrow down a few-”

“You don’t have to do that,” Steve said quietly. “I know who it is.”

“You do? Is he another mob man? If he’s running HYDRA, he’s gotta be a prominent figure, but I don’t think I have any files on anyone named Pierce.”

Steve looked at him solemnly. “That’s because he’s not part of any other mob.”

“Then who is he?”

“Pierce. Alexander Pierce.”

Tony frowned. “Why do I think I’ve heard that before?”

Steve rested his head against his hands. “Because you have. Because Alexander Pierce is the head of the NYPD.”

Alexander Pierce sat in his office, looking down at the mask of The Red Skull before placing it back in its case.

“Do you think he’s dead?”

Pierce turned slightly, looking at Obadiah Stane. “It’s probably best to assume he survived. Barnes and Stark were there; they probably pulled him out.”

Stane grunted, but didn’t reply.

Pierce clenched his jaw. “Did you hear me? I said Stark was there. You told me they were done.”

“They were,” Stane hissed. “Tony hid out for a few days after the news spread about The Captain’s name, and then as soon as he came back, he’s been doing nothing but working out of the office. I never even saw him go home. We must have missed something.”
They did miss something; he missed something. Pierce had sat idly by when Tony Stark released the name of ‘Joseph Grant.’ While Pierce was the only one who knew it was fake, he didn’t comment, just thinking that Stark had gotten it wrong for once. Was it really just an act the whole time? Were Rogers and Stark ever enemies?

Part of him wanted to confide in Stane, and tell him the truth about Steve Rogers, but he knew he could never trust the man. Besides, he had no use for Rogers anymore anyway. Loki had told him where Rogers said the SSR kept their files. The Captain was just as expendable as the rest of them now.

“It doesn’t matter now,” Pierce continued. “We’ll adapt.”

“We need to get a hand on those files,” Stane responded. “Why haven’t we gone and gotten them yet?”

“I sent Laufeyson in first. And, since he hasn’t returned yet, it’s safe to say that I was right and The Captain left men there to stop him. Hopefully they’ll be too distracted by his mind games to keep a watch on it. They’ll let their guard down and we can sneak in this week and take it all before they decide to move the files.”

“Agreed,” answered Stane, standing up to leave. “Keep me informed.”

“I’m not finished,” Pierce said, gesturing for the man to sit back down.

The man frowned, but slid back into the chair, crossing his arms. “What is it?”

“It’s time for you to pull your weight. You promised me Stark wasn’t going to be a problem anymore, but yet he is.”

Stane raised an eyebrow. “What are you asking me to do?”

“Kill him.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the short chapter, but it was definitely needed to set up the next sequence of events. Enjoy!
“Will you relax? You know he doesn’t answer his phone when he’s on patrol.” Natasha walked over to Clint, trying to cease the man’s pacing.

“Relax? Are you listening to the same conversation that I am? Alexander Pierce, Natasha. The Chief of the NYPD. The same NYPD, might I add, that Phil is currently working at!”

Steve stepped in, blocking the man’s path. “Yes, this is a very big problem, Clint, but we can’t do anything about this now. Phil’s made it this far keeping out of the spotlight, I think he can handle one more day. Wait until he gets off shift, and bring him back here, okay? I promise you, we’ll do everything we can to keep him safe.”

Clint gave a small nod, but Steve could tell it wasn’t enough. Steve sighed. “Why don’t you go out and shadow him? Just until he’s out of uniform. You’re not going to be of any use here; might as well give your mind some peace.”

Clint relaxed, shooting Steve a toothy grin as he raced towards the door. “Thanks, Steve. I’ll bring Phil back in a few hours.”

Steve reached out and grabbed the other man before he got too far. “Stay outta sight, and do not engage, you got that? I’m serious, Clint. We’ve kept Phil under the radar this whole time; the last thing we need right now is you blowing his cover because of this new info. You need to trust that Phil can take care of himself, okay?”

Clint deflated, but nodded, heading out the door quickly and silently.

“You think that’s a good idea?” Bucky’s voice sounded behind him.

“He’d have gone whether or not I gave him permission. Better just try and get him to keep his head on straight.”

Bucky nodded. “Want me to follow?”

Steve shook his head. “Clint’s a professional. I trust him; sending you after him would send the wrong message. Besides, we need to deal with this.”

“How exactly are we gonna deal with this?” Sam piped up. “Because, Steve. The Chief of the NYPD? I know we’ve taken on a lot of challenges before, but this….we’re in over our heads.”

“Well, we can’t exactly leave,” argued Tony. “If The Commandos disappear, how long before Pierce and the rest of HYDRA run rampant through the rest of New York. We’re the only thing standing in their way. It doesn’t matter if we’re in over our head; we don’t exactly have a choice anymore.”

Pride swelled in Steve’s chest. Tony was right; they were the only ones qualified to handle this. There was no other choice. “Tony’s right. Pierce doesn’t change anything. I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m not leaving until the remainder of HYDRA is buried alongside the rest of them.”

“You sure you want to punch your way out of this one?” Natasha argues. “We can’t exactly go to war against the NYPD. We don’t know who’s dirty, who’s clean.”
“We should wait until Coulson gets here,” said Bucky. “If anyone will know anything, it’s him.”

“That brings up a problem, doesn’t it?” asked Tony.

Steve looked over at him. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” he started. “Coulson’s our man on the inside now. We’re not going to want to pull our last remaining link to HYDRA, especially now that we know his boss is in charge of the whole operation. But.”

“But Clint will go mental if we let him back into the firefight,” Steve finished, deflating slightly as he rubbed a hand across his temple. “Let’s wait until Phil gets here. Until then, there are things we can do. Thor, try and get anything else out of your brother. I highly doubt it, but who knows, he might be more willing to talk now that we’ve got leverage now. Nat and Sam, we need inventory on what we’ve got, what we need. That goes the same for you, Bruce. I have a feeling that we’re gonna need some more medical supplies.”

The four of them nodded, walking towards their respected jobs. “What about me?” Bucky asked. Steve bit his lip. It was still a struggle for Steve to let the man out of his sight each day, wanting nothing more than to lock him up to keep him safe. But their friendship had been so strained, with Steve fretting constantly over him, and Bucky fuming over Steve’s mother henning.

“I, uh, actually require your services,” Tony interrupted. With the other two men giving him a confused look, Tony continued. “Come on, Barnes, you’re gonna love it.”

Steve and Bucky followed Tony through the lengthy hall and down a winding staircase. As they walked down, Steve’s eyes darted everywhere, taking in the new area. While he’d never been down there personally, Steve had seen Tony sneak down there a couple of times, murmuring something about a lab.

Steve wasn’t sure what he was expecting when he was met with large glass panels at the bottom of the stairs, but he couldn’t help but smile when the lights flickered on as the three passed through the glass door. Because the lab? It was all Tony. Completely contrasting with the rest of the speakeasy that remained a style from the past with its old wood and dark walls, the lab looked almost white. Sleek tables littered in papers surrounded the lab, the walls lined with cabinets still half open from where Tony had dug around through them. Whiteboards covered in Tony’s scrawl hung on the walls, while random contraptions of metal that only Tony could understand sat in all the only available free space. Steve could see a small mini fridge in the corner with a small cot shoved alongside it. If Steve had to guess, that cot saw more nights than Tony’s actual bed did.

Steve loved it. The lab was so unbelievably Tony. It stuck out like such a sore thumb compared to the rest of the building, but Steve couldn’t imagine the speakeasy without it. It was just like Tony, standing tall next to The Commandos.

“Wow,” Steve found himself saying.

Tony flashed him a grin. “You like? Had to gut the place myself. Howard’s style didn’t really fly with me. Now, it’s a perfect paradise to escape for a few hours.”

“Or a few days,” Bucky murmured, looking at the cot.


Bucky shot him an unimpressed look, but slunk forward. Steve watched as Tony circled Bucky, as
“You checking me out, Stark?” Bucky teased.

“Don’t flatter yourself. You’re not my type.”

“You have a type?”

“We all do,” Tony murmured, glancing over at Steve. Steve couldn’t help but blush, looking away from the intense stare. “Now. Hold on to your hats gentlemen, and be ready to be amazed.”

Tony walked over to the far lab table that was covered in a sheet, before ripping it off. Steve could barely hear Bucky’s gasp over his own.

It was an arm.

It shone brightly under their gaze, the silver limb sparkling under the lab lights. “Well,” Tony started. “This is the part where you say something.”

Steve flushed, looking over at Bucky, who was just gaping at the arm. “Is-is that?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Come on, use your words.”

“It’s an arm,” Bucky whispered. “Is it for me?”

“No, Barton wanted an extra arm to hold his coffee. Yes, it’s yours.” When Bucky didn’t answer, Tony pushed on. “I’ve been working with Bruce so we can get it attached to your nervous system. If our math is right, and let’s be honest here, it always is, you shouldn’t be able to tell which one is made of metal. And, I mean, the possibilities are endless. This is just the prototype, but I figured that you would want one as soon as possible. It might carry a little heavier; I haven’t had the right alloy shipped in yet, but I promise, that- oof-“

Tony was cut off by Bucky snatching him into a tight hug. “Oh God, you’re gonna kill me. This is the end, isn’t it?” Steve smiled at the pair, blatantly ignoring the wetness that started to form at the edge of his eyes.

“You built me an arm,” Bucky whispered.

“Well, you kept moping around! What did you expect me to do?” Steve watched as Tony hesitantly place a hand along Bucky’s back, patting it awkwardly. Bucky tensed, as if finally catching up with what predicament he was in, and jolted back. Steve could barely contain his laughter as he watched his friend sputter. “I, okay, well, that-that’s, um, great? I-I’m just gonna-” he broke off, running out of the lab.

Tony glanced over to him, but Steve just shook his head. “Give him time to process,” he said. “He doesn’t really do the whole feelings thing. When we were in middle school, he volunteered at the hospital just because he was too scared to the dance with this girl. He’s got a real way with words, doesn’t he?”

Tony snorted. “I always thought he was such a smooth talker.”

“Not when it matters,” said Steve. When they were younger, Steve wouldn't hesitate reaching out to Bucky, asking him for advice on what to say. Bucky was suave and grew into his body fact, quickly elevating his status on the school grounds. It seemed like he could day anything on the school grounds to make the girls swoon. But it was just for fun, a complete facade based on empty words and quick smiles. Enough to work on the common crowd, but not those closest to him. It had taken years for Bucky to muster out the strength that he considered Steve his best friend, the
brunette biting his lip and kicking at the ground, as he wasn't sure his admission would be taken well. “He can talk his way out of any crime, but God forbid that man actually says he likes you,” Steve laughed.

Tony chuckled slightly, leading Steve back out of the workshop. “Good to know The Winter Soldier has his weaknesses.”

“We all do,” Steve responded. He followed Tony out, but pulled the man back before he could walk up the stairs. Tony looked at him with wide eyes as Steve stroked a thumb over his hand. “Thank you,” he said softly. “This means the word to him that you did this.” *It means the world to me,* was left unsaid.

Tony flashed him a smile. “Just trying to be a team player. I’m going for employee of the month,” he chided.

Steve barked out another laugh, pushing Tony up the stairs. “You’re an ass,” he laughed.

Tony shot a fierce grin over his shoulder as he charged up the stairs. “You wouldn’t have it any other way, Cap.”

Steve found himself stumbling on the steps. “No,” he stated, mostly to himself. “I really wouldn’t.”

He bit his lip to try and stop him from smiling as he raced up the rest of the stairs to catch Tony. Trailing back into the main room, he found that everyone had regathered around the police scanner. *Shit,* he thought to himself, speeding over to the rest of the group. “What’d Clint do?” he asked.

Natasha shook her head. “Wasn’t Clint. It’s definitely HYDRA.”

“They’re attacking one of my shipping warehouses,” Tony grit out, his hands balling into fists.

“Loki was right,” Sam added. “HYDRA found out that Stark was still working with us and retaliated.”

“We need to do something,” Tony snapped, already looking at Steve.

“Aye,” answered Thor. “Stark is with us now. His people are ours.”

Tony shot the blonde a shocked look, but didn’t comment. “Alright,” Steve said. “Bruce, watch the joint. Everyone else, let’s roll out.”

People shoved past each other as they grabbed everything they could carry. Guns were loaded and boots were tied before everyone was running out front, piling into huge vans. Sam sped down the street, listening to Tony’s clipped directions. Steve watched as Natasha handed Bucky an already loaded gun so he wouldn’t have to fumble with his one arm. Thor looked gravely out the window, his fingers dancing over his extra ammo pack. Steve felt Tony nervously tap his leg in the car, the blonde shooting a hand out, placing it on his knee.

It was a short drive, but tense; the air was almost cackling with tension from its inhabitants. Sam pulled up in front of the warehouse, the windows already lit up from gunfire. The van was barely in park before the team piled out, charging for the entrance before a spray of bullets had them diving behind large crates.

“We know who’s behind this?” Steve shouted over the gunfire.

“Does it matter?” Tony shouted back, already loading his own sidearm. “If they’re shooting at us, I
think it’s safe to assume that they’re not on our side.”

Steve snorted, but looked over Tony’s shoulder at the impending battle. Turning back around, he faced the rest of his men. “Call it, Captain,” Tony prodded.

“We’re a man down, so Tony will fill in for Clint. Go with Sam and Bucky round the back; you need to try and get us the high ground. Thor, you’re with me. We’ll charge through the front and let Nat flank through the side. Keep tight against cover, avoid civilian casualties, and no heroics, you got that? Watch the others’ back, and they’ll watch yours. We good?”

The team nodded at him, stern concentration written across all of their faces. Nat took off to the right instantly, Sam and Bucky backing up, getting ready to charge around the back. Tony stood up, intent on following the other two, but Steve grabbed his shirt collar.

“What?” Tony said, his voice barely heard over the crackle of gunfire. His eyes almost looked aflame in the warehouse lights, his hair manic from where he had ran his fingers through. The gun fit perfectly in his hands, his callused fingers steady on the grip and trigger. His clothes were old, wrinkled and covered in grease, no doubt the same outfit he’d worn the past two days. A fine sheen of sweat had formed on his brow, his tongue darting out to lick his lips as he panted through his adrenaline rush.

He was beautiful.

Making up his mind, Steve surged forward, capturing Tony’s lips in his own.

While Steve had thought about this moment lots of times, never once had he pictured kissing Tony in the middle of a firefight. In fact, it probably wasn’t a good idea, considering the kiss must have looked downright awful. Steve’s force almost pushed Tony on his ass, the movement causing Steve to catch more chin than mouth. When Tony finally got with the program, their noses bumped and teeth clacked as they tried to press further upon each other. There was no push and pull, just take, take, take, as the two men fought for dominance.

But to Steve? To Steve, it was perfect.

Tony’s hands wound around his neck, his rough fingers threading through the hairs on the nape of his neck. The scratch of his goatee was a welcome sting across his face, complementing the smooth glide of Tony’s tongue. One of them barely had time to take a breath before the other was on them again, taking more and more, never getting enough.

It was too soon before Tony was pulling away, his eyes almost black. Steve almost whimpered, trying to pull the other man back in. Tony huffed out a small laugh, the warm air bouncing off his lips before he dragged Steve back into a surprisingly gentle peck. “Later,” he winked at Steve. “Don’t you have work to do right now, soldier?”

Steve squeezed his hand one last time before pushing Tony towards the door. “Later,” he agreed, cocking his gun.

Steve watched him go before turning back into the building, blatantly ignoring the smug look that Natasha was sending him. Fight first, Tony later. The sooner they finish up here, the sooner he could go home. And then, Tony. Easy.

If only things were ever that simple.
"You’re already ba-fuck!"

Steve watched as Bucky jolted on the lab table, his body springing up like a tense coil. Right behind him stood Tony, in the middle of what looked to be surgery on his new arm. Even though he was wearing obnoxiously large goggles, Steve knew he was shooting Bucky his patented glare. “I told you not to move,” he grumbled, leaning back over the arm. Bucky huffed back at him but complied, stilling under Tony’s prodding.

“How many was it this time?” Tony drawled, this time at Steve.

“Five,” he frowned.

Bucky furrowed his brow. “They can’t even muster up a dozen anymore? You think they’re finally running low on numbers?”

Steve shook his head. “I don’t know what they’re doing. But whatever they’re up to, it can’t be good.”

It had started last week, with the first attack at one of Tony’s warehouse. Steve would have been lying if he said he didn’t enjoy any of it. The thrill of the fight, the adrenaline pumping through his veins. It was the closest he had ever felt to being his normal self in a very long time. Even with Tony added to the crew, everyone just clicked. They were one unit, moving swiftly and deadly through the entire warehouse. He should have known then that something was wrong. That is was almost too easy for The Commandos to slice down those numbers that quickly. But all he could see was Sam’s outlandish victory dance, Bucky’s long forgotten smile, Tony’s kiss-ridden lips. Maybe he had wanted to believe that for once, they had the upper hand again. That for once they were able to pull a move back on HYDRA.

He should’ve known.

Because it was within mere minutes of getting home, when Steve wanted nothing more than to smother Tony up against the nearest wall, the brunette had received a call that someone was attacking his shipyard.

That was five days ago. Ever since then, a new warehouse was constantly getting overrun by HYDRA’s forces. As soon as Steve and his men would race out to help, there would be two more problems waiting for them. Steve actually had to call Clint back in to help before he had a chance to talk to Phil. With the increased criminal activity, Coulson was putting in the extra hours as well, so there was no free time to snag the officer to ask him about Pierce. Steve knew it was driving Clint up the wall, but until they figured out what was going on, it was out of their hands.

HYDRA was up to something, he just couldn’t figure it out. There were never overpowering numbers when they got there. No close calls, no explosions, no hostage situations. The attacks were less coordinated, sloppy even, and so unlike HYDRA’s usual M.O. It was driving Steve insane.

After the first few days, Steve decided it best to split the team, always having a backup option if something else went wrong before the other team got back. It was actually Tony who asked if
Bucky could stay back with him and Bruce to try out his new arm. With the increased threats and activity, they couldn’t afford to be a man down.

It was almost surreal, how fitting Bucky’s new arm was. The shiny metal contrasted greatly with his pale skin, but the size and movement just flowed with the rest of his body. It was if it was just paint covering an actual, flesh arm. Steve had never thought of it until he had seen Bucky’s arm, but Tony was one hell of an artist, in his own way. While of course, Steve had been worried over the initial installment, what with Tony and Bruce having to connect the arm to the nerves in Bucky’s upper shoulder, he knew it was all worth it when he saw Bucky’s eyes light up as he picked up his rifle again.

“Only five you say? Did you even break a sweat?” Tony smiled.

Steve snorted. “ Barely. Clint had just rounded up two before the cops showed up to deal with the other three.”

Tony leaned away from Bucky’s arm, putting his tools down. “Anyone hurt?”

“No,” Steve said with a shake of his head. “Something’s not right. This is too easy.”

Bucky hummed. “HYDRA usually wouldn’t go around wasting their numbers like this. I mean, we’ve had to have taken care of over fifty people in the past week. The police will be running out of cells soon.”

“Maybe they’re really desperate. Or a distraction?” Tony pondered. It was a valid theory. From what Tony had told him, there wasn't anything of value at the hit targets. Anything of importance was stored deep in SI’s research and development vaults, all financial information locked on Tony's secure servers. Some of the locations did store some of the company's weapons stocks, but they were never touched. It was as if the men attacking were there only to bring chaos, damaging equipment and attacking employees.

“Maybe,” Steve agreed. “But for what?”

The amount of armed men that started laying siege to Tony's empire was astounding. There was no other reason for that to be happening besides HYDRA; but if the rival gang was able to pull these numbers for what seemed like milk runs, who knows what else they have in store.

“Who knows what goes through their heads,” sighed Tony. “Alright,” he continued, patting Bucky on the back. “You’re all done. Don’t go too crazy; my baby needs time to adjust to your Neanderthal body.”

Bucky rolled his eyes before hopping down from the lap table. “Yes, mother,” he said, dashing out of the lab. Steve smiled after him before looking back at Tony who was giving him an odd look.

“You look like you could use a nap,” the brunette smiled,

Steve sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Or a few,” he agreed.

“Why don’t you?” replied Tony, nodding towards the door. “We’ll handle the next one that comes in.”

Steve shook his head. “Not until the job’s done.”

Tony smiled again, eyes crinkling slightly. “Anyone ever tell you that you’re a workaholic?”
“Pot, meet kettle,” answered Steve, shooting him an unimpressed look.

The two fell into a silence, one staring at the other. Tony cleared his throat, looking away to start putting his tools away. It was odd, seeing him clean up after himself. Tony never put away his tools, leaving them laying about, waiting for the next use. "I'm a visual learner, Steve," he had said. "I like being able to see everything." Steve had initially rolled his eyes, claiming that the man was just lazy, but now he wasn't so sure. In between their recent quarrels with HYDRA, Steve found himself repeatedly ending up in the lab - the room quickly becoming his favorite in their new home. It had started as him staying there as a support for Bucky, but Steve stayed for the pure enjoyment of watching the man work.

It was often overlooked by others, Steve included, how brilliant Tony was. When he was younger and working for the SSR, he had always been awed be Howard's intelligence. Steve could see now that he wouldn't be able to even hold a candle to Tony. Watching the man dart around the lab, performing a dance that only he knew was breathtaking; Steve found himself with him sketchbook in his lap more than once. It was there he started to notice that Tony actually needed to be able to see anything. The man would wander from table to table, stopping in front of a tool and staring, his mind no doubt spinning any and all possibilities. Tony would multitask, jumping between SI work, Bucky's arm, and his own personal projects as easy as breathing. Whatever he was working on was dependent on what he saw, the item in his hand solving the next step on his unending list of projects in real time. He'd never seen anyone draw inspiration from a single lug-nut until he met Tony.

So, to see the man start to tidy up was almost wrong. He was stalling. Steve shifted a little closer, his moments hesitant. It wasn’t awkward between them, per say. It’s just that they hadn’t had a lot time to come to terms with what happened at the first attack. With everything else happening, there has only been a handful of times that Steve has found himself alone with Tony, and each time that he’s there, he doesn’t know what to do.

Tony stopped his movements and looked at him with a raised eyebrow, not doubt amused by his awkwardness. He seemed to take pity on Steve, however, stepping closer as well. Steve was just about to put his hands around Tony’s hips when a shrill chirp sounded through the room. Tony sighed, letting his forehead fall onto Steve’s chest. Blindly, he reached behind him, his hand wandering aimlessly across the table for his phone. Steve snorted, pulling Tony closer as he reached his own arm out, pushing the phone into Tony’s questing hand.

From the groan that emanated from the smaller man when he looked down at the screen, Steve already knew what it was about. “Pepper?”

“Yeah,” Tony sighed. “Apparently five armed men just tried to attack my assembly plant. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?”

“First I’m hearing about it,” Steve quipped, small smile adorning his face.

Tony huffed softly. “I need to go in to the office. HYDRA’s hit everything in the New York area. I gotta talk to my people, see if I can prepare them for if HYDRA starts attacking on a national scale.”

Steve frowned, but found himself nodding. “You should take someone with you.”

“No, I’ll be fine," Tony dismissed. "What if there’s another attack, Steve? You might need everyone. Besides, I’ll be at the office. Nothing gets past my security.”

“I did,” Steve responded.
“They only let you in because of your looks,” Tony chided.

“If you say so,” said Steve, a small smile playing on his lips as he rested his cheek in Tony’s hair. “You’ll be safe?” he asked quietly.

Tony pulled away to look up at him. “Absolutely. I can’t hide down here. I need to do everything I can to keep our people safe.”

Steve rubbed a hand on the back of his neck, blushing slightly. “I like it when you say our people,” he stammered.

Tony bit his lip and reached out, grabbing Steve’s shirt collar. He moved deliberately, giving plenty of time for Steve to move away before pressing their lips together. It was slow, almost chaste, their lips molding together. Steve sighed into it, relaxing into the comfort of Tony’s embrace. Just like the last, it was over too soon, Tony leaning away with a quick nip to Steve’s bottom lip.

“As much as I would love to stay, I have a feeling that if I did, I’d never make it to the office.”

Steve shrugged. “Wouldn’t be the worst thing to happen.”

Tony laughed, leaning up to give Steve a final peck. “I’ll be back soon. Go get some rest.” Steve watched him saunter out of the lab, blatantly ignoring the sway of his hips.

After flicking off the lights, Steve trudged back up the stairs to the main room, where Bucky was showing off his new arm to the rest of the crew.

“Dude, you’re like one bad haircut away from being the next Terminator,” Clint was saying.

Bucky smacked him on the back of his head, Clint squawking as the metal made contact. “Ass,” he muttered.

“Steve,” Sam called him over. “Your boy Stark does some nice work. Think he’ll make me something if I ask nice?”

Steve raised an eyebrow, shaking his head fondly. “What the hell could you possibly need?”

“Listen, a brother’s got to impress the ladies somehow.”

Steve huffed, ignoring him. “We have to talk about these attacks,” he said, sliding in to one of the chairs.

“What do you think HYDRA’s angle is? These attacks don’t make any sense. Some of them are heavy, but the next one will be complete shit. All of them have accomplished nothing. What’s their play?” asked Sam.

“Well, if HYDRA has all of these men, there’s always the potential for different attack styles,” Natasha offered.

“None this drastic,” Steve retorted. “They’re fighting as if they’re completely different units.” The thought hit him like a ton of bricks. “Maybe because they are different.” He knew something didn't add up, he knew something wasn't right.

“What do you mean?”

“The attacks. What if they were all done by different people?”
Clint furrowed his brow. “Why would HYDRA do that?”

“They wouldn’t. Because it’s not HYDRA,” Steve whispered.

“It’s not?” Clint asked. “Who else is there?”

“Everyone,” answered Bucky, no doubt on the same wavelength as Steve. “This isn’t Brooklyn we’re dealing with. This is Manhattan.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that we’ve been foolish to think HYDRA would be our only problem. There are mobs everywhere in the city. Each of the hits, they weren’t from the same mob. They’ve all been from different ones,” Bucky responded.

“It makes sense,” said Natasha. “The constant attacks, the endless amount of hired guns. Something must have happened if every mob is coming after us. We must have something they want.”

“Could it be the files?” questioned Sam.

Steve shook his head. “I don’t think so. If HYDRA knows about the SSR files, I don’t think they’d have blabbed that information to everyone else. It’d be a bloodbath.”

“Maybe it’s the weapons,” Clint added. “Stark weapons are the best on the market; mobs would go crazy at a chance to get those.”

"If they were after Stark weapons, you'd think that they would try a little harder,” Natasha replied. "So far, they haven't been able to take anything."

“Well, we better figure it out quick, because Stark is out of warehouses. How much longer until they find something else to attack?”

Steve froze. Oh my God.

“What?” asked Bucky. “What is it?”

“Tony’s warehouses,” Steve breathed, heart pounding fiercely against his rib cage. “We’ve been so blind.”

“What about them?”

Bucky sucked in a breath, catching up with Steve. “Natasha’s right. If they wanted Tony's weapons, they would have made harder attacks at his stocking locations. That wasn't what they were doing. They were just there to cause a scene and draw us out. It was never about what was in the warehouses. It was about who owned them.”

“They’re not coming after us,” Natasha replied with a grim face.

“They’re coming after Tony,” Steve finished. Without a moment’s of hesitation, Steve grabbed his phone and was out the door, racing towards Stark Industries.

Chapter End Notes
Brb, still processing Civil War feels. (don't worry, this will be spoiler free)
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

Warning: It gets a little graphic up in here.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

"How much did we lose this time?" Tony leaned back in his chair, a hand running over his tired face as he waited for an answer from the surrounding board members.

"Not much," answered Obie. "There weren't any weapons laying around, so the shipping containers took the brunt of the attack. Damages like that can be replaced."

"Does it look like I care about some boxes, Obie? Tell me what I want to know."

Obie shifted in his seat. "Only four dead this time. There have been worse-"

"Only? You make it sounds like it's okay that I have four employees dead after today," Tony snapped.

"It could have been a lot worse," Obie sighed.

"Right, what could be worse than having to call four families saying that someone's not coming home for dinner?"

He still remember making the call from the last two that had been killed, massacred by HYDRA. Husband and wife butchered on their way to work. He was no stranger to death, but trying to explain over the phone to the husband's brother what happened was nearly impossible. They were bio engineers for God's sake - Tony had recruited them to start data mining for the potential of starting a market in the medical field. The Parkers were brilliant, and passionate, starting ventures in medical technology advancement. They were good, innocent people - they probably didn't have a stain on their entire record. Except that they worked for Tony. And apparently that was enough to put them in danger.

"You could be calling five families," a voice filtered in from down the table.

Tony clenched his jaw. How dare you, Tony thought, glaring at the older man. Maybe this was the reason Pepper wanted him to come to board meetings. To come and see the greedy warmongers he let run his company while he turned a blind eye to keep tinkering in his lab. "I wouldn't say that," Tony responded. "There's a high chance that I'll be calling your family tonight," he hissed.

"Tony," Obie hissed beside him, grabbing for his arm.

Tony jerked away, galking at his CFO for not backing him up. The balding man just stared back, and Tony could almost hear the look say, "Shut up and smile. Keep the board happy."

Tony rolled his eyes, but obliged. "Do we know who's behind it?" he asked, changing the subject.
There were a few mumbled answers. "HYDRA? There have been whispers about them," one said loudly enough.

"Please," Obie snorted. "HYDRA isn't out there. It's just a scam started by the cops to keep the other mobs from running rampant in the streets."

Tony opened his mouth to object before someone else said, "What about the Captain? He's tried to take out SI before."

"It's not him," Tony said quickly, on instinct.

"What makes you so sure?" Obie asked. "You guys aren't exactly friends."

*If only you knew*, Tony thought. "If The Captain was behind this, then all of the warehouses would have burned at the same time and I would have washed up on the shores of the Hudson already. He's a one-and-done kind of man. He wouldn't drag this out. It doesn't matter who did it, we just need to deal with it. This is a problem and needs to be handled immediately."

"Tony, we're already doing everything we can," Obie placated. "We've called all the branches, we increased security protocols and hired more guards."

"That's not good enough!" Tony roared, fists pounding on the table in front of him. "Our people are dying out there, Obie. Some are already turning in their resignations because they're too scared to come in to work. What kind of company can't even protect its own employees?"

"Tony, my boy," Obie started, clapping a hand against his shoulder. "The board and I will handle this. You just do what you do best, and keep that brain running. Show people that we can still deliver in the middle of a crisis, okay?"

Tony frowned, but let Obie usher him from his chair and walk him towards the door. "Fix this, Obie," he said. He got another pat on the back before he was pushed through the door, the heavy wood closing firmly behind him.

He walked back to his office slowly, his thoughts heavy. He trusted that Obie would get the job done, but he could only pray that he get it done it time. He cracked open the door to his office slowly, intent on calling Pepper when the sudden burst of activity on his security man’s radio stopped him.

"What's going on?"

The guard leaned down listening to his radio. "There's a situation on the main floor. We'll take care of it, Mr. Stark."

Tony furrowed his brow. "What kind of situation?"

"Someone is trying to gain access without identification."

Tony froze. Steve had warned him about this. Maybe he should have brought one of The Commandos with after all.

He scoffed. *Fuck this*, he thought. If the same people who were attacking his warehouses were down there, making a clear run at headquarters in public, who was Tony to sit upstairs and stay quiet. He'd give them a real show and end it all right here. He found himself moving to the elevator, brushing off the guard's hand, clamoring in the lift. If security catches who it is, it could be the potential lead they need to stop the rest of the attacks. He just hoped that he wouldn’t regret
not bringing his gun.

The elevator dinged as he reached the main floor, the doors opening smoothly. Tony had barely stepped out of lift before he heard the shouts.

"You don't understand, I need to see Mr. Stark! Get out of my way!" Tony stumbled immediately, tearing off in a run. I know that voice.

He flew around the corner to see Steve struggling with five armed guards. "Stop!" he cried out, racing towards the crowd.

It was almost comical to see the group freeze, their heads all whipping towards Tony guiltily.

Tony ran up and pushed the hands off Steve. "This isn't necessary. He's with me."

"Sir, he doesn't have any-"

"I said, he's with me," Tony snapped. He pulled Steve away from them, dragging him back into the elevator, fingers jamming the 'Close Door' button before the rest of his security could follow.

The doors had barely shut before Steve was on him, pressing him tightly against the far wall, his hands tracking up and down his sides, as if looking for an injury.

Tony pushed the man away and slammed the emergency stop button, the elevator screeching to a halt. "What the hell, Steve?" Tony hissed. "You can't just show up here. It's not safe for you!"

"Are you alright?" Steve pressed, completely ignoring Tony's comments. "Anyone try to get in the building?"

"Besides the crazed mob boss in front of me? No, no one's been in or out that isn't supposed to."

Steve relaxed, his defenses dropping. Tony raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. "You gonna tell me what all of this is about?"

Steve rubbed the back of his neck, face flushing in embarrassment. "We had a breakthrough. We don't think it's HYDRA going after the warehouses. We think it's a bunch of smaller mobs doing the targeting."

"What the hell would they be after?" asked Tony, crossing his arms defensively.

"You," replied Steve grimly. "You're the only connection between each of the attacks. They're after you, Tony."

"Me? What good am I?"

Steve frowned, inching closer again. "You know the answer to that. You know how much you would be worth to people like them."

Tony gave a small smile, hands sliding down the front of Steve's shirt. "So you came down here guns blazing for little old me?"

"I think you know the answer to that too," Steve whispered, giving him a small smile.

Tony huffed out a laugh, dragging Steve's mouth to his. Oh, how Tony could write odes to that man's lips. How despite that they belonged to a hardened shell of a man, the lips always remained soft and smooth, always inviting. Tony sighed, trying to push deeper when Steve pulled away,
Tony giving a small noise of disapproval.

Steve's eyes softened as they met his. "What is this?"

Tony furrowed his brow. "What do you mean? I think it was pretty obviously I'm trying to make out with you in an elevator."

Steve shook his head, his hand tracing Tony's beard. "I mean us. What is this? What are we doing here?"

Tony bit his lip. This was not the time or place for this. If Tony had his way, there would never be a time for this discussion. Tony didn't do feelings. Tony could argue the validity of abstract math theorems, but through emotions at him and he's basically useless.

"Steve, I- "

"It's just, we haven't really talked about it. And, don't get me wrong, I'm very happy about the direction this is going, but I can't... I lost you once because of secrets and miscommunication. I need you on the same wavelength as me if we're gonna do this."

Tony rubbed a hand down Steve's arm. "Why do we need to label anything? Can't we just see where this takes us?"

Steve closed his eyes, contemplating. "I need more than that Tony," he said softly.

Tony thread their fingers together. "Listen to me. This isn't last time. I'm not going anywhere; I'm not leaving your side. You need more? Know that I'm just as invested as you are, Steve. I've never had this before, either. Just know that I'm here, with you, right now. And I don't plan on going anywhere."

Steve squeezed their hands together, kissing Tony's forehead. "Okay. Good," Steve replied, Tony able to feel his smile against his own skin. "Can I ask a favor?"

Tony hummed. "Name it and it's yours, Cap."

"You've got quite a price on your head in the criminal community. I'm sorry to say, that as the head of The Commandos, I'm going to have to kidnap you and bring you back to our base for interrogations," he said, eyes twinkling. "Probably extensive ones, I might add. I'm just wondering if you'll come quietly or if you're going to put up a fight. I hear you're a wily one."

Tony chuckled, releasing the emergency stop, pressing the button for the garage. "I guess it depends if resisting will be more favorable to me."

Steve bit his earlobe teasingly. "It could be," he murmured.

Tony shivered, plastering himself against Steve. "Sounds enticing. Although I'm sure the whole damsel in distress thing has its perks as well."

"Oh, it does. It's a win-win for everyone," Steve laughed. The elevator stopped and the pair got out, walking towards Tony's car. "Come home with me?" Steve asked, holding the door open for Tony.

Tony smiled, slipping in gracefully. "Of course. The board's already kicked me out. I'm all yours."

He saw Steve smile as he hopped into the passenger seat. The drive back to the speakeasy was silent, but comfortable. Tony couldn't keep the sappy smile off his face as Steve grabbed one of his
hands about halfway through the drive, gently rubbing shapes into his skin. Tony parked a few blocks away, opting to walk the last few leaning against the hard plane of Steve's warm body.

A familiar jingle of the bell and Tony was opening the door to Yinsen's shop, intent on stopping to chat with his old friend.

Which of course, was the plan, before three SUV's came tearing out around the corner, screeching on their brakes in front of the Sharma shop. Steve immediately placed himself in front of Tony, throwing the first punch before the first assailant had finished opening the door.

Tony barely had time to think before he entered the fray himself, pulling a man off Steve's back onto the ground. Of course, it was no time before he felt himself being overpowered. He hadn't had his gun, and Tony was in no shape for dealing with a small army.

"Tony!" Steve shouted, still fighting off his own hoard valiantly. "Tony, you need to run!"

Tony landed a good punch, clipping another man with an elbow, intent on pushing away. A cry of pain had him freezing in his tracks as he watched Steve fall to the ground, out cold. Tony raced forward, towards the fallen man, but hands were grabbing him again. He struggled, pulled, yanked his way closer to Steve until he felt a small prick in his neck, everything slowly fading to black.

Steve groaned, his head pounding as his eyes fluttered open. He tried to move around, only to find himself zip-tied to a chair. Even his feet were secure against the legs of the chair. The last thing he remembered was the assault, and Tony was there, and then- Steve winced as he remembered the pipe that had come down on his head. Steve could only pray that Tony had fled while he had the chance, going for backup.

Looking around, Steve could only guess he was in some run down building, virtually indistinguishable in New York. It was completely empty except for the chair he was in, another chair across from him, and some barrel pushed off to the side. It was dimly lit, moonlight barely seeping in from the large windows along the far wall. Steve sighed, trying to stay relaxed. He was no stranger to playing prisoner, even if that meant getting beat around a little bit. His team could come. Tony would come, he knew it.

Steve barely had time to work on wearing down the zip ties before the door on the left burst open, a stern looking man walked in.

"Ah, Captain," he jeered. "Finally awake. I was wondering if my men had actually killed you or not."

Steve ignored him, eyes tracking over the man's body instead, looking at what he was up against.

"Not a talker? Don't worry, we'll get right down to business then. You see, Captain, I need something from you. There's been whispers on the street about you, and I know that a lot of people will pay top price for what you know. I need your name, Captain."

Steve rolled his eyes. "Well, I'm sorry to say you'll be disappointed then. So, come on. Show me what you got. You'll be getting nothing from me."
The man patted his cheek. "I intend on doing just that. You see, you might be willing to sacrifice yourself to stay quiet, but tell me. Are you willing sacrifice your friend?"

With a snap of his fingers, the door burst open again, two armed guards dragging another body in.

Steve's world stopped.

It was Tony.

_No no no no no no no no no._

The guards tossed the brunette in the chair across from Steve, Tony's movements sluggish in retaliation. _Drugged._ Steve forced his body not to react, blatantly ignoring the way his brain was screaming at him.

"I'm sure you're aware, Captain, that a bounty has been put on Mr. Stark. But not for his weapons, not this time. It was because of you, Captain. You see, new word on the street says that you're not enemies, but the closest of friends. Now, I'm going to ask you again. What is your name?"

Steve clenched his jaw.

Steve knew, as the first punch landed, that it wouldn't be the visual that haunted him for the rest of his life. It would be the sounds, the ones that he that he heard, the ones that he didn’t. Tony just sat there and took it. It was sickening. He didn't bat an eye as they pummeled into his ribs, bruising, if not cracking them. At each slam to the face, Tony would just try and smile, offering a cheeky remark to let Steve know that he was still fighting.

It didn't become unbearable until they started cutting. It didn't look like much, just little flicks of their knives here and there. Along his collarbone, the inside of his thighs, down the stretch of his arms. It took Steve too long to figure out that each cut just went that much deeper. That after each cut, they'd dig back in, moving the blade around the open wound. It was then, where Tony fell back into silence, only to speak again, not with words, but with pained groans. A small moan here, a tiny gasp there. They were quiet, Steve barely able to pick them up. That after everything, Tony was still trying to be strong for Steve.

"Thinking of reconsidering?"

Steve blinked, not even realizing the beating had stopped. After a while, Steve had focused in on Tony's eyes, making sure that they were still open.

"Don't tell them anything, Cap," Tony slurred out, his head rolling against the back of his chair. "I got this," he tried to smile.

_No you don't_, Steve thought. Tony was stronger than Steve could ever imagine, but there was no way he could keep this up. No way that he should have to. Not on Steve's watch. He needed to do something.

"Let him go and maybe I'll tell you." It was out of his mouth before he could think better of it.

Their captor laughed. "Please, Captain. Don't be naive. Your name, now."

Steve closed his eyes, praying that Tony would forgive him. He needed more time. His team needed more time.

"Fine then. Get the hammer."
Steve stared as one of the thugs went over and picked up a hammer. The other cut Tony's bound hands, stretching one out in front.

Steve and Tony arrived at the realization at the same time, both men struggling against their binds. *His hands,* Steve thought wildly. An engineer was nothing without his hands. There was no way Tony could survive without them. He knew Tony thought the same if they way his wide eyes and shouts to the guards meant anything.

"Wait," Steve said softly.

It wasn't enough, as the hammer was swung down, two of Tony's fingers crushing loudly. Tony's scream echoed through the room, the man struggling harder against the thugs as they brought the hammer down again. Steve’s chest was heaving, his brain in overdrive as it screamed at him to help.

“Did we hit a nerve?” a voice filtered by his ear, a grimy finger brushing along his cheek, picking up a drop of wetness in its path. Steve didn’t realize he had been crying, but he chastised himself. Tony was over there getting a beating of a lifetime, and Steve was the one that couldn’t hold it together. He just played into their hands; now they knew it was working.

“We’re almost there. Grab the knife.”

Steve watched in horror as they threw the hammer away, picking up a large machete instead. Ignoring the mangled mess that was Tony’s left hand, they stretched out his right, not even waiting for a command before cutting right below his wrist. Slowly.

Steve jolted in his chair again. "Stop!” he cried, trying desperately to get free. *They were going to cut off his hand.* Steve was gasping now, his eyes blown wide. Tony was going to die. Steve was going to let him die.

“I need more than that, Captain.”

“Don’t do it,” Tony whispered, his voice hoarse from screaming.

“A name, Captain!” The knife cut deeper, showing bone. Tony gurgled, closing his eyes in resignation. “Do it,” their captor said to the guard. Steve stared as the machete was raised high into the air, one guillotine slice away from making Tony an amputee.

*I’m sorry Tony.*

“WAIT!” Steve shouted. “It’s Joseph Grant! My name is Joseph Grant. I told you, now *please,* don’t hurt him.”

The machete dropped. Steve pointedly didn’t look at Tony’s hand that was gushing blood. Their captor snorted. “And you call yourself a mob boss. You’re *weak.*” The man leaned down, inches away from Steve’s face. *“And you’re a liar.”*

Steve’s blood froze over. They knew it wasn’t his real name. “You think anyone’s falling for that parlor trick anymore? The name that Tony Stark released to the public doesn’t mean anything when you are still allies with the man.”

One of the thugs moved away from Tony. Steve braced himself, thinking the man would go back for the knife, but was surprised when he pushed the heavy barrel forward until it stood innocently in front of Tony.
The captor sneered at Steve. “The real name. Give it to me.” Steve looked at Tony who shook his head minutely. He made a move to respond as well, but was cut off as his head was shoved in the barrel.

Immediately, Tony tensed, head thrashing in the barrel as water slipped over the side. He was drowning. “I’ll kill him,” the voice of their captor hissed. “Tony Stark means nothing to me. I will kill him in front of you and you’ll take it to the grave knowing it was all your fault.”

Tony was drowning. Tony was dying. Suddenly, Steve was back in the ice, but this time, he was on the other side, watching as Tony screamed, his mouth open side at is searched for air. There was no time to think anymore. Steve didn’t care.

“Stop!” he screamed. “I’ll tell you, just let him breathe!”

“You know, I don’t think you will. I think you’ll lie again.” Tony was pushed further into the barrel.

Steve watched in pain as Tony’s struggles grew more manic. “I won’t! I promise,” he cried, tears streaming down freely. “I won’t lie, just let him live!”

“That’s not an answer.” Tony’s trashes turned into twitches, getting slower by the second.

“STEVE!”

A pause. “What was that?”

“Steve,” he whispered brokenly as Tony's body stilled. “My name is Steve Rogers.”

There was a nod and Tony was thrown out of the barrel and on to the floor. Steve knew it was him that moaned softly as he watched Tony cough up lungfuls of water, gasping for a full breath. He was alive. That was all that mattered.

“You’re a disgrace,” was whispered at him, but Steve didn’t care. His eyes never left Tony. Never left the fact that his eyes were open and he was breathing. The guards threw him back into his chair, retying his hands behind him. Not that it mattered. Tony wasn’t putting up a fight.

Steve thanked every God he knew of when the three men left the room, leaving Tony and Steve alone. As soon as the door shut, Steve opened his mouth, but stopped as he watched Tony jut a leg out and hook it around Steve’s chair, using what little strength he had left to drag himself to Steve. As soon as he was within range, he leaned forward until his head pillowed into Steve’s chest. Steve curled down immediately, needing more proof that Tony was alive under him. He felt Tony tremble from the cold as Steve placed searing kisses along the man’s neck, not caring as new tears spilled over onto his skin. Tony’s damp hair had him thinking back to the river, but he refused to pull away. The only wetness he felt that had him reeling was the smearing of blood onto his skin every time the smaller man shifted. Tony's blood. Eventually, Tony's whimperes ceased, tremors lessened, his breaths evening out. Steve pushed closer, offering every inch of heated skin that he could. He wasn’t sure how long they sat there, Steve crying as Tony rocked him slightly.

Steve was the one to finally break the silence. "I never said I was sorry."

Tony moved his head minutely against his chest. "Hmm?"

"I never told you."

"Steve."
"I don't know why," he continued, cutting Tony off. "It's not that I wasn't, because God, Tony. When you left, I couldn't...I was so horrible to you. And now this? Look at what I've done to you. This is all my fault. If I never sought you out in the first place, none of this would have happened. You would have been safe. I'm so sorry, Tony. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm- " Steve broke off with a quiet sob, pressing his face into Tony's hair.

He felt Tony pull away, only to be surprised as the man stumbled out if his chair, falling forward until his full weight straddled Steve's thighs, Tony's body curling into his chest.

Steve wanted nothing more than to wrap his arms around the man, cradling him close. He settled for burying his head into Tony's neck, wet tears smearing across the tan skin. He could hear Tony shushing him softly, his lips pressing gently under his ear. "It's okay, it's okay," Tony whispered, making Steve tremble harder.

Tony pulled back. "Look at me." Steve clenched his eyes shut in response, but eventually relented to Tony's prodding. Looking up at Tony, Steve was reminded of how awful he looked. The parts of his face that wasn't mottled in bruises were pale and drawn, both blood and water drying in his hair. "Everything that's happened," Tony started, shaking his head slightly. "Everything we've gone through. It was worth it. You were worth it."

Fresh tears poured over Steve's cheeks. "Why?" he asked brokenly, voice cracking.

"The same reason you told them your name," Tony replied with a soft, knowing smile. "You asked me earlier, what we were. But, I don't know how to quantify this. All I know is that I don't... I-I can't..."

"I can't lose you," Steve finished, pushing his head back into Tony's chest.

A long silence stretched between the two of them, before he heard Tony snort. "We're both a couple of fucking saps, you know that?"

Steve found himself laughing. "You started it," he responded, voice muffled by Tony's clothes.

Tony hummed quietly. "Well, Captain, how do you suppose we get out of this one?"

Steve sighed, looking back up at Tony. "Have faith. The team will come for us."

Tony nodded, leaning down slightly. Steve tilted up immediately, not even hesitating to connect them together when a huge crash sounded, the window behind them shattering.

Tony fell to the floor, Steve's head snapping around in alarm at the sound. He heard Tony scramble to stand up, but he couldn't tear his eyes away from what had flown in through the window.

A bomb.

It looked almost innocent, the way it lay in the shattered glass. A small trail of smoke emitted from the back, partially covering the large 'STARK' written in white, block letters.

Steve barely had time to react. He heard Tony shout an expletive before the man was jumping in front of Steve as the bomb exploded. A burst of heat had both him and Tony flying to the floor, and then there was nothing.
"-eve?!

Steve blinked, pain coursing through his body as he struggled awake the second time today. Around him, the building was in shambles. His body felt like one entire bruise, his brain starting to panic when he couldn't get himself to move. That was until he looked down and found himself still tied to the chair, now sprawled across the ground.

“Steve!”

“Buck?” he managed to croak out.

A familiar figure danced into his view, Bucky’s hands making quick work of the zip ties.

“What happened?”

“There was a bomb. Come on, we need to get out before the building collapses.”

Steve let Bucky pick him up, but faltered. Something wasn’t right. Something was missing.

Tony.

“Tony?” he asked.

Bucky pulled him towards the door. “Come on, Steve. Let’s get you to Bruce.”

“Where’s Tony?” Steve asked, dread filling his veins.

Bucky ignored him again, just kept trying to pull him towards the door. Steve yanked away, grabbing Bucky by the front of his shirt. "Where's Tony?"

Bucky looked back at him gravely. "He's gone. They took him."

Chapter End Notes

Okay. So. This is that part where you hate me. You need to believe that I didn't mean for this chapter to coincide with this, it just happened this way.

I'm going to be leaving the country for a while. Ergo, I won't be able to post until June 5th (three Sunday's from now). Oops?

I already had my 'oh shit' moment as I was writing this, knowing I'd be leaving you with this cliffhanger. But, what else is new. I've accepted my role as Satan, and I hope you can forgive me. So, enjoy? (laughs nervously as I back away towards the closest door)
He was on fire.

The flames coursed through his veins, scorching through his body.

There were hands on him, pulling, scratching, taking him away.

There were voices, shouts.

Maybe that was him. Was he screaming?

He couldn’t tell over the roar of the flames.

They were yanking at his chest now.

A thousand knives pierced his skin, the weight crushing his bones.

Every tug to get away was almost worse than doing nothing.

Maybe this was it.

Maybe this was hell.

And then, like a candle snuffed out, the fire was gone.

Darkness.

His eyes felt wide open, but the black never left.

The fire was gone, but the weight remained.

The cold, crushing weight that consumed him, locking him in place.

The voices were gone.

A constant breeze passed over him, the whooshing sound bouncing across the wall.

A broken wheeze from pipes sounded along with it every now and then.

Oh, wait. That was him breathing.

A drip from a leaky pipe echoed in the room, echoed in his head.

But there was no one there.

He was alone.

Except for the darkness.
This was what death was.

No.

This.

This was hell.

“How is he?”

“He’s in shock, but he’ll be fine with proper rest.”

A blanket is thrown over him.

“Steve?”

“I brought you something to eat. Bruce made it, so you know it will be edible.”

A disk clanked next to him.

“Steve?”

“When was the last time you slept?”

A hand brushed against his forehead.

“Steve?”

“Don’t worry, Cap. We’ll find him.”

A firm squeeze on his shoulder.

“Steve?”

“Come now, brother. Your warriors need your guidance.”

A soft sigh echoed through the room.

“Steve?”
“Enough of this, punk. Get your ass up; we need to end this.”

A flash of metal glinted against the light.

“Steve?”

“This is bad.”

Clint’s hand twitched on his gun. He glared over at Sam. “Really? I didn’t notice,” he hissed.

“Easy,” Bucky said to his left. “Starting fights is the last thing we need right now.”

The three of them peered back down the hall, at the door of Steve’s continually silent office. Within the room sat their boss, most likely in the same position that he was in the last time Clint went in to check on him. The same position he’d been in for days. Sitting in his desk chair and staring at an unseen scene in front of him.

“Well, what do you suggest?” Clint responded. “It has been three days, Buck. Three days and we have no leads on Stark and a half catatonic mob boss!”

“He’s in shock, Clint. You can’t expect him to bounce back from everything,” said Bruce, walking out of the room they were keeping Steve. Bruce didn’t shut the door completely, leaving it cracked open. It was a habit they’d gotten into, setting the door open just enough for them to catch a glimpse of Steve as they walked by his office. Just to make sure he really didn’t do anything stupid.

It had been a legitimate concern they had when they first brought Steve back after rescuing him in that burnt out building. In their defense, the last time a bomb had went off, Steve made some less than ideal decisions, ending up with them in the middle of a shitstorm with Thor’s brother and Steve freezing in the bottom of a river. But it wasn't anything like last time.

There were small signs that it would be, with Steve yelling at Bucky with a familiar crazed look in his eyes, pleading with him to find Tony. But soon after he collapsed unconscious, whether being from distress or the concussion he suffered in the blast. When Steve finally woke back up, it had taken him one look around the room for him to realize that Tony was still missing. And from then on, just silence. Deafening silence.

“He didn’t eat?” asked Bucky, looking down at the tray in the doctor’s hands. Bruce shook his head and Bucky sighed, rubbing a hand across his forehead. “He won’t talk, he won’t eat, he won’t move. I have no idea what to do.”

“Something must have happened at the warehouse,” inserted Natasha.

“Well, no shit, Nat! A bomb went off in there!”

“Then where did Stark go? Steve was asking for him when we got there, so he was obviously there at one point.”

“You don’t think,” Clint started, ice forming in his veins. “You don’t think they killed him in front of Steve, do you?”
While Clint thought that The Commandos were some of the strongest people he'd ever met, he knew that each of them suffered from the same weakness: each other. It wasn't as if it was an easy fix - Clint knew that they were stronger together, but he would be blind to see that it couldn't be used as their biggest downfall. It was strange, as when they'd first collected as thieves and murders, it would have been laughable to Clint that he would consider them family, let alone trust them. But here he was, years later, so interwoven with the rest of the group that now he couldn't imagine leaving any of them behind. Steve was not immune to this affliction; recent events solidified that he was in the same boat as the rest of them: he would do anything to protect them.

But with Stark, it was... different. The first blossoms of their relationship were known to everyone by now; if they hadn't seen Steve and Stark getting hot and heavy at the warehouse fight, they were definitely filled in by the gossip of those who had. Clint would be lying if he said he saw this coming. He wasn't sure anyone would have - well, except maybe Natasha. He's pretty convinced she knew before Steve and Tony did.

It wasn't as if he didn't agree with it, it was just surprising. Clint had had inclinations that Steve swung for both teams, but he'd never brought it up with the other man. When he first started with The Commandos, Clint had just assumed that he wasn't out to the rest of the team. He went so far as to assume Steve was a closeted homophobe. Of course, in order to prove his theory, Clint ended up blurring that he was gay during the first dinner he was invited to with the rest of The Commandos. What he hadn't excepted was Steve to just smile and say, "Okay, Clint. Will you please pass the bread?"

And there went that theory. Clint did see that there were a few members of the group that didn't appear to appreciate his statement. But he hadn't ever got a chance to confront them, as when he went to go look for them the next day, they were nowhere to be seen. All he did see was Steve, giving him another smile and a tight nod. He should have known that if Steve was willing to accept him being a deaf, homeless hitman, he wouldn't have a problem with him being gay.

So logically, it shouldn't surprise him that Steve and Tony would end up together. Stark, having lived in the public eye his whole life, has had his romantic preferences out in the open for a long time. Both men were objectionably attractive with similar backgrounds; adrenaline junkies with sordid pasts a knack for guns and had criminalistic hobbies - which, now that he thinks about it, checks off a lot of boxes on his own list. To a third party, the pair of them falling into bed together just made sense.

But it didn't. Steve doesn't date. Never.

After the internal homophobia ideal didn't pan out, Clint just assumed that the whole dating scene just didn't seem to interest Steve. Which was hard enough to believe - the man was an artist that still believed in the value of khakis, for God's sake. He just screams Hollywood romantic. It wasn't until Bucky let something slip that Clint figured it out.

There had been somebody before. A woman. Before The Commandos - during the reign of the SSR, he imagined. Clint didn't push any further - he knew better than anyone that were just some things were just meant to stay buried - but since then, there hadn't been anyone else. Turns out Steve didn't have a problem falling for people, it was just when he did, he fell hard.

And with Tony it hadn't been any different. Except this time, he didn't have any time to revel in it before Tony was ripped away from him.

_God, Steve._

"The dead leave bodies, Clint," Natasha negated, pulling him from his thoughts. "Why bother
hiding the body from us? If anything, they’d want us to find him.”

“That brings us to the second question of the hour,” interjected Sam. “Who’s they? We don’t think they’re HYDRA, so who could it be?”


Sam groaned. “Perfect. So we know nothing.”

“If Steve won’t talk, then Tony is the only one who knows what happened there. We need to find him,” said Clint. *For both his and Steve’s sake.*

“Only Stark knows,” mused Thor, leaning back in his chair. “He was at the warehouse with The Captain, and now he’s not. Steven won’t even talk about what happened. What if Stark was in on it? What if he was the one who- ”

“No,” Bucky snapped. “You cut that shit right or you can leave. Stark wouldn’t do that. He wouldn’t do that to Steve.”

“Bucky’s right,” added Sam. “Stark is one of us now. He’s proven that enough.”

“So we’ve got nothing,” whispered Clint. All eyes turned towards Bucky. “What do we do?”

“The only thing we can do. Bruce and I will stay with Steve to see if we can get him talking. Everybody else, you need to start canvasing. Get in touch with your contacts and find us something useful. Got it?”

Chairs scraped along the wood floor in answer, everyone scrambling to find answers. Bucky’s arm reached up and grabbed Clint before he took up the stairs with the others. “Yeah?”

“You talk with Phil?”

Clint nodded, biting his lip. “I told him what happened. He said nothing’s changed at his end. Pierce still doesn’t know about him.”

Bucky nodded. “Good; let’s keep it that way. Keep him safe, okay?”

Clint shot his friend a jaunty salute, before tearing up the stairs, his fingers dancing across the phone’s screen.

*Meet me in our usual spot.*

Clint jogged across the street, darting around traffic as he scanned the street’s crowd. It was always a shock, seeing the normality of it. People stopping for coffee, kids running to school, patrons cramming on the bus. Clint’s world was crumbling around him, but as soon as he walked upstairs, it was if nothing was wrong. It was just your average Tuesday.

But that was how it always was.

It was like thinking about smoking. There are thousands of articles, books, even stories about smoking. About how bad it is; about how it kills. It’s not like people aren’t aware of the implication; the evidence is everywhere. But people still line up every morning in the convenience store to get a fresh pack of cigs anyway.

People knew about mob activity, but they still stepped out onto the streets every morning.
But that’s life. It didn’t matter what happened, the world would still turn. Why not just buck up and turn with it?

Clint slipped away from the crowd, darting down the back streets until he reached his destination. The train yard was quiet and still, looking like a graveyard for the old box cars. He hopped over a chain-link fence, landing in the overgrown weeds that had infiltrated the abandoned space. Clint stepped onto the tracks, walking in between the cars, eyes sweeping over each one.

“I could hear you breathing all the way across the yard,” a smooth voice sounded behind him. “Out of breath already, old man?”

Clint snorted, turning around. “I would watch what you say about old men with hair like that.”

Pietro pouted at him, running a hand through the silver that had already sprung up on top of the brown. “It makes me look more mature,” he replied, his faint accent filtering through the breeze. “Women like mature.”

“Which is why you’re still single,” another voice replied. Wanda stepped out from behind the next car, walking over to the two men. “You might look mature but as soon as you open your mouth, the women go running.”

Clint laughed at the exchange, not missing as Pietro smacked his sister on the shoulder.

“Clint,” Wanda smiled.

“Wanda,” he smiled in return.

“What do you want?”

Clint clutched at his heart in fake dramatics. “What, I can’t come visit my favorite twins?”

Pietro shot him a blank look. “We’re the only twins you know.”

“At least you don’t have to worry about competition.”

Wanda rolled her eyes. “Clint.”

“Fine,” Clint sighed. “I have a job for you.”

“And we would help you because?”

“Because I’m your favorite Commando?”

Wanda picked at her nails. “I don’t know, I quite like Sam.”

“Wanda,” Clint whined. “This is serious. I really need you guys on this one.”

Wanda huffed. “Fine. What can my brother and I do for you?”

“One of our men has been kidnapped. It wasn’t HYDRA; it was one of the mobs here in Manhattan. I need you to help find out who took him.”

Pietro shrugged. “Should be easy enough. Who are you looking for?”

Clint bit his lip, wondering if he could get around without telling them. “Tony Stark.” he conceded.
Wanda bit out a laugh. “Are you joking? No. Absolutely not. If Stark got nabbed then that’s on him. It’s about time he finally get wiped off the map.”

“Wanda, he’s not a bad guy-”

“Coming from a criminal, that doesn’t mean much. Stark deserves what’s coming for him. We’re not helping.”

Clint’s hands balled into fists unconsciously, as if preparing to defend their newest employee. He should have known it wouldn't have taken Stark long to weave himself in with the rest of his family.

“Please,” Clint begged. “You know Stark is on our side.”

“Stark’s on his own side,” Pietro snapped.

*You don’t know him,* Clint thought viciously. But he had no choice here. He couldn't lose any extra chance on finding Stark.

“I am begging you, here. I’ll give you anything; you’re the only people I know that will get me that answers I need. If you won’t do it for me, then do it for Steve. The only reason I’m out here asking is because Steve is wasting away because Stark is gone. The man is broken. So do it for him. You guys owe him that much.”

Wanda looked over at Pietro, having a silent conversation.

“Please.”

Wanda slumped her shoulders. “Fine. We’ll poke around, but as soon as things start to get hairy, we’re out of there. I don’t want either of us tangled up in this mess.”

Clint beamed at her. “Thank you.”

He watched the pair dart off, quickly disappearing within the yard. He started to backtrack himself, heading back to the speakeasy. Knowing the Maximoff twins, Clint would have Stark’s location by the end of the week.

He would fix this. He would save his family. All of them.

Chapter End Notes

Oh, my friends, how I’ve missed you so.

But, hey! Look! New characters! Take this as a distraction from how much a salty move that cliffhanger/three week long break was. (If you can't tell, this is me trying to get back into your good graces. I'm a terrible baker, so I can't offer comfort food... this will have to do.)

Enjoy! (And, yes, we are back on regular update schedule, so I'll see you all next Sunday. Be there or be square.)
“Can you at least make it look like you attempted to eat this?” Bucky pushed the bowl closer to Steve, who was staring at the wall of pictures in his office, just like he’d done for the past few days. “Come on, man. Nat made this, and if I go back out there with the full meal, she’s gonna kill me. And yes, you heard right. Natasha made this. You know things are bad when that women goes anywhere near a kitchen.”

Still no response.

Bucky sighed, walking over until he crouched in front of Steve. “Listen, Clint’s got the twins looking in to this, Steve, but they’re not going to find much if you won’t tell us anything. We need to find Tony. Help us find him.”

Steve’s eyes slid shut at the mention on Tony’s name.

“I can’t.”

Bucky almost missed it, the way it was uttered so quietly. “What do you mean you can’t? Steve, if anyone’s going to find him, it’s you. What happened at the warehouse?”

“I killed us all.”

Bucky ran a hand over his face. “Steve, buddy, you’re not making a lot of sense.”

“I told them, Buck.” Another whisper.

“Told them what? Another file drop? Steve, that shit isn’t a top priority anymore. We’ll work it out, just like we always do.”

“My name. I told them my name.”

Bucky’s breath hitched. That couldn’t be true. Could it? Steve’s name had been a trade secret ever since the SSR was finally taken out. It was Steve’s idea, but it was the one that guaranteed their survival. If HYDRA had known that the SSR’s shining star had survived the final fallout, they’d barely live to see the sunset. It was better this way; constructing a new identity until Steve had enough forces to take out HYDRA once and for all. When everything was said and done, the pair realized it was just easier to keep up the charade. The looming name of ‘The Captain’ gave Steve the street credit he needed to raise The Commandos to the top tiers of New York’s mob scene, and no one on the outside ever found out about the valuable secrets that Steve still had access to.

“They know who you are?” Bucky whispered incredulously. “What about the aliases?”

Steve breathed out a hollow laugh. “They knew Grant was a lie. They knew that Tony was always on our side. They knew everything.”

“And you gave them your name? Why?”

Steve sent Bucky a cutting look, answering the question for him. Bucky knew that Steve, as well as the rest of The Commandos, were trained for hairy situations such as kidnapping and ransoms, but Bucky could imagine how their latest enemy could have gotten a little creative to get answers. Especially since they had Stark to dangle in front of Steve.
“Did they kill him?” he asked.

Steve bit his lip, but shook his head softly. “No. I mean, I don’t think so. But, the bomb…”

Bucky leaned back on his heels, letting everything soak in. This was worse than he could have possibly imagined. HYDRA was already nipping at their heels, but the introduction of a new mob was the last thing they needed right now. And, considering what they’ve managed to accomplish in the past week, Bucky couldn’t even begin to think how they were going to get out of this one. “Okay,” he said, nodding to himself. “Well, let’s get to work. Problem’s not gonna solve itself, right?”

He stood up, offering a hand to Steve, but it was quickly slapped away. Seeing that Steve had finally made eye contact with him, Bucky could finally look into the haunted look in his eyes, the planes of his face, covered in red blotches. “Didn’t you hear what I said?”

“Just a minor setback,” Bucky tried to reason. “We’ll get through it. We always do.”

Steve was laughing again, that harsh and broken sound, like an instrument out of tune. “You don’t understand. It’s over. We’re done for.”

“Steve, I-”

“They know my name, Bucky!” Steve roared, sending the chair he had been sitting in across the room.

Bucky held his hands up, trying to calm his friend down. “Steve, HYDRA, already knew your name. What’s one more mob?”

“Because I watched this one mob beat Tony to a pulp. I watched this one mob drown him within an inch of his life. How long until one more mob turns into two? Into three? Bucky, we’ll be lucky that we last until the end of the week before the rest of New York’s criminal system comes knocking down our door demanding my blood.”

“Then we’ll deal with it. We can protect you.”

“I don’t give a shit about me, Buck! They’re going to kill you. They’re going to mow down every single one of you just because you know me. Don’t you get it? I’m a poison. With the decisions I’ve made in the past month, it’s a miracle that anyone ever thought that I could lead them. I mean, HYDRA almost killed you, Buck! I got our home destroyed, I got us loved with Loki, I gave out SSR secrets! And was that enough? No. No, now I gave them my name.”

"You were doing what you thought was right," Bucky whispered. "You're only human, Steve."

"No, I'm not," he answered, giving a broken laugh. "I'm death. My name brings nothing but death, Bucky, and now you, Tony, and everyone else is gonna die because of me.”

The silence that followed Steve’s outburst seemed more deafening than the previous shouting. It was always moments like these where Bucky saw how Steve was never cut out for being a mob boss. That he was meant for something more than that life he was currently living. He was so passionate, and had so much to give the world; it seemed that hiding in the shadows and living a life of crime wasn’t one for him. But the fact that it wasn’t meant for him and he was doing it anyway was such a Steve thing to do. Bucky always knew the real reason Steve was born past his due date was because he was too stubborn to come out of the womb.

“If you had the choice to do it over,” Bucky started. “If you could go back in time and stop
yourself from giving up your identify. If you could stop yourself from dropping everything to be someone new just to stop HYDRA, would you do it? Would you go back, change everything, so you could keep your name and just walk away? Start a new life far away from New York City?”

Steve looked away, tears threatening to spill over his ashen cheeks. “No.”

Bucky clapped a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “Then trust that we wouldn’t change our minds either, Steve. It doesn’t matter how bad this is going to get for us. We’re not leaving. It’s time to get your head out of your ass, because you’re stuck with us. You might as well work with us.”

Steve snorted despite himself, his hand wiping away at his nose as he stifled. “We’re in a real mess, Buck.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve always worked better with real drama. Now, come on. We’ve got work to do.” Bucky led Steve over to the door, first leading the blonde over to the desk, glaring at him until Steve finally got the memo to pick up the meal and bring it with. The pair made their way over to the exit when Clint came bursting in, looking frazzled.

“Oh, you’re up,” Clint fumbled, before his head finally caught up with seeing Steve active. “Wait, you’re up!”

“What is it?” Steve demanded, ignoring Clint’s initial outburst. “The Maximoff’s. Have they found Tony?”

Clint turned grim. “Not yet, but they’re still looking.”

Bucky furrowed his brow. “Then what’s with all the commotion?”

“Because that’s not all,” Clint continued. “I just got off the phone with Phil. I asked him about Stark.”

Steve nodded. “That’s good. If we plus the cops are out looking for Tony, it won’t be long before we find him.”

“But that’s just it. The cops aren’t looking for him.”

“Why the hell not?” snapped Bucky.

Clint shot them a wary look. “Because Tony Stark hasn’t been reported as missing.”

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The constant ringing in his ears was what woke him. The pain that followed, radiating all over his body, had him wishing that he was anything but conscious. A noise followed, like broken glass, but it wasn’t long until he figured out that it was him that made such a grating sound.

Something cool was pressed up against his lips and Tony opened his mouth on reflex, almost sobbing in relief as cold water washed over the desert that had taken up residence in his throat. It was a mistake, one that he realized too late, to open his eyes. Harsh light burned into his retinas, scorching all the way inside his head.

“Shh,” a voice filtered into his ear, his head turning towards it immediately, despite the pain. It was a comforting blob to look at as his eyes slowly shifted into focus.
“Yinsen?” He tried to grate out. The man mustered up a small smile, his eyes crinkling softly behind his glasses. “Where- ” Tony started again, but Yinsen cut him off.

“Rest, Mr. Stark. You need rest.”

His head was swimming and his body was throbbing, but Tony pulled his head away to take in his surroundings. It was dark, so Tony couldn’t really see the extent of the room they were in. He appeared to be laid up on a small cot, not much different than the one he had holed up in his lab at the speakeasy. While looking around, he caught sight of one of his hands, or at least, he thought so. It was so bandaged that it looked more like a snowball than a hand. He looked back at Yinsen, who shot him a sympathetic look, before looking down. But he wasn’t looking at Tony’s hands.

In the end, Tony wasn’t really sure how he didn’t notice it right off the back. It had felt like a car was sitting on his chest, but Tony had played it off with the rest of the pain coursing through his body. No, it was the buzzing that got his attention. The constant whirring of electricity pulling his attention down to his midsection.

“I’m sorry,” Yinsen whispered to him, but Tony could barely hear over the roaring in his ears.

Tony looked down at his chest and screamed.
“Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

Steve ignored Bucky, barreling past the man and out of his office, leaving the room for the first time in days. He checked the waistband along his back to make sure his sidearm was still there as he took the stairs down to the main level two at a time.

“Steve, wait!”

Everyone else who had gathered downstairs turned in surprise, no doubt shocked that Steve was back with the land of the living. While Steve felt a small pang of guilt rush through him, he didn’t stop his path to the door. Tony hadn’t been reported as missing yet. How much time had they lost because the police didn’t even realize he was gone? How did no one realize?

A metal grip finally had him stopping in his tracks.

“What,” Steve hissed back at Bucky.

“I know what you’re going to do,” Bucky said calmly. “You’re stupid if you think that I’m going to let you.”

Steve could feel his blood start to boil. “Tony has been missing for days and the police don’t know about it. Are you telling me that you want the police to continue to not know about it? What the hell is your problem?”

As incompetent as Steve thought the average policeman was, there were still many times that Steve found himself relying on them. With them being on the right side of the law, they had access to things that Steve couldn’t even get a hold of. A high profile client such as Tony Stark would have the NYPD scrambling to put their best men on the case - this could even venture into FBI territory. And Steve depended on it.

He had spent days going over the entire scene in his head, torturing himself over and over again to find something, anything. But there was nothing - he couldn’t sketch the faces of the man that took them, he couldn’t remember what guns they were using, what accents they had. He couldn’t picture anything. That was, except for Tony’s blood on the floor, his moans as he was beaten, his stuttering breaths as he gasped for a full breath. His soothing words as his lips moved across his skin.

"It's okay, it's okay."

“Steve, you aren’t thinking straight!” Bucky snapped at him.

“And you are?” he yelled back.

“What the hell is going on here?” Sam called over, wedging himself between the two men that seemed close to blows.

“Tony hasn’t been reported missing by the police,” started Steve.

“And this dumbass over here wants to walk up to the station and deliver the news himself,” Bucky
finished.

Sam furrowed his brow. “What do you mean he hasn’t been reported?”

“I just got off the phone with Phil,” inserted Clint. “He didn’t know anything about it. At first I thought it was because he doesn’t handle those cases, but this is Tony Stark we’re talking about. If he went missing, the entire world would know about it. I had Phil check the recent reports, and there was nothing.”

“What is why,” continued Steve, “they need to be informed. We might have people out looking for him, but the police have resources we don’t have. I want every available set of eyes out looking to bring Tony home.”

Sam was silent for a moment. “Of course, Steve. But I’m with Bucky on this one. You can’t go down to the station.”

“Why the hell not?” Steve barked.

“Some random guy comes in to the station claiming that Tony Stark is missing. You think they’re going to accept that without asking questions? They’re going to want to know how you know, what your connection is to Tony, and where you were when he was missing. We have no cover story for you. How long before they match you with Joseph Grant?”

Steve blinked. “But I’m not Joseph Grant.”

“Do they know that?” asked Sam. “All they know is that Tony Stark dumped a mob man’s name on the internet; a name that the cops might have gotten hold of. Your story doesn’t line up; they compare some data, and boom. You’ll be thrown in the clink.”

“Besides,” added Bucky. “Pierce is still running the NYPD. You think that he’ll let you leave if you go waltzing in there? I understand you want to do everything to help get Tony back, we all do. But getting yourself thrown in prison is not gonna help anyone.”

Steve closed his eyes, letting his body thump against the back wall. God, he missed Tony. He would know what to do. Of course, it if were Tony, he wouldn't have found himself in this situation at all.

He could still see Tony’s face as he saw the bomb land at their feet.

"Everything that's happened. Everything we've gone through. It was worth it. You were worth it."

Steve swallowed down a fresh stream of tears. He had failed before; like hell he was going to let it happen again. They took Peggy from him, but not again.

Never again.

“I’m not going to just sit here anymore, Buck,” Steve whispered. “I won’t lose him.” I can't.

Bucky just smiled. “I said that you couldn’t report Tony missing. Why don’t we just ask someone else?” Steve opened his mouth to respond, but Bucky dragged him back up the stairs and through the door. “Come on; I’ve got a plan.”

They exited through the restaurant’s entrance, Steve frowning at the darkened room. “Where’s Yinsen?” he asked.
Bucky frowned. “There was security footage of when you and Tony were taken in front of the restaurant. Yinsen saw the whole thing. Our kidnappers saw him and were not too keen; they threw him in the van with you two. He wasn’t at the warehouse?”

Steve shook his head, his mind already racing to the worst possible scenario. Yinsen was just a witness; he was the odd man out in the equation. If Steve was on the other side, he could see Yinsen being of no use, a spare. Steve could only pray that another innocent hadn’t lost their life because of him.

“You coming?”

Steve startled from his thoughts, piling in the vehicle that Bucky had already started. “Where are we going?” Steve asked as Bucky weaved effortlessly though the streets.

“You’ll see,” he responded, his metal hand scratching at the shadow of a beard that threatened to form. It drew a slight smile to Steve’s lips. Although Bucky had been wary at first, he was so at ease with his arm now. Besides an intermittent barb from Clint here and there, no one treated Buck any different. As they shouldn’t. Maybe it was the craftsmanship; how Tony had slaved over that arm to create such a work of art. Hell, sometimes it just looked like an arm that was just painted silver. Besides, seeing the surprised joy that crossed Bucky’s face when he could hold a gun again would be enough to warm Steve’s heart for decades. It was just another thing that Steve owed Tony; for bringing his best friend back.

“Hey,” Bucky whispered, tapping him on the shoulder. “We’ll get him back.”

Steve nodded, rubbing at his eyes. “Yeah,” he agreed.

The rest of the car ride was silent, but Steve couldn’t have been more grateful. There were probably hundreds of questions that Bucky and the rest of the crew wanted to ask him; here were a lot of questions he wanted to ask them as well. But Bucky kept his distance, focusing on the road ahead.

It wasn’t until the car had stopped that Steve finally knew where they were. Steve stepped out of the car, staring at the huge ‘STARK’ printed on the side of the building. He shuddered, instantly thinking about how he had seen those words just a few days before on a bomb.

“Come on,” Bucky said, leading him into the building and towards reception.

“What are we doing here?”

“Use your head,” replied Bucky, swatting Steve in the back of the skull. “Stark’s been missing almost all week and we haven’t heard a peep from his company. Don’t you think it’s odd that no one thought to ask about the man whose name is on the side of the building?”

_How the hell did I not think of that?_ Steve thought to himself.

“Because you were too busy moping over your crush,” Bucky chided. “Once again, I’m the one who has to swoop in and do all the goddamn work for you lovesick teenagers.”

Steve blushed furiously, but he couldn’t tell if it was from the comment, or that he had been speaking his thoughts aloud.

“Can I help you?” the twig thin girl asked behind the counter, her voice almost as fake as the smile she flashed them.
“Uh, we have an appointment,” Bucky answered.

The girl looked down at her book. “I’m sorry, but Mr. Stark won’t be in for a few days.”

Steve frowned at that. “Where the hell do you think he is?”

She shrugged, her ponytail bouncing with her shoulders. “He’s just blocked out until next Tuesday.”

“That’s alright,” Bucky said, cutting Steve off from another comment. “We’re not here to see Mr. Stark anyway. We’re here for Ms. Potts.”

“And who should I say is asking for her?”

“Captain Grant,” Steve answered on impulse.

The receptionist looked at Steve warily, but made the call upstairs anyway. The silence that followed was awkward, with Bucky tapping his foot on lightly against the hard tile, Steve biting his lip as he watched the employee talk with Pepper Potts.

“She said she’ll see you,” the receptionist said, finally hanging the floor up. “Forty-seventh floor,” she said with a gesture to the elevator.

The pair piled in the elevator, listening to the hum of the machinery as they climbed to Ms. Pott’s office. “I looked at her calendar,” Bucky started. “It had Stark listed as unavailable starting the day you two went missing until next week. Did he say anything to you about taking off?”

Steve shook his head. “He didn’t say anything to me. Maybe he wanted to work on finding out who was attacking his warehouses? But Tony’s a multitasker. If he had another thing to take care of, he would just take that time away from sleep instead of skipping work.”

Bucky nodded. “Something’s not right here.”

The doors slid open smoothly, Steve debarking with Bucky as they headed for the frosted glass of Ms. Pott’s office. Steve walked up to the door and knocked, listening for a response. When he didn’t get one, he looked at Bucky, who rolled his eyes in return before barreling past him and into the office.

“Ms. Potts, I’m very sorry for my friend- ” Steve started before colliding with Bucky. He made a small noise, trying to right himself as he peered around what caused his friend to stop.

There on the other side of the office, was Pepper Potts, staring down at them over the barrel of her gun.

“Uh,” Steve stated.

“Shut the door behind you,” she hissed.

Steve complied and then raised his hands in the arm, Bucky mirroring him. “Ms. Potts, I- ”

“Don’t you ‘Ms. Potts’ me,” she snapped. “You have a lot of nerve showing up here, Joseph Grant. Or should I say The Captain?”

Shit, Steve cursed. Tony and Joseph Grant were still enemies in the eyes of the public. Of course Pepper would know. And of course, without thinking, Steve had just blurted his normal alias.
“Ms. Potts, I think there’s been a huge misunderstanding,” Bucky tried to insert.

The redhead cocked her gun. “Oh, I don’t think so. I should’ve known you were in on this as well. Who are you supposed to be again? Sergeant Proctor?”

“Please, ma’am,” Steve pleaded. “We need to ask you a favor.”

“I’m not doing anything for you.”

“Do you know where Tony is?” Bucky asked.

“Of course I know where he is,” she scoffed. “I sure as hell am not telling you.”

“Has he been answering your calls?” Steve tried.

Steve could see the surprise grace her face before the stony gaze returned. “Why does that matter?”

“Because I know he hasn’t,” continued Steve. “And I also know that Tony never misses your phone calls, because the one time he did you scheduled him with contract negotiations for a week in Canada just to get back at him.”

Pepper let the gun fall back to her side, eyes wide. “How could you know that?” she whispered.

“Because he told me,” Steve answered gently, a small smile slipping on to his face. “Just like he told me of all the times he tried to get you to quit, although he prays that you’ll never leave because he loves you. He told me that the one time that he saw you out of heels he actually called a physician because he thought you were sick. He even told me that how no matter how far technology has come, you will always hand write your reminders and appointments because it helps you remember better.”

There it was. The steel was gone from Pepper’s face, leaving a flurry of emotions and confusion. “I-I don’t understand,” she stammered.

“There are a lot of things you’ve been kept in the dark about,” Bucky replied. “And we’ll get to that. But first, we need your help.”

“My help?”

Steve nodded. “You see, Ms. Potts. Tony isn’t ignoring your call. He hasn’t answered because he’s been kidnapped.”

Pepper’s legs buckled, the assistant falling down into her chair. How she still managed to do so gracefully after the load that had just been laid on her was incredible. Steve could see her face crumbling, no doubt the same look on his face at some point this week.

But then, she got up. She straightened out her suit, marched over to the mini bar and poured herself a generous drink. Pepper stomped back over to the desk, took a swig, and sat back down in her chair. She gestured to the seats facing her.

“Tell me what you know.”
Holy cannoli, Batman. Chapter 50.

Welp. This story seems to have gotten away from me a bit. Oh well.

Please comment! Even though we are deep in the heart of this story, I'm still throwing in new names and new plots. If there are characters that I haven't mentioned or one you want to see more of, let me know! Most of my story follows crudely alongside the MCU, so if there are certain scenes that you want me to delve into, let me know! This is a very collaborative story. Know that I do read your comments and ideas and try to mix them in to the current backbone I've constructed. So let the ideas flow! I'm more than happy to hear your creativity/critique. (I'm always available on Tumblr as well if you wanna chat there!)

And, as always, thank you for following along on this journey. Although we're nowhere near the light at the end of the tunnel, it's nice to know that we're all heading into the storm together.

-JAT
Steve watched Pepper refill her drink for the umpteenth time, before continuing to rub at her temples. “So, you’re telling me that not only was the whole feud between you and Tony a fraud, but that he was in on it the whole time?”

“Yes ma’am,” Steve answered, twiddling his thumbs. He and Bucky had been in her office for the better part of two hours, slowly explaining everything that had happened between his crew and her boss. It was excruciating, but it needed to be done. Tony had told Steve that he trusted Pepper with his life; if there was anyone that could help them find Tony, it was her.

“You’ll have to forgive me,” muttered Pepper. “It’s just a little hard for me to wrap my head around this. I mean, shootings and bombs? The Tony Stark I work for may deal with mobs, but he steers clear of anything that could be considered that messy.”

“But it’s true,” Bucky almost whined.

"You're right," Steve continued. "It's not his usual MO, but HYDRA isn't only making plays against us. They're responsible for the bomb that put Hogan in the hospital, as well as the murder of your employees."

Pepper nodded slowly, disguising the information. "Well," she said, smiling sadly, "that would be more than enough for Tony to get his hands dirty. He's destructibly possessive with those he cares about. But working with others?” she questioned, looking between the two of them.

Steve huffed out a laugh. She knew Tony too well. "He did start off withdrawn, Ms. Potts, but even he didn't want to take any chances with HYDRA. Not after what they were capable of when he wasn't invested. He’s been a real asset in hunting them down; Tony’s provided endless data, weapons, not to mention the speakeasy-”

“I'm sorry, the speakeasy?” Pepper interrupted. “He showed you the speakeasy?”

Steve shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “Yes. It’s where we’ve been basing our operations recently.”

Pepper leaned forward. “Tony never shows anyone the speakeasy. I haven’t even seen it; I’m lucky to even know it exists. Why the hell would he show it to you?”

Steve startled, staring at the redhead in confusion. He knew Tony's speakeasy was a secret, but by the way he'd write odes to Pepper, Steve just assumed that she would have been made privy. *He didn't show Pepper, but he showed me,* he thought to himself, feeling his cheeks start to heat.

“I can think of a few reasons,” Bucky whispered under his breath.

Steve smacked him on the shoulder, but it was too late. Pepper had caught the comment, and by the way her eyes narrowed slightly, Steve knew that her brain was already putting two and two together. “I see,” was all she said.

“Ms. Potts,” Steve sighed. “We can sit here and talk all day about this, but we really need your help. Tony’s in trouble, and just sitting around here isn’t doing him any favors.”
Pepper’s expression darkened as she nodded slightly. “Are you sure it was kidnapping?”

“Yes. I saw it. I was there when they…” Steve clenched his jaw. “I was there.”

“You didn’t notice this entire time he was gone?” Bucky asked, steering the conversation away from that dreadful day. “You had no contact?”

Pepper pulled out her schedule. “Tony said he wasn’t going to be in the office until next Tuesday. I just assumed it was him trying to lay low and hide from you guys, because you know, you’re supposed to be enemies and such. Tony’s erratic like this anyway, so I didn’t even think twice about it; I can’t even tell you how many surprise trips to Paris we’ve had.”

“Tony asked for that time off?” Steve questioned. Had he been planning something? He sure as hell didn’t mention anything to Steve.

“Yes, he sent me an email saying he wouldn’t be in until next week.”

Bucky leaned forward in his chair. “An email? When did he send it?”

Pepper took out her phone, scrolling through her emails. “This past Monday morning.”

Steve shook his head, his heart beating erratically. “That’s not possible,” he whispered. “Tony was in the warehouse with me; we'd already been taken at that point. There was no way that he could have sent that email.”

Pepper paled. “Well then who did?”

“The kidnappers,” answered Bucky. “They must have wanted time before Stark’s disappearance went public. Maybe they had to move him somewhere more secure.”

"No, that's not possible." Pepper shook her head, biting her lip. “You don’t understand. Tony built all of our firewalls. Not even the Pentagon can crack through them; believe me, they’ve tried. There’s no way some second-rate mobsters managed to hack into a Stark Industries account, let alone Tony’s.”

Steve’s eyes widened. “What are you saying?”

Pepper sighed softly. “I’m saying, that an email like that only could have been made if the hacker was already through the firewalls. It could only have been made if they worked here.”

“Shit,” he heard Bucky whisper.

“Oh my God,” Steve moaned. “It makes so much sense. They snagged me and Tony off the street after I picked him up from the office the night before. They must have followed us from the office. It’s probably how they were able to locate and kill those SI employees earlier this month as well. You have a mole.”

“We have a mole,” Pepper agreed.

It was silent for a while, as the three thought. Steve’s insides were churning as his head screamed for blood. How one of Tony’s own was able to turn on him made Steve itch for his gun. It was if he was young again, discovering the rat that was walking within the walls of the SSR. He’d told them about it as well; but he could never find it and they’d all died anyway.

But not this time. Adrenaline started pumping through his veins. He was finally getting the answers
he needed. That meant they were catching up.

*I’m coming, Tony. Just hang on a little longer.*

“Well, that’s not something you find out every day,” Bucky laughed, trying to lighten the mood. “So, what now?”

Pepper downed the rest of her drink. “Now, you stay sitting and start thinking of a plan to get Tony back. I’ll get JARVIS to start decrypting that email; maybe we can back trace it. But first, if you’ll excuse me, I need to make a quick phone call.”

“The police already know about Tony; I took care of it,” Steve said.

“Oh no,” Pepper replied. “I’m not calling the police. I’m calling Rhodey.”

“Rhodey?”

Pepper snorted. “Oh, you haven’t met him yet? You gentlemen better brace yourselves.”

______________________________

“You’re late.”

Alexander Pierce drummed his fingers impatiently on his desk as he watched Obadiah Stane waltz into his office.

“Like you had anything else to do today.”

Pierce rolled his eyes. “Can I help you with anything, Stane? You’ve been behaving, haven’t you? No other bombs I should know about?”

Stane snorted. “If you only knew.”

Pierce narrowed his eyes. “What do you want?”

Stane leaned his hands forward to rest on his desk. “Nothing, really. I’m just here to inform you that I will be terminating our little agreement.”

Pierce jolted forward in his seat. That was unexpected. “I’m sorry?”

“You heard me.”

“Why the hell would you do something as stupid as that?” Pierce laughed.

“Because you lied to me,” Stane hissed.

“It’s my job to lie to people,” Pierce answered.

“Not to me,” the other man snapped in response. “Not about our little business deal.”

Pierce sighed. “Alright, then. Let’s hear it.”

“Two words. Steve Rogers.”
Pierce’s brain stuttered to a halt. *How?* He’d been so careful not to let anything slip - the name Steve Rogers was a relic. No one was supposed to care about him. He was Pierce's for the taking. While his brain was screaming at him, he tried to remain unfazed. By the way Stane was smiling at him, however, Pierce knew that he had failed. “Who?”

“Don’t play dumb,” Stane said, rolling his eyes. “You knew Grant wasn’t The Captain’s real name, didn’t you? That’s why you wanted him all to yourself, wasn’t it? I knew there was something you were hiding.”

Pierce tightened his fists. “Steve Rogers is not your concern. Only Stark is.”

“Oh, he’s my concern now. I know who he is, now. I know what secrets he has.”

“And you think you can get it?” Pierce laughed. “I’d like to see you try.”

Stane shrugged. “It took me half a day to pry his name out of him. Because I have the one thing you never have: leverage.”

Pierce furrowed his brow. “What could you possibly have on Steve Rogers?”

Stane flashed a grin. “The one you left to me. Tony Stark.”

“You kidnapped your own CEO?” Pierce asked, gaping at the man.

“Tony needed to go eventually, you said it yourself; it’s nice that he can help out a dear old friend one last time before I off him. Besides, no one cares that he’s gone. I’ve had him for days and the public is still in the dark about the whole thing. Face it, Pierce. You aren’t running the show anymore.”

“You’re really going to turn on me? On HYDRA?”

“HYDRA is a broken shell of what it used to be. You lot were nothing but a stepping stone for me.”

“You’re going to regret this,” Pierce stated. “You don’t want us as an enemy.”

“The only thing you are is obsolete,” replied Stane, heading back to the door. “Good day, Chief.” And with that, he slammed the door behind him.

Pierce listened as the hours ticked by as he sat staring at the door. Stane knew about Steve Rogers. Any advantage he thought he had was gone now. *What the hell am I going to do now?* Finally, as the sun started to slip below the buildings, he buzzed the intercom on his desk. The door was reopened and a young officer stepped through the threshold. “Yes, Sir?”

“Ward, I need you to put out a few men to tail Obadiah Stane.”

“Of course, Sir. Anything else?”

Pierce rubbed a hand across his forehead. “There wasn’t any news about Tony Stark today, was there?”

“What kind of news?”

“Like ‘he’s missing’ sort of news.”

“I’ll look.” Ward slipped back out through the door, only to return not minutes later.
“A report was made; it’s just waiting to be approved. Won’t be long now before the media hears about it.” Ward opened the file, showing Pierce an almost bare slip of paper, scantly describing Stark’s disappearance. He was almost about to send Ward away when something caught his eye.

“Wait.” Pierce shot a hand up to stop him from taking the file away. “What’s that?”

“It’s the timestamp, Sir. It shows what time the officer made the report.”

Pierce hummed. “And tell me, Officer Ward, what time does that say?”

“9:30 AM,” he answered slowly.

“How peculiar.”

“How so, Sir?”

Pierce adjusted his glasses on his pale nose. “Well, I watched Stane strut through my office today broadcasting the fact that he had snatched Tony Stark off the streets to dangle in front of The Captain, and that no one even knew he was gone.”

“So?”

Pierce sighed. “Stane came in after lunch.”

Ward scratched at the back of his head. “I’m not following.”

“So this report was filled out before I had my meeting with Stane, yes?”

“I guess so, yes.”

“Now, Ward. How in the world would an officer know a person, Tony Stark no less, was missing hours before the rest of the city got a single clue?”

Ward shifted on his feet uneasily. “I’m not sure, Sir. Maybe there was just a typo when it printed.”

“Or maybe someone tipped them off,” Pierce interjected.

“But no one knew about it,” continued Ward. “How would they know to file a report about information that no one knew about?”

“Exactly,” Pierce grinned. “But someone did know. Someone, besides the kidnappers, knew that Tony Stark had been taken.”

Ward furrowed his brow. “Who?”

“The Captain.”

“But if The Captain tipped them off, then that means that-”

“Yes, yes it does,” Pierce finished, leaning back in his chair. “Who filed the report?”

Ward stared back down at the report. “Officer Coulson.”

Chapter End Notes
Uh oh.

Also, I pinky promise that we will be back with Tony and all his lovely angst next week!
Please comment!
“Let me see.”

It was whispered so softly, Tony could barely hear it over the dancing flames that their small fire emitted. He leaned forward, starting the struggle to open his robe when a gentle hand lay on his shoulder.

“Just the hands,” continued Yinsen.

Tony sighed, but said nothing, returning to his original position and stuck his hands out slowly, careful not to jostle the heavy rectangle that sat in his lap.

He heard Yinsen hum. “The braces are fine; they’ll hold for a few more weeks and we’ll go from there. As for the other one,” he said, carefully switching between hands. “You haven’t ripped your stitches, which, for you, is a momentous achievement. Any loss of mobility?”

Tony shook his head, wiggling his fingers on his right hand as evidence. Yinsen nodded, patting his hand before leaning back against his chair.

Tony’s eyes swiveled over the room that had housed him for the past week. Well, he’d been told it had been just over a week. Tony was out for most of it, but figured Yinsen had no reason to lie about it. It wasn’t much; Tony could only surmise that they were underground from the dirt that was packed in to make the floor. The ceiling was constantly leaking; rusty water dripping into buckets, the sound no doubt going to eventually drive Tony insane. He and Yinsen were currently sitting in the far corner, in front of an empty barrel that someone jerry-rigged into a fire pit. Tony had seen a vent on the ceiling, so he could only pray that they wouldn’t die of oxygen deprivation. Besides, if they’ve been down there for as long as Yinsen said they had, then if lack of oxygen were a problem, they’d be long dead by now. Other than the ancient lawn chairs that were probably scavenged from the dump, and the two lumps that were barely passing as cots, the room was empty.

Tony’s voice broke over the cracking flames. “Did they- ”

“No,” replied Yinsen. “They haven’t been in yet. Maybe today is your lucky day; you’ll finally meet our gracious hosts.”

Tony shivered.

The Ten Rings.

From what Yinsen had filled him in on, the pair was currently being held by one of New York’s most gruesome gangs. He had gathered more than enough intel over the years, and none of it was good. They were the type of people that would give HYDRA a run for their money. Tony found himself wondering if it would have been better to have been kidnapped from HYDRA. Because wasn’t that the kicker.

Yinsen said The Rings never once mentioned HYDRA, which Tony couldn't decide if it was concerning or not. Months ago, when The Commandos had snatched one of Hammer's men off the street, he had first mentioned the illusive Monger. Which, with a little digging from Romanoff, led to the Ten Rings. Maybe the Ten Rings were acting as the fist of HYDRA - Loki had let it slip that The Monger had been working with HYDRA, so it would make sense that the manpower of The Ten Rings be utilized. It would definitely explain the recent attacks on his business.
But it didn’t explain why he was still alive. HYDRA didn’t seem to have a problem with setting off a bomb with him in it - twice, apparently. Loki had already confirmed that he was a dead man, so why keep him alive? In fact, it seemed that The Ten Rings were doing everything in their power to keep him alive, if the medical supplies given to Yinsen and the lack of continued violence were to mean anything.

Which most likely meant that he was just here as a cash cow. Bait.

Tony shuddered. “But did they-”

“No,” Yinsen repeated, knowing exactly what he was going to ask. “If they haven’t been in today, how would they have been able to tell me about The Captain?”

Tony sighed, staring back into the flames. This is a good thing, Tony tried to reassure himself. It had been over a week; if The Rings still had Steve, they would have heard about it, right? Steve already upheld his part of the bargain, so they didn’t need him anymore, right?

No.

He refused to think about it. Tony knew what mobs did to people who weren’t useful anymore. Besides, none of that matters if he didn’t survive the bomb, his mind betrayed.

Tony moaned softly, his head flopping against his chest. Steve had to be alive. He had to be. He had survived a run in with the East River in the middle of winter, so of course he could survive a little bomb. Besides, if Tony’s math was right, which it always was, he took most of the blast by jumping in front of Steve. And while Tony would normally use that instance to get bragging rights for all eternity, he wasn’t feeling much like celebrating.

Tony glared down at the car battery that sat in his lap, wires almost innocently connecting to the center of his chest. Tony bit his lip hard, trying to stop the tears that threatened to spill over his cheeks again. It was a good thing Yinsen had bandaged his chest back up. After a less than stellar first sighting of the mangled mess that was his torso, Tony didn’t think he could bring himself back to look at the monster he’d become. The only thing that had been keeping him sane the last few days is that he had potentially saved Steve’s life. Tony shook his head. No. He did save Steve’s life. If there was anything to keep him going in this hellhole, is that Steve is somewhere out there still, looking for a way to bring Tony home. I hope.

Tony cursed at what he must look like; no better than a teenage girl clutching to the whims of hopes and dreams. If only his father could see him now.

Tony was about to reply before a sharp banging echoed against the locked door of their room.

Yinsen scrambled over to him fearfully, tugging at his robe. “Get up, get up,” he hissed.

“Is it them?” Tony asked, quickly obeying the smaller man.

“Don’t speak unless spoken too, do you understand? Hands above your head, like mine, alright? And don’t do anything stupid.”

Tony nodded mirroring Yinsen’s with one hand, the other clutching his life support, when the door burst open, five armed men filling the empty floor. Behind them, a bald man with dead eyes and browned skin stepped in. When he saw Tony he smiled, his fingers playing idly with a ring on his hand.
“Ah, Mr. Stark. You look like you’re feeling better.”

“No thanks to you,” Tony said on impulse. Yinsen shoved an elbow in his general direction.

The man offered a hollow laugh. “Of course. I’d apologize, but it needed to be done.”

Tony glared at the man, fingers tightening on the car battery.

“My name is Raza.”

“I don’t care,” answered Tony.

The goon to Raza’s right growled, shifting his hand on his gun.

“I would be careful, Mr. Stark,” replied Raza. “My men don’t have the same restraint I do.”

Tony balled his hands into fists but refused to respond. The last thing he needed was a bullet to the head. Just sit tight, he thought to himself. Steve’s coming for you.

“I’m sure you’re wondering why you’re here, but it would be so much better to show you.”

Before Tony could grunt out a complaint, a bag was thrown over his head and hands were grabbing his arms, dragging him out of the room. From the sounds of a scuffle behind him, Tony could assume that they were dragging Yinsen along for the ride as well.

The pair was pulled along a hallway, just as damp as their current boarding, revolting smells clogging his nose and mouth every time he drew a breath.

Sewers, Tony’s mind supplied as his nose crinkled against the odors. They were somewhere within New York’s sewer system.

Tony was jolted right and then pushed forward, someone snatching the bag away from his head. Tony squinted at the bright lights illuminating the room. Once he forced himself to reopen his eyes, Tony could only wish that he hadn’t. There, encompassing the entirety of the room, were his weapons. Every weapon imaginable, it seemed, from SI’s top sellers, to the ones always meant for the clearance rack.

“What do you think?” The man grinned, obviously proud; a smile that suited nothing but a dragon, showing off his horde.

“I think you’ve got a lot of my guns,” Tony responded.

“Yes,” Raza agreed. “But this is business, and as you can see, it’s booming. I need more.”

“Then try your usual supplier,” Tony snapped. “You seem to be doing just fine without my help.”

“You misunderstand me,” continued Raza. “I don’t need that kind of more.”

Tony shot him an unimpressed look. “I’m not following.”

“I don’t need of the same guns, I need variety. I need a golden egg, and you’re going to help me get it.” He reached into his pocket, pulling out a worn photo to hand to Tony.

Tony’s eyes widened as he saw what was staring back up at him. It's not possible. That photo shouldn't exist; it hadn't existed. Not for a long time - or so he had thought. “Where the hell did you find this photo?”
Raza ignored him. “I need this. I need the Jericho missiles.”

“How did you get your hand on this photo?” Tony hissed again. “The Jericho program was scrapped a few years ago. These things were too dangerous to give over to the military. There aren’t any left; I had all the models destroyed.”

“Yes, but I don’t need a model when I have you,” Raza replied easily. “You’ll build me one.”

Tony gaped at the man. “What?”

“You will build me a Jericho.”

“And why the hell would I do that?”

“Because,” Raza said, “if you do, I’ll release you. I’ll let you go home, no harm, no foul.”

*Home.*

Tony wanted nothing more than to find his way back to his rickety speakeasy. He wanted to trip over muddy boots and discarded guns as he walked down the stairs. He wanted to wake up to the smell of Bruce’s tea or even Thor’s booming voice on his quest for Poptarts. He wanted to hear Clint’s bad jokes, Sam’s disgruntled bickering, Natasha’s quiet judgement. Hell, he’d even take Bucky tapping a forgotten melody with his metal fingers against the table. But mostly he just wanted Steve. Steve’s eyes, glowing even without any light. His smile, especially the ones he fights to keep down as he tries not to laugh at something inappropriate. His furrowed brow, making him look like a kicked puppy as he tries to maneuver Tony’s miscellaneous tech. His hands running through Tony’s hair. His feet falling into step besides Tony. His larger frame brushing against his as they passed each other in the hallway. His voice, a masterpiece of soft lullabies and crashing crescendos. He wanted Steve.

But if Tony only knew one thing in this world, was that he’d never see Steve again if he said yes to this man.

“No,” he whispered.

Raza paused, turning slowly. “What did you say?”

Tony lifted his chin in defiance. “I said no.”

In retrospect, Tony thought as he found himself waking up again on his cot, he should have come up with a more diplomatic answer. Shifting slightly, he felt the dampness of his skin and instantly turned to his side, throwing up whatever bile remained in his stomach. Tony shuddered, not really knowing if he should count himself lucky he didn’t remember the waterboarding this time. It was bad enough the first time, in the warehouse. How no matter how much he struggled, how much he screamed in protest, there was nothing but the silence and the water.

“Ah, back with the land of the living, I see.”

“How bad is it?” asked Tony, counting on Yinsen to give it to him straight.

“Well,” the man answered, “you’ve definitely seen better days. Don’t worry; the bruises will fade. You managed to avoid breaking any more bones, so you’ve got that going for you.”

Tony mustered up a smile. “I’ll drink to that.”
The cold lip of a metal cup was pushed up against his mouth. “Of course you will,” Yinsen continued. “You were out like a light after two punches. You’re still dehydrated, still healing from the warehouse.”

Tony hummed as he gratefully sucked the water down. “That bad, huh?” he managed to grit out after the cup was finally empty.

“I’ve seen some pretty sad things in my life, Mr. Stark. But you went down faster than a flower bows to the wind,” Yinsen smirked.

Tony shot Yinsen a glare, ignoring how the man’s smile grew, instead shifting around on the cot until he managed to snag the blanket between his good fingers, hoisting it over his body for some semblance of warmth. “Well, you can just forget your Christmas bonus.”

Yinsen let out a breathy chuckle. “I’m sure I’ll survive.” When Tony didn’t respond, he continued, “What about you?”

“What about me?” Tony replied.

“What will you survive?”

Tony clenched his jaw, looking down at his broken body.

“They will be back,” Yinsen pushed. “And something tells me that they won’t be as generous as they were last time. We need a plan.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not usually the man with the plan.”

“You don’t have a choice,” answered Yinsen.

Tony pushed himself up to a sitting position. “I guess not.”

“What are we going to do?”

Tony sighed. “I’ll think of something.”
“Come on, Phil,” Clint whined into the phone. “Can’t you call in sick?”

“I’m sorry, Clint. You know I’d be there if I could.”

Clint kicked a small rock, listening to it echo as it skipped down the alley. “But it’s Friday. You promised me steak and potatoes.”

He heard a warm chuckle over the phone. “You know, I’m starting to get concerned that you’re only with me for the food.”

Clint gasped dramatically. “Why, Phil, I never! The food is just a nice bonus.”

Another chuckle. “Well, we’ll just have to postpone dinner until Saturday.”

Clint frowned, pressing the phone closer to his ear. Above him, the sky was a bleak gray, an ominous warning of the storms to come. “It’s getting really busy over there, isn’t it?”

“The statement’s finally been released to the public,” Phil sighed. “The media is going nuts over Stark’s disappearance. I can barely make it into the precinct every morning without being hounded. What’s worse is that we don’t have any answers for them.”

“You guys got nothing?”

“You have to understand, Clint, I can’t just show up to work with all of these mysterious tips. If I mention the warehouse him and Steve were in, people are going to want to know how I know. That would put everyone at risk.”

Clint frowned, but he knew his boyfriend was right. An unfortunate side effect of working on the side of the law meant that you actually had to follow the law. A bit overrated, if you as him. “This is why I should be your CI! People would be less suspicious if they thought your tips came from one.”

“No,” Phil’s voice replied harshly. “Absolutely not.”

“Come on, Phil- ”

“Clint, I said no.”

Clint sighed, leaning against the outer wall of the shawarma shop. “I’m just trying to help, Phil.”

“I know you are, sweetheart. I just can’t do that to you. Criminal informants don’t last long because they’re either thrown back in prison or end up dead. I refuse to risk you like that.”

Clint found himself smiling. “I can take care of myself.”

“I know, I know. Just humor me, please?”

“Yeah,” Clint conceded.

Silence fell between the two of them, Clint just zoning in on Phil’s soft breathing that reached over the phone. Another date cancelled. Of course, Clint can’t blame it on Phil; he had cut out on him more than once. Except, instead of protecting the citizens, it was usually for reasons more along
the lines of muggings someone or breaking and entering. With everything that’s been happening, the time the pair actually got to spend together was drifting further and further apart. It wasn’t like this was the first time they’d both been busy dealing with their respective empires, but the reappearance of HYDRA was doing them no favors.

Phil was working in the belly of the beast, just feet away from the man who was now in charge of HYDRA. Clint had pleaded with Phil, trying anything to get the man to leave, to quit, to do something. But the man had refused. "You need someone on the inside," Phil had answered. Clint had been furious, desperate to take action, but he knew that he couldn't. It was the type of man that Phil was. Clint knew it - it was part of the reason he fell in love with him. And while Clint had kept his mouth shut for every other job that Phil worked, he knew that they weren't just playing cops and robbers anymore. What HYDRA had managed to accomplish in a few months was devastatingly immeasurable. If Phil was to become another check mark on HYDRA's to do list, Clint wasn't sure what he would do with himself.

There was only one time that Clint was grateful that HYDRA existed. He wouldn’t have met Phil without them. Sometimes, Clint wishes that they never met, and that Phil was off living some apple pie life with some cellist or something like that; Clint knew he was a danger to Phil. But if anything, Phil was more stubborn than Clint. He wasn’t leaving Clint; wasn’t taking no for an answer. He knew that from the beginning.

“Excuse me.”

Clint tuned the voice out out, casing the crowd. It was almost time. With any luck, the man he was looking for was already within the building.

“Excuse me.” A sharp tap on his shoulder finally had Clint turning. A harsh retort formed on his lips, but he fumbled when he saw who was addressing him. While usually, Clint would see the police uniform and run, the man wearing the suit had him stopping. His jaw was clenched tightly, but the strong line they formed along his face was worth it. His dark hair was parted and combed perfectly; everything about the man screamed neat. But what had Clint’s tongue in his throat were his eyes. Clint couldn’t even discern what colors they actually were. It was like staring into the Milky Way; a dark sky splattered with bright constellations and planets.

“I-I’m sorry?” Clint managed to stammer out. Smooth, Barton. Real smooth.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

The question caught Clint off guard. Well, both the question and the smooth voice it was asked in. Like caramel. “Well, Sir,” he answered slowly. “This is a bank. I’m here to withdraw money from my account.”

The officer squinted his eyes. “Yeah, that’s not working. Try again.”

Clint startled. “What’s not working?”

The policemen pointed over to the far wall, where a small line was formed. “If you were waiting for a teller, you’d be over there. Besides, it doesn’t take a man over twenty minutes to decide whether or not he wants cash or not.”
Clint cursed internally. Sure, he’d gotten there a little early to meet his mark, but he didn’t want to miss him. Today was too important to screw up. Everything has to go as planned if he wants this to be finally over. Cap was counting on him.

“Well, I’m not your average man,” Clint chided.

“Not average is right,” the officer noted. “Clinton Barton, am I right?”

Clint froze. “How the hell do you know me?”

The officer nodded over to one of the security cameras on the walls. “One of the tellers phoned the cops saying that a suspicious man has been stalking the lobby for a while. I thought I’d stop by and say hello. Of course, I always like to know who I’m talking to, so I thought I’d plug your face into the database first and see what I got. You made for quite an interesting read, Mr. Barton.”

Clint leaned forward, blinking coyly through his lashes, unable to help himself. “Did you like what you read? Let me tell you that I’m much more impressive in person, Officer…”

“Coulson,” the man answered, flatly. “And impressive isn’t the word I would use.”

“Why, Officer Coulson, that’s not how you address a fine citizen such as myself.”

“Please. You are anything but fine.”

“You’re right. I’m stunning,” Clint winked.

Coulson leveled him with a glare. “With quite a stunning record to match. You’re here to cause trouble.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I know guys like you. In and out of jail all the time, one would think that you’ve got nothing better to do. But you don’t, do you? You’re just a child; a nobody craving attention.”

Ouch. Clint balled his hands into fists, praying that he had the strength not to punch this man. He’d hate to ruin the face; he should have known. The pretty ones always turn out to be douches. He opened his mouth to reply with a cutting reply, when he stopped. Across the bank, a man in a trench coat walked through the revolving doors, briefcase in hand. "Well," he said, eyes not leaving the case. "This has been enlightening, Officer, but I need to go.”

Coulson shot out and grabbed his arm. “I didn’t say you could leave.”

Clint watched as his mark bent over, setting his briefcase down. “You can interrogate me after,” Clint hissed. “Let me do my job.”

“What job?” Coulson demanded.

But Clint wasn’t listening. He watched as the man pretended to get a phone call, starting to walk away from the briefcase. Shit, shit, shit. “Get the hell off me,” Clint snapped, pushing away from Coulson.

“How do you know that’s going on!”

His mark got closer to the door. Clint swung back around. “I’m sorry,” he uttered quickly before decking Coulson in the face, finally escaping his grasp. He heard patrons gasp at the scene, but Clint ignored them as he pounced forward, grabbing the briefcase. He barely had the thing snug in
his hand before he was whipping it around, clipping his mark in the back of the head. The guy crumpled instantly, body falling to the floor in a heap.

“Hey!” he heard Coulson yell, but Clint just had eyes for the briefcase.

30 seconds. Shit, he’d armed it. Cap was gonna kill him - that is, if the active bomb didn’t first.

Clint’s eyes darted wildly around the bank, looking for somewhere safe to toss it, but to no avail. There were people everywhere. Hands grabbed at him again, Clint struggling against Coulson’s grip.

“Get off me!”

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” Coulson yelled in response.

“Saving your goddamn life,” Clint roared back before taking off behind the tellers. He heard Coulson in pursuit of him, but Clint didn’t dare look back. Suddenly, he was sent crashing to the ground as Coulson managed to jump forward, knocking his legs out from under him. Clint couldn’t contain the shout that left him as pain coursed down his legs.

15 seconds.

Ignoring his leg, Clint kicked away from Coulson, pushing forward. Come on, he thought. Where is it?

At the end of the hall, Clint stumbled into the back room with all of the safety deposit boxes. He snatched the keys hanging off the hook, opened the closest one, and tossed the briefcase inside.

“Stop in the name of the law!”

Coulson must have thought he was going to put up more of a fight, as the man was shocked to see Clint running back towards him. The policeman barely had time to open his mouth again until Clint tackled them, sending the pair barreling to the floor. Clint tried to cover as much as Coulson’s body as he could when-

BOOM!

The bomb exploded, the blast shaking the entire building. Clint could feel shards of deposit boxes fall over his body, but nothing too painful. He exhaled deeply, unable to stop himself from flopping his head down onto Coulson’s chest.

“Was that a bomb?” the other man whispered.

Clint groaned, finally peeling himself off the other man. When he turned back, he was met with a gaping hole in the wall, the once gleaming metal nothing but black soot now. “Curtesy of HYDRA,” Clint replied.

“HYDRA?” Coulson gaped, standing up with shaking legs.

“Don’t worry. The rest of the crew will handle the other bombs. HYDRA won’t be a problem much longer.”

Clint could hear sirens down the hall, the rest of Coulson’s gang finally showing up to the party. “You probably want to arrest the bomber before he gets away,” Clint shot at Coulson before starting to limp down the hall. It was a miracle he was able to slip out the back door without
anyone noticing, or being arrested. Seems like Coulson had decided to let him walk. He managed half a block down the back alley before he had to stop, legs buckling under him. Pulling his pant leg up, Clint could see the dark bruising that was already forming around his ankle. He flopped against the alley wall, which of course, was a mistake because it looks like the bomb had left a few marks as well, if the throbbing pain in his skull was any indication.

“You work for him, don’t you.”

Clint froze, turning his head minutely to see the officer leaning against a streetlamp. How long had he been sitting here? The sirens weren’t on in the background anymore; the blue and red lights were gone. And yet, Coulson was not only still there, but had managed to sneak up on him. It was near impossible with his new hearing aids. That guy might just be quieter than Clint.

“I’m sorry,” Clint sighed. "You’ll have to be a little more specific.”

“Don’t play coy with me.” Coulson pushed away from the lamp and idled over to Clint. “There’s only one man in an active battle royale with HYDRA. You know who I’m talking about.”

Clint bit his lip, weighing his options. Sure, his term of employment with Rogers was still fresh. But after eradicating the problem that was HYDRA, Clint had never felt a stronger connection than with The Commandos. Clint knew he was in for the long haul; that is, if Steve let him. “Maybe,” he finally answered. “You gonna arrest me?”

Coulson gave him a thoughtful look. “Someone just called in an anonymous tip. The boys followed to some building in Harlem; sort of lab they say. You were right; HYDRA was behind the bomb. There was a list of a bunch of locations, the bank being one of them. I’m assuming that since there were no other reports of bombs at the other spots, your team got to the bombers before they detonated.”

Clint shrugged. “Probably.”

“That’s not all they found at the lab.” Clint didn’t answer, and Coulson continued. “They found a bunch of bodies there as well. Everyone’s assuming they’re HYDRA henchmen.”

“Good assumption.”

“That’s the rest of them, isn’t it? You got rid of HYDRA once and for all.”

“I wasn’t at the lab; I was here. The Captain got rid of HYDRA. I was just a nobody craving attention.”

Coulson dropped eye contact briefly. “You saved all of those people in there; you save my life. That wasn’t The Captain. That was you.”

“Better not go around and start spreading that around, Officer. Don’t wanna ruin my reputation. I’ve heard it makes for an interesting read,” he grinned.

Coulson gave a small laugh. Clint blatantly ignored how it reminded him of when he heard bells ringing for the first time. “No, of course not,” the man replied. He looked down at Clint’s leg and frowned slightly. “How bad is it?”

“Just a sprain. It’ll be fine in a few days.”

“Not if you don’t ice it properly.”
“What are you, a doctor now?”

“I can take you downtown,” Coulson answered. Once he realized what he said, he continued. “Wait, I didn’t mean it like that – shit, that’s not,” the man broke off in a sigh. “This is not going as planned.”

Clint gaped at the man. “You had something planned?”

“I wanted to say I’m sorry. Those things I said... they we’re wrong. I saw what you did today. You were ready to let me throw you in jail. You did that, just to save those people. Maybe you and I aren’t so different. You want to help people; you just do it in your own way.”

Clint didn’t know what to say. He definitely wasn’t expecting that. “Um, thanks?”

Coulson snorted. “Let me guess. You’re not used to the whole appreciation thing are you?”

Clint shook his head. "Doesn't usually happen in my line of work."

“Well, let me tell you. It’s a novel concept. You did something for me, now let me do something for you. Let me help you.”

Clint gave him a skeptical look before turning back to look down the street.

“I’m not going to arrest you,” he answered. “Not after what you did today. I was wrong about you; I’d just like to apologize. Besides, I’m pretty sure you’d kick my ass if I tried anything.”

Clint couldn’t help but smile. “I don’t know, Coulson. Something tells me you know how to kill a guy with a pocket protector.”

The man gave a small smile. “Let’s not try and find out. And, it’s Phil.”

Clint couldn’t help but smile in return. “Clint,” he answered, shooting out a hand.

Coul-Phil met his hand, shaking in a firm, but gentle grip, easily hauling Clint off the ground.

“There’s a little diner up the road that just so happens to give discounts to police officers. You play your cards right and there might just be a discount for you as well.”

Clint laughed, dropping Phil’s hand. The man quickly slipped against Clint’s side, wrapping a strong arm around his waist to take most of his weight, helping him stumble down the road. “You asking me on a date, Sir?”

Clint could see the other man’s smile from the corner of his eye. “We’ll see.”

“Clint?”

Clint pressed his fingers hard against his temple. “Yeah, sorry, Phil. Got a little lost in thought there.”

“Get some rest. You sound exhausted.”
“Don’t worry about me, Phil,” Clint retorted. “Just get that work done. You, Sir, owe me a steak dinner.”

“You got a deal. You know I love you, right?”

Giddiness bubbled in his chest, Clint biting down hard on his lip to keep it from escaping. “Of course, you do. What’s not to love?”

“Clint,” Phil scolded.

Clint snorted, unable to contain his goofy smile. “Yeah, I know. I love you, too.”

“I’ll see you on Saturday. Stay sharp.”

“Stay safe,” Clint whispered in return, staying on the phone until he heard Phil hang up. He thumped his head against the wall, letting the New York chill breeze over him.
“Loki, try to see sense here.”

Clint watched as Loki rolled his eyes dramatically, scoffing at Thor's plead. “I don’t know what you want from me, brother. I’ve been locked up in here the whole time. How could I possibly know anything that’s happened to Stark?” his tone was as slimy as always, and it made Clint roil with anger. Whether or not Loki had direct involvement with Stark's kidnapping, he was absolutely aware of it. Information, that's the market Loki dealt in. Trading whispers for secrets, that sort of thing. A very similar deal to what Tony worked with in the criminal world - except for the fact that Stark used it for protection, and Loki only saw information as fire starters, dropping bombs where he could to get something burning, leaving before it got too hot. It was why he'd never been caught before, never been blindsided. Until now.

“You were working with HYDRA. Who’s to say you weren’t working for other gangs as well,” Clint responded. “Getting their hands on Tony had to be the end game for some of them. We want names.”

Loki barked out a hollow laugh. “Well, I hope you have nothing else to do today, because you'll be here a long while. Over half the mobs in this city would kill to kidnap Stark. That worm is worth millions; his mind, billions.”

“Watch your tone,” hissed Thor.

“Look at this,” Loki continued, sneering at Thor. “Defending the enemy. If only father could see you now.”

“And is he saw you? What would he think then?”

“Like I care what that old fool thinks.”

Thor sighed, leaning back against the wall. The man had been trying for days, pleading with Loki about any possible leads for finding Tony. Clint was surprised to say the least. Sure, Thor would do as Steve asked and help the team out, but he never expected Thor to go completely out of his way to try and save his main competitor. Thor and Tony were always at each other’s throats, more so than Tony and Bucky. But then again, how the two of them managed to come away from it as the best of pals, Clint would never understand. He could only guess almost dying in a burning warehouse would change any man’s attitude.

“This isn’t working,” Clint said, walking over to the larger blonde. “He’s just throwing you through loops, now. Come on; we’ll find another way.”

Clint started to lead Thor out of the cell that Loki was currently housing, when Loki’s voice stopped them. “I can still help you.”

Clint shot the man a glare over his shoulder. “You’ve wasted enough of our time to show that you really can’t.”

“So testy,” Loki smiled. It looked even more terrifying with the new look that he’d been sporting. His face was ragged, hair in a tangled mess. His clothes were dirty, almost stale looking, no doubt from being locked in the same room for weeks. It just made him look more menacing. “I said I couldn’t help you in here. I can help you if you let me go.”
“Absolutely not,” snapped Clint.

“My informants and I would have Stark’s location within the hour,” Loki assured.

“Maybe we should-” Thor started.

“No,” Clint interrupted. “You actually think he’s going to help us? After everything? He’ll sell us out to the first person he sees.”

“It’s not like I even know where we are, Barton,” Loki said, with a roll of his eyes.

“As if a snake like you couldn’t figure it out,” Clint returned.

“Is that a compliment, Barton?” Loki smiled.

Clint clenched his jaw. “I don’t have time to waste on you. Come on, Thor. This asshole will get what’s coming to him eventually.”

“And you’ll get what’s coming to you,” Loki hissed in return. “I’ll make sure of it.”

Clint snorted as he waltzed out of the cell. “Can’t fucking wait.”

Steve shifted uncomfortably in his seat as James Rhodes glared down at him. Steve had pictured many faces that could have been Rhodes, but never the stern face that stared back at him. Whenever Tony talked about him, Steve could think of him as nothing other than Tony’s version of Bucky. He raved on and on about their college shenanigans, Rhodes basically being a mother hen, trying desperately to keep his wild chick from raining terror down on MIT’s campus, all the while snickering through the foolishness at Tony’s side. From what Steve had gathered, although Rhodes seemed unusual for being a confidant of Tony Stark, the man had been able to keep up with the genius for years, never once faltering from his side. This man standing in front of Steve, however, was nothing like that.

Rhodes seemed to tower over them, dark eyes piercing as they scanned over him. If his jaw was clenched any harder, Steve would think that his teeth would crack. He just screamed threat to Steve. Any other day, Steve would have been very pleased to know that Tony had someone so protective in his corner. Right now, Steve wished he would have sent Bucky to do this.

“I don’t like this, Pepper,” the man finally said, his voice as stony as the rest of him.

“Jim, he can help.”

“Just like he helped before?” Rhodes continued. “Hell, Tony probably wouldn’t even be in this situation if it weren’t for him!”

Steve flinched, but made no comment. There wasn’t anything to say, considering the man was right. Tony would be safe, hidden away in his penthouse if he’d never gotten involved with Steve. Now, because of him, Tony was probably rotting away with some second rate gang.

*If he’s even still alive,* his mind whispered. Steve shook his head, rubbing his fingers against his eyes. He wouldn’t let himself think like that. Tony was way more valuable alive. From a business standpoint, Tony Stark could open doors for any mob. It was what Steve himself had told himself
when he snatched Tony off the street for their first ever meeting. God, that seems like a lifetime ago. How the hell did we end up here?

So, no. Tony wasn't dead; he was an asset - which type of asset remains to be seen. They weren't even able to narrow down to a type of gang that would benefit from using Tony because everyone would. Steve almost wished that Tony wasn't as smart as he was; turns out Tony being the best and the brightest on multiple subjects was causing them nothing but problems. Please, like Tony would ever do anything half-ass," Steve thought morosely, chest throbbing for the missing limb that was Tony. Because he couldn't take in any comfort that Tony was still alive. Because defiant, stupid, beautiful Tony would always say no. Just like he had told Steve.

And that's what scared him the most. Being alive left a wide spectrum: there was a lot of wiggle room between being healthy and death. And regardless of who had taken Tony, Steve knew that they would be more than happy to explore any and every torturous scenario they could, until Tony said yes. But he never would.

“Jim, please,” Pepper continued, rubbing her temple. “I’m not exactly happy about it either, but he wants to find Tony as much as we do.”

If not more, Steve thought. “Please, Rhodes, you can hash things out with me later. I just want to find Tony.”

“No, you don’t get to do that,” Rhodes snapped, pressing a finger into Steve’s chest. “You can’t talk about him like a long lost friend. From what I gathered here, your relationship with him is nothing but destructive. I shouldn’t let you anywhere near Tony!”

“I’m not disagreeing,” Steve said mournfully. “I know that this is my fault. But I’ll do anything to fix it, anything to get him back.”

“My God, you’re just head over heels for that boy, aren’t you?” Pepper murmured.

“That’s just great!” Rhodes shouted, throwing his hands up to the ceiling. “You’re hooking up with him too!”

“Well,” Steve blushed. “Technically, we haven’t- ”

Rhodes held up a hand to stop Steve. “I don’t want to hear another word.”

Steve sighed. “Listen, I have a contact at the police, I’ve got men scouring the streets for him, but it’s still not enough. It’s been weeks, and there’s still no sign of him. No proof, no demands, no….. no body,” Steve cringed on the last word. “I don’t know what to do. You two are my last options; Tony never shut up about you two; I know you love him, just as he loves you. And I know that you’ll do anything to get him back in one piece.”

“Well, at least we’ve got one thing in common,” Rhodes conceded, flopping into the chair next to Steve.

“How’s JARVIS coming with the encryption,” Steve directed towards Pepper.

“Slow,” she frowned. “The coding is complex. If Tony were here, he could probably break through it in a few hours, but… we’ll know eventually.”

“Okay,” said Rhodes, slapping his hands against his thighs. “This is what we’re gonna do. Pepper, you stay here, keep the radar low. I want this door locked and that gun loaded at all times, do you hear me? If there’s a mole running around in here, I don’t want to leave you unprepared. You,” he
continued, pointing to Steve,” are going to call on any criminal and street rat you can think of. I want every possible pair of eyes looking out for Tones. If you get anything, and I mean anything, you are going to call me. You understand?”

Steve nodded. “What about you?”

Rhodes stood, walking towards the door. “The military doesn’t want to lose its golden egg. I’m gonna go pull some strings and get the techs looking into it. If we’ve got every possible side of the law looking for him, there’s no way we won’t be able to find Tony.”

“Brother, please,” he tried again.

“No,” Thor answered, dropping Loki’s dinner off on the small table.

“I can help.”

“You’ll help no one but yourself and you know it,” Thor snapped before rushing out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

*His anger will be the death of him.*

Loki waited until he heard the thuds of Thor’s steps as he stomped up the stairs. Once silence encased him again, he reached out, ignoring the food, and grabbed the knife. Not wasting any time, he followed the chain that connected to his ankle, the very chain that ensured his capture for weeks, all the way back to the wall. During the day, he throws his pillow up against it so they can’t see the progress he’s made. The chain had been bolted to the wall, and with such limited options, Loki has been forced to chink away at the old stone behind the blots in order to even dream of escaping. It was all too easy to get his hands on the knife. While usually one of The Captain’s goons sat and watched him eat, whenever Thor would be sent down, Loki just bit out a few cutting remarks to have the man and his damaged ego running for the hills.

*Not long now,* he thought as he surveyed his work. The bolt was half hanging off the wall already; a few more stabs with the knife and he’d be good to go. Loki rolled up his sleeves before getting to work.

He was getting out of there.
Chapter 55

Clint raced through the streets, pushing past civilians instead of trying to dodge their foot traffic. He could hear the angry retorts, but there was no time to stop and throw a punch. He flew across the last corner, flinging himself into the dark shawarma shop. Rushing to the back he almost collided with Bucky, who was walking up the speakeasy stairs.

“Jesus!” he shouted, grabbing onto Clint before he could stumble over. “What the hell has gotten into you?”

“I’ve got a location,” Clint gasped in between breaths.

“Stark?” Bucky asked.

Clint nodded, and then the other man was gone, tearing down the steps. It wasn’t long before Steve was racing up to Clint, panting, obviously caught mid workout. “You know where he is?” Clint could hear the slight wobble in his voice.

“The twins got word that he’s being held in the old firehouse.”

For the first time in weeks, Steve broke out into a smile, laughing brightly as he grabbed at Clint. “Get the vans ready!” he called behind him, the rest of the crew already on the move.

Once loaded, the fleet on vans peeled onto the street, Steve on the phone with Tony’s friend Rhodes to have him meet them there. The twins hadn’t said much, but he tried not to dwell on it. Apparently some of their homeless friends had seen Stark through one of the windows when they were trying to find somewhere to bunk for the night. He knew the twins wold pull through, despite their misgivings about Stark. This was the break that they were waiting for, the one that they needed.

It was a short drive, one that Clint could tell everyone was happy about. Guns were loaded and ready as The Commandos poured out of the vans. Steve gestured over to the right, a dark man quickly joining the group, Clint assuming him to be Rhodes.

“Give them all we’ve got,” Steve breathed. “Tony’s been in there long enough. It’s time to get him back.”

There was a resounding yes and they were off, moving as they once did. Windows were smashed, doors broken down, guns fired. It was just like the old days, Clint couldn’t help but notice. Soon, Tony would be back with them and they would be complete once again. He’d have his whole family again.

“What the hell?” he heard Sam say.

Clint had been so lost in his head that he didn’t even notice what was going on around him.

It was empty.

The main floor was completely empty.

“Search the place,” Steve snapped, looking warily around the room. “Tony?” he continued, calling out into the space. "Tony, you in here? Answer me, Tony, please!”
“Nothing upstairs,” Nat called.

“Closets are clear!” boomed Thor.

“Garage is empty,” Rhodes finalized.

“He’s not here,” Sam replied. "Dammit, he's not here!"

“No,” Steve snapped. “He’s here. He has to be. Tony? Tony!”

“Steve,” Bucky tried to intervene.

“He has to be here, Bucky!”

“The place is empty, Steve.”

“Goddammit!” Steve roared, kicking the nearest chair over.

Silence encased the group, unknowing what to say, before Steve spun on his heels, eyes ablaze as he glared at Clint. “You said this was good information,” he hissed, stabbing a finger onto Clint’s chest.

“Easy, Steve,” Clint said, pushing away from him. “They have nothing to gain by lying to me!”

Except he knew the Maximoffs had beef with Tony, especially Wanda. Would they really give him wrong information? No, they’d seen how desperate Clint was. Misgivings or not, they wouldn't risk the wrath of The Captain by leading them on a wild goose chase.

“Then why isn’t Tony here?” Steve shouted.

Clint’s shoulders slumped, breaking eye contact with his manic boss; he didn’t have any answer for him. Clint couldn’t imagine what Steve was going through; thinking he was so close to getting Tony back, only to realize that he was still at square one. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “They probably just got a bad tip.”

Steve sighed, rubbing a hand over his face, Clint trying to ignore how red his eyes were. “No, Clint. I-I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have… I just want him back,” he finished, deflating slightly.

“You will,” Clint answered firmly.

“So what now?” Bucky asked. “Find the guy who gave the twins this address?”

“I guess,” Natasha shrugged. “It just doesn’t make any sense. Why even bother with false information? It’s not like we had any inkling of what direction to head in before.”

Suddenly, Rhodes groaned, his head falling against his chest. “Because it was a distraction.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s simple military tactics. Tricking the enemy into thinking they’ll get what you want when you really get what you want.”

Steve furrowed his brow. “What could anyone gain from this? Watching us run around like a chicken with its head cut off?”

“Captain,” Rhodes continued. “You’re here. You’re all here. Where are you not?”
Realization hit Clint like a ton of bricks. “The speakeasy,” he whispered. The group was moving in an instant, scrambling to load the vans. Tires screeched and horns honked as the crew sped back to their home.

Bucky pulled up first, Clint flinging his door open, out of the car before it was even in park. He sped through the store for the second time that day, busting down the secret entrance to the speakeasy, gun drawn. He felt Bucky move in behind him, the pair walking silently down the steps.

All the lights were still on, left on in the crew’s haste to follow the potential lead on Tony.

“Anything?” he heard Bucky whisper.

“Clear,” he replied, his eyes seeing nothing out of the ordinary. Bucky filed in next to him, the rest of the team hot on his heels.

“Split up,” he heard Steve say. “Yell if you find anything.” The pack spread out, fanning every corner of the speakeasy. Clint took the main floor, slipping his head into the kitchen and the closets, coming up with nothing. A shout from the basement, however, had him sprinting once again.

By the time he rounded the corner, a group had formed in Loki’s cell.

“He’s gone,” Thor sounded out. “Chipped the stone right out from behind his chain.”

Steve looked furious, but more so scared. As he should be. Loki was dangerous as is; who knew what would happen if he knew where the team’s new headquarters were.

“This was his doing,” Natasha said, walking over to Loki’s cot. “You left your phone down here, Thor,” she continued, pointing to the sleek tech left on the table. “He got one his lackeys to spread the tip. The twins overheard it, and he just sat back and waited until he left.”

“Fuck,” Clint heard Bucky groan.

Steve balled his fists, no doubt trying to rein in his anger. “Check the rest of the base. He could have made off with some of our stuff.”

Clint marched back up the stairs, eyes scanning for anything missing. Who knows how long Loki had run around in here before taking off? And now he knows where they’re stationed. A sharp pang hit Clint in the chest. If Loki knew where the speakeasy was located, that meant that they’d probably have to move again. Clint sighed. He thought they’d finally found a place worthy of calling home again.

Clint walked aimlessly upstairs, quickly peeking into bedrooms, but nothing seemed missing. It wasn’t if they really had anything worthwhile here - or, at least anything Loki didn’t already have access too. It wasn’t until he reached the staircase again that he saw it.

Steve’s office.

The door stood slightly ajar, the light pouring out onto the floor. Steve hadn’t been in his office when he left. He was in the gym.

“Steve!” Clint shouted down the stairs, all while charging into the office. He raised his gun up, just in case, but it proved useless as the office was empty of Loki as well. He had definitely been in there, however. Steve was always a bit of a neat freak, but now, papers were strewn about his desk,
some of the drawers opened.

“What is it?” came Steve’s breathless reply as he rushed into the room.

“Loki was here,” he answered. “Anything look like its missing?”

Steve walked around the room, poking at the papers, shutting the drawers. “Not that I can see. I’m sure he was looking for more addresses for location drops. Don’t worry, he didn’t find any. Other than that, there wasn’t anything important enough to take in here.”

Clint nodded, surveying the room one last time. In Loki’s rush, he must have torn some of the pictures away from Steve’s wall. He walked over, picking them up to tac on the wall, smiling down at one that featured a dancing Natasha. Once the photos were back in their original position, he started to walk away, but something caught his eye.

There, on the edge of the collage was a photo, barely hanging on to the wall, ripped in half. Clint grabbed for it immediately, unable to stop the gasp that left his throat as he looked down at it.

“Clint?”

“Oh my god,” he whispered, the ripped photo shaking in his hand.

“And you’ll get what’s coming to you. I’ll make sure of it.”

Loki had taken something from the office. The other half of the photo. A certain photo of a smiling Clint, leaning into Phil’s side. Loki had ripped Phil right out of the picture. No, no, no, no, no.

Clint heard Steve call for him again, but he was already out the door. He ran into Bucky, but just grabbed the man, pushing car keys into his hands. “Get me to Phil. Now.”

Luckily, the man didn’t argue, sprinting up the stairs behind Clint and back into their car. Bucky had barely pulled out into the street before Clint opened his phone to call Phil.

“Hello?”

“Where are you?” he demanded.

“Clint, what’s- ”


“I’m walking back up to the precinct. May and I tried this new restaurant for lunch. We’ll have to go there for dinner one night, it’s was- ”

“Stay there,” Clint snapped, heart thumping as Bucky tore through traffic. “Don’t go anywhere until I come get you, you understand?”

“Clint, what happened? What's wrong?”

“Don’t worry about it. Just stay on the phone with me until I get there, alright?”

“Sure, sweetheart. Whatever’s wrong is going to be okay. You’ll fix it; I know you will.”

Phil’s voice was steady, calming as it always was, but it didn't help Clint this time. He knew that Loki already had a head start on them; if he was able to get the entirety of The Commandos chasing a whisper to a condemned firehouse chained to a wall, who knows what he could do when
he was walking free. “Go faster,” Clint hissed to Bucky.

“Clint, I really need to-”

“No, you keep talking to me, alright?” Clint begged. "I need you to keep talking to me.” Keep telling me that you're alright.

A sigh. “I expect an explanation when you get here.”

“Of course, Sir. You can yell at me about all the work I’m keep you from when I get there.”

Bucky sped through a red light, nearly getting the pair in two different accidents, but they pulled away just in time, Bucky pressing harder on the gas. Clint saw the police station ahead, tumbling out of the car once Bucky had slowed down enough. “Phil?”

“Yes, Clint. I’m still here.”

Lo and behold, there he was, standing right on the steps of the precinct, waving over at Clint. Thank God, Clint couldn't help but think. “There you are. Are you satisfied that everything’s alright now?”

“No yet,” Clint answered, jumping out of the car heading over to Phil.

He heard Phil snort over the phone. “So needy. God only knows why I love you so much.”

Clint opened his mouth to reply, but was cut off by a car horn blasting from down the street.

An SUV screeched around the corner, speeding towards the precinct.

Time slowed.

Clint charged down the street, heading for Phil, Bucky hot on his tail.

A window lowered.

Phil tore his eyes away from Clint long enough to see the black car approaching.

A gun emerged.

And then suddenly everything came crashing together. Time sped forward, people screamed, bullets went flying, glass shattered, tires screeched. And then there was nothing.

Bucky threw Clint to the ground, choking off the other man’s screams, trying to protect him from gunfire. Clint tried to stand back up, but Bucky was one step ahead, pushing him back down to the ground.

Pressing the phone against his ear, Clint called out. “Phil?”

Silence.

“Phil.”

Nothing.
Clint’s heart rate skyrocketed, the man dropping the phone from his ear. He pushed away from Bucky, trying to get to Phil.

“Clint, stop! Don’t look!” Bucky’s yelled behind him.

“Get off me,” Clint hissed. “Phil!”

“Clint, I can’t let you go over there,” Bucky pleaded, his eyes wild as he tried to grab at Clint again. “Clint, please, listen to me!”

Clint shoved Bucky against the wall, finally managing to cast a glance over to the precinct. “Phil?” he whimpered. Why was Phil on the ground? Why was Phil not moving? Why was he not over here with Clint?

“No,” he moaned. “Oh God, please no.”

He tried to walk forward but stumbled, Bucky’s arms managing to catch him. This was wrong. This wasn’t happening.

Get up, get up, get up.

Arms were tugging at him, but he refused to move. He screamed, but the man he wanted to answer wasn’t listening.

“PHIL!”

“You can’t keep saying no to them.”

Tony shivered, snuggling further under the blanket he was given, his face the only thing peering out over the thin material. “I can try,” he grit out, wincing at the sound of his voice, which sounded no better than an ancient engine trying to start.

“Then you will fail,” Yinsen continued. “It is time you try something else.”

“What do you want me to do, give in?” Tony snapped, gasping as the sudden anger jarred his bruised ribs, the latest addition to the artwork his captors were trying to make out of him.

Yinsen shot him an unimpressed look. “You know that is not what I meant.”

“Well, if you’ve got any ideas, don’t keep them to yourself.”

The door flung open, Raza stomping into the room. Yinsen stepped in front of Tony who was struggling to get up. “Leave him alone!” Yinsen cried. “You’ve asked too much of him already; his body needs time to recover.”

Raza flung the smaller man out of the way, eyes only for Tony. “You refuse to help me and I torture you. Back and forth the game goes, but there’s never a winner. I’m changing the game now, Stark.”

Raza flung something into Tony’s lap. A hat?
Tony glared down at the innocent looking hat until he saw what was blazoned on the front. There staring back up at him was badge for the NYPD. Tony's lips started to form a question but stopped when he saw a tag sticking out of the hat. Tony's blood turned to ice as he read the name on the tag.

P. Coulson

“You keep refusing to help me and I’ll come back with another. Your choice.” With that, the man stomped out of the room.

Tony’s hands trembled as they traced over the police logo of the hat. Oh, God. This was happening because of him. Coulson was probably dead because of him. Tony couldn’t help but think of Clint, the two of them leaning together at Tony’s first team meeting.

“This is all my fault.”

Yinsen stumbled back over to him. “You could not know that this would have happened.”

“I should have,” Tony snapped, eyes burning and angry.

“Well, Mr. Stark. If you’re going to think of a plan, I suggest you do it fast, because it won’t be long before they bring in another hat. With the head still attached.”
“Oh my God.”

Bucky could barely hear himself over the chaos that lay before him. People were screaming, running through the streets, although there was no point. The van was long gone by now. Officers ran down the steps of the precinct, grabbing for-

_Coulson._

Clint was struggling in his arms, shouting, pleading for Phil to get up. Bucky would be wrong if he wasn’t mere seconds away from yelling the same thing. Coulson couldn’t be dead. He just couldn’t.

They had to get over to him. Bruce would be able to fix him up, no problem. _Right?_ Bucky scanned the sidewalk, when- _oh, shit._ Bucky should have known that being in front of the police station meant that there were going to be cops littering the street. While most were standing over Coulson, some had caught on to the scene that Clint was currently creating.

“Clint,” Bucky hissed as they started to move towards the pair lying in the middle of the street. “We need to go.”

“No! Get the hell off me! _Phil!_” the man underneath him sobbed.

“Clint, we gotta get out of here!” Bucky cried, tugging harder at his friend. The cops were getting closer, hands reaching down to draw their weapons.

“I don’t care! Let me go!” Clint snarled.

Bucky’s heart was pounding as he watched his options ran out. There was no way that he could let Clint go. He got anywhere near Phil, he’d be taken in for questioning, and then no doubt, once they figured out who he was, arrested soon afterward. It wouldn’t matter about evidence - one of New York’s officers were shot down in the middle of the street, right in front of the damn precinct. There was no way the boys in blue would rest until they put someone behind bars; and, it's Police Theories: 101 to always start with the significant other. Especially is the significant other is a convicted criminal. But could he leave Coulson here?

Bucky looked over to see paramedics swarming the downed man. Logically, Bucky knew that if Coulson had survived that gun spray that he was in the best hands possible, but that didn’t make his choice any easier. Coulson was basically part of the crew; he couldn’t just leave a man behind.

_But if you don’t leave, you’ll all be done for._

Mind made up, Bucky blinked back tears as he quickly pulled a hand away from Clint to pull out his gun. “I’m so sorry,” he whispered, before bringing the butt of it down onto Clint’s head. The man crumpled instantly, his screams ceasing.

The cops shouted, obviously catching Bucky in the act. Without stopping, he scooped Clint up, lugging him over to their parked van. The police were closing in fast; Bucky could hear the bullets pelt the side of their armored car as he tossed Clint in the back before making a man dash to the
Tires squealed as Bucky peeled away, the man thanking every God he knew that all the cops chasing then were on foot. It wasn't long before they blinked out of the rear view mirror. However, he didn’t take any chances, insisting on speeding all the way home to get Clint to a safe spot. With an officer down, police scanners would already be blasting a description of the van.

Dumping the van in the back alley, Bucky hoisted Clint over his shoulder, stumbling into the speakeasy. Adrenaline pulsed through his veins as he charged down the stairs, his ears still hearing nothing but echoes of gunfire and Clint’s screams.

“Bucky?”

Hearing Steve’s voice made the brunette crumple, both him and Clint falling to the floor. Another voice shouted to get Bruce, no doubt seeing the blood leak out from Clint’s head.

“Buck? Hey, look at me; you’re safe now. It’s alright now,” Steve’s soothing tone whispered against his ears, his friend’s arms squeezing his shoulders.

Bucky shook his head, tremors taking over his body once he felt tears finally slip down his face. “No,” he moaned. “They shot him, they shot him.”

“Where,” Bruce snapped, his hands searching all over Clint’s body.

“Not him,” Bucky sniffled in return.

“Who?”

“Coulson,” Bucky managed to croak out. "They shot him." And I left him there, goes unsaid.

He saw Steve’s face pale, eyes shooting down to Clint immediately. “…what?” Steve breathed out.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky replied, voice heavy. “The van came out of nowhere and just… I couldn’t stop it. And then Clint, he wouldn’t leave, but there were cops everywhere. I had to get him out of there before he did something stupid!”

“Hey, easy,” Natasha said, rubbing comforting circles on his back.

“I just left him there,” Bucky retorted quietly. “I don’t know if he’s even alive or not.”

“You couldn’t have gotten to him, James,” Natasha answered. “The police would have arrested you before you got anywhere near him. You did the right thing.”

“Thor,” Steve interjected, voice hoarse. “Take Clint to his room. We need to deal with this.”

“How the hell are we going to deal with this?”

Steve looked away. “I don’t know, Buck. I really don’t know.”

Steve’s hands trembled as he poured another glass of whiskey. It was quiet, the only sounds coming from the bottle hitting the glass tumbler.
Everyone was waiting for the inevitable really. The team had turned on every news channel, every radio station, to see if they could find anything out about Phil, if he was alive or not. But they found nothing; there was just nothing. Of course, Pierce was still running the show over there. Steve knew that man would just try and brush everything under the table. As for now, the team was just waiting. Waiting for Clint to wake up. Waiting the screams to start again.

Steve closed his eyes, feeling moisture starting to gather behind his lids. God, he didn’t even know what to say, what he could say to Clint. Phil was family to all of them, but to Clint? To Clint he was everything. And now it’s all gone, in a blink of an eye. Steve could understand what that was like, but it crushed him to know that there was someone else that shared the same fate.

He still remembered, of course. There would be no way he could forget; Steve doubted he ever would forget. Everyone else was already gone: Howard, Erskine, even Phillips. He had managed to get Bucky hidden away, but he had been too late for her.

Peggy.

Her skin was still warm as he tugged her across his chest, arms winding around the still body as he sobbed into her perfect hair. If he had been ten minutes earlier, he might have been able to save her.

What would haunt him forever is her eyes. Her once bright and curious eyes, just staring at him, now only cold and empty. He didn’t know how long he sat there, screaming for her to come back, unable to let her slip from his grasp. He prayed, begged, cursed away, trying everything to hear her voice one more time.

It had been Bucky who had found him as well, eventually able to pull him away from the body. He had been inconsolable for months, taking unnecessary risks, just praying that the rest of HYDRA would just kill him already so he could finally be at peace. But then Bucky started talking crazy, started talking about putting a new team together.

So he did. And now it was happening again.

Over half of his crew was gone, Coulson was probably dead, and Steve was letting Tony slip through his grasp.

What now?

It didn’t matter if it was HYDRA or not anymore; everyone was out to get rid of Steve and his team.

They’ve already started with Coulson. How long before another one dies?

Steve collapsed into his chair, crying into his hands.

Chapter End Notes

Okay. So.

Good news is is that I have the rest of the story mapped out. What I need to figure out now is how much is actually going to be published.

Obviously this is a much longer fic, with an immensely slow build (don't worry, Tony
and Steve will be reunited in 2-3 chapters). However, if I want to publish as much as I want to, the story will probably hit 200K.

I guess what I need to know is how everyone feels about it. I want to introduce a new villain, but if things feel like they're dragging on too much, I can hold off, and maybe do a sequel? (I just feel sequels never have the same momentum as the first one).

So please let me know what your thoughts/feeling are. If you've been on this ride this long, I'm sure you've got some things to say!
“Get. Out.”

Bucky faltered at the tone, but continued to step into the room anyway, shutting the door quietly behind him. “I brought you some dinner,” he said softly.

“I don’t remember asking for any.”

Bucky placed the tray down before wringing his hands nervously. “Well, you haven’t eaten anything all day, so it seemed like the best course of action.”

“And you always make the right call, don’t you?”

Bucky shut his eyes at the harsh tone. He’d never heard Clint sound this way, not even when they’d first met. “Clint- ”

“Don’t,” Clint hissed. He was currently curled up in his bed, the only thing visible was a greasy head of hair that hadn’t been washed in a few days. Bucky could only count his blessings that Clint was facing the other way; Bucky knew that he wouldn’t be able to survive another look from that broken face.

“It was the right call and you know it,” Bucky tried to placate. He wasn’t sure if he was saying it to convince Clint or himself. He’d spent the last few days not much better than Clint, running through Phil's shooting in his head over and over again.

“How? How was it the right call?” Clint roared, spinning around to glare at Bucky. His face was drawn and pale, no doubt from not seeing the sun in the past few days. His eyes were open and irritated, rubbed raw to the point where tears couldn’t be created to soothe him.

Bucky looked away, not able to answer.

“How? How was it the right call?” Clint sneered. “I’ve sat through three days of you blabbering into my ears, and now you’ve got nothing to say?”

“Clint, I was trying to protect you.” Another platitude. That's all it was.

“Bullshit. You were only trying to protect yourself.”

_Ouch_. Bucky closed his eyes, trying not to get mad at his friend; he couldn’t imagine what he was going through. It wasn't as if he hadn't dealt with this before. Steve had been positively murderous when Bucky had pulled him away from Peggy's corpse. There was no one else around, so Bucky ended up as Steve's figurative punching bag. He was more than happy to take the blows, gratified enough to know that Steve was taking it out on him instead of the streets where he'd most likely get killed. He knew that Clint was itching to head out there as well, ready to burn down the entirety of New York to find the people that had taken Coulson out. Luckily for Bucky, the rest of the team was on the same page as him, helping sequester Clint to the speakeasy until they figured something else out. And until they had a more definitive plan, Bucky had taken up the old mantle of whipping boy. _Baby steps_, he told himself. On the bright side, at least Clint was talking to him today.

Yelling, technically, but Bucky would still count it as a win.
Anything was better than that first day, when Clint finally came too. The man had been an absolute wreck. No one could even figure out what was spewing out of Clint’s mouth half the time. Hell, it took Thor to try and pin the man down. Of course Clint, being the slippery bastard he was, managed to dart away into the night, no doubt to try and find any sign of Phil. He and Steve had barely managed to catch up to him before Clint was able to charge into the precinct demanding Pierce’s blood.

They had tried to stay positive. Hey, no news is good news right? But Clint wasn’t buying any of it. He sent everyone away once he was basically put under house arrest. He wouldn’t even let Nat in. What was worse was that with each passing day, the more Bucky realized that it wasn’t like last time. Peggy's death hadn't been Bucky's fault, it was HYDRA. Logically, Steve knew that, but losing a loved one like that, he more than deserved to take it out on the only person within hearing distance. But Coulson? Well, Bucky wasn't exactly convinced that it wasn't his fault. For as much as he could try and convince himself that he made the right choice, that what he did was the best scenario, he couldn't get past the the issue that regardless of that, he'd still left Coulson there. He'd just tucked and run; it was his fault. And Clint knew it. And that whatever happens, regardless of whether Coulson survived or not, that bridge between him had Clint had burned. No, it wasn’t burned, it was eviscerated.

“It’s not like I wanted to leave him there!” Bucky tried to argue.

Clint shot him a venomous look. “Don’t try and play hero here. If you really cared about Phil, then you would have-”

“Don’t you dare,” Bucky reared back, jabbing a finger into Clint’s chest. “Don’t you dare say that I don’t care about him. He was my family too.”

“Then why did you leave him to die?” Clint’s voice cracked, new tears finally spilling over his cheeks. Clint seemed to sense another breakdown doming so he pointed at the door. “Get out. We’re done here.”

“Clint-”

“Please. Just get away from me before I leave you to die in the streets.”

Bucky swallowed his own tears because nodding sullenly, finally walking out the door. He barely had it shut before Clit’s sobs started to echo through the hallway.

"How is he?"

Steve's voice sounded off right next to him, causing him to jump. There was no way he could have been that close unless he was stalking the outside of the room like a worried mother.

"How do you think?" Bucky couldn't help but snap.

Steve just sighed, not bothering to call him out on his tone. "Just give him time. He'll come around."

"You make it seem like he only lost his favorite pair of shoes."

"Buck, don't be like this," Steve replied, putting a hand in front of Bucky's chest to stop him from retreating. "I know what you're doing. I can't imagine how hard it was for you, but you did the right thing. You protected Clint. You protected the family."

"Phil was part of the family," Bucky answered flatly. "I did a pretty crap job protecting him."
Steve clenched his eyes shut tightly. "There wasn't anything you could have done," he whispered, voice wavering in pain. "You couldn't have known that was going to happen."

Bucky couldn't help the hollow laugh that left his throat. "It's quite a cycle, isn't it?"

Steve shot him a questioning look.

"It's almost funny. How you can go and preach on how it wasn't my fault when you were getting the same speech not even a month ago."

"Buck-"

Bucky held up a hand. "Not now, Steve. Just let me be for a little bit."

He walked down the hallway, glad that he didn’t hear Steve behind him. It didn’t matter how Steve tried to support him. The team might think they agree with him, but there is no way that Clint wasn’t affecting them. There was no way that they hadn’t thought how it might have gone different if they were there instead of him.

Bucky rubbed at his eyes. It didn’t matter. None of that mattered as long as he reminded himself that there would always be one person who knew he made the right call.

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"Barnes."

Bucky jumped at the sudden noise, the gun he was cleaning clattering to the floor. "Jesus," he replied, heart hammering in his chest. Clint had mentioned that his boyfriend had a knack for stealth, but Bucky had always brushed it off. Coulson could do anything and Clint would be convinced that it was the second coming of Christ. But maybe he wasn’t exactly wrong on this account; why the hell wasn’t Coulson working for them again? "How the hell do you do that?"

Coulson just smiled innocently and shrugged. "Sorry, that corner was really dark and I couldn’t help myself."

"There’s something wrong with you, Sir," Bucky laughed, shaking his head.

"Coming from a convicted criminal, I’ll take that as a compliment."

Bucky snorted again, eyeing Coulson as he sat down across from him, picking up the nearest gun and began cleaning it. "If you’re looking for Clint, he’s not here. He’s, uh," Bucky faltered. "Well, it’s probably better that you didn’t know."

"He told me," Coulson replied easily, not even looking up from his work. Wow, Bucky thought to himself. Clint really had found a winner - how that bumbling tragedy that was his friend managed to end up with a guy like Coulson in his lap, Bucky would never know. To this day he wasn’t even sure how they made it work, how they trusted each other so easily, the copper and the crook. "I was actually looking for you," Coulson continued.

Bucky’s hands faltered as he bent down to pick up his own gun. "Me?" he asked. "Is this an interrogation? I swear, whatever it was, it wasn’t me." He pauses to think of his recent activities. "Probably."
Coulson chucked. “No, it isn’t anything like that.”

Bucky looked at the other man, thinking about whatever else he could be needed for. “You…you don’t need me to kill someone, do you?”

Bucky would forever pride himself on the flash of surprise that flew over Coulson’s face. “What? No! Why would I ask you something like that?”

Bucky shrugged wildly. “Well, I don’t know! Maybe you felt weird about asking Clint because you’re like banging or whatever! I mean, there’s no need to freak out or anything; I want to kill someone at least twice a week. It’s kind of nostalgic, in its own way, and–”

Coulson put up a hand to stop him. “Stop talking. Please.”

Bucky snapped his mouth shut, bringing his hands down to tap awkwardly on the table. “So…”

Coulson sighed, shaking his head slightly. It was like he was a school principle, scolding Bucky for his shenanigans during recess. And if he was dating Clint, Bucky could only assume it was a look that he dished out a lot.

“You, uh, you go out a lot with Clint, right?”

Bucky shot Coulson a weird look. “Well, yeah, we’re friends. Believe it or not, Coulson, we do have normal lives outside of work.”

“Normal,” Coulson huffed under his breath.

“But, yeah, we go out,” Bucky continued. “Wait, not like that. We’re not, uh, sleeping together or anything, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Barnes,” Coulson groaned.

“Because let’s face it, we’re both hot, but I don’t swing that way, man, and Clint’s got like a perm-a-boner for you, so–”

“Are you ever going to let me finish?”

Caught by the teacher again. “Sorry.”

“I’m talking about when you’re working. Steve always puts you two together.”

Bucky shrugged. “Yeah. We work well together.”

“You’ve got his back?”

“Always,” Bucky answered without hesitation.

Coulson nodded. “I need you do to something for me. I need you to look out for him.”

Bucky stared at the shorted man. “Didn’t we just establish that I already do?”

Coulson didn’t even look fazed. “You’ll keep him safe and make sure he comes home every time you go out.”

“Um, yeah, I’ll try my best, Coulson, but-”
“I’m not asking.”

Bucky couldn’t help but shiver at the tone. Now that’s how Bucky can see how Clint could never shut up about the man. Sure, at just a glance, Phil Coulson just looked like another pencil pusher, but he was anything but that. There was a presence about him, an aura maybe, that just screamed authority and respect.

“You will bring him home safe. No matter what the case. Do you understand me?”

Bucky gulped, but found himself nodding. “Yes, Sir.”

“Good.” And then, with an upward twitch of his lips, the tension crackling between the two of them was gone. Coulson broke eye contact, returning his focus to the gun in his hand, humming a tune softly under his breath.

Bucky did the same, keeping Coulson in the corner of his eye. He would never underestimate that man again.

“Careful!”

He heard Yinsen sigh next to him. “I am not deaf; I heard you the first three times.”

Tony shot him a glare. “Yeah, well this is some very unstable material. We only got one shot at this.”

Yinsen manages to roll his eyes as he slowly crossed the room, his hands carefully holding the tongs. “Relax, I’ve got steady hands. I used to be a doctor.”

“A doctor?” Tony asked, watching as the man tilted the tongs, the boiling metal slipping seamlessly into the mold he had earlier created.

“You sound surprised,” said Yinsen, leaning back to look at his work. “Who do you think pulled the shrapnel out of your chest?”

You didn’t get all of it, Tony’s mind hissed. He cursed inwardly, hating himself or thinking that. He owed Yinsen everything; there was no way he would have survived the blast without him.

“How many?”

Yinsen’s voice snapped him out of his thoughts. “Now, we wait until it cools,” Tony answered. “And then, if my math is right, which it always is, it’ll power this,” he finished, pointing to the small circular object he had started to tinker on.

“An arc reactor?”

Tony nodded, picking up the small object in his fingers. “Then I won’t have to keep lugging this thing around,” he said, tapping the car battery currently connected to his chest.

“Are you sure it will work?”

Tony shot the man a dirty look.
Yinsen rolled his eyes in response. “Forget I asked.”

Tony stood up slowly, surveying the now crowded room. Since they had thrown Coulson’s hat at his feet, Tony sprang into action. He wouldn’t dare give his captors another chance to attack another one of his people. Of course, there was no way in hell that he would make a Jericho for the Ten Rings, but Tony could just throw around a few technical terms and have those Neanderthals fooled.

He’d sent out a list of everything he needed, pulling scraps and basically bullshit out his ass to get where they were today: an almost finished miniaturized arc reactor and a huge pile of crap that Tony had convinced everyone was the start of the Jericho missiles. “Keep taking this shit apart,” he said, gesturing to the pile of discontinued Stark weapons. “We’re going to need some of it soon. Besides, I don’t want our friends to think we’re slacking off.”

“No rest for the wicked, I suppose,” Yinsen answered before taking apart the nearest weapon closest to him. “How are the hands?”

Tony shrugged, wiggling them slightly. They were healing slowly, but healing none the less. Tony still had to leave most of the delicate work to Yinsen, but it wouldn’t be long before the bones and stitches would be completely mended.

“And everything else?”

Tony didn’t even deem that with a response. Since he’d finally fallen into ‘compliance’, his role as daily play thing had decreased immensely. Of course, that didn’t stop Tony from flinching every time the door was thrust open. “I’m behaving now,” Tony spat with disdain. “I’m doing what they ask.”

“But what if they ask for more?”

Tony looked as Yinsen questioningly. “What do you mean?”

“Mr. Stark, they know you have a relationship with The Commandos. Need I remind you that they are one of the most powerful mobs in all of New York. You really think that they’ll stop at just weapons?”

“I don’t know anything that they’d be interested in.” The Commandos were still under Steve’s command. Tony was just a… God, I don’t even know what I am to Steve. They couldn’t be after Steve’s name; they already knew that. What else could they want? Surely nothing Tony had any idea about. Right?

Yinsen placed down the weapon he was working on. “Are you sure?”

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“There you are.”

*He tried to keep his voice light, but Tony still saw the small jump Steve’s body gave at the sudden noise. His eyes snapped up, the whites of his eyes shining in the soft light of his office. While Tony could see the slump of Steve’s shoulders once he realized who was at the door, the worn face remained.*
Tony wanted nothing more than to wipe it away; seeing Steve like this was doing weird things to his stomach. Of course he had to count his blessings, as he was actually seeing Steve. The last few days have been hell; it seemed that HYDRA had every one of their men out to dismantle Stark Industries. While The Commandos didn’t think twice about helping Tony protect his assets, the past two days had taken its toll. Tony hadn’t even seen most of the team since the first fight they’d shared in the warehouse. Steve had insisted him and Bruce stay back at the speakeasy while the rest went out, leaving their focus on Bucky’s arm. While usually Tony would have protested, he bit the bullet, knowing that giving Barnes his second arm back would help immensely in their current predicament.

Working on the arm should have given him enough distraction, but Tony couldn’t stop thinking about the first fight. His first fire fight in so long. He could still feel the comforting weight of the gun in his hand, the blood singing as it pumped through his veins. He could still hear the team around him, each working as a different cog into a well-oiled machine.

He could still feel the press of Steve’s lips against his own.

“Tony?”

Steve’s voice filtered into his head, Tony shivering at the tone. “I’m sorry, what?” His fingers scratched through his hair, his gaze meeting Steve’s again, the blonde man shooting him a knowing smile.

“Get another stroke of genius?”

Tony tried to shrug nonchalantly. “This is me we’re talking about. Strokes of genius are an everyday occurrence.”

Steve shot him another tired smile. “If you say so,” he chided.

Tony looked down at the other man’s clothing. “Jeez, when was the last time you changed? Wait, have you eaten? Now that I’m looking at you, you don’t- ”


Tony crossed his arms, unimpressed. “I’m sure whatever you’re working on can wait until you won’t keel over from exhaustion.”

Steve hummed. “Weird, I think I can remember saying those exact words to you yesterday.”

“That’s different, Steve. I’m trying to finish Grumpy’s arm. You on the other hand, have been running yourself ragged trying to keep HYDRA out of my facilities. You’re running on fumes.”

Steve looked up from the boxes he was puttering in, standing up to walk over to Tony. “I gotta take care of my people,” the blonde murmured. “That always comes first in my book.”

“Well, maybe I gotta look out for my people too. Which apparently includes you,” Tony replied, jabbing a finger into Steve’s way too toned chest. He pulled back, or at least tried to, his movement stopped as Steve grabbed Tony’s hand, cradling it gently.

“You’ve already given us so much,” he said softly, as if the words were only for him to hear. “Given me so much.”

“Steve?”
Steve’s eyes snapped to his, and Tony couldn’t pull himself away. The shocking blues mesmerizing, sparkling like crashing waves reflecting in the sun, or the opening of the clearest sky after a storm. Tony stood frozen, like a deer in headlights, as Steve inched forward, stopping to press a small peck on the inside of Tony’s palm, never breaking eye contact with the brunette. Tony’s breath hitched as plush lips ghosted over his; no force behind it, but leaving an impressive jolt of current pulsing through Tony’s body.

Tony felt his knees go weak, eyes fluttering shut, wondering the last time he had ever felt this way. 

Oh.

Red flags danced in his head.

Tony’s eyes snapped open, arms slamming into Steve’s chest as he pushed the man away. Steve barely managed to keep his balance as he stumbled away, knocking into his desk.

“Tony?”

Tony didn’t answer, pacing away in Steve’s cramped office. He could feel them now, the others. Their hands trailing down his neck, his side, whispering promises into his ears. Not promises, lies. Their gentle touches turning to ice, their once soft tone scorching as they burned him, chipping more and more away, taking everything he had.

Steve’s hand reached out to stop him, but Tony smacked it away. “What’s your angle?” he snapped.

Steve fumbled, wearing a shocked look. “What?”

“Your angle. They always want something; what else do you want from me? I don’t have much else to give you.”

Steve looked like he was about to cry. Figures, Tony thinks viciously, now that he’d been caught in the act. “Is that what you think?” Steve voice was small, but so full of emotion.


“Look me in the eye and tell me what we have is just business then,” Steve argued.

“Steve-”

“No,” he cut Tony off. “Tell me.” When Tony didn’t answer, Steve continued. “You can’t, can you? Because it isn’t. Tony, I would never, I have never even considered doing something like that to you. If that doesn’t convince then I’ll pack everyone up and we’ll leave. We’ll go somewhere else, find a different way to work on cracking HYDRA.”

Tony’s heart rate skyrocketed. “You’d leave?”

“I don’t want too. You just need to understand that no matter where we are, no matter what we’ve got, we’d never drop you. I’d never drop you. I don’t need your tech, your home, your information. I just need you. I just want you. You’ve already given us everything; I know I don’t have enough years to repay what you’ve done for my family. Just know that if it was all gone tomorrow, I’d still be here. By your side for as long as you’ll have me.”

Tony shook his head slowly, fingernails digging painfully into his palms. “You don’t mean that.”
“Try me.”

Tony had to break away from the intense look Steve was giving him. He was so open, so passionate. He couldn’t really mean what he was saying, right? Maybe he didn’t want anything from Tony. The way he was talking… Tony could believe that. But could Steve really feel the same way he did?

“You don’t have to humor me.” Tony said, flashing him his best press smile. “What happened wasn’t really what you wanted to happen. Adrenaline,” he gave a hollow laugh. “It does crazy stuff to your system. It was the first time in a long time you’d been out in a fight. I won’t hold it against you. You don’t have to keep up an act to keep me happy,” Tony finished, giving him an out. Scrambling to find any other reason why Steve would kiss him.

“Who did this to you?”

He could hear the heartbreak in Steve’s voice, Tony trying not to break with it. “It’s the way I think, Steve. I need to factor in every possible scenario.”

Steve clenched his jaw. “Well, then you’re an idiot as you seem to be missing the biggest reason why I would do this.” He stomped forward, hauling Tony around the waist, mashing their lips together. It was as gravity defying as their others, swooping Tony up and surrounding him, until all he could think was Steve, Steve, Steve.

“What was that?” Tony asked breaking away, internally cursed at how breathless he sounded.

Steve didn’t answer, just grabbing Tony’s hand instead, linking their fingers together as they pressed onto Steve’s chest, right over his heart. “There’s no adrenaline now. Just me and you.”

“Then why is your heart beating so fast?”

God, he’d never get used to that blush. Steve bit his lip, the pink of his cheeks getting stronger. “Well, I’m looking at you. It always does that.”

Tony gaped at the man. How was he even real? He surged forward, catching Steve’s bottom lip between his teeth. Steve had no time to react before Tony’s tongue brushed over the wound soothingly, pushing further into his mouth. Steve responded enthusiastically, large hand cupping the back of Tony’s neck, drawing him closer as their mouths molded together.

It was everything that their first kiss what not. The two of them moved slowly with each other, as if drinking in every second. Tony lost himself in the glide of lips, the feeling of Steve pressed up against him. Steve was the first one to break for air, but Tony barely sucked in a breath of his own before the blonde’s mouth was on him again, fingers digging into his dark curls.

It was all too soon before Steve pulled away again. His large hands framed each side of Tony’s face. “Do you understand, now?”

No. He never would. He’d never understand why Steve would give him more than a second glance. But he sure as hell wasn’t going to say something to challenge it. Tony nodded instead. “I think so,” he answered in a small voice.

“Good.” Steve leaned forward again, pressing their foreheads together. Tony let himself be held, swaying slightly with the other man. This…this could be something, a traitorous part of his brain whispered to him. The other part of his head was still roaring at him, telling him to dip while he still could, but Tony tuned it out. He’d spent too much of his life running away. Maybe it was time to finally face the music.
A small chirp from across the room, jolted the two men out of their day dream. Steve pulled away, almost reluctantly, heading over to check his phone.

“Who is it?” Tony questioned.

“It’s Thor. They finished at your inventory lock up; they’re on their way back now.”

“Any problems?”

Steve shook his head. “Doesn’t seem that way.”

“Good,” Tony hummed. “Come on. If everything went smoothly, you can go catch some z’s.”

“Not yet,” argued Steve. “I have to finish this first,” he said, gesturing down at the boxes before him.

“Yeah, what are you doing, exactly?” Tony asked carefully, hoping Steve would take the bait and switch the subject. Tony may be stepping out of his comfort zone, but there was only so much he could take before he’d clam up.

“It’s the reason I was late coming home. I stopped at the file drop first. And before you say anything,” Steve continued, noticing how Tony tensed, immediately scanning his body for injuries. “I know it wasn’t safe, but I had to go. The Skull said that Loki told him where the file drop was. But when I went there, it didn’t look like anything was out of place since the crew had picked up Loki.”

“You think he didn’t have time to get around to it yet?”

Steve snorted. “He seems to have plenty of time to attack your entire business; I feel like he would have made time for something he was so keen to get his hands on.”

Tony rubbed at his goatee, nodding in agreement. “Why else wouldn’t he have gone?”

“Honestly, I think Loki gave him a fake address,” answered Steve. “Loki may not have been on our side, but I don’t think he’s on theirs either. I think he’s just on his own side, just playing both of them to ensure he wins in the end.”

“He gets the address from you, and tells the Skull the wrong one just so he could get to the files all by himself.”

“Which is where the team found him before bringing him in.”

Tony walked over to Steve, idling looking over the stack. “So we’re in the clear? HYDRA doesn’t know any more than they did before?”

“I can only hope,” Steve sighed. “I’ll just keep these here until I have time to move them to another drop.”

Tony reached forward to open one of the boxes before stopping. Sure, he and Steve’s relationship has been skyrocketing lately, but this was his old life. Tony knew he didn’t want people digging into his past without permission; the least he could do was show Steve the same courtesy. “What are in these, anyway?” he asked instead, placing the ball in Steve’s court.

Steve walked up behind him, flipping the lid of the box off for Tony. If Tony’s heart flopped a little at the sign of trust, he wasn’t going to say anything about it. “Names, locations, whispers, you
name it,” Steve replied. “The SSR got its power from information. Just knowing a few sentences could have a whole city under our fingertips. Since we had been around since World War II, everyone assumed we were a mob made up of thousands.”

Tony shot him a quizzical look. “You weren’t?”

Steve shook his head. “When I started, there were just the people working out of New York. It was simplistic; high efficiency without all of the managerial issues.”

Tony furrowed his brow. “Then how did you manage to come by so much info?”

“Informants. They weren’t full members of the mob, but they were loyal to us. They come across a tidbit we might deem useful, they’d send it our way.”

“Sounds like quite a system to handle.”

“That’s where people like your father came in,” said Steve. “We had people working for us everywhere; the only way we could keep them was to make sure they were taken care of. They scratch our backs, we scratch theirs kind of thing.”

“And who says loyalty can’t be bought,” Tony answered hollowly. Sounds like Howard.

“It wasn’t always that,” Steve answered, shaking his head. “We usually just gave them protection or took care of a problem for them. They were customers, really. They’d ask us to do a service for them and they’d pay us back with secrets.”

Tony frowned, looking back down at the boxes. “So everything that’s in here- ”

“Is everyone we ever did business with and everything they told us,” finished Steve. “You can see how dangerous this stuff would be if it got into the wrong hands. HYDRA getting their hands on these lists of names would be catastrophic.”

“This is one file drop,” Tony murmured, counting the boxes in his head. “How many others are there?”

Steve’s moth was set in a grim line. “A lot.”

“Jesus.”

“Listen, I’ve guarded the information for years. HYDRA wouldn’t be able to find the other locations without me telling them where.”

“But you’ve already told them one, Steve,” Tony whispered.

Steve dropped his head to his chest, his soft blonde hair flopping slightly. “I know. I-I just thought I was protecting my crew and- ”

“Hey,” Tony interrupted, dropping his head to catch eye contact with the mob boss. “You’ll get no judgement from me. I just think that… if it ever happens again, we need to be ready.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“Just some security measures,” Tony retorted. “So in case HYDRA ever does stumble across another location it won’t be too easy to get in. I can make you some better locks, throw JARVIS into a remote server, anything you want. You don’t even have to tell me where they are; I’ll just give you everything you need and- ”
Steve pressed a hand over Tony's mouth, stopping his rambling. “I trust you,” was all he said.

“Okay,” Tony answered in a small voice. “Yeah, that’s—that’s... okay.” Wow, really nailed that one, Tony.

Steve snorted. “You have such a way with words.”

“Shut up,” Tony pouted, smacking Steve on the shoulder. “This is a momentous occasion. I’m offering you my services, for free, might I add.”

“I’ll make sure to count my blessings,” Steve joked. He pulled Tony away from the boxes, leading them to the other side of the room.

“So, how many more locations we talking here? I can’t work my magic without any numbers. You can send them to me and I’ll get JARVIS cracking on some camera footage as well.”

“I never put the data in a computer.”

Tony sighed. “Of course you didn’t. You know, sometimes I think you were born in the wrong century.”

Steve shot him an unimpressed look. “Computers can be hacked, paper can’t.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “You’re leaving a literal paper trail, Steve. Besides, you can disguise coding; there’s only so much you can do with a slip of paper with addresses on them.”

Well, then tell me,” Steve started crossing his arms. “How can I hide them better?”

“I need to see where you put them first, Steve,” Tony huffed. “I can’t make lemonade without the lemons.”

Steve shrugged nonchalantly. “You’ve seen them plenty of times.”

“Steve, I think I would remember you showing me some of the most dangerous information you possess,” Tony answered defensively.

“You did see,” Steve persisted. “You just didn’t know that you were.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “Okay, you’re officially not making any sense.”

Steve spun Tony around until he faced the wall covered in Steve’s doodles. “What do you see?” he whispered in Tony’s ear.

“You, wasting your talents on being a mob boss instead of what could be the potential of a honest job as a comic book artist.”

“Tony,” Steve chastised.

“What do you want me to say, Steve? They’re just doodles.”

“You’re not looking at them right. Come on. You’re the engineer. Work your magic; find the numbers.”

Tony’s eyes fluttered from drawing to drawing, scouring for any type of clue. “Look here,” Steve’s voice filtered in, a hand pointing out to a picture in front of him. Depicted was a serious Barnes, meticulously cleaning a gun. “Now, look closer.” Steve tilted his head so he wasn’t looking at
Barnes, but at the wall behind him.

“The calendar?”

“And the clock,” Steve murmured.

“Okay? It’s 4:07 and it looks like you’ve circled the 8th of December.”

“And over here,” Steve continued, pushing him to another picture of Bucky, this one of the brunette laughing as he watched a baseball game.

This time, Tony’s eyes scanned immediately for the numbers. “The scoreboard,” he muttered, looking at the half shown board peeking out over Bucky’s shoulder.

Steve hummed. “Quite a lot of runs for only half the game to be done, don’t you think?”

Tony squinted as he looked at the partially finished scoreboard.

“Come on, now. Show me a stroke of genius.”

Tony looked between the two pictures.


4:07. 12/8. 7. 4. 0, 0. 5. 9.

407128740059.

It hit Tony like a ton of bricks.

40.7128. 74.0059.

“Directions,” Tony breathed.

He could almost feel Steve’s smile form to the side of his own face. “Latitude and longitude lines.”

Tony stepped back and looked at the rest of the pictures. “Do they all?” he trailed off.

“Yep. Everyone holds a different location.”

Tony’s eyes darted between each of the drawings, trying to find the pieces of the puzzle, struggling to put them together. “You did this?”

Steve shrugged. “A picture’s worth a thousand words, right? Maybe a couple thousand in this case.”

Tony couldn’t help the strangled laugh that left his throat. “You are unbelievable.”

Steve blushed, giving Tony a bashful look. “Had to remember them somehow.”

"Wow."

“You see? This information has been hidden for over seventy years. It was never going to be as simple as an address written down on a napkin.” Tony shook his head, giving another soft laugh. “So tell me, oh master of discretion,” Steve continued. “How can I improve my so called ‘paper
“Alright, alright,” Tony griped, pushing a smug Steve away from him. “You proved your point. I’m gonna go down and sulk in my lab.”

“Awh, don’t be like that,” Steve joked. “It’s not like I outsmarted you or anything.”

Tony shot the man a dirty look, getting a shit eating grin in return. “Don’t be such a child,” he pouted. “Stupid Mr. Mob Boss thinks he’s so smart,” he grumbled. “Let me remind you, I have Ph.D.’s, Steve. Ph.D.’s! Plural!”

The bastard continued to giggle. “Whatever helps you sleep at night,” he smiled, ruffling Tony’s hair. 

Tony batted the hand away and very maturely stuck his tongue out. Before Steve could throw another jibe, Tony marched out of the room, heading back down to his safe haven, Steve’s bright laughs following him down the hallway.

“You do know something else, don’t you?” Yinsen asked quietly.

Tony nodded, not trusting his voice as his heart throbbed at the memory of Steve’s teasing laughs and carefree smile, his promises burning sweetly. “But they don’t know that I do,” Tony finally managed to grit out.

“What are you going to do?”

“Keep the focus on me,” Tony answered. “So far, they haven’t been interested in anything besides me and my weapons; we need to keep it that way. If they start wanting to poke around The Commando’s secrets... I know I’m not strong enough to hold it in forever. They’ll break me eventually.”

Yinsen nodded. “Let’s not give them a reason too. What did you have in mind?”

Tony threw his head over his shoulder, quickly checking that his body was blocking the view of the camera nestled in the top left hand corner of their cell. “Well,” he started, gathering some of the wax paper sheets they’d been provided with. “Here’s what I’m thinking,” he finished, straightening the pile out under the light, each page adding a different puzzle piece to complete the picture.

“What is it?” he heard Yinsen ask over his shoulder. “I’ve never seen a weapon like that before.”

“That’s because it’s never been done before. No bullets, no reloads, no anything. All the power comes from that,” he added, pointing to the half made miniature arc reactor.

“This is not the Jericho,” Yinsen murmured.

“No. It’s our way out of here.”

Chapter End Notes
First of all, please enjoy a super duper long chapter.

Seriously, you guys deserve it. I could not (and still can't) believe all the positive comments left on last week's poll. With a story this long, sometimes it's hard to keep everyone on board and engaged, especially since it's a work in progress. Seriously, you guys are fantastic; it's such a blessing to be on this journey with each and every one of you.

In response to that, I think I will be tacking on the other villain and pushing on with the story. But, addressing some certain concerns, this villain won't be around until at least two of the current ones are taken care of. I don't want the story to be so all over the place that no one has any idea who they're fighting anymore.

Also, get ready! The reunion is happening soon! (Honestly, I might be more excited than you guys; those boys need some serious lovin' and finally have their moment to kick some ass.)

Finally, don't mind me, I'll just be putting some foreshadowing here:
- these names and files that are mentioned will play a HUGE part later in the story, especially with Pierce and our new villain
- while I am trying to keep things as canon as possible, there will be some deviations in the next parts of our story, just purely based on how realistic it would be in this world and where the characters are currently at in the story
- hey, what's Fury been up to?
- where have the twins been in all of this?
- did anyone remember about Peter Parker?

Just some things to think about.

-JAT
“My patience is running thin, Stark.”

Tony quelled the need to roll his eyes. “You’re right. It’s not like this is rocket science or anything. Oh wait,” he said, placing a finger on his lips. “It is.”

“You promised me the Jericho,” Raza growled.

“And you’re getting it,” Tony snapped back. “It’s not exactly easy with the box of scraps you gave me to work with here.”

“And yet, you managed to make this,” Raza replied, stepping forward to tap at the blue emanating from his chest.

Tony was unable to hide the flinch, Raza laughing in response. “Sorry to say, Mr. Stark. You’re little nightlight won’t save you from me.”

“Maybe I’d have the Jericho done already if you wouldn’t keep interrupting me every day to monologue.”

A hand closed around his throat, easily lifting Tony off the ground as if he weighed nothing more than a pack of potatoes. “Don’t test me,” Raza hissed. “Keep working, before I find a different way to distract myself.”

Tony shuddered, letting the man drop him down to the floor. He didn’t look back up until he knew that Raza had left the room.

I need to get out of here, he thought to himself.

“I think we’ve put off this meeting long enough, don’t you think?”

Pierce tried to feign disinterest, but Loki’s piercing gaze had him realizing that he wasn’t fooling anyone. “You’ve got a lot of nerve showing up here,” was all Pierce said in response.

Loki flashed him a shark like grin. “Intimidation won’t work on me, Pierce. Besides, both us know that I’m not the one who should be afraid.”

Pierce clenched his jaw, but ignored the comment. Loki was still a powerful foe to be reckoned with. He was already fighting a war on too many fronts; he didn’t need to start on another one. “What do you want?”

“It’s not what I want, it’s what you want.”

Pierce rubbed a hand down his face. “I don’t have time to play games with you. I’m too busy trying to clean up the mess that you created.”

Loki leaned back in his chair, picking idly at his nails. “You left me no choice.”
“No, you just wanted attention,” Pierce snapped.

“Maybe I did.” Loki snarled back. “Maybe I was curious to see if you’d actually forgotten about our little partnership. After all, you left me to fend for myself against The Captain’s mutts. I was their captive for months!”

“And the first thing you do when you get out is charge down the street guns blazing, isn’t it?” Pierce sneered. “You’re such a child.”

“And yet still so much smarter than you.”

Pierce could feel the wood groaning under his hand as it tightened on the arm of his own chair. “You gunned down an officer of the NYPD.”

Loki rolled his eyes. “Please. I know that you pieced together that Coulson was a mole. You weren’t going to let him live.”

“But he was an asset!” Pierce hissed. “With Stark gone off in the wind, The Captain is keeping his cards close to his chest again. The people he considers his family are the only things to draw him out of his cave, now. I could have used him.”

Loki shrugged nonchalantly. “Karma’s a bitch, isn’t she?”

Pierce clenched his hands into fists. “Just say what you need to say and get out before I kill you.”

“Oh, I do so like it when you get riled up.”

“Loki.”

“Fine, fine,” the Norwegian drawled. “The way I see it, we’re even now. You hold out on me, I turn on you.”

“So what, we’re just going to come away as friends, now?” Pierce scoffed. If the past few months had taught him anything was that his gamble in using the foreigner's services had caused him nothing but problems. He'd ended up with a false address for one of the SSR's precious file drops, and his one connection to The Commandos - who was working in his own damn office - was now dead.

“No, but I think as business men we can pick up where we left off. Especially with the information I have for you.”

Piece rolled his eyes. “Please. You’re an idiot if you think I’ll believe anything that comes out of your mouth. You gave me a fake location to where The Captain was hiding some of his files.”

“If you recall, I didn’t get to the files either. The Captain played both of us, and I don’t like losing.”

Pierce leaned back in his chair. Loki was a loose cannon; there was no way that he could possibly trust the man. On the other hand, Loki could be the step to get him back out in the game. Now that the lead with Coulson is gone, HYDRA was stagnant. Rogers and his crew were hanging on by a thread. He couldn’t afford to put their demise off any longer.

“Tell me,” he finally answered.

“Like I said before, I was being held by The Commandos. But now I’m here. I got back out.”

“So?”
Loki grinned. “So I know where it is. And I know how to get back in.”

“What are you thinking?” Pierce smiled.

“It’s been a while since we’ve had a good bombing, don’t you think?”

“No, please!” Tony cried. “I need him!”

The brand was mere inches from Yinsen’s face, Tony able to make out the sweat that had begun to form on the trembling man’s face.

“You guys fucked up my hands,” Tony continued. “I need him to do precision work. Please,” he begged.

Raze dropped the hot stick of metal, throwing Yinsen to the ground. “You have until tomorrow Mr. Stark. Give me the Jericho tomorrow, or I’ll come back for him. Maybe I’ll bring back a few extra bodies just to make sure my point gets across.”

Tony kept his face stony as he stared down at the other man. “Tomorrow then.”

Raza stomped out of their cell, Tony barely waiting until the door was slammed shut before helping Yinsen up. “You alright?”

Yinsen nodded. “We’ll never be ready for tomorrow,” he whispered.

“I’ve crammed for enough college finals to know that’s not true,” Tony tried to joke. When he saw a small smile grace Yinsen’s face, he knew he could count it as a win.

“Now come on,” Tony continued, slapping Yinsen on the back. “We’ve got work to do.”

“Give it.”

“Nat, come on-”

“Give it.”

Clint just stared back. Natasha huffed, stomping forward, easily dodging the man’s hands to reach behind him and grab his gun.

“That’s mine,” Clint managed to slur out.

“You can have it back when you get your life together,” she hissed before pushing the man back down onto the couch. “Drunkard,” she whispered under her breath before breezing out of the room, Clint’s weapons in her hands.

“Clint, maybe you should-”
“Get the fuck off me,” Clint snapped at Sam, pushing the man off as he struggled to get off the couch.

Steve watched the two interact, almost ready to get up and intervene when a voice stopped him.

“Hey, man.”

Steve looked up, meeting the gaze of an equally disheveled James Rhodes. In fact, he looked worse, Steve noticed, just by looking at the state of his clothes. Of course, while the last three months had been pure hell, the last few days for the Colonel had been a nightmare. Apparently, the military didn’t take too kindly for taking such an extended leave. Rhodes had been on the phone constantly, begging his commanding officers for just a little more time.

Just a little more time.

Steve had been whispering that to himself for months. Just a little more time and he’d find Tony. Just a little more time and he’d be whole again. Just a little more time and everything would feel right again.

But Steve found himself slipping. He knew it; everyone else knew it. To be fair, just by looking around the state of the room in front of him, the rest of his team wasn’t doing much better. Clint was nothing more than a stumbling bar now. Steve knew he would forever have nightmares of even going so far as to check the man’s pulse a few times. Bucky is withdrawn, again. With the loss of Clint and the weight of Coulson’s demise, his friend had closed up so far into his shell, Steve wasn’t sure he’d ever get him back out. I’d rather have lost the other arm, Bucky had said.

Natasha was always angry. Gone were her chiding remarks and soft hums. All that was left now was a mother that was too fed up in dealing with her children. Sam wasn’t doing much better. He filtered through the rooms of the speakeasy, trying to help everyone. Of course, when no one wanted it, Sam’s become nothing but constantly drained. Steve hadn’t seen Bruce or Thor in weeks. Bruce had ditched in the midst of another screaming match, the doctor always avoiding conflicts that brought up undesirable childhood memories. As for Thor, Steve wasn’t sure he’d ever come back. It wasn’t hard for any of them to put the pieces together on who was responsible for Coulson. One look at Clint’s face and Thor was out the door, guilt hanging over him like a cloud.

As for him, Steve wasn’t sure how he was doing. He’d be lying if said he was okay, but with everything that happened, Steve had a hard time remembering if there was a time where he was ever okay.

“How’d the call go?”

Rhodes shook his head, taking a seat next to Steve. Look how far we’ve come, Steve thought. Tony would be proud. “Not well. I have to be back on base by Friday.”

Steve hummed. “So you’re leaving.”

“I didn’t say that, did I?”

Steve couldn’t help the smile that tugged at his lips. “Tony is lucky to have someone like you.”

“Not doing him any favors right now,” Rhodes grit out.

“No, no we’re not,” Steve agreed.
Rhodes cleared his throat next to him. “You don’t think-”

“No,” Steve cut him off. “That is the only thing that is keeping me afloat right now, Rhodes. I will believe he is alive until I see otherwise.”

Rhodes sighed. “You’re right. That bastard’s too stubborn to die.” When Steve didn’t respond, the man continued. “We’ve got quite a mess to deal with here,” he said, gesturing to the so called crew in front of them.

“No kidding,” Steve breathed. “We need a win; something to remind everyone about the common goal ahead.”

“We need Tony,” Rhodes replied.

Steve nodded, hopping up to his feet, placing a hand down to help the other man to his feet. “Well then, we better get cracking. We only have until Friday before you join us on the wanted list for desertion.”

The pair started to make the journey back to Steve’s office, where the two had been holed up for months, pouring over files and security footage from JARVIS. They had just made it to the bottom of the stairs when -

**BOOM!**

They stumbled, Steve catching Rhodes with one arm and the railing with the other before the both of them went crashing to the floor. The floor was trembling, as if an earthquake was approaching, the lights above them shaking like leaves in the wind, dust and plaster from the ceiling falling through the light rays.

Rhodes gaped at Steve with wide eyes. “What the hell is that?”
“What the hell was that?”

Tony lay sprawled over his cot, his ears still ringing from the blast.

Yinsen scrambled over to the door and peered out the small hole. “Oh my God,” he uttered.

“What is it?” Tony asked, stumbling to his feet to make his way over to the door.

“Down the hall,” whispered Yinsen. “It looks like a bomb went off.”

“A bomb?” Tony pushed Yinsen out of the way to see for himself. Sure enough, down a ways was the shelled remains of the hallway that had led Tony to way too many ‘interrogations’. “Sunlight,” Tony said suddenly, as he finally managed to take in the light streaming down into the dark, cave-like sewer.

“Someone threw a bomb down a storm sewer? Why?”

“I’m not going to stop and ask questions,” Tony responded, rushing back past Yinsen, over to their desk. “That’s a signal if I’ve ever seen one. We’re getting out of here. Today.”

“You’re sure?” Yinsen's voice was quiet, uncertain. They'd gone over the plan plenty of times, but there was no room for error here. One wrong move and it was over for the both of them.

Tony nodded, starting to unwrap the bindings form his hands.

“Get them ready.”

“Since when does New York get earthquakes?”

Steve lurched forward as both he and Rhodes stumbled back into the main room. The rest of his team were still gathered there, holding onto different pieces of furniture for support.

“It doesn’t,” Bucky hissed, glaring at some of the cracks that had formed along the walls.

“Then what the hell was that,” Clint snapped back.

“I know that sounds all too well,” Bucky replied, looking right at Steve. “It was a bomb.”

Steve clenched his jaw. Not again. “Search the place, even the tunnels down below. If they’re trying to get in, get ready to give them the fight of your life.”

Everyone scrambled to get weapons and heck the base for any infiltration, but Steve paid them no mind. Inside, his head was shouting at him, no, not again, not again. This couldn’t happen again. They had already broken so much. One more crack in the foundation and they’d be done for. The
Commandos would fall.

Instead of trailing off with the rest of his crew, Steve said behind, gun trained on the main door that led down from the restaurant. There was no way in hell he’d let anyone through that door to his family. There was no way he would fail again. If HYDRA wanted in, they were going to get a hell of a fight. He felt his heart beat slow, the predator emerging to protect what little family he had left. He could barely hear his crew shouting ‘clear!’ from room to room over the blood roaring through his veins, adrenaline pumping into every inch of him.

“Cap!”

“What,” Steve grit out, eyes not leaving the door.

“At ease, soldier,” Bucky said, grabbing his gun, tugging it down.

“You find the intruder?” Steve kept his voice level, but in no way was he calm. Months of pent up frustration screamed for him to spill blood.

“There wasn’t one.”

“What?” Steve snapped his head towards Bucky, finally taking his eyes away from the door. “What do you mean? Are you sure you checked everywhere?”

Bucky shook his head. “There weren’t any open points of contact anywhere in the speakeasy.”

Steve looked around, seeing the rest of his crew filing back into the room. “But how?” Maybe this was another distraction. Another plot to draw them out of the speakeasy and into the streets.

“The bomb wasn’t meant for us,” answered Natasha, who had an ear pressed to the police scanner. Steve was surprised they still had it. No one bothered to listen to it after… Coulson. Steve shot a glance over to Clint, who had curled away from the noise, as if pretending it didn't exist.

“What are they saying?” asked Bucky.

“That there’s a huge, gaping hole in the middle of the street not three blocks from here,” she replied easily.

“Someone threw a bomb in the middle of the street?” Clint’s lifeless voice questioned. “Oh boy, now people can’t get to work on time. Real bummer.”

“Maybe it didn’t come from on the street,” Natasha murmured.

“Where else could it possibly have come from?”

“Underneath.” Rhodes cut in. His brow was furrowed, but his eyes wide with a glimmer of a new idea.

“The sewer system? That makes even less sense,” Steve replied. Maybe there was a build up that caused the pipes to burst? A lot of those systems were decades old - there had to be a level of water that they weren't able to bypass. But that couldn't be; New York hadn't had a storm surge that would cause any hint of flooding in months. He couldn't even remember the last time it had drizzled.

“Steve, think about it,” replied Rhodes, walking over to the blonde. “That blast was huge. It happened mere minutes ago and it’s probably already covered by the news stations. Someone
wants attention.”

Steve’s heart pounded. “Who?”

“You know anyone else who would want a more dramatic entrance?”

Steve was running towards the door before Rhodes had finished talking.

Tony.

“That’s as good as it’s going to get,” Yinsen said, throwing the last chair against the door, barring it as best he could.

“Why bother?” Tony asked over his shoulder, fingers flying across the dusty computer. “You know that we’re gonna have to break it down when we leave.”

“And I will gladly do that. But until then, it stays put,” Yinsen panted, checking over the barricade he’d constructed. "I know you’ve heard the guards shouting out there. The bomb’s gone off, killing their men. I’m assuming it hit some of their stolen weapon stash as the blast went off, making it so huge.”

“Who cares?” Tony snapped. “Less of them to kill when we leave.”

“Use your brain,” snapped Yinsen. “There’s been an explosion right down the hallway where they’ve locked up a weapon’s manufacturer with access to explosives.”

Tony finally peeled his eyes away from the computer. “I didn’t do it!”

Yinsen rolled his eyes. “I know you didn’t. But do they?”

Tony stared at the door, guards shouting on the other side as they started to thump against it.

“Good point.”

He heard Yinsen rush over to him. “Is everything ready?”

“Yep, you’re going to have to do the rest. Now help me put these on.”

Crude metal clamped over his arms, pinching his skin, but Tony paid it no mind, instead focusing on the wires that connected to his arc reactor. “Are you sure this is going to work?” Yinsen asked.

Tony shrugged, trying to stay nonchalant. “One way to find out.”

There was no time like the present. Yinsen was right; he may not have constructed the bomb, but the situation doesn't seem to sway in his favor. While The Ten Rings have kept him alive this long, there's no telling how they’d respond to their own men being killed. They don't exactly have the best track record of keeping their cool - in fact, Tony had records on more than enough instances where they'd retaliated with gruesome violence and murder for events that were eons less devastating than this. Tony knew first hand that a mild inconvenience would be enough to piss them off.

So, no, waiting it out was not an option. Besides, he'd probably never get a chance like this again.
This was his only chance to make it back home. And if he died in the process? Well, it will probably be a quicker way to go than whatever The Rings would cook up for him if he did nothing.

Yinsen shot him a dirty look, but dutifully walked over to the computers. “I’ve got the algorithm all set up,” Tony continued. “Start the virus and it should get into every bit of tech they own: computers, cameras, electronic locks, you name it.”

Yinsen nodded, already typing on the computer. A large boom came from the other side of the door, sending it caving in, furniture flying everywhere. Tony pushed Yinsen behind him, arms raised. Two armed guards stormed into the room, one prepped with another grenade.

Tony didn’t give them a chance to think.

He pressed his thumbs down, a whining noise filling the room as electricity sped through the wires, building together to create a blast. A flash of bright light and boom. Both guards lay dead at Tony’s feet.

“Holy shit,” he heard Yinsen whisper behind him.

“No kidding,” answered Tony, breathless with amazement. It was a feeling that he loved, he craved over and over again. The initial joy of a successful experiment. While it had been a while since he’d ever doubted his ingenuity, but the hand blasters were something so far from the grid he usually worked with, Tony couldn’t help but constantly fret over whether or not they would work. Because, well, his life kind of depended on it. “Now, we should finish-”

More shots came from down the hallway. Tony raised his hands again but Yinsen slapped them down. “Save it. The repulsors need to recharge, otherwise you’ll overheat the reactor.”

“Somehow, I don’t think our hosts will let us stop and take a breather,” Tony hissed.

“Then finish this,” snapped Yinsen, shoving the computer towards him, before running over and taking one of the fallen guards gun. “I’ll buy you some time.” And with that, Yinsen sped out of the room, shouting and shooting down the hallway.

“Wait, Yinsen!” Tony shouted. “Dammit,” he whispered to himself, his clunky fingers moving over the keyboard to finish the virus.

Just a few keyboard clicks seemed to take ages; time that he didn’t have. He could still heard shots in the distance, so Tony took that as a sign that Yinsen was still out there and still fighting. A small ding from the computer sounded and Tony knew it was working, if the flickering lights were any indication.

Not looking back, Tony took off down the hallway towards Yinsen. Towards freedom. He passed some bodies littering the ground, mostly bloody, but Tony could smell the burning flesh from the bomb. His stomach churned, but he pushed forward.

“Stark, duck!”

Yinsen’s voice sounded in his ear and Tony hit the deck, ducking right as a grenade launched right by his head. He could feel debris pierce his skin, but Tony barely had time to react before he snapped straight back up, facing Raza.

“Burn in hell,” Tony yelled, firing both repulsors full blast, one catching an ammunition box, setting in ablaze. Raza started screaming, rolling around on the floor, but Tony found that he only
had eyes for one man.

“No,” he whispered, knees wobbling. “No, no, no.”

He ran over to Yinsen, dropping down onto the floor loudly next to him. What Tony had assumed as the man ducking for cover, was a man curling around his wounds. Blood soaked through the ragged shirt that Tony had laughed at every day as the man had attempted to keep it clean. “Yinsen.”

The man gave Tony his usual small smile, now only making him want to be sick as Tony saw it laced with blood. “It’s alright, Stark. I want this, I want this.”

Tony was shaking his head, eyes blinking furiously. “No. I won’t let you,” he moaned. "We didn’t spend the past three months slaving away just for you to quit here!”

Yinsen tried to answer but stopped, a coughing fit racking through the smaller man’s body. “Please,” Tony pleaded. “You have to stay with me long enough for me to take you back to your family. You need to see them again.”

“I will,” Yinsen responded, voice barely reaching Tony’s ears. “I’m going to see them now, Stark. My family. They’re dead.”

Tears slipped down his cheeks now, as Tony had stopped trying to rein them in. “No, please. Don’t do this. Don’t leave me.”

Yinsen shot him a small smile. “You have others waiting for you. You have your whole life with them. Don’t waste it. Don’t waste it.”

Tony watched in horror as Yinsen’s eyes fluttered shut. Tony scrambled, slapping the man’s cheeks, screaming his name, but Yinsen refused to answer.

He was gone.

Rage poured through Tony’s veins like icy fire. They were going to pay.

They were all going to die.

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“Do we have a plan here?”

“Do you need a plan?” Steve shot over his shoulder. “Tony’s down there. Therefore, I’m not wasting another second up here.”

He could see the hole in front of him, the huge gap right down the street. A hand reached out, yanking him to a halt. “Think this through,” Bucky snapped in his ear. “The hole is crawling with cops. They’re not going to let you down there.”

“I don’t care!” Steve yelled. “I am not wasting another damn second, Bucky. I’m getting down there to him!”

“We’re not going to stop you, Steve,” answered Natasha, catching up with them. “We just need to go a different way.”
Steve looked back at the horde of cops and spectators that were surrounding the bomb radius. “How?”

Natasha pointed to the curb. “The catch basin. When it rains, it catches the water and brings it to the sewer. Where there’s catch basins, there’s storm sewers. Find another one of those and we’ve got another way in.”

Steve nodded, mind happy to be presented with another task. One that would bring him closer to Tony. The crew ran down another street, away from the smoking crater. Sure enough, it wasn’t long before they found another storm sewer.

“I got this,” Bucky said, pushing his way to the front, reaching down. His metal arm wrapped around the lid and yanked, sending the metal cap flying down the alleyway.


While on any other day, Steve would be impressed, he ignored it, pushing forward, tucking his gun in his belt as he started to hop down the ladder and into the sewer. His eyes watered as the smell hit him, but Steve pressed on.

“We’re not all gonna fit down there!” Sam’s voice carried from the surface. Sure enough, by the time him, Rhodes, Bucky, and Natasha had made it down, they were basically pressed up against each other. “I’ll stay up here with Barton! We’ll keep any interested parties away.” Sam called.

Steve saluted his thanks before turning to the group in front of him. “Bucky, take Nat and go right. Rhodes and I will go left.”

Bucky nodded, clapping a hand on Steve’s shoulder for comfort before heading down one sewer way, the pair disappearing into the dark, the slapping sound as their feet hitting the water slipping further away.

“Come on,” Rhodes said, pushing forward. “We need to find him.”

Steve nodded, gun back at the ready. He wanted nothing more than to call out for Tony, but he bit his tongue. He didn't know who else was down here. The last thing he needed was to give away their position and put them in danger. Or worse, put Tony in danger.

Of course, the logical part of his brain tried to convince him that they didn’t know if Tony was even here or not, but Steve tuned it out. Tony had to be here. He just had to be.

“Do you hear that?” Steve almost ran straight into Rhodes as the other man screeched to a halt, peering carefully around a corner, a connection to the main sewer line.

“Shouting?” Steve replied, his ears training in on the faint sounds.

They waited a few more seconds, trying to see if they could piece together any parts of a conversation, but stopped when they heard more blasts. The tunnels seemed to shake around them, the pair almost feeling the heat each blast gave off.

“Tony,” Rhodes breathed out before the two of them were running again, tearing down the tunnel. Steve didn’t hold back any longer, screaming Tony’s name, listening to his voice echo through the sewer. It caught some attention, yes, but it was dealt with before it could even think to become a problem. He and Rhodes cut through the men efficiently, not stopping for anything.

When they reached what seemed to be a pause in the mayhem, Rhodes look at the trail of bodies

“They were running.” Rhodes said.

Steve furrowed his brow. “From what?”

A whining noise sliced through the air, a bright light burning into his retinas before a body came barreling around the corner from where they were currently taking cover.

“What the hell?” Steve gaped.

“Shit,” a third voice sounded, and Steve felt his legs buckle.

He knew that voice.

“Shit,” Tony hissed, the metal burning into his hands. They were shaking as he peeled them off, the man having to lean against the wall for support, using every bit of strength to yank the gauntlets and the wires out. Maybe it was just him, but the reactor seemed to be dimmer, its power draining. Not that Tony could fire off another shot before permanently ruining his hands. Besides, he didn’t think he could hold his hands up anymore.

Blood dripped down from his face, onto his burned hands. Breathing was hard; was that a floating rib? It didn’t matter. He'd tried, he'd tried his damnedest, but there were just too many, and with any form of protection only on his hands, it wasn't long before Tony was out-manned. *Oh, well,* he thought to himself. Getting out alive was a pipe dream now - at least he'd be bringing The Rings to hell with him.

“Tony!”

*Ah, yes.* Seemed a bit early for hallucinations, but hey, Tony wasn’t complaining. Not when it was Steve’s voice. He felt his legs finally give out, the brunette slumping against the wet tiles. Whatever. So, he was probably dying. Even still, he kicked some ass while doing it. Steve would be proud.

“Tony, is that you?”

*Rhodey?*

Tony was kind of hoping this Steve hallucination would turn sexy, but there was no way he was doing that with Rhodey around. *Just typical. Even hallucination Rhodey is a major cockblock.***

Then, something was grabbing his shoulder, and Tony’s eyes snapped wide open in fear. There, in front of him, stood Rhodey, bloody and beautiful.

“Wha-?” This wasn’t real. *Was it?*

Rhodey was laughing, grabbing at him, shaking him that Tony couldn’t help but reach up and grab Rhodey’s hands, almost crying when they felt solid and warm against him palms.

“Only you would get snatched from an armored car,” Rhodey joked with wet eyes, his grip tightening around Tony. Tony couldn’t help but break into a smile, inching closer, not daring to
lose contact with Rhodey. “Next time you ride with me, got it?”

“Tony!”

Wait, if Rhodey was really here, then that means-

Rhodey was pulled away suddenly, Tony being transferred into another set of arms.

_His arms._

“-eve?”

Bright blue eyes locked with his. “Tony,” the other man replied, surging forwards without hesitation to press their lips together.

Tony tried to soak in as much as possible, and when his face grew wet, he knew it was Steve crying. He was here. He had come for him. He was safe.

Steve broke off with a shuddering breathe, but that didn’t stop him from pressing kisses to every inch of Tony he could, murmuring his name in between each one. Tony tried to intervene and bring Steve’s mouth back to his, but he found himself drifting, losing himself in Steve’s embrace.

“-get you out of here, don’t you worry,” Steve was saying. “We’ll take you to the hospital and then everything we’ll be fine.”

“No,” Tony whimpered, his voice barely carrying over Steve’s hysteria.

Steve shook his head, his lower lip trembling. “Tony, not today. You can negate me every other day for the rest of my life, but right now you need to let me take care of you. Please, Tony. Let me help you. **Please.**”

Tony grabbed at his shirt, pulling it down slowly, his eyes focused on Steve’s expression.

Tony felt Steve’s arms tighten around him, frozen in place as blue light finally started to dance around in Steve’s eyes. “Oh my God,” the blonde moaned, fear etched clearly on his face.

“What the hell is that?” he heard Rhodey say.

“Tony,” Steve started again, a hand creeping forward to touch it, but pulling away, opting to curl tightly into Tony’s shirt instead.

“No doctors,” Tony tried to plead again.

Still not tearing his gaze away from Tony’s chest, Steve nodded slowly. “Okay,” the blonde’s voice wavering slightly. “Okay, I’ll take you home.”

“Home?”

Steve broke out into a smile, the flash of white gleaming against his blackened face dampened by tears. He laughed, almost sobbing, as he pressed his forehead gently against Tony’s. “Yeah, Tony,” he whispered. “Home. We missed you. I missed you.”

“Missed you,” Tony slurred in response. God, his mouth tastes horrible. When did he eat copper?

Why was Steve frowning at him?
“Tony?”

Steve turned to a blur, a blob of black and red with a yellow halo. Something was patting his cheek gently, but it seemed to reverberate through his skull. There were sounds, but they were so far away. He was drifting, sailing on a boat, finally at peace.

“Tony!”

*God, I’m so tired.*

His eye lids fluttered shut, the curtain drawing on its final act.

“Tony!”

Eyes snapped open, wide in fear.

Thoughts zoomed through his head like a runaway train as he tried to piece something together. Anything.

He tried to push forward, but he barely made it an inch before pain sliced through his body, causing him to freeze.

“Relax.”

A hand pushed him back down onto the mound of pillows. His chest heaved in short pants as he tried to breathe around the pain. His chest ablaze, as if hot coals were dancing around on his insides.

“Easy now. You just got some strength back. Wouldn’t want to go wasting it already.”

*What the hell? Where am I? What’s happening? What day is it? What’s wrong with me?* A million questions echoes through his head, his body finally settling on a pained groan for a response.

“Don’t try and talk. You’ll have plenty time for that later.”

His bleary eyes finally locked on to the voice. The one light in the room shone across the dark trench coat, showing the creases in all the leather. The man leaned down, his single eye staring intensely down at him.

*Fury.*

“You’ve got a lot of explaining to do, Officer Coulson.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank the Lord. They’re finally reunited. Thanks for being less of a dick and finally showing some humanity, author.
Anyway.

Something you may have noticed: Unfortunately, I don't think the Iron Man suit will be making an appearance in this story. Although it is completely badass, and I would love to write it, I don't think it will fit in. Here's my reasoning:
- While in the movies, Tony needed the suit to escape in the desert; he was underground in this story, and all I could think about was Tony in a suit bouncing around the sewer walls like a piece of popcorn.
- Second, while I am trying to keep this story as canon as possible, there are just some things that I don't want happening. I want this story to be as real as possible (Which saying that, makes no sense, as I am writing a piece of fiction that was based off something that was already fiction, but who's counting). Like, a mob boss probably won't be running around with a shield as his only weapon. Steve and Bucky aren't actually supersoldiers (more on their buffness later). Bruce won't actually turn into a rage monster; yada yada. So, Tony running around in an armored suit didn't make much sense when everyone else has been kind of tailored to fit my story. What I'm aiming for eventually, are the hand gauntlets he had in CACW.
- And thirdly, just because I'm a stubborn engineer, and my brain won't shut up about the fact that there is no way that Tony Stark could have built a suit in a sewer based off the weapons that I pictured him having. (My brain is so lame and has no imagination).

So, yeah.

Anyway, I hope you enjoy the chapter. I've been getting a lot of messages about new readers, so welcome aboard! As always, write me any thoughts/ideas you have and I'll try my best to throw them in!

Also, complete side note. I have some business to deal with next weekend (wow, I feel so cool saying that omg), and I won't be able to post next Sunday. I might be able to post a few days later, but I might just push it off until the Sunday after just to keep with the fluidity.

That's what sucks about the real world. You're going to have all these responsibilities to take care of. (Okay, you guys caught me. I'm taking a road trip and will be too drunk to distinguish what a keyboard is. So. Oops. Life handed me lemons, and I said screw lemonade and made cocktails instead. Don't judge me.)

Have a great week!

-JAT
“I don’t understand. Where am I?”

Phil could barely see Fury through his half lidded eyes. Even if Fury hadn’t mentioned their location, Phil would have been able to figure out that he was drugged out of his mind. Honestly, it was a miracle that he got a full sentence out of his cotton mouth.

“I’m going to tell you the same thing I’ve told you every time you wake up,” answered Fury, crossing his arms. “You don’t get to ask any questions until you answer mine.”

Phil’s head flopped down on his pillows, groaning when his body protested the harsh movement. “I don’t know what you want from me, Sir.” His eyes lazily tracked the ceiling, trying to make out any semblance of where he was. It didn’t look like any time of hospital he had seen before, what with the room’s severe lacking of the color white. This place was dark, the only sort of light coming for strung up industrial lights, the beams showing specs of dust and God only knows what else dancing around in the dank room.

The only thing that resembled any sort of medical facility was the bed Phil was currently laying on and the numerous machines he was still hooked up too. To the right of him, an EKG blared the steady beat of his heart, the graph shown on the screen reflecting onto the fluid bags that were dripping into small tubes, sliding down with gravity until they reached Phil’s arm. An arm that was currently handcuffed to the bed. That shouldn’t be a problem, though. Clint had taught him every way imaginable to get out of-

Oh God, Clint.

His heart clenched at the thought of the other man, the EKG singing in response. He had to get out of here; he had to get to Clint. He remembered the phone call, he remembered Clint's frantic tone. Clint had known something was wrong and had been rushing in head first to go get him. Actually getting shot, however, was more of a blur. He had felt the blinding pain, of course, that had him on the ground within a blink of eye. But all Phil could focus on was the screaming; not everyone's - bullets firing always had the knack of sending the public into a blind panic - but his screams. Clint's. He had been there. He had seen the whole thing. It was thing that Phil could latch onto before he’d lost consciousness. That damned fool, charging in blindly to save him, instead of scattering like he should have. Where was Clint now? Had be been arrested? Had be been shot? Phil's heart clenched at the thought of Clint bleeding out on the ground, still crying for Phil.

“What are you thinking about?”

Phil jumped, forgetting that Fury was even there. The man had pulled his chair closer to the bed, looking as he always did: like a man that already knew the answer to questions he hadn’t even asked yet.

Phil ignored the inquiry. “How long have I been here?”

“For some time,” came the vague response.

“Are you going to give me any real answers?” Phil snapped.

“Funny,” Fury sighed. “That’s what I was going to ask you.”

Phil scoffed. “I can’t imagine what you could possibly want from me.”
Fury leaned forward, his elbow resting on his knees. “Do you remember what happened to you?”

Of course he did. “Hard to forget,” Phil grit out.

“Why don’t you walk me through it?”

Phil rolled his eyes. “I was at work.” I was spying on our boss. “I was walking outside the precinct.” I was going to break into his car. “I was on the phone with my friend.” I was on the phone with my criminal boyfriend who probably thinks I’m dead right now. “And then some guy leaned out of a van and shot me.” At least that part’s true.

“Any idea who it was?” Fury asked, his face still blank.

“Are you kidding me?” Phil asked incredulously. “Someone gunning down a bunch of cops? It could have been anyone.”

“That’s the thing,” Fury continued. “They didn’t. It seems as if they swooped in, shot you, and then left.”

Phil hummed, shifting around in the bed, trying to get more comfortable. The drugs were seemingly wearing off if the dull throbbing that had bloomed against his side was any indication. “Maybe I wrote one too many parking tickets.”

Fury just had the gall to laugh at him. “You know, when I hired you, I remember you having a lot less snark and a little more work ethic.”

“What can I say, I made some new friends,” Phil couldn’t help but sneer back.

“Maybe you’re hanging out with the wrong crowd.” Phil couldn’t help the escalation in his heart rate. There was no way that Fury could know about The Commandos, right? No. Phil was careful; all of them were careful.

“Are you here just to harass my personal choices?”

“We’ll get to that,” Fury smirked. “What I want to know now is why they targeted you.”

“What do you want me to say?” Phil spit out. “To fess up and say I was in on it the whole time? You know what? You’re right, Sir. It was me. I went and put a hit on myself so I could get the extra vacation days.”

“I want you to tell me the truth, Officer Coulson.”

“What truth?” Phil cried in response. “I’ve answered all of your questions. What more could you possibly need to know?!”

“I need to know why Clint Barton is your emergency contact.”

Phil’s blood ran cold. “What?” he asked quietly, caught completely off guard.

“You heard me,” Fury answered plainly. “Why is Clint Barton your emergency contact?”

Phil was shaking his head as Fury spoke. He could hear the EKG betraying him, his pulse escalating like a runaway train. “You’re wrong. I don’t know who that is.”

“You’re right,” Fury replied, pulling over a file that was sitting on the table beside him. “Your emergency contact is one Louis Ronin.”
“Yes,” Phil wavered, his body as tight as a coil. “He’s an old friend from school.”

“He must not feel the same, considering he hasn’t responded to any of my calls.”

*Jesus,* Phil thought. Clint wasn’t answering the phone. That did not mean good things. “He’s got his own life to lead,” he tried to play it off. “He’s probably busy.”

“You sure that’s the answer you’re gonna go with?” Fury asked. “Because I know you’re lying.”

“You’re making a mistake,” Phil whispered.

“See,” Fury started, standing up to pace around the room. “If you would have told me that two months ago, I would have believed you. Now, however, is a completely different story.”

“I’ve been in here for two months?” Phil gaped.

“No. Two months ago is when I started looking into you.”

“I don’t understand,” Phil repeated, stumbling over his words. “You were looking into me? Why?”

Fury slipped a piece of paper from his file, placing it on Phil’s lap. “You remember filing this, correct? The missing person file on Tony Stark?”

Phil nodded slightly, looking down at the document. What did that have to do with anything?

“It said on the file that his assistant got in contact with you. A Ms. Potts, yes?”

“Yes. So?”

Fury hummed. “Then you’ll forgive me that I’m so confused. Because when I called Ms. Potts, she couldn’t remember the name of the officer that she talked to or the exact date that she talked to you on. So either she’s not that bright, or you never talked to her.”

Phil gripped the paper tightly in his hands. “She lost her boss and a close friend. You can’t expect her to be on top of her game.”

“I considered that. But then I was thinking. You and Stark have interacted before. You drove him home after I questioned him.”

“I was doing my job,” Phil grit out.

“Or you were saving his ass.”

Phil rolled his eyes. “So me and Tony Stark can’t know each other?”

“No offense, Coulson, but you don’t strike me as a man that would be buddy-buddy with Tony Stark.”

“Maybe you don’t know me very well.”

Fury chuckled. “Well, that much we can agree on.”

“I’m allowed to have friends, Sir,” Phil hissed. This was not good. This was definitely not good. With Fury poking around, who knows how long it would be before something slips out of Phil’s mouth. For all he knew, Fury already asked him when he was drugged out of his mind.
“Yes, you can. But Tony Stark doesn’t have friends. So what would he be doing with a cop like you?” When Phil didn’t answer, Fury continued. “I’m sure you know all about Stark’s recent entanglement with the mob community, namely The Commandos.”

Phil shrugged. “I heard that The Captain wanted him dead, that’s all.”

“Please, Coulson,” Fury replied, shaking his head. “That’s old news. Word travels fast on the streets. Everyone knows that it was a set up and the two of them are working together.”

“Well, Sir, I- ”

“And then I was thinking,” Fury interrupted. “What would you be doing with Tony Stark if you knew he was working with a mob? And then? It hit me. See, you’ve been covering your tracks for a long time, Coulson, but you slipped up.” Fury stomped over to him, his finger slapping down on his personal information form. “Louis Ronin.”

Phil’s brain was screaming at him, his blood singing as it pounded through his veins. _I need to get out of here, I need to get out of here_. “What about him?” Phil tried to ask calmly.

Fury sat back down in the chair next to Phil. “I looked him up, and oddly enough, the only Louis Ronin I could find in New York, which is where you vaguely answered that he resided, was a twelve year old kid. So it wasn’t a real name. But whose fake name was it? A quick search through the criminal database and I found him. Clint Barton. Ten years ago he used the same name to check into a hotel before robbing the place blind.”

_Oh God._ He knew about Clint. How long before he’s arrested? Persecuted? Phil had basically gone ahead and signed his death sentence. “I-I don’t- ”

“Clint Barton,” Fury continued, “who is a known constituent of The Captain. You see, I had it all wrong. You weren’t helping Stark because you were friends with him, you were helping the man because you were friends with The Commandos.”

And there it was. Out in the open. He had been made. It wasn’t like Phil thought he could keep the secret forever. He knew that someone would find him out one day. He had only prayed that Clint would have been as far away as possible when it happened. He hoped that when he’d get incarcerated, that Clint would be safe.

Now he’s gone and ruined everything. Fury would start with Clint and slowly work his way down the line until every Commando, even Steve, sat rotting in prison for the rest of their lives.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

Phil swallowed, holding back tears. “Sorry, Sir. But you’ll get nothing out of me.”

Fury stared at him hard for a long moment. “Fine, we can come back to it. There are more pressing matters to deal with.”

Phil scoffed. “And what would they be?”

Fury dropped another file on the bed, this one largely overstuffed and worn, like it’d been gone through each day.

“Why don’t you start by telling me why you had a file on Alexander Pierce in your apartment.”

“You broke into my apartment? Who the hell do you think you are?”
Fury gave him another blank stare. “I’m the man asking the questions.”

“And you thing you’re above the law, don’t you?”

“I’m above your laws.” Fury reached into his pocket, flipping out his wallet. A quick flick of the wrist and Phil found himself staring widely at engraved letters gleaming on a square of gold.

_FBI_

“You should get some rest. He won’t be waking up for a while.”

Steve just hummed, not taking his eyes off the man that lay next to him.

“Steve. _Steve._”

Steve exhaled as a hand finally tore his eyes away. Bruce was shooting him an unimpressed gaze, his fingers grasping Steve’s chin like a scolding mother. “What?” Steve blurted out.

“Go get some sleep or at least shower,” Bruce pressed. "You won’t miss much, I promise.”

Steve yanked his face out of Bruce’s grasp. “I want to be here when he wakes up.”

“Steve, Tony is pumped full of enough drugs to keep him out of it until tomorrow morning at the earliest.”

“I don’t mind waiting,” Steve replied as he smoothed out the blankets that covered Tony, tucking them tightly against his sides. Sides that were too small, _too small._

Bruce sighed. “I can see why he likes you; you’re just as stubborn as he is. You two are perfect for each other,” he grumbled, checking over Tony’s vitals.

Steve smiled softly, taking a washcloth of the side table, dabbing it over the sleeping man’s face. Even if Bruce could convince Steve to lay down, Steve knew it would be years before he would sleep again, even knowing that Tony was finally safe.

Each brush of the washcloth seemed to bring up another scar, another bruise that Tony had to suffer through alone. Steve had sat beside Bruce and helped him clean each one, taking a chunk of Steve’s tainted soul with each one. He felt himself turning the other way when Bruce had to tear out the stitches to replace the crude string that was currently keeping Tony whole. Steve barely managed to hold it together when Bruce had to re-break two of Tony’s fingers that were healing incorrectly. Steve didn’t think he’d be able to describe the feeling of seeing Tony like this; the once well-oiled machine barely able to keep running.

But Tony _did_ look like an actual machine now, what with the large contraption laying on top of his chest like a ticking time bomb. The eerie blue light seemed to give Tony a ghostlier look than his pasty skin. Tony had been adamant about not going to the hospital, which Steve could understand. If he was the doctor on call, the first thing he’d want to do was take it out. Of course, Bruce had popped that bubble, as well as helping in Steve heave up everything he had eaten, by showing how the blue circle was actually lodged into his chest.

“Bruce, what the hell did they do to him?” Steve moaned, unable to stop the tears that rolled down
his cheeks.

“I don’t even know how to go about beginning to understand this,” Bruce murmured in return, hands hovering slightly over the metal. “But I think you and I both know that no one would be capable of creating something like this except Tony.”

“He did it too himself. Why?”

Bruce rested a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “I have a feeling we won’t like the answer we get.”

“I think he’s finally good to go,” said Bruce, pulling Steve out of his head. “Of course, God forbid we get an actual doctor that can give you actual answers.”

“Thank you, Bruce,” Steve reassured. “Tony wouldn’t want anyone to look over him except for you. Neither would I.”

“That’s because you’re both insane,” snorted Bruce, gathering up his things. “I’ll be back in a while to check up on him.”

Steve heard the door click behind him but he paid it no mind, instead just focusing on the callused fingers that he linked through his. While Tony looked peaceful in his slumber, Steve wanted him to be anything but. He wished that Tony would look like he usually slept; unintelligible ramblings slipping out of his mouth as he snored slightly, his body twitchy slightly, in motion as it always was. Now, Tony was still. Quiet. Steve hated it.

“Wake up,” Steve whispered in Tony’s hair, letting his lips linger to place a gentle kiss against the brunette’s forehead.

“How is he?”

Steve jerked, his body moving to cover Tony immediately. He reached for the handgun he had stashed in his belt, whipping it and his arm around to aim at the intruder with a snarl.

Bucky rolled his eyes, crossing his arms. “Really?” Steve didn’t have time to apologize before Bucky was snatching the gun out of his hand, smacking the butt of it against his head gently. “You haven’t slept in God knows how long. You shouldn’t even be allowed to look at a gun.”

Steve shot the other man a dirty look. “What do you want?”

“Such hostility,” Bucky chided, tossing Steve a small bag. “Especially when I come bearing gifts.”

“Thanks,” Steve murmured, taking in the clean set of clothes, water bottles and packed sandwiches.

“Yeah, well, someone’s gotta take care of you, since you seem hell bent against it. Besides, have you seen yourself? Stark’s gonna wake up and take one look at you before he goes nuts.”

Steve smiled, looking back down at Tony’s pale face. “He’d find a reason to yell at me anyway,” Steve responded fondly.

“How you could possibly find that endearing makes me think that you were dropped on your head too much as a child,” Bucky drawled.

“Go berate someone else,” Steve scolded. “I’m busy.”

“I’m sure,” Bucky mused. “I just thought I’d stop by before I leave.”
“Leave? Where the hell are you going?”

“Hunting,” Bucky smiled.

Steve rubbed at his temples. “For what?”

“Well, you’ll be happy to hear that the police finally caught up and found the secret underground base in the sewers. They’re out there right now scouring the whole system looking for people.”

“And we care why?”

“Because that means the cockroaches that survived have nowhere else to hide,” answered Bucky. “They’ll have to come up for air if they want to avoid the cops. And I’ll be there, graciously waiting.”

“We could interrogate them,” Steve breathed, catching on to Bucky's plan.

“Exactly what I was thinking,” Bucky agreed. “It’s about time we get some answers. Besides, it’d be fun to finally get to kick around the people that held your boy for three months.”

Steve nodded, knowing there was no way he’d be able to stop Bucky anyhow. “Keep to the shadows and stay away from the cops.”

“You got it.” Bucky slapped his thighs as he pushed himself up, walking towards the door.

“And Buck?” Steve took one last look at the injured man lying in the bed before glancing up to meet his friend’s gaze. “You can catch as many as you like. Just know that I only need one alive.”

Bucky shot him a feral grin, his eyes turning cold as ice before ghosting out of the room.
Chapter 61

Someone flicked him on his arm. “You’re staring.”

Tony smiled upon hearing Rhodey’s voice, turning slightly to see his friend slip into the seat on his right. “Can you blame me?” Tony asked flirtatiously, eyes returning to Steve’s prone form.

The blonde had at some point, which remains a mystery to Tony because his drug addled mind hadn’t really clamped down on a solid time yet, had passed out on the side of Tony’s bed. Even though he more or less looked like he passed out in the bed, as the mob boss had over half of his weight on the bed while still managing to sit in the chair he’d pulled up alongside Tony’s bed. His position was almost hilarious because, knowing Steve, the man had probably spent hours trying to find a position where he was as close to Tony as possible without actually touching him for fear of injury. The only point of contact was Steve’s hand, which was threaded gently through one of Tony’s, limp from sleep, but still warm and alive.

“I’m surprised he actually managed to fall asleep,” Rhodey murmured, looking over at Steve as well. “I’d believe that Barnes came in and drugged him before thinking the guy actually fell asleep on his own. He’s been sitting here for days waiting for you to wake up.”

Tony frowned. Days?

“Yes,” Rhodey answered, smiling at the fact that he knew Tony didn’t think he’d said it out loud. To be fair, Tony wasn't exactly planning on waking up again. In fact, when he first did, he had assumed that maybe that bullshit about heaven had been right, as he found himself surrounded by his friends. Of course, that dream had been shattered very quickly by Rhodey, who politely informed him that while heaven did exist, there was no way that Tony would have ever made it up there. At least Rhodey also added that he would be burning in hell alongside him; that's a friend right there.

“Has it really been that long?”

“Yes,” Rhodey answered, smiling at the fact that he knew Tony didn’t think he’d said it out loud. To be fair, Tony wasn't exactly planning on waking up again. In fact, when he first did, he had assumed that maybe that bullshit about heaven had been right, as he found himself surrounded by his friends. Of course, that dream had been shattered very quickly by Rhodey, who politely informed him that while heaven did exist, there was no way that Tony would have ever made it up there. At least Rhodey also added that he would be burning in hell alongside him; that's a friend right there.

“Tones, you weren’t exactly in the best shape," Rhodey frowned. "It’s a miracle we found you stumbling around down there in the sewers at all.”

Tony looked away, opting to play with Steve’s fingers instead. “There was a bomb,” he started. “I used it to my advantage.”

“That wasn’t you?”

Tony looked at Rhodey questioningly. “No. I thought it must have been you.”

Rhodey furrowed his brow. “It doesn’t matter. You’re home, now. That’s what counts.”

Tony wanted to argue, but he didn't, just nodding himself. There were another answer as to who could have played the bomb-starter - one that seemed to have a knack for explosions - but Tony kept it to himself. It wasn't as if Rhodey hadn't thought the same thing. But he was right, that was a problem for a different day. He was home, out of that hell-hole, and was alive. The war was far from over, but for now, Tony was going to take a moment and relish in his continued heartbeat. And in the warmth of Steve pressed against him.

“Listen,” Rhodey continued. “You wait right there. I’ll see if I can find you something to eat. Try not to do anything stupid while I’m gone.”
Tony flipped him off as his friend sauntered from the room.

Looking back down at Steve, he counted each of the deep breaths that whooshed out from his firm chest. Tony frowned, looking at the state the man was in. The usual fluff from his blonde locks was gone, replaced by dirt and grease. Dark pouches sat underneath each closed eye, a huge contrast to the sickly pallor of his skin. He had seen this look before; Steve working himself to the point of exhaustion. That look usually did not bode well. Tony reached his hand not clasped in Steve’s to brush a few locks out of his face. After everything, the man definitely needed his sleep.

But.

Tony bit his lip. Wait patiently for Rhodey to come back, or mess with Steve, he thought to himself, weighing his options. Tony looked down at Steve, sleeping peacefully and grinned. Steve would probably given him a free pass on this one. He reached forward, yanking at the blonde’s hair.

Steve shot up like a rocket, his eyes wild as they darted over to the door, his grip tightening on Tony’s hand while he- wait, where did he get a gun? The weapon was pointing at the door before Tony could protest, Steve’s chest heaving as he looked for a potential threat.

Tony cleared his throat awkwardly. Steve’s head snapped towards his and ouch, Tony could almost feel the whiplash. But none of it mattered when blue eyes met brown. Distantly, a gun clattered to the floor but Tony could barely hear it over his heart pounding in his chest, his veins singing.

“Tony,” Steve said ever so softly.

God, that voice. Tony couldn’t help but smile. “Well, hey there, blue eyes.” And suddenly it was like a spell was broken because Steve made a broken noise before, much to Tony’s amusement, climbing onto the bed with him. Laying a thigh carefully on each side of Tony, Steve leaned over the brunette, shaking hands clasping his face like a treasure. “Tony,” was all Steve managed to get out again before he descended, lips colliding against Tony’s. It was so sweet, soft even, but Tony could feel the desperation barely hiding behind each kiss.

Growling softly, Tony carded a hand through Steve’s hair before yanking the man closer, using Steve’s small gasp of surprise as access to slip his tongue inside. That must have been the last straw, because Tony could barely catch a quick breath before Steve finally caught on with the program, preceding to relearn every inch of Tony’s mouth.

It was too soon before both men broke apart, gasping for air, Steve proceeding to continue his conquest by placing searing kisses down along Tony’s neck. “Missed you,” the blonde uttered quickly, as if not wanting his lips away from Tony’s skin for a prolonged about of time. Tony’s heart clenched at the thought of Steve sitting along, desperately trying to find Tony day in and day out. He could feel his emotions getting the best of him so Tony reached down, jerking Steve’s mouth back to reconnect with his.

This was what he needed. This was safe. Steve was safe. He was alive and warm under Tony, pulse frantic under his touch, skin life fire to the touch. It was getting too much for them, Tony could tell. They were a mess, pressed tightly together, the only sounds coming between them were wet gasps as they pretended one or both of them were not crying.

“Really?”

Steve tensed, letting go of Tony’s mouth with a wet pop as they both turned to see Rhodey leaning back into the room, bowl of soup in his hands.
“I leave for like five minutes, Tony,” he groaned, unimpressed. “Five fucking minutes and you can’t keep your hands to yourself.”

Tony could feel more than see the blush creep up Steve’s neck as it burned into the skin Tony was trying to hide his snickers in. “That’s your own fault, honeybunch. You should have known better.”

Rhodey shot Tony a dirty look before sighing softly, turning to look at Steve. “Can you please get off my best friend who, might I remind you, is laying in a hospital bed after being held captive for three months and is still recovering from collapsing in the sewers not just three days ago?”

To Tony’s delight, Steve whispered a quick, “oh my God,” in horror before he scrambled to get off him, receding quickly back into his chair.

“Give him a break, Rhodey,” Tony chided, rolling his eyes. “The poor man hasn’t gotten any in three months.”

Rhodey, apparently, wasn’t having any of it. “No, you don’t get to do that,” he snapped suddenly. “You don’t get to sit there and crack jokes like nothing’s wrong. You were gone, Tony! You were missing for months. It was like you’d vanished off the face of the Earth!”

“Rhodey,” Tony started. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“That’s right,” inserted Steve. “It was mine.”

Tony groaned, flopping his head against the pillows. “Not you too.”

“He’s right, Tony! We sat here like chickens with our heads cut off looking for you and none of us even thought to look down!” cried Steve. “How long did you sit there, just waiting for us?” Steve continued, looking down as tears finally slipped down his cheeks. “I promised I’d protect you,” he whispered, cupping Tony’s cheek. “And I couldn’t do it.”

Tony grabbed Steve hand before it pulled away, placing kisses on the inside of his palm. “But you did. You did come and get me. You guys brought me home.”

“Didn’t do a very good job,” Steve croaked sadly.

Tony shook his head. “I won’t let you do this to yourselves. Neither of you. You wanna get angry, get angry at the people who actually kidnapped me.”

“Don’t worry,” Steve said darkly. “It’s already being taken care of.”

“Barnes?” Rhodey asked.

Steve nodded. “He’s rounding up a few friends for us to meet.”

Rhodey hummed, bending down to pick up the gun that Steve had dropped when he’d basically jumped Tony. “My flight’s not until tomorrow. I’m sure I can pencil it in.”

Tony looked at the fierce smile that Steve was giving Rhodey, then back over to his friend that seemed hell bent on inspecting the weapon. “I’m sorry,” Tony blurted, eyes continuously snapping between the two. “How do you know each other?”

“I called in reinforcements right after you were taken. I went to see Pepper.”

“You,” Tony gaped. ”You went to see Pepper. Steve, she knows who you are!” After flubbing out the last sentence, Tony cursed, slapping a hand over his mouth. “I mean, Cap. Not Steve. I don’t
Tony could see Steve biting his lip to keep from laughing. “Relax. He knows about me. So does Pepper. I had no choice, really,” he continued. “It was either tell them my life story or Pepper would blow my brains out.”

“Oh, God,” Tony moaned. “I am so sorry.”

“We just laugh about it now.”

“Steve, she almost killed you.”

Steve shrugged. “I mean, she thought I was out to kill you, so.”

“I’d call it even,” Rhodey agreed.

“Wait, you laugh about it? How well do you know Pepper?” Tony gaped.

Steve shot him a sympathetic look. “You missed a few things when you were gone.”

“Great,” Tony pouted. “Just great. You’re all friends now. Why do I feel like this is a bad thing?”

“I wouldn’t say we’re exactly buddy-buddy,” Rhodey replied. “But we do all have the same interests in mind.”

“Me?”

Rhodey hummed. “More like keeping you on house arrest for the foreseeable future.”

“You can’t be serious,” whined Tony. He looked at Steve, only to get a blank face in response. “I don’t need the three of you hovering over me. I’m fine.”

“I can name thirteen other incidents that your description of ‘fine’ has landed you in the hospital.”

“Thirteen,” Steve hissed, his face hardening.

“You see, this?” Tony said, gesturing between the other two men. “This is why you weren’t supposed to ever meet officially.”

“Tony,” Rhodey sighed.

“Don’t,” Tony snapped in response. “I don’t wanna hear anything from you. Or you for that matter,” he continued, pointing at Steve. “I just want to sit here and enjoy my soup and the lovely view.”

Steve blushed again but Rhodey just scoffed. “Fine. You don’t have to hear it from us. You’ll just hear it from Pepper, then.”

Tony froze. “You didn’t.”

Rhodey just smiled. “Did what?”

Tony looked over at Steve. “Steve, please tell me you didn’t-”

“ANTHONY EDWARD STARK!”

Tony pushed his head into hands, moaning quietly. “Dammit.”
He barely had time to recover before the door was kicked open, a furious looking Pepper stomping into the room, her eyes more fiery than her hair. “Pepper, I can-”

A manicured hand had him stopping in his tracks. “Not a word.” She looked at the other two men in the room. “Gentlemen, if you could leave us. I’d like to have a few minutes with my boss.”

Rhodey and Steve got up. Tony trying to stop the blonde with a tug on his arm. Steve just sent him a small smile, kissing him softly against the temple. “Good luck,” he whispered before pulling away, nodding to Pepper on his way out.

For a long time the pair just stared at each other. “Those tears for your long lost boss?” Tony finally asked, taking in Pepper’s puffy eyes.

“Tears of joy. I hate job hunting.”

Tony chuckled quietly, waving his hand for Pepper to walk over.

“I am so mad at you,” she whispered into his hair as she bent down to give him a delicate kiss.

“I know.”

“We are going to have words, Mister. Words.”

“I know.”

“I missed you. We all did.”

“I know.”

Pepper shot him a dirty look. “Eat your soup then, Mr. Smarty Pants.”

Tony huffed before looking back down at his meal.

“Pepper?”

“Yeah?”

“I missed you too.”

“I know.”
Chapter 62

Tony knocked on the door, leaning an ear close to the wood for an answer he knew wasn’t coming. He sighed, looking back down the hallway to where his bag was, currently housing his favorite mob boss, which seemed like a way more inviting option.

Regardless, he turned back to the obstacle in front of him, tugging the mound of sweaters tighter around his body. It seemed that since he’d come back, he just couldn’t get warm. Being kept in the sewers of New York in the back half of winter really taken a toll on him. *Which is reason number thirty-seven you should just turn around and go back to cuddle with your personal space heater,* his brain hissed at him.

But he ignored himself, opting to open the door that was thankfully unlocked. Walking in, he saw the room was pitch dark except for the sliver of light he brought in with him. Although he couldn’t see anyone inside, Tony knew that he was being watched anyway.

“**You shouldn’t be up,**” a soft voice called out.

“I **could say the same for you,**” Tony answered, not walking away from the threshold. “It’s the middle of the night.”

“But you came anyway.” The voice was tired, defeated.

Tony shrugged. “But I **came anyway.**”

A small thud and suddenly Barton was in front of him, his face as pale and drawn as Tony’s, looking like nothing more than a ghost in the light of the hallway. “**Why are you here?**” he asked.

“You haven’t been in to say hello. Even Thor stopped by, and you know how much he likes me,” Tony tried to joke.

Barton however, remained unimpressed, staring at Tony with a blank face. “I haven’t been myself,” the man answered quietly. “I’m glad you’re back, though. The team is stronger with you here.” Tony could see the door starting to shut on his face so he stumbled forward, stopping it.

“**Wait,**” he started. “**Listen,** I know you don’t want to see anyone and by the way I wanna throw up I probably shouldn’t be walking around but I need to get this off my chest.”

Barton froze, eyes doing a quick once over on his body before dragging him inside, leading him to the edge of the bed. After Tony was settled, Barton went back to close the door and flick on the overhead light. Tony tried, and most likely failed, to ignore the current state of the disarrayed room.

“**Maybe I should get Steve,**” Barton murmured, eyes tracking over Tony's form. “**You don’t look very good.**”

“Well, you’re not a ray of sunshine yourself, Barton.”

The blonde clenched his jaw, his arms crossing. “Did you want something or did you just come here to taunt me?”

There was a long stretch of silence as Tony tried to figure out what he was going to say to him. What could he say? “**I’m sorry,**” was all he settled on.
Barton scoffed. “They told you.”

“No, no one said anything,” Tony answered sullenly, looking down at his hands. “I already knew.”

“I don’t need your pity, Stark,” Barton snapped.

“No, it’s not pity!” Tony tried to interject. “I’m just saying that—”

“You should leave.”

“Clint, I really need to talk—”

“There’s nothing to talk about. Get out.”

“It’s my fault!”

Barton froze by where he had stomped over to the door. He turned slowly, eyes wide and piercing.

“What?”

Tony gulped. “I’m just saying. Coulson’s dead and I’m pretty sure it was my fault.”

A hard face stared back at him as the archer crept back over to the bed. “I don’t understand.”

“Listen, I’ll tell you but you gotta promise not to kill me until I finish. Deal?”

Tony didn’t get a response, but he didn’t think he would get one. The Barton that was looking at him was the one that Tony used to see when he had been researching the Commandos. The still photos encompassing ‘The Hawk’, the man hidden in the high shadows. His targets would never see him coming until they were already dead. Tony knew, from being on the other side of the look, that he was as good as dead himself. That’s what he gets for doing the right thing. Somehow, it didn’t seem to bother him. He had known he had been walking into the lions den, but this was something that he couldn't bury. It had kept him up enough nights while he was captive, but the tipping point finally came when he was home, tucked into bed with Steve, the blonde sadly explaining how Clint had fallen off the wagon.

“The men who kept me,” Tony began slowly. “They wanted me to build them weapons. One weapon, in particular. An idea that I’d come up with a few years before, to give to the military. Based on its testing however, I decided to scrap it. It was too dangerous, even for them. If The Jericho fell into the wrong hands, it could be catastrophic. So I got rid of it before it even hit the market.” Tony sighed, continuing. “Somehow they got their hands on a set of plans and tried to force me to do it. I refused, of course, which landed me in the state I am now.” Tony laughed hollowly. “I guess they finally figured out that beating the shit out of me wasn’t going to work on me.”

Tony paused. “What did they do?” Clint’s voice was hoarse.

“Clint, if I would’ve known, I wouldn’t have—” Tony broke off. “They came out one day with his hat. They threw his officers hat at me and his blood was on it and I just knew. I didn’t fight back anymore after that; I couldn’t risk them sending something down that belonged to any of you.”

Tony clenched his eyes shut, not wanting to see Clint’s reaction. “But it was my fault. He died because I didn’t wasn’t cooperating.”

There was silence for a long time, Tony’s heart rate jumping with each moment passing.
“Were you in the van?”

The question caught Tony off guard. He raised his head slowly, meeting Clint’s tired gaze again. “I’m sorry?”

“You heard me. Were you in the van that tore 67th Street three weeks ago at 3:42 PM?”

“No,” Tony said slowly. “I was underground.”

“Then it wasn’t your fault,” the archer responded decidedly. As if he was saying to convince both him and Tony. "You didn’t kill Phil.”

Tony shook his head. “But Clint, I- ”

“Stop,” Clint responded, putting a hand up. “There is a long list of people that can be placed at fault for his death. You’re not one of them. You couldn’t have known that would happen.”

“But I should have,” Tony retorted. And he really should have. His file compiled on The Ten Rings had more than enough proof of the games they like to play. Tony should have known that they would have eventually shifted their tactics to try and get them to comply.

Clint shrugged. “I should’ve as well.”

“I’m still sorry,” Tony repeated. “I know what he meant to you.”

The small bend in Clint’s lips looked about as close to a smile as the man could muster. Whatever, Tony would still consider it a win. “Thank you.” He tilted his head slightly, almost looking like the old Barton for a second, when he added, “You falling asleep on me?”

Tony blinked, not even realizing that he had shut his eyes. “Well, I’m on a lot of drugs. It’s a miracle I even made it over here.” Upon hearing Clint’s small laugh, Tony reached for a hand to help him up. “I’ll just, uh, head on back to- ”

Clint pushed him back with enough force to send Tony flopping fully onto his bed. “You look like you would make it about ten feet. Just use this one; I don’t have any use for it.”

Tony frowned even thought his eyes were already closed. “You need to sleep,” he murmured into the pillow. “And eat. You’re skinny.”

Tony felt Clint scratch the top of his head. “Whatever you say, Mom,” he whispered. Tony barely heard the man slip through the door before he was already out.

Tony didn’t know how long he’d been there when he found himself waking up again. Peeking one eye open, he’d seen that someone had attempted to tidy of the room as Tony could actually get a clear shot of the floor. An arm reached across his middle, pulling him gently to lean against a chest and Tony tensed.

“Relax,” Steve’s voice tickled his ear.

Tony sighed into the familiar touch. “What are you doing in Barton’s room?”

Tony could feel Steve’s smile form against where it was tucked into his neck. “I could ask you the same thing.”

“I had to talk to him, clear up a few things.”
“Well, whatever you said must have been something right. I actually ran into him in the kitchen eating breakfast.”

Tony stretched over on his back finally meeting Steve’s sparkling blue eyes. “What can I say? I’m a miracle worker.”

Steve rolled his eyes but still looked amused as he leaned down to give Tony a long kiss. “Good morning,” he said as he finally pulled away.

“I certainly hope so,” Tony replied, wagging his eyebrows.

Steve turned scarlet, sending Tony into a laughing fit. “Don’t even think about it,” Steve tried to scold. “You’re on bed rest.”

“And you’re no fun,” Tony pouted.

“You’ll get over it,” Steve chided, rubbing a hand down Tony’s flank. He stopped, however, when he reached back up towards Tony’s chest, where the new addition of an arc reactor currently resided. Carefully, watching Tony to make sure it was okay, Steve pulled down the sweatshirt he was wearing, the pair’s faces becoming washed in soft blue light.

“What is it?” Steve whispered.

Tony sighed, contemplating not telling Steve, but there was no way it wouldn’t bite him in the ass if he didn’t. “It’s a magnet,” he answered simply. There, not a lie.

Steve shot him an unimpressed look. “Why is it there?”

“You’re not going to like the answer.”

Steve frowned. “I need to hear it anyway.”

“The bomb,” Tony started. “When it exploded, metal shards got into my chest. Yinsen tried to pull them all out, but some of them were too small to take out without creating more damage. So, hence the battery,” he said, tapping the reactor with his knuckles. “It keeps the shards from getting to my heart.”

Tony could see the flurry of emotion flash across Steve’s face, but to Tony’s surprise, the blonde held it all in. Instead, he reached for Tony again, twisting slightly so Tony was encased in his hold. The two lay there in silence, Tony pushing closer to Steve, hoping the man would feel his steady heartbeat. “Tell me you’ll be alright,” Steve finally uttered.

“I’ll be alright,” Tony replied without hesitation.

A quick kiss was pressed to his cheek before the two were surrounded in comfortable silence yet again. He knew this conversation was far from over, but Tony knew that Steve wasn't going to push him about it now. Tony contemplated falling asleep again, feeling safe in Steve’s arms when there was a sharp rap against the door.

Tony grumbled in annoyance, opting to burrow further into Steve’s chest when the other man found quite amusing. “Tell them to go away,” Tony groaned.

“If we’re being technical,” Steve placated, “this isn’t either of our bedrooms.”

“If we’re being technical, you’re the boss and this is my house,” Tony responded sourly.
Tony could feel his toes curl in pleasure at the sound of Steve’s laugh, almost missing when Steve continued with a “Come in!”

“Traitor,” Tony frowned, watching as Thor burst through the door.

“Captain!” The man started, freezing for a second when the hulking blonde finally saw their current predicament. “Forgive my intrusion.”


Steve hushed him, flicking Tony on the arm. “What’s up, Thor?”

“If I thought the news could wait, then I wouldn’t have barged in,” the foreigner replied, voice shaking. “But this is urgent. I just got off the phone with the police.”

Tony felt Steve tense, but he was the one to dart up in surprise. “Coulson?” he asked with a sliver of hope.

“I wish, my friend,” Thor replied solemnly. “It wasn’t about that. It’s about Loki.”

“What about him?” Steve frowned.

“He was just arrested. For Coulson’s murder.”
Chapter 63

Alexander Pierce walked down the long hallway, his whistles echoing off the wall as he did. Stepping up to the front desk, he whispered a few words to the guard on duty, the man nodding before pressing the buzzer to unlock the gate separating the prison from the outside world. Obadiah Stane stepped through the doorway, quickly letting the other officers do a quick search of his body. Once he got the okay, Pierce jerked his head to the left, Stane quickly falling into step beside him.

It was strange, Pierce thought to himself, as the pair slipped back down the long hall. The two of them were the furthest things from allies but here they were, walking in tandem as if nothing was wrong. They were the United States and the Soviets; fake smiles and promises shared between them while one waited for the other to make the first move, leading them into war.

Regardless of their current standings, however, there had been more than one instance that the powers were drawn together to defeat a common foe. And as of right now, there wasn't a better cause for the two to fight for. One that they had let run wild for too long.

Pierce led Stane down a maze of hallways, towards the back of the prison. Their walk was silent, but for once, Pierce couldn't detect any lingering tension in the air. It was something he'd always admired about Pierce; the man was exceptionally ruthless once he had a certain goal in mind. But that was what he needed to do to survive as a business man - always playing the game, changing between allies and foes and then back again, all to just stay one step ahead of everyone else. Once they finally reached their destination, Pierce flashed a quick signal to the camera watching them, the green light blinking red as Pierce's men cut the connection.

Pierce and Stane stared into the cell in front of them. "I told you it was worth the view," he murmured to the bald man next to him.

Stane snorted. "A worthy sight indeed." The man leaned forward, face almost pressing in between the thick bars. "Comfy?"

There was a long silence before the prisoner finally looked up to glare at the two of them. Greasy, unruly locks covered a pale face. Loki was almost unrecognizable in the cell; Pierce grinned at the man's current state. He'd told his boys that their most recent inmate was not their top priority, and it seems that they had some lingering beef with the Norwegian as well.

"What are you doing here?" Loki asked, giving them a bored expression. "Come to get me out?"

"You wish," Stane laughed in response. "After what you did, you should count yourself lucky Pierce's men got to you before I let you bleed out in some alleyway."

"What I did?" Loki sneered. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Stane, but Pierce is the one who bombed out your little operation down in the sewers."

"Don't bother trying to spin your way out of this one," snapped Pierce. "You told me that was where I would find The Captain. But you knew that's where the Ten Rings were holding Stark. You've got your little birds everywhere, don't you? Spinning your web, playing every side so everyone loses - except you, right? Well, we're done playing your game."

Loki had the gall to laugh at them. "So, you've thrown together some half ass truce to take me
down? Please, you two won't make it through the day before taking each other out."

Not this time," Stane interjected. "You've cost us both Stark and Rogers. You can't be allowed to continue."

"What are you planning to do? Kill me?" Loki jeered. "My father would rein down hell if any harm came to me."

"Are you so sure?" Pierce replied. "Last I heard you wasted your one phone call on the man, and he couldn't even be bothered to answer."

Pierce thought he might have seen Loki pale further. "You can't kill me, Pierce. Too many people have seen me here; you won't be able to keep my murder under wraps. You've got nothing to hold me. Now, let me out before my lawyer gets here and sues you and this decrepit country for all it's worth."

"Oh, we can't let him out, can we?" Stane smiled.

"Absolutely not. He's a convicted murderer."

Loki's eyes snapped to Pierce's. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Haven't you heard?" Stane continued. "You've been convicted for the murder of the upstanding officer of Phillip Coulson."

"But-but that wasn't me!" Loki cried, jumping up to rush to the bars separating them. "It couldn't have been. I was still escaping The Commandos' compound!"

"But it was some of your followers, wasn't it?" Pierce asked. "It wasn't either of us, so it had to have been you who put out the personal hit."

"But I didn't shoot the gun!" the foreigner snarled, hands slapping against the metal bars.

"But I've got plenty of officers who witnessed you gun down their friend in cold blood," Pierce winked.

"You can't do this," Loki whispered hoarsely.

"I can and I will," Pierce countered. "You've gotten too comfortable here. So comfortable that I see that you've forgotten who runs this town. You've been nothing but a thorn in our side for the better half of a year, giving us nothing and taking everything."

"You made me lose Stark," hissed Stane.

"You lied to me about the file drop," continued Pierce.

"You refuse to tell us the location of The Captain's new hideout."

"You gunned down a police officer, who was my only lead on cornering Steve Rogers."

"You've been a threat to the growth of my company for years."

"Face it, Loki," Pierce finished. "You have no worth anymore. You're being convicted, which will lead to your deportation and incarceration in your home country. You'll never take a single step on American soil ever again. You're finished."
"No, no you can't do this!"

"It's already done," Pierce smiled maniacally. "You'll be gone by the end of the week. Do me a favor and say hello to your dear old Dad for me, won't you? You see, he answered my call, and he just can't wait for you to get home."

Stane laughed as they pulled away, walking back down the hall. "Wait!" he heard Loki call out, his face pressed against the cell. "I'll tell you everything! Anything you want to know!"

"Don't bother," Stane snorted. "You don't have anything we want."

Loki's continued cries were met only with silence, the pleas slipping away into nothing as Pierce led Stane into his office. He gestured for Stane to sit, Pierce himself walking around to collapse into his desk chair.

"Never thought we'd be back in here together," Pierce said, keeping his tone light.

Stane frowned. "Cut the shit. Don’t act like this is going to be a common occurrence."

"If that’s how you want to play this," Pierce sighed. Back to foes, it was.

“I do. Loki might be the root of our problems, but you are not without blame. You kept Steve Rogers from me and you played a part in me losing Stark.”

“Not by my own knowledge,” Pierce snarled.

“Which only begs the question of what you would have done if you did know where Stark was,” Stane mused, standing up slowly. “Anyway. Loki’s being sent away; our business is done. Do yourself a favor and stay out of my way. Don’t forget that you’re not the only man with power in this city.”

The wood in the arms of his chair creaked under his grip as Pierce watched Stane saunter from his office, all to run into a frantic Grant Ward. Stane passes the younger man a stony glare, but didn’t stop from leaving the office. Once the doorway was clear, Ward shut the door behind him.

“What do you have for me, Ward?”

Ward bit his lip, not answering.

Pierce slammed a fist down on his desk. “Nothing? You still have nothing?! Ward, I gave you this job a month ago and you’ve made no progress.”

“Well, Sir, it’s not exactly—”

“How hard is it to find one man? Coulson has to be out there somewhere. The man’s was shot, it’s not like he’s going anywhere anytime soon. And yet somehow, he has been able to avoid our gaze for weeks now.”

“I don’t what to tell you, Sir,” Ward sighed. “I’ve checked all of the hospitals in the entire state, all the morgues, everywhere! He’s simply gone.”

“Ward, you and I both watched as an ambulance picked him up on scene and drove off with him,” Pierce hissed. "He can’t have disappeared; he has to be around here somewhere.”

“I’ll keep looking then, Sir.”
“Yes, you will,” Pierce replied darkly. “And keep this to yourself. I don’t want any other officers poking around.”

“Of course.”

“Phil Coulson knew more than he was letting on. If he’s still alive and gets back to The Commandos, this could mean very bad things for us. I won’t take any chances. We need to find him first, dead or alive.”

Ward nodded, walking back towards the office door.

“And, Ward?”

“Yes, Sir?”

“If you do find Coulson alive, kill him.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“So, you think that Alexander Pierce is the leader of one the most nefarious gangs of New York City?”

“I don’t think. I know.”

“Tell me.”

Steve sighed softly, not wanting to get up from the cocoon of warmth he was surrounded in. However, he knew that there was work to be done, so he took one last look at Tony’s sleeping form before slipping out of the bed, making sure to tuck the corners of the blanket back around the sleeping brunette.

Steve smiled at the color that had started to return to Tony’s skin, a beautiful olive with a slight flush around his cheeks. He ran his hand softly through Tony’s tangled locks before finally retreating out of the room.

Checking his phone, he noticed he had a text from Sam saying that Thor was still at the police station. If what Thor had told them yesterday was true, then Loki might be out of the picture for good. The blonde was over at the station right now, with Sam keeping an eye on him from the distance, no doubt getting a complete report from the officers on duty. Of course, now that Loki has been arrested, Steve could only think about the presence of Pierce. Would he drop the charges on Loki? Would he throw out the case entirely? Or would he go so far as to cover it up by blaming an innocent?

But that could wait. There were more pressing matters at hand. With Thor’s declaration last night, Clint had shut down yet again. Just as he was starting to make progress, the confirmation of Phil’s murder was not something that the archer needed to hear. The last Steve saw of him, he was
retracting back up to the vents. Steve knew Natasha was still looking out for him, making sure he remained in the compound in case Clint got it in his head that he needed to go on a suicide mission to the precinct.

Steve walked down the hall and down the first flight of stairs, peering into the main room to find it empty. He didn’t expect it any other way. Sam was watching Thor, Natasha was watching Clint, Tony was safe, sleeping upstairs, and Bruce passed out long ago. And Bucky was downstairs, waiting for him.

A sharp rap on the door not but a half hour ago had pulled Steve from his sleep, his body curling protectively over Tony’s as the door opened. Seeing Bucky and the look in his eyes had Steve tensing for a whole different reason. “Start without me,” he had mouthed to his friend, not quite wanting to leave Tony’s side yet. But eventually, after looking back down at Tony’s frail body, Steve knew it was time to get off his ass and go kick some instead.

Which is how he found himself walking down to the expansive cellar, down the dimly lit hallway to reach the set of rooms they’d set aside as cells. While Steve didn’t know exactly where Bucky was, he let the muffled groans and fists hitting skin lead the way.

Stepping up to the last door, Steve swung it open, just in time to see Bucky deliver a sharp uppercut to a bound man, the man’s head flopping around wildly like a fish out of water. Upon hearing Steve enter, Bucky stopped, panting from exertion.

“I said start without me, not run away with the whole show,” Steve said coldly, the mask of The Captain falling into place.

Bucky smirked as he wiped the blood off his metal hand on their captive’s shirt. “What can I say? I got lost in the moment.”

Steve cracked his knuckles. “Is he talking yet?”

“No,” Bucky replied. “But then again, I didn’t ask him anything.”

Steve pulled Bucky aside. “Buck, this is our only chance to get answers. Believe me when I say that I want nothing more than to squeeze the life out of him, but I won’t. We can’t let ourselves get carried away until we get everything we can out of him.”

But Bucky just grinned, slapping a hand against his back. “Well then, do I have some good news for you. I know you told me you only needed the one alive, but when I was out there, I thought to myself, ‘why do I get to have all the fun?’”

Steve furrowed his brow. “I don’t understand.”

Bucky dragged him back out until the hallway. “Pick a room, any room. I may or may not have gone above and beyond my duty and brought you six choices.”

“You brought me six members of the Ten Rings?” Steve gaped at the other man. "How the hell did you even manage that?”

“Don’t ask so surprised,” Bucky pouted. “I’m kickass.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “If you say so. Now tell me. Why did you bring me six?”

“Because, Steve,” Bucky responded. “These men are part of the crew that held and tortured Tony for three months while we sat by and did nothing. They kidnapped a Commando, a member of our
family. They don’t deserve the luxury of a quick bullet to the head.”

Steve’s pulse quickened, his blood pumping as adrenaline filled his system.

“You know what they did to Tony. You saw what they did. I saw it,” Bucky pushed. "And I know you feel the same way I do; the word anger doesn’t begin to cover it. I brought the others here alive because I knew there was no way that I would have the strength to ignore the urge to kill the one guy if I brought him here alone. And I know you wouldn’t be able to do it either. The way I see it, we can fuck up five times and still have one left over to interrogate.”

Steve was silent for a long time, looking at the cells in front of them.

“We need to make them pay, Steve.”

Steve closed his eyes, thinking of Tony, who had struggled to walk to the bathroom. Who had to lay his tablet on the bed because his hands were shaking too much to hold it. Who was still covered in healing bruises, leaving behind patches of a sickly yellow-green as the skin healed. Tony, who had come home with a whole chunk of his chest missing and a battery to keep him breathing.

A fire roared inside him, anger consuming him. “Come on, then,” Steve finally answered. “Let’s go make some mistakes.”
“Shouldn’t you be in bed?”

Tony reluctantly pulled his eyes away from the staring contest he was having with the coffee machine, watching as Barnes slipped into the kitchen.

“Shouldn’t you be,” Tony trailed off, giving the other man a once over. “I’m going to go with painting a Jackson Pollock?”

Barnes just snorted, looking down at the red splatters that covered his torso and arms, unable to see the few dustings of blood that also streaked across his face. “Let’s go with that,” he replied, slipping around Tony to start the sink, sticking his hands under the stream to watch the dark rivulets drip into the basin and down the drain.

“Where’s Steve?” Tony asked. He knew who that blood belonged too. Part of him still clung to the slight uneasiness of violence, but it was barely present. After everything that had happened over the course of his relationship with The Commandos, Tony’s tolerance for being directly involved in daily gang brutality had increased immensely. So much so, that the slim part of him that wasn’t clouded by these doubts, were reveling in the fact that what was happening in the basement was due to him, was for him. Knowing that they were down there, trying desperately to claim some semblance of revenge, delivering payback of Tony's pain one punch at a time, had Tony's blood pumping and heart singing with a newly discovered viscous pride.

“Still painting.”

Tony frowned. “Are you sure that- ”

“I’m keeping an eye on him, don’t worry,” Barnes interrupted. “It’s just… he needs this right now. It wasn’t exactly easy for him, for any of us, when you were gone. And don’t,” he continued, barring Tony’s attempt to speak. “Don’t apologize. What happened to you is on the rest of us.”

Tony huffed, buckling down for a familiar argument. “You couldn’t have known what was going to happen. If I remember correctly, you were already taking care of the mess at my warehouses.”

Barnes sighed, running a hand through his greasy hair. “It shouldn’t’ve mattered. We should have kept you closer. I should’ve kept you closer.”

Tony snorted. “Since when are you my personal body guard?”

“My job is to keep Steve happy. Believe it or not, you seem to do the trick,” Bucky shrugged, turning the sink off, wiping his now clean hands on the back of his pants. “Ergo, to keep Steve happy is to keep you safe.”

“Is this your way of telling me you like me?” Tony smiled sweetly.

Barnes shot him a blank look. “Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

Tony laughed again as he pulled the finally full mug from under the coffee machine, humming slightly as he curled around it’s warmth like a cat. That was until it was ripped from his hands.
“You dare,” Tony hissed, watching in horror as Barnes downed the whole cup in one go.

Barnes moaned appreciatively, slamming the now empty cup down against the counter. “You’re supposed to be on bed rest,” he said smugly. “No coffee for you.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“And besides,” Barnes shrugged. “I’ve had a rough day. Dealing with those assclowns downstairs really took a lot out of me. I needed the pick me up.”

“I’m going to sick Steve on you,” Tony threatened.

Bucky chuckled. “Go ahead. I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to see you out of bed.”

“Dammit,” Tony hissed under his breath.

“Go back to bed, Stark,” replied Barnes. “Eat a tub of ice cream and cry over a rom-com, or whatever you usually do on your days off. Just relax. I’ll send Steve up to entertain you in a little while.”

Tony glared at the man, stomping past him to leave the kitchen.

“And don’t even think about going down to the lab!”

Tony whirled around. “Excuse me?”

“JARVIS is programmed to send us an alert if you think about going anywhere near the lab. Or if you try to leave the building for that matter.”

Tony scoffed. “Like JARVIS would ever report to you.”

“Maybe not to me, but he definitely will to Steve,” Barnes smiled.

“J?”

“I do feel that The Captain holds your safety as his top priority, Sir. It’s about time someone did.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Not you too.”

“This is your own fault you know,” Barnes smiled. “You’re the one who said you wanted to be a Commando.”

Tony furrowed his brow. “You know I never said yes to that job offer!”

“Sure you didn’t,” Barnes sang back at him as he waltzed back where he came from, no doubt to pick up where he left off.

“You’re an asshole, Barnes!” Tony shouted at the retreating figure.

Barnes peeked his head back around the corner he disappeared from. “Is this your way of telling me you like me?”

Tony, in mature retaliation, threw the empty mug at his head, the cup shattering against the wall as Barnes dipped back out of view, the other brunette cackling as he did.

Shit, he thought to himself. What now?
Tony knew he couldn’t stay here. He had work to do. His company was in shambles after the kidnapping - he didn’t even want to think about the stocks - and from what Pepper had shown him, the competitive market was a disaster.

But none of that mattered right now. There was a much bigger issue to deal with. And if what Barnes said was true, it’s going to be a lot harder to slip out for the day.

Part of Tony thought about powering JARVIS down and slipping through the back door where no prying eyes could catch him, but he knew that was a fool’s errand. Past Tony, in his infinite wisdom, had programmed an alert to The Commandos’ phones to tell them if and when JARVIS ever went offline. JARVIS was the first line of defense to the speakeasy; if anyone managed to get through his firewalls and into the building, at least the team would still be ready for whatever was coming. So, if he took J offline now, Tony would probably make it half a block before the beefcake twins downstairs would know what he’d planned.

So. Time to think out of the box.

Which is how he found himself slipping into not his bedroom like he was supposed to, but one of his new teammates.

“Hey.”

He could heard Barton’s sigh, the lump on the bed shifting slightly through the released breath.

“What do you want?”

“Just passing through,” Tony said nonchalantly. “I was going to make something to eat if you’d like something.”

Clint sighed. “You really should leave the mother henning to Steve, Tony. And besides, everyone knows you can’t cook for shit.”

Tony walked over to the side of the bed. “Fine,” he shrugged. “You can make something for us, then.”

Clint peeked his head out far enough to where Tony could see his hollowed out eyes. “Valiant effort, but no thanks. Go and bug Steve if you’re bored.”

“Steve and his other half are downstairs doing things I’d rather not think about. Doesn’t matter, you’re the one I wanted to talk to.”

“Oh yeah?” Clint asked, pushing himself up to rest against his elbows. “Sure you wanna ask me? Word on the street is that I’m not too stable right now.”

“Well, I’ve never been stable ever, so you’re still doing better than me if my math is right.”

“And it always is, isn’t it?”

“You know it, Birdbrain,” Tony smiled.

Clint rolled his eyes, hunkering back down into his bed. “Seriously. Why are you here?”

“I would ask how you were doing,” Tony started. “But I think I can make my own deductions.”

“Maybe it is true what they say,” Clint drawled. “You are a genius.”
Tony paused, looking over the dirty blonde. It was sickening to think that he could still look like complete shit, but also look better than he had a week ago. Of course, his eyes were still haunted and his breath had a more pungent smell than his personal bar. Ignoring all of that, the worst of it was the slight shaking. Small tremors in the hands, the uncoordinated movements, the shaky voice. Tony had been around Barton enough to know that if the man didn’t have to move, he wouldn’t, opting to be more still than a statue. Always on the prowl, always stalking, like a bird of prey. The Clint before his eyes, however, seemed to be what the old Barton would hunt.

*Help him,* his mind hissed. *Fix him.*

*How?*

“They took someone for me too, you know.”

Clint stared at him. “Yinsen? Yeah, I heard Rhodes talking about it. I’m sorry.”

Tony looked away, not able to answer. *I should have been faster. I could have saved him.*

“You know neither of those two downstairs are going to let us get close to any of the guys down there, if that’s what you came in here to ask me.”

“Like it’d matter,” Tony snorted. “The pair of them only believe in one interrogation technique: punch.”

Barton swept his feet over the side of the bed, finally stretching out. *Still too small,* Tony thought. “Then what are you suggesting?”

“I talked with Pepper,” Tony started. “When I was taken, it took them a while to declare me as missing because my company apparently didn’t even know I was kidnapped.”

“Yeah, Phi-,” Clint broke off, eyes getting dangerously empty before continuing, ”we had to go out of our way to file a police report because no one else had done it.”

“Well, it was because someone had marked me down as on vacation; no one even thought twice that I wasn’t in the office.”

Clint gave him a blank look. “How does this help us?”

Tony sat next to him on the bed. “There isn’t any way to get into the scheduling assistant unless you have access through our internal servers. That means that only a Stark Industries employee would have been able to write it in.”

“Which means that you’ve got at least one employee connected with the Ten Rings.”

“And at least one employee that knows who’s in charge of the whole thing. And who really took out Phil.”

“What are you asking me to do?” Clint asked blandly.

“I need to get to the office, but I seem to be on house arrest. I need you to find me a way out of here.”

Clint raised an eyebrow. “And you think I can help you because?”

Tony pointed over to the corner of his room, where Clint had seemed to be starting his out recycling yard. “I know for a fact that I wouldn’t be caught living with alcohol with a net value less
than forty dollars. So either you’ve been sneaking out to get cheap whiskey or someone is doing it for you. And, based on your previous comment on mental state, I don’t think anyone here would add fuel to that fire. Ergo, you play super spy dress up and sneak out.”

“What makes you think I don’t go out the front door?” Clint asked in return.

“Because JARVIS isn’t only programmed to make updates on me. And I haven’t heard a word from our British super nanny about you. But you’ve obviously gotten out.”

Clint gave a small smile. “Maybe.”

“Well then,” replied Tony, clapping his hands together. “Let me make you an offer. You get me outta here and over to SI safely, I will buy you a liquor store. Oh, and find the guy who killed your boyfriend and who kept me away from my razor for three months. Square deal?”

“It’s been a long day. Go shower.”

Steve bit his lip, ignoring the copper taste that flooded his mouth. “How many left?”

“Two.”

Steve hummed.

Bucky grabbed his arm. “Don’t go back in. Let them stew for a little bit. Give them time to figure out what they wanna spill to us tomorrow.”

Steve nodded. He was right. Bucky was always right.

“Go check on your fella. I saw him earlier and he was already itchin’ to get outta here.”

“How was he?” Steve’s voice was harsh from disuse. Then again, it had been a long time since he’d stopped asking questions, just relying on his fists to do the talking.

“Go ask him yourself,” Bucky replied. “I’ll clean up down here.”

Not waiting for an answer, Bucky pushed his towards the stairs, Steve stumbling to get his feet beneath him. He contemplated, as he walked up the stairs, if he should shower in the communal showers instead of his private bath in his room. He didn’t really want Tony to see him like this, covered in unmentionables.

Mind made up, he changed course, slipping into the far door, quickly scanning the room to find the showers empty. It wasn’t a surprise of course, as there wasn’t anyone else in the speakeasy except for Bucky, Tony, and Clint.

Turning on the water, Steve quickly stepped out of his clothes, just dumping it into one of the laundry baskets. Steve wasn’t sure how, and wasn’t sure he’d ever know, but no matter what they threw in there, it always found its way back to the corner of their bed, folded and completely spotless.

The water was still cold when he stepped in, but Steve paid it no mind. He didn’t want to waste time in there anyway. Steve just focused on scrubbing, washing away any evidence, thinking about
his warm bed and equally warm engineer waiting for him there.

Just as soon as it started, the shower was stopped, Steve padding his feet against the tiles grab from the mound of fluffy towels, scrubbing his hair before wrapping it around his waist.

Upon leaving the bathroom, Steve was hit with a deep chill that came as the temperature drop, the blonde almost scurrying to his room.

He opened the door slowly, not wanting to wake Tony if the man was sleeping. Peering in, the curtains were closed, and the room was quiet, but that didn’t really surprise Steve. What shot up warning bells in his head was the lack of a blue glow that Steve had gotten used to curling up against.

Steve walked back into the hallway. “JARVIS, where’s Tony?”

Tony had made it a point when they moved in to tell them that while JARVIS is connected throughout the house, there weren’t any cameras installed within the bathrooms or bedrooms. Privacy, Tony had smirked. So you can throw a wild orgy in peace.

“Sir was last seen entering Mr. Barton’s room, Captain.”

Steve nodded, changing course. This wasn’t a surprise either. Tony had taken to Clint’s side the instant he was back up walking around, as if a child nurturing an injured bird.

Walking up to the door, Steve knocked.

“Clint? Clint, is Tony in there?”

Hearing no answer, Steve opened the door, again being met with nothing but the quiet.

A quiet, empty room.

“Tony?” Steve called, walking through the dump that was Clint’s room. “Tony!”

And that’s when he saw it, sitting innocently on Clint’s pillow.

Don’t be pissed. Making a taco run with Clint. Oh, and making a quick stop at the office. That’s it. Pinky promise.

P.S. I’ll bring you home a burrito.

P.P.S. Please don’t kill me when I get home.

- Tony

Steve was out the door in a flash.

Chapter End Notes
Well, I'm back.

I don't really have a good excuse for not posting, but these last few months have been anything but easy. I lost someone very close to me and my coping methods were not healthy.

I took a step back, took some time off, but I'm back now. I can't promise the same weekly updates as I am just getting back in the swing of things, but I can promise that I will not be giving up on this work.

Thanks to all who have waited patiently and who are still along for the ride. And as always, I'd love to hear and feedback, what you like/don't like, questions, suggestions, or anything else of the sort.

Enjoy!
Chapter 65

“I feel like this is supposed to make me feel better.”

Clint stared at the TV, reading the scrolling text on the bottom of the screen over and over again.

Asgard Son to Receive Extradition

He watched as the news played an earlier clip of Loki being shoved into a police car. It was the third time he’d seen the video. He should feel something. Anything, right?

Tony hummed beside him. “Na,” he replied softly. “I’d be more worried if you did. That asshole deserves every hell imaginable, not free meals for the rest of his life.”

“Found to have been guilty in the murder of Officer-”

Tony turned the TV off before the newscaster could finish. The brunette eyed him like he always did, as if trying to find the problem like he would on a machine. It was something Clint had found he liked about Tony, the way that he was always trying to fix and improve, always the engineer. Of course, Tony was used to working with inanimate objects, so watching him flounder about, trying to solve their personal dilemmas - while the man had about the same amount of empathetic delicacy and listening skills as an onion - always made for an entertaining sight. Of course, the only downside to it all, was when trying to be the team fixer, Tony immediately shouldered the burden himself and without question, like he was the reason that the problem was there in the first place. “You know, I do have a private jet,” the man said.

Clint looked down at the half eaten meal in his hands. “I’ve never been to Norway,” he mumbled. “I hear it’s beautiful.”

He could feel the heat of Tony’s gaze upon him. “Okay, so is that like a sign that I should go and call my pilot? Because I’m kinda getting one of those murder vibes you guys give off, and hey listen, buddy, I’m totally with you, just let me, you know what, maybe I should-”

Clint shoved the burger Tony was holding into his mouth. “You talk too much.”

Even with the meal in his mouth, Clint could still hear the rumble of Tony throat trying to form words. He felt a small smile tug at the corner of his lip, watching at Tony’s increasing frustration at the speed of his chewing – turns out even his own body couldn’t keep up with that mouth. “I’m just saying,” Tony continued, as he washed down the rest of the burger with his drink, “everyone needs closure. And if your version of closure is flying thousands of miles to murder a foreigner with a weapon from the Paleolithic Era, I’m game.”

Clint held back a snort as he watched Tony’s face scrunch as he replayed his previous statement. “Man, I’ve been hanging out with your guys for too long if I’m totally okay with what I just said.”

“Because you were always so innocent,” Clint smirked into his drink.

Tony gasped in fake surprise. “Am. I am innocent. I’ve never been convicted,” he said proudly.

“Only because of insufficient evidence.”

Tony shrugged. “Not my fault I’m smarter than everybody else. Besides, Barton, you should count yourself lucky that I’m on your side. Someone’s got to keep you out of fire from the Norwegian
police when we make our little field trip – wait. Does Norway even have police? Do they use vikings?"

Clint rolled his eyes. “What year do you think this is?”

“From the man that regularly uses a bow and arrow, I’m curious as to what your answer is as well.”

Clint hummed as he took another small bite from his hamburger – his third. Clint couldn’t remember the last time he ate that much. All he knew was that every single time his hand was empty of food, Tony was shoving something else in his face. Part of him wanted to snap out in a rage; the last thing he needed was another person trying to coddle him. Tony could probably give Steve a run for his money with the amount of nervous mothering he was doing. But the rest of him was, well, content. Happy almost, that Tony was there with him. Mainly because he refused to leave and Tony was more of a man-child than he was, but it was the thought that counted. He didn’t have a lot of moments like that growing up – it took him a long time to learn that it was okay to want that form of care. That he deserved it.

It was mainly Phil’s doing. He caught on to it pretty quick; then again, he always did. He was always so sharp, so bright. It didn’t take him long to see through Clint at all. That every time he tried to push away, it was a silent plea to never leave. He was never overbearing. Just simple things – a cooked dinner here, a foot rub there. Just small reminders that he cared; that Clint always had a home with him.

The Commandos had their own methods. Clint never found out if Phil talked to them about it, but Clint likes to imagine that the team was doing it just for him, not because they were told too. Steve always threw a warm shoulder over him after a training session, Nat made sure to always keep the refrigerator stocked with strawberry milk just because he said he liked it once. Bucky always came and sat with him for hours after a mission went wrong.

So it was nice, Tony being here. Everyone has been tiptoeing around him since what happened. Not that you let them do anything more, he reminded himself. Maybe he was just too tired to try, maybe he was so sick of saying no. Maybe he just needed to sit with someone he knew was just as broken as he was.

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Clint finally answered. “Not sure killing that twig would help in the long run. I don’t think Phil would much approve of it anyway.”

Tony gave a small smile. “Yeah, he was always the best out of us all. Comes with being the only one in the family with a moral compass.”

Clint just hummed.

Tony sighed. “I think the best we can wish for is that Loki gets sent to the Norwegian version of a gulag. Don’t they tie people to boats and set them on fire?”

Clint gave a weak smile. “I think they just do that to people who are already dead.”

“There’s a first time for everything.”

The wheeze that left his chest was the closest he’d come to a laugh in months. “I don’t want to burst your bubble, but I don’t think that’s gonna happen.”

Tony threw a fry at him. “Don’t be such a party pooper.”
“That’s rich, coming from the guy that promised me tacos only to stop at Burger King,” Clint replied blandly.

“If you’re going to sit there and insult the sanctity of the American cheeseburger, then you can get the hell out,” Tony snapped.

“I don’t know,” Clint shrugged, stretching languidly across the couch he was on. “It’s nice here. I think I like the whole billion dollar business thing you’ve got going on here.”

After ‘breaking out of the clink’, as Tony put it, the brunette brought Clint into SI’s main office in downtown New York – not without a quick burger stop. The building, well, tower really, was everything he expected it to be. It was loud, sleek, and ostentatious; basically Tony personified in a building.

The view though, was very nice. Tony had hurled Clint into the nearest elevator, smacking the top floors button with the sole of his foot as he juggled fast food bags in his arms. After a quick stroll through the receptionist foyer, Clint stepped into Tony’s personal office.

It was impersonal, but that didn’t surprise Clint. He knew Tony well enough that the man did his best work covered in grease in a dimly lit basement lab. Tony had just thrown everything on the nearest couch and stomped over to the computer. From what Tony told him, someone at SI was responsible for his kidnapping. Clint couldn’t really imagine how that felt – he didn’t know what he would think if someone from the team stabbed him in the back like that.

JARVIS had apparently been running back-traces through all of SI’s servers to find potential leads at some point, but from what the AI had told Tony, he had stopped about a month in and was ordered to by Ms. Potts to focus all efforts on finding Tony. Now that Tony was back, JARVIS was back on the grind, transferring everything he already had over to Tony to look over. Which he did, for about ten minutes. One second he was over at his desk, typing away like a madman, then the next he was sitting with Clint, smushing his feet, sans shoes, underneath Clint’s thigh for warmth.

“How long do we have to wait?”

Tony bit his bottom lip. “Not sure. Only a few people have access to my calendar, but since JARVIS can’t find the initial coding to have come from their computers, that means that someone hacked into the private server to update my calendar. Which means we have to go through the CPU’s individually to find a trace.”

Clint frowned. “Let me guess. It’ll take a while.”

“Well, when I say we have to go through every one individually, I wasn’t joking. So that means everyone that works here and everyone at our other offices across the country. Oh, and we have to go back track through data from almost four months ago. So yeah, it’ll take a while.”

“Probably would go faster if we had tequila.”

He heard Tony sigh. “There is just no pleasing you, is there.”

Clint rolled his eyes, sliding forward to stand up, listening to his joints pop. “What can I say, Stark. I’m a classy broad; I expect to be wined and dined. You got a bathroom in this joint?”

Tony nodded towards the door. “Go left. Down the hall.”

Clint shot him a thumbs up and headed towards the door. “Wait.” Tony’s voice rang out again.
Clint turned back around. “What?”

Tony pointed to his feet. “Give me your left shoe.”

Clint blinked. “Excuse me?”

“So your shoe,” Tony pouted. “Give me your shoe.”

“And why am I giving you my left shoe?”

“Because that means you’ll have to come back here and get it after you use the bathroom. Because you can’t leave without it.”

“You think I won’t walk out of here with one shoe?”

Tony just shrugged. “Na, I think you would. But at least security will know who to be looking for. Now give me your shoe, Barton. You promised to spend the day with me. I’m not going to let you ditch now so you can continue on your life’s mission of being a bed hermit.”

Clint huffed out a breath, stepping out of his left shoe. “I can’t believe you,” he muttered, before chucking the shoe at Tony’s face. “Breathe it in, Stark. That smell will get stuck on your clothes for days.”

Tony didn’t reply, just smiled, happy that he got his way again, like the princess he is. Clint sees that face all the time when Tony’s with Steve.

In all honestly, Clint didn’t have to use the bathroom, he just needed to get up and walk. He’s found himself doing that more and more lately. He fidgets, twitches, and can never seem to get comfortable. He’s lost count of all the circuits he’s made in his room, how many times he’s just walked aimlessly through the tunnels underneath the speakeasy.

He strolled down the hallway, shooting a quick salute to the blushing receptionist. He slipped into the bathroom, making a beeline to the sink. Cranking on the faucet, Clint put shaking hands under the cold water, splashing it on his face. He repeated for a few minutes, until he felt the cool tile start to make its presence known through the warmth of his sock. Clint looked down, smiling slightly at shoeless foot.

He blatantly avoided his reflection in the mirror as he wiped his hands with scented paper towels. He knew what he would see, he just wasn’t ready to face it. Clint eyed the clock on the wall. It had been almost ten minutes. He should probably head back before Tony made good word on his security threat.

Clint walked out, back down the stretch of hallway and, after noticing that the receptionist had slipped away, pocketed a handful of hard candy she had sitting out on her desk. Popping one in his mouth, he stepped over to Tony’s office when a sharp voice coming from inside stopped him.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Steve.

“I left you a note,” Tony replied, as calmly as ever.

He could hear a deep inhale, most likely Steve. Clint could almost picture the blonde man, chest puffed out as he clenched down on his hands, trying not to throw a punch. “Oh, we’ll get to that later. Now I’m gonna ask again. What the hell are you doing here?”
“Well, Steven, this is an office. I know you’re not used to a normal line of work, but this is usually where people go to do their job.”

“Yeah, people. Not you. You’re on medical leave. You should be in bed.”

Tony scoffed. “I’m not a child, Steve.”

“Then stop acting like one,” Steve snarled back.

Clint bit his lip. He shouldn’t be listening to this. Maybe he should leave. Or would it be better to barge in? Before, when the pair were barely on speaking terms, Clint and the others would always intervene before Steve and Tony’s hourly argument went nuclear. But it was different now. They were together; couples fight, he shouldn’t get involved. But those two were also the only ones keeping the family together. A huge fallout could be catastrophic.

“I’m sorry, but that’s rich coming from the man that came all the way over here to stamp his feet and whine.”

“I don’t want to hear it,” Steve replied. “Come on; I’m taking you home.”

“The hell you are. I’ve got shit to do.”

“Do you have any idea what I thought when I found you gone?” Steve asked. “Jesus, Tony, I was out of my damn mind.”

“I left you a note!”

“Will you quit it with the goddamn note! You have to understand; I can’t have you running off without telling anyone.”

“I’m not one of your trained dogs, Steve,” Tony snapped in return. “You can’t keep me locked up!”

“The hell I can’t!”

Clint sighed, pushing his forehead against the cold glass of Tony’s office door. “Oh, Steve,” he whispered under his breath.

“I want you to think long and hard about what you just said. In case you haven’t noticed, HYDRA is still out there, I’m not going to just sit on the sidelines, and-” Tony started.

“That’s exactly what you’re going to do. You’re done with this. You’re out. I’ve talked with Pepper. She’s going to take you to Malibu for a while.”

A glass shattered. Clint cringed.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Steve hissed.

“What’s wrong with me!” Tony yelled. “You’re planning on sending me off like some crazy to a mental hospital!”

Steve scoffed. “Don’t be overdramatic. And I’m not planning. It’s happening.”

“I don’t know when you had time to hit your head, Rogers. You don’t control me. I’m not some piece of ass you can just package up and save for a rainy day.”

“Jesus, Tony,” Steve groaned. You can’t possibly-”
“Possibly think that you’re acting rationally? No, no I cannot.”

“No. My head has never been clearer. The team and I will deal with this.”

“Right, because you’ve been doing such a bang up job already!” Tony barked.

“Tony, please, just listen.”

“No, you listen, asshole. You can damn well keep your opinions to yourself, because I could care less what you think.”

“It’s not my opinion, Tony, it’s an order! As head of the-”

“Oh, so you’re going to pull rank! Last time I checked, my job application was never finalized.”

“Dammit, Tony, just do as your told for once!”

“Screw you, Steve. I’m staying whether you like it or not. With or without you.”

“I won’t ask again, Tony!”

“Jesus, Steve, let go, you’re hurting me! What the fuck is your problem?”

Clint heard a shuffle of feet, followed by a large thud. Then nothing.

Silence.

Clint pressed his ear closer to the door, but there was just nothing. Oh wait. There it was. A small hitch of breath. Clint bit his lip, taking a chance to crack the door open to peek inside.

There was Tony, eyes wide as he grasped his right wrist, looking down at – Steve. The blonde had crumpled, knees on the floor, head cushioned between his two hands. His shoulders shook, and dear lord, was he crying?

Clint had never seen Steve cry like this. He’d heard it once, curled up in the vents, when the entire team thought Bucky was dead. But seeing it was something else entirely. It was a harsh reminder that no matter how strong the man was, Steve was still human. That he was just as broken as the rest of them.

“Steve?” came Tony’s timid voice. The smaller man reached out slowly, hand brushing against Steve’s shoulder.

Steve’s hand shot out, curling around Tony’s hip, pushing the man right up against him. Steve pushed his face into Tony’s stomach, breaths coming harsh and fast. Clint couldn’t make out what gambled mess was coming out of Steve’s mouth, but he could see Tony visibly soften.

“Oh, Steve,” Tony murmured, bending down to place a few kisses on Steve’s head before crouching down, bundling the larger man in his arms.

“I can’t,” Steve whispered. “I can’t, please, Tony, I-I-”


“I lost them all,” Steve moaned. “The SSR, your family. I lost Peggy. I almost lost you and Bucky already. Phil’s gone, half our crew left, Clint’s not all here anymore. They’re all gone. And I can’t do it again. Not again.”
“Baby, I’m not going anywhere. I’m still here; you came and got me, remember?”

“I’m not a good man, Tony,” replied Steve, finally looking up to meet Tony’s gaze. “I can’t keep you safe; I can’t give you the life you deserve.”

“Well, that’s good, because I’ve got a pretty nasty rap sheet. I don’t think I’d much like the life I deserve.”

Steve gave a watery chuckle. “Tony.”

“You give me the life I want, though. You do, those bunch of rascals back home do. You think I could bear to lose you, either?” Tony’s hand circled around Steve, rubbing soothingly at his back, while the other cupped right behind his neck.

Steve shook his head. “No, but Tony, I really- ”

“Shh,” Tony hushed again. “Sorry, sweetpea, but you’ve lost this one. Nothing you can say or do is gonna get me to leave. I’ll handcuff myself to the kitchen table if necessary.”

Steve snorted as he buried himself closer into Tony’s embrace. “No you wouldn’t. You’d get bored out of your mind.”

Tony hummed. “You’re right. Maybe the bed posts then. I can probably find a way to be kept entertained there.”

Clint gagged, but saw a small smile grace Steve’s face. “You’re a menace.”

Tony kissed Steve’s forehead. “But yet, you’re thinking about it in your head. You are, aren’t you? I bet you’d like that, tying me down and- ”

“Tony,” Steve hissed, ears going red. “Not in public.”

Tony just smiled. “I’m going to have so much fun with you.”

The pair broke off into silence, just laying together on Tony’s floor. Clint was trying to figure out what he should do when Tony met his gaze. How long had he known Clint was there?

“Go,” the brunette mouthed as he pushed closer to Steve. Clint nodded, closing the door softly behind him.

“We’re stronger together, you know that, right? I’ll keep you safe, you keep me safe. Square deal?” he heard Tony say on the other side of the door.


“The Captain apologizing? Did you really hit your head?”

Tony squawked; Steve probably smacked him. Clint sighed, finally pushing away from the door. He needed to leave. He’d already heard too much. “You have to understand. I can’t stop, I won’t stop being this way. I’ll do anything to keep you safe,” Steve continued, his voice getting softer. “I’ll do anything not to lose you again. Tony, I lo- ”

The elevator beeped its arrival and Clint stepped on, the metal doors cutting off the rest of the conversation.
Chapter 66

Tony shifted, bouncing on the balls of his feet as he watched the journalists cycle in. The open room was already filled with excited chatter; it seemed that everyone and their mother had crammed in to hear his first public press conference since he'd been kidnapped. He let his eyes drift across the room, locking on to each open doorway, each clear window. He bit his lip. Maybe Obie was right.

"This is a stupid move, kid. You're still healing - you shouldn't put yourself in front of those vultures just yet," his partner tried to argue. "You're only going to get one chance to make an initial statement. If you screw up out there, they'll be talking about for months, regardless of how hard you try and pick up the pieces later."

But Tony had just barreled on past his mentor, snapping at Pepper to get a press conference put together.

*Stark men are made of iron.*

He didn't need more time. It was time to spread his wings, as the phoenix that had clawed his way out of the ashes, out of the sewers. Let them look. Let them see him, truly see him for who he is. He will not cower, not bend, nor break. He will stand before them today not as a broken man, but as one reborn. Obie was right. They will be talking about this for months.

*Good.*

"Ladies and gentlemen, if you could please find your seats, we can begin."

Tony scanned through the crowd again, towards the back, until his eyes landed on Steve. If Tony didn't know he was already there, he wouldn't have even seen the blonde. Standing in the shadows, hiding from the crowd. It was for his own safety - Tony wasn't sure how many people would recognize him as Joseph Grant.

Brown eyes locked with blue and Tony could already feel the tension bleeding from his body. Steve shot him a smile and a firm nod. *I'm here with you, it said. You're not alone.*

Steve would protect him. He would keep him safe. And if Steve was here, then the rest were as well.

Looking back out the windows, he could see a slight lump sitting on the roof on the building across the street. In the crowd in front of him, he picked out a bulking man slouching in his seat, tugging on his left sleeve, no doubt to cover up his metal arm. A fiery redhead scribbled onto a notebook a few rows up, while a man whistling an old Marvin Gaye tune, fiddled with a camera.

Tony took another deep breath. There was nothing to worry about. His family was here. No threat would get close to touching him.

"Well, then," Obie's voice cut through the chatter of the room, other conversations halting immediately. Obie always had that sort of power; one simple word and the room would go quiet, waiting with bated breath to see what he would say next. A true American businessman. "I guess we should get started."

He nodded to Tony with a wide smile, clapping Tony on his back as he headed up to the podium. Tony could see the faint uneasiness sitting behind his icy eyes. Tony hadn't confided with him
what we were really speaking about today, just telling his CFO that it was just a fluff piece for the press, something for Stark Industries to use to gain some points in the public eye. While there hadn't been anything previous to this that Tony had kept from Obie - especially on matters involving company policies, Obie really did handle this sort of stuff better - Tony knew the man well enough to know what his stance on this would be. And he knew that he couldn't let Obie talk him out of this one. Not this time.

God, his legs felt shaky. He could sit down, he could ask them all to sit down, and they would. But he wouldn't. He will not cower, not bend, nor break. Not today. Tony clenched his jaw, staring out at the sea of people. *Showtime.*

"Thank you all for coming," he started. "I know there are a lot of questions that you have, surrounding my disappearance. Trust me, I have a lot of the same ones. And we could sit here all day, going back and forth, making accusations, throwing out theories, scribbling anything worthy to print on your papers. And you can do that. But on your own time, and not with me." he paused, taking in their amused faces.

"You know, my dad had a lot of sayings. Lessons, he would call them," he continued. "I didn't get a lot of time with him, hell, I didn't even get to say goodbye, but I'll always have what he taught me. One saying that I got on a regular basis was *how do you expect to move forward, if you keep looking back?*

"I've been thinking about that, these last few weeks. On what I should do. How I should move forward."

There were a few murmured 'Mr. Stark's', but Tony held up a hand, and the room once again fell silent.

"Did you know that not even five months ago, an Army convey was ambushed in Afghanistan? There weren't any survivors. Autopsy shows that the bullets pulled from these soldiers belonged to Stark guns. My guns," Tony spat. "These guns, in the hands of terrorists being used on *our* soldiers - the same guns that I had created to defend and to protect them. These same guns that I saw in the hands of one of New York's most nefarious mafias.

"It was one thing to shelter myself from the military news cycle, to never really see the destruction that I was creating. But to be there first hand, seeing my creations in the hands of civilians, *cold blooded criminals,*" Tony paused, taking another shaking breath. "I realized that I was part of a system that is comfortable with zero accountability. I had my eyes opened. And I-"

Tony stopped again, looking down at his hands. He closed his eyes, and thought back the hushed conversation he had with Steve not minutes before.

"Thoughts?"

*Steve just shot him a small smile. "Tony, no one can stop you from doing what you want, except for you. I'm just honored that you're giving me a little heads up."

*Tony rolled his eyes, put grabbed on to Steve's jacket, pulling him closer. "Well, I know you know that I have a flair for the dramatic. And as much as I'd like that watch the expression on your face when this story blows up, I decided against it. You manage to tell me every day that we're a team, you and I. I don't just have to think about myself anymore. And, sometimes you give good advice," he murmured, pressing a kiss into Steve's neck. "You're like this wise, but sexy, owl."

*Steve snorted, pushing strong fingers through his hair, Tony humming in pleasure. "Oh yeah?"*
“Yeah,” Tony continued. "I value your input." At Steve's raised eyebrow, he continued, "Sometimes."

Steve still didn't answer. "Am I doing the right thing here?" Tony pressed.

Steve sighed, pulling back to look down at Tony. "You're asking the wrong man, Tony."

"Steve."

"Listen to me," Steve said, cupping Tony's face with his hands. "Whatever you decide, I'm with you, no questions asked. But don't do this to yourself. You've made up your mind; you're following your heart and doing what you think is right. That's enough for me. Don't second guess yourself. You're worth so much more. You can offer so much more. I know that. You know that. Now go tell them that."

Tony smiled, leaning in for a kiss. "I knew there was a reason I kept you around."

"Finish up here and I can show you a few more reasons to keep me around," Steve whispered, biting gently at Tony's lobe.

Tony had almost said screw it and cancelled the whole conference, but Steve was bouncing off before he could reply, shooting a final wink over his shoulder. Ass.

"Mr. Stark?"

Tony shook his head, rising his eye line to meet the gazes of hungry reporters. "I came to realize that I have more to offer to this world than just making things blow up. And that is why, effective immediately, I am shutting down that weapons manufacturing division of - "

He couldn't even finish before the room exploded, both camera flashes and shouts consuming the room. He could feel himself being yanked from the microphones in Obie's steel grip, his voice now trying to carry over the crowd, to keep it tame, but Tony didn't hear him. His eyes searched the room until he found Steve again.

He was still there. Still smiling. I'm with you.

And for Tony, that was enough for him.

“Get up to your office,” Obie hissed in his ears. “I’ll deal with you once I clean up your mess.”

Tony just pulled away, gliding down the few steps from the podium. With a final glance at Steve, he could see the blonde jerk his head to the right, mouthing ‘back door’.

Tony nodded in response, opting to go the long way so he wouldn’t have to cut through the sea of reporters. He would meet Steve by the back door where no doubt, he already had a car waiting. He would get in the armored vehicle pressed tight against Steve’s sides while they loop around to pick everyone else up. And they’d go back to the speakeasy, where Tony would collapse on the closest couch, letting himself be surround by Steve, by family, by safe.

His shoes clacked loudly on the linoleum floor under him, the angry voices of the press conference slowly slipping away.

He was almost there, just a few turns away, when a hand shot out, grabbing him and pulling him down another hallway.
Tony twisted immediately, ignoring the tightness of his still healing body as he threw himself onto his attacker. Snatching the man by the back of his jacket, Tony tossed him into the wall, the man crumpling easily. A well timed kick knocked the man’s knees out from under him, before the same foot stomped onto his stomach, keeping him on the floor. A quick reach behind, and Tony was pulling out the handgun that Steve had slipped into the waist line of his pants, flipping the safety off and aiming it at-

“Phil?”
Chapter 67

“Phil?”

Almost on auto pilot, Tony reached down to help him up. The man looked positively horrible. Dark bags of restlessness lay on sickly skin, under weary eyes. Tony could feel the fingers that were latched on his shoulders trembling, shaking the layers of clothing that barely clung to Coulson’s emaciated body. And good Lord, was Coulson wearing a hoodie? Tony always assumed hell would freeze over before he saw the man in anything besides his uniform or a stiff suit. But it was close enough, seeing as the man wearing sad hoodie was supposed to be dead.

“How is this possible,” Tony whispered, mostly to himself, eyes darting over Coulson’s form. “You’re alive?” Tony couldn’t help the shaking laughs that bubbled out of his chest. “Fuck, you’re alive!”

Tony pulled Coulson closer, almost shoving the man into his embrace. He could feel the other man tense up and well, it wasn’t surprising. Hell, what was surprising was that Tony went in for a hug at all. He spun around the hallway until he found a single door, not hesitating to tug Coulson over. Thankfully, the door was unlocked, and soon Tony had both himself and Coulson crammed in what looked to be a supply closet.

“Where the fuck have you been?” Tony fumed. “Do you realize what you’ve done to us, to him? Christ, Coulson, you killed Clint!”

Coulson only responded with a shaky breath, but Tony could still see the blatant relief in his eyes. Coulson was shaking his head slightly. “Stark- Tony, I- ”

“You’ve been alive this whole time and what – didn’t think to stop in and say hi?” Tony fumed. “He’s not dead,” Coulson whispered, eyes wide, non-believing. “He’s not dead, he’s not dead. Please, tell me you didn’t let him- ”

“He’s still got a pulse, but that’s about it,” Tony jeered.

Coulson only responded with a shaky breath, but Tony could still see the blatant relief in his eyes. Tony shoved Coulson out of his grip, stomping a few steps away. He couldn’t look at look at him, couldn’t listen to whatever story he was going to spin. Nothing would be worth the months of grief.
“We mourned you,” he said hollowly, not even turning around. “We all did, in our own way. Christ, I spent this whole time thinking I was part of the reason that you- ” Tony broke off. “They tried to find your body, you know. For Clint’s sake. To give him some closure I guess, I don’t know. It makes sense now why they couldn’t ever find you. They just figured that Pierce had just dumped you in a hole somewhere.”

“I figured that they would have been too busy finding you,” Phil answered sheepishly.  

Tony clenched his jaw, whipping around to face the ghost. “You have no idea what you’ve done.”

Coulson broke his gaze away, staring at his bony fingers. “I’ve been made aware of the chain reactions that I’ve caused.” He paused. “Although, I’m sure that certain things were left out for my sanity.”


Coulson just gave him a sad look. “Why didn’t you come home?” he asked softly.

Oh God.

Of course he wouldn’t just vanish. It was Coulson- Phil, for God’s sake. How could he have been so stupid; if he would have just used his brain, he could’ve put two and two together.

“There’s another lesson for you, boy. That thing beating in your chest is only there to contradict your brain. A strong man knows to always lead with the mind. Your heart is a weakness, and you’ll never be successful using it. So lose the tears and grab that socket wrench because I’ll be damned if I let my son be a failure.”

Tony could laugh. If only his father could see him now. Seconds away from losing his shit on a not-so-dead cop for not being there for his not-so-nuclear family of misfits, only mere feet away from where he had announced the not-so-good news of SI’s most profitable market.

“Screw him. He was wrong, anyway. Wrong about everything. I was never smart enough to see that. But you were.”

That was Steve’s voice. Soft reassurances that were whispered in a darkened room as they clung to each other. Tony could still smell the soft, clean linen of Steve’s shirt. Could still faintly hear someone running down the hall, while someone else clanged around in the kitchen. Maybe Howard was right. Using his heart was a weakness, but it was worth it every time. They were worth it.

All of them, he thought, looking back at Coulson. Tony bit his lip, chastising himself, as he felt another rage boiling for an entirely different reason. “Who took you?” he asked, clenching his fists. “Who took you, Phil? Tell me, and I promise you that they won’t make it to see tomorrow’s sunrise.”

Phil just offered a wavering smile. “Be careful, Stark. The Captain is rubbing off on you.”

“Well, that was the plan,” Tony murmured, unable to help himself, “but I have a feeling that getting you home safe will take precedence. Come on, Cap’s out back waiting. Home first, avenging rampage later.”

Tony began to tug on Coulson’s sleeve, but the man refused to move. “I can’t,” was all he said.
“Don’t be ridiculous,” Tony scoffed. “Of course you can.”

“Tony?” Steve’s voice was ever so faint, the man no doubt waiting by the back door for him.

“I have to stay with them, Tony,” Phil continued.

“The people that took you?”

“They saved me.”

“Yeah, but last time I checked it doesn’t take this long to heal from a bullet wound. Come along, Coulson.”

The other man gave a short laugh. “I can’t go with you.”

Tony glared at the door one last time, before turning his attention back to Coulson. “Who are they? The ones that are so powerful that have you quivering in your boots.” Tony paused. “Is it HYDRA? Did Pierce-”

“No. If HYDRA got their hands on me I really would be dead.”

“Then who?”

Coulson sighed. “The FBI.”

Tony huffed out a hollow laugh. “Are you joking? The FBI is holding you hostage?”

“That’s not what they call it,” Coulson shrugged.

“Well, then, humor me. Pray tell how you got mixed up with them.”

“I don’t really remember most of it,” Coulson replied. “I remember getting shot, and then I woke up in a hospital bed. With Fury.”

Tony gaped at the other man. “Wait, Fury? Eyepatch wearing, trench coat having, Fury?”

Coulson nodded. “He’s deep undercover. I never knew.”

Fury, FBI? That’s just what they needed. Another superpower sniffing around him and the team. “No offense, but why the hell would the FBI want to get involved with you?”

Coulson bit his lip, looking away. “Fury was able to piece together my involvement with The Commandos. He’s knows I was in their pocket.”

“Jesus,” Tony moaned. “Isn’t that just great.”

“I told him about Pierce.”

Tony froze. “You what? You trusted that asshole enough to tell him about Pierce? What if he’s with HYDRA?”

“He isn’t,” Coulson negated. “He believes me. And wants to help take him down.”

“This is unbelievable,” Tony snapped. “How the hell did you convince him?”

“I, uh, had to tell him some stuff. About what’s happened,” he said ringing his hands.
“Are you nuts?” Tony hissed. “What the fuck is wrong with you? How could you squeal on the family like that?”

“I didn’t, I swear! That was part of the deal!”


“The deal I made with him. I would supply any information proving Pierce’s guilt and involvement with HYDRA, and in return, I would be absolved of the requirement to testify to any and all of The Commandos whereabouts and crimes, both past and present. The times that I did have to include them to use as evidence against Pierce, well, don’t worry about it. I got you all immunity. They can’t touch you.”

“Fuck,” Tony moaned, rubbing a hand over his face. “You’re playing with fire here, Phil. This better not blow up in our faces.”

“It won’t,” Coulson stated. “There are no gaps, no loopholes, nothing. I wouldn’t put any of you at risk like that if I didn’t know for sure.”

“God, you’re insane,” Tony laughed.

“So I’ve been told.” There was that smile again.

“Just another thing to deal with, I guess,” Tony sighed. “You can explain this to Steve in the car. Let’s go.”

“I already told you, Tony, I can’t go with you.”

“Why the hell not? You said it yourself. We’re on the same side here, Phil. Fury wants Pierce gone, we want Pierce gone. Come with me.”

“I can’t. The only chance we have of bringing Pierce down is coming at him from multiple sides, you know that.”

“What I do know is that the other side can be fought with Fury. You’ve already told him everything you know about Pierce, he doesn’t need you for anything else. We need you.” Tony paused. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Coulson said nothing.

“Phil,” he pressed. “What did you do?”

“Tony,” the other man sighed. “I’m a criminal.”

“Am I supposed to be impressed? Phil, last week I saw Natasha cleaning blood off a stiletto. A stiletto. If you’re starting to worry about your moral compass, trust me, you’re still in a better boat than the rest of us.”

“It’s not that. It’s… did you know that aiding and abetting in a crime can sometimes be considered as serious of an offence as actually committing the crime?”

Tony shot the other man a questioning glance. “What are you saying?”

“The deal I struck. It wasn’t free.”

Tony narrowed his eyes, his brow furrowing. “Course not. You provided the information on Pierce
in return for our safety.”

“Well, yes, but,” Phil sighed. “In order for me to talk about his offenses, I had to explain why I had the knowledge.”

Tony could feel his heart threatening to thud out of his chest, the blood rushing through his veins a dull roar in his ears. “You confessed,” he finally grit out.

Phil gave him a shaky laugh in return. “I’m a crooked cop, Stark. There’s no way I should have known the things that I knew unless I was involved. Fury already had the conclusion, but he and his team couldn’t act on anything without a confession.”

“You could have said you heard it on the street! You could have pretended you had a CI, Phil!”

Coulson just shook his head. “All CI’s have to have some form of documentation at the station. There’s nothing. I’ve never had one. There’s no way anyone would have believed me if I said I did.”

“So when you said you got immunity…”

“I did. For you. For the crew.”

“But not for you,” Tony croaked.

“I wasn’t part of the deal. I had to give Fury something.”

“You already did!” Tony yelled. “Jesus, Phil, how could you-”

“It was either me or them, Tony. And I chose the family. It wasn’t a hard decision. One that I’d happily make again.”

“Phil,” Tony whispered. “This isn’t just beat cops anymore, this is the FBI we’re talking about here.”

“I know.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“I know.”

Tony shook his head. “Whatever. This is just another thing to deal with. The Ten Rings, HYDRA, and now the FBI. I’m sure we’ll figure something out, we always do. I’m sure somebody knows somebody whose neighbor’s brother in law works with someone who knows someone in the FBI,” he blubbered, pacing around the room. “We’ll find someone. It can’t be that hard.”

“Tony.”

“And that someone will be a pencil pusher for someone else who has the office right next to Fury’s.”

“Tony.”

“We’ll kidnap Fury, get him to tell us where you are, we’ll come bust you out and voila. You’re scot free.”

Phil just shot him a blank look. “You know that won’t work.”
Tony shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not. Probably a waste of time considering I’ve been hacking into the FBI’s database since my drunken college days. Seriously, I could pinpoint you in minutes.”

“You couldn’t find me before.”

“I didn’t know you we’re alive, Phil!” Tony shouted. “This changes things. Trust me, I can get you out of this.”

“It didn’t matter if you knew I was alive,” Phil sighed, shaking his head slightly. “You said it yourself. They’ve been trying to find my body. I’m sure you joined the search ever since you’ve been brought back home. And I’m hedging to bet that you’ve already coasted through every local and national law enforcement body to try and find me. But you couldn’t, could you?”

Tony refused to answer, bowing his head to play with his hands instead.


“Then leave me with me,” Tony pleaded. “We’ll hide you. We can protect you.”

“Tony, there’s people waiting outside for me. If I get seen anywhere near you or The Captain, they’ll bring us all in.”

Tony breathed deeply, weighing their options. What options? There weren’t any. Coulson has basically sold himself in order to pull the FBI off their trail, and onto Pierce’s. “I don’t know what you expect me to tell the team,” Tony said finally. “Clint will have my head if I let you walk out that door alone.”

“I don’t expect you to tell them anything.”

“What?”

“You heard me. You can’t tell them you saw me.”

Tony scoffed, running a hand through his hair. “You’re joking right? Like you’re having a laugh. You really can’t expect me to not tell the family that you’re not dead!”

“I can, and you will.”

“For the number of stupid decisions that you’ve made recently, excuse me if I don’t listen to you,” Tony snapped.

“I’m sure by now you’ve been made aware of the lengths that we’re taken to get you home,” Phil countered. “Steve nearly burned New York down to find you.”

Tony’s heart fluttered painfully. “So?”

“Surely you can guess that similar measures would be taken to come and get me. Including terrorizing a few someone’s until you find the guy whose office is next to Fury’s.”

“I wouldn’t say terrorize,” Tony grumbled.

“It doesn’t matter what you call it,” Phil continued. “What matters is the team dropping everything to come find me. Pierce is watching you guys like a hawk – any slip up and one of you actually could end up dead.”
Tony shrugged. “You’re worth the risk,” he said quietly.

“What about the risk from the FBI? They might not kill you all like Pierce would, but you’d be separated. With the team’s laundry list of crimes, they’d never be free again. They’d be locked away with life sentences and you’d never see any of them again. Tony, you’d never see Steve again.”

Tony’s mouth filled with blood as he bit his lip, unwillingly picturing a defeated Steve behind bars, just out of reach.

“Something tells me that knowing they’re alive but finding yourself unable to ever get to them would be worse,” Coulson finished.

Tony just hung his head, knowing he was defeated.

“I need you to keep them focused. Pierce can’t win, you can’t let him. You and the team need to take him down. And,” Coulson added with a shaky breath, “I need you to look out for Clint. If he’s as bad as I think he is, I need to know that there will be someone in his corner. Please, don’t let him do anything too stupid. Keep him safe for me.”

“I can’t keep this secret for you,” Tony replied. “I don’t want to! Why even bother showing up and blabbing your mouth to me just to turn around and say that I can’t tell anyone!”

“I wasn’t supposed to,” Phil whispered, looking ashamed. “I don’t know how I managed to convince Fury that I should be here for the conference. I told him that no one would be looking out for a dead man, and it could get us a lead with Pierce, and he agreed! I knew that if you were here everyone else was and I just- I just needed to see him. One last time,” he croaked. “But I couldn’t find him, he - ”

“Was on the roof across the street,” Tony finished meekly. “You wouldn’t have had a good angle of him unless you were at the podium with me.”

“I was supposed to leave after your statement but I couldn’t, and no, I didn’t want to leave this weight with you, but I needed to know that he was okay.”

“He’s not,” Tony argued. “He’ll never be okay without you.”

“He’s going to have to learn to be,” Phil replied.

Tony shook his head, aiming to respond when, “Tony?” Steve’s voiced carried from down the hall, much closer this time. “Tony, where the hell are you?”

“Go,” Phil said, pushing him towards the door. “Get out of here before he catches us.”

“I can’t,” Tony replied, eyes wide. “I can’t do this, Phil.”

“You have to. You have to be the one to look after them now. Keep their noses clean and their heads down. Do it for the last wish of a free man. Please, Tony.”

“Tony?” Steve would be a few feet away by now.

“Phil, I-”

“Go!”

Too shocked to put up a fight, he let Coulson open the door and shove him out into the hallway,
before shutting it again.

“Tony?”

Tony whirled around frantically, Steve shooting a concerned glance his way. “Steve,” he breathed shakily.

Steve frowned, looking at where Tony had come from. “Were you in a… storage closest?”

Tony just nodded dumbly.

“Tony, I’ve been looking for you everywhere, you scared me half to death!” Steve reached for him and Tony didn’t have a chance to blink before he was wrapped up in familiar arms. “Are you hurt?” Steve continued. “Did anyone touch you? Tony, talk to me, sweetheart-”

“No, no, I’m fine. Steve, look at me, I’m alright.” He pulled away slightly just so he could look up at the blonde, trying to give him a winning smile.

Steve furrowed his brow, a large hand coming to cup at Tony’s cheek. “You sure? Why were you in the closet?”

“Steve, it’s been years since I’ve been in the closet,” Tony joked, trying to change the subject. And, judging by Steve’s unimpressed look, it still didn’t work on him. Tony sighed, staring into those blue eyes.

*Tell him, tell him, tell him.*

“I just- I needed a moment,” Tony finally said, a cold pit settling in his stomach. “I was just-”

“Overwhelmed?” Steve finished, smiling softly.

“Yeah.”

“It’s alright, it’s been a big day for you,” Steve responded, kissing his forehead gently. For the first time, it did nothing to help slow his racing thoughts. “Come on, let’s get out of here before anyone realizes you’re still in the building.”

Steve let go and stepped back, Tony immediately left with the frigid feeling of being alone. His body ever on autopilot, Tony dutifully stepped behind Steve, risking a quick glance back at the storage closest, and the man still housed inside.

*What have I done?*
Tony hummed, sinking into the expansive bed, Steve following quickly, accepting every kiss that came his way. He could feel Steve peel away the layers of his clothing, not leaving a single stretch of naked skin without a peck in his wake. They curled around each other, soaking up the other’s warmth.

Tony wasn’t even sure how they’d made it to the bed. He’d planned on only coming up for a quick change of clothes, but Steve had followed him up and well – here they were.

“You have to be the one to look after them now. Keep their noses clean and their heads down. Do it for the last wish of a free man. Please, Tony.”

Tony jolted, Phil’s words echoing in his skull. What the hell was he doing, making out with Steve like a teenager?

“You okay?” Steve asked, backing off in concern. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“No, course not.” Tony tried to shoot a winning smile his way, but he could tell by the wary look he got in response that Steve didn’t believe him.

“Tony.”

The brunette sighed, sitting up, Steve mirroring him. He had to tell him about Phil. That was the right thing to do, wasn’t it? If he didn’t say anything, no one would be the wiser – the FBI would be off their ass and onto Pierce’s, but they’d never see Phil again. But it was Phil - how could he possibly even consider leaving him to rot with the feds? But if he said something and the team tried to go after him? Tony could only imagine that ending in lifelong prison sentences.

*What would Steve do?*

It was a question that plagued him the whole ride home from the press conference. He’d kept secrets in the past. He’d know what to do. But how to get an answer from Steve without giving showing his hand?

Tony bit his lip, playing idly with their joined fingers. “If you could back in time, but still know everything you knew now, would you do it?”

“Do what?” Steve asked, tilting his head in confusion.

“Lie to me,” Tony answered softly. “About you, about- ”

“No.” The answer was short, harsh in its finality. Tony looked up through his lashes to see Steve’s strong gaze looking back at him, never wavering.

“Really?”

Steve frowned slightly. “You think that I wouldn’t?”

“I don’t know,” Tony answered honestly, shrugging his shoulders. “I don’t even know what I would do if I were in your shoes. I mean, it got us here, right?” he asked gently, almost shyly, as he
took one of his hands and pressed it firmly against Steve’s chest, feeling the strong heartbeat thump under his fingertips.

One of Steve’s hands came up to cradle over his, pushing Tony tighter against him as a smile tugged at his lips. One of Tony’s favorites. It was so small, small enough that sometimes it could be missed, but Tony was more than happy to lose storage capacity in his brain to remember the signs of that smile. Tony liked to think of it as a reflex, an unconscious action – that even though the blonde may have had his Captain face painted on, there was a little piece of Steve that broke through the surface.

But it was gone as quickly as it appeared, replaced again by that invisible weight that tugged at Steve’s face, leaving a furrowed brow and a deep frown. Tony’s fingers twitched, wanting to rub away at those lines until they disappeared. Steve finally pulled Tony’s hand away, keeping it palm down, his thumb moving to gently rub over a thick scar at the base of his wrist.

Tony shivered, feeling the phantom slice of the blade.

“It’s how we got here that makes me say no,” Steve answered quietly. “I would do it over again in a heartbeat if I could save you all that pain. I kept you in the dark for so long, and look where that got you,” he finished, leaning down to press a kiss on top of the scar.

Tony frowned, batting Steve away, just to crawl in his lap. The last thing he needed was putting more guilt on Steve’s conscious. Everything that had happened had been out of Steve’s control, but Tony knew him well enough by now to know that Steve would carry this weight to his grave.

Tony grasped Steve’s head in his hands. “I was walking a tightrope long before you came along. What’s not to say it wouldn’t have happened anyway? And if it did happen, which it probably would have, I would have had to face it alone, without you. And that isn’t worth it.”

Steve hummed before surging up, a strong hand wrapping around Tony as he twisted the pair around, dropping Tony down onto the bed, looming over him. “Well, if I knew all that I know now,” he started, dropping a kiss to Tony’s lips, “then I would know how I feel about you. How much you drive me crazy,” he added into Tony’s ear, biting along his neckline. Tony flushed, his arms circling tightly around Steve, fingers digging into the strong muscles along his back. “If I got a do-over, I could do it right. Tell you who I was off the bat; convince you to give me a chance anyway. Take you on dates, bring you flowers.”

A laugh spurted out of Tony’s chest. “Do I look like a man who wants to be wined-and-dined?”

Steve pulled back, trailing his fingers down Tony’s face, following the line of his beard. “You look like a man who never got the experience to decide if he wanted it or not.”

Tony hummed, unable to stop himself pressing into the touch.

“I’d like to think you’d make an exception for me,” Steve continued.

“I seem to be making a lot of exceptions for you,” Tony chided with a raised eyebrow.

“Must be my Brooklyn charm,” Steve smirked.

“Ass,” Tony snorted, cuffing the man’s head with a pillow.

Steve laughed, flopping down next to him, dragging Tony to lie across his chest.

They were silent for a few moments, Tony syncing up with the deep breaths echoing out of the
chest he leaned against, Steve’s calloused digits sinking into his hair.

“Where would you take me?” Tony whispered.

“Hmm?”

“On a date.”

Steve hummed again, the sound reverberating against Tony’s head.

“Well, you’re Tony Stark,” Steve started. “You’ve sat with generals, celebrities, foreign dignitaries. You’ve probably eaten at places that I couldn’t dream to get a reservation in, eating meals that cost more than my total grocery bill, wearing clothes that I’ve only ever seen in pictures. I would never be able to compete with that. But I don’t think you’d want me to,” Steve confessed.

Tony smiled into the blonde’s chest. Steve had a way of knowing things about Tony that he didn’t even know.

“I’d take you to some hole-in-the-wall restaurant, the greasier the better,” Steve continued. “I’d watch you flirt with the waitress to get extra fries, and laugh when you spill ketchup on your shirt. I’d walk you home in the moonlight, try and hold your hand.” Steve took Tony’s hand and linked it with his own. “Then if that went well, I’d take you out again to the science museum and listen to you tell me why all your designs would be better. And if you could still stand me by then, next would be the movie theatre; I’d see how long it’d take for us to get kicked out, because I wouldn’t be able to keep my hands off you.” Tony snorted, imagining the pair of them messing around in the darkened room. Hushed whispers, wandering hands. Lips that had the faint taste of butter.

“I’d start bringing you lunch to SI, and we’d eat together in your workshop as you try and explain what you’re currently working on,” the blonde added. “I’d selfishly keep you out late, only to give me a better chance to stay the night. And if things still go well up to that point, I’d take you on a trip. South, I think. I’d like to see you spread out on a towel, lying the day away as you tan beneath the sun. I’d take you camping, and even though I think you’d hate it, you’d still do it. For me.

“I’d let you convince me to buy a rundown car, just on the off chance it’d break down so you can fix it. I’d take you out west; speed down country roads and let you listen to that crap you call music,” Steve laughed. “I’d complain when even with all your PhD’s, you still manage to get us lost, even though I wouldn’t really mind being lost with you. I’d lay under the stars with you, letting you choose the direction we went in the next day, because it would never really matter, because I would be happy as long as we’re together.”

Tony didn’t realize a stray tear had slipped from his wet eyes until Steve swiped it away with his thumb.

“Sounds like another life,” Tony replied hoarsely.

“Yeah,” Steve agreed. “One that I thought I never wanted. But somehow I can still dream about it with you.”

Tony picked his head up to meet piercing blue eyes. “Really?”

Steve nodded. “Yeah.”

Tony looked down, tapping a forgotten tune against Steve’s sternum with his fingers. “We still could.”
“What?”

Tony bit his lip. “I mean, there’s nothing stopping us from doing some of those things. And you said it yourself, how would I know if I wouldn’t like it if I’ve never done it before?”

He looked back up shyly, hesitantly meeting Steve’s gaze again. Steve looked back, his mouth parted as he tried to form a response.

“You’d want to do that stuff with me?”

Tony shrugged. “Well not now, we’re kind of in crisis mode. But after? Yeah, I could swing it. I’m pretty sure you’re the only reason I’d even consider it.”

Steve’s answering smile was blinding, and Tony didn’t even have a chance to reciprocate before the blonde was atop him again.

“After?” the blonde whispered excitedly against his lips.

“After,” Tony agreed. “Except for the camping thing,” he scoffed. “You may have a lot of leeway, Rogers, but you’ve gotten one too many concussions if you think you could ever convince me to spend a night wrapped in a tarp in the woods.”

Steve laughed brightly, lips descending on Tony’s once again. “What you do to me,” he whispered.

Tony hummed in agreement, arm curling around Steve’s neck, keeping him from pulling away. Steve was more than happy to stay, the blonde leaning down further until his body fully engulfed Tony’s, giving Tony access to explore his expansive back.

The world seemed to slip away as Tony started to drown in Steve’s kisses, his mind drifting to him and Steve on the beach, on the open road, even in a damn tent. It was so normal. He should hate it.

But he couldn’t. Not if it was with Steve.

Steve’s breath hitched as Tony’s hands pressed lower, a gentle question to see if the offer was still on the table. And while Steve’s body seem to jolt an affirmative yes, his brain clearly wasn’t done, as Steve muttered a quick, “wait,” against Tony’s mouth before pulling back.

“What do you mean wait? I basically just said that I’m the Thelma to your Louise, and you want to wait?”

“That’s not – wait, why am I Louise?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “That’s not what you should be focusing on. You should be focusing on the very attractive and very willing man who’s underneath you.”

Steve’s response was cut off with a moan as Tony ground his hips up to meet Steve’s. “I’d be more than happy to oblige,” Steve gasped. “Just give me a second here. You okay?”

“Um, I think you can clearly feel that I’m doing more than okay.”

Steve huffed. “That’s not what I meant. This whole thing started because something was bugging you.”

Tony groaned, head flopping against the pillows. He’d gotten completely sidetracked. Damn Steve and his distracting self. No, damn Phil. This was all his fault. Of course that man could be a complete cockblock without even being present.
You owe me so much for this, Coulson.

“There is something bugging you,” Steve confirmed dejectedly, sliding off Tony to rest next to him. “Is it because of all the lies I told you?” Steve said softly, plucking at the comforter, unable to meet Tony’s gaze. “I know what I did was wrong, but you have to know how sorry-”

“No!” Tony cut him off sharply. “It’s not that,” he reassured, giving Steve’s knuckles a quick kiss. “We’ve had this conversation already – you’re the only person left that has to forgive yourself for that.”

“Don’t count on that happening any time soon.”

“Steve,” Tony sighed, wanting to push more, but let it slide. Trying to get Steve to accept forgiveness was like talking to a brick wall.

*Maybe it will be a little easier once you tell him your secret.*

Tony shuddered. What would Steve think?

Coulson’s plea had tormented him the whole way home and followed him into bed with Steve. It wasn’t hard for him to see that history was repeating itself – a huge secret that would make or break the two of them.

Tony knew what he had to do. There was no way that he could sit idly with this; he couldn’t burden this alone. Telling Steve was a must. But now, sitting hours later after the press conference, Tony knew that it was too late. He’d already made the wrong decision by walking out of that building without Coulson, and walking out with Steve none the wiser.

It didn’t matter he’d seen Phil alive – because Phil was gone again. Maybe to never be seen again. And Tony had just let it happen.

“Tony?”

Tony breathed a deep sigh, rubbing at his face. *Please don’t hate me.*

“I think I made a mistake.”

He could feel Steve shift next to him, but Tony couldn’t meet his gaze.

“You think?”

“No, I know I did.”

Steve leaned up on one elbow. “You mean the press conference? Shutting down the weapons division?”

“No, that was the right move. I’m talking about what happened after.”

There was a short silence, Steve no doubt trying to think of anything that could have happened in the span of leaving the building and walking to the car. “Tony?” he prompted.

“I don’t know why I let it happen,” Tony answered roughly. “I just, I froze! I didn’t know what to do, so I just let it happen, and it was wrong, it was so wrong, I see it now, but I don’t know if I can fix it, and-”
“Woah, woah, woah, slow down,” Steve placated. “Whatever it is, we’ll deal with it, just take a breath- ”

“Don’t say that, don’t defend me, you don’t even know what I did!”

“Did you kill someone you weren’t supposed to?”

Tony let out a broken laugh, because God, that shouldn’t be a logical scenario, but it was. “No, I just, I- ”

A shrill ringing cut off the rest of his statement. “Dammit,” Tony hissed. “Ignore it,” he added when he saw Steve look over at the bedside table.

“It’s your phone,” the blonde said in response.

“Fine, then I’ll ignore it.” The pair waited until the call would eventually lead to a voicemail and the ringing would cease. But it didn’t.

“Tony, you just made some pretty earth-shattering statements about your company today. It could be important.”

Tony growled, sticking out a hand for Steve to slip the phone into. When he saw who was calling, Tony nearly threw the phone at the wall.

“JARVIS, just because you’re not installed in the bedroom does not mean you should use that as an opportunity to disrupt my personal time by other methods.”

“Apologies, Sir, but I thought you would have liked to know that Mr. Stane has entered the premises of the speakeasy.”

Tony froze. “What?”

Tony scrambled over Steve, grabbing a tablet that sat on the end table, JARVIS already pulling up the external security feeds. Lo and behold, there was Obie, waltzing straight through the closed down shawarma joint like he owned the place, heading to the back room where the speakeasy entrance was.

“I thought he didn’t know about this place,” Steve said, leaning over Tony’s shoulder to watch the feed.

“He shouldn’t,” Tony replied. “I certainly didn’t tell him where it was.”

The pair locked eyes, both looking for answers they didn’t have in the other.

“He can’t know were here,” Steve said.

Tony was already out of the bed, clawing on a shirt, Steve chucking him his pants. “How am I gonna get rid of him? If he knows where this place is, he’ll want to come in.”

“Stall him,” Steve snapped, pushing them both out the door. “I’ll take care of the rest.”

“Wait, Steve, I- ”

But Steve was gone, running down the hallway, just shouting out another, “Stall him!” at Tony.

“He’s reached the main entrance, Sir, and is attempting to get in.”
JARVIS’s words had Tony tearing down the other side of the hallway, hoping to reach Obie before he’d descend the stairs. Steve was right – Obie couldn’t know that he was harboring The Commandos in his basement.

How would Obie react? It wasn’t like Obie didn’t know that he dabbled with mobs, just as Tony knew that Obie didn’t have a problem with it. Hell, Obie was in the process of trying to convince Tony to start selling to them. But the last time he and Obie had talked about The Commandos, Tony and The Captain were… less than friends. At least in the public eye.

“Listen,” Steve had said, when Tony had brought up bringing Obie in, “I only met the man once and I knew right off the bat that that man was meant to dominate the boardroom. He’s a businessman, Tony, a shark. With the plans that you have for the company, you already know he isn’t going to be happy about it. Knowing about our alliance, he could use it to sway your opinion on keep your weapons division open. I don’t want the family to be used against you like that, like a bargaining chip. You’re doing what you’re doing because it’s what you think is right. I don’t want to muddy the waters for you. And besides,” he had continued. “You may trust him, but I don’t. I don’t want him anywhere near the team. Not saying that we won’t ever let him, but for right now, I think we should keep him at arm’s length.”

Tony had agreed. Steve had welcomed Pepper and Rhodey in, working tirelessly alongside them while Tony was in captivity. But to Steve, Obie was still an outsider. And with everything going on with HYDRA and now the Ten Rings, Tony was more than happy to hide their allegiance in the shadows. Keeping Obie in the dark was most likely the best way to keep him safe as well.

Tony charged down the stairs and across the living area and bar, sprinting back up the entrance steps as quickly as he could. He didn’t know who was looking out for him, because he made it in the nick of time, reaching the top as Obie opened the door.

“Obie,” he said breathlessly, trying to cover it up. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Looking for you,” he answered, giving Tony a skeptical once over.

“Well, you found me. I was just leaving, so I’ll walk you to the door?” he asked, trying to push past the other man, but was stopped by a large hand.

“You look horrible, what the hell’s gotten into you?”

“Nothing,” Tony replied, too quickly to be casual.

“Nothing my ass,” Obie grit out in return. “Come on, we need to talk.”

“Fine, let’s talk,” Tony snapped, not moving from his spot. “Let’s talk about why you know what this place is.”

“You think your dad didn’t tell me about this place?” Obie laughed. “Howard and I came here all the time for night-caps. Your mother didn’t like us drinking in the house.”

Never stopped Dad, Tony couldn’t help but think.

“Your dad used this place as a quiet place to think all the time, so it wasn’t hard conclusion to come to. You’re a lot more like him than you care to admit.”

Tony flashed more grimace than smile at the older man. “Is there a reason you’re here, or did you just come to insult me?”
Obie postured, pointing down the darkened staircase. “You gonna invite me down for a drink?”

No, no, no, no, no.

“It’s only 11,” Tony tried to placate. “Besides, I’m on meds. I shouldn’t be drinking.”

“You really must be off your rocker if that’s the best you can come up with.”

“Obie, I-”

“Don’t bother,” the other man interrupted. "You owe me an explanation and a drink.”

And with that, Obie was pushing past him, down the stairs into the speakeasy. Into their home.

Tony walked down the stairs slowly, heart in his throat as he tried to spin a possible explanation in his head.

This isn’t what it looks like?

This is what it looks like and you interrupted the party of a life time?

I’ve never seen these people before in my life, call the cops?

Obie was anything but stupid – there was no point. Tony walked down the rest of the steps, eyes firmly locked with the floor as if that would help him escape his impending doom. He reached the main floor, and Tony waited to see who would speak first. When he was met with silence, Tony sighed, thinking that Obie was just waiting for him to explain himself. He looked up to try and reason the scene in front of him and stopped.

It was empty. The speakeasy was as empty.

There were no muddy shoes cluttered by the doors, no guns littered on the tables. The medical journals that Bruce liked to read were gone, along with the trash mags that were housed on the coffee table. Even the atrocious afghan that always managed to find its way back on the couch was gone. The bar had been cleaned, each glass painstakingly placed where it should be, the chairs turned over onto the tables, and all the lights dimmed.

As if no one was ever there.

Tony gaped, coming around to stand next to Obie.

The only thing that was out of place was a single glass resting on the bar, half filled with scotch from a bottle sitting right next to it.

Obie shot him an unimpressed look, before walking over to the bar. “Meds, huh?”

Tony huffed out a hollow laugh. “Well, you did always know me better than anyone.”

He trailed after Obie in a daze, eyes darting all over the bar in front of him, still searching for any type of clue that could lead to the discovery that he was hiding the crew in there. Obie pulled down a stool, taking a seat next to the bottle, reaching over the bar to pluck another glass, helping himself generously to the scotch.

“Take a seat, son.”

Tony sat wordlessly.
“Well, let’s hear it.”

“What?” Tony asked. He was too focused on the overwhelming silence in the speakeasy. No chatter, no laughter. There was no TV playing, no grumbled arguments as darts hit the board, no clinking glasses or weapons being cleaned. Logically, Tony knew that this was for show, and that the crew was still somewhere within the building, but being presented with the very thought of being alone without them was enough for a sharp pain to thrum through his chest.

“I’m sure you’ve got quite an answer for the stunt you pulled at the press conference today.”

Oh, that. Of course that’s why Obie’s here. He had basically tanked his company just hours ago.

“It was the right thing to do.”

Obie huffed, pouring himself another drink.

“It was, Obie. We’re not holding ourselves accountable. We need to look at the whole picture, and-

“No, you need to look at the whole picture. People need guns, so we build them. End of story.”

“I can’t in good conscience- ”

“But are you in good conscience? Do you hear the words that are coming out of your mouth?” Obie retorted, finally turning to look at Tony. “Listen, I can’t imagine what you’ve been through these last few months. You need to take some time for yourself. What happened today – you’re pushing yourself, and you’re clearly not ready to jump back in. You’re making rash decisions that-

“It wasn’t rash,” Tony couldn’t help but snap. “This isn’t the first time that I’ve thought about shutting down the weapons division. What happened was just the push I needed to get over the hump.”

“And what, you thought you could just spring this on everyone, on me, like that? People depend on us, Tony!”

Tony scoffed, jumping out of his stool to pace along the bar. “I’m sorry I kept you in the dark, Obie, but I had too, because I knew you’d try and talk me out of it! This is still my company, and I will do with it what I see fit. We have so much untapped potential, and we’re just wasting it. There are so many markets that we’ve been idle in for years, pouring our entire R&D into weaponry. We could change that. We could change the face of the company!”

Obie was silent for a minute, shooting an unreadable expression at Tony. “What, like arc reactor technology? That was a publicity stunt, Tony. We haven’t made any advancement in that field in over thirty years. Isn’t that right?”

Tony narrowed his eyes, glaring into Obie’s knowing ones.

He knew.

“Who told you?”

“Rhodes. Let me see it.”

Tony signed, unbuttoning his shirt, letting Obie’s face be washed in a soft hue of blue.
“Jesus,” Obie whispered.

“It works. Think of what we could do with this,” Tony pitched, closing his shirt back up. “There are endless possibilities. Unlimited power source? Asgard wouldn’t stand a chance against this thing.”

*Sorry, Thor, if you’re listening.*

“Asgard’s done for, now that one of Odin’s sons has been convicted of murder. Their stocks will never be able to recover.”

“Okay, so we go farther. Medical equipment, transport capability, clean energy. How’s that for need? People need this too.”

Obie glared at him. “You want to know why your father and I put so much into our weapons division? Because it will *always* be profitable. You are right, people need those things. But they won’t forever. Diseases are being cured left and right, solar energy is sweeping the globe, technology becoming more advanced. Eventually there will come a time where the next step won’t be necessary. There’s a peak in those markets, and once you’re there, there’s nothing left to get from it.

“But weaponry? It was always be there. Why? Because man will always have the desire for war. You can solve every major crisis that envelopes the globe, but nothing could erase man’s need for conflict. That will always remain. It’s the way the world works, and the way we do, son.”

“Is that all this company is to you, a meal ticket?”

Obie sighed before downing the rest of his drink.

“Sorry,” Tony blurted. “I didn’t mean-”

“I know you didn’t,” Obie cut him off, a heavy hand clapping warmly on his shoulder. “What we do isn’t pretty, but it stops the world from falling into chaos.”

“I just don’t want a body count to be our only legacy,” Tony added quietly. “This isn’t a mistake.”

“It better not, or you’ll owe me a lot more of these,” Obie laughed hollowly, shaking his empty glass.

“This is the right thing to do, Obie, and you can’t convince me otherwise. My decision’s final.”

“Now that right there?” Obie replied, pointing at Tony. “That’s all Maria. And just like your father, I am powerless to say no.”

Tony blinked up at his business partner. “Really?”

“Tony,” Obie sighed. “We’re a team, you and I. I’ve stood beside you for years, and never blinked an eye. I even stood by your drunk ass when you busted into a board meeting and tried to demonstrate your rocket powered roller blades.”

“That was a spring break well spent,” Tony smiled. “You have to admit, they were pretty cool.”

“Yeah, they were something,” Obie laughed, Tony unable to stop himself from joining in.

“Thank you,” he said quietly, once they’d both quieted down. “For doing this for me.”
Obie just waved him off. “Anything for you, my boy. Now, you know how this works. The board it going to be pretty pissed, but I’m sure they’ll forget it ever happened if you come in with a shiny new toy for them to play with.”

Tony nodded, following Obie as the man got up from the bar, heading towards the door. “I’ll get you something.”

“Good,” Obie replied. “I’ll hold them off in the meantime, but I’ll need something quick.” He tapped at Tony’s chest, right over the reactor.

“Of course. No problem.”

Obie just nodded again. “Do me a favor and stay out of the public eye for a bit, huh? It’ll help soothe things over.”

“Sure thing,” Tony agreed. “I’ll call you later.”

He watched Obie disappear up the steps before heaving a great sigh. Just another thing to add to the list, he thought to himself.

But, he knew that Obie was right. He needs to placate the board somehow – I’ll think of something.

“I don’t like him,” a voice rang out behind him.

“Jesus,” Tony said – and most certainly did not scream – as he whipped around, a hand already over his arc reactor while the other grasped for the gun he knew he didn’t have on him.

Barnes just sent him an unimpressed look from where he was perched on the bar, taking a swig of the alcohol left out, straight from the bottle. “Easy, Princess,” he chided, once he’d pulled away from the lip of the bottle.

“Don’t do that,” Tony hissed. “How the hell did you even get here so fast? Were you in here the whole time?”

“Trade secret,” Bucky winked.

“He was under the bar.” Tony turned to see Steve enter the room. It looked like he came from down the stairs, so if Tony had to guess, he had been up in his office, letting the scene with Obie unfold under his watchful gaze.

“You’re no fun,” Barnes snapped at the blonde.

Steve just rolled his eyes, making a beeline for Tony, only stopping once his hands got close enough to wrap around his hips.

“You clean up quick, Cap,” Tony smirked, eyeing the bar again.

“Gets it from his mom,” Bucky answered. “No dirty room was every worth the wrath of Sarah Rogers.”

“I could have really used you in my teenage years when I tried hiding evidence of my soirée’s before Howard got home.”

Steve smiled lightly but Barnes interrupted before he could respond. “What are we gonna do about Stane?”
Tony sighed. “I’m assuming you heard everything?”

“We all did.” Tony spun around again to see Natasha perched casually on the sofa and _Jesus, were they all hiding in this room?_ 

“I’ll handle Obie,” Tony replied. “This is an SI problem. Good news, I’ll be locked in the workshop for the foreseeable future, so I’ll most likely not get kidnapped.”

“Well, I’m always on board for that,” Steve murmured. “Besides, we’ve got our own problems. The Monger is still out there are we don’t know how he connects the Ten Rings to HYDRA.”

Barnes nodded. “We’ve still got a few guys downstairs. They might tell us something.”

“And I’ll hit the streets,” Natasha added, already heading for the door.

“Good,” Steve retorted. “We need answers quick. We’re running out of time.”

Obadiah Stane waltzed out of the closed down restaurant, harsh wind billowing past him as he scanned the street before him. A black SUV caught his eye, the man ambling over to it quickly.

A burst of warmth hit him as he sidled into the backseat, slamming the door behind him. Ignoring the other occupants, Obadiah tapped a quick rap against the divider and his chauffeur took off, navigating easily through the New York streets.

It wasn’t a quick drive, inner city traffic making sure of that, but Obadiah quickly found himself losing time, all his thoughts leading back to Tony’s glowing chest. _My saving grace._

Before he knew it, the car was stopped again, and Obadiah was back outside, standing in one of the harbor’s shipping warehouses.

“You’re late.”

“I didn’t realize you were on a time crunch.”

Raza sneered, the few men be brought with him echoing his statement behind him. “You’ve kept me waiting for days. Do you know how many men I lost last week? The bomb was bad enough, but now I’ve got Commandos picking us off one-by-one.”

“I promised you that you’d get your revenge on The Commandos, did I not? They’re weak right now; they’ve been weak since their home burst in flames. I have total confidence that their downfall is near.”

“And do you know where they are?”

“No,” Obadiah sighed. “But Tony does. And with Stark on full retreat, I’m the only one who can get you the answer you need.”

“Fine,” Raza hissed. “See that it’s done.”

Obadiah hummed, shaking his head. “That’s not how this works. I hired you, not the other way around. And after your last botched effort, if you want this favor, you better have an incentive for me.”

Obadiah could see a vein bulge on Raza’s temple, just barely visible under the poorly healed burns. The man reached into his jacket and pulled out some crumbled pages, handing them over to
Obadiah hesitantly.

Obadiah snatched them, eyes immediately catching on the familiar scrawl. “What is this?”

“Looks like a high-tech glove to me, but what do I know. What I do know is that it gave Stark enough fire power to blast out of the sewers.”

“So this is how he did it,” Obadiah gaped.

Raza nodded, gesturing to the side of his head.

“Well, if you killed him like you were supposed to, you’d still have a face.”

Raza growled. “Don’t patronize me. We’re still in business, you and I.”

“And I thank you for this contribution,” Obadiah sneered.

“If Stark could manage this in the sewer, it won’t take him long to perfect his design. We just don’t know how he powered it.”

Obie grinned. “I do.”

Tony, my boy, you’ve outdone yourself.

“Now, I’ve held up the end of my bargain with this gift. I’ll expect mine to come shortly.”

Obie hummed, turning away to walk back to the vehicle. “You’ll get the gift you deserve,” he answered, looking back at Raza one final time, before looking to his guards. “Finish up here.”

Echoing gun shots and screams bounced around him as he stepped back into his car.

Chapter End Notes

The end is near.
“Say something.”

It was said quietly, but it still shattered through the ominous silence like a freight train.

“Steve, please.”

Steve glanced up, not enough to catch Tony’s eye, but enough to see his figure. The smaller man was pacing around the room, harshly wringing his hands with each turn. It was strange seeing Tony this way. Sure, Tony always seemed to have some flurry of movement about him – an explosion waiting to happen, the reaction barely contained behind bars, roaring inside like a furnace as he prowled around – but this was different. His movements were jerky, almost erratic, like a single cog was out of place in his assembly line, and the machine was still trying to function despite the broken part.

“I don’t know why I didn’t say anything. God, Steve, you have to believe me! It’s just, we’re in so over our heads – I mean, we already there before, but God, this just shatters through the ceiling.”

“I know it was a mistake, I know it was. How the hell could I just stand there and let him leave? Why did I do that, Steve?”

Steve didn’t have a good answer for him.

It was the first time they’d been alone in days – they’d only managed to find time as Tony had basically dragged him into his office to talk. In the days following Stane’s unannounced arrival, the team had been a sporadic mess, trying desperately to get some foothold of a lead on HYDRA. Natasha had hit the streets to see if her contacts knew anything about The Monger, Steve and Bucky had locked themselves in the basement to try, unsuccessfully, to get any more info out of their remaining prisoners. Even Barton had gone out to see the twins. All the while, Tony was either sequestered to his lab with Bruce to find something that would keep Stane happy, or he was being whisked away by Pepper to try and put out the fires that SI’s recent statements had made.

Steve frowned, plopping his head into his hands. How many times had Tony wanted to have this conversation with him? He’d definitely tried multiple times over the past few days – hell, Steve knew there was something that was eating at him, but it got swept under the rug as problems were prioritized.

And now? Now it seemed like they were too late.

Steve groaned lowly, closing his eyes, trying to find the right words to say.

“Can’t sleep?”

Steve jolted, spinning around to catch Erskine peeking through the doorway. He smiled warmly at Steve before entering the room, a bottle of vodka in one hand, two crystal glasses in the other.

“Got the jitters, I guess,” Steve responded truthfully, tracking the man until he was seated across
the table from him.

Erskine chuckled. "Me too. After all, it is my job on the line. I was the one who recruited you."

Steve frowned at the older man.

"Oh, relax," Erskine laughed, reaching over to check Steve’s shoulder slightly. "You are too serious, my friend. You have nothing to worry about; Phillips would be a fool to reject my proposal to induct you. You've won everyone else over – even Stark raves about you. You’ve got the job."

Steve bit his lip. "And Bucky?"

Erskine smiled. "I think Phillips has realized that we won’t get one without the other. Like he could say no to another hand on deck."

Steve smiled, relieved. "Thank you," he whispered. "For this chance. I won’t let you down."

"I know you won’t," Erskine answered. "That is why I chose you."

Steve frowned when he saw Erskine’s expression. "But?" he asked uncertainly.

"But," Erskine sighed. "You are young. And I fear dragging you into this world will change you."

Steve balled his hands into fists. "I’m ready," he said firmly. "I can handle it."

Erskine eyed him skeptically. He held the two glasses out for Steve, the small blonde holding one in each hand as Erskine filled them both before closing the bottle and taking a glass back for himself, clinking his glass against Steve’s own gently.

"You know back when I was in school," Erskine started, "I took this class on psychology. Personally, I found the subject particularly dull, but there was this redhead that I had my eye on who was also taking the class and I decided that I suddenly loved psychology. The whole class was centered on good versus evil, right versus wrong, and the complexities of human nature."

"Sounds boring," Steve smiled.

"It was terrible," Erskine agreed. "It was decidedly worse when halfway through the semester I figured out the redhead was not interested in me."

Steve snorted, twisting the tumbler around in his hand, watching the clear liquid slosh around.

"Eh, I learned a few things from that class. One day I will never forget, is the day we talked about the trolley dilemma."

"Trolley dilemma?"

Erskine hummed. "Imagine you see a runaway trolley, racing down the tracks. Further down the way, there is a group of five people, completely oblivious to the trolley headed their way. Now you," he added, pointing to Steve, "are outside of the tracks, but there is a lever in front of you. If you pull the lever, you’ll change the direction of the tracks, and the trolley will move to the left side, and avoid the group of people. However, on that track, there is a single man, who doesn’t notice the trolley either. It is for you to decide what to do. Do you pull the lever and kill the singular man, or do you do nothing, and let the five people perish?"

"Sounds like a hell of a class," Steve drawled.
Erskine smiled again. “Well?” he pushed.

“Well, what?”

“Well, what would you do? Would you pull the lever, or not?”

Steve stared at the other man, trying to get a read on him. He was met with another encouraging nod and Steve sighed, knowing he wasn’t going to get out of this.

“You save the group of five,” Steve answered confidently.

“Really?”

Steve nodded. “This is another test, right? On whether or not I could leave someone behind?” Steve questioned. When Erskine didn’t respond, he continued. “Well, that’s part of the job, isn’t it? Our job is to save as many people as we can. Sometimes that doesn't mean everybody.”

Erskine hummed. “That’s very wise of you.”

Steve silently preened.

“But what if it was me?”

Steve furrowed his brow. “What?”

Erskine just shrugged. “What if I was the man that stood alone on the track? What if it was Barnes, or even Ms. Carter? Would you still pull the lever?”

Steve gaped at the man, head pounding as it screamed, ‘No, no, no!’

“I-” Steve floundered.

“Well?” Erskine pushed. “You have to save as many people as you can. That’s what you said, correct?”

Steve cleared his throat, looking down to worry his hands. “Right,” he croaked. “You’re right. I would still pull the level.”

Erskine just hummed again. Silence descended on the pair as Erskine poured himself another drink. “There is another theory we discussed in that class. Can’t remember the name – it’s the one thing I don’t understand about these philosophers. So smart and so daring, you’d think they’d come up with easier names for us to remember their topics!” he laughed. “Anyway, the theory was about the discord between reality and the hypothetical.”

“Discord?”

“Yes,” Erskine confirmed. “It talked about how given a situation hypothetically, a man would choose one direction, while if he were ever faced with the situation in reality, he would choose the complete opposite.” At Steve’s blank stare, the older man continued. “It’s all centered around the brain. On one half, you have logic and reason,” he said, pointing to the right side of his head. “Logically, it makes sense to save the group of five. It’s for the greater good, and five is much larger than one, is it not?”

Steve nodded hesitantly.

“But on the other side,” Erskine pressed, moving his hand until his finger tapped against his left
temple. “Emotion. Five may be greater than one, but that one has a stronger bond with you than the other five combined. Is that not worth saving?”

Steve didn’t have a good answer for that one.

“Logic versus emotion, the yin and yang that constantly battle within you, fighting for control. In a hypothetical situation, it’s almost as if you can remove yourself, and watch the scene play out before you. Of course it’s easy to pick logically. But if you were actually there? If it actually happened to you? You can no longer be impartial.”

“So, you think I’m lying,” Steve countered. “You think I’m the type of man that will forever be clouded by jilted judgement and would never be able to choose innocent lives over the SSR?”

“I think you’re the type of man who would throw himself in front of the trolley to save everyone,” Erskine replied simply. “But that’s not always an option, is it?”

“Why are you telling me this?” Steve asked. “Is this your way of telling me to always lead with reason? That emotion is nothing but destruction? That I should sever all ties to make the path easier for me?”

“Is that what you think I’m telling you?” Erskine’s eyes twinkled mischievously as he took another sip of liquor.

Steve clenched his jaw, glaring at the other man and his stupid riddles.

“Think about Howard,” Erskine continued, taking pity on Steve’s refusal to play along. “That man will always lead with his head. He rules with an iron fist, putting business and expansion in the forefront of his mind. He’s a futurist, a conqueror, and will respond only with cold judgement before anything else, so he will always come out on top. Is he right?”

Steve thought of the light that never turned off in his office, even in the early hours of the morning. He thought of flimsy excuses to a suffering wife, hushed arguments to a forgotten son. He thought of a never-ending glass of whiskey, empty eyes, and a smile like a siren – easily enamoring, but lethal, and unwavering as it drew you close until it left you to drown.

“Or what of your man, Barnes? He is at the other end of the spectrum, letting emotion mold his reactions. His loyalty to you is what drives him, overwriting any judgement. Is he always right?”

Erskine wasn’t wrong. Steve knew that Bucky would do anything for him – and it terrified him. He remembered just not last year, he stumbled on a man pinning Steve in an alleyway, pocket knife trailing over Irish skin. Bucky had jumped the man, pumbling into him unapologetically. He didn’t stop for the gasps of bystanders, nor the faint wails of sirens. He didn’t stop until the same knife was embedded in the man’s gut. He didn’t even think twice. It was the first time he’d killed someone.

“I-I don’t know,” Steve answered finally.

Erskine just smiled. “Does anyone? Who can say who is right and who is wrong? Certainly not me.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Steve repeated.

“What I’m trying to teach you, is that regardless of the situation, a decision will have to be made. Whether you make it with reason or emotion is all dependent on you. But this job,” Erskine broke off with a sigh. “This job will force you to make decisions that you don’t want to, and you’ll be
forced to fight between the two. But there will always be a winner, whether you like it or not. Whatever road you choose, you need to be prepared to burden the consequences. Because it doesn’t matter if one is less wrong than the other – it matters that they’re both not right. You need to learn to accept it, and to live with it.”

“Steve?”

Steve startled and pressed his fingers into his eyelids, sighing deeply.

“Are you mad?”

Yes.

He could feel it gnawing in his gut, growing with each intake of air. How could he not be angry? Each day peeled back a new layer, revealing a new dilemma, throwing another player in the ring.

But was he mad at Tony?

He could argue that Tony didn’t trust him, that he made a decision for the entire group and tossed Coulson aside. But he could also argue that decision was made for the safety of the majority of the family.

“You pulled the lever,” Steve whispered, mostly to himself.

“What?”

“Whatever road you choose, you need to be prepared to burden the consequences. Because it doesn’t matter if one is less wrong than the other – it matters that they’re both not right. You need to learn to accept it, and to live with it.”

Tony chose to protect the group, agreeing with Phil to keep them in the dark, and away from the FBI. Sacrificing Phil’s freedom to do so.

In the end, none of it mattered. What’s done is done. And Phil was alive.

Alive.

And that was all he needed to know.

“Tell me what to do,” Tony said miserably. “Tell me how to fix this.”

Could they fix it? Phil was in the wind again, probably never to be seen again. Hell, he’d been the one to help Tony pull the lever, staring back down at the trolley in the face.

Wait.

Phil wasn’t oblivious to the speeding car, heading down the tracks towards him. He knew what was coming, what would happen if it hit. He told Tony what would happen.

Maybe the trolley hadn’t hit just yet.

“Fury,” Steve breathed.

“What?”
“That’s how we find Phil. We need to get to Fury.”

“Okay? Then what?”

“Phil offered Fury a deal for the family, right? Tell the FBI what he knows and we walk free?”

“Right, that’s what Phil said,” Tony confirmed. “How’s that help?”

“It means that the FBI is interested in what’s happening between The Commandos and HYDRA. And we know a lot more about it than Phil sure did.”

Tony froze, the proverbial lightbulb appearing above his head. “And if Phil managed to strike a deal with Fury for us-”

“We offer him a better deal to get Phil back,” Steve finished.

Tony’s face drew grim, the man no doubt following the same line of thought. But it lasted just a moment before it was gone, Tony nodding determinedly. “Of course,” he said before smiling sarcastically. “You think we have something he’ll want to hear about?” Tony asked, eyes twinkling.

“I think you’re the type of man who would throw himself in front of the trolley to save everyone.”

Sometimes it was an option.

“I’m sure we can scrounge together something,” Steve answered ruefully.

“Really?” Tony chuckled. “What do a couple of law-abiding citizens such as ourselves have that the FBI would be interested in?”

Steve snorted, smiling slightly as he reached out to grab Tony by the hips, pulling the smaller man in between his legs, sighing as he felt Tony curl around him, calloused hands rubbing gently through his hair and down his back.

“I’m sorry,” Tony whispered into Steve’s hair.

Steve squeezed Tony’s sides in acknowledgement. “I know.”

Tony pulled back far enough to meet Steve’s gaze. “Was I wrong?” he asked hesitantly. “What would you have done?”

“Well, what would you do? Would you pull the lever, or not?”

“I don’t know,” Steve answered truthfully, smiling sadly. “I don’t know what I would have done. Either way, we would have lost something. We can’t go back and change what happened; all we can do is try and get in front of it before the crash happens.”

Tony frowned, obviously not happy with the answer, so Steve stood, his lips meeting Tony’s easily. “Thank you for telling me,” he whispered before leaning back in for another kiss.

Tony hummed, but pulled back, face still distraught. “Well, yeah. Relationships are all about communication, right?” he tried to joke.

Steve smiled again, but a sharp rap at the door stopped him before he could reply. Without further
permission, the door was opened by Natasha, the redhead leaning around the door, smiling mischievously as she caught them mid-embrace.

“You ready?”

“Shit,” Steve cursed. Natasha lofted an unimpressed eyebrow in return, clearing concluding that he had forgotten.

“Where are you going?” Tony asked.

“Cap and I were going to take a look at more of the SSR file drops to make sure everything’s accounted for. Unless of course, you’ve overlooked our little excursion?”

“No, no,” Steve sighed, rubbing a hand against his aching temple. “We shouldn’t put this off. We’ll do the big ones tonight, and finish the rest off by the end of the week. Once they’re all accounted for, I’ll see if it’s worth moving some around to be safe.”

“You’re going now?” Tony pressed, obviously alluding to the conversation they had just finished.

“We won’t be gone long,” Steve placated. “Just a few hours to check on the files and put my mind at ease. I’ll be back soon. Okay?”

Tony looked unsure, but nodded along anyway. “Go get the car ready,” Steve said, turning to Natasha. “I’ll be down in a second.”

Without a response, the woman was gone, closing the door behind her.

“I’ll be back soon,” Steve repeated, turning back towards Tony. “And then we’ll fix this. I promise.”

Tony nodded again, jerkily, as he worried his hands together. Steve couldn’t stop himself from grabbing them gently, pressing a firm peck against the slender fingers. “Everything’s going to be alright,” he placated.

“Right,” Tony sighed, pulling his hands away to run them over his face. “I guess in the meantime, I can start canvassing for Fury. JARVIS and I should be able to find something.”

“Good idea,” agreed Steve. He frowned however, as a thought his him. “Maybe… maybe you should do it at your place.”

“What? Why?”

“Well,” Steve sighed. “I have to tell Clint about Phil. And I’m not sure it’s a good idea that you be around when I tell him.”

Tony paled. “You think he’s gonna kill me?”

“No,” Steve blurted. “God, no. It’s just… I haven’t really been in his corner, for a while, actually. With everything that’s happened, he’s really needed me, but I haven’t been there. He hasn’t had a chance to really let it out – and with this news, I have a feeling he’s gonna burst. Let me be the scapegoat. I’ll sit with him and let him wear himself out while you get some semblance of a plan to get Phil back together. We’re gonna need to give Clint something before he goes in guns-blazing into the FBI headquarters.”

“You’re sure? Steve, I- ”
“Yeah. Let me do this. Please.”

“Fine,” Tony relented. “I’ll, uh, go pack up some things, and head over for the night.”

“Take Bucky with you. I don’t want you out by yourself.”

“Slumber party with Barnes, it is.”

Steve huffed out a laugh. “I’ll call you when I’m back home, alright?”

“Oh okay,” Tony agreed, pressing a final kiss against Steve’s mouth. “Stay safe.”

“You too,” he whispered against the brunette’s lips before the man was gone, scampering out of the room. Steve frowned as he watched him leave before walking over to his desk to grab his gun.

It was going to be a long night.

“Do I even want to ask how screwed we are?”

Steve stared into the cavernous room, the flickering lights flashing evidence of disaster right back in his face.

.Empty.

Another one empty.

“Steve?”

Steve ignored her, taking out his cell, typing furiously.

To: Sam Wilson

Please tell me you’re at home. – 17:31

From: Sam Wilson

I’m home. What’s up? – 17:33

To: Sam Wilson

Go into my office. Send me a picture of my art wall. – 17:34

From: Sam Wilson

Weird request. Why? – 17:34

To: Sam Wilson

I’m trying to get a commission with the MoMA and I forgot my portfolio at home. – 17:35

From: Sam Wilson

Alright, no need to be an ass. – 17:35

Hold on. – 17:35

<image attached> – 17:37

Steve stared down at the picture, zooming in on the picture, eyes pouring over each corner. It didn’t look like anything was missing. Each of the sketches remained undisturbed, staring back at him in their rightful place.
Steve sighed, tapping a few more buttons on his phone. “JARVIS?”

“Yes, Captain?” the accented voice asked in return.

“You have eyes on the speakeasy at all times, correct?”

“Of course.”

“And no one’s entered the building that wasn’t supposed to be there?”

“Besides the incident a few days ago involving Mr. Stane, no party has entered any part of the building that was not already deemed ‘a family member’ by Mr. Stark.”

“Shit,” Steve snapped.

“What?”

“All of the locations of the file drops are still at the speakeasy. They haven’t been tampered with, and no one outside of us had access to them, and yet somehow,” he trailed off, gesturing to the empty room in front of them.

“Maybe someone just got lucky?”

“This is the third one we’ve stopped at, Tasha. And all the same. Empty. You really think that’s a coincidence?”

“No,” she smirked. “I was kind of hoping you would convince me that it was.”

“Come on,” Steve said, heading back towards the door. “We’re going to another one.”

He didn’t wait for a response, just jogging back over to the car. Starting the engine, he barely delayed enough for Natasha to hop in besides him. He tore out of the parking lot, heading south before picking his phone back up.

“You get that commission?” Sam’s voice chided as he answered the phone.

“I need you to call Bucky,” Steve replied, not bothering to respond. “Get him and Tony home, and then go and sober Clint up. We’ve got a problem.”

“Is this a gun kind of problem?”

“Not yet. As soon as Tony and Bucky get home, tell them to give you locations on the SSR file drops. Bucky knows where some of them are, and Tony knows how to find the rest. I need you and Barton to check all the local locations and make sure that everything is still there. Understand?”

“You got it, Cap.” Came Sam’s firm reply.

Steve didn’t bother with a response, just ending the call and returning his focus to the long road in front of him. The site in New Jersey was a bit of a drive, but the thought of that archive being cleaned out had his insides twisting in knots.

Natasha, bless her heart, knew to stay silent as the minutes stretched on, allowing Steve to stew quietly. However, it wasn’t long before he felt his phone buzzing constantly against his leg in his pants pocket. He grit his teeth, knuckles whitening as he tightened his grip on the steering wheel. He didn’t have time to explain everything to Sam; Tony would take care of it. His mind was too tunnel-visioned, running theory after theory as to how someone, most likely HYDRA, finally got
their hands on secrets he’d been hiding all those years. As the buzzing persisted, Steve huffed angrily, reaching into his pocket long enough to silence his phone.

He could feel the weight of Natasha’s stare on him, but Steve refused to meet her gaze, shifting in his seat as he tore through traffic, speeding down the highway.

The silence between the two lengthened, Steve twitching at each movement made by Natasha, like a frightened deer in headlights. The twitch turned to a full startle, the car jerking in the road, as Natasha’s ringtone blared, filling up the space of the truck’s cabin. Natasha rolled her eyes at Steve’s steely glare, eyes flicking down at the phone long enough sigh softly before answering the phone, leaning back in her seat, feet swinging up onto the dash lazily.

“Tony,” she answered, a small smile splayed on her face.

A burst of angry tones blasted in response, and Steve slumped in his seat, realizing that he probably should have answered his phone.

Natasha seemed to agree with his sentiment, mouthing a “You definitely should have picked up,” as she half-listened to Tony’s rant, humming and gasping in fake surprise each time the man stopped for a breath.

“Relax, Stark, he’s fine,” Natasha drawled. “Not sure why he didn’t pick up the phone,” she accused, looking back to Steve.

“I’m driving,” Steve responded gruffly.

“He says he’s driving, Tony,” Natasha laughed. “God forbid he gets pulled over for talking on the phone while operating a vehicle.”

There was a small stretch of silence before the rapid-fire shouting was back, even louder than before. Steve winced at the number of expletives coming over the receiver.

“Do you have an actual reason for calling, Stark?” Natasha interrupted.

The volume decreased to Tony’s usual ramblings, Natasha listening intently to the engineer. “No, Sam’s not lying to you. Really. Steve wants him and Clint to go check on the old SSR file locations. We’ve stopped at some already and someone’s been clearing them out. We need to know what else is missing.”

Another pause for Tony’s response. “I just told you,” Natasha sighed. “Steve wants you to tell them about the locations. He isn’t going to be pissed at you for spilling the beans.”

Steve couldn’t help but smile, thinking of Tony, forever loyal, defending his secret to the very end. “It’s alright, Tony,” Steve said, loud enough for Tony to pick him up over the other end of the call. “I need you to tell the rest of the team about the file drops.”

Tony answered, Natasha shaking her head fondly.

“He says that if you can’t be bothered to pick up your phone, he doesn’t have to listen to you.”

Steve rolled his eyes.

“No, Tony, you don’t want to know what he did. Something tells me you wouldn’t let him live to see tomorrow.”
He couldn’t hear what Tony said back, but it had Natasha laughing before she hung up the phone.

“Real keeper, he is.”

Yes, he is, Steve couldn’t help but silently preen.

“He agree to get the locations for Sam and Clint?”

“Yes,” Natasha confirmed. “He and Bucky are already writing them down. He said he’ll shoot over a list of which ones are empty after they’ve all been checked.”

“Good,” Steve retorted, nodding his head.

“So,” Natasha continued, leaning back further in her seat. “Is Tony Stark really that good in bed? I’ve heard some stunning reviews.”

Steve shot her a cold stare. “Get your foot off the dash,” Steve scolded instead.

“All this fuss over a stolen truck?”

“Borrowed,” Steve corrected. The vehicle would make it back to its original owner eventually. Probably.

Natasha rolled her eyes again, before continuing. “So. You going to tell me how bad it is that all of this information is in the wind?”

“I guess it depends on who took it all. But it couldn’t have been anyone good.”

“What was on all the files?”

“Everything. Anything you could think of,” Steve answered truthfully. “Double agent identities, stock pile locations, ammunition drops, addresses of all our informants. The SSR was founded in a time of crisis. It was during the brink of World War II, and the world was floundering, trying to pick up the pieces. Believe it or not, it was the perfect time to set the foundations of an empire.

“Soldiers were either dead or still deployed. Everyone was too worried about their next meal or if they were going to get bombed by the Germans that no one had time to worry about problems on their own turf. Mobs ran the city: selling arms, running booze, you name it. Everyone thought the world was ending anyway, so no one bothered to stop them.”

“Sounds like a hell of a time,” Natasha commented.

“Well, it wasn’t too long before even New York City got too small for the number of mafias crawling around in the gutters. It was pure anarchy – people were killing each other left and right as they fought over territory, contraband, anything, really.”

“Let me guess – then the SSR showed up.”

“The mob for the mob man,” Steve responded from memory. “They started small, picking up bits and pieces, whispers from the streets. They knew who to talk to, and it wasn’t long before they had enough to start tipping off the local mafias. Who had the best guns, which routes to avoid when smuggling, the best times to operate their business.”

“Really? The SSR was the ‘Ask Jeeves’ for mobsters?”

“Yeah,” Steve laughed. “Surrounding mobs would ask them for intel, and the SSR would get paid
in return. They grew and gained rapport – they ended up being the middle man between the
different mafias. The third party that everyone could agree to deal with, because they never
infringed on any other part of their business. They didn’t run guns, or make liquor – they sold
secrets. Any everyone was always in the business for that.

“But then the war ended – soldiers came home, treaties were signed, and America tried to pick up
the pieces and move on. It wasn’t long before everyone realized that the mobs weren’t in charge
anymore. The law struck back, and gangs were forced back into the shadows. In order to survive,
the SSR evolved. Changing from an info center to a mock government agency. By that point,
they’d amassed enough respect with the local groups that they were able to take charge and make
some suggestions. Mafias realized that they couldn’t fight a battle on both fronts, so an unspoken
agreement was formed – each mob would stay out of each other’s way, letting each run their own
business, so they’d only have to worry about the law, and not another gang ready to backstab you
in the alley.”

“That really worked?”

“For a bit,” Steve continued. “Territories were divvied up within the boroughs, businesses spread
even so there wouldn’t be any monopolies. Of course, asking a bunch of criminals to adhere to a
new set of laws wasn’t going to end well. Agreements were broken, people were screwed over;
they started stealing from each other, squabbling and killing each other in the streets.”

“What happened?”

“That’s when the SSR reared its ugly head. Like I mentioned before, the SSR only dealt in secrets.
Secrets that everyone else would kill to know. If anyone had a problem following their rules? One
quick message was all it took before they’d be dead in the gutter.”

“So the SSR became the Big Brother of the mafias.”

Steve hummed in agreement. “They had eyes and ears everywhere. Mobs learned very quickly that
if they were to step out of line, the SSR would cut them off cold turkey, feeding unlimited info to
their rivals until they were all eradicated. But no one fought them for power – as the years went on,
their strength and knowledge only grew. They could get information on anything and anyone.
Mobs feared them, but didn’t dare try to get rid of them.”

“Because despite all that, they needed the SSR in order to survive.”

“Correct. They were the only thing standing between them and a war between another mob, or even
the cops.”

“Until HYDRA showed up,” Natasha said softly.

“Until HYDRA showed up. They wanted all that power to themselves. They wanted to run the
show their way.”

“So, all these files,” Natasha continued, changing the subjects. “They’re just whispers that they got
from their customers?”

“Well, seventy plus years of whispers start to add up, don’t you think? All the info they collected
over the years – it’s way more than what Tony’s ever compiled.”

“So, I guess it doesn’t really matter who took them. In any scenario, it’s not going to end well.”

“Pretty much,” Steve agreed.
Natasha hummed, tapping her fingers against her armrest. “This whole time you’ve basically been the crypt keeper for all these secrets. You never thought about getting rid of it? Burning it? Hell, even selling it all?”

Steve nodded. “I’ve thought about it many times. The SSR has been done for years, sometimes I find it ridiculous that I’m still guarding their mysteries. But every time I think about it, I just – I can never bring myself to do it. Honoring their memory, I suppose. Continue to hold the line and keep at my job that I swore to all those years ago. But I refuse to use it, either.”

“Why?”

“Look what happened to the SSR,” Steve shrugged. “We were in everyone’s pockets, and they were in all of ours. But we got too big, cast out too far. We couldn’t see what was happening right in front of us, couldn’t see the huge targets that we had painted on our backs. They all died. And I won’t – I can’t – risk that again.”

Natasha hummed in reply, staring blankly out her window. She didn’t make a comment the rest of the drive, no doubt mulling over their next options. It was one of the things that he loved about Natasha. While most people would choose a singular route, and maybe think a few steps ahead, she always spread her bets. Looking at every angle, each work around, and adapting flawlessly to the situation, no matter the curveball, until she came out on top.

Steve pulled his eyes back on the road, losing himself in his own head. What was the plan? With the last three sites empty, odds were not in their favor for this next one. There were no obvious signs left by the thieves anywhere else – how was he to track them? Tony could probably hack something close by and get them a lead. But how long would that take? Were they already too late?

These thoughts plagued him the rest of the drive, amounting to a throbbing migraine by the time Steve was easing off the highway and onto rural roads. Even though it had been ages since he’d been able to check up on this one, he still knew the road like the back of his hand, his eyes easily finding the familiar surroundings of the nearby terrain.

It wasn’t long before the surrounding woods engulfed them, blocking out the faded sounds of the expressway, hiding them from sight. When a well-known gate came into view of his headlights, Steve finally rolled to a stop, turning the car off. He took a moment for himself, resting his head against the seat, before finally digging out his phone.

8 missed calls from Tony Stark

Steve shook his head, scrolling past to see the messages that had accumulated from the man as well.

From: Tony Stark
What’s wrong? Barnes told me we’re to come home. – 17:54

Is it Barton? – 18:07

Is he really going to kill me? – 18:09

Steve? – 18:15

Answer your phone. – 18:23
JARVIS says your vitals are fine. – 18:39

Why the hell are you going to New Jersey? – 18:51

What’s wrong with the file drops? Wilson wants me to start naming locations. You really want me telling everyone? – 19:25

Don’t answer in the next five minutes and I’m doing it and you can’t be mad at me. – 19:33

Fine. Be that way. – 19:38

I swear to God, Rogers, if you’re doing something stupid, I’ll kill you myself. – 19:50

Don’t even bother coming home. This bullet has your name on it. – 19:59

Talking on the phone while driving is against the law? I reiterate: don’t bother coming home. Especially if that’s the best you can come up with. – 20:08

You’re not alone in this. You better not go lone wolf on us. – 20:32

Promise me. – 20:37

Please. – 20:40

Steve smiled softly down at the phone, finger tracing over Tony’s name before finally typing out a reply.

To: Tony Stark

I won’t. I’ll call you when I’m on my way home. 10 minutes. – 20:43

From: Tony Stark

Finally. Now was that so hard? – 20:43

Steve snorted, tucking his phone back into his pocket.

He hopped out of the car and looked around, trying to pinpoint anything that was out of place. But the rundown buildings just stared back silently, refusing to give him the answers he wanted.

“Camp Lehigh?” Natasha asked, reading a rusted sign. “An army base?”

“I told you the SSR started back in the war,” Steve responded. “No better place to start collecting info than inside the United States Army.”

“So this is?”

“The first one,” Steve answered, opening the rusted gate wide enough for both him and Natasha to slip through. “The original meeting place for the SSR and the first info hold. When the war ended, the Army shut the camp down, making it the perfect place for them to meet. They collected the scarp of intel that the military left behind and started to build their territory. This camp houses some of the most important and the oldest information that the SSR ever came by. It’s the only file drop that I never even included in my sketches. HYDRA getting their hands on their information would be catastrophic.”

He walked through the rotting buildings, idling left as his memory took over, leading him to the
vault of information. A concrete construction loomed in front of him, looking just as it did all those years ago when Phillips brought him here for the first time.

He walked up to the door, pulling his sidearm out of the hem of his pants to shoot the lock off. He heaved open the door, grunting at the resistance, the metal door creaking open.

The duo stepped in and Steve reached over to his right, flicking on the lights. The room was washed in the florescent glow, revealing walls of empty cabinets, dusted over desks, and abandoned chairs.

“Huh.”

“What?”

Natasha shrugged. “Nothing, just thought it would be a little more impressive.”

“This isn’t it,” Steve said in return, walking past her to the back of the room. He stepped over to the back corner and over to a wall lined with dusty, unused shelves. “Look,” he added once Natasha caught up with him, pointing over to a long cobweb stretched between the shelves, a breeze making the silk fluttering slightly.

“There’s something behind it,” she concluded.

Steve nodded, yanking at the shelves that were bolted on a swivel, revealing a dated elevator. Wrinkling his nose against the faint waft of stale air, Steve pressed the button on the panel, unused parts squeaking in as the doors opened.


The pair stepped in, Steve pushing the only button on the inside panel, the doors creaking shut behind him before the two of them started to descend. It was a short ride, and Steve was quickly back at the door, prying them open to reveal another dark cavern of concrete. As soon as the doors were open, however, the two of them were hit with a pungent smell.

“Jesus,” Natasha groaned, hand already coming up to cover her nose. “You really couldn’t pick a better location for this place?”

“I didn’t exactly get to pick,” Steve replied, following Natasha’s action. “The smell is a new addition, though.”


“You telling me Natasha Romanoff is scared of rats?” Steve laughed.

“No, but if I get dead rodent on these shoes, you will personally see to it that they are replaced, plus interest.”

Steve snorted and stepped out of the lift, feeling around the cool wall for another light switch. When he would the familiar shape, he jammed the switch upwards, heart pounding in his chest, hoping to be met with rows and rows of files and computers.

“Fuck,” he exclaimed when the lights flickered on.

The computers were gone and cabinets were overturned, clearly emptied.

It was gone. It was all gone.
“How did they find this place?” Natasha gaped.

Steve ignored her, pushing further into the room, walking around, looking for any sign, any clue as to who had cleaned out the whole space. “Dammit!” he shouted, kicking at a metal shelf.

What the hell was he going to do? How long had the information already been gone?

He put his head in his hands. It was over.

Suddenly, Natasha gasped. “Steve,” she whispered.

Steve spun around, marching over to where Natasha was frozen, shock pale under the overhead lights. “What’s wrong?”

She pointed at a pile of tables that had been tossed around. And hidden behind the fronts was –

A pile of bodies.

Steve’s stomach roiled, but he couldn’t stop his feet from dragging himself closer. Maybe there was a scuffle? Whoever was cleaning out shop got into a fight? Was it HYDRA? The Ten Rings? Neither The SSR nor The Commandos never used this place as a dumping ground, so the bodies didn’t come from them.

Who were they? Steve got closer, looking over decomposing flesh and rotting bodies, clearing showing that they were anything but fresh.

And that’s when he saw it. A vintage bowler hat.

Dugan.

“Oh my God,” he breathed, looking at the rest of the bodies.

They were all there.


The Commandos.

What was left of them.

Steve couldn’t stop himself. He leaned over and retched, losing his stomach all over the floor, next to the bodies.

His friends, his family. Slaughtered like animals.

“This is why they never came back,” Natasha concurred, hand over her mouth in shock. “Why we never heard back from any of them. It looks like they’ve been down here for months.”

“How is this possible?” Steve demanded.

“It’s HYDRA. It has to be,” answered Natasha. “Back when we caught Hammer. He said that they were digging around. What if they found some of the locations? That was the last time we saw everyone.”

“Oh, but we did look. And we found.”
Justin Hammer’s voice echoed in his head. “But how?” Steve pressed. “None of The Commandos besides Bucky knew where any of the information was located; they didn’t know where to look to find it! How could HYDRA, after all these years, finally find where everything was located?”

“One would say, they finally had a breakthrough.”

Steve spun around at the disembodied voice, gun already up. “Who’s there?” he asked into the dimly lit room, eyes tracking around the perimeter.

“I’m right here,” the familiar voice replied.

On the far wall, a box of light flickered on – a laptop sitting on a dusty table. Steve walked towards it warily, gun still at the ready, Natasha’s steps falling right behind his. He could see a small camera sitting right next to the laptop, whirring softly as it moved, tracking Steve’s movements.

“It is good to finally see you again, old friend. I was wondering when you would finally show up.”

And then a body was stepping into frame.

“Zola?” Steve gaped.

“Who?” Natasha questioned.

“Arnim Zola,” Steve continued. “We were in the SSR together.”

“The Captain and I go way back,” the man responded, his mousy face giving a smile.

“I don’t understand,” Steve breathed. “You’re dead. We found your body.”

“Look for yourself. I have never been more alive.”

Steve shook his head. “This whole time you were alive? Why didn’t you- ” he broke off, a chill spilling over him. He glared back at the screen, staring back at the not-so dead man. “It was you,” Steve whispered hoarsely. “That whole time, it was you. You were the mole.”

“Mole?”

“I knew you were real,” Steve breathed. “I knew it wasn’t just HYDRA!”

Zola just smiled back at him through the screen.

“You killed them all,” Steve realized. “They were our family. And you gave them all up and killed them. For what?”

“A better offer,” Zola shrugged. “HYDRA.”

“You sick son of a bitch,” Steve scorned. “HYDRA should have died with the Red Skull.”

“Cut off one head, two shall take its place,” Zola retorted. “Schmidt may have perished, but I lived on. I recruited, and the new HYDRA grew. The loss to The Commandos taught us much, and we adapted. We hid in the shadows, infiltrated some of the biggest organizations, and grew like a beautiful parasite. As we grew, we were secretly feeding crisis and reaping war in the streets of New York. And no one was the wiser.”

“How could you do this to us?” Steve gasped. “You murdered your own family!”
“HYDRA murdered your family. I just simply told them where to point the gun.”

“Don’t shift the blame. You did this.”

“I did not. Well, except for one.”

“One?”

“I got greedy,” Zola shrugged. “I assumed SSR numbers had dwindled enough for me to steal in broad daylight. It was a small miscalculation. I was caught.”

Steve paled, soaking up Zola’s words.

No.

“She was always so bright, wasn’t she? She didn’t even give me time to think of an excuse; she figured me out so quickly. It’s a shame, really,” Zola replied, almost sadly. “Ms. Carter would have made an excellent recruit for HYDRA.”

Steve remembered cradling her lifeless body against his, sobbing into soft hair, cheek pressed against chilled skin. He remembered porcelain skin, lips stained the same color as her blood, and eyes – eyes once bright and full of life gone, clouded by a dull substitute.

“She cried for you, you know,” Zola sneered. “When she was bleeding out on the floor.”

Rage, all-consuming and overpowering, surged through his veins. “I’m going to kill you,” Steve hissed, charging towards the computer, barely blocked in time by Natasha.

“I understand your pain,” Zola continued, completely unbothered by Steve’s ill-contained fury. “Sometimes I feel the burden of their deaths. It is a lot to shoulder, I know. But their sacrifices brought with them, a new era.”

“Don’t you dare talk about them,” Steve snapped in response. “You don’t get to feel that pain; you don’t get the luxury. I was the one who had to bury them – you were the one that put them in the ground!”

“The years have not been kind to you, my friend,” Zola sighed. “And I am sorry to say that there is no reprieve in sight. More will be sacrificed. Once the purification has been completed, HYDRA’s new order will arise.”

“How did you do this?” Steve snapped, gesturing to the rest of the room. “You didn’t know about any of these places!”

“It took me a while, but with the data that I managed to steal away before the SSR crumpled, I was able to write an algorithm. Compiling old receipts, running leases, scanning bills. The SSR hired you to keep the secrets they were too scared to keep on hand; little did they know that all the information was already there, waiting to be put together. Your work for the SSR has amounted to the same as your impact with The Commandos. A zero sum.”

“We’ll stop you,” Natasha barked back.

“I think not. Unfortunately, you will be too dead for that.”

Shrill beeps sounded in the room, the warnings echoing throughout the room, bouncing from wall to wall. “I’m afraid I’ve been stalling, Captain.”
“Steve,” Natasha whispered, pointing back over to the pile of their fallen comrades. Red lights, blinking in time to the beeps, bled through the spaced between the bodies.

“Bomb!” Steve shouted, grabbing at Natasha, charging back towards the elevator. He could still hear the faint cackle of Zola’s laugh in the background as they sprinted back towards the lift. Skidding to a halt inside, Natasha jammed the button, Steve helping in squeezing the doors together.

The elevator roared to life but Steve could barely hear it over the thumping in his own chest and their gasping breaths. Once the contraption came to a halt, Steve clutched Natasha’s hand, yanking her onto the new floor. He could see the front door in the distance, the couple running towards it. But they never made it, as a huge vibration below them knocked them both to the ground. He could feel the building shake as foundations started to crumble, the walls starting to crack.

Steve stumbled to find his footing, dragging Natasha over to one of the abandoned desks, barely managing to cover her body with his own before the ceiling was coming down on both of them.

Chapter End Notes

I'm baaaaaack.
Please enjoy an extra long chapter as an apology for my absence.
Good news is that since Carrier is done, this story has my full attention. Finally time to finish this mammoth!

As I add more chapters, I will be spending some time revisiting the old ones. This fic is in need of some major TLC. No major plots points will change - just some minor tweaks and edits to smooth out the story. I mean, come on, it's 2018. It's about time I use some proper grammar.

Enjoy!

-JAT
Chapter 70

“This is stupid.”

Tony rolled his eyes for what felt like the billionth time. “So you’ve said. Repeatedly.”

“Feels necessary since you’ve elected to ignore me. Repeatedly.”

Tony huffed dramatically as he looked up from the project in front of him, turning to face Barnes. The man was trailing the outskirts of his workshop, unconsciously walking the perimeter of the glass-walled room. It was like watching a tiger at the zoo, prowling behind his cage; all that power bottled up behind iron bars, just waiting to be released.

It was a nervous habit, obviously. A dangerous man like Barnes would be stupid not to constantly be aware of his surroundings. But it was more than that; the metal-armed man didn’t like being here. The room was one thing – a glass, almost aquarium like structure, open on all sides, offering almost no cover and shadows for the hit man.

But no, it was the situation that really irked Barnes. The need for control out of his reach, and no nervous pacing was going to bring him any closer. Tony had noticed him act like this more frequently, jumping between statuesque and twitchy quicker than he could blink his eye. The strain of this war with HYDRA had taken its toll on everyone, but it seemed almost surreal seeing Barnes struggle this way.

It was like seeing armor crack that Tony forgot he was wearing. He’d been starting to see glimpses, more and more every day, of the man that he’d heard whispers about from the team. A softer side, hidden behind a hardened shell, only opening up for those who deserved it.

When he first got involved with The Commandos, there were plenty of nights that he lay awake wondering how Steve not only kept the rag-tag group together, but also drove the reins. It seemed like all of them had a reason to do what they did, and given their backgrounds, would have ended up resorting to some sort of crime in their lifetimes. But Steve, or the illusive Captain, as he was known at the time, didn’t seem to fit that mold. Of course, now he knew better. He knew why Steve was the way he was. He knew that he of all people had the most reason to be involved in what they were.

But not Barnes. How he’d snagged the title of being the most dangerous nightmare in New York’s shadows was definitely no walk in the park, but Tony first viewed as dark and almost revolting was now only seen as convoluted, at best. It was no surprise that Tony had been wrong about Bucky’s character, but the degree he’d been off by was startling. Now, when he lays awake at night, his doubts don’t air for Steve, but for his right-hand man. Hell, Tony was so off kilter with his new investigation, he wasn’t even sure if Barnes wanted any part of this life.

He was the dirty jobs guy for The Commandos, no question, but Tony could start to see that Barnes had carved this little niche for himself not because to desired too – in fact, the only desire he probably had was to make sure that no one else had too. The unrewarded guardian angel, constantly laying down in the filth and the gore so the rest could walk over him unblemished.

Tony was sure that Barnes had no plans of letting anyone in on his little ruse – he’d managed to keep even Steve off his back all these years. But with everything that had happened, there was no way that Barnes could keep up with each blow that came their way. The crew knew for sure, Steve especially, given the way they’d been almost hyper aware of Bucky’s presence, the concern only
taking a backseat for Clint’s dire situation. Everything seemed to finally be locking into place these past few days, and Tony was furious that it had taken him this long to catch up.

Barnes was faltering, unable to keep up his act as he struggled to continue to juggle the crew. He was spastic and impulsive, and almost cruel in his remarks, signs of him kicking into overdrive to try and grasp some semblance of control again. Control that he knew had slipped far from his reach – but yet he tried anyway, like code stuck in a loop, trying repeatedly to fix the unwanted error, only to create several more in its wake.

Tony could relate. Turns out they were more alike that they originally thought. Made from the same mold, I suppose, Tony thought to himself. He and Barnes weren’t the ‘glass half full’ type of man, nor were they the ‘glass half empty’. They were the ‘it doesn’t matter how much water is in there now, it’ll be gone eventually’ type of men.

The worst-scenario type of guys.

They could both see it, the end on each horizon. HYDRA was closing in, backing them into a corner that was surrounded by FBI. The rock and the hard place that would eventually be the death of all of them.

They were running out of time.

Barnes’ hands twitched again, an unconscious reach for a gun to soothe him. Tony wondered what he was thinking about. Not surprising; he could almost never get a read on Steve’s stone-faced friend.

He knew it had to be something about Phil; they were all thinking about him.

Tony hadn’t meant to confide in Barnes about Phil, especially not talking to Steve about it first, but it just sort of happened. One minute, they were in silence, Tony tapping nervously on the steering wheel as they drove to SI’s office downtown, the next Tony was rambling, spitting the truth like a geyser.

“He has this way about him,” Steve had told him one late night they were sat in the blonde's office. “He doesn’t even have to say nothin’ to you, he doesn’t need to do anything. He just sits there and then suddenly, you’re spilling every secret you’ve ever had. I told him if he wasn’t such a crook, he’d make a great cop. Or a nun.”

Tony smiled at the memory, about how Steve had laughed at the thought of Bucky wearing a nun’s habit, gliding around their home silently with a ruler, smacking the hands of the rest of the crew for sinning.

It was one of the first times he had ever heard Steve laugh.

And while at the time of the conversation, Tony had thought that Barnes’s menacing nature was all it took to turn a man into a blubbing idiot, he could see that it was for an entirely different reason when it related to the gang.

Barnes wasn’t one to judge. He didn’t demean, or scoff at the hidden truths. He was just a solid presence, a silent ear for their woes, an unbiased party as they worked through their issues out loud. Tony thought that maybe after all the things that Barnes had done in his life, he didn’t exactly have room to judge. Or more likely, Steve wasn’t actually full of shit this whole time, and Barnes was actually a decent guy.

So Barnes had sat quietly the entire ride, listen to Tony sob out his recent blunder with Phil. He
stayed silent well after they’d gotten to the lab, Tony’s guilt getting the best of him, forcing him to tinker with something to alleviate some of the stress.

Wouldn’t Barnes be happy that Phil was alive? He’d known the mild-tempered cop for a lot longer than Tony had, and Tony had been, once the mid-life crisis had ended, ecstatic. But just like Tony, the joy of the life of a man thought dead was tempered, overruled by grief.

Barnes had left him there, dragging an unconscious Clint from the cops, ditching the scene before they were all caught. But he’d thought Phil was dead. Even if he knew that he wasn’t, there wouldn’t have been much he could have done. Charging through the street to get to the injured man would have only resulted in the same ending, only this time with Barnes and Barton also in custody.

But he knew Barnes didn’t see it that way, and he never would. All he saw was him walking away from his family, leaving him to the vultures of the United States government. And that was nothing he could forgive himself for.

Just like Tony.

For the amount of times they’ve tried to kill each other over the past year, it was almost ironic how life kept putting them in the same boat.

The long silence’s that Barnes provided were comforting to a point, but Tony was almost manic, desperate for conversation. Anything to keep his mind off the speakeasy. Anything to distract him from the thought of Steve calling Clint into his office, sitting him down and letting him know that they’d failed him again.

So Tony had talked enough for the both of them. Not so different from the last time he and Barnes had spent time in this building, when Tony had tried to distance himself from Steve’s betrayal, and a one-armed Barnes pleading for him to dive off the deep end. The only good thing about this trip to the office was that Tony could finally give himself the upgrade he so desperately needed. With the weapons division shut down, Tony had been working exuberantly, desperate to finalize that product that Obie needed to hook the board in.

He was sure that the miniature arc reactor would be just what they needed – of course, perfecting the design required a test subject. And unless anyone else showed up at his door with a chest covered in shrapnel, Tony was the only chance they had.

Not that he was worried. Worried happened when he and Yinsen fumbled a prototype together in the stinking sewers of New York’s underground. This would be a cake walk.

And, not that Tony would ever admit, this switch was almost necessary. The original reactor was clunky, a constant weight on his chest that each breath jostled. And while Bruce had told him it would take him a while to get used to his diminished lung capacity, he knew it was more than that. Each day drained more and more from him, the power source seemingly taking energy straight from him. And as exhausted as he was, each night he lay awake with no rest in sight. Laying on his back resulted in wheezing gasps for air as he tried to breathe around the crushing mass resting on his chest. But he couldn’t turn over, as the bulky cylinder stuck out from his chest just enough to catch on clothes and leave him unable to lay on his stomach. Every night ended up with him curled in the fetal position on the edge of the bed, shock still, and without a restful sleep.

Not that Steve would ever know.

No, to him, this would just be a shiny replacement.
He’d unknowingly walked Barnes through the process, his mouth spewing steps out before his brain had thought to catch up. And while Barnes was quiet in his deliberation of Phil’s situation, he had more than enough to say about him replacing his night-light.

“Stevie’s not gonna like this,” Barnes continued, almost nervously.

“Stevie doesn’t much like the current predicament,” Tony returned, tapping his fingers against the arc reactor. “If anything, he might like this one a little bit better,” he said, turning back to the new arc reactor that was sitting on the lab table, illuminated in a halo of white light from the nearby desk lamps.

“Seems a bit sketchy to be doing this here and now. What if something goes wrong?”

Tony snorted. “Barnes, if I could pull this off in the shit-storm that is the New York sewer system, I think I can handle it in it a state of the art lab.”

“It doesn’t matter where you’re doing this, you shouldn’t be doing it without a doctor,” Barnes growled. “Let me at least call Bruce.”

“I’m not that kind of doctor,” Tony parroted in Bruce’s tone.

“And neither are you,” Barnes snapped. “This isn’t you messing around with scrap in the basement, this is serious! That thing is going in your chest and is supposed to keep your heart beating. Don’t you think that risking your life would require a little more planning?”

“You’re right, Barnes,” Tony deadpanned. “What was I thinking, doing this without a professional’s help. Do me a favor and pull up the top reactor medic in New York.”

Barnes scoffed with a roll of his eyes.

“There isn’t anyone who knows more about this than me, so therefore, there’s no one better than me to do this. And it needs to be done. Getting this out of the way without Steve here is the only way, and you know it. That man wouldn’t let me get anywhere close to this lab if he knew what I was planning to do. ‘Too much risk’ he would say. But there isn’t any more risk in this than there is in any normal surgery. And Barnes, I need this. You know I do. This one can’t hold up much longer, and with everything else that’s going on, I don’t want to take that chance.”

Barnes stared at him for a long moment. “Fine.”

Tony grinned. “Great. Besides, I did call a professional. Pepper should be here any minute.”

“Your secretary?”

“Don’t let her hear you call her that,” Tony mused. “She’s more useful that you think. Besides, I needed tiny hands, and I sure as hell wasn’t going to ask Romanoff.”

“Tiny hands?” Barnes asked. “Tiny hands for wh- oh, God,” he broke off, staring at Tony’s chest. “This is so fucking stupid.”

“That’s the spirit,” Tony agreed, turning upon hearing Pepper walk into the lab. He could see the slight falter in her step as she glanced from Tony to Barnes. Tony knew that Pepper was distrustful of The Commandos – the redhead had a more protective streak than Rhodey – but there was no time to dwell on that now. Pepper, ever the professional, opted to ignore Barnes, and head straight for Tony.
“Tony,” she greeted. “What was so important that I had to leave the office?”

“Show me your hands,” he stated, watching as Pepper raised them slowly, distrust already clouding her eyes. Smart of her, considering the laundry list of tasks that Tony had asked of her, most of them unseemly.

“How?” she asked plainly.

“I need you to do something for me,” Tony explained. “No biggie.”

“No biggie, he says,” he heard Barnes huff behind him. Tony shot the man a dirty look over his shoulder.

“Oh my God, is that the thing keeping you alive?” Pepper’s tone had Tony wincing. Right, Pepper hadn’t really been exposed to the concept of the arc reactor much. Asking for her help with this was starting to seem like a bad idea.

“It was,” Tony answered, walking towards where he’d set up a reclined medical chair. “It’s soon to be replaced,” he added, hopping up. “With this baby, right here.”

Pepper walked over slowly, looking at the new reactor Tony was holding in his hand. “How?” she asked.

Tony shrugged, ignoring the long list of reasons why that listed in his head. “Just an upgraded unit, swapping out the old for the new. But, I’ve run into a little bit of a speed bump. There’s an exposed wire under this device,” he said, tapping at his chest. “It’s contacting the socket wall and causing a little bit of a short.”

“Okay,” Pepper replied slowly. “So why- ”

“I need it out of the way,” Tony clarified. “I want you to reach down and gently lift the wire out.”

Pepper looked down at his chest again, then down at her hands. “Oh, no,” she said shortly. “Absolutely not, no way, Tony. You can’t ask me to do this.”

“Well, I’d ask Barnes here, but I don’t want to electrocute myself,” Tony tried to joke.

Pepper continued to shake her head. “Tony, I-I really don’t think that- ”

“Great!” Tony interrupted, twisting the current arc reactor out of his chest and dropping it into Pepper’s hands. To her credit, she didn’t drop it, her hands instinctively curling around the glowing glass, movements freezing. She really did work well under pressure.

“Oh, God, Stevie’s gonna kill me,” Barnes whined behind him. Tony tried not to pay attention, but even he couldn’t ignore the ringing of his own phone. He looked over to where he had it sitting on the lab bench and looked back at Barnes, jerking his head back towards the ringing device, giving his permission for the other man to answer.

“Wilson, please tell me you need me anywhere but here,” Barnes said as he answered the phone, pressing the device up to his ear. “If you could just see the shit that I’m dealing wi- what?”

Tony watched as Barnes gaped, eyes wide as he listened into the phone. “No, no I heard you. It’s just… you sure that’s what he said?”

Tony narrowed his eyes, trying to think of anything that Wilson would be asking of Barnes to
warrant such a reaction.

“Now what?” Pepper’s voice turned his attention towards her, his friend cradling his current arc reactor gently in her petite hands. *Right. Focus.*

“This is irrelevant,” he answered, yanking the cord connecting the arc reactor to his chest out before he could think twice. He felt the jolt in his chest, his body on high alert with the shift in his system. “Just put it somewhere over there,” he continued, waving vaguely over to one of his work benches.

Pepper stuttered, round eyes never leaving the reactor. “Are you sure? *Tony,* this is- ”

“Garbage,” Tony answered quickly, trying to move things along. “On to the better model, now.”

Pepper nodded slowly, still gaze still stuck on the glowing orb in her hands. She walked over to the closest lab table and deposited it gently, as if damaging the unit would still hurt Tony. When she walked back over to Tony, he tried to give her an encouraging smile. “You’re doing great already,” he said. “Now, I just need you to grab this,” he continued, pulling her hand to his chest cavity.

“Oh, God,” Pepper whispered under her breath. “Is this safe?” she asked, looking back up at Tony.

*A little too late to ask now,* he wanted to say. Something told him that she would not be amused. “Yeah, of course,” he replied instead. “Just make sure that the wire doesn’t touch the socket wall. Pretend you’re playing *Operation.*”

Pepper shot him a dirty look. “The game? Tony, this is serious!” she cried.

“You’re gonna be great.” Tony shot her another winning smile.

He watched Pepper reach her hand close to Tony’s chest cavity, his fingers barely dipping below the surface before she was pulling out with a hiss. “You know, I don’t think I can do this. I’m not exactly qualified- ”

“No, you’re perfect,” Tony argued. “You’re the most qualified, trustworthy person I’ve ever met.” Pepper’s gaze softened slightly, but she still made no move to continue. His chest throbbed in response, urging him of the task at hand. “Is it too much to ask?” he added, giving Pepper his best puppy eyes. “Because I really need your help here.”

“Oh, okay,” Pepper relented, hand heading back to his chest. Tony breathed out a sigh, leaning back in the chair, trying to get comfortable. In the background he could here Barnes arguing with Wilson. *What were they talking about?*

“Ugh, there’s pus!” Pepper cried.

“*God,* that shit’s just sitting in your chest?” Tony looked up to see Barnes leaning over his shoulder, phone still pressed too his ear.

“It’s not pus, it’s an inorganic plasmic discharge. It’s from the device, not from my body.”

“It smells,” Pepper whined.

*Yeah, no shit,* Tony thought to himself.

“Sam, hold on a second,” Barnes muttered, watching with disgusted fascination at Pepper kept reaching down his chest.
“What does he want?” Tony asked him.

“This is not the time,” Barnes snapped, but he could hear the faint shouts from Wilson on the other side of the phone. Something was very wrong.


“Perfect,” Tony breathed. “Now, you need to make sure that it doesn’t touch the- ” A faint buzzing was the only warning he got before his chest jumped, an electrical shock traveling throughout his chest.

“What the hell is happening?” Barnes shouted, head snapping between Tony and the EKG monitor.

“That’s what I was trying to tell you,” Tony groaned over Pepper’s apologies. “Don’t let the wire touch the sides, okay?”

“Right, sorry, sorry!” Pepper replied.

“Okay, now make sure when you pull it out,” he continued, watching as Pepper’s hands emerged with the edge of the wire. He never finished his statement as he heard another burst of Wilson’s heated voice. He couldn’t make out anything except for one word: Steve.

Tony started to reach for the phone before his body spasmed in protest. Tony’s mouth opened in a silent scream, his gaze turning back to where Pepper had pulled out the entire magnet. The EKG shouted a litany of alarms, both Pepper and Barnes adding in the chorus with their own concerns, but Tony could only focus on Wilson’s mention of Steve.

“DUM-E, hand me my phone,” Tony panted.

“What the hell?” Barnes yelped, jumping in the air as his clawed robot snatched the device from his hand, DUM-E scurrying over with the tech clenched gently in his claw.

“Listen,” Tony groaned, grabbing at Pepper. “You weren’t supposed to do that- ”

“No shit!” she screamed. “God forbid you tell me that!”

“We’re going to have to move quickly,” he continued, ignoring her outburst, hand reaching out to grab the phone from DUM-E. “Nope, don’t put it back in,” he batted at Pepper’s hands.

“What’s happening?” Barnes demanded.

“Oh nothing, just going into cardiac arrest because she yanked it out like a trout, and- ”

“I thought you said this shit was safe!” Barnes shouted at him.

Tony opted to ignore him, placing the new reactor in Pepper’s hand. “Come on, we’ve got to get this in,” he told her, before placing the phone to his ear.

“Tony, it’s going to be alright,” Pepper tried to placate.

Tony shot her another winning smile, but it came out more like a grimace, each heart beat sending waves of pain through his body. “Wilson,” Tony gasped.

“Now is so not the time to do this,” Barnes repeated with a hiss, metal hand tugging nervously on his long hair. “Give me the phone!”
Tony tried to jerk away from Barnes’ reach, resulting in Pepper to bang her hand along the inside of the reactor casing. Tony groaned, barely audible in the angry beeps of the EKG. Barnes backed away as if he’d been burned, resorting to awkward hovering over Tony’s form, eyes darting between Tony’s face and the heart-rate monitor.

“What the hell is going on over there?” Wilson’s voice carried through the phone.

“Just some minor heart surgery,” Tony replied before Barnes could even open his mouth.

There was a short silence before, “You better be joking. Jesus Christ, please tell me you’re joking.”

“What’s Steve?”

“He’s still out with Nat,” came the reply. “I already explained this to Barnes. Cap needs me and Barton to look at the rest of his file drops and he says that you know how to find the rest.”

“That doesn’t sound right,” he said with a groan. “Yes, stick it in, quickly,” he added, directed at Pepper. He could feel his heart pounding, rattling against his rib cage for any form of relief.

“Attach it to the base plate.”

“Stark?” Wilson’s voice came through the phone again. “What the hell are you doing?”

“Nothing.” His answer was strangled, his voice hoarse as he watched Pepper reach back into his chest with the new reactor. His heart clenched again, and Tony grit his teeth. Don’t think about the pain, don’t think about the pain. He turned his focus back towards Wilson. “Listen, there’s something else going on here. Let me talk to Steve and – ahh!” he broke off in a cry, his body jolting as the new reactor locked into place.

Both he and his heart couldn’t help but slump in relief, the new reactor taking over its job of keeping Tony alive flawlessly. He didn’t protest when Pepper screwed the reactor in its final place, nor when Barnes came back over and snatched the phone out of his hand. Instead he watched silently, taking careful breaths, as Pepper grabbed a towel to clean off his chest and Barnes whisper a few final sharp words to Wilson before hanging up the phone.

“Well, that was fun,” Tony finally said, breathlessly, still flopped against the chair. It was probably subconscious, but Tony swore he could start to feel his body reacting to the new reactor. It was like getting a new battery, literally, and Tony was the Energizer Bunny, rearing to start banging on his drum again.

Barnes scrambled over to his side, eyes wide as they traced over Tony's body, looking for any type of negative reaction. Upon reaching Tony's face, his worried frown turned to a glare, watching as Tony grinned up at him. "I hate you," he grit out, slapping at Tony's shoulder. "Don't ever do that again."

"With this," Tony breathed, rapping his knuckles against the glass casing of the new reactor, "I won’t ever have to do it again."

“Good," Pepper snapped. “Because I cannot do this again. Never ask me to do this again.”

Tony laughed. “You got it, Ms. Potts.”

“I’m serious,” she snapped. “That was so not okay, on many levels.”

“Okay,” he answered, before uttering a quiet, “thank you, Pepper.”
“Of course,” she said back, her hand squeezing Tony’s shoulder comfortingly.

“You need to rest,” Barnes interjected. “You got a bed somewhere in this joint?”

“No time,” Tony retorted, swinging his legs back over the chair. “You heard Wilson. We’ve got work to do.”

Barnes bit his lip, looking away. If Tony had to guess, he was just as confused at Wilson’s message of Steve’s favor. “Fine,” he relented. “We’ll figure this shit out, then get you in bed.”

“Excuse me,” Pepper interrupted. “You better not be dragging him into another mess of yours,” she said with a frown, her arms crossing.

“Pepper,” Tony placated. “Look at him,” he continued, pointing to Barnes. “He wants me to come with probably as much as you want me to go. But this is something they need me for.”

“I’ll take care of him,” Barnes added, looking at Pepper, voice quiet.

“Yes, you will,” she snapped back, giving the metal-armed man an unimpressed stare. God, I love her, Tony thought gleefully.

“Yes ma’am,” Barnes whispered before retreating across the lab, much like a dog with its tail between its legs, to gather the rest of their belongings.

“And you,” Pepper continued, icy glare shifting over to Tony. “Behave.”

“Yes ma’am,” Tony parroted, throwing his shirt on before jogging to catch up with Barnes.

“Dammit,” Tony hissed next to him.

Bucky’s hands tightened on the wheel, pressing harder on the gas pedal as they raced through the cramped New York streets – well, as much as one could race through them. Bucky swerved left, just dodging the station wagon that had cut them off, speeding past them with a metal middle finger pressed against the glass. Beside him, Tony didn’t even comment on the erratic driving, his eyes never leading the phone in his hands, fingers typing wildly on the screen.

“He still not answering?”

Stark didn’t answer, but by the way that he pressed his phone up to his ear again and biting nervously on his thumbnail was answer enough. Of all the times for Steve to not answer his phone. Bucky itched to reach down and pull his own out to dial his friend, a fake semblance of hope that maybe Steve would pick up for him. But Bucky knew it was no use; if what Sam said was happening was actually happening, then the tunnel vision would have already engulfed him by now, and Steve wouldn’t be answering until he needed too.

They themselves shouldn’t even be bothering with dawdling. “We need to check the rest,” Sam had said. If someone had managed to find their way to a one hideout, they could find their way to them all. And while Bucky had never personally seen the files that the SSR entrusted to Steve, he knew that it was more than enough to bring their world crashing to its knees. Sam was right. They needed to check the rest – they needed to see what, if any, were left.

But that didn’t stop the nagging in the back of Bucky’s head. Probably the same nagging that had
Tony making call after call to Steve. The file drops, they were everything to Steve. It was all he had left of the SSR, and it was something that Bucky had thought he would never give up. Steve defended those files more than a dragon would protect the last of his own gold hoarde.

Hell, Steve hadn’t even told Bucky about the locations for years. It wasn’t until he had found the frail blonde in some dive bar in Hell’s Kitchen drinking himself to death that he’d first heard about it. Peggy was dead. She was the last of them, but more than that, she was Steve’s tipping point. The final crack that shattered his armor.

“Wha’ you doin’ ’ere?” Steve slurred. He was collapsed on the floor, leaning against the wooden bar. His face was blotchy and covered in sweat – Steve was never a pretty drunk – and his clothes were rumpled, the same he’d worn yesterday. They were still covered in blood. It was a miracle that the bartender taken Steve’s phone and dialed him instead of phoning the cops. Then again, it was Hell’s Kitchen; he probably saw this sort of stuff all the time. Bucky wasn’t sure how long ago Steve had fallen off his chair, but it didn’t look like he let that deter him, if the bottle still cradled in his hands meant anything.

“Sobering your ass up,” Bucky snapped, nodding to the bartender in thanks for phone call. He reached down and grabbed at Steve’s shoulders. “Look at me,” he said, snapping his fingers in front of Steve’s face. “You with me? Follow my fingers, Stevie. You need the hospital?”

“Go ‘way,” Steve replied, slapping at Bucky’s hands.

“Don’t be an ass. I’m not going to let you drink yourself to death. ‘Specially not here. No offense,” he added to the disgruntled barkeep.

“You should,” Steve continued, his eyes fluttering shut as his head tilted back, smacking against the edge of the bar. “They’re comin’ for you. They’re gonna kill you.”

The nefarious ‘them’. The HYDRA, the beast lurking in the shadows. The one you couldn’t be seen until it was too late. “I’d like to see them try,” Bucky tried to smile. “I’m like a cockroach.” He threw one of Steve’s arms over his shoulder, his other hand bracketing the blonde’s hip, and yanked him up. Steve stumbled and groaned, a telltale warning of his stomach sending something back up. By the smell on his breath, it didn’t seem like it would be the first time. “Come on, Short Round.” A familiar nickname that caught on, much to Steve’s chagrin, after seeing Temple of Doom. It didn’t really fit; Steve was always tiny, sure, but he was built more like a beanpole. His body was so focused on trying to grow up that it forgot to grow out. He tugged Steve towards the door, pausing only to reach into his pocket and dump a wad of bills on the bar top.

“Leave me,” Steve moaned lowly. “They’ll come for you, and I can’t… if you… I can’t,” the blonde stuttered.

Bucky shushed him, pulling the blonde outside and over to his car.

“They’ll kill you and then they’ll kill me,” Steve chuckled out a broken sob. “Good. I hope they do.”

“Don’t be so dramatic.”

“They’re comin’ for ‘em,” Steve continued to mumble as Bucky loaded him into the passenger seat. “I know they want ‘em. But I won’t tell. They can do whatever they want to me, but I won’t tell. And when we’re all dead, they’ll realize they still got nothin’,” he hissed.

It was hard, seeing Steve that way. So on the edge, so ready to jump in front of a bullet, just...
waiting for someone to load the gun. He really had been ready to die that day. That part of Steve was so lost and dark, and even now it still managed to come back and haunt Bucky. He shuddered, remembering Steve’s outline on the ice, before shots rang out and the river swallowed him whole.

“They’ll kill you and then they’ll kill me.”

_Then we’ll die together_, Bucky had wanted to scream at him. There was nothing on this Earth that would ever scare him enough to leave Steve’s side. It was an admirable trait to a third party, but Bucky knew it was Steve’s least favorite thing about him. But it turns out that that was Bucky’s least favorite thing about Steve. How he is always ready and willing to lay down on the wire, but vehemently refuses the offer to have anyone lay down with him. It’s almost as if he saw himself as nothing else besides cannon fodder.

After HYDRA had wiped out the last of the SSR, convincing Steve not to jump into his grave head first had been near impossible. The man was more than ready for it to be over than to even consider any plan involving some semblance of revenge. His support system was gone, and Steve knew it was best to just pull the plug instead of waiting for another miracle.

But Bucky wasn’t.

“Don’t lay down and take it,” Bucky had said. “Get up. Get mad.”

“And what exactly do you expect me to do?” Steve had hissed in return. “Won’t do much good going in guns blazing by myself, is there?”

“I didn’t say anything about doing it alone.”

The Commandos had been their saving grace. Not just for Steve; Bucky found himself unbelievably codependent on the rag-tag group of criminals they threw together. They were the glue that held him and his best friend together, and by all accounts, are the very reason they’re both still alive today.

They had come so close to losing it all again many times in the past few months. He knew that everyone was getting desperate, trying to hold on to each other as they hurdled closer and closer to destruction. It seemed that with each passing day, Bucky was reminded that they still had room to hit rock bottom.

Tony jammed a few more buttons on his phone, pressing it up to his ear again. Not sure why he continued to bother; Steve obviously wasn’t going to be picking up anytime soon.

“Romanoff,” Tony sighed in relief. Bucky perked up at the name, cursing internally that he hadn’t thought to call her. But thank God Nat had gone with Steve; Bucky would trust her to keep his head on straight. “That man had better be lying dead in a ditch because there should be no other damn reason why he thought he could ignore my calls. God forbid he learn a fucking lesson and read the room; maybe going off the grid isn’t the best idea while in the middle of a mob war.”

Bucky snorted. Steve definitely picked a winner with that one. Stark paused, and Bucky could hear the faint dulcet tones of Nat’s response and faint laughter.

“Driving?” Stark hissed. “Well, excuse the fuck out of me. Who am I to disrupt Grandpa’s Sunday afternoon drive? You can go ahead and tell your chauffer that he best _keep_ on fucking driving because as soon as he stops, I’m going to put a fucking cap in his ass.”

Bucky winced, but it was hard to argue with Stark. If what Sam said was true, and the SSR files were stolen, there’s no telling what else was waiting for them. There was a chance that they were
still in the act, just camping out at one of the locations until Steve showed up, just to gun him down. And even if they weren’t, the thefts of Steve’s last bargaining chip would be more than enough to set the man off to do something stupid again. He didn’t exactly have the best track record for dealing with surprises, so of course Steve not answering his phone would be enough to make him worry. Bucky was just glad that Stark seemed to be in the same boat as him. Even better for him, Stark had a way of getting Steve to listen to him. Benefit of giving good dick, he supposed.

Another response from Natasha, and Stark sighed. “Yes, there is. Sam called and said that Steve wants us to give out the rest of the file locations? That can’t be right.”

Bucky looked over and saw Tony frown into the phone. “Is he sure? It’s not that I don’t trust them, it’s just that I know how important these are to Steve.”

Bucky found himself nodding in agreement. There were many times that Bucky wished Steve shared everything about the files with him. There was a subconscious part of him that was angry, jealous even, that Steve didn’t trust him enough to share his secret. But a larger part of Bucky knew that it wasn’t true. Steve trusted him with anything and everything – like not pestering him about his SSR secrets. The files were the last connection that Steve had with the SSR, the last link to the first family he had after his mom died. Maybe it was a sense of duty, maybe it was to honor the fallen that Steve continued to keep their secrets. Whatever it was, Bucky never questioned it, and was more than happy to sit back and help support the pieces of information that Steve did share.

Abruptly sharing the information with the team seemed like a decision that would be out of Steve’s wheelhouse. He’d never given anyone the full story, and here he was, giving the go for everyone to put the final puzzle together with the each of the pieces they had. Sure, with some of the files missing, it was more than enough reasoning to check the rest of them, but Bucky would have guessed that Steve would have gone and checked them all himself. Just an extra precaution, giving him a way to protect the rest of the group, as well as protect the location identities, if he stumbled on any that weren’t touched.

It was a great deal of faith that Steve was giving them. His last secrets on display.

Bucky frowned, pulling into the back alley behind the speakeasy, slipping into a parking spot. Stark had hopped out before the be had put the car in park, Bucky unable to do anything besides trail behind him.

“Well, tell him that if he can’t be bothered to pick up the phone for me, I sure as hell don’t have to listen to him!”

Bucky rolled his eyes, grabbing the door that Stark opened before it slammed shut. The pair of them walked down the stairs, Bucky straining to try and catch Natasha’s response in the phone.

“What did he do?” Tony snapped, but Bucky could hear the underlying fondness. “He’s making a face, isn’t he?”

Bucky caught Natasha’s laugh over the receiver. His chest clenched, his fingers twitching to reach out for her, when he knew she wasn’t there. Her laugh had always been his favorite thing.

“Tell him he’s sleeping on the couch,” came Stark’s final reply before he ended the call.

“What’d she say?” Bucky asked, unable to keep his curiosity at bay. Stark sighed, walking down the final steps to the landing, heading straight over to the bar. “Wilson was right,” he shrugged, rubbing at the back of his neck. “Steve wants them to check the rest of the stock piles.”
“Now why you saw the need to double check is beyond me,” came a new voice. “I told you that’s what he said,” Sam said, arms crossed over his chest. He was seated on one of the couches, obviously waiting impatiently for their return.

“God forbid we double check,” Bucky replied with a huff.

“Well, now that you’ve permission from Dad, can you send us where we need to go? Barton and I have some work to do.”

Bucky’s eyes shifted to the other lump on the couch, Clint not looking up at the rest of the group, idly picking his nails. God, Clint. What the hell were they going to tell him? Hey, sorry, buddy, turns out your boyfriend – who we told you was dead – isn’t dead, and has been under FBI custody this whole time? Surprise?

Jokes on you, more like it.

“I guess so,” Tony answered, looking at Bucky for guidance. Bucky just nodded in confirmation.

“That settles it, then,” the engineer continued. “Come on, Barnes, let’s get this done.” He followed Stark up to Steve’s office, watching as the man carefully started to take down each of Steve’s sketches. He wanted to protest, but it was obvious he was doing it for a reason. He shifted from one foot to another, watching as Stark examined each photo carefully.

“You okay?” he finally asked, eyeing Stark warily as the other brunette rubbed over his chest, where his new lifeline lay beneath a thin layer of cotton.

Stark hummed, not even looking up from Steve’s drawings.

“I’m serious,” Bucky persisted. “I’m not Steve, but I have a feeling you wouldn’t tell him if anything was wrong. If you need help, you need to let me know. Do I need to get you to a hospital?”

Tony looked up at him, eyes wide with faint surprise. I’ll have to work on that, Bucky thought to himself, mentally adding another item to his to-do list. “Uh, no,” he finally answered. “I think I’m alright. I’m pretty jittery, but I think it’s just an adrenaline rush. The new reactor has a higher cycling rate, so my body’s trying to adjust. I’ll, uh, let you know if anything changes.”

Bucky nodded. ‘Good. Now keep crackin’ on this, well, whatever the hell you’re doing. I’ll send Sam and Clint to the locations where I know are, and we’ll just text them your list.’

“Done deal,” Tony agreed, looking back to the pile in front of his before grabbing an empty sheet of paper, starting to scribble Steve’s final secrets out.
Chapter 71

“What the hell happened to ten minutes, Steve?” Tony hissed into the phone. “Ten minutes, actually means ten fucking minutes. Not twenty-seven. I’m trying to be patient here, but Jesus, Steve, you’re not making it easy.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve replied hoarsely.

Tony froze at his tone. “What’s wrong?” he replied instantly. “Were the files all cleaned out?”

“Yes,” Steve answered. “But, but it’s not, Jesus,” he continued, the phone microphone picking up his breath catching. “Tony, I-I can’t-”

“It’s okay,” Tony blurted, his heart rate picking up. He jumped up from his seat at the bar, where he’d been anxiously sitting for the last half hour, and headed towards the kitchen, off to find Barnes. “Whatever it is, it’s alright, we’ll fix it. Where are you? Are you hurt? Steve, please-”

“I’m fine.” The response had Tony’s knee’s buckling, his hand not holding onto the phone reaching out to grab a countertop to steady himself. “I’m okay, but there was an explosion-”

“What?” Tony stumbled again, ice pouring through his veins.

“And Nat is here, and I need, I-I need,” Steve broke off. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Okay, calm down. It’s alright,” he whispered to both him and Steve, breaking out into a run, down the hall to find Barnes. “Barnes!” he shouted, the man popping his head out of his bedroom door immediately.

“What’s wrong? Is it the reactor?”

Tony held a finger up, putting the phone on speaker. “Steve, Bucky’s here with me. Now, where are you?”

“Bucky,” Steve moaned, not listening to anything else Tony said. “Bucky, he killed Peggy, he did it! I knew it... I knew it was wrong and now they’re all gone. Dead!”

Bucky didn’t hesitate, just snatched the phone from Tony’s hands. He started to walk away, whispering in soothing tones to Steve, but Tony could still hear Steve’s distressed cries. Tony wanted to follow, wanted to push Barnes out of the way. Steve had called him, and an ugly envy inside of him yearned to snatch the phone back. He could comfort Steve, he could help him.

But he didn’t. He heard her name. Peggy.

Tony wasn’t oblivious to Peggy Carter. Sure, he’d never met her, but he’d heard more than enough about the impressive woman from his father. He didn’t know what she looked like, but he could never picture anyone else besides Pepper when he thought about her. Tony was also aware that the elusive Peggy Carter shared some history with Steve. His father had told him once that he thought they were going to get married.

“Rogers lucked out with that one,” Howard had slurred into his tumbler. “That woman’s a real ten.”

Steve had never mentioned her. Why would he? Tony could put two and two together – the end of
the SSR and Steve sleeping in his bed each night was enough for him to know that Peggy was no longer living. Tony never pressed Steve about what happened to her; Tony had more than enough skeletons in his own closet to have the right.

That’s why he stood still as Barnes walked away. It was something about Peggy. And that was a conversation that Tony shouldn’t be a part of. Instead he leaned against the wall, feeling his legs finally give out from under him. He slipped down the wall and curled in on himself, focusing on the only thing he could.

“I’m fine,” Steve had said. And for now, that had to be enough for him.

He wasn’t sure how long he sat there, alone in the bedroom hallway. It was quiet. Barnes had gone off to God knows where to talk with Steve, Wilson and Barton out checking SSR stock pile locations. Thor wasn’t in – hell, Tony hadn’t remembered the last time he’d seen the blonde. He spent almost all of this time at the police station and the Norwegian embassy, trying to figure out a plan to deal with his brother. He could go find Bruce, but he just couldn’t get his feet to cooperate.

“Tony,” came a soft voice.

Tony looked up, watching as Barnes crept back over to him, holding his phone back out. He snatched at it eagerly, mentally slumping as he saw the screen was dark. Steve was gone.

“He’s on his way home,” Barnes said. “Try not to call him. He-he needs some time to think.”

Tony nodded. “Is he okay? And Natasha? He had mentioned her, and- ”

“Yeah,” Bucky interrupted, swallowing thickly. “She got knocked out, but Steve’s said she’s already come too.”

“Explosion?”

Barnes crouched down, sitting next to him. “Yeah. HYDRA rigged the place to blow.” He paused before adding, “Steve found the rest of The Commandos down there. Their bodies, anyway.”

Tony clenched his jaw, his stomach roiling. “I’m so sorry,” he replied.

“Thanks,” Barnes answered softly. “I think we all knew that they were dead, we just wanted to hold on to some hope that they’d made it out.”

Tony nodded again, not sure what to say. All he could think about was Steve, stumbling upon their bodies. Tony could barely keep it together when Yinsen had passed, let alone the employees that he’d lost, but this was their family. A family that they keep burying.

“Did your dad ever mention Zola?”

Bucky’s question caught him off guard. “Uh, a few times,” Tony replied with a shrug. “Not much, though. He worked in the SSR with you guys, right?”

Bucky didn’t reply, staring blanking at the other wall. “Why?” Tony pushed.

“He was there as well.”

“Oh,” Tony said sadly. “Listen, Barnes, I’m really sorry about- ”

“He wasn’t dead.”
Tony paused. “What do you mean he wasn’t dead? What the hell would be doing there if – oh.” The pieces started clicking together. “Mole?” he asked simply.

Barnes scoffed. “Yeah,” he sneered venomously. “I always believed Steve that there was a rat in the kitchen, the evidence was everywhere. We never found out who it was, but with everyone being killed by HYDRA, we just assumed that they might have gotten caught in the crosshairs. Guess we should have known better.”

Tony frowned, but didn’t respond. He couldn’t imagine what that would feel like. Having your own family turn against you, and for what? Deeper pockets? “I’m sorry,” he repeated. “I know it’s kind of shitty, and it doesn’t seem like I mean it, but I don’t know what else to say. Only thing that might help is me promising that he’ll be dead soon. I’ll kill him myself if I have to.”

A ghost of a smile graced Barnes’s lips. “I might hold you to that, Stark. And thanks,” he added as he stood up. “Steve will be home soon. I’m just gonna take a walk.”

“Yeah, okay,” Tony nodded his head. “Holler if you need anything.”

“I really am fine.”

Tony smiled as Steve’s voice pulled him from his own thoughts. Tony looked down, his figure wrapped in bed, under a mound of blankets. “Humor me,” he replied to the blonde.

“Then humor me,” the blonde countered. “Stay home. Why you insist on going to this is beyond me.”

“I don’t think I’m supposed too, and that’s more reason for me to go,” Tony smiled. “Even Pepper didn’t bring it up to me. It’s a miracle I caught the reminder on television.” When the blonde pouted, Tony continued. “Listen, I don’t want to go, but I should. The reason no one told me about the gala is because they want me on the sidelines and out of the spotlight. But the entire board and my investors will be there. After the stint I pulled on them with my last press conference, I owe it to them to be there. Well, be there and not make a mess of things,” he laughed. “I do still have a day job, Steve.”

“It’s too dangerous,” Steve argued, pushing himself further up the bed, his icepack falling onto the floor. Tony huffed, reaching down to pick it up, placing it back where it should be, resting on Steve’s knee.

“It’s a public event, Steve,” Tony sighed, tucking the blankets tighter against Steve’s side, dodging the other man’s attempts to push him away. “Complete with private security. I’ll be as safe as can be.”

“I don’t want you going alone,” Steve pushed. “You should take Bucky with you.”

“No can do,” Tony replied, fixing his bowtie in the mirror. “In fact, oh, right on time,” he continued, watching as Bucky pushed open the bedroom door, a tray stacked with sandwiches and chips. “He’ll be too busy looking after you.”

Barnes dropped the platter on the table besides Steve. “How’s it look?” he asked Tony.

“His knee’s pretty sore, and I’m going to have Bruce come up in a bit and look at the bruising on his ribs, but otherwise, he looks fine.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve interrupted, gesturing between the two of them. “When did this become a thing?”
“It became a thing because you continue to be a dumbass,” Bucky deadpanned. “Speaking of,” he added, turning to face Tony with an unimpressed stare. “Why the hell are you in a suit?”

“He’s going to the gala for the Maria Stark Foundation.” Steve frowned.

“I’m sorry, what?” Barnes gaped. Tony scoffed, grabbing at his comb to run through his hair a final time.

“I just need to make a quick appearance, don’t get your panties in a knot.”

“No, no, no, no,” Barnes blurted. “You definitely are not going. Potts will kill me is she sees you there, especially after what happened in your workshop earlier today!”

“What happened in the workshop earlier today?”

Tony glared at Barnes, chucking his comb at the other man in retaliation. But of course, because god forbid Tony catch a fucking break, Barnes snatched the comb in midair. *Thanks a lot, pal.*

“Nothing, don’t worry about it,” Tony responded to Steve, eyes narrowed in challenge at Bucky.

He could see Steve frown in the corner of his eyes, but his focus was stolen by Barnes placing the comb in his metal hand and crushing it to pieces.

“That’s a Tomas Veres, you ass,” he gasped.

“It *was* a Tomas Veres,” Bucky snarked back.

“Don’t be petty,” Tony hissed.

“God, not now,” Steve groaned. “If you’re going to do this, please, just do it outside. I’m not sure what’ll kill me first: this headache, or you two.”

“Sorry, dear,” Tony apologized, dropping a gentle kiss on Steve’s forehead. “Bucky will get you some pain killers.”

“Already on the tray,” Barnes sighed. “This ain’t my first rodeo.”

Steve gave the man a weak smile, and Tony couldn’t help but lean down and kiss it as well. “I’m glad you’re alright,” Tony whispered when he pulled away, words only for Steve.

“Me too,” the blonde admitted.

“Now, look,” Tony explained. “I will be gone for two hours at most. If I’m not back by then, I give you pull permission to send Kujo after me,” he said with a nod towards Barnes. “Just let me go, Steve. I promise, I’ll be fine.”

Steve didn’t look happy, but he finally relented. “Fine.”

“Thank you,” Tony grinned, hopping off the bead and heading for the door. Barnes reached out and grabbed his elbow.

“Don’t go,” he said in a low tone.

“Barnes,” Tony sighed.

“He needs you,” the man pressed.
“No,” Tony negated. “Not this time. He needs you.”

“He is sitting right here.”

“Hush, Steve, the adults are talking,” Tony snapped over his shoulder. “With what he saw,” he added, looking back at Barnes, “with, you know. If it were me, all I’d want would be Rhodey. Even if I stayed, we both know you’d still be in here.”

“I need to be there for Nat as well.”

“Natasha can take better care of herself than any of us ever could, and you know it,” Tony huffed. “Besides, I know you’ve seen these.” He held up his phone to show the group message between the team. The last six messages came were from Wilson, only a single word each: empty.

“I think it’s safe to assume that HYDRA’s cleared out the rest of the locations. I need you here to keep doing your job – to keep him from doing something stupid.”

“Tony, come on, I wasn’t going to leave.”

“Bold words coming from a man of your recent actions,” Tony snarked back, Steve shooting him the finger, but dutifully hunkering further down in his bed.

“Listen,” Tony said, facing Barnes again. “I need a couple of hours, just enough time for me to schmooze for some extra cash for my company. I’ll be home before you know it.”

The other brunette let out a long sigh, pinching his nose between his fingers. “Fine,” he relented. “Two hours. No more than that.”

“Two hours.”

When Tony saw her he had to pause, taking in her beauty. Pepper was always stunning, but tonight, in the royal blue gown with an open back, hair hanging behind her in loose curls, he couldn’t help but stop and admire her. By the speed of her moving mouth and fake smile plastered on her face, Tony could only assume she was bitching out one of their investors for an inappropriate comment. He watched the man she was talking too – what was his name again? Generic old guy #7? – taking in the pallor of his face, getting exceedingly redder by the second. A final scoff and the man was stalking away, nose turned firmly in the air. Tony grinned. God, what a woman.

He skipped over to her, shooting a plastic grin at the bystanders who met his gaze. He was sure there were plenty of people that wanted to speak with him; there was probably even more people he needed to speak with. But they could wait.

“Dance with me,” he murmured over Pepper’s shoulder, not even waiting for a reply before dragging her into the throng of swaying couples. He could see the slight shadow of uneasiness pass over Pepper’s face before it was gone, replaced by a fake amusement that she’d mastered years ago. One that was eaten up constantly by both the paparazzi and the boardroom.

He couldn’t even imagine a time that he didn’t think Pepper was perfect for this life. Even in the first five minutes of them meeting, she was dragging him down the hall by his collar to an investor’s meeting. By the next week, she had her own chair at the table next to his.

She was driven, ruthless even. She could have any investor emptying out his pockets with a few words from her; she could have this this entire room waiting on her hand and foot by the end of the night is she wanted. It was if she was destined to end up here. Tony had always envied that –
Pepper always seemed to know what she wanted, and when she wanted it. Tony had spent too much of his life bouncing between doing whatever the fuck he wanted or riding others curtails to get by. He was always stuck out in limbo and rolling with the punches, doing what he needed to stay ahead of the other guy. In the moment, he thought that was all he needed, just living the high of proving he was the smartest person in the room. But in the end, after the rush had gone, and he was left alone, he was always left floundering. Floundering to a point to where he’d make his next bad decision only to start the cruel cycle over again.

But not Pepper. She never had a single hair out of place, both literally and figuratively. With her standing next to Tony, it was a constant reminder that maybe his dad had been right. Maybe he was worthless. But he could see now that he wasn’t meant for this. This, being here in these clothes, in this room, with these people? It was all fake. It was as if he had been walking through a dream – one that was not his.

It was Pepper’s. She would be much better in his shoes – hell, everyone knows she basically runs that company anyway.

*Now that’s an idea. Write that down.*

Tony wanted the same thing, in his own way. Something real, something meaningful to wake up to every morning. And maybe the reason that he’s only now having this realization is because he’s finally found his place. A place where he can see himself adding his own chair to the mix.

“What are you doing here?” Pepper’s voice pulled him from his thoughts.

Tony shrugged. “Maybe I just wanted to see you out of a pantsuit. You look stunning by the way. New dress?”

“Yes, it was a birthday present. From you.”

Tony hummed. “I’ve got good taste,” he beamed.

She glared at him in return. “Compliments will get you nowhere,” she snapped. “What on Earth are you doing here? Tony, you should be in bed, you almost had a heart attack today!”

“Please, that was hours ago,” he jested.

Pepper dug her fingernails into the side of his neck. “You are walking a very thin line, mister, so you better watch it.”

Tony winced and jerked his head away, smiling over at the couple dancing next to them that had turned at them questioningly. “Maybe I just needed to get some air,” he whispered.

Pepper frowned at his smile, the same hand that had dug just into skin now coming up to gently cradle his neck. “What’s wrong?”

*She was always too clever for her own good.*

Tony shook his head. “Nothing that should worry you.”

“Well, believe it or not, most things that involve you worry me,” Pepper snarked back. “It’s kind of my job.”

Tony huffed, but opted not to respond.
“It has to do with them, doesn’t it?”

“Pepper,” Tony sighed. He didn’t really have time to get into them with her.

“No, you don’t get to do that,” she snapped. “Every single time I bring them up, you brush it off as if it’s nothing, and now it’s been months, and he hasn’t sat down and discussed this! Tony, I… I’m concerned.”

“Well, you just said it was your job, didn’t you? You better be doing a good job if I’m buying you dresses like this.”

“This isn’t a joke,” she hissed. “Tony, you’ve been shot, kidnapped, assaulted, and tortured! Ever since you’ve gotten involved with this mafia, it’s brought you nothing but pain.”

“But it’s given me a family,” Tony admitted quietly. It felt good saying it; it felt right.

Pepper’s eyes softened, but she slowed their sways to a halt. “Rhodey and I are your family too, you know,” she said in response.

Tony thought of the glass case that was now sitting down in his lab. The one that was currently housing his old arc reactor. When he’d stumbled onto the package while he was waiting for Steve to return home, Tony written into the impeccable wrapping paper in Pepper’s neat scrawl, Tony had been ecstatic. Pepper had always been the best at gift giving – another superpower, Tony was convinced. How she managed to find something for him, the man who had everything, was increasingly mind-boggling.

But he never could have seen this gift coming. She’d made the old reactor look almost beautiful, housing in simply in a way made it seem decadent, priceless even. PROOF THAT TONY STARK HAS A HEART was engraved into the lower casing. When did she even have time to put this together? He had just seen her hours before. To get this done, she’d have had to march straight down to R&D for them to throw something together immediately. Knowing Pepper, that’s exactly what she did.

He hadn’t seen much of her after his announcement. He was trying to lay low at the speakeasy to remain out of the public eye, while Pepper was trying to put out fires at the office. In fact, the only time they’d gotten together was when Tony replaced his arc reactor earlier that day – and hadn’t that gone swimmingly.

But somehow, in the midst of everything else, Pepper had managed to surprise him, yet again. But that was so Pepper; going miles out of her way just to make sure she got her point across. Sneaking into the speakeasy, a place she’d avoided like the plague, only to show Tony a glimpse of what she saw through her eyes. A sliver of the humanity that Tony thought he’d lost long ago.

It was moments like that that showed Tony how much he relied on Pepper, on how he needed her in his life. She was his lighthouse, a constant beam of light and security that he would be lost without.

“I know,” Tony smiled in response. And he did. She and Rhodey had been with him since the beginning. And they were here still. They were part of the family that he wouldn’t trade for the world.

“It’s just,” she sighed, “we’ve seen a lot of people walk in and out of your life. And each time they do, they take a little piece of you with them. I know you’re invested, I know you love them. I’m just worried about what will happen if they decide to leave too. I’m afraid there won’t be much of
“They won’t leave.” I know that now, Tony didn’t add.

“I know you know more about them than I ever will. But I’ll always worry about you. I just want you to be happy.”

“Well, with everything going on, it’s going to be a little hard for me to be happy,” Tony chided. Pepper slapped his chest. “You know what I mean,” she laughed. Another long pause stretched between the pair before she added, “You’re sure about this?”

“I’ve never been more sure about anything else, Pepper. I have a responsibility to see this through. For my family.”

Pepper sighed again, nodding slightly. “Alright, then. I’m in.”

Tony sputtered. “Really? That’s all it took? A cheesy one-liner and now you trust one of New York’s biggest mobs?”

“I don’t have to trust them, I just have to trust you.”

Tony bit his lip. “And do you?”

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.”

Tony felt his heart swelling. Even when he had nothing, Pepper was still there.

“Oh, God,” Pepper sighed.

“What?”

“People are staring,” she said, looking over his shoulder.

“So?”

“So? Well, you’re my boss, and we’re dancing, and I’m in this ridiculous dress.”

Tony snorted. “Your virtue is safe, darling. I’m a taken man.”

Pepper gave him a long glance. “You’re serious about him,” she said matter-of-factly. “I can tell that he really loves you.”

Tony flushed again, clearing his throat. “Well, that’s good,” he croaked. “Because I also, you know, like him, uh, like that.”

“You are such a child,” she scolded fondly.

He shot her a winning grin and spun her around the room, the pair gliding easily along with the orchestra. When the song ended, Pepper pulled away, patting at his chest.

“Go get me a drink Mr. Stark,” Pepper sighed. “If I’m going to deal with the rest of these antiques, I’m going to need another martini.”

“You got it, Ms. Potts.”

He stepped away from the dance floor, expertly dodging the milling bystanders. He thought he saw
Obie’s large frame across the room and made a point to catch him on his way out. The bar was surprisingly empty, most of the patrons already out and about, bragging to one another about their endless wealth. “Martini,” he told the bartender, leaning over the tabletop. “Extra everything.”

The man nodded and walked away, starting to fix the drink.

“Tony Stark.”

Tony grimaced, slow to turn around. Despite what he’d told Steve, he had no interest in talking with any of New York’s elite. His departure from the speakeasy was more for Steve’s doing. He didn’t get a chance to know the rest of The Commandos before they’d disappeared, and he seemed almost out of place to be there with them while they were grieving. That, and there was probably a good chance that Steve was still going to tell Clint about what happened with Phil. He promised Steve he’d make himself scarce for that conversation, for good reason.

When he finally spun around, he paused, taking in the woman in front of him. She was beautiful, crystal eyes with blonde hair pinned perfectly, dressed in a glittering gown that accented her deadly curves. She was exactly the type of woman he would usually go for – for a time that seemed like an entire lifetime ago. In fact, by the way she was looking at him, the more he thought that he had already make a move in the past. He peeked down at her manicured hands and – oh, now I remember. Blurred images of wandering hands and empty laughs flashed through his head. How had they met? Tony had won an award for something?

The woman continued to glare at him. Right, name. He bit his lip, hoping that maybe he remembered that as well, but to no avail. Apparently, she wasn’t worth remembering. By the look in her intelligent eyes and her cruel smirk, it finally hit him. She’s a reporter. That’s why. Tony remember her boasting about her being a rising star; Tony had been more interested in the curve of her backside.

“Tony,” she snapped again.

“Uh, hey,” he started. What was her name… something with a ‘C’? “Carrie?”

“Christine,” he corrected sourly.

“Right,” he confirmed.

“You have a lot of nerve showing up here tonight.” she scolded. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

Tony startled at her tone. Was she that put out that he never called? “I’m sorry?”

Christine laughed. “You know, I almost bought it. That bullshit speech you gave about ending weapons manufacturing? I should have known it wasn’t real.”

Tony shot her a cold glare. “I was out of town for a few months, well, under it. That was real.”

“Is this what you call accountability?” She pushed a picture into his unwilling hand. Tony gave it a cursory glance, eyeing the dead bodies littered with his weapons that looked back up at him.

Tony sighed. “Listen, there’s still a war going on. The supply has been cut off, but the US army has to meet me halfway. They want guns out of terrorists’ hands? I’ve down my part, now they should do theirs.”

“This wasn’t taken in the Middle East. This is in New York.”
Tony froze, staring back at the picture. He looked closer and – *Oh, God.* That was Raza.

“When were these taken?”

“My informant from the NYPD gave them to me this morning. Someone found the bodies washed up on the shore. Ballistics report confirm your weapons, Stark.”

“I didn’t approve this,” Tony whispered, mostly to himself.

“Yeah, well your company did.”

“I am *not* my company,” Tony snarled, stomping away from Christine, photos still in hand. He needed answers. *Now.*

He found Obie on the steps, posing for the paparazzi. He loved doing it, and the paps loved him for loving it. Tony remembered asking him about it one day. *“It’s a reminder of power, boy. Each flash is another step closer to the top.”*

He could see him laughing, schmoozing with the reporters like he usually did, but Tony couldn’t wait. He grabbed at Stane’s shoulder and yanked him around, showing him the photos out of any camera’s eyeline.

“Tony, my boy, what are you-”

“Have you seen these?”

Obie cast a quick glance down before scoffing. *Yes, he definitely has.* “Tony, Tony, you can’t afford to be this naïve.”

“I was naïve before, Obie,” he hissed. “But I remember our conversation. I told you that there was a line, a line we wouldn’t cross. Are you dealing under the table to mobs?”

Obie sighed. “Tony, you have to understand-”

“It’s a yes or no question! Do you even know who these people are?” he cried, pointing to the picture.


“So you admit it, you admit to selling to them? Jesus, Obie, these are the ones-”

“I admit to killing them.”

Tony froze, gaping at the other man. Since when did Obie ever get his hands dirty? “Obie, what the hell?”

The other man shrugged, waving at someone over Tony’s shoulder. “Deal didn’t go the way I wanted,” he answered, almost distracted.


Obie met his gaze and for a moment, Tony was afraid, catching a glimpse of something – of someone – he’d never seen before. “You know how I feel about failure. I have no tolerance for it and they didn’t get the job done.”
And with that, he walked away. Tony stood shock still, the voices around him muffling, time slowly.

They didn’t get the job done.

They didn’t get the job done.

They didn’t get the job done.

Oh, God.

“Wow, you’re actually back on time. Color me impressed.”

Tony didn’t even acknowledge the snide comment. He couldn’t focus, he couldn’t think, he couldn’t breathe-

“Shit, Tasha go get Steve.” Hands grabbed at his shoulders, one warm, one cool. “Stark, Tony, are you okay? Are you hurt? Should I go get Bruce?”

Tony shook his head, hands balled into fists at his sides. Maybe he shouldn’t have come home. Everything was too close, he needed air, he needed-

“Tony!” Steve.

Warm hands were grabbing at his face, forcing Tony to meet the gaze of an endless sea. “Are you alright?”

No. Nothing was right, nothing was ever right. Whenever he thought that he’d had enough, life had a way of reminding him that he wasn’t in charge. How the hell did it come to this?

“I’m sorry,” Tony croaked, looking at the group. “I-I didn’t know.”

“Didn’t know what?” Bucky replied.

Tony scoffed, wiping his eyes. “It turns out that going on national television and shutting down my weapons division doesn’t mean shit if my CFO is still selling under the table.”

Steve sucked in a breath through his teeth, muttering a quick breath. “I’m sorry, Tony.” His voice dripped with sincerity. Steve didn’t even like Obie. Said he had a bad feeling about him. He should have listened, he should have listened. “At least you know, now. You’ll put an end to it, I’m sure.”

Tony shook his head. They weren’t getting it. “He sold to the Ten Rings. That’s how they had all those weapons when I was kidnapped.”

“Shit,” Bucky whispered.

“Why the hell would he-” Tony handed Steve the picture that Christine had given him, cutting off Steve’s reply. “What is this?”

“The last of the Ten Rings. NYPD finally found their bodies. Autopsy shows that they were killed using my guns.”

Steve frowned, looking over the photo. “Maybe one of them went rogue, taking out the rest of them?”
“It definitely wasn’t us,” Bucky added. “No way in hell anyone’s found when I hid our bodies.”

Tony shook his head. “Obi- Stane told me he did it.”

Steve furrowed his brow. “He sold them a bunch of guns, just to kill them?”

“He killed them because they failed to do their job,” Tony answered hollowing.

“What job? Tony-”

“You know what they call us?” Tony asked, voice hollow. “The military? They have a term they use for weapon dealers. They call us war mongers.”

He saw Steve pale. “Monger,” he whispered. “Oh, Tony. Tony, tell me he’s not-”

“I didn’t know,” Tony babbled, body shaking. “You have to believe me, I didn’t know, I didn’t know it was him.”

Strong arms engulfed him, pressing him into Steve’s chest. He shushed Tony, rubbing his hand along Tony’s back, kissing his forehead gently. He could even feel Barnes rest a metal hand against his shoulder. “Of course we believe you,” Steve soothed. “Jesus, Tony, I’m so sorry.”

Tony pulled away, shuddering at the cold space that now surrounded him. He shrugged, disassociating. “I should’ve known. I should have seen this, but I was so blind. Not anymore,” he vowed. “I’m going to kill him myself.”

He tried to shove past the two men, intent on grabbing the first gun that he saw, but Steve stopped him. “Tony, wait-”

“Steve, get out of my way. I need to-”

“This is good news,” Steve replied, eyes far away in thought.

“Stevie,” Barnes hissed.

“You better choose your next words carefully, Rogers,” Tony snarled, slapping at where the blonde was holding him.

“Jeez, not like that Tony! You don’t think I want to go and squeeze the life out of him myself?”

“Then you must be mad. Did you miss everything I just said?”

“No.”

“Then what am I missing here!” Tony cried.

“Fury.” That single word stopped Tony in his tracks, his brain already whizzing back to a previous conversation that he had with Steve. “Listen,” Steve continued. “I can’t imagine what this is like for you, and if you tell me you want to go and kill him right now, I’ll drive you there, but just maybe…” he trailed off.

Maybe this is what we needed to save the family.

“What are you talking about?” Bucky asked.

Tony sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. “Fury is undercover with the FBI, and he has Coulson
in custody.” Barnes nodded, already aware of that from Tony just hours previous. “Steve and I, well, we needed a way to get him out, and we talked about cutting another deal with Fury.”

“What are you nuts?” Barnes cried.

“We can’t leave Phil behind,” Steve argued. “Think about Clint! We have enough intel on Pierce, and now Stane, to cut another deal. Don’t forget that the FBI is after them too.”

“Yeah, and us! What if Fury says no and arrests you,” Bucky snapped.

“Can we talk about this later?” Tony asked, already rubbing his temples, the impending migraine looming. “I just- I need to-” he walked away without finishing, ignoring Steve’s calls.

“You know how I feel about failure. I have no tolerance for it and they didn’t get the job done.”

Tony bit his lip to keep from screaming, swiping a full bottle from the bar before retreating down to his lab.

Steve sighed, wiping a hand across his face. He was tired, he was so damn tired, but he didn’t dare move. He sat at their meeting table, eyes watching members of his family filter in and out as the night progressed. Watching for the one member that had yet to appear.

JARVIS had confirmed that Tony had locked himself in his lab, overwhelmed by grief. He knew there was something wrong with Stane, he just couldn’t figure it out in time. A common trend for him, unfortunately. God, if he’d only been quicker. If he’d only seen what was right in front of his goddamned eyes, Tony might have been spared.

No point dwelling on it. All he could do now is count the minutes until Tony returned. As much as it would hurt him, they needed to finish their conversation about Fury. A throat clearing caught his attention.

Bucky stared at him from across the room, eyes challenging. The gaze flicked over to Clint before returning to him. He knew. Knew about Phil. Tony must have told him, if their previous conversation was any indication. Steve wasn’t upset that he did, Bucky needed to hear the news almost as much as Clint, but there was still a painful tug in his chest that he wasn’t the one to do it. Seeing as this was the first time that Bucky was confronting Steve – if he could even call it that – about Phil, even when the pair were alone together after Tony left for the gala, it didn’t bode well. Bucky had quite the reputation of going and licking his wounds in private. And if Tony was the one to spill the beans to him, even with their newfound olive branch, Bucky wouldn’t have allowed himself to be that vulnerable in front of the other man. Bucky would rarely do it in front of Steve.

Steve took a step towards Bucky, but was stopped by the man’s answering glare. He jerked his head over to Clint. Apparently, Bucky still wasn’t in the mood to deal with the news about Phil. Tell him, that stare said. Tell him, or I will.

Steve sighed in defeat, looking at where Clint was sitting quietly at the bar, cleaning his gun. It wasn’t as if this wasn’t the plan – Steve knew that he had to tell Clint as soon as possible – but it didn’t make it any less hard.

Clint had been doing so well, lately. Well being a relative term, of course. But it seemed that it the recent weeks there had been tiny slivers, echoes of a Clint that the team had been long since buried alongside Phil. But telling him this? Well, Steve honestly didn’t know how Clint would respond. And that was what terrified him the most. Steve didn’t miss the irony of the situation; who knew that such could news would potentially have the most devastating reactions.
“Clint?”

The man looked up as Steve approached. “Hey, man,” he answered sullenly. Right, Steve thought, stomach dropping. He’s barely had time to grieve the loss of the rest of The Commandos, and now Steve was going to drop this bomb on him.

“Can I talk to you for a second?”

The archer nodded automatically, putting down his gun to give Steve his full attention. “Not here,” Steve continued. “Let’s go up to my office, alright?”

The smaller man relented, walking towards the stairs like a kid walking to the principal’s office. Steve stopped to give a final glance to Bucky, and man worrying his hands together, distressed eyes watching Clint’s retreating figure.

The stroll to his office seemed shorter than usual, Steve’s brain frantically thinking of something to say, anything to say, that would make this easier for Clint. But there was nothing. Any stability that he had found over the last few months were to be destroyed, brought crashing to the ground by Steve.

Clint was already sitting in the chair opposite his desk when he walked in. Steve sighed, wishing Tony was by his side. He was always stronger with him there. Man up, Rogers, he thought to himself. He heaved out a heavy sigh and crept over to him desk, sitting in his own chair silently.

Clint gave him a long look. “Well?”

“Clint, I- ” Steve broke off. “Clint, I’m not really even sure how to tell you this.”

Clint already started to show signs of worry – for good reason – and Steve couldn’t look away. Maybe he should have let Bucky tell him. Hell, even Tony. Give him a gun, and he could walk into any room, no matter the odds. He wasn’t scared of the violence, he secretly craved it. But this? He didn’t have the stomach for this; the ability to admit his failure.

Steve Rogers had always been a weak man.

“What’s wrong?”

Steve swallowed thickly. “It’s about Phil.”
“Are you sure about this?”

Tony shrugged, leaning against the door jam in Steve’s office. “You said it yourself, no man left behind, right? Well, the ones that are still alive, anyway.”

Steve dropped his head, his heart constricting at the thought of The Commandos, uncaringly thrown into a pile and left to rot. They were probably nothing more than ash, now. No more, will he hear Dum-Dum’s jovial laugh, echoing through the halls. No more cooking experiments from Dernier – French cuisine, he called it. No more smiles shared with Jones, no more drunken nights with Falsworth. It was becoming increasingly devastating, this part of him, that retained a sliver of hope. That the rest of them had left of their own volition, as Steve had pushed them too so often. That his crew would flourish, enough so that one day they could go straight. That HYDRA would have stayed gone.

He remembered his mother always praising this part of him. “You are a beacon of inspiration,” she had said. “You bring out the best in people. With this outlook, there is nothing you can’t achieve.” But she was wrong. Optimism has brought him nothing but pain and grief.

Wishes are nothing more than narcotics for the hopeless, dreams a sham for the innocent. He was naive if he thought those empty thoughts would work.

“Hey.”

He looked up to see that Tony had crossed the threshold to come stand in front of him. He reached out with a warm hand, calloused digits caressing his neck and cheek. “I’m sorry,” Tony continued.

Steve shook his head, turning it slightly to kiss the insides of Tony’s palm. “Wasn’t your fault.”

“And it wasn’t yours,” the brunette pushed. “Nothing we can do for them now except avenge them. That’s us now, The Avengers.”

Steve hummed, flopping his head down to rest against Tony’s stomach. No point getting that argument going again.

“Alright, big guy,” Tony continued, pulling at Steve’s shirt. “Off to bed with you.”

“I’m not tired,” Steve answered automatically.

“I didn’t ask if you were tired,” Tony rumbled. “You just survived a collapsing building, which, by the way, you are so not off the hook for. You need to lay down.”

Steve snorted. How he’d survived the rest of Tony’s wrath this long was a miracle. “Alright,” he agreed. “Come with me.”

“Maybe later,” Tony sighed. “I need some time to think.”

Steve wanted to argue. He wanted to clamber into bed with Tony next to him, his lithe body fitting perfectly against his. He wanted to hold him close and breathe in his scent, wanted to reassure him that the fight was still worth it. That not all had been lost yet. He needed Tony to be there when his eyes shut all for the reason of encouragement to open them back up and keep moving forward.
But he didn’t.

Whether or not he was malignant towards Stane from the beginning, Tony viewed him as family. To say this news of his betrayal would be devastating is an understatement. Even Howard had nothing but good things to say about him back in the day.

Steve shuddered. How far did Stane’s betrayal go back? How involved was he in the deaths of the last Stark generation? Tony was the last one standing in the way before assuming full control of the company. Stane had tried to get rid of Tony once already, but yet, he hadn’t tried again after his first failed attempt. He was waiting for something.

“Steve?”

Steve blinked, following Tony’s gaze to where his hands were digging into the smaller man’s sides. Just the thought of Stane getting anywhere close to Tony again was enough to make his blood boil.

Steve relinquished his grip, running a quick thumb over Tony’s hands as a silent apology. “Okay,” he finally relented. “Don’t stay up too late,” he added, getting out of his office chair. “And if you need anything?”

“I’ll know where to find you,” Tony shot back, giving Steve a weak smile.

Steve bent forward, brushing his lips against Tony’s temple before pulling back, stepping away and out of the office, leaving Tony alone with his thoughts.

He wasn’t surprised when he woke up alone.

Steve sighed, shuffling under the covers as he stretched his arm out to Tony’s side of the bed. It was cold, undisturbed – the way it had remained all night.

Steve had known that there was a good chance that Tony would never come to bed, but he still couldn’t help but feel upset, a small gnawing grief that sat in the pit of his stomach, that Tony chose to lick his wounds in private rather than share them with Steve. It was irrational of course – it wasn’t as if Steve had always been forthcoming with his issues. But Tony had remained by his sides anyway. And if that’s all Steve could do, that’s all he would.

If anything, this worked out better for Steve. If Tony had fallen asleep in his lab, it would be easier for Steve to slip out of the speakeasy unnoticed. He knew what he said, he knew what he promised Tony. Trying to negotiate with Fury was their only option, the only way that they could potentially come out with some semblance of a win. This situation was bigger than them. HYDRA needed to be stopped, and they couldn’t get greedy. With Pierce controlling the NYPD and Stane running guns to anyone that was remotely criminal, New York City was just steps away from becoming a war zone.

Tony and Steve had made the decision to take the brunt of the fall in order to deal with Fury. With both of them together, they should have enough to entice the him to come to some sort of plea for the rest of the family. But after heading to bed last night, Steve had tossed and turned at the thought of Tony in an orange jumpsuit. It was a recurring nightmare, popping up ever since Tony had become more involved with The Commandos. Tony had spent years riding coattails and hiding in the shadows, dabbling in the criminal world just to satisfy his appetite. But he wasn’t an accessory anymore. By Tony jumping on their bandwagon full heartedly, he’d become more desperate, sloppy even. Now, he’s backed into a wall like the rest of them, facing down the barrel of a full life sentence.
Not on my watch. If Steve could do one final thing for Tony and for the rest of his family, is give them a chance to continue to live their life. After everything that he’d put them through, it was the least he could do for them. Especially since they’d given him so much. Which is why he planned on slipping out of the speakeasy now, planning to meet Fury alone.

He knew Tony would be pissed, probably even murderous, once he found out what Steve had done, but there was no changing his mind on this. The FBI would love to finally bag Tony Stark, but he wasn’t sure that they would. He was an asset for them, and if anything, they would lock him down with unbreakable contracts. Steve, however. Steve was a cash cow. He’d been on watch and wanted lists for longer than he could remember. And since Steve already knew everything that Tony did, there was no reason why he needed to be involved in this anymore.

He dressed silently, afraid that a single noise could alert the rest of the group. He peeked out into the hallway, empty, just as he had assumed. Creeping down the main floor of the speakeasy, Steve thought about asking JARVIS to confirm that he wouldn’t run into anyone else, but he refrained. Knowing his luck, JARVIS would alert Tony. He could already feel an air of judgement as he walked passed JARVIS’s cameras. Luckily, the ground floor was just as barren, his family still tucked in their bets. Safe. As they should be.

Steve took a final look around the dimly lit room before turning, jogging up the stairs and out of the speakeasy.

He wasn’t exactly sure what his plan was when he walked into 1 Police Plaza. The NYPD headquarters was teeming with both security and tourists. Not to mention that all of the employees the building housed were experienced police officers. No, he couldn’t exactly walk up to the receptionist and ask for a walk-in with New York’s Police Commissioner.

Couldn’t he? It wasn’t like he had any other type of plan. Causing any sort of scene would get him arrester on sight, and there was no way they’d let him near Fury after that. Trying to sneak through the building seemed to have a similar outcome.

This is why he needed Tony. The man hadn’t mentioned any semblance of a plan on how they were to get past the front desk when they were to come together, but Steve hadn’t worried. Being a prominent and very public figure, Tony Stark’s name just had a way of opening doors. Well, so did Steve’s, but in his case, it was usually only doors to jail cells.

Steve sighed, looking around the grand foyer again. There was no good way to make any further progress. This was a dumb idea. He needed to regroup and scout the building. Regardless, he had to find something fast. Tony would be up soon, if he wasn’t already, and once he found that Steve wasn’t in his head, it wouldn’t be hard for the other man to put two and two together on where he’d gone.

“Can I help you?” a voice sounded behind him.

Steve spun around, brain scrambling for a response. Any answer he could have concocted fell apart when he saw who was speaking to him. A woman in a hard stance, with an equally stern face, glared up at him.

Hill. Fury’s right-hand woman.

“Uh,” Steve answered eloquently.

“Can I help you?” she asked again. “Captain?”
Steve froze. Oh God, this was a mistake. She knew who he was. If she knew, that meant that Fury knew. What else does she know? Steve gaped, head snapping around the surrounding patrons in the room. Was this a trap? Bucky had warned him about this, back when he threatened to walk into a simple precinct when Tony was kidnapped. And now here he was, in the NYPD headquarters of all places.

Steve bristled, his jaw clenching. This doesn’t change anything. Sure, Hill threw a wrench in things and pushed everything ahead of schedule, but Steve was an idiot if he thought that he would be getting out of here without being clapped in handcuffs. But that was the plan that he and Tony decided on – wearing the handcuffs so no one else would have.

“Yes,” he finally answered, staring back at Hill. “Yes, you can.”

She raised a single eyebrow, face still blank.

“I’m here to see Fury.” Steve continued.

Hill hummed. “With me,” she answered, not even waiting for his response before turning on her heel and heading towards the elevators in the back. Steve scrambled to follow, trailing behind the woman like a lost puppy. He continued to cast side eyes as they progressed, watching for any sign that was going to immediately turn south. In doing so, he almost missed Hill reach into her back pocket and thrust the contents back towards him, without turning around.

A visitors pass.

Steve paused again, fingers tentatively curling around the laminated plastic. Apparently, Hill knowing that he was The Captain wasn’t the worst thing. It was that she knew he was coming here. Another urge to sprint out the front door engulfed him, but Steve refused to stray from his current path. If this was inevitable, he should be counting his blessings that he decided to come alone. Tony would be spared what was to happen on the other side of those elevator doors.

The pair stepped into the lift, the doors shutting behind them with a small thud. It was a silent ride upwards, for which Steve was very grateful. His thoughts were scattered and frantic. It was if subconsciously, Steve had known that he wasn’t going to get in here without Tony, but now that he had, he realized that he had no further plan. What would he even say to Fury? Would he just be arrested on the spot?

The ding from the elevator sounded like a death bell tolling, causing Steve to jump. The doors slid open and the pair stepped out to see a plethora of cubicles, all cleared out. On the far wall stood a single door, closed, staring back at Steve ominously.

“He’s waiting for you,” Hill said, pointing at the door. Again, without waiting for a response, she turned and was gone, heading back into the elevator. Maybe to head back to the ground floor, waiting for the next wayward soul to drag into the belly of the beast.

Steve paused a final time, hand hovering over the door handle. He’d made a lot of stupid decisions this year, but this would take the cake. But he knew that he was going to do it anyway. Stupid or not, Steve knew it was the only chance he had to get Phil back and secure the rest of his family. He just hoped that what he had to offer was enough to get everything he wanted in return. Nodding to himself, Steve turned the knob and opened the door, stepping through the threshold.

The office was bare, impersonal even, and Steve couldn’t help but think back to when he first stepped into Tony’s office. Both were just covers; no real work was done here.
“You have to understand. I can’t stop, I won’t stop being this way. I’ll do anything to keep you safe,” he had whispered, forehead pressed against Tony’s as they lay together on the plush carpet of his office. “I’ll do anything not to lose you again. Tony, I love you.”

It was the first time he had told Tony, with cheeks flushed and pulse racing, much like he was a fumbling high-schooler all over again. But he’d never forget the way Tony had looked at him. How he’d kissed him, how he’d held him. It was in that moment that he knew that he was completely whole. Knew that he wasn’t too late this time.

A chair creaked, and Steve’s focus snapped to the center of the room, where Commissioner Fury was turning in his chair to face him.

Steve wasn’t sure what he was expecting when he finally looked at Fury. Tony had been more than descriptive of the man – well, mostly about his eyepatch, but it was Tony, so that was hardly surprising. And while the eyepatch did offer a certain malice, it was the rest of his face that left Steve uneasy. Fury’s face was hardened, much like Hill’s, but instead of the blank slate his Number 2 wore, his showed one that was blatantly unimpressed. By the age lines that flowed with the expression, Steve guessed it was a face that he worse often. His eye that wasn’t covered was darker than his skin but was still mesmerizing as it caught Steve’s gaze. It was piercing, intelligent. It reminded Steve of a movie Tony made him sit through; that burning eye in a tower, always watching.

Steve watched as the all-knowing eye give him a once over, scanning him slowly, before slipping back over to the left, looking at one of the chairs that was faced away from the door.

**Fury wasn’t alone.**

Steve fumbled, still focused on that sharp stare, his entire argument evaporating from his mind. All he could think of, was his mother, yelling in his ear about manners. “Sorry,” Steve blurted. “I-I didn’t realize you were with someone. I’ll come-” he tailed off when he saw the person Fury was meeting with flounder at the sound of his voice. A familiar mop of unruly, and a pair of equally unruly eyes, peeked at him from over the chair back.

“Tony,” he breathed. The engineer just sighed, flopping back against his chair, refusing to respond. “What are you doing here?”

“The same thing as you, if I had to guess,” Fury interjected. His voice was smooth but carried the threat of easily turning sharp at a moment’s notice.

“Did you tell him anything?” Steve pressed, ignoring the policeman. **God,** if he was too late, if Tony had shouldered the whole burden… Steve didn’t know what he would do. Get on his knees and plead with the Commissioner to take him instead? Kill him?

The whole reason he had come early was to avoid this situation entirely. It was the only way he could finally do right by Tony. Sure, he’s not exactly a model citizen, but Steve’s laundry list is a lot longer than Tony’s. It would have been more than enough to get Fury to set up a deal. Tony could have the chance of new life, a fresh opportunity without Stane of HYDRA hiding in the shadows. He could move on, forget about this patchwork life he was trying to make work, and start over with a blank slate.

*There was only one way to get that clean canvas again. To paint over his old life and pretend that no one from his past would be able to chip through.*

The searing anger that was building in his chest diffused upon meeting Tony’s eyes.
He was here because he wanted the same thing for Steve.

“Did you tell him anything?” Steve asked again, softly this time, eyes welling as they stared into Tony’s. *Please say no.*

Tony shook his head quickly. Steve could see him wringing his hands, yanking and pinching at his calloused skin. It was a common practice of his, one that Steve had been privy too many times. It was if Tony had a sliver of him that was the same as the machines he worked on. He was always moving in some way shape or form – pacing throughout his lab, gesturing animatedly with his hands as he spoke, feet tapping in time with the clicks of his fingers against a keyboard, head bobbing as he worked over open guts of a car. Steve had found that Tony even twitched in his sleep, murmuring something unintelligible before twisting around to burrow into Steve’s side. There was only one time that Steve had seen Tony still, and it was when he was laying small in frail in bed, after being pulled from the bowels of the New York underground. It was a scene that Steve prayed he never saw again.

Steve liked to think of these movements, these reactions, as a personification of Tony’s brain. His thoughts, his ideas. His ingenuity was always flowing, his genius always turning gears.

Or like now, where Tony was almost chastising himself, each nervous jerk of his hands a negative reinforcement as he pushed himself to find a solution. It was as if his brain was shouting at Tony clearly in the room. *Solve the problem! Why haven’t you got an answer yet? Fix it, fix it, fix it!*

Steve couldn’t begin to imagine the scenarios the man was chugging through in his head. Formulating numbers and outcomes in milliseconds, searching desperately for a way to win. No doubt his head was mostly filled with ideas on how to get Steve out of the room. Keeping his eyes locked with Tony, Steve stepped right next to him, dropping in the chair next to him. *I’m not leaving without you,* he tried to convey.

Tony looked away, head dipping back down to his lap. Steve could see the other man bit down on his lip, so hard that the skin turned ashen white.

“Two visitors in one day? Fury drawled. “It must be my lucky day.”

Tony shot the man a dirty stare, but otherwise didn’t respond. Steve looked back at Fury, pondering the correct thing to say. He had to tread lightly.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your company?” Fury pressed. “Stark, I believe you had something to say.”

Steve shot a hand out and gripped at Tony’s arm on impulse, a silent plea for the man to keep his mouth shut. Tony yanked away but obliged, watching Steve with careful eyes, ready to jump in at a moment’s notice.

“He was just going to tell you that I was running late,” Steve lied. “Ran into traffic.”

“Is that so?” The tone was light, but Steve could tell that Fury already knew he was lying.

Steve huffed out a deep breath. “We haven’t had the pleasure of meeting yet. I’m-”

Fury held up a hand to cut him off. “I know who you are.”

*No shit,* Steve thought to himself. Fury obviously had to have known about the involvement of The Captain of The Commandos and Tony Stark to at least some degree. But, with Hill’s stint in the lobby proved that Fury must also know what he looks like. So while part of their bargaining chip
was gone, they still had Steve’s name to offer.

“Well,” Steve continued. “Not completely, Sir, and that’s part of the reason we’re here. We think
that- ”

“I know who you are,” Fury boomed in a droll tone. “Steve Rogers.”

Steve could see Tony stiffen in his chair minutely in his peripheral. How the hell could Fury
know? Phil telling him was out of the question. Phil had told Tony that Fury knew what he needed
to know about the situation – about Pierce. Everything else was irrelevant, and a way to protect the
crew from the FBI. Knowing Phil, he’d given up anything necessary, but would leave anything
incriminating about the rest of the crew out of it.

Fury smiled at the pair of them. “I hope you brought something more interesting than that. It’s
going to take a little more to impress me.”

“How- ” Steve started.

“Don’t waste my time,” came Fury’s response. “It will take a little more to surprise me, Rogers.
Now, let’s cut the shit. Tell me why you’re here.”

“Why bother?” Steve shrugged. “You already know why we’re here.”

Fury smiled. “You’re here to strike a deal.”

“What makes you say that?” Tony asked.

“Because I offered to work with you months ago, Stark. And you told me to shove it where the sun
don’t shine,” snapped Fury. “Now, you’re a very proud man. There’s no way you’d come crawling
back to me out of your own volition.” At Tony’s silence, he continued. “I will hand it to you. I
didn’t think you would make it as long as you did. Color me impressed.”

“I have a knack for exceeding expectations,” Tony grinned, shark-like.

“Yes, quite the cockroach, aren’t you?”

Steve clenched his fists. “We’re here for Phil.”

Any hope of catching Fury off guard was quickly stamped out, as Fury’s stone-cold expression
shifted over to him. “Officer Coulson? He’s dead. Lost in the line of fire to gang violence. We held
a memorial for him not too long ago; he was a good man.”

“If he’s dead,” Tony started, “then I just had a hell of a conversation with a ghost a few days ago.”

That did get a reaction, as Fury’s jaw jutted slightly. “Is that so?” he grit out.

“And he had quite the story to tell,” Tony grinned. “I find it odd, your choice of words today. Odd
that you’re so quick to celebrate me falling to my knees and crawling back to you for information,
when I hear that you’ve been doing the exact same thing.”

“Tony,” Steve warned, eyes not leaving Fury’s face, but it fell on unheard ears.

“You sit there like you’re so high and mighty, but you can’t even seem to manage your local
precincts, let alone Manhattan. Who’s begging for scraps now?” Tony hissed.

“Tony!” The man reared back towards him with a growl, and Steve caught a faint glimpse of the
reason why Tony Stark was known as ruthless in the boardroom, before his face softened, Hyde returning to skulk behind the cowl of Jekyll.

“Look,” Steve sighed. “We can play this game all day, just sitting around trying to one-up each other with what we know. But this is a waste of all of our efforts. You know that we wouldn’t be here if we didn’t need something from you,” he continued, looking at Fury. “Just as we know you’d never agree to having a meeting with you us without immediate arrest if you didn’t need something from us.”

Fury leaned back in his chair but said nothing. Steve took that as a sign that he still had the floor. “Now, about Phil. Obviously you know the extent of our relationship.”

“Turns out Phil Coulson leads quite the exciting life,” Fury quipped.

“I’m sure we don’t know the half of it,” Steve smiled in return. “But Phil is innocent, well, most innocent, out of the rest of us. We know that he cut a deal for us at the price of his freedom. We’d like to make some alterations to the deal.”

“That deal is already cut and dried. Coulson’s confessed; there isn’t anything you can do for him now.”

“And what if we offer you something better?” Tony questioned.

“What? Like Alexander Pierce? We already know he’s with HYDRA, thanks to Phil Coulson. We’re conducting our own investigation of him.”

“If you already know about Pierce, then why the hell haven’t you done something about him?” Tony grit out.

“Because believe it or not, Mr. Stark, there are rules in the justice system. I can’t just have someone meet him in a dark alley to take care of the problem,” Fury responded, before turning to look at Steve. “That is how you have Barnes do it, right?”

Steve bit down hard on his lip, coppery liquid filling the inside of his mouth. This was a mistake. Fury was a mistake. Every time he opened his mouth it was to block and parry with ease, cutting down each of their own remarks. We need something else.

“What about the files?” He could feel Tony’s glare, the man obviously not happy with him jumping the gun.

“The files,” Fury repeated.

“The SSR files,” Steve responded. “If you know my real name, then you must know that I used to run with them, correct?” At Fury’s nod, Steve continued. “There were more than enough rumors about the massive wealth of information that they had collected over the years. I can tell you they’re real.”

Fury leaned back in his chair. “When I was younger, just a beat cop, I remember bringing this guy in. We’d been chasing him for years but we just couldn’t pin him. One day, well, it was almost as if he’d just fallen right into our laps, handcuffs already on.” The man rubbed a hand over his bald head. “When I asked him how he’d managed to slip up, he said he pissed off the Librarians.”

Steve couldn’t help but smile. *The Librarians.* An old nickname, one he hadn’t heard in a long time. Many in the criminal community called the ever elusive SSR files held more secrets than the lost Library of Alexandria. ‘*Treat their works with respect, don’t anger the staff, and never return*
“You mess up once and you’re banned from the Library. For life.”

“The SSR was responsible for putting a lot of people behind bars,” Steve stated. That was, until HYDRA got sick of the status quo and murdered them all.

Fury hummed. “Those must be some files.”

“You have no idea,” Steve confessed. “I’ve talked it over with Tony,” he lied with a nod towards the man on his left. “We’re willing to give you access to some of them if you help us take down Pierce and Stane.”

“Well, that’s all well and good,” Fury agreed. “But you don’t have the files, do you? Pierce does.”

Tony threw his hands in the air. “How the hell could you possibly know that?”

“You aren’t the one ones with plants in the NYPD,” Fury replied. “Not that I needed them. The whole precinct is abuzz. Pierce has claimed to have stumbled onto The Great Library. Quite a find, according to him. He said his men were out on a simple drug bust when they managed to find them.”

It wasn’t as if Fury’s declaration should have been shocking. It was easy enough to assume that HYDRA managed to find the files – although he still wasn’t sure how yet. *Some drug bust my ass.* What didn’t make sense was why Pierce had been spreading the news like wildfire. “Why would he report this to the NYPD? The information collected is priceless.”

“I was hoping you could tell me,” said Fury. “You were the head Librarian. What sort of things did the SSR have?”

This time it was Tony who held a finger up to stop Steve. “What do we get it we tell you?”

“How about I don’t immediately arrest your ass?”

Tony crossed his arms. “You don’t have anything on us.”

“I’m sure I can find something,” Fury deadpanned. “I can get pretty creative.”

“Can we focus, please?” Steve interjected. “Listen, Fury, we’re on your side here. We want Pierce and HYDRA gone for good, but Tony’s right. We’ll help you in any way that he can, but not without a price.”

Fury leaned forward, head steepled in his fingers. “And what price would that be?”

“Immunity,” Steve answered quickly. “For us and the whole crew. And that includes Phil.”

“No way,” Fury answered with a scoff. “I would be stupid to accept a deal like that. You haven’t given me anything useful.”

“And Steve and I would be stupid if we came here without having something useful.”

Fury eyed Tony with curiosity. “Is that so?”

Steve nodded in agreement. “Consider our knowledge on the files pro bono,” he said. “Because it doesn’t matter what’s on there. Names, locations, dates, it doesn’t matter. All that does matter is that they’re all at Pierce’s disposal. The SSR collected whispers and scraps since World War II, all hand written and organized into a massive filing system. And I mean a massive system; like
several buildings worth of it. With this power at his fingertips, HYDRA would be unstoppable.”

Fury paused for a moment, deep in thought. “You can consider this pro bono, as well,” he finally responded. “Pierce has made this find as public as possible. The bust of the century, they’re already calling it. He’s already gotten in contact with the governor. He’s going to present it to him in a ceremony with full press, tomorrow morning. He’s probably hoping for a large promotion, most likely my job. And if what you said is true, handing that information over will mean bad things for the people named on that list.”

“You think Pierce might find your name in there?” Tony snapped.

“He might,” Fury shrugged.

Steve narrowed his eyes. Was this Fury admitting to dealing with the SSR in the past? No one ever mentioned his name when Steve was working there, but they had been running a long time before Steve had shown up.

“If your name is listed, you sure as hell don’t sound concerned,” Tony noticed. “If Pierce is going public with this and you’re somehow involved, that could mean bad things for you. No more corner office.”

“But it’s like you said, I don’t sound concerned,” Fury countered. “Because there’s a bigger issue on the table here.”

“And that is?”

“A little bird from the governor’s office overheard the conversation he had with Pierce.”

“So?”

“So,” Fury continued, “Pierce seemed to have claimed that he found the lost files on zip drives.”

Tony shared a look of confusion with Steve. “Is there something that I’m missing?” Tony questioned. “Why does that matter?”

“It matters because you,” Fury replied, pointing to Steve, “claim that all the files are in hard copies. Unless you’re lying-”

“No,” Steve argued. “The SSR never stored any of that information on computers. Computers can be hacked, paper can’t. If anyone ever caught wind of the paper trail, we could always just burn it down.”

“Why is this important?” Tony asked. “With the number of files that the SSR collected over the years, it would make sense that Pierce would put them on an electronic platform. He could keep them on his person at all times, and it would be way easier to sort and organize all of the information he collected.”

“It’s one thing to put them there, it’s another to say they were there the whole time,” Fury countered. “To the rest of the force, the physical files don’t exist. Why?”

“Because the physical files have something he doesn’t want anyone else to see,” Steve breathed in realization.

“Exactly,” Fury agreed.
This was not good news. By claiming the information fell into his lap via USB, that meant that Pierce could manufacture a fake, and tailor it as he’d liked. The SSR had compiled years’ worth of date on HYDRA; Pierce’s name was bound to have popped up somewhere in there. No way he could let that type of information be leaked to the public; all of his work would have been for nothing.

“He’s made fake SSR files,” Tony breathed in realization. “Ones that will be able to clear him for good.”

Fury nodded. “But what’s worse, is not what he can remove, it’s what he can add.”

“What are you saying?” Steve questioned.

“Captain, this man is going in to make his final move, do you really think he’s going to half ass it?” Fury countered. “Now, while you’ve been guarding the SSR secrets all these years, how much have you updated the files?”

Steve shook his head. “I haven’t at all,” he confessed. “I had a large target on my back. If I started using them as the SSR did, everyone would figure out who I was in relation to them eventually. I figured it was easier for me to let them collect dust.”

“I assumed so,” Fury responded. “Because of that fact, while the SSR had collected a multitude of secrets, more than enough to keep the government happy, it’s not exactly up to date. I’m sure it doesn’t mention have most of your current employees, or you for that matter,” he added, pointing to Tony.

“They shouldn’t,” Steve confirmed. “Why does that matter?”

“You really think that after all of this, Pierce is going to let any of you walk? What’s to say he hasn’t written up a whole litany of lies about your entire gang. Howard Stark was a known constituent of the SSR, so pining the unpinable Tony Stark just got a whole lot easier,” Fury explained, giving Tony another long stare. “As for the rest of your crew, there would be more than enough scraps for him to work with to put them all away for life.”

Steve paled, unable to stop himself from risking a glance at Tony. With this type of power, Pierce really could wipe out the rest of them without getting his hands dirty. If they didn’t get those hands back on Pierce’s files, they’d all be done for.

“Or,” Fury continued. “Worst case scenario, he leaves everything as is, but whenever HYDRA is mentioned, he cuts some names, and pastes yours instead. With all of the shit that HYDRA has put this city through, it would be more than enough for the boys in blue to look the other way and shoot on sight. Forget the luxury of prison.”

It was worse than he could have imagined. The original files alone in Pierce’s hands were enough to make Steve on edge, but he should have known the man was going to play dirty. He wasn’t just going for the win anymore, he was going through the kill. And not just them, anyone that even looked at Pierce the wrong way could end up behind bars, or worse, dead in the street.

It was almost ironic, feeling this type of fear. It was the same type of fear that the SSR had used all those years, just to make sure people stayed in line. Now it’s come back to bite him in the ass. The grass is always greener on the other side, he thought to himself viciously.

“So, you agree that he needs to be stopped?”

“Of course,” Fury agreed. “More than that, I need those files out of HYDRA’s hands for good.
You’re the only one who has seen all of them. I have a lead on where Pierce would keep the physical files. I need you there to make sure they’re all accounted for."

“And I will,” Steve confirmed. “For Phil’s exoneration.”

Fury let out a deep sigh. “I see Stark has been rubbing off on you.”

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Tony snarked.

“Tony,” Steve blushed.

“Obliviously not well enough, if you’ve dropped your price to just Coulson,” said Fury. “The act of the compromise is an art form, really.”

“You’re mistaken.” Steve flashed the man a plastic grin. “I haven’t dropped my price. We’re here for immunity, and I won’t leave with anything less.”

“We have something else to give you for that,” Tony added. “Something we know that you don’t have, and that you desperately need.”

Fury narrowed his eyes, obviously displeased that he couldn’t see the ace that they were holding. “Fine,” he agreed. “I get you to confirm the SSR files for me, you get Coulson. That is,” he continued, “only if we manage to bag Pierce. I have more than enough testimonies against the man, but I need evidence. The man knows how to cover his tracks. The only thing I have him cornered on is suspicion of domestic violence. His live-in housekeeper was very specific.,” Fury stated. “It would be enough to keep him behind bars to search his house and personal affects, but I need back-up in case his stuff comes back clean. If I can prove that he altered the files for his own benefit, we’ll be golden.”

Steve looked at Tony, both men nodding their head in agreement. “Done.”

“Now,” Fury sighed. “Tell me about this smoking gun? What do you have, that will get me to let you all off scot free?”

“How much do you know about The Monger?”

Fury frowned, running a finger over his bottom lip. “Nothing of use,” he admitted. “We know he’s a supplier. We have reports of him dealing with New York’s worst, but we can’t get close to ID’ing him, because anyone who can is already dead.”

“I can ID him,” Tony whispered. If anyone heard how his voice broke, no one mentioned it.

“Is that so?”

Tony nodded. “Yes. Positive ID and more than enough evidence to put him away.”

“And we’ll give it to you. For immunity,” Steve pressed. “Deal?”

Fury scoffed. “What, am I just supposed to take your word on this? I shake hands with now, only to find out your lead is nothing but is a pile of horseshit?”

“You can personally send me to prison if you don’t find my findings satisfactory,” Tony hissed. “We’re not lying.”

Fury shook his head. “I’m going to need more than a promise from a criminal.”
“Stane.” Steve yearned to reach out to Tony, to bundle him in his arms, but he refrained.


“Now, tell me Commissioner,” Tony swallowed. “Would I lie about that?”

“He basically confessed to me yesterday,” Tony confided. “He’s dealing my weapons under the table, giving them out like candy to the monsters under our beds. Obie’s good, but not better than me. He’d have left a trail. And I can find it to you. And,” he added, “if that’s not enough, I will sign whatever form you want, giving you full permission to sweep through SI’s internal servers.”

Fury looked stunned. “You do realize what you’d be giving me? You, your company; as soon as word gets out about this, it might all be over.”

Steve watched as Tony’s fingers dug into the arms of his chair. Could he really let Tony do that? Stark Industries might have started with Howard, but it flourished because of Tony. The brunette barely talked that side of his life with Steve, but he knew that it was still an important part of him. It had always been a part of him. Just last week, Tony had been manic, whispering excitedly to Steve about the new avenues the company was going to explore now that they shut down their weapons division.

“Yes,” Tony croaked. “I’ll do it. But only if you’re willing to pay.”

Fury rubbed his hands together. “Full immunity, huh?”

“Yes,” Steve confirmed. “For everyone.” He reached into his pocket, placing a sheet of paper on Fury’s desk. “I made a list.”

Fury looked between the two of them, but remained silent, only moving to pick up Steve’s list, giving it a cursory glance. “I’ll be right back,” he said out of the blue, standing and walking towards the exit before either he or Tony could protest. The door shut behind him with a sharp thud.

He and Tony remained quiet for a few moments. “What if he comes back in and arrests us?”

It was a thought that had crossed his mind. He reached over the gap and grabbed Tony’s hand in response. He wasn’t sure what he’d do if Fury came back in with handcuffs. He didn’t much care to find out.

The pair sat in silence, listening to the seconds and minutes tick by on Fury’s wall clock.

The door opened, and Fury walked back in. No handcuffs.

“Alright, gentlemen,” Fury sighed, sitting back down in his chair. “Here’s my offer.”

“You gonna tell us about your little fieldtrip this morning?” Bucky drawled, kicking his feet up on the table. Tony and Steve had been gone for hours, sitting and debating with Fury about how they could all get a semblance of what they wanted. Unfortunately for all of the men involved, none of them were good at compromising. They’d settled on an arrangement in the end, but even now, Tony wasn’t completely on board. He and Steve were, surprisingly, able to get Fury to agree to their major concerns, but there were still a bunch of red flags that were looming in his head. The idea didn’t sit well with him at all, but it was what they had to agree to if they wanted their family to make it to the other side. By the way Steve had sat silent the entire trip home, Tony could only
assume he was following the same trail of thought.

“Not sure,” Steve answered. “You’re not going to like it.”

“Let me guess. You’re pregnant.”

Steve sighed. “Now really isn’t the time for this, Buck.”

“You meet with Fury?” Natasha cut it, stopping the pair’s argument in its tracks.

Steve nodded.

“He want to rub everything in our face?”

Tony flinched at the broken tone. He hadn’t thought about Clint being in the room. Why wouldn’t he? Out of the rest of them, he’d want to know what Fury had said to them most of all.

“No,” Steve answered. “We came to an agreement.”

“Really? No offense, but I didn’t think it was going to be that easy,” Natasha interjected.

“Your faith in us is astounding,” Tony huffed.

“It wasn’t easy,” Steve said, ignoring Tony’s remarks. “But, I think we managed to get the best offer we could. I told Fury about the files and Tony’s promised to supply any information he collects from SI on Stane. In return, the FBI will use our intel to take them both down. Fury confirmed that it should be more than enough.”

Sam hummed. “Not bad. It’ll be nice to finally be able to sit back, let the law finally pull their weight in this city. Looks like we won’t even have to get our hands dirty.”

“What about prison?” Bucky prodded. “We get immunity?”

“Yeah. We’re in the clear.” Steve couldn’t even muster a smile.

Natasha frowned. “But?”

“But, there are stipulations,” Steve said quietly.

“Stipulations,” Bucky repeated hollowly. “What exactly did we agree to?”

“Witness protection,” Steve answered, being met with resounding groans around the room.

“Great,” Sam frowned. “Knowing out luck, we’ll be shipped to buttfuck nowhere North Dakota. I don’t do the cold weather man.”

“Well figure it out,” Natasha tried to placate, but Tony could see the slight furrow in her brow. “We always do.”

“That’s the thing, though,” Steve replied. “We won’t.”

“We won’t what?” Sam pushed.

“Be together.”

The silence in the room was deafening, the group looking up at Steve like they didn’t understand the words that came out of his mouth.
“What are you saying?” Bucky dared to ask.

“We have to go into witness protection, but we have to go separately.” Tony watched Steve swallow a lump around his throat. “That means we won’t be together. We can’t.”

“No,” Buck replied hoarsely. “No fuckin’ way, Steve. That’s some horseshit, right there.”

“Buck, I couldn’t- ”

“While the hell did you agree to that?” Bucky cried. “How the hell are we supposed to take care of each other?”

“Fury said the only way he could get us together is in gen-pop. And we figured waiting this out alone would be better than all of us behind bars,” Tony interrupted.

Bucky collapsed down into his chair. “Jesus,” he moaned, rubbing at his face with his flesh hand.

“Where are they sending each of us?” Bruce piped in.

“I don’t know,” Steve replied, rubbing at the back of his neck. “We can’t know where the rest are going. I think it’s Fury’s way of making sure we don’t run as soon as everything is over.”

“This is the stupidest shit I’ve ever heard off,” Bucky snapped.

“You don’t think I know that?” Steve hissed at his friend. Tony came up behind him, placing a comforting arm on his back. “You think I’m happy with this arrangement?”

“What about Phil?” Clint’s voice was small, the man afraid to even ask about his boyfriend’s face.

“Fury agreed to drop his charges,” Steve tried to smile. “But, since he was still involved with us, he still has to go into protection.”

There was a flash of emotion over Clint’s face, but it was gone as soon as it appeared, the man resorting to nodding numbly.

“I’m sorry,” Steve continued. “That I couldn’t do more.”

“He’s not going to prison, and he’s not dead,” Clint stated, as if to remind himself. “I’ll take what I can get right now. I always wanted him to get out of this type of life, but I guess I should have been more careful of what I wished for, huh?”

Tony looked away in shame. He knew none of this was going to go over with the rest of the room, but with each passing second, he couldn’t help but feel more defeated and broken. I should have fought harder for them, he thought to himself.

“Um,” Steve started. “I know that this, well, to be honest, it’s a fucking blow. But, I think we all knew that we weren’t going to be able to finish this without assistance from the law. And especially since we found out Phil was alive, there wasn’t a chance that we were going to leave him behind.” He rubbed a tired hand over his face. “I didn’t want this. Just the thought of being on my own again is enough to terrify me, but the thought of any of you dead or locked away terrifies me more.”

“Think of this as the best way to keep us safe,” Tony placated. “Witness protection was only ever an option because we know HYDRA doesn’t end with Pierce. There’s a whole network that we haven’t unearthed yet, and once Pierce is out of the picture, they’re going to be gunning for us. At
least this way we’ll be out of New York and living on the FBI’s dime,” he smiled.

“For how long?” Clint asked.

Steve bit his lip. “Until the FBI manages to root out the rest of HYDRA.”

“So, indefinitely,” Natasha snapped.

“I’m so sorry,” was Steve’s only response.

“When?”

“Tomorrow.” Tony looked at the ground, unable to watch the rest of their worried faces, eyes darting around the room in disbelief. “They don’t mess around it seems,” Tony tried to joke.

“Tomorrow, Fury will arrest both Pierce and Stane simultaneously. While that’s happening, I’ll be taking a few of you with me, per request of the FBI. Fury thinks he knows where Pierce is housing the files, he needs us to confirm it. The rest of you, after all this is over, will be escorted to your assigned FBI handler. From there, you’ll be sent away to your safehouse.”

Silence descended over the room. “We did our best,” Steve croaked. “I mean, with all the shit that we’ve done over the years, it would be dumb of us to assume that we could just walk away from this. I know this is hard, and if you’re gonna be pissed, be pissed at me. I just have to believe that it’ll all work out.” Steve paused, eyes blinking rapidly. “It will be, it will be, uh, I’m sorry… I-I just need to–”

And with that Steve stomped out the room. Tony yearned to go after him, but remained, finally looking up at the rest of the group. They were still silent, and all looking at Tony, as if hoping that he would be the one to laugh it off, telling them all it was just a joke.

“Keep your phones with you today,” Tony said instead, softly. “You’ll be getting a call from a restricted number. The FBI. They’ll be calling with instructions for each of you on what to do when tomorrow comes.” He paused before adding, “Please don’t do anything stupid tonight. I know it doesn’t seem like it, but this really was the best deal for us. If we go off the reservation now, there’s no telling how the FBI would retaliate. We would all be in a super-max before dinner tomorrow.”

Still no response. Bucky was the first to stand up, stalking away, making a pit stop at the bar to snag a full bottle of whiskey. Natasha followed right after him, trailed by Clint. The rest of them left, one by one, until Tony was alone. He trusted them not to make a run for it; he knew that they understood that this was their only choice, but he knew that they needed to grieve in their own ways.

“JARVIS?” he asked the empty room.

“Yes, Sir?”

“Lock the place down and keep an eye on everyone, alright?”

“Of course. Do you require anything, Sir?”

Tony looked to where Steve had stomped off. A better ending, he thought to himself. “Nah, I’m alright, J. I just need to make a quick call to Pepper.”
He knocked on the door to the bedroom softly, ear pressed against the door. It was strange, having to knock at his own bedroom door, but he didn’t want to startle Steve. Tony had already checked the blonde’s own room and his office, to no avail. He should have assumed that Steve would go straight to Tony’s room. After all, he’s been staying there ever since Tony came back from his captivity.

Getting no response, Tony turned the handle slightly, peeking his head in. He wasn’t exactly sure what state Steve was in, but after everything that happened today, and with what was to come, he needed Steve more than ever. He had planned on coming up earlier, but he’d been stuck on the phone for hours, talking with both Pepper, and then Fury.

Steve was sat at the edge of the bed, head down in defeat, rubbing at his hands nervously. “Hey, there,” Tony greeted.

Steve looked up long enough to give Tony a weak smile. “Hey.”

“You okay?”

Steve huffed out a low chuckle. “I haven’t been okay in a long time.”

Tony snorted. “So, last night in paradise,” he said. “You got any plans tonight? Want to play some checkers?”

Steve rolled his eyes. “I suppose I should check in on everyone.”

Tony hummed, but noticed Steve made no move to get up. “Alright,” he said, assuming that Steve wanted him to go with him. “I’ll come with. Come on, let’s-” He paused when he felt Steve grab at his wrist, holding him firmly. He looked back in question to see Steve looking at him with heated eyes. He didn’t have time to question him before Steve sprung from the bed, pushing Tony against the wall.

Steve’s mouth descended onto his wildly, his body sandwiching Tony against the hard surface. Tony tried to keep up, but Steve was frantic, movements jerky and uncoordinated, as if he wasn’t sure where he wanted to be touching Tony most. His mouth dominated Tony’s, each kiss leaving him dizzier than the last. Steve’s breath was warm as it landed on Tony’s skin, his hands gentle but firm, roaming over the length of Tony’s body. It wasn’t long before Tony was able to zone in on another pillar of warmth, radiating against Tony’s hip.

“Now?” Tony gasped as Steve jammed a thigh between his legs, Tony unable to stop himself from rutting against the hard plane.

“What, you waiting for marriage?” Steve huffed in response, before continuing to lay a siege of bites along Tony’s neck.

Tony yanked Steve closer to him in answer, tilting his head back as far as he could, while his own hands roamed the blonde’s expansive back. In truth, Tony had made multiple attempts at getting in Steve’s pants since his return from captivity. After an unspoken agreement of the mob boss spending each night in his bed, Tony had thought he wouldn’t have had to put in too much effort. But boy, was he wrong.

Steve was excruciatingly gentle with him when he first came back, refusing to let Tony so as much lift his own fork without a helping hand – not that Tony had minded. Surprisingly, Tony found himself actually enjoying the overabundant codling, a heady warmth spreading in his chest that he hadn’t felt since he was a child, skinny legs swaying back in forth as he excitedly blabbered about
a new idea to Jarvis, in between bites of Ana’s homemade Shepard’s Pie. But if anyone asked, that feeling was due to his body regulating with the arc reactor, nothing else. Certainly not because of Steve Rogers.

But even once Tony was on his feet again, karma reared its ugly head yet again. God forbid he ever get what he wanted. Everything that happened came in quick succession, like dominoes falling one after the other, keeping the mob more than busy. Even when they were able to catch moments alone, Steve would slow any kiss that Tony gave him, and bundled him in his arms until they both fell asleep. It wasn’t as if that wasn’t also what Tony wanted, but leave it to Steve to wait until their last night together to finally snap.

He was always so dramatic.

Steve grabbed at the bottoms of his thighs and suddenly Tony was air born, the brunette wrapping his legs around Steve on instinct. Steve walked slowly and blindly, his mouth never leaving Tony’s, moving them back over to the bed.

Tony flopped against the mattress and looked up at Steve hovering over him, chest already heaving. Steve stared right back, blue eyes burning like the center of a flame. Strong hands trailed across his chest, and Tony could almost feel them twitching for a pad and paper to capture the scene forever. The movements were gentle against his skin, but Tony watched Steve’s muscles shift as he continued his path down Tony’s ribs, a clear reminder of how much power lay beneath the surface. To have Steve like this, to have him look at Tony like this – it was indescribable.

Steve leaned down and kissed Tony slowly, hands grasping either side of Tony’s face to keep him from moving, savoring each second their mouths were connected. Tony gave everything he could, wholeheartedly. He would give anything to Steve if he asked. Nothing was rushed, as it was just moments before, the pair of them getting lost in the other, as if they had all the time in the world.

Steve’s hands left his body long enough to unbuckle his pants pushing them down around his knees. Tony could see the outline of his erection, pressing tightly against his underwear. Tony’s mouth watered and moved to follow suit quickly, shimming out of his pants as quickly as he could.

It was difficult, laying on his back, being caged in by Steve. It wasn’t long before he realized that his eagerness was causing him to make zero progress. He heard the blonde laugh softly before taking pity on him, helping Tony shred away the cloth. Tony tried to shoot him a dirty look, but stopped when he saw the fond smile that the man was giving him.

He saw Steve open his mouth to talk, but Tony brought his other hand up to cover his mouth. Steve stopped, eyes widening just a fraction. He knew what Steve was going to say. It was the same thing he whispered each night they were together, just as Tony was drifting off to sleep. It was the same thing he’d admitted to Tony on the floor of his office, the words fumbled out of a nervous mouth. It was the only thing that had seemingly kept Tony sane these past few weeks.

But Tony had never been able to say it back. Call it cowardice, call it cold, call it whatever. It’s not that he didn’t want too. Sure, he was slow on the uptake – he’d never felt as strongly about anyone else as he did with Steve. And it wasn’t like he had a long list of prior loving relationships that he could compare the feeling too. But once he’d finally been able to connect the dots, when Steve had first whispered it into his neck, Tony hadn’t been able to get it out of his head.

Every second, every breath – all he could think about was Steve. He knew he loved Steve.

And it terrified him.
Everything that he’d tried to bar himself away from, everything that his father had warned him of was sitting in his lap. It was like playing with fire – the love he felt for Steve was ever growing, pulsing strongly. The flames were beautiful and entrancing, and Tony knew that he would never want to look away from them. But love was dangerous and uncontrollable. If he got too close, how badly would he get burned?

And what was worse was that Steve didn’t seem to expect anything else in return. He never got angry when Tony never said it back. It was like Steve was more than happy to keep giving, handing Tony piece after piece until there was nothing left of him.

*His own personal giving tree.*

But he wanted to give it to Steve. He wanted to give Steve everything. It didn’t matter if he had to cut himself down in the process. Steve was worth it.

And Tony wasn’t sure if it was the right moment or not – they were crashing together on an adrenaline high, holding off the last few minutes before leaving to face an unimaginable doom. But, in a moment of clarity, Tony could finally relate to every cliché in all those cheesy movies. The thought of Steve leaving with the chance of never returning, all without knowing what Tony had to say was an unbearable thought.

So, Tony stopped him. Enough was Steve the one to give. He needed Steve to know that he was with him, will always be with him, at the end of it all.

He could see the uncertainty looming in Steve’s eyes. The tiny fear that his love was finally being rejected. But Tony just smiled, moving his hand far enough to kiss the fear away. When he leaned back, he stared into Steve’s endless eyes.

“I love you.”

And he did. With everything that he had.


Steve surged forward, lips mashing against his harshly, the force toppling Tony onto his back. Tony’s gasp was swallowed by Steve, the blonde plastering his body over Tony’s fully encompassing him. There was a time that Tony hated that, reason enough for him to stay away from people who were larger than him. But when Steve did it, Tony’s heart sang, his body thrumming with glee as he was surrounded by love and security.


“Yes,” he hissed in return, grabbing at Steve’s hip so they can grind their hips together. The pair parted, only long enough to shred the rest of their clothing. Tony marveled at the miles of Steve’s pale skin, littered with scars and memories of his battles and victories. He looked down at Tony, his blue eyes radiating in the glow of the arc reactor. He was so beautiful.

Steve must have been on the same wavelength, if the way he whispered “Gorgeous,” under his breath. They clashed back together, both of them fighting for dominance, trying to take everything they could from the other. Tony could feel Steve’s erection burning along his thigh and Tony moaned, already reaching down to grasp it in his hand.
Steve groaned when Tony’s fingers brushed against his pulsing length, hips thrusting into Tony’s grip. “Please,” he whispered again, lips dragging along Tony’s neck. He grabbed at Tony’s hand holding his erection and dragged it lower, fingers brushing against his opening.

“Really?” Tony asked.


“Nothing,” Tony blurted. “I was just thinking that I would bottom.”

Steve shot him a questioning look. “You want too?”

Tony shrugged. “I may have thought about it a few times.”

Steve paused, his brow furrowing. “You sure?”

Tony swallowed, nodding slowly. “Yeah. Just, go slow, alright?”

Steve grabbed at Tony’s face gently, forcing him to meet his gaze. “I would never hurt you,” he whispered reverently.

“I know,” Tony responded quickly, not giving reason for Steve’s doubt. “It’s not that, it’s just… I’ve never done this before.”

“You’ve never been with a man before?” Steve shot him an incredulous look.

“No, no, that ship sailed a long time ago,” Tony laughed. “I’ve just never, you know…” he trailed off, gesturing at how they were positioned.

“Oh!” Steve blushed.

“Yep,” Tony said slowly, popping the ‘p’.

“Never?”

“Never,” Tony confirmed. “Never really thought about it.”

Steve started to pull back. “Well, Tony, I don’t have to- ”

“Never thought about it until you,” Tony finished.

“Tony,” Steve breathed, sitting back on his heels, giving the other man a small, private smile. Tony hated that smile. It always did funny things to his chest.

“Alright, no need to get sappy,” Tony admonished, shifting around on the mattress. “Hop to it, soldier,” he added, gesturing to Steve. “Let’s see what all the rage is about.”

Then Steve was laughing, a deep rumble from his chest, and leaning forward, catching Tony in a deep kiss. “I love you,” he smiled, eyes crinkling.

Tony hummed into the kiss, frowning as Steve pulled away. “Which way would make you more comfortable?” the blonde asked.

“This is fine,” Tony replied, gesturing to where he was on his back, Steve leaning over him.

“It might be easier if you’re on your knees.”
“Might be,” Tony shrugged. “But I want to see you,” he countered softly.

Steve shot him a soft smile. “Alright,” he said, leaning back on his knees. “Where’s your lube?”

“Bedside drawer,” Tony nodded. Steve reached over and opened the drawer, shuffling the contents around until he pulled a fresh tube out.

“Hoping you were gonna get lucky?” Steve asked playfully.

“Still hoping, apparently,” Tony grumbled, shifting into a more comfortable position on the bed.

Steve chuckled and slapped at his thigh, the blonde shuffling into the gap of Tony’s legs.

Tony leaned back with a deep breath, but he couldn’t help his body starting to tense. He knew, logically, what had to happen. Tony had watched more than enough porn in his life time, and had plenty of bed partners who had bottomed for him that should have gotten Tony more than comfortable with the process. He’d even tried to experiment with his own fingers on himself before, although he was never able to completely chase the pleasure that he so desired.

It wasn’t as if he wasn’t interested; Tony had wasted countless time in the shower or in bed, imagining Steve pound into him from behind. But still, traces of fear lingered. Being here, Tony had never felt more exposed, the idea of bottoming feeling like giving up the last bit of power that he was clinging too. It was subconscious, he was sure; Tony trusted Steve with everything, would give him everything.

“You sure about this?”

Tony sat up on his elbows, looking down at Steve’s doubtful gaze. “Yeah,” Tony placated, shooting Steve a smile. “I trust you.”

Steve grinned, obviously pleased with the answer. He took one of Tony’s hands and kissed the inside of him palm. “Let me know if anything hurts, and we’ll stop, alright?”

Tony nodded again, flopping back against the mattress. He heard a cap pop, Steve opening the bottle of lube. There was another pause, and Tony couldn’t help but peek up again, watching Steve rub the lube between his fingers. “What are you doing?”

“Warming it up,” Steve answered, ears pink with embarrassment. “It’s a bit cold, and I just thought that- ” he trailed off. Tony grinned, the smile growing as the blonde shot him a dirty glare. “Shut up,” he pouted.

Tony let out a low chuckle, but it quickly turned to a strangled gasp as he felt a finger circle his hole. “It’s alright,” Steve said, as if soothing a wild animal. Tony scoffed, reaching down to thrust Steve’s hand forward, finger slipping in past the first knuckle. “I’m not a wilting flower, Rogers,” Tony grunted, shifting around the intrusion. “Get on with it.”

“You’re such a romantic,” Steve remarked dryly.

Tony’s barb was cut off my Steve’s lips, the man licking back into his mouth. Tony hummed at the comforting familiarity. He jolted when he felt Steve grip his cock, stroking his thumb gently across the tip. Tony moaned, unable to help pushing into the touch, but stopped when the shift of his body caused a pain in his rear, a reminder of Steve’s large finger – fingers, now, Jesus, when did he get two in there? – pressing in.

Steve must have felt him tighten, because he drew his fingers out. “Relax,” he whispered into
Tony’s ears. “The first time is always tough. Let me distract you,” he said, grip tightening on his erection that had started to flag. “I’ll take care of you, I promise.”

“Okay,” Tony answered shakily, head tilting back towards Steve. The blonde hummed when Tony led him into the kiss. This time, Tony let himself fall once he felt himself teetering to the edge, letting himself be at the favor of Steve’s hands. His right, that was curled around his length was merciless, fingers switching from playful teasing to harsh tugs, all to stop, a single fingernail dragging along the underside, tracing Tony’s vein.

It wasn’t long before Tony was panting, letting out the occasional soft cry as Steve’s hand twisted right where he wanted. “You’re doing so well,” Steve murmured. “God, you look so beautiful right now, you don’t even know.” Tony felt a flush bloom on his cheeks in response. “I’m going to try for three now, alright?”

Tony made a questioning noise, only then looking down to where Steve had two fingers scissoring out of him. Tony nodded, mesmerized at the movement of the digits. The introduction of the third finger had him hissing, the dull ache of his entrance becoming more pronounced as Steve tried to make room for another thick finger.

Steve didn’t say anything this time, but instead brought his head down to mouth at the top of Tony’s dick. Tony cried out, his movement pushing Steve’s fingers in deeper. The gentle suction and occasional prods of Steve’s tongue had him grabbing at Steve’s hair, rushed pleas flowing out of his mouth. Steve pulled back with a smile, letting Tony taste himself with a kiss. He felt Steve start to spread his fingers, stretching his rim.

“How’s it feel?” Steve asked, voice low and husky.

“Kind of weird, not going to lie,” Tony admitted.

“Good weird, or bad weird?”

“Not sure yet,” Tony said. “I’m not really sure what I’m supposed to feel – Jesus Christ,” he moaned, his body already twisting around, as if trying to chase the phantom touch.

“There it is,” Steve said, soundly way too smug.

“What the hell?” Tony panted.

“Congratulations,” Steve chuckled. “You just discovered your prostate.”

“That’s real?”

“You cannot be serious,” Steve gaped at him.

“Don’t be an ass,” Tony frowned. “It’s not like this comes up in everyday discussions!”

“You’ve topped for men before!” Steve argued back. “You’ve bound to have encountered this before.”

Tony shrugged. “I just thought I was that good of a lay.”

“You are ridiculous,” Steve laughed, leaning down to kiss his smirk away. “Wanna feel it again?”

Tony nodded eagerly, breaking off into a moan as Steve pressed his fingers forward, his body lighting up in pleasure. “Fuck, again,” he pleaded. And Steve delivered. Again and again, like he
Tony could start to feel a fire burning low in his gut, Steve’s fingers only stoking the flames. He arched clear off the bed again and ground down onto the fingers harder. Dear Lord, is this what he’s been missing out on? *These are just his fingers,* a voice whispered in Tony’s head. *Just think of what his dick will feel like.*

Tony let out a low sob, both in pleasure and desperation. *Fuck,* it was too much. Each press of Steve’s fingers, each breath ghosted over his cock. Another zing of electricity though his body and suddenly Tony couldn’t handle it. “Stop!” he cried.

The pressure from Steve’s fingers were immediately gone and Tony couldn’t help but moan at the loss. “Tony? Tony, did I hurt you?” he heard Steve ask. “God, I’m so sorry, here, let me go get Bruce, he can- ”

“No, no, no,” Tony soothed quickly. “I’m fine. I was just going to cum.”

He saw Steve slump in relief, grin growing on his face. “You do understand that’s kind of the point, right?”

Tony smacked at Steve’s pec. “Yes, thank you, Captain Obvious,” he replied dryly. “I wanted to wait until you were in me.”

“You sure? We can keep going like this if you’re enjoying it so much.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, I can hold off,” Tony snapped. His eyes trailed down Steve’s body and he couldn’t help but smirk. “But can you?” he questioned, looking at Steve’s large cock, colored almost an angry red and steadily leaking.

Instead of another teasing remark, Steve leaned down and kissed him soundly. “Can’t help it,” he said as he pulled away. “The way you feel, the sounds you’re making? God, it’s incredible.”

“You too,” Tony smiled against plush lips. “Now hop too, soldier. Stick it in me.”

Steve snorted and pushed back on his knees. “How you’ve managed to convince the world that you’re a suave playboy is beyond me.” Steve crawled off the bed and stepped back over to the end table, Tony unable to pull his eyes from the thick length the bobbed between his legs with each step. The drawer was opened again, and Steve pulled out a condom.

“I’m clean,” Tony said in a small voice. Sure, he’d been around the block a few times, but Tony was nothing if not careful.

“So am I,” Steve responded, but ripped the foil to slip the condom on anyway. “But it’s your first time. Condom stays on.”

Tony nodded. Steve stepped back over to the bed, pausing only to get another handful of lube, slathering his cock liberally. Tony reveled in the moment, listening to small noise of relief that Steve gave as soon as his hand closed on the hard flesh. He also felt a wave of pride and desire as he watched Steve pinch at his base, staying his orgasm.

He crawled over to Tony on his hands and knees, leaning up to give Tony a final kiss. “Ready?”

“Yes,” Tony answered breathlessly. He peeked down, Steve’s erection prepped at the starting line, waiting for gun shot.
Fingers tugged his chin back up. “Look at me,” Steve whispered. Tony was powerless to disobey. *Why would I look anywhere else?* He felt Steve shift forward, his blunt tip pressing against his hole. He felt the slight burn as his head went in, already feeling more full than he was with just Steve fingers. He felt Steve’s heat entering him. But not once did he look away. Inch by inch, Steve slipped further into Tony’s body. He went slowly, stopping at every gasp and hiss, allowing Tony to get used to his girth. He pushed for what felt like a lifetime, but Tony didn’t mind. All he could think about were those blue eyes, lovingly staring down at him.

Finally, Steve bent down, kissing Tony lightly on the lips. “Ready?”

Tony nodded. Steve started slow, seemingly moving slower than when he had as he was pushing in. Just gentle thrusts, more rotating his hips than anything else. When he saw no discomfort show on Tony’s face he grew bolder, pushing deeper and deeper into Tony. Tony couldn’t help but lean back farther, his legs opening wider on instinct. He arched when he felt Steve graze over his prostate, mouth falling opened as he panted. Steve repeated the movement, angling his hips farther to get a more direct hit. “Fuck,” Tony moaned, starting to feel his own body push up to meet Steve’s gentle prods.

The blonde was frustratingly patient, even when Tony saw him screw his own eyes shut, sweat starting to bead on his red forehead. Even like this, he was still stunning. Tony could see him shaking, the teasing pleasure driving his insane. But yet, he forced himself to hold back, letting Tony chase his own enjoyment first. It wasn’t enough.

Tony shot a hand out to grab Steve’s hip, stopping his movement. Steve’s eyes blew open, pupils blown, but already searching for Tony’s discomfort. Before he could air his concerns, Tony grabbed at Steve’s shoulders and twisted, yanking the man down to the bed, Tony smoothly sliding on top of him.

Steve gasped, chest heaving and a questioning look. Before he could think twice Tony grabbed at Steve’s dick, which had slipped out of Tony after their movement. Steve immediately tensed, his abs contracting as Tony’s fingers danced around it. He fumbled with the hard length, struggling to guide it back towards his entrance. He’d had this done to him multiple times and it always drove him crazy; he could only hope to give Steve a fraction of the same pleasure.

When he felt the slight give of his hole as he pressed Steve back in, Tony sank down, letting gravity do the rest. He was lying if it didn’t feel like Steve’s member had grown two sizes since it had last been in, the new angle exceedingly ruthless on him. But it was immediately worth it, seeing Steve clench his eyes shut, head thrown back in a silent scream. “Jesus Christ,” he was finally able to moan out, his hands planting themselves on Tony’s hips.

Another century passed by the time Tony bottomed out, but he found he didn’t mind. The dull aches had receded, leaving only the satisfied feeling of being full of Steve. If fact, meeting Steve’s groin was almost a disappointment, Tony immediately shifting upwards to start the process over again. He wished he had Steve’s patience, but it was like there was an itch he couldn’t stretch, and it wasn’t long before Tony had a steady rhythm, bouncing on Steve’s cock.

Any control Steve had maintained was long gone, the blonde dancing between whispered curses and choked gasps as Tony brought his body up and down.

*It still wasn’t enough.*

He could feel the burn return, the incessant need to cross the finish line searing into his brain. But it wasn’t fucking enough. Tony let out a sob, and apparently Steve knew exactly what he needed because the grip on his hips turned to stone, Steve jacking up into Tony in double time.
Tony shouted, reaching over to grab the headboard of the shaking bed. *There it is,* he thought to himself, imagining Steve pile deeper with each thrust. “More,” he gasped. “More, Steve, please, I need—”

Steve roared, surging up to wrap his arms around Tony, securing him in his waist. Tony’s own wrapped around the back of Steve’s neck, holding on for dear life. He pushed down as hard as he could, meeting Steve’s desperation. The wildfire in him was burning, out of control, and Tony just took it, letting his body be covered in flames.


“Yes,” Tony answered, question not even asked. “Yes,” he repeated, grasping at Steve’s face. “Yes, Steve, please—”

He heard Steve scream his name and thrust up a final time, hips bowing perfectly. Tony closed his eyes and imagined he could feel Steve’s seed spilling inside him. He barely had time to revel in the feeling before Steve’s hand was back on his cock.

Tony sobbed, his body scalding and eager for release. But then Steve was pumping him again, once, twice, three times, and Tony was gone, semen arching up between the two of them. Tony felt like he was on fire, heart galloping and veins singing. Within that moment, everything disappeared, until all that was left was Steve. All he could feel was Steve. Tony fumbled blindly until Steve’s mouth was back on his, and he sighed in relief, intent to ride the high straight to oblivion.

“Here, I have something for you.” They were curled around each other, two halves making a whole that Tony was loathe to pull away from. But he knew he wasn’t going far, dipping out of bed long enough to pull the present from his pants before he was retreating back into Steve’s welcoming arms. Tony opened his palm, pressing the object into his grip.

“What is this?” the blonde asked quietly, his large hand engulfing the small scrap of metal.

“A key,” Tony deadpanned.

Steve shot him a blank look in return. “For what?” he replied, playing along.

“Dad has some property in South Carolina, a lake house. I’m sure it was at my mother’s instance; she was always trying to get me outside.”

Steve ran his fingers around the ridges of the key, humming softly.

“It’s nice,” Tony continued. “We went there a few times when I was a kid. It’s all wooded, and there’s a private lake.”

“Sounds nice,” Steve smiled.

“It’s nice,” Tony continued. “We went there a few times when I was a kid. It’s all wooded, and there’s a private lake.”

“Sounds nice,” Steve smiled.

“Yeah, you’d like it. You can fish, camp, or whatever. I’d even lay out on the beach for you; you said you like to see that, remember?”

Steve snorted, trailing a hand down Tony’s arm. “Sounds familiar. Not sure when we’re going to have time to plan this little excursion. I don’t know if you remember, but we’re all getting shipped off to solitary tomorrow.”

“Hard to forget,” Tony frowned. “It’s just, I…,” he sighed. “That’s where I’m going. That’s where they’re sending me. I called Fury earlier and he agreed; I am accustomed to a certain lifestyle, after
all, and I didn’t want to end up staying at Motel 9, you know? No one knows I own property down there, so it’s a perfect get away.” When Steve stared blankly at him, Tony frowned, continuing. “Kind of going out on a limb here, but, you ending up anywhere around there?”

“Tony,” Steve warned.

“I know, I know, I’m not supposed to tell you and you’re not supposed to tell me,” he snapped in reply. He was more than aware that a threat from Fury was not to be taken lightly. “I just, I- ”

“I can’t be in a place and not have you know where I am. I can’t not know where you are.

Steve’s eyes softened, obviously following the same thought train, as he tugged at Tony’s chin, pulling it up enough so their lips could meet in a tender kiss. “Kansas,” Steve breathed when he finally pulled away.

Tony flopped his head down against Steve’s chest, his fingers fumbling as they played with a corner of the sheet. There were way too many miles between Kansas and South Carolina. Tony swallowed around the building fear that was threatening to spill over. “Sounds boring,” he opted to say instead.

“Tony.”

“I mean, is there anything even there? I hear South Carolina is all the rage. Maybe you could just come stay with me.”

“Tony, you know that- ”

“I know,” Tony hissed. “Don’t you think I know? But we don’t know how long we’re going to be there, Steve! All I can think about it when I’m going to see you again. Or if I ever will.”

“It’s not like I haven’t thought the same thing,” Steve replied quietly.

Tony’s heart clenched at the tone. God, this was so unfair, why the hell did they ever agree to it? How could any of them pick up the pieces after all this is over, all on their own? Would any of them even survive?

“You’ll be alright,” Tony said, not sure if he was convincing Steve or himself. “You’ll find yourself some hot Kansas piece and you won’t even remember little old me.”

“Tony,” Steve sighed.

“What?” Tony scoffed. “You heard Fury. This is the chance to start a new life. Why wouldn’t you want to start something fresh in Kansas? You know what? Forget I said anything,” he snapped, eyes burning.

“Don’t do this,” Steve responded, reaching back for him. Tony tried to yank away but Steve was stronger, and he pulled Tony against his chest. “You know I wouldn’t do that.”

“And why not?” Tony argued, unable to stop the vicious thoughts to pass through his head. “I’m sure you’ll so just fine.” Steve could adapt anywhere; he would survive in Kansas. Hell, he would probably even thrive. He’d done it before, and he would do it again. And he’d do it without Tony.

He was sure that was the point Fury was trying to make, by sending them to different corners of the world. Keep us safe my ass. Tony thought. Fury was just hoping that he could keep them caged long enough to break them, killing two birds with one stone. The rest of the team would make it; their lifestyle required them to start a new identity at the drop of a hat. But Tony? Ever since
making the agreement with Tony, he couldn’t help but think about going back to the life he used to lead. How he once thought that he had everything that he ever wanted – now, Tony saw that he had nothing. And that’s what he’d go back too. Nothing.

“You’re missing the point here.” Steve’s voice filtered through his thoughts.

“What, that I should be counting my blessings that Fury didn’t decide to send you to LA? I mean, everyone’s beautiful there, and- ”

Steve cut him off with another kiss, pushing him back down against the mattress and crawled over him until his body was bracketing Tony’s, surrounding him on all sides. “Because I am yours,” he whispered in-between pecks. “And you are mine. Always.”

Tony found himself smiling into the next kiss, giddy with relief. “Besides,” Steve continued. “When am I going to find the time to stare at Kansas floozies when I’m in South Carolina with you?”

Tony froze, breath stuttering in his lungs. He grabbed at the sides of Steve’s face, hopeful eyes darting between the endless blue pools that stared back at him, looking for any hints of deception. “Really?” Tony asked quietly.

“What,” Steve smiled. “You really don’t think that I would have gone looking for you anyway? The key just made it a little easier.”

Tony felt laughter bubbling in his chest like a lovelorn teenager. He jumped on Steve’s chest, hearing the blonde curse quietly before they were kissing again, twisting against each other in the silk sheets of Tony’s bed.

“Fury will be pissed,” Tony replied when he finally pulled back for air. Steve just hummed, not looking up from where he was licking up Tony’s ribs. “He’ll throw us in prison,” Tony gasped, throwing his head back as Steve glossed over his nipple.


“If they know what’s best from them, they’ll keep us as far apart as possible,” Tony smiled. Steve hummed, playing with the ends of Tony’s hair. “I’d find a way to get to you.”

Tony’s breath stuttered in his chest, as if reality all came crashing back on him at once. The looming dread that the morning brought, the uncertainty of all their fates.

I can’t lose this. Please, I can’t lose this.

He wasn’t sure who he was talking too, who would even listen. Fingers tugged at his chin, forcing Tony to meet Steve’s gaze. “Stop thinking,” he whispered. “Focus on me,” he added, hand trailing down Tony’s chest. “Just focus on me.”

A sharp knock roused him from a peaceful slumber. By the way Steve instinctively curled around
him, he wasn’t ready for it either. Wasn’t ready to face the world again, wanting to stay in the small oasis they’ve created for themselves.

“What?” Steve groaned, voice rough as he rubbed his face in the top of Tony’s hair.

“It’s time to meet Fury.” Barnes’ voice sounded through the door. “We’re ready to go, unless you wanna bang it out one more time. Not like there’s a crisis going on or anything, no Sir.”

“Be down in five,” Steve replied, ignoring the barb in favor of tangling his fingers in Tony’s.

Blue eyes bored right into Tony’s brown. It was a way he’d never seen Steve look at him before. Steve always manage to keep him on his toes, going as far as getting Tony to blush as he was gazed at with an artist’s appreciation, but this was different. It was a more intense, a certain finality to it. Tony shivered but didn’t dare look away.

When Steve finally pulled the covers away and slipped out of the bed, Tony couldn’t follow, the lingering cold that was left in his wake too encompassing to escape. Steve had to reach back down for him, gentle hands helping him stand. A final kiss was pressed against his head and Steve was moving again, over to their clothes.

They were silent as they redressed, one passing the other their respective clothing. Tony was grateful that Steve didn’t mention anything when he slipped the blonde’s shirt over his head, instead of his own. He watched, nose buried deep in the fabric – how does he get them so soft? – breathing in the familiar scent, as Steve walked over to his dresser to pull another shirt out for himself. The cotton stretched over his chest, covering remnants of love bites and red scratches, almost erasing any evidence of their previous activities.

Almost. Tony could see the stubborn locks of hair that refused to fall in line, a result of his incessant tugging. He could still see a faint flush on chiseled cheeks, matching Steve’s kiss-ridden lips. He looked so startlingly young in that moment, but no less handsome. But in a flash, it was gone, the veil dropping back into place as Steve slipped his jacket on. Gone were the bright eyes and boyish grins. Only The Captain remained now.

A hand brushed against his cheek. “Tony.”

Tony’s stomach clenched. It didn’t matter what he said; he could use any and every excuse under the sun and he would still lose. His eyes fluttered open, meeting Steve’s gaze. There it was again. That look.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Tony whispered hoarsely. Don’t look at me like you’re trying to memorize my face.

Steve’s face softened, leaning forward enough to knock their heads together. Tony’s eyes slipped shut again and he breathed deep, shivering as Steve’s hands trailed through his hair. Tony trailed his own over Steve’s chest, curling them around his neck to feel the steady pulse. He wasn’t sure how long they stood there, sharing each other’s warmth. Loud footsteps sounded through the hall and the pair startled, the moment shattered by the harsh reminder of their current predicament.

“I should go,” Steve whispered. Tony nodded numbly, feeling Steve’s hands drop away, leaving him cold.

“Now, don’t do anything stupid and listen to Bucky, alright?” Tony said as he stepped back, smoothing out the lines on Steve’s jacket.

The blonde smiled. “Listen to Bucky, huh?”
“He has a knack for keeping your ass in line,” Tony shrugged.

“Such high praise. Should I be jealous?” Steve asked, wrapping an arm around Tony’s waist.

“Don’t be silly,” Tony smiled in return. “You have nothing to worry about, darling. Not as long as Natasha is still on this Earth.”

Steve laughed, Tony’s smile widening at the bright sound. *Please, whatever deity is out there, bring him home so I can hear it again.* Steve brought a hand up, wiping at an errant tear that Tony hadn’t notice slip down his cheek. Tony sniffled, giving Steve a final once over. “Go save the world, hot shot,” he croaked, tucking the key into Steve’s breast pocket. “Dinner is at 7:00,” he added, tapping a hand over where the key sat. “So, don’t you dare be late.”

Before Steve could respond Tony jolted forward, catching his lips in an embrace for the final time. Unrestrained desperation tainted each kiss, each breath, and Tony could barely feel his fingers locking around Steve’s neck over the gripping hold that permeated around his hips.

“Wait for me,” Steve whispered against his lips. “I’ll be there.”
“What’s our play?”

They were all standing in a near empty parking lot, the morning bleak and foggy. They were standing on either side of a parking spot, the yellow line acting as the unofficial line in the sand. Bucky, Sam and Natasha stood behind him, each a comforting presence, but Steve could feel the lingering tension between them all.

It was understandable, as the group of them stared down another, consisting of Fury, Hill, and a few other FBI agents he wasn’t acquainted with.

“Two groups,” Fury answered gruffly. “One to arrest Pierce, and one to secure the files. I’ll take some of my men to handle Pierce, but we’ll need you and your people to make sure all the files are accounted for.”

Steve nodded. “You know where the files are going to be?”

“We believe so,” Hill replied. “Pierce started a task force a few years ago to crack down on drug trafficking. We now believe that he’s using it as a cover for his dealings with HYDRA. The task force is operating out of a small warehouse just south of Midtown, covering as a small packaging company.” She handed Steve a file folder containing some pictures of the building. “What do you think?”

Steve looked over the photos. It didn’t look like much, but then again, it wasn’t meant to. It made him wonder about all the other holes that the NYPD were hiding out in. “Where is this?”

“Right off 9th avenue. Meatpacking district.”

“Well,” Steve said, handing the photographs back to Hill, “it looks like this place would be enough to store the files. The location itself is great; no one would question multiple delivery boxes in that area, especially if they’re covering as a package distributor. That, and it’s pretty equidistant to most of the SSR files origin locations. This will have to be our best bet.”

“And if they’re not there?” Fury asked.

Steve shrugged. “We keep looking, I guess. If you take out Pierce before he meets with the governor, we’ll have to move fast before the rest of HYDRA carts everything off.”

“Well, we’ll have to coordinate then,” Fury “You take your people with Hill to the warehouse to collect the files, I’ll go and arrest Pierce. We in agreement?”

“No.”

Steve startled, turning around to face Natasha, taken aback by her response. “Nat,” he started, giving her a glare, but she ignored him, looking back at Fury.

“I’m sorry?” the Commissioner asked.

“No,” she repeated. “No deal.”

Hill scoffed. “That’s not your decision. This arrangement was already agreed upon by your boss, and you can’t just- ” she was cut off by a wave of Fury’s hand.
“Why?” he pressed, eye glaring at the redhead.

“Why do you see the need to send some of your men with us?” Natasha shot back. “We’re more than capable of handling this ourselves.”

“To make sure you do your jobs,” Fury responded blandly. *To make sure you behave,* was left unsaid.

Natasha hummed. “Fine. Then I’m coming with you.”

“And why would that be necessary?”

“To make sure you do your job,” Natasha answered, smiling sweetly.

Fury smirked in return. He didn’t answer, so Natasha continued. “You’re so worried about handling some of the responsibility to criminals, right? Well, we feel the exact same way. The new head of HYDRA has been under your own roof all this time and you couldn’t sniff him out without our help. We won’t be taking any chances. Pierce is going down today, with or without your help.”

“Tasha,” Bucky snapped beside him.

“Are you suggesting that you’ll do something illegal?” Fury responded, his eyebrow arching in challenge.

“If it comes to it,” Natasha shrugged. “Depends on how well you can handle this.”

There was a tense silence, before Fury started to laugh. “I like you, Romanoff,” he said, finger pointing at her. “Fine,” he continued. “Fair’s fair. You can come with me.”

“Sir, you can’t possibly- ”

“Save it, Hill,” Fury interrupted.

“*Tasha,*” Bucky hissed again, and this time she turned to face him, her eyes glowing.

“Me too. I’m coming as well.” Sam, also catching onto the silent argument between Natasha and Bucky, chimed in.

Natasha’s glare slid over to the other man. “I don’t need anyone to protect me.”

“Maybe you don’t, but I sure as hell do,” Sam tried to joke. “You must be joking if you think that I’m going with Dumb and Dumber over here.”

Natasha narrowed her eyes, not falling for any of it, but her stance softened. “Fine.”

Steve barely caught mouth a thank you over to Sam. Steve agreed, and sent a reassuring smile Sam’s way. He had no doubt that Natasha could take care of herself, but they were stronger in numbers. He sure as hell didn’t trust Fury to pull something on the fly – much like he was planning on doing. Pairing up was the best way for all of them to watch each other’s backs.

“Why don’t you all just go?” Hill bit out.

“Don’t be an ass, Hill,” Fury sighed. “If anything, I’m taking a few problems out of your lap. Now, let’s quit the chit-chat. We’ve got work to do. Let’s load up.”

The agents behind Fury scattered, heading to their respective locations like the trained hounds that
they were. Hill clenched her jaw like she wanted to say more, but obediently stomped over to the
van that she would be taking with Bucky and Steve to the warehouse. Steve watched her fume over
to the driver’s side – *maybe I should have volunteered to go with Fury*, he thought to himself.

“Rogers.”

Steve turned back to Fury. “Yeah?”

“Phillips had a lot of faith in you. Get the job done.” Steve gaped at the other man. *Fury knew
Phillips?* So, it was true. Tony’s accusation. Fury had dabbled with the SSR in the past. To what
extent, he had no idea, but maybe Fury was more invested in getting his hands on these files than
he thought. Steve nodded numbly, watching as the eye-patched man turn sharply, this trench coat
flapping, as he made his way to his own vehicle.

*This was it,* Steve thought to himself. The final moments before the end. It had been hard enough
to say his goodbyes to Bruce and Thor, hell, he could barely meet Clint’s eyes. Pulling away from
Tony had been damn near impossible. But this? He saw Bucky clap Sam on the back and whisper
something in his ear before he moved over to Natasha, gathering her in his arms.

*When will I see them again?* He didn’t know how deep HYDRA went, he didn’t know how long
Fury would drag it out. He wasn’t even sure that if it ever ended, they’d be able to come back as if
nothing had happened. He couldn’t even be sure if they would all survive.

“-had more time,” he caught Bucky whisper.

Steve shifted, taking a few steps farther away from the intimate moment between him and Natasha.
It was a pain he could relate too, one they all could. No one was happy about the agreement they
had with Fury. The gang was the only real family they had left. He could understand the idea of
witness protection – after Pierce and Stane were taken out of the picture, it wouldn’t be hard for the
rest of HYDRA to put the pieces together on who was involved. So, he agreed with Fury that they
needed to drop off the grid for a while, for all of their safety. What he didn’t agree on was the fact
that they needed to do it all separately. They worked better as a unit; they would be able to protect
each other, just like they’ve done in New York. But keeping them all together also made them a
threat. And Fury knew that.

Steve couldn’t help but feel a pulse of selfishness, the key to Tony’s safehouse burning a hole in
his pocket. Steve would be getting a larger slice than everyone else – that was, if Fury didn’t arrest
him on finding out he ditched Kansas to head to North Carolina. But, if he knew the rest of his
team, he had no doubt in his mind that they wouldn’t be trying something similar.

He looked up to catch Bucky and Natasha mid embrace, Bucky’s metal arm gleaming as it twisted
in Natasha’s fiery red hair. But it was Natasha, as always, who was in charge, grabbing at Bucky’s
collar to yank him down into a kiss. Steve smiled sadly. He knew that they had a complicated
relationship, but who was he to judge? But from what Bucky had admitted to him, it seemed that
even with all the chaos happening around them, it was the most steady they’d been in years.

“Damn, am I the only one who’s not getting any?”

Steve snorted at Sam’s outburst, Bucky pulling slightly away from Natasha to shoot the man a
dirty look. “You want me to kiss you so you don’t feel left out?” Steve chided.

“Absolutely not,” Sam negated. “I like my junk where it is, thank you very much. I don’t need
Stark sending a homemade Terminator on my ass.”
Steve smiled, unable to pull the man into a hug. “Take care of yourself, Sam,” he whispered. “Make sure Pierce gets put in the ground. For the family.”

“You got it, Cap.” He pulled away, Natasha quickly filling the empty space.

“Don’t be a stranger,” she said to him, cryptically, kissing him on the cheek.

He watched them walk off, hopping into Fury’s van. “We’ll see them again,” Bucky said next to him as the van pulled out of the lot.

“Of course we will,” Steve confirmed. I’ll make sure of it.

Bucky knocked their shoulders together. “Come on,” he stated. “Let’s go finish this.”

“You know what he’s going to try and do, right?”

Tony’s voice pulled him from his slumber. The smaller man was cradled against his chest, breaths matching Steve’s own. The adrenaline and natural high of their love-making was long gone, leaving a chill in the room. Steve shifted on the mattress and pulled Tony closer to him, chasing after the lingering warmth. “Hm?” he mumbled, pressing his face into Tony’s hair.

“Fury,” came the engineer’s response.

Steve sighed. “Tony, I don’t think I’ll ever fully know what that man is, and is going to be, up too.” Nor did he care; not at the moment. These were the last few hours of peace and quiet he had before the storm that the morning brought. Moments that he had planned to spend wrapped around Tony in the comfort of his own home, pretending that dawn would never arrive.

“He’s not going to let you take them back,” Tony whispered.

Steve frowned, flopping his head back against his pillow. Tony was right. Fury may be on the same page as them and agree that leaving the SSR files in the hands of Pierce would be catastrophic, but Fury was still on the side of the law. The side that would be very eager to keep their hands on the encyclopedia of the criminal world. What was worse was that Pierce had already blabbed that the Holy Grail was were the files existed; that, and Steve had confirmed that fact when he met with Fury. Whether or not they stop Pierce from distributing his own version of the information or not, the cat had been let of the bag.

“What can we do?” Steve asked. “Fury isn’t exactly going to let those disappear. The FBI would go nuts for anything the SSR had collected.” It would definitely answer a lot of questions that the agency had, but it would put countless people at risk. Informants, intel, crimes, everything they could think of, including things that Steve and Tony did not barter for in their agreement with Fury. Would the man look the other way? Or would he spring at the opportunity to bag both HYDRA and the remaining criminal web of the SSR? While the files being left in Fury’s hands wasn’t wrong per say, like it would be in Pierce’s, it definitely wasn’t right. It was a risk that he couldn’t take. But how would he get them back?

“I’ve been thinking about it, actually,” Tony continued and, much to Steve’s chagrin, pulled away from him and sat up on the bed. The silk sheets pooled around his waist, revealing his toned backside. Steve could still faintly see red marks from where his fingers clawed across the olive skin, just hours before. He couldn’t help but trace back over the marks, his mind supplying the memories of choked moans, Tony’s head thrown back in pleasure as he shuddered beneath Steve.

“When are you not thinking,” Steve smirked, drawing his own body up behind Tony, the pull from
the other man too intoxicating.

Tony snorted. “I didn’t realize that was such a turn on for you.”

“Didn’t think it was,” Steve admitted. “Maybe it’s just you,” he added, kissing at Tony’s neck.

Tony hummed, chuckling lowly. “Sap.”

Steve smiled, tugging at Tony’s chin so he could meet him in a kiss. Tony responded eagerly, and Steve couldn’t resist reaching down to palm at his lover’s ass. “I take it back,” Tony huffed, pressing back into Steve’s touch. “You’re just bring nice because you want to get laid.”

“I can’t be both?”

“Steve, focus,” Tony admonished.

“I am very focused,” he argued, fingers trailing over Tony’s half hard cock.

He watched in satisfaction as Tony moaned softly, his head falling back against Steve’s shoulder. A familiar thrill rushed through him as he was reminded of how he was the only one who got to have Tony like this. That Tony let him.

Tony slapped at his hand. Well, let’s me sometime, apparently, Steve thought to himself. God forbid he love an easy man. “Steve,” he pushed. “Files. Fury.”

“Jesus, Tony, I don’t know!” Steve snapped as he pushed off the bed, rubbing a hand over his face. “Fury already knows about them, so we can’t exactly cart them off somewhere without him asking any questions. We wouldn’t even have the time or the manpower to do it anyway. Can’t we just,” he huffed, gesturing wildly, “burn it all?”

When Tony didn’t respond, Steve turned back to face him. He looked back at Steve with wide eyes. “What?”

“Well, nothing,” Tony blurted, rubbing at the back of his head nervously. “That’s actually what I was thinking. Just didn’t think you’d be on board with the whole thing.”

Steve paused. “You’re serious?”

“Steve, you said it yourself. Not much else we can do that ensures Fury won’t get his hands on it.”

Steve frowned, but didn’t argue. Again, Tony was right. Everything had already gone too far to shit to salvage everything anymore. It would all have to burn.

Steve couldn’t help but be conflicted. He couldn’t count the number of times he’d thought about burning all of the files, to finally get rid of the curse of the SSR. The files had plagued him for years, a mocking reminder of how he’d failed his first family. How he could protect dusty papers behind locked doors but couldn’t manage to protect the ones right in front of him. A captain with full ammunition, but no armada. But he couldn’t never manage to go through with it. It was an unspoken arrangement he had, to continue to shoulder the burden of the dead’s secrets, to honor them in the only way he knew how.

He wondered what Peggy would do. He hadn’t asked himself that in a while. Usually, putting Peggy in his shoes would keep him on the straight and narrow. With everything that had happened recently, he supposed that he was too embarrassed to ask what Peggy would do. Like he assumed that she would be too ashamed of what had become of him. If she were still here, things would have
Steve looked back over to Tony, the man regarding him with a worried expression. She would have loved you, Steve thought.

“Steve?”

“I think you’re right,” he said finally. “There’s no other way.”

Tony padded over to him. “I know it’s hard,” he whispered, rubbing a hand through Steve’s hair. “I’m sorry. I know that they mean a lot to you.”

“No, it’s alright,” Steve sighed. “It’s been a long time coming, I think. Was just trying too hard to hold on, I guess.” Calloused fingers rubbed gently at the back of his neck. Steve looked up at Tony. “I’m assuming if this has already crossed your mind, you’ve already got some half-crazed plan to carry it out?”

Tony grinned like a school boy and began to tug at Steve’s arm. “Come on,” he said, pulling them towards the bedroom door.

“Tony, we’re naked.”

Tony didn’t even falter in his movements. “It’s late, everyone will be in bed,” he countered. “Besides, this is my house, I can damn well please walk around with my junk out whenever I want.”

Steve chuckled, but pulled the brunette away from the door. “I don’t think so,” he responded, reaching down to pick up the underwear that was previously chucked to the ground. “This may be your house, but I’m the only one who gets to see you naked.”

Tony rolled his eyes but was obviously pleased with the answer. “Caveman,” Tony chided, but relented, slipping on his briefs. He barely waited for Steve to follow suit before yanking him out the door. Steve wanted to argue that underwear barely constituted as acceptable clothing in the speakeasy, but he figured he should pick his battles.

The hall was silent as they walked through, the rest of the family retired to rest for the night. Steve paused in front of Clint’s door when they passed, noticing the light was still on. Tony frowned, but followed suit. He couldn’t imagine what Clint was going through. If someone had told him Tony was alive, after weeks of thinking him dead, there would be nothing that could keep Steve from finding him. But it was something like that that they couldn’t afford to do right now. The agreement they had with Fury was fragile, both sides waiting for a reason to break the truce off and go AWOL. A grief-ridden Commando chasing after his boyfriend would be more than enough for Fury to just say ‘screw it!’ and throw them all in jail. It was heartbreakingly painful. Steve wanted nothing more to be the first person on Clint’s side to rush in and get Phil back, but instead, he had to be the one standing in his way. Yet again, the fate of the entire family was pushed to the front, leaving Clint to dangle in limbo.

Steve slumped, defeat bearing down on his shoulders. Before he could think twice, he reached down and pulled the handle open. Please still be here, he thought.

The room was dim, the light they had seen coming from a single reading lamp. The chair next to the lamp, however, housed Bucky instead of Clint. His friend looked exhausted, hunched over, elbows resting on his knees as he nursed a glass of alcohol.

He nodded when he met Steve’s gaze, not even fazed with his appearance. Steve turned to look at
the bed, seeing Natasha leaning against the frame, the barely visible head of Clint Barton resting in her lap. Clint may have been the only one who looked sound asleep, but he didn’t look anymore rested than anyone else in the room.

“Don’t worry.” Steve could barely hear Natasha’s voice. “We’re looking after him.”

Steve nodded, giving Clint a final once over. He felt Tony pull him from the room once more and he went willingly. The door shut quietly behind him, and the pair continued their trek, Tony’s hand remaining tangled with his.

The mood seemed to instantly lighten when they reached Tony’s lab. The large room was easily a favorite for both men. For Tony, it was an escape to an endless wonderland of possibility. For Steve it was a similar safe haven, even if most of the things discussed in there went way over his head.

Bruce had laughed when Steve admitted it to him one day. “I know exactly what you’re talking about,” he chuckled. “Tony has a way of being a great conductor. Believe it or not, I’m at my most productive when I’m working with him.”

Steve wasn’t sure about any of that, but he did know that he could – and has, multiple times – just watch the man dance around his workshop. There was something so comforting about the being with him in his natural habitat. It reminded of him when he was younger, content to listen to the sounds of his mother putting about throughout the house, humming quietly to herself.

“Here,” Tony stated, leading Steve to a work table littered with odds and ends. He bent down, tugging open a few drawers, muttering quietly to himself. “Ah, here we go,” he finally said, pulling out a small orb.

“What is it?” Steve asked, taking the sphere from Tony’s hand.

“Incendiary grenade,” Tony answered. “SI’s version is pretty popular with the boys in the Middle East. Extremely lightweight and comes with AI compatibility. A few of these would do the trick.”

“Do you normally keep bombs in your drawers?”

“If you’re already this concerned, you probably shouldn’t poke around in any of the other nooks and crannies here.”

Steve shot Tony a dirty look. “There’s no pin. How does this work?”

“These puppies can be used as standard grenades, or as delayed detonations. These ones here are specifically designed for delayed explosions. The military can link them all up, place, and get their boys out of there before anything goes off. For you, I can link JARVIS to the grenades and get them primed up for you, but this way, you get to decide when they’ll go off. Wouldn’t want to get those pretty eyelashes singed.”

Steve smiled. “They’ll be alright to carry?”

“Of course,” Tony answered firmly. Stupid question, Steve thought to himself. Tony would never put him in danger like that. “They won’t be armed until you tell JARVIS you want them too.”

“Got it.”

Tony handed them another two. “This should be more than enough,” he explained. “They’re my design, and you know I don’t do anything half ass. These pack a punch, so make sure you’re way
out of dodge before you light the candle. You’ll probably need only one, but you should take extra
just in case Pierce doesn’t have all the files in the same spot.”

“Right,” Steve agreed, palming all three. “I’ll go put them in my jacket.”

Tony grabbed at his wrist. “Are you sure about this?”

“No,” Steve replied honestly. “But I’m gonna do it anyway.”

Tony chuckled, wrapping his arms around Steve’s waist. “I knew there was a reason why I liked
you.”

“Is that the only reason?” Steve questioned, eyes twinkling.

“There might be a few others,” the brunette murmured. “But I might need to be reminded,” he
added, kissing Steve sweetly on the lips. “Upstairs?”

Steve grinned, slapping Tony on the ass playfully, the other man laughing brightly as he
scampered up the stairs.

“Steve?”

Bucky pulled him from his thoughts. He looked over at his friend questioningly. “We’re here,”
Bucky stated, nodding out the window. Steve peered out and saw the innocuous warehouse looking
back at him, across from the alley where they’d parked. Please be in there, he thought to himself. He
reached into his picket, feeling the three small orbs that sat there. Hill and the other agents
hopped out the van, Steve and Bucky following suit.

If the files were in there, he’d have a very small window to place the grenades and detonate. He
didn’t want any NYPD or FBI blood on his hands, but he knew that Hill would move quickly to
secure the scene for Fury. One problem at a time, Steve thought to himself.

“We’ve got NYPD officers armed and ready in these buildings,” Hill said, pointing to a few offices
across the street. “They’ll swoop in on my signal, but I’m hoping that we can just sneak in quietly.
This place should be emptied out.”

“You don’t think Pierce would leave behind a skeleton crew for security?” Bucky asked.

“There’s a chance, but he might not have,” Hill argued. “The official use of this building is for a
task force sanctioned by Pierce. Our usual hideouts, when in use, are monitored by officers and our
tech employees from our home offices. Pierce could theoretically be hiding the files away from the
NYPD by using the NYPD to hide it.”

“Well, that’s just great,” Bucky drawled.

“Lucky for us,” Hill continued, “Fury shut down the security measures on the building. It’ll be
easy for us to get it. All you have to do is check and make sure all the files are accounted for and
your job is done.”

Steve frowned. “How much back-up did you bring?”

“I’ve got ten on standby, spread throughout the block, not counting us. Why?”

Steve shook his head. “Pierce wouldn’t leave these files unprotected.”

“Did you not hear me, Rogers?” Hill replied. “Pierce would have used the NYPD- ”
“Listen, lady,” Bucky interrupted. “I’m sure you’re very good at your job. But so are we. We’ve been dealing with HYDRA the longest; they didn’t get to where they are today without being precautious. You may be right, but so is Cap. Pierce wouldn’t rely on just the NYPD security measures.”

“Sure, he’s transferred fake files over to a USB to present to the governor, but he still needs the originals to manipulate the city through HYDRA,” Steve added. “This info is his cash cow, so no way would be content to only use police resources. He would need a contingency plan, for this very scenario,” he continued, gesturing to the group. “Pierce would be a fool if he didn’t consider that the force may catch something that they weren’t supposed to. He’d have his own men holding down the fort, just in case it came to a firefight. More than usual if he was nowhere close, like for example, when he leaves for a meeting with government officials.”

Hill frowned, but didn’t argue. She reached down to her belt and pulled up her walkie-talkie. “May?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Take your men and increase the radius. Start clearing out any other civilians we missed. Looks like we’ll be getting a bigger firefight than we wanted.”

“Affirmative,” the voice crackled over the radio. “You want heading in the front with you?”

“No,” Hill replied. “Keep to the windows for now, watch for any runners. I’ll signal if anything changes.”

“You got it, ma’am. May, out.”

Hill pocketed the radio and looked at Steve. “That’s the best I can get you right now,” she said.

Steve nodded. “Thanks. I just don’t want to take any chances today.”

“Of course,” she replied. “There’s an east entrance right over there,” she added with a point of her fingers. “I’ll take two of my men through there, while you and Barnes head through the back, accompanied by one of my own.”

“We gettin’ any guns?” Bucky asked, nodding over to where Hill’s team were loading their own weapons.

“Absolutely not. You’re still criminals.”

“Right,” Bucky huffed. “Meat shields, it is.”

Hill just smiled sweetly. “Get ready. We’ll head in in a few minutes.”

Steve scowled as he watched her walk back over to the van, an agent holding a bullet proof vest out for her. He assumed that the FBI wouldn’t allow them to arm themselves for this, lest they try anything funny, but from the looks of it, he and Bucky wouldn’t be getting anything that would count as added protection. Why would they? He had already cashed in the rest of his secrets to Fury; all they needed was for him to identity the SSR files, and honestly, they could probably figure that out on their own. He was a loose end now; it probably worked out better for Fury if he and Bucky didn’t survive. Less mouths to feed when they were sent into witness protection.

Maybe he should have brought his own gun. He was sure that Bucky had a knife strapped on him somewhere, but Steve had warned the whole group away from hiding firearms on their person.
They were difficult to conceal, and with trained FBI agents, it’s not like they wouldn’t already be on the look for anything suspicious about them. One wrong move made by the gang and the whole arrangement could be called off, all of them being carted off to prison. But in the end, no one had searched them. Maybe they just assumed that Steve wouldn’t be that stupid, bringing a gun to a fight with experts wielding semi-automatics. Better for me, Steve thought to himself, thinking of Tony’s presents that were sitting innocently in his pocket.


Bucky cast a quick look over his shoulder, making sure none of the agents were watching as he stepped over. “What’s the plan?” he asked, voice low.

Steve smiled fondly. “Weren’t you listening? Hill laid it out fairly clear.”

Bucky snorted, rolling his eyes. “Pigs will fly before the day comes that you actually listen to what you’re supposed to do. Now, stop being an ass, and tell me what I need to do.”

“Here,” Steve said, shuffling close enough to Bucky to stuff a grenade in his pocket. Bucky’s hand quickly replaced his, no doubt trying to distinguish the object. “We follow along until we find the files. Then, we’re going to improvise.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“Fire starters,” Steve replied.

Bucky froze before letting out a deep sigh. “Please tell me you did not just put a bomb in my pants.”

“Okay, I won’t,” Steve smiled.

“Steve,” Bucky hissed, eyes darting around the agents milling around him. “Are you fucking insane?”

“Don’t worry,” Steve placated. “They’re Tony’s.”

“Oh, and that’s supposed to make me feel better?” Bucky huffed. “I distinctly remember that fucker telling me how nicely my blood would stain on his floors.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Quit your griping. You know he wouldn’t risk us.”

Bucky paused. “You really alright with blowing everything sky high?” he finally asked.

Steve shrugged. “Got no other choice, really. Can’t let Fury take them.”

Bucky nodded in agreement. “Alright, alright. What do you need me to do?”

“Just place them near the largest pile of files you see,” Steve explained. “They won’t go off until I give word to JARVIS, so we’ll have time to clear out. Tony thinks we should only need one, but I don’t think we should take any chances here. We need to make sure that everything burns.”

“How many you bring?”

“Three.”

“Jesus,” Bucky sighed. “You and Stark are a fucking match made in heaven, you know that? You’re as nuts as he is.”
“You do understand that Nat’s killed someone with a stiletto, right?”

“So hot,” Bucky whispered under his breath.

“Focus,” Steve chided. “All we need to do is place them. I hit a few buttons and JARVIS will take care of the rest.”

“Just, you know, make sure I’m clear before you push the red button, alright? I only got one arm left,” Bucky joke, cackling when Steve shot him a dirty glare.

“That’s not funny,” the blonde grit out.

“You’re right, it’s hilarious. But only if I tell it.”

“You boys ready?” Hills voice sounded, interrupting their banter.

“Yes,” Bucky answered firmly.

“This is Campbell,” she said, pointing to the armed agent behind her. “He’ll be heading in with you.” The man nodded at them, but said nothing, already taking off towards his designated entry point. “Time to move,” Hill added, but stopped them before moving. “Stick to the plan,” she pressed. “You said it yourself. HYDRA is too dangerous to be messing around with.”

Steve nodded, watching her turn and head off with her own group. “C’mon, Steve,” Bucky prodded, pulling him to follow Campbell. “Let’s finish this.”

The warehouse was seemingly quiet as they walked up to it. Steve didn’t buy it for a second, his hands already itching for a gun. “I go in first,” Campbell said tersely. “Once my men have the building cleared, we’ll call you in.” Bucky gave Steve a side-glare.

“Stupid plan,” he mouthed at Steve.

He heard Hill give a countdown on her radio and then Campbell burst through the door, gun raised. They were met with silence. “Clear,” Campbell whispered, but Steve didn’t move. Something wasn’t right. Before he could say anything, gunfire crackled across the building, where Hill was entering with her team. He could see Campbell startle, ready to charge in, but gunfire rained down on him as well, the man hitting the floor, dead.

There was a pause in the gunfire. He could hear Hill screaming for backup over the dead man’s comm. “Rogers?” a voice called out.

He knew that voice. He could hear Bucky hiss out a protest, but Steve charged in. He didn’t see anyone, nor was he immediately shot. Of course, his vision was limited, the entirety of the SSR files stacked in neat rows on the main floor. There was a slight movement that caught his eye, a figure looming on the open balcony, above them.

Steve walked towards the stairs slowly, weaving in and out of the stacks of files as cover. He looked at Bucky, following dutifully behind him, the man how holding Campbell’s gun. He looked at Steve with fierce eyes, but didn’t try to stop him. Instead, he reached into his pocket and placed one of Tony’s grenades on a couple of crates. Steve nodded, following suit with the two he carried, dropping them quietly as he made his way towards the stairs.

His brain was screaming at him, shouting Trap! Trap! Trap!

But that voice called to him. Mocked him, as it did over the computer just a few days prior. Steve walked up the stairs slowly, finally meeting the gaze of the man once called family, the mole of
the SSR.

“Zola,” Steve breathed.

“Steven,” Zola responded, calm as always. “It’s so good to see you. And look, you brought your loyal bloodhound.”

“You fucking cockroach,” Bucky hissed to his left.

“What are you doing here?” Steve asked. His blood was pounding, his brain screaming at him to charge, to squeeze the life out of the slug in front of him, but Bucky grabbed at his wrist, holding him back.

“Guarding the golden egg,” Zola answered with a slimy smile, gesturing the stacks of boxes around them. “Still so much information to go through. Our old employers were very diligent.”

“Well, I’m sorry to say that you won’t get the chance. It’s over Zola.”

“For you, maybe,” the man smiled, reaching behind his back.

“Steve!” Bucky shouted, the only warning he got before he was knocked down and over the railing.

Bright pain shot up his side as they landed one floor down, but it was ignored by the fire radiating from his leg. Zola had shot him. Bucky was up in a flash, yanking Steve to cover when he saw Zola lean over the bridge above them. Steve twisted, Bucky stumbling under him as another shot went off, this one burying deep into his side.

“Steve!” Bucky cried, pulling away from his to aim his own weapon that he’d taken off of Campbell’s body. He fired wildly, causing Zola to retreat. Steve took the chance to crawl over to the back corner, hiding behind a stack of crated files.

More shots echoed throughout the building. Zola had brought reinforcements. He looked back to where Bucky had taken his own cover, dipping out only to fire a few shots. He wouldn’t have enough ammo. Not enough to fight off the men that Zola had with him, especially with the guns that they were using. He needed to get Bucky safe.

“Go!” Steve shouted at his friend. “Get out of here!”

“No, not without you!” Bucky charged, bullets flying around him as he raced towards Steve. The blonde could see the moment one made contact, grazing Bucky’s thigh, the man stumbling, falling to the floor. Steve reached out on instinct, ignoring the searing pain of his body to grab Bucky’s hand and pull him the rest of the way.

“Well, that settles that then,” he smiled at Steve, ignoring the man’s dirty look. “No way we’re getting out of here,” he added, curling up tighter behind the crates as another wave of bullets careened over their heads. “There’s too many of them.”

“Well, not through the front door,” Steve slurred.

Bucky followed Steve’s eyeline, looking at the tall windows in front of them, mostly shot out from the onslaught of bullets. “You serious?”

Another wave of pain burned through his chest. “This place is on a pier. There could be water down there to break our fall.”
“Yeah, or concrete,” Bucky hissed.

“Your choice, bud, concrete or bullets.”

Bucky groaned. He could hear HYDRA moving around them, most likely closing in. “Fine,” Bucky finally agreed. “We’ll need a distraction though.”

Steve grappled for his phone. “You sure?” he questioned, typing out the command to JARVIS.

“We had to do it anyway,” Bucky shrugged. “Besides, I’ve already survived an explosion. Odds are in my favor for this one.”

“Pretty sure that’s not how probability works.”

“Don’t be an ass, Rogers,” Bucky replied, shifting on to his knees. “Let’s light this candle.”

He thought of Tony briefly, a bright smile and warm eyes flashing through his mind. *Survive this,* he thought to himself. *Survive so you can get back to him.*

He sent the command for JARVIS, tossing his phone away. There was a split second that nothing happened, but Steve moved anyway, a burst of adrenaline pushing him up towards the window. He felt his skin being pierced, shards of glass that remained in the windows cut him as he crashed through, but it was negligent, as a rumbling sounded, the only warning that came before a wall of heat roared behind them, sending them crashing out of the warehouse.

"Wanna tell me what we’re doing here?"

Natasha looked over to Sam, the man shifting his weight between his feet, eyeing the FBI agents suspiciously.

She knew why Sam had gone with her; she wasn’t stupid, and James sure as hell wasn’t sneaky. Part of her was frustrated, finding herself in a situation she was all too familiar with. Ever since she was a little girl, he had made a vow to herself to be strong on her own, never having to resort to lean on a man.

But, there was a larger part of her that was pleased that Sam was by her side. Upon Steve sharing the news yesterday of their fate, Natasha was conflicted. She has spent a majority of her life on her own. And while she knew that she would be able to thrive in whatever environment the FBI put her in, she couldn’t help but feel a certain uneasiness, one she hadn’t felt since she was a child.

Her relationship with The Commandos was her weakness; she was more than aware of that fact. She was positive that if she had told her younger self where she would end up, her past self would reply that she would rather take a bullet to the brain. But now, thinking of the patchwork of people that had joined together and caught her from free fall, Natasha knew that she wouldn’t have it any other way.

Sam met her gaze. *Yes,* Natasha thought to herself. *Not for the world.* “Nat?” Sam asked. “You okay?”

She nodded, looking around to take in her surroundings. There were plenty of times that she imagined what she would do if she ever got in the doors of the NYPD headquarters. Shame this would be a waster opportunity. They were in Fury’s office, the Commissioner dropping them off like school children, grumbling at them to stay put while he got his people together. Any chance to poke around the office was thwarted by an FBI agent posted at the door. Natasha was more than
confident that she could get away with a cursory search, but she had promised Steve that she would be on her best behavior. Well, for the time being.

“Pierce leaving this building is not an option,” she said. She eyed the agent posted in the door, watching him scroll through his phone with a bored expression, clearing uninterested with the other occupants in the room.

Sam snorted. “No kidding. Don’t worry; Fury will have him in cuffs in no time.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

She saw Sam stiffen to her left, the man tilting his jaw upwards. “You’re not serious.”

“I’m never not serious,” she drawled.

“Nat,” he hissed. “You heard Steve. If we break off from their agreement-“

“Alexander Pierce is the current head of HYDRA. He wears the red mask but still gets to bask in the sun,” she sneered. “He is reason for everything happening. For how many people we’ve buried, for how much he lost. Think about our family. You really think that you’ll be satisfied knowing that all he got was life to waste away in prison?”

She saw Sam pause, mulling over her statement. She knew that he would agree with her, but Sam did always have more restraint. “I have no idea how Steve agreed to let Fury take the reins on this one,” she continued. “He’s lost the most from this, and now he’s just going to stand aside and let the law intervene?”

“He had to, Nat,” Sam placated. “He cut a deal with Fury. For us.”

“He’s given us too much,” she muttered angrily, shaking her head. “Pierce will continue to be a threat as long as he breathes; prison bars won’t stop him from being the HYDRA’s puppeteer.”

“And what are you saying? You going to go in there and kill him yourself?”

“If necessary,” Natasha shrugged. “I wasn’t lying when I said I needed to see if Fury was going to do his job or not. His real job; putting the American people first, and not worrying about government guidelines.”

Sam sucked in a breath through his teeth. “Nat, you do this and you’ll be arrested!” he argued. “No way Fury lets you go into protection.”

“That’s a price I’m willing to pay.” For them, I’d give anything.

“And what about the rest of us?” Sam asked quietly. “What if Fury throws the whole lot of us in prison?”

“There’s a chance,” she frowned. “But that’s where you can be of use. As soon as it happens, you’ll have a very short window. Get out and warn the others. Run.”

Silence descended between the two. She could tell he wasn’t happy, but were any of them? This was a call that she’d made last night; it was something that needed to be done, regardless of whether or not everyone else was on board with it. Funny, how Steve and Tony had sat in this very room to barter for all of their lives, and her she was, not twenty-four hours later, potentially undoing the whole thing.
“Alright,” Sam finally said. “Fine. But the same goes for you.” She looked at him questioningly. Sam shrugged, rubbing at the back of his neck. “There’s a chance that I might have a better shot.”

“Sam, I can’t ask you to- ”

“You think I wouldn’t pay the price for you all either? This protection thing, well, it’s basically prison without bars, so why does it matter? Hell, prison might have better food. At least I’ll make some friends there,” he added with a smile.

This, Natasha thought to herself. This is how she ended up sucked into the life of this gang. The undying loyalty, the love they had for each other. Loyalty wasn’t something new for her, but she’d been shocked all those years ago, when Steve first threw together The Commandos, that it could be given without anyone being bought or beaten.

“Alright,” she agreed, voice low.

Suddenly, Fury burst through the door. The agent on babysitting duty straightened immediately, coming to full attention. “Here’s the deal,” the man gruffed out as he stopped towards Natasha and Sam. “Pierce is in our main briefing room. He’s there with the governor and his wife. The governor is there to take some pictures and shake a few hands, the usual PR bullshit. The ceremony doesn’t start for another hour, but I’m gonna go in and sweep this up, now. As much as I would like to cuff the bastard in front of New York’s news cameras, the NYPD wants this out of the public eye as much as possible.”

“What about us?”

“You’re staying with Ward,” Fury replied, pointing to the other man in the room.

“That’s not what we agreed on,” Natasha pushed.

“You’ll get a front row seat to me leading Pierce out in cuffs, but I can’t worry about dealing with three criminals at the same time. Stay put.” And with that, Fury marched out of the room, trench coat flapping behind him.

“Now what,” Sam whispered.

“We need to find out where the briefing room is,” Natasha responded. “No way it’s on this floor. We need to get there before Fury finishes his arrest and put Pierce down.”

“You got a gun?”

“No, but he does.” The agent watching them had returned to his phone, fingers tapping wildly on the screen.

“Great, murder and assault. I can feel the years’ sentence piling up.”

“Don’t be a baby,” Natasha sighed. She looked at the clock hanging in the room. 9:47 AM. Fury had mentioned in the next hour, but given that the place will be packed with reporters, this was the type of story to be breaking news, right at the top of the hour. 11:00 AM. Of course, that didn’t mean much if Fury was planning to have Pierce on his way down to the station before that. They needed to move fast. “Is there a bathroom in here?” she asked loudly.

Ward looked up from his phone, giving her a blank stare. “Well, can I use it? Or are you going to make me go on the floor?”
The man frowned, obviously unpleased. “Fine,” he agreed, but postured, hand trailing over his sidearm in an obvious threat. “But you’re going too,” he continued, nodding towards Sam.

Without giving Sam a chance to argue, Natasha started to walk towards the door. She pulled it open slowly, taking in her surroundings. The cubicles were still empty, littered with the occasional office supply. She could kill Pierce with a pen – it wouldn’t be the first time – but she wasn’t sure she would be able to get that close. No, she needed Ward’s gun. That wasn’t what she was out here for, anyway. She stared at the elevator across from her and smiled.

She let Ward lead her down the hallway, Sam trailing behind him. Once in the bathroom, she stalled, waiting the appropriate amount of time to wait before flushing an empty toilet. She walked over to the sink and turned on the water, looking in the mirror instead, fixing her hair. After a few moments she flicked the faucet off and wiped her hands with an unneeded paper towel.

Stepping back in the hallway, she eyed Sam immediately. Ward waited until they were both in front of him before guiding them back to Fury’s office. Sam was still watching her out of the corner of his eye. Carefully, she leaned a hand out in front of her, making sure her body blocked the view from Grant.

3rd floor, she signed.

Sam didn’t reply, but she knew he understood. When she was walking to the bathroom, she’d looked at elevator, mainly the indicator above the doors. The glowing red light had read 3.

Logically, she knew that there was a chance that Fury went down to a floor and someone else used the elevator, bringing it a different floor, but it was a better option that trying to go floor by floor. They didn’t have the time for that.

Repetitive noises sounded behind her and Natasha turned slightly. Ward’s fingers were tapping over his holstered gun, almost nervously, much the same way they had moved over his phone screen. He met her gaze and frowned. “Move it,” he snarled, pushing her forward slightly.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Sam snapped, immediately coming to her defense. Red flags started to flash in her head and she looked back towards the elevator. It was coming up.

“It’s alright, Sam,” she soothed the man, grabbing his arm and squeezing it in an iron grip. The man relented immediately, letting her lead him back to Fury’s office. “What floor are we on?” she asked quietly.

“Eight,” came the reply.

She cast a final gaze over her shoulder at the elevator as they stepped back into Fury’s office.

No way he was back to collect them yet. On one else should be coming up here, especially since a keycard was needed to activate this floor. Something wasn’t right. She looked back at Ward, who was also looking at the doors. They had hit the floor, but they still didn’t open. Someone was holding them shut.

Without a second thought, she dragged Sam into Fury’s office for some semblance of cover. She could hear Ward step in behind her and she spun, tackling him to the ground in surprise. She was off of him before he managed to get with the program. He swore and grabbed at her ankles but then Sam was on him, fists beating into the side of his temple. She allowed her focus to shift back outside, Ward’s gun already nestled in her hands. The doors still hadn’t opened and she used it to her advantage, dipping back out the door, hiding in the cubicles and waited.
Finally, the elevator dinged, and two men stepped out, guns already trained on Fury’s office. HYDRA members, no doubt there to finish them off. She saw the moment the pair of them caught the faint rustlings of Sam wrestling with Ward.

The two men walked forward, passing her without a second glance, heading for the door. She never gave them a chance. She popped up from behind cover, sending two bullets into the back of each head. They dropped quickly, their hands only inches from Fury’s door.

After a quick look to confirm no one else was in the elevator, she raced back over to Fury’s office, ripping the door open. Sam was grappling with Ward, the men trying to land a hit on the other. “You can’t win,” she heard Ward say. “HYDRA will always survive. Cut off one head, two more-”

“Man, shut the hell up,” Sam snapped, delivering a stomping kick to the man’s chest, sending Ward flying over Fury’s couch. He shot a quick look over at Natasha. “You good?”

She nodded, gesturing down to the bodies at her feet. “There will probably be more.”

Sam waved her off. “No problem,” he smiled, eyes back on Ward, who was struggling to get up. “Go!” he waved her off. “I got this!”

Her body paused at a viscous reminder from her brain. You won’t see him again, it hissed at her.

She frowned, shaking the thoughts away as she turned away from Sam, heading towards the elevator. There was no time for grief. Not when there was still a job to do.

She darted into the elevator, hitting the button for the third floor. The descent was silent, leaving Natasha alone to her thoughts. She could only pray that there wasn’t anyone waiting for her on the other side. What’s more, she hoped that Pierce was still in the building.

When the elevator slowed to its destination, Natasha plastered herself against a wall. The doors opened, but no shots went off. Taking a risk, she peeked out. The entryway was clear, well, of anything living. She looked down at the two bodies that lay on the floor, wondering if they were regular officers or HYDRA moles.

Without giving them a second glance, she stepped out, trying to distinguish which way to go. A quick look down the hallway and Natasha was met with more bodies. Following the trail like bread crumbs, she finally stumbled onto a pair of double doors. She could hear murmuring on the other side.

“You know there was a time when I would have taken a bullet for you?”

That was Fury. She must be at the front doors of their man briefing room. She frowned, weighing her options. There must be another way in. She skulked around the back, preening when she saw another door farther down the side.

Door on the handle, she opened it slowly, listening intently for anyone picking up on her presence. Peeking in, she saw bodies littered on the floor, no doubt the press that had come for the PR junket, as well as unsuspecting police officers. That and, oh God, there was the governor’s wife. The governor himself was on his knees, temple pressed against the end of Pierce’s gun.

Pierce was turned away from her, as well as the three men that flanked him as protection. Each of them were staring at Fury, who was the only one still standing on his side, gun aimed at Pierce. If he saw Natasha looking in, he didn’t give any indication.

She needed to do something, fast. Pierce would not leave this building alive.
Natasha took a deep breath before charging into the room. Her hands were almost on autopilot, the gun moving from target to target, dropping the armed guards around Pierce before any of them could react. After the third body hit the floor Natasha paused, slinking over in front of Pierce, gun trained on the back of his head.

“What a waste,” she heard him say.

“I’m sorry. Did I step on your moment?”

Pierce’s eyes narrowed in confusion, watching her with beady eyes. “Romanoff,” he finally breathed in realization. “What, Rogers didn’t have the balls to face me, so he sent you instead?”

His face was twisted and red with anger, as if he was wearing the Skull mask. “He sends his regards,” she said sweetly.

“You should have shot me when my back was turned,” he snarled, pressing his gun harder against the governor’s head, the man sobbing lowly.

“No,” Natasha negated. “I wanted you to see my face when you died. I wanted you to know who beat you.”

“Pierce,” Fury interjected. “You’re not getting out of this one. You’re surrounded.”

“I brought my own soldiers, Fury,” Pierce smiled. “They’ll come.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” Natasha replied with a sharp smile. Not with Sam on the loose upstairs. “It’s over.”

For a slight moment, Natasha could see a flash of uncertainty on Pierce’s face, the man finally coming to terms with his situation. “Fine,” the man finally grit out, arm holding the governor throwing the terrified man to the floor. Natasha waited for him to drop the gun as well, but he didn’t the weapon coming up to stare her in the face. “It may be over for me, but the least I can do is send Rogers home with another body bag.”

**Bang! Bang!**

Pierce dropped to the floor. Natasha gaped, watching the man gasp, his body twitching a few times before slumping, face going still, a final “Hail HYDRA,” slipping from his lips. Blood pooled out behind him, spreading over the NYPD crest that was inlaid in the carpet. He was dead. It was over.

Natasha looked over at Fury, his gun still aimed. His face was expressionless when he finally holstered the weapon, his eyes only giving a hint of disgust as he looked at the dead man in front of him. “What a waste,” Fury repeated.

The door burst open again and both Natasha sand Fury reacted, both their guns trained on the newcomer.

There stood Sam, gun in hand, face beat to hell. His eyes swept over the carnage in the room. “Have fun?” he asked with a bloody smile.

Bucky gasped, fresh air filling his lungs. He was only up for a second before bricks hailed down on top of him, forcing him back under the surface. He drew his knees up, trying to stay as small as possible, as debris rained down around him.
Steve, he thought wildly, his eyes immediately opening in the murky water. The blonde had jumped right next to him, but Steve didn’t exactly have the best track record with the river. Someone must have been smiling down on him, however, as his hands brushed against Steve’s side almost immediately.

Bucky broke the surface again, yanking Steve along with him. He made sure his friends mouth was above the surface, his head leaning against Bucky’s should as he started to kick away from the burning building. He heard Steve groan, and cough out a few lungsful of water. “That’s it,” Bucky groaned, pulling the pair farther away from the collapsing warehouse. “I’m sick of dragging you through the water. Time to finally teach your ungrateful ass how to swim. I’ll get you and Stark some matching floaties.”

He swam as hard as he could, arching around the building that had gone up in flames. The explosions had been so powerful that some of the buildings around the warehouse were also alight. *Stark really doesn’t screw around.* Bucky could only hope that Hill and her men were still clear of the building when the grenades went off. No way they escape prison if they’re dead. Bucky looked back at the flames, the last of the SSR burning within them. *Probably can’t escape prison anyway, not after this.*

He pushed that thought from his mind, focusing on pulling Steve to dry land. Bucky huffed, yanking Steve’s dead weight the final few feet, out of the shallow water and onto the shoreline. Once Steve was secure he collapsed like a pile of bricks, gasping for a deep breath. *God, how the hell did Tony carry me out of that warehouse?*

His chest clenched, like it had been doing in a more consistent pattern, upon thinking about the newest team member. He never thought a Stark of all people would manage to shoulder his way into his heart. In his defense, he sort of had a reputation for clashing with the people he would later consider his family. Hell, even Steve just about broke his nose when the two had first stumbled into each other all those years ago.

“God, he’s gonna kill me,” he chuckled uncontrollably. “Well, no, he’s gonna kill you first, then me,” he clarified. He sent a smile over to his friend, freezing when he saw that he wasn’t smiling back. He wasn’t even looking at him, Steve’s eyes closed, his body still.

“Steve? Stevie?”

Bucky shook his friend, the blonde remaining unresponsive as he became more frantic. “Come on, don’t do this,” he whispered, leaning down to check that he was still breathing. He flopped his head onto Steve’s chest after feeling the faint puff of Steve’s breath against his ear. He could feel the warm rivulets smear against his cheek, a sharp contrast to the cold of the river water. *Blood.*

Bucky leaned back, peeling Steve’s jacket back to see the wine stained shirt underneath. He gasped, his hands immediately pressing down on the wounds as hard as he could. “Come on, wake up,” he tried again. This couldn’t be happening. No way was he going to let Steve get this far, only to have him tap out now.

The faint whine of sirens grabbed his attention. He looked up to see red and blues start to stain the yellow flames. “Hey!” he shouted, voice already hoarse from the smoke and water. “Somebody! I need help down here, *please!*”

“Barnes!”
Bucky’s head snapped to the left and let out a sigh of relief, seeing Hill stumbling over to him. “Hill,” he greeted. “We need to get him to a hospital.”

Hill gave Steve a once over. “He still alive?”

“Yes, but he won’t be for much longer if we sit on our asses. Hill, please!”

The woman nodded, talking into her radio, requesting aid. It wasn’t long before agents were dropping down around them. They pushed Bucky away, hands tracking over Steve’s body. He tried to fight back – *he needed to be there!* – but it was Hill that kept him out of the way. “Let them do their jobs,” she snapped. “We’ll get him help.”

Bucky slumped in the wet sand, head dizzy with relief. “We need to move,” Hill continued. “Got word from Fury; Pierce is dead. Once they catch wind of that and this explosion, the rest of HYDRA will be on the move. Up,” she said, prodding at Bucky’s shoulder. “You need to stick to the plan.”

Bucky shook his head, eyes not leaving where they were loading Steve on a stretcher. “I’m not going anywhere without him.”

“That was your agreement,” Hill hissed. “I need to get you out of here and on your way to your designated safehouse.”

“Fuck that,” Bucky snarled, legs shaking as he tried to walk over back over to Steve. Hill grabbed at his arm.

“Fine,” she said. “You can go with him. I’ll just let my boys know to bring the handcuffs down.”

Bucky faltered, eyes closing. *It’s not fair, this isn’t fair!* This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. He blinked open to watch a sea of agents push Steve’s body away from him.

*I’m sorry, Steve.*
“I can’t believe I just did that.”

“You need to give yourself more credit. You did great.”

Pepper sighed through the phone. “Tony, I just glanced over the files and it’s bad. Like, really bad. Obadiah has his fingers everywhere. How did we not catch this!”

Tony didn’t respond, unwilling to face the truth. The man, who he’d considered more of a father than Howard, turning out to be nothing more than another Brutus.

“Tony?”

“Sorry, Pepper, what did you say?”

“I said, I think he’s on to us. He stayed in the office after I left, and- ”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Tony cut her off. “He was at the office?”

“Yeah, he walked in on me downloading the files,” Pepper answered. “I got out with the drive no problem, but I’m not as good of a liar as you.”

“He was there with you and you didn’t think to leave?” Tony snapped. “Pepper, he could have hurt you!”

“You told me that finding the ghost drive was important!” she hissed back.

“Not as important as your life!”

“It doesn’t matter,” Pepper sighed. “I’ve got the copies and everything’s fine.”

Tony paced around the bedroom, running his hand through his hair. “Is this what it feels like to deal with me?”

“Yes,” Pepper answered. “Except there’s usually more alcohol.”

Tony flopped onto the bed, wishing it was the way he had with Steve just hours previous. “Where are you?”

“I’m being escorted to my car by a very nice officer.”

“Officer?”

“Well, you’re the one that told me that this information was going to the FBI. Maybe they want to make sure it got there in one piece.”

“Is it Hill?”

“No, I’m sorry, what was your name again?” There was a pause. “His name is Phil.”

Tony’s heart stuttered, unable to let out a breathless laugh. “Coulson, you son of a bitch.”

“What?”
There was a sigh from Pepper, but he could tell that she had relented. “Stark?” Phil’s voice filtered through the phone, and Tony smiled.

“You want to tell me why I was suddenly allowed to go back to SI to pick up Ms. Potts? Without an escort? Stark, what did you do?”

“Nothing, don’t worry about it,” Tony hastily replied. “Just get you and Pepper out of there. We’ll talk later.”

Now, hours later, Tony sat at the abandoned bar of the speakeasy, twirling a tumbler of scotch in his hand. He’d sat there many times before – after long days at the office, when arguments with Pepper or Rhodey went sour. He even used it as a hideout from his parents a few times. It would just he him and a single malt, shutting out the world for a few hours of peace.

But now, all he could focus on how quiet it was. There was no murmur of the TV, no glasses clinking, no comforting sounds and smells of guns being cleaned. He couldn’t hear the faint tones of jazz coming from Steve’s office. They were all gone now, off to face the beast of HYDRA. He wanted to be there; he should be there, standing alongside his family. That’s what this was all leading too, wasn’t it? But no, he’s been benched, forced to the sidelines. Steve had gone with Barnes, Wilson and Natasha. Bruce and Thor had left not long ago as well. He couldn’t hear Clint anymore, so he assumed that he’d been picked up as well. He didn’t even say goodbye. Why would he? Tony thought viciously. Now Tony was back to where he started, alone.

“You think I’m happy leaving you here? What if something happens when I’m gone?”

“I think you should be more concerned with getting yourself home safe,” Tony said in reply. “Come on, I’ll be fine. I get to sit back and watch the FBI arrest my CFO. Fun times had by all, and what not.”

Tony drained the rest of the glass, shuddering at the thought of Steve out there in danger without him. He’d be fine, he repeated like a mantra. Everything would go to plan, and soon he’d be back in Steve’s arms. He’d told Tony that himself. He’d promised.

Tony sighed, pouring himself another drink. It had been hours since Coulson had escorted Pepper to the closest police precinct with evidence against Stane. She was originally supposed to bring them to Fury at his headquarters, but Tony had shot them down quickly. Pierce was going to be there, and Tony wasn’t going to let Pepper anywhere near that monster.

He wondered if they’d arrested Obadiah yet.

Tony closed his eyes, tamping down the waves of betrayal crashing around inside him. After the gala and the meeting with Fury, it was impossible to deny, but this was the final nail in the coffin. Obie was everything to him – hell, he was more of a father to him than his own dad was. He never yelled at him, never called his ideas stupid, just said “Keep on building, son. All ideas are worth a chance.” Now, Tony could see behind the curtain – was he always just a meal ticket for him? What would Dad say if he saw him now? Did Dad know?

Tony stood up from the bar in a huff, walking over to the couches, flopping into the cushions. He
could smell a faint whiff of Natasha’s perfume. Maybe he should call Pepper again, see how things were going. It shouldn’t be taking this long, right?

He pressed the phone to his ears, barely able to catch Pepper’s answer of “Tony?” before his body was locking, seizing up at an unknown force. He could faintly hear Pepper calling for him, but the phone slipped from his grasp, his fingers frozen in place.

“Remember these?” a cold voice asked. A small device was held in front of his eyes. “These were always one of my favorites,” Obi continued, his face now coming into Tony’s view. He switched the device off, dropping it onto the couch. “Shame the government didn’t go for them” he continued, pulling out his earplugs. “Short time paralysis can be so useful.”

Tony glared at him, mouth begging to scream at the man, plead, berate, anything. Ask him why he did this. Ask him how. He was family. He was supposed to be family.

“Don’t look at me like that, boy,” Stane snarled. “You know, when I put the hit out on you,” Tony’s heart clenched at the confirmation, “I was worried that I was killing the golden goose.” Obidiah leaned over him, his bulking frame menacing. He grabbed at Tony’s shirt and ripped it down the middle, the light of his arc reactor illuminating their faces. No. No, no, no. “It was almost fate that you survived,” Stane laughed. “Turns out you had one last golden egg to lay.”

Suddenly a claw was in his chest, ripping at the sides of the arc reactor. Tony gasped, begging his arms to move, to do anything, but he was frozen, stuck to watch his mentor pull his heart for his chest. “Would you look at that?” Stane smiled. “You’ve really outdone yourself, boy. It’s beautiful.”

You can’t call it that, Tony hissed in his head. Only Steve can. Steve? Where’s Steve?

Stane leaned down close to him. “You really think that just because you have an idea it belongs to you?” And with that, he tugged, the cord of the arc reactor disconnecting from his body. The pain that followed wasn’t new; he’d been unplugged by Pepper just earlier this week. But this was different. It was vicious and cruel, paired with lingering betrayal.

I’m going to die, Tony thought. I’m going to die here.

Stane held the arc reactor in front of him. “This is your ninth symphony, Tony. This, this here is your legacy,” he said, shaking the arc reactor. “This is going to put us back on top. A whole new age of weapons with this at the heart of it.” He laughed again, standing straight. He cast a final glance to Tony before retreating to the speakeasy stairs. “Thank you, my boy.”

Tony watched him and his lifeline go, leaving him to suffer in silence. Was this really it? He’d pictured himself dying alone, lying in a pile of sweat many times, but usually it was with more hookers and booze. It didn’t seem to bother him before, but now? People depended on him, his family did. Steve did. Tony had made the promise as well, to meet him down in South Carolina.

I can’t die here. But how can I live without a heart?

PROOF THAT TONY STARK HAS A HEART, flashed through his mind. Pepper’s gift, his first reactor. It was still usable. And currently sitting in his workshop downstairs. Adrenaline coursed through his body as his leg twitched, the paralysis wearing off. He was overzealous of course, desperation getting the better of him, and ended up on the floor. He crawled, slowly and painfully through the main room and back through the kitchen, a rusted over machine trying to get back in rhythm. He let his body fall down the stairs, reveling in the pain to distract him from his failing heart. He let out another cry as he pushed his body into the lab.
He leaned up, catching an eye of his old reactor, sitting what seemed like miles away. For a moment, he was two years old, staring up in wonder at his father’s workshop for the very first time.

*I’m not going to make it,* Tony thought.

He could feel his heart screaming for release, his movements slowing, like the paralysis kicking back in. He could see his salvation mocking him from across the room. It was over. He knew it, his body sure as hell did. All he could do now was sit back and watch his last failure, thinking of memories of Steve. *I’m sorry, Steve.*

“Stark?” a voice asked. “Tony? Tony, where are- Jesus Christ!”

Gentle hands flipped him on his back.

*Clint.*

He was still here. He hadn’t left yet! Clint’s eyes were wide with worry as he tracked over Tony’s body. “What the hell happened? Where’s your light?”

Words were beyond Tony now, all he could do was raise a shaking hand to the left, directing Clint towards the other reactor. The other man dashed from his sight, and Tony could hear the sound of glass shattering. And then Clint was back, sliding across the floor, arc reactor cradled in his hands.

“What do I do?” he asked frantically. “Tell me what I need to do.”

Tony’s hands shook as they guided him over to the cavity in his chest. Clint caught the end of the plug, looking up at Tony for confirmation. He could only nod, the archer then reaching down into his chest. He let out a sob of relief when he felt the plug connect with the baseplate. His heart echoed the sentiment, pulsing wildly as it tried to reregulate. Black dots danced in front of his vision, threatening to take him from his consciousness.

“-be dead, I swear to God. If you’re dead, I’m going to bring you back just so I can kill you myself,” he heard. “Tony, come on!”

A sharp pain cracked against his cheek, eyes bulging back open at the slap. He groaned, rolling around on the workshop floor, each movement pure agony. “Barton?” he asked weakly.

“Yeah, I’m here, man.” Hands helped him up, guiding his to rest on Clint’s chest.

Tony hummed, breathing in the familiar scent. “Remind me to never make fun of you hiding in the vents ever again.”

He felt Clint’s amused chuckles reverberate against him. “You’re telling me,” he answered. “What the hell happened?”

“Stane happened.” Tony pulled back, trying to push himself to his feet.

“Whoa, take it easy, maybe you shouldn’t- ”

“No time, Barton,” Tony interrupted. “He’s still out there and he has my reactor. Knowing him, he has a whole line of prototypes to try out.”

“What about the FBI? They’ll have enough evidence to arrest him.”

Tony shook his head. “Exactly. Who do you think he’s going to try and test the weapons on? We
need to stop him.”

Clint frowned at him, obviously not pleased with the answer but dutifully stood, reaching down for Tony to clasp his hand in his. “What a shit show,” he said, yanking Tony to his feet. “Fine. Let’s go be the good guys.”

He started to guide Tony to the door. “Wait,” Tony stopped him. He walked over to his lab table, stumbling slightly, and grabbed his gauntlets.

“Are those how you escaped from the sewers?” Clint asked, looking at the devices in interest.

“Yep, with a few minor upgrades. They run on their own now,” Tony explained. “They don’t need to be connected to a direct source like the reactor.”

“Can I have one for Christmas?”

“Only if you’re a good boy,” Tony chided, leading Clint out of the lab. He walked ahead, letting Clint dart off to grab his own weapons before they made their way to the car. Tony only let himself pause over the couch where he’d been stabbed in the back, grabbing his phone.

“Ready?” Clint jogged over to him, bow draped across his shoulder, firearms strapped to his sides.

Tony nodded, following the man out the back and over to one of their collective cars. “You sure about this?” Clint asked as he hopped into the driver’s seat, ignoring Tony’s protest. “We’re supposed to wait for our handlers here for them to come collect us. Something tells me they won’t be too happy when they see we’ve flown the coop.”

“We’ll have to worry about that later,” Tony sighed, redialing Pepper’s phone number. “Stane needs to be stopped, now. Head to SI’s office. No way Stane wouldn’t stop by and immediately try his new toys with my reactor.”

Clint didn’t respond, just starting the car and slamming on the gas. Tony jolted with the rest of the car, pressing his phone back up to his ear. He shuddered, thinking of what happened the last time. “Tony?” Pepper asked as she picked up.

Relief coursed through his veins. “Pepper,” he breathed.

“Tony, are you alright? The ghost drive, God, Tony, Obadiah’s gone insane!”

“Pepper, relax,” he replied, keeping his voice calm as Clint weaved through traffic. “We’re gonna bag him, alright? Now, where are you?”

“Back at the office. I-”

“What?” Tony cried, his chest giving another painful lurch. Pepper shouldn’t be there, she couldn’t be.

“The FBI got a search warrant for Stane’s office, what, was I supposed to say no? They said that you gave them permission!”

Tony cursed, damning his past self to hell. “Pepper, Pep, you need to leave. Now. It’s not safe, Obadiah is on his way over there right now! He’s probably already there!”

“Tony, relax. The FBI is here, Phil says we should be-”

“Coulson’s with you?!”
Horns blared and tires screeched, Tony thrown into the side of the car as Clint barely missed a head-on collision. “Phil’s, there?” he asked, face drawn and pale. The car jumped forward without Tony’s response, Clint drawn to the chance of seeing the other man.

“Pepper, please, you need to listen to me. Grab Coulson and- ”

The rest of his response was cut off by a scream, by Pepper’s scream. There were crashes in the background, and he could hear shouts of distress. “Pepper? Pepper!” He shot a frantic look to Clint. “Get me there, now.”

He pleaded into the phone for Pepper to answer, but he never got a response. There was an occasional muffle on the other line, but nothing else. She must have dropped the phone. God, if anything happened to her, he would never forgive himself.

The car screeched to a halt. “Why are you stopping? We’re not… there… ” he trailed off, looking out the front window. Traffic was bumper to bumper, only a mere block away from Stark Industries. And while there was always traffic in New York City, there wasn’t a jam due to bright flashes of light, the bursts showering out from the glass windows of his building, wreaking havoc on the public below.

People were screaming, jumping out of their cars and sprinting the over way, praying to avoid the chaotic beams. He looked down at the gauntlets in his hands. He would recognize his designs anywhere. By the powers of the blasts, Tony could only assume that he wasn’t the only one who had updated his gauntlet design.


“Yeah,” he answered. “It’s Obie.”

“What the hell is he doing, shooting at the civilians. Is he fucking crazy?”

“He’s not, look,” Tony pointed. There, barely visible through the smoke and throngs of other cars was a single van, bright yellow letters painted on the side. FBI. “Pepper said they came back a warrant. They must have tried to arrest him.”

Clint was out of the car in an instant, dashing towards the calamity. “Clint, wait!” Tony called, following right behind him, grabbing at the other man’s arm.

“Phil’s in there!”

“It’s too dangerous! We can try and- ”

“Fuck you,” Clint hissed. “I’m not leaving him again.” He tore out of Tony’s grasp, sprinting towards SI, Tony unable to do anything but follow.

With each stride towards his company, more destruction seemed to reveal itself. Cars were burning around them, smoke billowing and fires burning. He could hear people screaming, but it was muffled by the familiar whine of repulsor blasts.

Most of SI’s main floor had been blasted, the glass walls shattered. He could see FBI agents sheltered behind cars for cover, each popping a few shots off at an unseen target. “Hey!” Tony yelled.

One of them spun to look at him. “Stark, what are you- ”
“Why the fuck are you out here? Stane’s in there, and-”

“There are still employees in the building,” the agent explained. “We go in there and he’ll start taking out innocents.”

God, Obie. Tony needed to get in there. Maybe he could draw him out?

"Hey, you can’t go in there!” The agent's yell wasn't directed at him, but at Clint, who had decided that he had waited long enough, charging straight into the warzone. "Shit," Tony hissed, chasing after the man.

"Wait, Clint, don’t!” he yelled, grabbing at the man. "You go in here, he'll roast you." He could see the argument building in Clint's mouth, eyes alight with rage, but Tony placated him before he could utter a single word. “There’s a maintenance entrance this way,” he stated, tugging on Clint’s arm. “We’ll sneak through without Obie noticing.” Clint followed wordlessly, but he could feel the buzzing tension radiating off him.

The maintenance entrance was out of the way, tucked neatly in the alleyway giving easy access for trucks to move in and out. Now, however, the alleyway was filled with frightened people, his employees, pushing and shoving their way out of the door and to safety. Clint and Tony pushed through the crowd as best they could, slowly making their way against the current. They were almost inside when Tony caught a flash of red hair.

“Pepper!” he shouted in relief. Thank God.

“Tony!” Her white pantsuit was stained, dirty with debris and dust, and there was a small bruise on her cheek, but otherwise looked unharmed.

“Are you okay?” he asked anyway.

“Yes, of course,” she confirmed. “Tony, Obadiah has gone insane, he’s in there and-”

“Where’s Phil?” Clint pleaded.

“I-I don’t know, he’s been helping me get everyone out, and-”

Clint was off before she could finish, charging into the building. Dammit, Barton.

“Listen, I’m going to go take care of this-”

“What? Tony, no, you can’t-”

“Take everyone with you and get behind the barricade, okay? Take – Pepper do not argue with me on this – you need to go and get to safety.”

He could see the fight in her eyes, but she relented, turning to the rest of terrified employees, voice soft and sure as she instructed them to remain calm. After a final lingering gaze, Tony turned, chasing after Clint. He caught sight of the man charging right into the lobby, desperately calling out to his lost lover. He had almost caught up to him when he was a bright flash, Obie’s path of destruction aimed right at Clint.

“Clint!” Tony cried. The blonde tried to dodge, but to no avail, thrown clear of the lobby and through the connecting wall.

“Tony,” Obie drawled, gaze turning towards him. He stood in the center of the lobby, the room
completely ablaze around him. The gauntlets he wore were massive, looking like mutated boxing gloves, traveling all the way up to his elbows. There were wires weaving around the twisted metal, connected to Tony’s other arc reactor, laying like a mockery across the man’s chest.

“Obie,” he replied. “Obie, please, stop this. It’s over!”

“Over?” Obie hissed in return. He charged his gauntlets, shooting a beam over towards Tony, the man barely able to dodge in time. “Thirty years I’ve been holding you up!” he screamed, shooting another blast. Tony wasn’t so lucky that time, the force of the explosion sending him to his feet. “I built this company up from nothing! Nothing is going to stand in my way.”

“It’s not your company.” Tony jumped up and fired two of his own blasts, sending Obie flying. He watched the other man groan, standing back up. Tony looked down at his hands, watching the flickering orbs of the hand repulsors. Right, he thought to himself. Wireless power source still in need of beta testing.

“It was always mine,” Obie countered, back on his feet. “You and your father were just too dumb enough to see it.” The shrill whine was the only warning he got before another explosion went off beside him.

He cried out in pain, the close heat from the repulsor beam too close to Tony, the external metal from his own gauntlet warming, starting to burn against his skin. “Fuck,” he groaned, ripping the gauntlet off without thinking, sending it flying across the room.

“Your father had to go, and now, so do you.” Obie walked towards him slowly, hands raised again.

“Did you know?” Tony asked, tears in his eyes. Obadiah gave him a long look. “Did I know about HYDRA taking out your parents? Who do you think called the hit?”

Tony froze at the admission, fury raging beneath his skin, everything starting to click into place. That man had taken everything from his. His parents, his company. Well, almost everything. He thought of Steve and The Commandos, waging war and taking revenge for him.

“Shame about Maria,” Obie continued, almost sadly. “I really liked her.”

“Don’t you dare say her name,” Tony snarled.

“It’s the nature of things, Tony,” Obie explained. “I did what I had too.”

“You won’t win, not this time,” Tony promised fiercely. He powered a blast and shot it above Obie’s head, watching in grim satisfaction as scaffolding collapsed on him. He could hear Obie’s pained shout, but saw the metal shifting, the man looking for a way to get out. Tony darted behind a fallen support beam, taking cover as quickly as he could.

“Tony,” came a quiet whisper.

Tony whirled around, gasping in relief as he saw Clint crawl towards him, one arm cradled against his chest, definitely broken.

“Clint, you’re alright!”

“Alright being the operative term,” the other man groaned. “Jesus, he’s still kicking?”
Tony nodded. “We have to move quickly. You still have your gun?”

“No, I lost it somewhere. I see my bow, but no way I get over there before he blasts me.”

“Tony!” Obie roared, his own repulsors shooting the debris off him.

“Okay, new plan,” Tony answered, mind already moving a mile a minute. “See over there?” he asked with a point. Barton nodded. “It’s my other repulsor. I’ll distract him, and I need you to go over there and get it. It’s already armed, so you just need to put it on.”

“Okay,” he said getting ready to go.

“Wait,” he added, stopping Clint in his tracks. “We need to kill him, and I have an idea how. I need you to put on the gauntlet and shoot it at mine.”

“What, why?”

“If we aim them at each other, the beams will join, condensing and collapsing on itself to create a small explosion.”

Barton looked pale. “You want to blow this place?”

Tony shook his head. “Mine don’t have enough power in them to take out the foundations, but Obie’s do. If we wait, he’ll bring the whole building down on top of us.”

“Fuck,” Clint hissed. “Alright, let’s do this.”

Tony grabbed his arm. “Stay as far back as possible, okay? The blast shouldn’t reach you, but I don’t want to take any chances.”

Clint nodded frantically, eye peeking over their cover at Obie. “Ready?” Tony asked.

“Whenever you are,” the man answered.

Tony took a deep breath and leaped over their cover, glowering at Obie. “There you are, you little rat,” he hissed, charging at Tony. Tony sprinted to the left, barely dodging a blast that landed behind him. He barely caught Clint dart the other way, running towards Tony’s other dropped gauntlet. Fate must have had it out for him because all of a sudden he was tripping over a piece of fallen ceiling careening to the ground. He scrambled to get up, but then Stane was there, delivering a sharp kick to his ribs.

Tony cried out, curling in on himself before there were hands on him, metal ones, burning along his arms, and tossing him across the room. Tony landed with a thud and groaned, forcing himself to crawl away. He could hear Stane chasing after him, too close, too close, when Tony saw it. He barely had time to snatch it before Stane was grabbing at Tony’s throat, boot stomping on his armored hand. He felt himself gasp for air he knew he couldn’t breathe anymore. Obie grinned down at him manically, tightening his grip on Tony’s throat.

Tony floundered, chest spasming before he was bringing his other man up, jamming one of Clint’s arrows into his sides. The man screamed in pain, immediately releasing Tony. Tony sucked in a gasp greedily, trying to push himself away. He looked and saw Obie roar, yanking the arrow out of his side. He saw Clint behind him, gauntlet on his uninjured hand.

“Clint,” he cried, voice hoarse. “Now!”
“You’re too close!”

“Barton, now, please!”

He could see Barton clench his jaw, but dutifully raise his gauntleted hand. Tony’s vision was blurred, but he trusted that Clint would be able to hit his mark.

“It’s over, Tony!” Stane yelled, struggling to get to his feet. “There’s no way out for you!”

Tony ignored him. He held his repulsor up high, a faint whine sounding as it charged. “Now!” he yelled. There was a split second before he saw a flash of bright light, Clint’s beam heading straight towards him. But it never hit, Tony’s own beam meeting in the middle.

He saw a ball of energy form between the two of them, growing erratically as the power built. He could see when Obadiah caught on to his wavelength, the orb growing right in front of him.

Exothermic reactions: the heat needed to go somewhere.

Before he would make a move to escape the ball exploded, the surge to powerful to be contained. Tony was flung back, the blast of the explosion flinging him into the nearest wall. His head handed against the plaster with a crack, and everything went dark.

“-ony?”

A familiar voice pulled him from the depths. Hands were on his shoulders, shaking him roughly. He groaned in pain, each breath relaying to him nothing but agony. “Wake up, asshole!”

His eyes fluttered open and Clint was leaning over him, bruised and bloody, but _breathing_. The man slumped back on his heels, slumping in relief. “Thank God,” he whispered. “You gotta stop doing that, man. That’s twice in one day,” he snapped. “I’d rather die by an explosion than have to deal with Steve.”

Tony cracked a smile, a soft pulse of affection running through his veins. _Steve_. He’d survived. He’d survived for Steve.

Clint helped him lean up on his elbows, finally able to take in the carnage of the rest of the room. It, well, looked like a bomb went off, the R&D lab almost completely ruined. In the center of it all lay Obadiah, unmoving. He was dead. Tony wanted to be happy, to celebrate the victory. The snake was gone from his company’s garden, defeated by the mongoose. But he didn’t. All he could feel was an overwhelming tide of grief. _Just another body to bury._

Tony tore his burning eyes away, looking back at Clint. “You alright?”

The other man nodded. “Yeah.”

“I’m sorry,” Tony whispered. “I shouldn’t have put you at risk like that.”

Clint actually grinned. “Probably not, but you gotta admit, that was pretty badass. If I would’ve known science was that cool, maybe I would have stayed in school.”

Tony snorted. “You are something else, Clint Barton.”

“Clint?” a frantic voice called. “Clint, where are you? Answer me!”

Clint’s head perked up, following the sound of the voice. “Phil?” he called out.
There was a muffled curse and they few sharp thuds and then there the man was, pushing past a few pieces of fallen debris. He looked fairly similar as he did the last time Tony saw him, in this very building. Thin, pale and broken, although this time he was covered with dust and a faint glimmer of hope. He stopped when he met Clint’s gaze. “Clint,” he whispered.

Tony could feel Clint shaking next to him, fingers twitching with the need to have Coulson in his arms, but never moving, as if afraid that if he looked away, the man would be gone. Thankfully, Coulson came to him, sprinting the distance between them. Clint barely got his arms up in time before Phil was colliding into them, sending the pair sprawling onto the floor.

Tony tried to move, to distance himself from the intimate moment, but his body protested, forcing his to remain stagnant. He could hear Clint sobbing, sounds barely muffled by Phil’s jacket.

“- alright, it’s alright, sweetheart, I’m here, now,” Phil hushed, pressing kisses to Clint’s temples.

Tony squeezed his eyes shut, biting his lip. He wanted Steve here, whispering that to him. Soon. He’d see him soon.

There was a short silence and Tony looked up, catching Clint and Coulson, mid embrace, Coulson’s tongue down the archer’s mouth, and wow, if he wasn’t a third wheel already. As if feeling them being watched, Coulson pulled away, quieting shushing Barton’s whine of displeasure before turning back to Tony, raising a single and very unimpressed eyebrow.

“This is awkward,” Tony coughed. “Just pretend that I’m not here. But, if I may say, Coulson, you must be an absolute freak in the bed.”

Clint let out an ugly snort, half laugh, half cry, burying his face into Coulson’s neck. “And if I may say, Stark,” the man answered flippantly. “Do shut up.”

Tony giggled, ignoring the protests from his chest, and then he was laughing, unable to stop the abhorrent noises from escaping. He could hear faint shouting, no doubt the FBI rushing in to ‘save the day’. God, I hope they came with an ambulance, he thought as his eyes drifted shut.
Tony thought he would have gotten used to the sound of chirping birds waking him up each morning, but here he was on day twenty-seven, and his fingers still twitched for the sidearm he knew wasn’t there. Dreaming about popping the demonic alarm clocks into nothing more than a pile of feathers was only satisfying until he opened his eyes, and he realized that they were still there.

Tony groaned, stretching his limbs across the expansive bed, fingers digging into the silk sheets. His eyes fluttered open, barely glancing at the lofted ceiling above him before his head was turning, gaze following to the other side of the bed.

Empty. As it always was.

He wasn’t sure why he did this, checking the bed each morning. Tony had been at his safe house for almost a month – Steve hadn’t shown any of the previous days, there was no reason as to why he’d be in bed today.

Tony swallowed around the lump forming in his throat, ignoring the pain throbbing just behind the arch reactor, opting to continue with his daily routine.

It was auto-pilot, stepping into the bathroom to do his business, brushing his teeth and splashing cold water on his face, all while ignoring the urge to look in the mirror. He wasn’t exactly sure what he would see, but Tony knew he wouldn’t like it. He hadn’t been shaving, hell, he’d barely been showering. But Tony knew the parts that weren’t covered in greasy hair would be worse; pale skin that had been showing an increasingly amount of bone ridges with each passing day. Food wasn’t exactly a priority either.

In fact, the kitchen remained mostly unused, Tony only slipping in for coffee, using the same mug day in and day out. JARVIS automatically starts his brew when he wakes so it is ready by the time Tony heads down the stairs. For the past ten days, JARVIS had been pouring him decaf, in silent protest. Tony had finally muted the bothersome AI, and JARVIS was left to strike back in the only way he still could. Tony didn’t mind; he could barely taste the coffee anyway.

Slipping down the stairs, he reached for the coffee stained mug he had stuck back under the machine last night. He reveled in the silence before taking a large swig. Instantly be found his lips curl in distaste. Tony knew that his industrial coffee machine – that’d he’d designed himself – could store months’ worth of coffee roast. He peaked down at his mug, taking in the rust brown water. It seemed that JARVIS had seemingly upped his game, resorting to watering down the morning cup-of-joe. Tony glared into his AI’s nearest camera but opted not to respond. He’d just be talking to himself, really.

Curling his hands around the steaming mug, Tony strolled through the rest of the kitchen and opened the door onto the back patio. The first step into the open air always came with a blast of frigid air – his second alarm clock, he liked to call it. There was no snow on the ground – the chance of that was few and far between – but even the South was not immune to the cold grip of Winter’s fist. And in the mornings, before the sun could start to peek out behind the wooded surroundings, the breeze was a merciless as it was in New York.
Reasons like that were more than enough to call for more layers, maybe even shoes, but Tony couldn’t be bothered. Each morning he’d stumble out in whatever threadbare shirt that he’d collapsed into bed with, ratty pants, and worn socks that started to bear rips and holes from his walk outside from the days before.

He welcomed the cold, breathing it in deep each morning like an old friend. The shivers that coursed through his body urged him on one step at the time, the frost covered grass staining the bottom of his socks. It never took long for a numbness to engulf him, and he was left as a husk of himself, a zombie stumbling through the grassy field. It reminded him of one of the ghost stories Jarvis would tell him as a kid – a soul trapped to walk the moor for all eternity, stuck in an endless loop of searching for a lost lover.

The trees that surrounded most of the property stood tall, like a protective fence, shrouding him from the outside world. The only open area was where the property sloped down to the private beach. The lake it rested on was shared, but Tony’s property was so remote that he hadn’t seen a single boat pass through in his time here. No sounds except the lapping of water against the shore. Sometimes, Tony found himself walking all the way to the beach, watching his feet sit upon hardened mounds of sand and be engulfed by frigid water. Tony eyes the crystal water; maybe not today, he thought to himself.

The birds had stopped chirping; their daily routine of keeping Tony from wasting away in bed now completed. It would be clear skies today – another day in paradise.

Tony’s fingers twitched, itching for a phone. When he’d first gotten here, he’d spent over a week in front of his computer, coming through the FBI mainframe, searching for his lost family members. It was laughably easy, JARVIS taking over and providing him with completed dockets on each member. From what Tony could tell, his team had safety made it to their respective locations and were in seemingly good health – at least, he could only assume, if he read between the lines of the FBI agents’ weekly reports. The check-ins listed gold star reviews for Natasha and complaints of having to diffuse a few instances with the local force involving noise complaints from Sam’s new home. There had already been a small fire from where they had moved Clint, not to mention he’d recently been busted for starting a gambling ring with his new neighbors. Bucky’s agent had straight up asked for a reassignment. JARVIS had even found some paparazzi photos of Thor in Norway – ones that showed blurry images of Bruce’s rumpled figure. So yes, his family was all tucked away safely and out of harm’s way.

All but one.

Tony had tried every avenue that he could think of, even going so far as hacking into the CIA – they had to know something. It was their job to know. But alas, each avenue let to the same result: nothing.

There was no ongoing operation Kansas jurisdiction of the New York office, let alone an operational and occupied safehouse. There was just nothing.

There was no need to post agents in Kansas if there was no one left to guard.

Tony’s fingers tightened around his mug but made no other reaction. He didn’t think he could muster up anything else. The time for anger, for tears, for desperation, had already long passed. Any and every possible scenario he could picture Steve in had already played out in his mind.

In the beginning, Tony didn’t worry. He knew it would take some time for Steve to ditch his house and make his way to Tony. But day after day passed, and still nothing. Steve should have made it out here by now, even if he had walked the whole way.
Steve wasn’t coming.

Tony swallowed thickly, eyeing the tree line again. It was beautiful enough to be a postcard. Tony liked to imagine him walking out here each morning to find Steve stretching the view, his golden hair shining in the morning rays of the sun. A stray tear slid down his cheek.

Steve wasn’t coming.

Tony sighed again, wiping away the errant affection. He cast a final look inside before turning around, stopping only to dump the rest of his spoiled coffee onto the ground. The house was silent – shocking, Tony thought viciously to himself. He placed his mug back under the coffee machine, ready for a repeat performance the next day. Then, Tony went to go stand in the hall.

Here was the next part of his day, where he wasted time by looking in each direction, pondering on how he would waste his time today. Each corner of the house offered him some semblance of solace, but Tony could never find himself able to get lost in anything.

It wasn’t like he didn’t have anything to do. With Obi-Stane’s betrayal, his company was more than floundering at the moment. Stock points were dropping by the minute and the board was scrambling for any way they could sweep up the mess. Pepper, who had been somewhat informed of his arrangement with the FBI, had been in constant contact on their plans to move forward. But, as if reading his mood from hundreds of miles away, had been able to distinguish that something was wrong and was shouldering most of the work load, keeping everything she could off Tony’s lap. While he was forever grateful for her – no way he’d be of any use right now – part of him wished that she wasn’t like this. That she would get back into the swing of things, forcing him to move past Steve.

Steve wasn’t coming.

Tony groaned, rubbing at his temples. If Pepper hadn’t called yet, there was probably nothing for him to sign. Either that, or it was the weekend, Tony wasn’t really sure.

He could go force himself down to his makeshift workshop he sat set up in the basement. He tried many times, hoping that his typical vice would be enough to get his mind off things. He was sure SI’s board would be more than happy to get something pushed through to R&D as quickly as possible. But each time he went down there ended up with him doing the same thing he was doing now. Staring off into space, his mind a jumbled mess of confusion and indecision, unable to agree on a single task. He probably wouldn’t be able to make anything usable anyway; for the first time, he had almost no desire or inspiration to build.

Steve wasn’t coming.

Watching TV was out, as it would end with him either being reminded or recent events, or with him on the shopping channels buying yet another ‘miracle product’. He could try reading, as his mother had a library built in each of their properties for her. But it was never really Tony’s thing. It was more his.

Steve wasn’t coming.

Tony closed his eyes, letting out a deep breath. Blinking them back open, he turned towards the stairs, starting his journey. Back to bed it is, he sighed to himself. The walk was as slow and torturous as it always was – he was in no rush – but it always ended the same, no matter what time he made the climb: him curled in the middle of the bed, lying in silence.
Tony couldn’t remember the last time he hadn’t in a bed that wasn’t King sized. He’d always preferred the largest size he could – when he was younger, it meant more than enough space for his bed partners; when he was older, it meant more than enough space for him to flop in any direction when he stumbled up from the lab. This bed was a queen; while Tony regularly updated the appliances on all his properties, most of the updates went towards his respective labs and workshops. Most of everything else went untouched, as he rarely used them anyway.

But it didn’t matter. Here, laying in this queen bed, he’d never been more aware of all the empty space around him.

*Steve wasn’t coming.*

Tears slid down his cheek again and he twisted in the sheets, worrying his face between an already tear-stained pillow.

When he woke, the sun was still out, silently mocking Tony at the slow passing of time. He shifted, ready to close his eyes again, but was painfully interrupted by his bladder. He sighed in discomfort, but dutifully tore the sheets away to make his way back to the bathroom. This time after washing his hands, Tony did allow himself to look in the mirror. There wasn’t much to look at, honestly. There was another painful twist in his gut, but Tony wasn’t sure if it was for disgust or from hunger.

*Eat something,* he thought to himself. *Before JARVIS takes the initiative of turning on the fire sprinklers.*

He slipped back down to the kitchen and eyed the refrigerator. He yanked open the door, and in a very similar fashion to his routine in the morning, shivered at the burst of cold air and stared unseeingly in front of him.

Suddenly, the icemaker turned on, shooting ice cubes onto the floor in front of him. “JARVIS,” Tony snapped. “Will you give me a fucking break? I’m going to eat something!”

When more ice poured out on his feet he roared, slamming the fridge door shut. “What?”

he hissed, staring into the kitchen camera. The icebox shut off with a small whir, the kitchen descending into silence again. Tony clenched his hands into fists, ready to deliver another angry barb, when he finally heard it.

The faint rustling, *The doorknob.*

Tony paused, eyeing the entry way from behind the kitchen island. No one else should know about this property. No one besides *Carl,* his assigned FBI handler. But he’d had a check-in with Carl just earlier this week. No way he’d be back already.

Unconsciously, Tony grabbed at a dirty frying pan that had been resting in the sink, waiting to be cleaned. He realized that he probably should go for something with a little more bang – it wasn’t as if he didn’t have a multitude of guns waiting downstairs for him in his workshop. But he didn’t bother. If this was a home invasion, a sick part of Tony hoped that he would get caught in the crossfire.

The handle jiggled again before the door swung open. Tony darted behind the doorway, head peeking out just slightly from behind the wall.

There were a few muffled movements from outside before two booted feet steeped into the foyer. And that’s when Tony saw him. Broad shoulders tightly wrapped in a thick sweater, the fabric only
loose around a tapered waist. Ruffled blonde hair stuck out of an honestly atrocious, and most likely handmade, wool cap. There was a backpack slung over his shoulder, but it barely made a sound when he dropped it on the floor, so there wasn’t anything likely in there. Clear blue eyes tracked around the room until they locked with his. A bright grin spread across pale skin and flushed cheeks, rosy from the wind.

“Tony,” Steve whispered fondly.

Tony walked out from around the wall and stared back at him. Then, he watched in grim satisfaction as the frying pan sailed across the room, smacking Steve in the shoulder with a satisfying thud.

“No,” Tony sobbed, pointing accusingly at Steve. “No, you-you can’t-”

“What’s wrong? What wasn’t wrong?

Tony let out another cry before he was running back into the kitchen. He could hear steps following him and Tony veered, turning back long enough to reach for the coffee mug, and chuck it at the apparition as well. Steve managed to dodge this one, the ceramic shattering on the wall behind him.

“No! No, you don’t get to say that.” This wasn’t real. It couldn’t be real. No, Tony had just finally broken his unspoken rule of leaving the alcohol locked in the cabinet.

Tony rushed around the other side of the island but here was there, hands grabbing at his wrists, and they were warm, just like his. “Oh God, Tony,” he said, drawing Tony closer. He smelled just like he always did. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to be so late. It’s alright now, I promise. I’m okay.”

I’m okay.

Another sob croaked out of Tony. Was it really Steve? He sure as hell looked like Steve, he smelled like Steve. The gentle hold that surrounded Tony felt like Steve. He peered up through wet eyelashes, gazing up at the other man.

It was Steve. Steve had come.

Steve was late.

“You asshole,” he hissed, hitting at Steve’s chest. “Don’t you ever fucking do that to me again, do you understand?”

He could feel Steve’s arms wind around him, his voice murmuring soft nothings in his ears, but Tony yanked back, trying to pull away. How could he show up here like nothing was wrong? Where had he been?

“It’s okay, it’s okay, I’m here,” Steve tried to placate.

“You’re not, you’re not,” Tony argued, but grabbed at Steve like a lifeline, fingers digging into the soft threads of his sweater.
“I’m sorry,” Steve whined. “I didn’t mean for this to happen. Forgive me, forgive me.”

“No,” Tony lied with a moan, barely able to get it out before his lips were crashing with his. If he needed any final confirmation that his was really Steve, he got it. Kissing Steve always came with a rush that he could never explain, no matter how angry at him he was. He held Tony tightly, reassuring him with each kiss, each touch, but it wasn’t enough.

Tony pulled at Steve’s sweater, the other man getting with the program to pull it over his head. Tony duked his head immediately, pressing his ear against warm, alive, skin, listening to Steve’s heartbeat, racing like a runaway train. He could feel Steve try and return the favor, but Tony refused to pull away. Eventually, Steve gave up with a huff, grabbing the back of Tony’s shirt and ripping straight down, peeling the cloth away.

Tony moaned at the feeling of his strong hands roaming over his back. He yanked at blonde locks, bringing Steve’s mouth back to his.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” Steve gasped, hands trailing over every inch of Tony’s skin that he could. Tony answered by kicking off his pants and jumping on Steve, jamming their mouths together. Steve groaned, letting Tony take and take with each messy kiss.

There was a shift in gravity and they were both on the kitchen floor. Steve must have lost his pants at some point because he felt a hard length against his own. Steve reached a hand down and grabbed both, tugging at them roughly.

Tony threw his head back, grinding down into Steve viciously. He didn’t think he would have even gotten hard, he was just so angry, but it was like he was an addict that had gone too long from his next fix. Each breath, each gasp, each kiss. All he could feel was Steve. And it was never enough.

It was over before he could even enjoy it, his release spilling onto Steve’s chest with a broken cry. Steve followed soon after, a few more rough strokes and he was gone, biting into the meat of Tony’s shoulder. He gasped, and relished in the pain, pulling Steve closer.

His heart was pounding, his body thrumming in the aftermath of his orgasm. He could feel himself shaking; it wasn’t until Steve reached up and brushed tears away from his eyes that Tony even realized he was shaking because it was crying. It was then that Tony could feel everything, each day that he spent waiting for Steve, each day spent alone. He collapsed into Steve’s chest, Atlas finally crumbling under the weight of the world.

Steve welcomed him, easily taking his burden, just as he always did. He laid there at let Tony sob and scream himself hoarse. Just like everything else, Tony didn’t have much energy left, and it wasn’t long before he was quite again, silent and content to listen to Steve’s heartbeat, breath hitching every now and then.

He was just getting comfortable when he felt Steve start to shift. “Don’t,” Tony said suddenly, hands digging into Steve’s skin. Don’t leave me.

Steve bundled him up in his arms, standing slowly, making sure his load was secure. “Not going anywhere without you,” Steve whispered, pressing a kiss to his forehead. “I just figured you’d like to more somewhere more comfortable. You got a bed in this joint?”

Tony hummed in response, but didn’t offer any other instruction, intent on burying his head into Steve’s neck. Steve didn’t push while he started to trek around the house, idly poking through the lavishly decorated rooms to find one with a bed. He walked up the stairs, murmuring quietly to Tony as he did, but Tony never responded. All he could do was focus on the steady heartbeat.
echoing through the chest he was leaning on.

Steve must have found the bedroom eventually, because Tony felt himself shift from the comfort of Steve’s arms and onto the soft mattress. He barely had time to whine out a protest before the blonde was climbing in after him, pulling the blankets around the both of them. “Sleep,” Steve muttered, lips pressing against the underside of his ear, as he bundled Tony into his arms.

Tony wanted to protest, wanted to scream and yell some more. Where had Steve been? Why was he so late? Would he still be here when Tony woke up? That was what scared him the most – that Tony would wake up cradling an empty bottle instead of Steve’s warm hands.

“Sleep, sweetheart. It’s alright, now.”

Tony turned over, so his face rested against Steve’s chest, his calloused hands wrapping around the muscled torso. His breath synced up with the blonde’s easily, as if nothing had happened at all. He felt his eyes flutter shut as Steve’s hand shifted, running through the hairs on the nape of neck. Sleep was coming hard and quick, his body reacting to Steve better than any pill. As he finally slipped away, he couldn’t help but think one final time: please be real.

Steve woke in parts, slowly coming around to the warm cocoon he’d surrounded himself in. It was dark out, the pale moonlight peeking in from in between the window curtains. He hadn’t realized he was that tired, but he had been too antsy to sleep while on his way to South Carolina, and once he saw Tony, well, he couldn’t seem to help himself.

Steve smiled, looking down at the brunette that was still passed out, seemingly pressed as tightly against Steve as possible. He’d made it. He was here, here with Tony. It seemed like such a pipe dream just days before, but he was here, and it was real.

It was the pain in his chest that woke him, the dull throbbing getting more incessant by the second. He groaned, squirming to try and find some semblance of comfort.

“Finally back with the land of the living, I see,” a gruff voice sounded.

Steve startled and snapped his eyes open, ignoring the protests of his lower half. The room was dimly lit, each of the walls and floor made of concrete. It was faintly familiar to the room he and Tony were imprisoned just last month. Where was he? He looked down to see a sea of starch white, his body swaddled in wires, a hospital gown and pristine sheets.

Another throb from his chest had his brain supplying the memory of being shot, Zola laughing and Bucky screaming. He barely remembered the explosion, just a quick roar of flames before he was knocked out cold. Where was he? Had they won? Where was Bucky, his team, God, where was Tony?

“Rogers.”

Steve finally looked over to the owner of the voice, seeing Fury leaning against the door jam. Steve relaxed slightly; at least he wasn’t in the hands of HYDRA.

“Where am I?” he asked. Or, at least, he tried to, his voice coming out more like a grating wheeze. Fury walked over to a small side table, pouring Steve a glass of water.

“We’re somewhere safe. You were shot a few times. Hill brought you in,” Fury responded, handing the glass to Steve. “It was touch and go for a while, but the doctor says you’re out of the woods now.”
Steve pressed the cup to his chapped lips, relishing in the water that soothed his throat as he drank. “What happened?”

“Things didn’t exactly go according to plan,” Fury sighed, pulling a chair next to Steve’s bed. “But, long story short, we still pulled out a win. Pierce is gone, and so is Stane. HYDRA is on the run, and you managed to take care of all the SSR files. I don’t remember that being in the plan, by the way,” Fury added with a glare.

Steve huffed, giving the other man a smile. “Sorry, but I told you how dangerous those files were. I couldn’t let them fall into the wrong hands, and well, you’re still a cop.”

“Fair enough,” Fury replied. “Cleared up some loose ends and managed to take care of the one other witness to the crime. Who am I to say who started the fire?”

Steve laughed slightly, grabbing at his sides as his wounds sent another wave of pain through him. “Where’s Bucky?”

“Gone,” Fury answered. “As was part of the deal.”

Steve nodded, frowning at the vague answer. Then again, he wasn’t sure what he was expecting. “You saved me,” Steve murmured. “You could have let me die. Might have worked out better in your favor,” he confessed. “One less criminal to deal with. I’m sure your bosses would love that.”

“They were more than satisfied with me finding the rat in the NYPD,” Fury responded. “And besides,” he continued. “I couldn’t let you die. You still owe me a favor. I intend to cash in on that one day; can’t do that if you’re dead.”

Steve looked away, pondering the new threat that loomed on the horizon. He wasn’t sure what Fury would could ever want from him, especially now that the files were gone, but Steve knew he couldn’t take the statement lightly. But that was a worry for another day. If what Fury said was true, that they won... what was he to do, now that it was all over?

“What now?” He wasn’t exactly sure if he was asking himself or Fury. “Surely you have more important things to do than cater to the whims of me.”

Fury gave him a long look. “Just wanted to return something,” the man replied, reaching into his pocket. “Hill picked it up. You must have dropped this,” Fury continued, placing a small object on the hospital tray in front of him.

The key to Tony’s safehouse.

“Fury, I- ” Steve started to bumble out an excuse, but Fury cut him off.

“Don’t bother,” he said. “I told you, you’d need to try a little harder to surprise me.”

“Is he?” Steve asked, unable to finish the question. He couldn’t bear the thought of anything happening to Tony.

“He asks about you,” Fury replied, and Steve crumpled in relief. “He asks every week.”

“And?”

“And he gets the same answer every week. He isn’t allowed contact or any information pertaining to The Howling Commandos. It was part of the deal he struck – it’s part of the deal you all did.”
The Avengers, Tony’s voice drifted through his head. Steve wanted to correct him, but he didn’t. “If we can’t ask about the rest of the team, then why are you telling me about Tony?”

Fury didn’t respond, opting instead to flip at the tails of his trench coat and sit in the hospital chair besides Steve. “Everyone else is accounted for. No major injuries reported, only some very explicit complaining.”

The rest of the weight vanished from his chest. They were alive, they were all alive. They’d done it. HYDRA was gone, Pierce was gone, Stane was gone, and Steve… Steve would finally be able to stop digging graves. “Thank you,” Steve whispered hoarsely. He knew Fury didn’t have to tell him; he could have left Steve fumbling in the dark like the rest of the crew. But he didn’t.

“You don’t exactly have the best track record with HYDRA,” Fury explained. “I figured you didn’t deserve any more sleepless nights.”

Steve nodded, the pair descending into silence. “What now?” Steve asked again, fingers picking at the edge of his stiff sheets. Each breath he took was stronger than his last, and it wouldn’t be long before the hospital ran out of reasons to hold him.

“Stick to the plan,” Fury said gruffly. “You’re a little behind schedule, but no one will come looking for you here. We’ll get you back on your feet and out the door to your corner of the world, just as discussed.”

Steve deflated, biting the inside of his cheek. It wasn’t as if it was surprising; he knew Fury would still need to get him out of New York while he cleaned up the rest of their mess. In fact, sending Steve on his merry way should be great news for him.

But Fury had found the key. He knew what he and Tony were planning on doing – he knew that Steve was still planning on getting there as soon as he takes his first steps outside these hospital walls. But Fury had made it adamantly clear that no one within the team was to be in contact, as if to avoid any slipups that would put the whole crew in danger. With the FBI cleaning up the rest of HYDRA and the Ten Rings, the last thing they needed was both crews fleeing across the country to track The Avengers down and finish the job.

“You’re all of great use to me,” Fury had said. He wasn’t going to let go of his prized turkey just yet.

But how long had he known about the key? About Steve’s plans? Fury must have found the key while searching his clothes. Fury hadn’t told him exactly how long he’d been out of commission, but it sure as hell was enough time for Fury to make some new calls. What if he decides to send Steve further away? What if he called Tony’s handler and sent him somewhere else? How the hell was Steve supposed to find him?

Steve had made Tony a promise, and he sure as hell wasn’t going to cut and run now. I need him, Steve thought to himself. Fury’s words could only do so much for him; he needed to see Tony, needed to feel the warmth of him in his arms. And he would, one way or another.

“Once the doctor signs off on you, we’ll get you on your way,” Fury added.

“Right,” Steve answered. “Am I travelling with an agent to Kansas, or do I have to fly and meet them there?”

“I didn’t say anything about Kansas,” Fury said, standing up.

Steve paused, looking at the key that was still laying in front of him. “You mean?”
“He’s waiting for you.”

Steve gaped at the other man. “You’d really let me go?”

Fury snorted. “Like you would have let me stop you from going anyway.”

Steve was unable to keep the smile from his face as he wrapped his hand around the key. I’m coming, Tony. “Fury, I-”

“Just consider this another favor you owe me.” And with a final swish of his trench coat, Fury was gone.

A soft moan pulled Steve from his memories. He turned slightly, watching a snoozing Tony twist around in the sheets. Steve shot a hand out, curling it around Tony’s back and tugged, urging the smaller man to rest against his chest. Tony hummed, nuzzling against his skin, doe eyes fluttering open.

“You’re still here,” he murmured.

Steve shot him a lazy smile. “Where else would I be?”

Tony bit lightly at his chest in retaliation. “No need to be an ass.”

Steve’s hand drifted to Tony’s hair, drawn to it like a cat to yarn, twisting the curly locks between his fingers. He hadn’t realized how long it had gotten, but he liked it; long, unkempt tresses just begging to be pulled.

But Steve could hardly focus on the newly opened avenues; he could only feel the grease on his fingers, could only feel Tony’s overgrown beard scratching at his sides. He wasn’t sure if it was better than when his fingers felt Tony’s now pronounced ribcage. He should have been here sooner; Tony had been counting on him.

He looked down to see Tony staring back up at him, eyes glowing in the moonlight. He was wearing a soft sort of smile, one that looked like it was made for him and only him, and Steve couldn’t help but lean down and kiss it. Tony molded perfectly against him, as he always did, the brunette hitching a leg around to push closer into his mouth, Steve sliding a hand down his smooth back to rest on the curve of his ass in response.

He had missed this. He had missed him.

Sure, he missed the rest of the team like a missing limb, but he wasn’t worried. He’d ask Tony if he could find them later today. He probably already had. Sleeping with one of the world’s most brilliant men had its perks, of course.

When he heard Tony sigh softly into his mouth, it really hit him. This was real. Tony, alive and warm in his hands, was real. This was real, and he could have this. This was the first of many mornings they’d have. Together.

Tony pulled back slightly to catch his gaze, a calloused hand trailing over the dopey look he was sure he was wearing. “Someone’s in a good mood,” Tony teased as he tried to keep from grinning in return.

“I have a feeling it’s going to be a good day.”

Tony chuckled, the vibrations echoing through Steve’s own chest. “If you say so.”
Steve frowned, poking at Tony. “You’re pretty grumpy for a man that just got laid.”

Tony sighed. “Well, it’s been a rough couple of weeks.”

“I’m sure it was such a hardship living in a mansion on the lakeside,” Steve snorted. “You’d think you would have been able to take better care of yourself,” he added without thinking twice.

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t have left me alone so long.”

It was said quietly. Almost as if Tony hadn’t really meant to say it aloud, but it was more than enough for Steve to feel a familiar pang in his chest. How many mornings had Tony sat in this bed, looking out the window, waiting for Steve to come? Not knowing whether he was coming, or if he was even alive? It was enough to drive any man mad. Steve knew because he felt the same way in the hospital. In those first few days, barely lucid and doped out of his mind on drugs, Steve could kid himself by imagining the smaller man, hearing his voice, feeling his touch on his skin, seeing him sit by his bedside. But the drugs wore off and he realized he was alone, trapped in the square room with nothing to do but stare at the starch white ceiling all day and concoct the worst ‘what-if’ scenarios for his lover and his family. If Fury hadn’t taken mercy on him and put his mind to ease, Steve didn’t know what kind of state he would be in now.

But Tony didn’t have that. Tony just had a voice on the phone telling him to stop asking. Steve tightened his hold on Tony, cradling him against his chest, listening to his steady heartbeat sync with his own. “Never again,” he whispered fiercely into Tony’s ear.

Tony hummed in response, dropping his head to rest against Steve’s collarbone, looking down at his fingers trailing over his chest, tracing a design that only he saw.

Tony skimmed over one of the many new scars that littered Steve’s pale skin. “I take it this was the reason for you delay?”

Steve grabbed at his hand, pulling them away gently to link their fingers together. “I’m alright, now.”

“I should have been there.”

No. Unwanted images of Tony bleeding out on the floor next to him, whispering unheard words in the rumble of the pending explosion filtered through his mind. He could see why Tony would have wanted to face the end together; he himself wanted the same. If anything, Steve should have been faster, should have been better, so he could have made his way back to Tony.

“A little bird told me you were dealing with problems of your own,” he said in reply.

He’d read the report that Fury gave him. He read how Stane had almost taken Tony from him. He read how he almost walked into this house only to find it empty.

“I’m alright, now,” Tony parroted.

Steve leaned up and kissed him, slow and firm. “You’re alright,” he reassured. “We both are.”

Tony hummed, responding to him eagerly. Steve felt a familiar fire build low in his gut, each kiss and touch from Tony just stoking the flames. He already felt the tension building; it was it was his first time, bumbling hands and whispered curses with an embarrassingly fast crescendo. But it seemed like it was like this was every time with Tony. Each touch, each kiss like a rush no high could get him, an addiction he was more than happy to lose himself too.
Steve drew his arms around Tony, bracketing him before throwing a leg over, twisting the pair so Tony lay beneath him. His eyes were almost black as he gazed back up at Steve. His chest heaved, the glow of the arc reactor dancing around the room. He was so stunning. “My kingdom to have you like this forever,” Steve uttered.

Tony smiled. “And a kingdom you did pay.”

Steve leaned down, catching Tony’s lips again. “Worth it,” he said, before swallowing Tony’s laugh.

“Come on, cowboy,” Tony husked when he broke away, pushing Steve’s head downwards. “You were late to dinner, so you’ve got a lot of making up to do.”

Steve smiled, biting down Tony’s chest, his hands cupping Tony’s leaking erection. “As you wish.”

When he woke again, it was too an empty bed. Any worry that was building up in his chest deflated when he heard the faint rumblings of Tony in the kitchen. He slipped out of the sheets and padded over to what he assumed to be the closet. Steve huffed when he opened the door; a closet it was, if the clothes lining the walls were any indication, but it looked like there was room to house another three people. Steve idly walked around the perimeter of the room, eyeing the open organized clothing, stopping in front of folded sweatpants. They were soft to the touch and yep, suspiciously his size. Steve laughed to himself as he pulled them on before exiting the closest, off to find Tony.

He found him in the kitchen, staring at the coffee machine release the final drips of his morning coffee. Steve watched as Tony brought the liquid up to his nose and breathed deep, eyes fluttering shut in satisfaction. He then took a large gulp, a soft moan echoing in his chest in satisfaction. Leave it to Tony Stark to make such a mundane routine erotic.

“Thanks, JARVIS,” Tony mumbled into his mug, already starting on his second sip.

“Of course, Sir,” the disembodied voice replied. If Steve didn’t know any better, it was said almost smugly. “Shall I start another cup for you, Captain?”

Tony turned at the sound of his name, smiling at Steve over the lip of his mug. “No, thank you, JARVIS.” Steve smirked in return, walking over to Tony, pulling at the other man’s hips until he was snug in his embrace. “I’ll get my caffeine another way,” he added, kissing Tony soundly.

Tony snorted into his mouth but was otherwise happy enough to let Steve kiss him senseless. When Steve pulled away, he didn’t move far, opting to nuzzle into Tony’s soft trusses, still damp from the shower. “You showered without me,” he pouted. Steve had caught a glimpse of Tony’s idea of a shower last night, his head unable to stop and think of all the pleasant possibilities it could provide.

“I didn’t want to wake you. It looked like you needed the sleep.”

“So could you,” Steve countered, thinking about the dark bags under his lover’s eyes.

Tony leaned away, rolling his eyes. “I could be convinced to take another one,” he responded, the hand not holding his mug trailing down Steve’s bare chest. “Or, if you’re up for it,” Tony added, “you could help me break in the hot tub.”

“Hot tub?” Steve laughed.
Tony shrugged with a smile. “We could watch the sunrise and what not. Seems like the exact kind of sappy crap you’d be into.”

Steve huffed, crossing his arms against his chest. “Well, don’t feel obligated to join if you’re not interested. I’ll go and enjoy the sappy crap by myself.”

“Oh, I’m coming with,” Tony said, placing his mug on the counter. “I’m sure I’ll find a way to keep myself entertained,” he added, stripping off his pants while heading towards the patio door.

“What on Earth are you doing?” Steve asked, eyes already glued to the toned legs.

“It’s a private residence,” Tony smiled, not even bothering to turn around as he kicked off underwear. “Clothing is optional.”

Steve gaped at the man, pausing to admire Tony’s backside before he was stumbling along, tearing off his own pants with far less grace. He jolted when he stepped outside, skin prickling in the cold air, but he dutifully followed a sauntering Tony to the hot tub that was already steaming and alive with multiple jets – the doing of JARVIS, Steve assumed, getting the machine ready as soon as Tony first uttered it in the kitchen.

He watched as Tony’s form slipped into the water, turning only to curl a finger at Steve beckoning him closer. It was impossible to disobey. Steve raced up the steps of the tub, eagerly taking his first step into the warm oasis. The water burned up his body as he kept going deeper, and Steve couldn’t help but close his eyes and relish the heat.

Faint laps in the water over the jets was the only warning he had before Tony’s hands grabbed at his arms, pulling him closer. “Is this alright?” he asked as Steve fell into his embrace. “Not sure how you feel about the water, but I- ”

Steve silenced him with a kiss. “It’s perfect,” he reassured when he pulled away.

Tony beamed, leading him over to where the benches were, pushing Steve down, the blonde groaning with satisfaction as powered jets sent pressure against his back. He peered up at Tony, waiting for him to follow.

Tony collapsed against his chest, Steve’s arms automatically winding around the smaller man’s chest. “What do you want to do today?” Tony whispered.

Steve hummed, leaning down to suck a mark into Tony’s neck. “How about a date?” he asked when he pulled away. “I believe I promised you one of those. I’ll even cook.”

Tony tilted his head up to look at him, his teeth digging into his bottom lip to keep from smiling. His eyes sparkled in the daylight, the ambers and golds twinkling with mischief and happiness. God, he was so beautiful.

“I think I’d like that,” Tony answered, brushing his lips against Steve’s. “But I think I have a better idea for a date.”

Steve huffed out a laugh. “Is that so? Better than a Rogers homecooked meal?”

Tony shrugged. “Personally, I don’t think so, but I have a feeling you’ll want to do this more.”

“And pray tell, what exciting activity would I enjoy more than a nice dinner with you, with the possibility of you naked in my bed?”
“My bed,” Tony argued.

“Our bed,” Steve countered in response.

Tony smiled sweetly, giving him a gentle kiss. “Our bed,” he agreed.

“So?”


Steve gaped at the other man. “You’ve got to be joking,” he deadpanned. “I distinctly remember a previous conversation about your feelings on camping and now all of a sudden you’re on board?”

“Maybe I’ve had a change of heart?”

“Nice try,” Steve said, pinching at Tony’s sides. “Why?”

“I may have done some digging in my spare time,” Tony answered innocently. “Found some cool spots that even I’d like to try. Washington, Nevada, Arkansas, Indiana. Florida.”

“Yes, Florida is known for its great hiking spots,” Steve replied sarcastically.


“Is that all?” Tony twisted in his lap, so they were facing each other.

Tony tilted his head, as if to ponder. “There was something else, wasn’t there,” he murmured, tapping his fingers against his chin. “Ah, yes. Just so happens that I’ve got family at each of these destinations. If we’re going to continue with this little tryst, you’re going to have to get my family’s approval, right?” Tony questioned. “That is, if you’re interested,” he added with another shrug of his shoulders.

Steve gaped up at the other man, pieces clicking into place. “Is that so?” he grinned.

“Mm,” Tony hummed. “And they’re all exactly right where I want to go camping. Weird how that happens, right?”

“So weird,” Steve snorted, tightening his arms around Tony’s waist. He’d found them. And, he was planning on going to get them whether or not Steve showed up at his front door.

“God, I love you,” he couldn’t help but whisper, pulling Tony into another embrace. Tony answered eagerly, running his hands along Steve’s shoulders in comfort, uttering a soft “I know” in Steve’s ear in response.

“So?” Tony continued when they parted. “Epic road trip across the nation? Maybe we shouldn’t even stop there – does Norway extradite to the United States?”

A laugh bubbled in Steve’s chest. “One step at a time,” he smiled, poking at Tony’s chest. “You do bring up a good point, though. You do know that we both have random check ins with our assigned FBI handler.”

Tony shot him an unimpressed glare. “Don’t insult me,” he snapped. “I have it covered.”

“Oh, Steve,” Steve chuckled. “I should have known better.”

“Yes, yes you should have,” Tony pouted. He paused, biting his lip. “So. You comin’ with?”
“I think I can clear my schedule.”

“Perfect,” Tony answered gleefully.

“Should I go pack, or do you have that covered already as well?”

“Of course not,” Tony stated with a roll of his eyes. “But, we’ll worry about that later. We’re not leaving until tomorrow, though. Travelling can be such a pain in the ass, and you just got here.”

“I think I’ll get over it,” Steve argued, already trying to push up from the hot tub, already eager to see the rest of his family. But Tony pulled him back down.

“Besides,” Tony continued. “We can’t leave tonight. You’ll be too busy cooking for me.”

Steve scoffed, dropping back down onto the bench, warm water splashing around the pair. “There it is,” he muttered, shaking his head back and forth, smile still plastered on his face.

“If you didn’t want to cook, then you shouldn’t have offered,” Tony pestered.

“Well, excuse me,” Steve huffed. “I just figured that a trip like this would require some precedence.”

“Uh, I require precedence,” Tony countered. “If you couldn’t tell, it’s been quite the month for me. My CFO turned out to be crazy, by boyfriend was missing in action for a little while, and I- ”

“Alright, alright,” Steve placated. “I think I can swing a meal.”

“Don’t look so put out,” the brunette continued. “Dinner means the possibility of me naked in our bed.”

“Well, I have you naked here, right now, in our hot tub,” Steve replied with a shrug of his shoulders.

“A fact that can be changed very quickly,” Tony answered, moving towards the edge of the tub.

Steve was up in a flash, grabbing at Tony, pulling the giggling man back into his arms. “I don’t think so,” he negated, tightening his hold.

“Fine,” Tony sighed dramatically. “I guess you win this one. But just this one.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Tony flicked water at him, frowning at his tone. “Rude.”

“And yet, you love me anyway,” Steve commented.


Steve drew their hands together, the digits interlocking perfectly. The pair descended into silence, only broken by the jets in the tub and the occasional bird chirping back at the morning sun.

“So?” Tony pushed again.

“So,” Steve huffed. “Dinner first, hopefully with a nice dessert,” he stated, with a deep kiss to Tony.
“Then camping.”

“Then camping,” Steve agreed, chest light and high on affection, a dopey smile plastered on his face.

Tony grinned against his mouth in return. “Sounds like a plan, Cap.”

Chapter End Notes

Fin. Finally, fin.

Contact me at:
Tumblr: just-another-tinker
Email: just.another.tinker@gmail.com

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