Bridge Over Troubled Water

by soniclipstick (veriscence)

Summary

Ultron is destroyed, the Avengers are in disarray, and the Winter Soldier is still in the wind. Steve knows that he has to fix the ever-growing ocean of distrust between Tony and himself, so he takes a leap of faith and tasks Tony with the most important thing: finding Bucky Barnes. But it takes a pair of sexy but stolen hand warmers, several robots, Hawkeye and countless selfies before Steve realises the immensity of what he's set into motion.

Notes

Thanks to my betas: ereshai and CallipygianGoldfish. CallipygianGoldfish had less than a week to beta this whole damn thing so she deserves all the cookies. All of them. Also a big thank you to knowmefirst for the lovely art.

This fic is for ereshai, who's kind of having a shitty month. I'm an ocean away, and I don't know how to help, so just know I love you and this is for you.
“Tell me you’ve had someone look at that,” Steve says, he’s only just arrived in med bay after instructing the Sokovian emergency response services.

Tony looks like he’d gone a few rounds with Natasha — *without* the care she usually gives him. He’s shirtless; the black fabric he’s using to press down on a civilian’s blood-spurting leg looks like it might be one of Tony’s beloved rock band t-shirts. The lack of it on Tony’s person is the only reason Steve notices the large splatters of bruising across Tony’s side.

Tony does a double-take when he sees Steve, then looks back at the civilian beside him on the floor.
Despite the size of the Helicarrier and its medical bay, there just isn’t enough room for injured civilians. “Nah, I didn’t take any major hits, if we discount your Frisbee.”

Tony says it as if it’s a joke, but Steve winces. That… had not been his best moment. “Tony, I’m sorry. That was wrong of me. Listen, we need to do a quick Avengers debrief before the officials show up. Let’s have a look at your ribs, first.”

A medic comes to relieve Tony. Steve holds out his hand, and Tony takes it, pulling himself up. There’s a red hair band around his wrist — clearly Pepper’s. It’s sweet, Steve thinks, even if he can’t help being more than a little jealous of what they have. On their way out, Steve catches sight of the goose bumps dotting Tony’s olive skin, and automatically strips his uniform jacket off. He offers it to Tony, who stares at it, and then at Steve.

Steve grins. “What, is Tony Stark too cool for the stars and stripes?”

Tony rolls his eyes and allows Steve to throw it over his shoulders. It’s too big on him, but the colours of the nation suit Tony just fine. Then again, everything suits Tony just fine. Steve slams a mental door shut in that thought’s face, and leads Tony into a quieter corner. Steve runs his hands up and down his rib cage. Tony winces, but he doesn’t fall over, and none of the bruises look or feel deep enough to be the results of internal bleeding. His fingers ghost over a blossoming bursts of blue and purple, the evidence of Steve’s shield against Tony’s vulnerable flesh.

“Is this some weird secret plan to grope me? Because seriously, you could just ask.” Tony says with a smirk. Steve pulls away suddenly, ears burning.

“Dammit. And I thought I was being sly. Guess nothing gets past you,” Steve replies, trying to hide his embarrassment. “I’m going to wrap your ribs just in case—“

“It’s a guilt thing, isn’t it?” Tony grabs his wrist. Steve freezes and looks up to face him. “You trusted the words of a couple of kids who’d switched to our side for all of five minutes over mine. And now you feel bad about it?”

Shame blooms violently hot over his cheeks. Steve busies himself with snagging a few bandages from the nearby medical cart and unrolling them. He knows he should apologise for the lack of trust he’s shown Tony. Yes, Tony was the one doing something new and dangerous, for the second time in as many days, but Steve had been the one who’d never given him a chance to explain. And yet, the moment Wanda had said those words, Steve had known them to be the gospel truth. “She said you’d do anything to make things right.”

“Duh.”

“That’s wrong, Tony. There are lines you can’t cross.”

“And if we’re all dead because we were too afraid to cross that line? What’s the point of it all, then?” Tony asks. “I made a mistake with Ultron, I know that, that’s on me. Sokovia? The kid we’re going to have to bury? Me again. But creating the Vision was the right thing to do. We would all be dead without him.”

Wanda’s words are etched deep into Steve heart, he can’t forget it.

*Ultron can’t tell the difference between saving the world and destroying it, where do you think he gets that?*

Steve’s eyes search Tony’s face, noting every small expression. Steve has watched Tony fall out of wormholes in the sky, but he’s never seen Tony look so *done*. Tony, who is bruised and bloody and
yet still helping others before himself, and that’s when Steve realises he’s made a grave mistake.

Wanda was right. But she was also wrong.

Tony isn’t Ultron. Because Tony cares. The difference between Ultron and Tony is that Tony cares deeply and profoundly about people, no matter how much he wants to hide it behind walls of metal. The difference is that Tony realised he’d made a mistake and tried to fix it, and Ultron had always believed himself incapable of making mistakes.

Steve had failed as a leader. He hadn’t been able to trust his own teammate in battle. Tony has always evaded Steve’s understanding; Tony twists and turns him around. Every attempt at making sense of the chaos fails. But now, looking at Tony, so lost and dejected, and yet still trying to help, Steve realises: he trusts Tony. And it would seem that that’s something Tony really needs to hear.

“You’re right. I didn’t trust you before. But I do now, Tony. With my life.”

“This isn’t about your life, it’s about the world.” Tony snaps the hairband on his wrist, the action making Steve frown.

“Tony, I don’t trust anyone with the security of the whole world.” Steve pauses to look Tony in the eye, one hand on his shoulder and the other over a roll of bandages on Tony’s lower back. “Not even myself. That’s why we’re a team, Tony. Not just to work together, but to keep each other in check. That’s our responsibility.”

Steve’s never been able to read Tony, but he thinks Tony understands.

Tony’s not sure he should be here.

Clint, despite being the irritating bastard that he is, is a friend, and he had told Tony that he’s always welcome to visit. But this isn’t a visit.

It’s a funeral.

The tombstone tells him that Pietro Maximoff had died at the ripe old age of twenty-six.

Cap’s probably saying something beautiful and inspiring. Tony’s looking at him right now, but his mind’s somewhere else.

Twenty-six.

Steve had been twenty-six too, when he’d taken the plunge and given up his life for millions.

So this is what war does to people, Tony realises, turning young men and women into martyrs long before their time. This is what Starks do to people. It’s what Tony had sworn to never be a part of again, yet is what he ends up coming back to no matter how badly he wishes this isn’t his life.

“This was never my life.”

That’s what Tony had said, but the truth is, even if Tony hadn’t known about the double-dealing, it was still his name on the bombs. It hadn’t been his life because he’d been too drunk to realise otherwise.]
Tony watches, but he doesn’t sprinkle dirt on the coffin. He doesn’t deserve that right. The others head to the kitchen to talk and share a drink. There is no proper reception, when it’s just the Avengers. Tony heads to the barn to have a look at the tractor. Apparently Laura hadn’t been lying about it being broken.

Fingers twitching, Tony takes his jacket off, loosens his tie, and opens her up. There’s something incredibly soothing about ripping apart her engine to fix her back up, and Tony loses himself in the work. Then the radio’s also a bust, and Tony fixes that too, and that’s when Tony realises it’s Christmas because this isn’t just any dirty old barn.

It’s a dirty old barn full of broken tech.

Tony doesn’t know how long he’s been at it when he finally notices the sound of pencil against paper. Turning around, he finds Steve sitting on a stool to his right, sketchbook on a knee and pencil in hand. Steve stops drawing to look up at Tony.

“Welcome back,” Steve says, grinning. “I was wondering when you’d notice.”

“How long have I been at it?” Tony asks. It’s starting to get dark in here, despite the small incandescent lights that Steve must have switched on.

Steve gets back to drawing, looking up at Tony every once in a while. “Oh, a couple of hours. Thor and the Vision have headed back to Sokovia to help with clean-up.”

“You could’ve called me earlier if you wanted me to fly you back to New York.”

“Nah, there’s nothing pressing we need to do except clean up.” Steve looks up at Tony, tilting his head before getting back to sketching. “And it looked like you needed the break.”

Tony doesn’t really know what that’s supposed to mean, so he ignores it. “Are you… are you sketching me?”

“Yeah. Sorry, I should have asked,” Steve says sheepishly, sticking the pencil behind his ear and shutting his book. “I didn’t want to disturb you.”

“Sketch away, Cap. Like I care.” Tony squashes the need to see the picture like an ant.

Before Steve can open up the book again, Laura waddles in. And he means that in a good way, because she’s honestly very beautiful, like Pepper on a summer evening, hair in a messy bun and—

Nope. Tony snaps the rubber band against his wrist. Not going there.

“Oh my God, Tony, what in the name of… did you tune the piano?”

“It’s possible.” He vaguely remembers wondering what a piano was doing in a barn.

“This belonged to my nana.”

“Uh, sorry?”

“Don’t be! Thank you!” Laura leans over to hug him tightly, and Tony pats her awkwardly on the back. She pulls back with a smile. “Come on, boys, dinner’s on.”

“No, Laura, it’s alright, don’t let us intrude.” Steve stands up. “We need to get going anyway.”

“Steve, don’t be a moron. You’re Avengers, and that makes you family. Now go wash up. Both of
“you.” Laura pats him on the shoulder before waddling away.

“Clinton, I approve of your wife,” Tony says later. “She called Steve a moron.”

Dinner is quiet, no one wanting to wake up Wanda who’s cried herself to sleep in the living room. Tony’s fine with that. Not the crying part, the asleep part.

Steve gets roped into reading bedtime stories for Lila much to Clint’s amusement. Steve looks really lost, like he doesn’t know what to do with kids, which Tony thinks is hilarious. Then Steve shuts Lila’s door in his face and Tony decides to stop being a creepy stalker.

They go home with a Tupperware container full of soldier cake, which Tony’s never had before but is decidedly pretty awesome for poor people food. Tony considers setting the jet on autopilot, but then wonders what he’ll do for the next three hours other than aggravate Steve.

Steve doesn’t seem to be in a talking mood anyway. The moment they’ve reached maximum altitude, Steve curl up on the bench with his eyes closed.

It’s when they’ve landed that Tony remembers. He sees the sticker as he turns in his seat to get out, and instead freezes.

JARVIS is my co-pilot.

Not anymore, he isn’t, and God dammit that thought is so pathetically bitter. Tony shakes his head, hoping to clear his mind. Tony’s a futurist; it’s time to move forward.

Tony reaches over and scratches at one end of the sticker. When there’s enough loose for Tony to hold onto, he pulls at it rather vindictively, and ends up with an uneven half, the rest of the now illegible white paper still stuck to the wall.

Tony crumples it up in his hand, biting his lip. There’s no point in tears. He hadn’t cried when his parents had died — had been killed, a treacherous voice in his head reminds him — and he isn’t going to cry now. It was only an intelligence. An artificial intelligence. It’s not even the real Jarvis, who’s long retired and now lives with his son in New Jersey.

Move on, Anthony, a voice in his head that sounds like Obie tells him.

A heavy hand drops onto his shoulder and Tony startles. He shakes off the shoulder and stands up. “It’s fine. The sticker’s Stark-grade. I’ll need acetone.”

“Tony.” Steve’s officially blocking his way now, even if he keeps his hands to himself. “I’m sorry. I forgot. Wanda’s not the only one who lost family. JARVIS—”

“Someone explained to your 20th century brain that he’s just code, right?” Tony snaps. Of all the people, Steve’s the last one he wants to talk to about JARVIS. “JARVIS isn’t—wasn’t really a person. He was just an artificial intelligence. Now are you going to move or what? I need a shower, I smell like the Midwest.”

Steve doesn’t move. Tony turns around, walking around the chair to the other side. Tony’s nearly outside when Steve speaks from behind him. “You and I both know it’s not true. He was your child. And for what it’s worth, I am so very sorry. He was my friend. JARVIS will be terribly missed.”
Tony can’t speak, the grief in his throat choking him, so he just nods and walks away.

Good God, he needs a drink.

The smell of piss surrounds *Gare du Nord*, and the Soldier wonders when he can tell Dernier off for lying to him about the beauty of Paris. The Soldier stops in his tracks, nearly dropping the pastry he’d found earlier in one of the green bins.

He doesn’t know anyone named Dernier.

Barnes must have, he thinks. And then stops thinking about it before his chest starts aching again. He eats the croissant in three quick bites, pickpockets a few angry-looking people, and then heads towards a youth hostel to book himself a room. The private room and bathroom is worth the extra cash — he can’t risk hurting someone mid-nightmare. He strips, showers, and combs back his hair with his fingers.

The man in the mirror doesn’t look much like the one from the Smithsonian videos. The Soldier doesn’t feel much like the one from the Smithsonian videos, either.

Except this is what the Soldier dreams.

He dreams of a skinny boy named *Steve* who couldn’t breathe, but loved picking fights. He dreams of carefully stitching up *Steve* after things got hairy at a HYDRA base. He dreams of the whole world gone mad, and yet *Steve* smiling at him as if he was the brightest thing in the world.

Sometimes he dreams of killing the Captain. Other times he dreams of kissing him. It isn’t the Captain then, it’s *Steve*. This man is happier somehow. Sometimes, he’s a sick, frail thing with more strength that one would imagine in his bony fingers. Other times he looks as he does now, big and strong and safe. The Soldier can feel Barnes’ frustration and desire, but for the life of him he cannot tell the difference between dreams and memories.

The church bells sound around the city, telling him it’s nine am and that he doesn’t have a lot of time. There’s no point in dwelling on dreams that may or may not be memories, especially on a Sunday.

There are rules when it comes to Sundays — for one, they belong to God. There’s a muted voice, a woman’s — ma’s — telling him that, and the Soldier wonders why this of all things has remained within him.

The Soldier roots through the duffle bag, trying to find his cleanest clothes and smooths them out. He doesn’t have a suit, but this will have to do. If these are his best, that makes them his Sunday best. He locks up, takes the most important things, weapons and a full-colour brochure from the Smithsonian, and begins the walk.

The *Sacre-Coeur* is a twenty minute walk that the Soldier manages in ten, and there are flashes of memory here and there. He’s been here before.

A bed of blood.

He throws up in an alley, and nearly considers not going.

But it’s a Sunday.
He enters Mass with the throng of people, blending into the crowd. The bishop preaches in a soft voice, but the multitude quiets, hanging on to every spoken word. He speaks of salvation, grace, and forgiveness.

Afterwards, the Soldier lights a candle, and prays a prayer he memorised long before he ever studied the dead language, and leaves.

He has no particular destination, just one goal: destroy HYDRA. They’re evil, the Soldier gets that now. They’d used him like a knife and then hidden him away when he wasn’t needed. And when he hadn’t known the difference between either side, hadn’t been awake long enough to know anything but obedience, he’d remained an undecided party.

But that’s no longer the case.

James Buchanan Barnes had been a good man. But HYDRA had taken Barnes away and put in something much uglier. They’d made the Captain cry. Both men should mean nothing to the Soldier, a ghost and a mission, but those crimes seem unforgivable, and the Soldier wants revenge.

Public news broadcasts blast the news of Sokovia and the Avengers’ involvement. The Soldier catches one through an open window, and sees the Captain and Iron Man working together. They’re a mesmerising symphony of metal and light.

The Soldier resists the urge to go after them; they don’t need help stopping the robot. Besides, he can’t face the Captain yet. He has his own things to avenge first.

HYDRA would pay.

“The Wrecking Crew? What the fuck kind of a name is that?” Tony asks into the comms.

“Chatter,” Steve says, throwing up his shield just in time to avoid the ball-and-chain the villain is swinging about. It still sends Steve flying, and Tony catches him just in time before messily dropping him back down on the bank’s front porch. Steve looks back up anxiously, Tony’s not that inaccurate. Something must be wrong in the suit. “Thanks, Iron Man. Are you okay?”

“Just peachy, Cap.”

Steve can’t believe this is what his life’s come to. Bank heists in the middle of New York should not be causing a block’s worth of damage, but these guys mean business, and Steve’s got no one but Tony and Clint.

Still, Steve knows the value of his teammates, and there are none as strong or as smart, or as calculated. Yes, it’s the three of them against four super powered villains, and Tony may be the only heavy hitter they have, but they’ll win.

It takes them less than an hour to knock them all unconscious. When SHIELD shows up for clean-up, Steve asks to stay behind to help, but Coulson tells them they have things under control, and packs the villains into prisoner transport.

After Natasha’s data dump, the Avengers had been made aware of Coulson’s return from death. But they hadn’t actually had the chance to meet him. Tony ignores Coulson, which makes sense for Tony, and Clint’s really affectionate with him. Steve doesn’t know the man well, so he stays professional, accepts his apology for the deception and leaves Clint alone with him when he asks.
Steve’s curious about a lot of things, not least of all the way Clint’s holding Coulson’s hand, but it’s not their business, so he drags an interested looking Tony back to the Quinjet to wait for him.

Shit hits the fan when they get back to the Tower and find Maria waiting for them. They head to one of the few undamaged briefing rooms. Clint drops into a seat, legs up on the table, and Tony and Steve follow. Maria doesn’t wait for debrief, she just tells them one thing: they need to expand.

“We’re too vulnerable. Thor and Vision need to stay in Sokovia to help, and appease the Sokovian government, not to mention the UN. But three Avengers is not enough.”

“Two,” Clint says.

“Pardon me?” Maria asks.

“Two. Listen, I love being an Avenger. I was with Nick from the beginning. But I can’t do this anymore,” Clint turns to face Steve. “Every time I go out, I’m seeing Pietro, and I’m seeing Laura go through what Wanda’s suffering. And I can’t do this to her anymore.”

“Barton, we need you,” Maria says.

“Cap?” Clint’s looking at Steve as if he’s asking for his blessing. Steve doesn’t know how to feel about that. Clint’s older than him, has spent longer in the field than him, and it’s Steve’s he’s looking up to.

“No one’s going to make you stay if you don’t want to, Clint,” Steve says. “We’ll miss you—”

“—no we won’t,” coughs Tony, and Clint grins and flips him the bird.

“—but you’re justified in leaving.”

“Fine. I’ll have exit papers made up. If that’s been dealt with, the US government wants military representation on the team. Which means that Rhodes is going to be an Avenger.” Tony punches the air at Maria’s words and Steve smiles; Tony’s adoration of Rhodey is so poorly hidden that even Maria smiles at that. “Romanoff’s not taking my calls, but we need her back.”

“We need to find Bruce,” Steve points out.

“Tony can do that. We used his tech to keep track of him last, why does Natasha need to run around playing hide and seek? Bring her in, and bring in Sam Wilson.”

Steve’s blood turns blue at the thought. “No.”

“Steve—”

“No. Sam’s busy. He’s on a mission and he’s not available.”

“That mission comes second to this. Finding,” Maria glances at Tony, “the soldier is important, but the world is unsafe. The next supervillain that comes after the two of you just might be the last one. So no offense, Captain, but you need to set your priorities straight and act like the leader of the Avengers.”

“Sam’s not coming back,” Steve says, standing up. He’d left Bucky behind once. Never again.

Steve makes it to his own apartment before his feet fail him, and he collapses against the wall, heaving dry sobs with his head between his knees. He can’t fail Bucky. He can’t go searching for him because of the Avengers — that was the whole reason he’d left Sam looking for him, until
things calmed down enough and Steve could leave. Except he can’t on good conscience leave the Avengers the way things are.

Steve doesn’t know what to do.

Steve hears the footsteps first, and then the knocking. “Maria please, not now.”

“It’s me, actually,” Tony’s voice drifts through the door. “Can I come in?”

“It’s your house,” Steve rasps. He hates how broken he sounds. His team shouldn’t see him so weak, but he doesn’t know where or how he could rally the strength now.

“Your apartment,” Tony says. He walks in and sits on the floor beside Steve, his back lined up against the wall. “So by soldier she means Barnes, right?”

Steve turns to face Tony. If Tony knows that name, it means he’s read all the information from the data dump. It means Tony knows who had his parents killed. Steve forces the bile in his throat back down. *Don’t think about Howard. Don’t think about Howard. Don’t—*

“What, did you think I wouldn’t know? Hello, remember that time you convinced our resident murder queen to leak all of SHIELD-slash-HYDRA’s secrets to the world? Of course I knew.”

Tony looks at his knees as if the answers to everything are written there. Maybe they are. “I get why you didn’t tell me though. I saw the files, the — the kill orders.”

“It wasn’t Bucky’s fault.” Steve fights to keeps his tone even. Tony has the right to be angry, but Steve doesn’t know what he’ll do if Tony decides to go after Bucky.

“I agree,” Tony says. Steve breathes out. Today really is a day for surprises. “What I don’t agree with is having a perfectly outstanding operative playing catch-me-if—you-can when he’s better used elsewhere.”

“You don’t even know if he’ll say yes.”

“I know I only met the guy once and we were pretty drunk, but he’ll say yes, Cap,” Tony says. “If it’s you who’s asking.”

“I can’t just leave Bucky.” Steve croaks, hating how weak he sounds. It’s not Sam’s decision he worries about, and Tony gets it.

“You won’t. I’ll look for him. Call in Natasha. I’m looking for Bruce, and I can easily add Barnes to the list.”

Steve toys with the idea for a moment. It’s one thing to trust Sam with Bucky. Sam went through hell and back for Steve, damn the consequences or the odds. And he had done it of his own volition. But Tony’s been an Avenger with Steve for nigh on three years now, it’s high time he trusts Tony, no matter how hard the man makes it.


“I’ll find him for you, Cap,” Tony says, then stands up. Steve nods. His feet fail him, so he decides to just stay here until after Tony leaves. At the door, Tony pauses. “You were in love with him, weren’t you?”

Steve almost smiles. Of course Tony sees through secrets he’s hidden for more than one lifetime. “I still am.”
Tony decides to let Clint fly the Quinjet to the farm one last time, though he is quick to correct Clint’s every tiny mistake while keeping an eye on his search algorithms. He might understand Clint’s choice, but he doesn’t have to be happy about it. They were bros, dammit.

Halfway through the trip, Clint rolls his eyes, and pulls off a Crazy Ivan. That shuts Tony right the fuck up. Well, it shuts Tony up about that particular topic. Because here’s the thing. Clint’s the man who is about to give up his job to be with his wife. But he’d been holding Coulson’s wrists two days ago with a tenderness only lovers share. So Tony asks in the only way he can. “So, you into zombiephilia or something?”

“What?”

“Clinton Francis, don’t you you know what me. How come you’re being all sweet and romantic with wifey, and then holding hands with Coulson like a lovesick teenager?”

Clint gives him a scrutinising look, then laughs. “Oh God. I hate you sometimes. Zombiephilia”

“You love me. It’s okay, love triangles are so last decade. And Laura’s awesome, I doubt she would mind sharing you with me.”

“I don’t know, she already shares me with Phil.”

That stops Tony in his tracks. He’d wondered, but still. “Wait, are you serious?”

“Yeah. Is that a problem?” Clint looks him straight in the eyes.

“No. Actually eww. Yes it is. Agent Agent should not be having sex, with anyone. Ever. Gross.”

The elbow in his bruised ribs is worth it for the look on Clint’s face.

Laura is officially an actual force of nature — Thor better watch out — and drags Tony in for dinner, and then Monopoly. Losing at Monopoly hurts a lot less when he’s losing to an eight-year-old girl who’s taken to calling him Uncle Tony.

Lila’s disappointed at the lack of Steve, but decides that instead, Uncle Tony has to read her bedtime stories. Two Frozen books, something about a hungry caterpillar and a Gruffalo later, Tony tiptoes out of the room and shuts the door behind him.

Wanda’s nowhere to be seen. Tony hates how relieved he is at that. He’s Iron Man, he shouldn’t be freaked out by a little girl. But every time he sees her, he sees his friends, dead or dying. He sees Steve.

Okay, enough melancholy, time to say bye and get the hell out of Hickville, but Laura and Clint are playing tonsil hockey in the kitchen. Great. Not that he wouldn’t love to interrupt Clint and embarrass them, but they need a moment together. Even emotionally stunted Tony Stark knows that.

He’s planning to just take a walk and maybe work out if cow tipping is physically possible, but when he stops, he realises he’s wandered to the gravestone.

“Oh. You.” Tony drops to the cold ground, knees complaining. “You’re a fucking idiot, kid. Why’d
you go and protect Clint for? We could do without Hawkeye; he’s a smartass and he’s part of the Murder Twins.” He laughs. “And now I’m the fucking idiot, talking to you like your soul or whatever is here. I’m an atheist; the only thing I believe in is the future. I had a friend who once told me, don’t waste my life. Well, you wasted yours. Protecting freaking Clint. Idiot.”

He was just a kid who wanted to fix his mistakes. Tony’s mistakes.

Tony wipes furiously at his eyes. He hates this stupid farm; he’s getting hay fever from just being here. There’s no point in it anymore, he’s speaking to the air, and no one’s listening.

Tony walks back to the house. The little witch sits on the porch bench, and Tony nods in her direction before reaching for the front door.

“I spent half my life terrified of you, and now you’re terrified of me,” Wanda says just as Tony’s turning the door handle. Tony lets go of the door. Then, astonishingly, she laughs. “It’s funny.”

“No it isn’t.”

“A little funny.” Wanda smiles and pats the seat beside her.

Well, here goes nothing. He accepts the seat. “Is this the part when you turn my brain into mush or something?”

“I considered it.”

“Why haven’t you then?”

“You said this was never your life,” Wanda looks at her hands in her lap. “And I saw the truth. You believed it. But also you didn’t. Explain.”

How to make her understand without bringing in all the embarrassing bits? Daddy issues? No, thank you. Only Pepper and Rhodey had truly known him before he’d stopped making weapons. And he doesn’t know how to talk to someone else about it.

“You owe me at least that.” Wanda reminds him. He owes her a lot more, he thinks as he finally starts to talk.

“I was seventeen when Obie — Obadiah Stane — began running Stark Industries for me. When I turned twenty-one, I came back. But I was fine with Obie running things. For fifteen years I did what I wanted to. I made learning bots and weapons in my lab, and then I got drunk and high every night. Obie told me what he wanted me to hear, and then when I realised he was double dealing with terrorists, I stopped him. Stark doesn’t make weapons anymore.”

“So what, you never knew about it, so it’s not your fault?” Wanda asks.

“Never said that, kid. I made those weapons. I was ignorant, but that doesn’t excuse that it was Stark bombs, bombs I built, that killed your parents, or that it was Ultron, an intelligence I awakened, that killed your brother. That’s on me.”

“No. Ultron could think for himself. He killed Pietro, not you.”

“Well the rest was. The rest was my life. I just didn’t know it.”

“Ask me why I let you have the sceptre.”

“Why did you let me have the sceptre?”
“Because I saw inside your head. You were going to make things right, that’s why you made Ultron. I thought Ultron would fix everything. I let you have it.”

“And we were both wrong.”

“Yes. My parents, I blame on your ignorance. My brother,” Wanda chokes on the word. “That is on my arrogance.”

He’s not sure he should offer comfort or not, so he lays his hand between them on the bench. Wanda clutches it tightly.

They don’t speak after that, instead they just sit there. When Clint finds them at midnight, Wanda is asleep on Tony’s shoulder. He offers Tony a bed, but Tony shakes his head, pulls out his phone and gets to work. There are at least fifty e-mails from Pepper that he should reply to.

Tony feels old.

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Tony’s alone when he wakes up.

The sun’s not out yet. But he stands up, groans at his aching bones. There’s a white board in the empty kitchen on which Tony leaves them a sketch of DUM-E — then makes himself a reminder to build a learning bot for the kids — and leaves.

Tony’s halfway back to New York City when his searching algorithm starts beeping.

“Well, Sergeant Barnes has been located, sir.” FRIDAY says.

Alright, let’s take a detour then? France it is. Oh, I could get shoes — never mind.”

“Sir, your armour is not battle ready,” FRIDAY reminds him.

“Honey, it’s a minor flight problem. We’re going after a guy with a metal arm. How bad could it be?”

The Soldier is so used to shooting and letting HYDRA ask the questions after that when he first sees a blob of red and gold at the corner of his eye, he almost empties a round into it. He’d have been justified to do that as well, considering that up until now, he’d been fighting HYDRA agents left to right.

“I’m a friendly!” the metallic voice shouts in his direction. “Stop shooting at me, and let me fucking help you!”

It’s Iron Man.

The Soldier decides to worry later about what to do about one of the Captain’s friends finding him. Instead, they work as a team. The Soldier remains silent, even as Iron Man chats and chats, and soon all the HYDRA agents are incapacitated. Their research is destroyed, and their test subjects are set free.

Afterwards, when the base is burning and Iron Man is calling in SHIELD to take over, the Soldier
sneaks away. He makes it out the base gates and nearly to the getaway car he’d stolen, when Iron Man lands beside him, the suit creaking a bit before it lands, which is the only reason the Soldier even hears him from behind.

“I didn’t need your help,” the Soldier tells him, weapon aimed at the suit. He’s not sure how much damage the gun will have, but he’s not just going to stand here and let the suit take him away.

“I don’t give a shit whether you need help. I was in the mood for a French omelette, and to kick some HYDRA ass. You just happened to be here, hold on.”

The Soldier turns around and watches the suit disassemble in front of his very eyes. It reforms itself into the suit again, standing behind the man — Tony Stark. He knows who that is; the Soldier watches the news.

“Okay. There, that’s better. Fuck it’s hot in there. Temperature control broke a while ago. I’ll fix it. Okay, can you please put your gun down now? I mean, you could shoot me if you wanted to. Actually, do shoot me. I’m wearing this prototype vest and I haven’t had a chance to test it out yet.”

The Soldier lowers his gun. Tony Stark is a maniac.

“What, really?” Stark pouts. “You’re no fun. I’m Tony, by the way.”

“I know. I could kill you.”

“You could, I guess. Man, you’re really no fun.” Stark runs a hand through his hair. "Steve says my hand-to-hand is shit. I did a round with him once a couple months ago, I don’t think I’ve recovered yet. Speaking of the good Captain. Wait a second.” He pulls out his phone, keeps the burning buildings behind him, and twists the phone around. “I need a selfie. Can I tell him we met?”

“Do whatever the hell you want,” the Soldier says, still watching Stark. “Stop following me.”

“Wait.” Stark looks up mid-text. “What do I call you?”

The Captain had called him James Buchanan Barnes, Bucky. HYDRA had called him the Winter Soldier, the Asset. He’s not going to lie and be James or Bucky, but he refuses to ever be an Asset again. “Call me whatever the hell you want, Stark.”

“Okay, that’s an open invitation, how about ‘hot metal arm guy’?” Stark asks. The Soldier ignores him and walks towards his car. He’s keeping track of Stark’s movements still, because you never know. Stark seems like a harmless lunatic, but he’s seen Iron Man fight, and knows he isn’t to be taken lightly. It doesn’t matter though. If Stark tries to force him to go anywhere, the Soldier’s going to slit his throat and move along.

“So, hot metal arm guy, I’m going to go get myself an omelette. Can I treat you to one?”

“No.” The Soldier gets into his car, tries rubbing the wires together to start the ignition.

“Don’t like omelettes? How about fondue?”

Something about that sets the Soldier laughing. Fondue. Stark is watching him, his deadly weapon just feet away, but fucking hell, it’s hilarious.

“O-kay. You’re a weirdo.”

“I’m a weirdo? You took your suit off in front of a guy who was holding a gun at you.”
“So no ricocheting bullets would hit you! This is what I get for trying to be a nice guy. Pop the front, let’s see what’s wrong with your car.” Stark tells him. “Or better yet, leave the hunk of junk where it is, get in my baby, and let’s get out of here before Coulson shows up. I’m still mad he came back from the dead and didn’t tell me. We had a connection and everything.” Stark looks up. “Yep, look, they’re here. Hot metal arm guy, I’m going now. You can come or go, it’s a free country. I think.”

“Did you mess with my car?”

“Uh. No. You picked up a shitty car and now you’re blaming it on me? You’re a dick, hot metal arm guy.”

“If you don’t take me directly to the city, I will shoot you in the head,” the Soldier holds up his gun to make his point.

“Fair. Now let’s ditch this ugly outdated thing before it gives me a rash.”

Stark stays true to his word and drives him straight back to Paris. The Soldier stays true to his word and doesn’t shoot him in the head.

He does nick a couple hundred Euros, a pair of fingerless gloves, and a med kit from the car when Stark stops to get gas. After all, he never made any promises not to do that.
“Where is he?” Steve wants so badly to suit up and go find Bucky, but the image and the text — *Just teamed up with your hot metal arm guy to fight HYDRA* — hadn’t been enough information.

“I don’t know. I found him beating up HYDRA goons, we did the whole team-up thing, he refused to shoot me — what a bore — and then I dropped him off in Paris.” Tony walks into the kitchen and drops his jacket on a chair.

“Why didn’t you answer my calls?” Steve asks, because that had been frustrating as hell. There’s a fist shaped hole in the kitchen wall to prove it. At least with the state of the Tower, no one can tell what’s from the fight with Ultron and what had been Steve.

“Because you would have wanted to see him.”

“I asked you to find him,” Steve says. The one time he actually trusts Tony… Steve should have known it was a bad idea.

“I did find him. He doesn’t want to come home. And I read his file before I went looking for him, Steve. Let him be. He’ll come home on his own terms, when he’s ready to.”

Everything Tony says makes sense. Even if all Steve wants to do is bring Bucky home and somehow make up for seventy lost years, he reminds himself that what Bucky needs is more important than what Steve wants. Even if sometimes it’s so difficult that he has to run and run for hours to escape the need to chase after Bucky.

“How was he?”

“ Weird. He’s kind of a dick.”

“Says you,” Steve says. Tony pouts. Steve really shouldn’t be so easily charmed by him, but he can’t help it.

“Be nicer to me. I let your boy steal eight hundred Euros and my favourite gloves off of me.” Tony seats himself at the breakfast bar. “I mean, what’s he even need two gloves for? He could have left me one of them.”

“Thank you.” Steve sits down on the seat across from Tony. “Did he…”

“Remember? I don’t know. I asked him his name and he told me to call him whatever I wanted. But then he laughed when I asked him out for fondue, which didn’t make much sense, until I remember on my way back. Aunt Peggy told me about fondue.” Tony snorts.

Steve colours up at that, because okay, that’s embarrassing. But hold on, Aunt Peggy?

“You know Peggy?” Steve asks, voice raspy.

Tony rolls his eyes. “No, of course not. My godmother is a total stranger to me.”

Steve takes a quick, short breath. Godmother. Peggy’s Tony’s godmother. “I didn’t know that.”

“Oh. Well, yeah. Listen, he’s fine. I didn’t put a live tracker on him, but it’s not like I need to. My algorithm’s still stalking him like a teenager with a crush. We have other things to worry about. Did you call Icarus and the Bride?”
“The Bride?”

“You haven’t seen Kill Bill. This is outrageous and must be fixed right now.”

“Did you mean Natasha?”

“Yep, I’m ordering pizza. We’re watching it.”

“It’s eight am, Tony.”

“Okay fine, I’ll order waffles.”

“Tony.”

“Fine, we’ll watch it tonight. But we’re still having waffles for dinner. So, did you call them?” Tony asks.

“Yeah, I did,” Steve says. “Sam was in Belgium, so he was pretty close to you. You could have picked him up, you know, if you’d answered any of my calls.”

“Yes, okay,” Tony pouts. “Didn’t I apologise? Let’s move on to more important things like is Natasha going to kill us now that Clint’s not around to stop her?”

“Clint wouldn’t ever have been able to stop her either way. She knew he was quitting already.”

“Are you sure that she’s not a telepath?”

“If she were, don’t you think she would have killed you ages ago?”

“Good point.”

Steve laughs, it’s a little uneven, but it could be worse. Tony can rile him up worse than anyone in the world, but no one’s as good as him at making Steve forget his worries. “They’ll be back tonight. We should clear out the kitchen by then, at least. Have you called in a clean-up team yet?”

“No, there’s sensitive material everywhere, I gotta go through it before I can let anyone else in.”

Tony looks away. “Make me pancakes and I’ll tell you about your hot metal arm guy.”

Steve smiles and indulges him, getting up to find a bowl in this mess.

“Okay so first of all, your boy’s hot, like holy crap, I totally get you — don’t give me that look, I’m a solid two on the Kinsey scale, look it up — but he’s Weirdy McWeirdo. And he has the audacity to call me weird. He owes me an apology. I’m not weird, I’m a genius, I have a Nobel prize! And an Apogee… well, I won an Apogee, I gave it to Elvis…”

In retrospect, Tony thinks, they’re very lucky that the alarms go off after Sam and Natasha return to New York City. It’s a direct line from the Vision, who tells them to turn on the TV. Tony pauses Kill Bill, and switches to CNN.

And watches as what looks like a swarm of evil robots attack the ruins of Sokovia.

“We’re on our way.”
They hustle into the Quinjet in various forms of undress. Tony’s in pyjamas. He’s piloting and he has no need to wear the suit yet. The inner armour is… somewhere. Besides, he tells Steve when Steve gives him that funny look of his, no one’s going to see inside the suit, so who cares. Steve shakes his head and zips up his suit jacket. His hair is adorably messy, the opposite of what one would expect from Captain America, but it’s so very Steve. Sam’s the only one who’s actually ready, which, Tony thinks, is a good sign. This might not be his official trial run, but it might as well be.

That’s when Clint calls them.

“Thought you were done, Mister,” Natasha says. She’s sitting on the floor, shoving one foot into her boot. Hmm. Tony needs to make better ones for her.

“Oh I’m done. But I got a Sokovian who really wants to protect her country. Wanna come pick her up?”

Tony bites back a frown even as Natasha looks at Steve. They need the backup. Steve turns to Tony and says, “Let’s pick her up.”

Tony nods, his expression tight, and turns his seat around to face the navigation.

It’s a disaster. When they arrive, Thor and Vision are trying to keep the bots at bay. There’s just too many of them. Steve’s shouting out orders before his motorcycle even hits the ground.

“Tony and Sam in the sky, Wanda, keep the civilians calm and out of the way, Natasha, find out what they’re here for. Thor, Vision, keep doing what you’re doing.”

“Any orders for me, Captain?” Rhodey’s voice filters in through the comms.

“Rhodey?” Tony asks.

“I was in the UK, figured I’d drop by and save all your asses.”

It’s not fluid. The founding Avengers had been — out of a little bit of practice and a lot of natural cohesion — worked seamlessly as a team. Outside the field, Tony and Steve may have not been able to spend a minute without fighting in those early days, but Steve had always been able to read Tony’s moves, know when to throw up the shield and which way to reflect the repulsor beams.

This time, it’s a little more difficult.

Wanda moves civilians to a safe area that Rhodey accidentally throws an exploding Doombot into. It’s only Wanda’s shielding ability that prevents a tragedy.

Steve and Natasha know how to work the ground, and Thor and Vision seem to know what they’re doing. The problem is when Natasha miscalculates the Vision’s ability to change density, and instead of using him as a stepping off tool, ends up phasing through and falling to the ground instead.

She rolls into the fall and jumps back up, shooting a quick thumbs up in Steve’s general direction before sneaking off. Steve breathes in relief and continues.

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They win, that’s not the issue. Within an hour, there are no more Doombots, and Natasha’s foiled
Doom’s plans to get into the citadel and declare himself ruler of Sokovia. The problem is that they’re a mess.

Steve’s pushing an injured civilian’s shoulder back in place when he hears the “Uh-oh,” in his comm unit and looks up. Pieces of the Iron Man suit are falling from the sky, and Tony’s following. The gingham pyjamas are the only pathetic protection Tony has from falling debris and gravity itself. “Tony!”

Not this. Not again, Steve can’t lose one more person. He runs towards Tony’s location, shield up above his head. “Iron Man needs air support NOW!”

“On my way, Cap,” Sam says, from under the shield, but Steve sees Sam flying into the falling assemblage of metal.

“Falcon, above you!”

“What—”

Sam’s voice gets cut off by a gasp as a gauntlet drops onto his back, severing one wings clean off the EXO-7 suit.

“No!” Steve shouts, running towards their location. “Iron Man and Falcon need a pick up, NOW!”

“Got him!” Sam’s flailing in the air with one intact wing, but he’s got Tony by the foot. It doesn’t matter though, because they’re both falling, any second now they’re going to—

“I got you,” Rhodey says, and a second later he flies into view, grabbing both Sam and Tony before slowly setting them down.

Sam pulls himself up, waving away Steve’s hand. “I’m good, man. Tony?”

They both turn to look. Rhodey’s out of his suit, and both men are sitting on the ground. Tony clutches Rhodey’s hand, which is splayed over Tony’s heart. They breathe in and out together. Slowly, deeply.

Steve doesn’t dare approach. Steve is no stranger to shell shock — PTSD — but Rhodey seems better knowledgeable about what to do. He turns back to Sam, who’s holding his right arm funny. Sam catches him looking and rolls his eyes.

“Cap, I’m fine, really. It’s a sprain.”

“The gauntlet hit you pretty damn hard, let me see your back.”

“Buy me a drink first, how easy do you think I am?” Sam grins, but at Steve’s serious look begins to carefully pull off his shirt. Flirting with Sam’s fun, but right now, Steve’s worried. Steve starts checking him over quietly even as Tony’s shaky breaths slow down into deep, stable ones. Might as well make himself useful, and as long as he’s breathing, it’s okay.

“Vision, please check in with Wanda and see if the locals need help with civilian rescue.” Steve says, running his hands over Sam’s shoulders and back.

“Ow, fucking —” Sam groans as Vision flies away. “Not cool.”

“I think you’re just bruised. You’re not losing feeling anywhere are you?” Steve asks.

“Nope, everything hurts, and I can feel it just fine,” Sam replies. “Go. Check up on your genius.”
“You stay put then,” Steve says, and walks slowly towards the duo. He looks to Rhodey for cues and when he nods, crouches down to where Tony’s fiddling with something in his ear.

“What happened?” Steve asks.

“Suit malfunctioned,” Tony explains. “I’m trying to call it back, come on babies, come to daddy.” Steve looks to Rhodey for a better explanation, and gets a shrug and a roll of eyes. “Is Sam okay?”

“For the most part, yeah. He’s got a couple of nasty bruises though. Tony, what’s going on?”

“I’m fine.”

“His suit malfunctioned and he had a panic attack,” Rhodey says.


“Considering you almost got yourself and Sam killed, I’d say it was definitely something big.” Steve fights to keep his voice even. This is the Tony that confuses and frustrates Steve. The Tony who thinks playing around with his own life is a joke.

“I know that! I wasn’t trying to hurt Sam—”

“You could have died!”

Before the discussion can escalate into an argument, Tony’s suit comes flying back in pieces. Steve’s expecting Tony to arm himself up again, hide himself away behind a blank expression made of gold, when instead the pieces fall to the floor in a grotesque jumble of metal limbs.

Maria Hill calls for a debriefing, and that’s how they end up in the citadel again, turning a former Hydra lab into a debriefing room. The table is round and Steve is reminded of King Arthur for a single moment, of equals and of leaders.

“Look, we don’t have time for a full debrief, I have Congress getting twitchy and the UN breathing down my neck. UN I can deal with. I’d rather fight the Abomination than deal with Congress,” Maria says, nose flaring. “Victor von Doom is saying he attacked because there were Avengers in his airspace, he said he felt threatened.”

Rhodey frowns. “But none of us—”

“Thor did. He didn’t know, but there’s footage.”

“My sincerest apologies, friends,” Thor says. “I did not mean to cause another war.”

“Not really your fault, Thor,” Maria replies. “That’s just Doom being Doom.”

“But the thing is, the Sokovians are still wary of Avengers, especially Vision.” Maria crosses her arms across her chest. “So here’s what you’re going to do. Everyone’s leaving Sokovia. Except you, Ms. Maximoff, as you’re a Sokovian national, and also super powerful, and can do whatever the hell you want.”

Steve bites back a laugh at that.

“The country is in ruins, the people are hurting, and the politicians have nothing better to do that hinder the ones helping the most,” Wanda says bitterly. “I will not stay here when I am being prevented from helping.”
Steve expected as much. With her brother buried in the US, the chances of her staying instead of returning to Sokovia were always high. Whether she would be interested in becoming an Avenger is a different question.

At the end of debrief, Steve stands up. The room quiets, and even now, years and years of service and combat later, Steve is still surprised at that. “Everyone, thank you for your assistance today. While we had our fair share of problems, we still won, and we did it together, and that’s what counts. That being said. As current elected chairman of the Avengers Charter, I want to exercise my right to call for an impromptu meeting before everyone goes their ways. So I’d appreciate if the others could excuse us for a few minutes.”

Steve waits until the room is cleared to continue. Only Thor, Natasha, Tony and Maria remain. Steve gestures to Maria, who flips her laptop around.

“Hey birdbrain,” Natasha says.

“Hey ex-work wife,” Clint says. “I can’t talk for long, actual wife might be in labour.”

“It’s just Braxton-Hicks!” Laura shouts from off-screen.

“You always say that, and our children keep being born in barns!” Clint shouts back, then he turns back to look at Steve. “Okay, can we do this quickly?”

“Yes, of course,” Steve says. “Tony put the tablet away.”

Tony groans. “But dad,”

“Now, Anthony.”

“She said it’s Braxton-Hicks!”

“You don’t even know what Braxton-Hicks are!” Clint tells Tony, but he’s grinning.

“Avengers,” Steve interrupts the argument and inevitable prank war, taking the tablet away from Tony simultaneously. “As some of you are aware, Hawkeye has decided to no longer be an active member. Dr. Banner’s current whereabouts are unknown, and that brings our numbers down to four active members and one administrative, Maria Hill. The world needs the Avengers. Threats are only increasing, and our forces are weakening. And we’re not the only ones who see that. The US government, as well as the UN, are urging us to increase our forces. They’ve agreed to give War Machine to us on an indefinite loan.”

“And by agreed you mean, they’re not giving us a choice. The Avengers Charter means we can act beyond the government or the UN.” Natasha argues. “That’s the whole point of the Avengers, that we can work without being hindered.”

“We can’t act beyond both of them together though,” Tony says. “Look, it’s Rhodey. They wanted us to take the Abomination once, remember? I say we throw a little bit of fuss, and then accept. The idiots will think Rhodey’s spying on us for them. And we have a member we know and trust.”

“Agreed.” Steve takes a deep breath. “That still leaves us short, so I want to nominate Sam Wilson, as Falcon. All who agree, raise your hands.”

One by one, the hands go up. “Then, by unanimous vote, Sam Wilson will be offered the position of active Avenger.”
“It’s a good thing I like the guy, or I’d think he was just a cheap replacement for me,” Clint jokes.

“Oh please, like the two of you weren’t making bird jokes when you met. I heard you,” Natasha says.

Thor laughs. “As did I, my friend. Steven, if I may?”

“Sure,” Steve says and sits down. Thor stands up, sticking his hammer on the table.

“During my travels to find out about the gems, I saw strange visions, of things to come, and things that have come. I must return to Asgard. I have cherished our glorious triumphs, but I as well, cannot serve Midgard — Earth — as Avenger. I must find answers. In my place, I wish to nominate the Vision. I have spent many days toiling with him, and I find him admirable and truly good. After all, one who is worthy of Mjolnir must be worthy of being an Avenger, do I not speak truly?

“You do,” Steve says. “I understand your need to return home, but we will miss you.” No one else had understood his confusion of the world as much as Thor had. While Steve had found everything jarringly modern, Thor had laughed at the amusing antiquities of technology he’d seen on Earth. Steve’s going to miss the days they spent walking around New York together. “All hands in favour of the Vision?”

Thor raises his hand, as do Natasha and Steve. Clint and Tony do not. “Look, it’s not a personal thing, but I don’t know him well. But I trust Nat. So I’m going to say yes.”

Everyone turns to Tony, who looks at the tablet in his hands. Steve wonders if it’s just cruel, to ask Tony to work with the Vision, who shares JARVIS’s voice but nothing else. Maybe it was asking too much. But finally, Tony raises his hand as well.

“Then again, by unanimous vote, the Vision will be offered the position of active Avenger,” Steve says. “Before I call this meeting to an end, is there anything else we haven’t covered?”

“Yes,” Maria says. “The UN’s asking for a disciplinary hearing against Stark, or at least a suspension for Ultron.”

Steve tenses. “No. The Avengers run outside of UN control, as strictly stated in the Charter. Tony will not be charged for anything, nothing he did was meant maliciously, suspending him is laughable —”

“Cap,” Tony interrupts quietly. “It’s okay. Here’s the thing. I’ve been thinking of switching to reserve Avenger status anyway. I’ll take a break, it’ll take a heat off of the Avengers, and you can continue being useful.”

“Tony, no.” Natasha turns to him, hand coming to rest on Tony’s neck. “You just had a panic attack, you’re not thinking clearly.”

“I know exactly what I’m thinking. And my decision is final. I know you’ll be one member short, but I think, with training, Maximoff could be something great. So I nominate her.”

Steve forces himself not to argue. He doesn’t know how to run the Avengers without Tony, but he has to respect his decision. “All hands in favour of Wanda Maximoff?”

Clint’s is the first to go up. Then everyone else’s as well, except for Thor’s.

“Are you sure about this?” Thor asks. “The girl has made some questionable decisions.”
“Haven’t we all?” Natasha asks. “How many of us are here on our third, fourth, fifth chances? Or is that just me?”

Thor raises his hand.

They finish the debriefing, deal with politicians by hiding behind Tony, and then head home. Steve wonders when the Avengers Tower became his home, but he gets that feeling he used to get when he saw Bucky at the end of a long gruelling day when he sees the tower striking the skyline of New York.

“Welcome home,” Steve murmurs to himself.

- Twelve hours, a breakfast, and a newborn baby later, Steve stands in the situation room at Avengers Tower with four new sworn-in Avengers.

“The Tower is obviously available for permanent residence and use, once it’s up and running again,” Tony says.

“Not that I’m not thankful, Tony, it’s a generous offer, but don’t you think having a team of superheroes living in the middle of a civilian population is an incredible security risk?” Sam asks. “Look what happened when Ultron attacked.”

“Military bases are never built in the middle of cities,” Rhodey says, and Steve knows he has a point. Still.

“We need a base, we have one,” Steve says. He’s only just found somewhere he doesn’t feel like a stranger in.

Tony sighs. “Sam’s right. My dad had an old storage facility in upstate New York. It’s fifteen minutes with a Quinjet. We can convert that into a training facility. The Maria Stark Foundation can cover the costs, and if they can’t, the UN clowns owe us, that’s in their damn charter.”

“It’s too much change, they might not accept it,” Steve says, grasping at straws. He knows they’re right, he knows it’s unfair and selfish, but he doesn’t want to move on.

“After Ultron, they’ll accept it. It’s time the Avengers evolved, Steve,” Tony says. “We need new blood, new ideas.”

“New Avengers,” Wanda says.

“Exactly.”

It’s a bright sunny Monday, and Tony’s watching the cleaners working through everything below the penthouse and the Avengers quarters of the Tower, when Bruce’s tracker goes off. Tony considers calling Steve, who’s upstairs, or Natasha, who’s off Bruce hunting on her own.

No. Better he do this on his own. He sends Steve a personal e-mail, knowing he only checks the damn thing once in the mornings, and takes the Quinjet.

-
Bruce is wiping down tables at a café in Perth when Tony finds him. “What can I get for you today?” He asks, staring at his notepad.

“A few minutes,” Tony tells him. “And you’re a terrible waiter.”

Bruce looks up from his notebook with a weary smile. “Hello, Tony. That took you a while.”

“Come on, it’s break time for the waiter. Don’t run out the backdoor. That’s just mean.”

“And after we talk? Will I have to go back?” Bruce asks.

“Since when do you ever do something you don’t want to do?” Tony shoots right back. “But it would be cool if you came back.”

Bruce sighs. “Let me tell my boss I need a break.”

“Can I have a—“

“Triple espresso?”

“I love you.”

“I know.”

Tony laughs at Bruce’s back as he walks away. What a fucking dork. Oh God, Tony’s missed him so much.

Bruce drinks his coffee quietly, as Tony tells him all about the new plans. He needs to know anyway, he’s a founding Avenger after all.

“Tony.” Bruce leans forward to place a hand over Tony’s. "You treated me like a human being, and I'm forever grateful, but I don't know how to say no to you, and I've used my intellect for enough harm. I won’t come back.”

“You're a scientist, you'll come back. Maybe not now, but eventually, you will. It's in your blood.”

"Maybe. But I won't work with you again."

“Well, it's not like I can do much,” Tony pulls his hand away, feeling more hurt that he’s ever going to let on. “I've lost JARVIS, and gained Steve. I can't do any work with Captain Poppins watching every move.”

“I think it's good for you,” Bruce says. “You need someone who can say no to you, and Steve’s the only one who’s ever succeeded in that.”

“He’s mean.” Tony knows he’s pouting. But it’s true. Steve makes him eat breakfast and go to sleep on time and it’s not cool. Especially now that it’s just the two of them together in the penthouse.

“Cause he won’t let you run around on caffeine highs? Oh, the kind of headaches I could have saved myself if I’d said no earlier.”

Tony laughs at that.

“I have to get back to work. And I’m sure you do too,” Bruce stands up.

“Bruce?”
“Yeah?”

“Natasha was looking for you.”

Bruce’s face shuts down. “I know. Don’t tell her.”

“Oh one condition,” Tony says, commanding his voice to remain stable. “That you check in with me every once in a while, let me know you’re still alive.”

“Well, killing me isn’t exactly—“

“You know what I mean.”

Bruce smiles at that. “I do, Tony. I will. Be good to yourself.”

“I always am.”

“Liar.” Bruce leans forward to place a hand on Tony’s shoulder. “Good bye, Tony.”


Tony tells Steve, doesn’t tell Natasha, and then waits until Steve’s gone to have dinner with Sam to get drunk. It’s fun. There’s no JARVIS to tattle to Pepper. No Pepper to tattle to, and no Bruce to look at him disappointingly. Tony’s always been alone. So what if his life had been slowly filling up with people? He should’ve known it wouldn’t last.

The Soldier is cold, but if he starts a fire, he’ll get noticed by SHIELD. A HYDRA base burns ten kilometres away, and SHIELD will follow any minute now. He’d have gone further, but he’s so tired. A small break can’t hurt. He leans up against a nearby tree, and criss-crosses his fingers. Even after having worn them for weeks, the finger-less gloves still smell like motor oil. They don’t do much for his flesh hand against the cold, but he wears them anyway. He wonders what Stark is up to, if he’s with the Captain. Then he wonders what the Captain smells like.

*Charcoal and asthma cigarettes,* his brain provides. *Charcoal and asthma cigarettes.*
“I swear to Thor I will end you, Steve.” Sam’s sprawled across the grass, panting between words. Steve comes to a stop beside him and sits down.

“Technically, I’m on your right this time.”

“I give up. You win. Just leave me to die.”

“No way. You owe me breakfast now.” Steve grins and lays down next to Sam.

“That was dumb of me. Why did I even accept that bet, why?” Sam throws a hand over his eyes.

“Sleep deprivation, and a general lack of self-preservation. I mean, you did join the Avengers,” Steve tells him. “Now get up, you owe me pancakes.”

“I said breakfast, not pancakes.”

“Last one to the gates owes the other dinner!” Steve grins before jumping back up and sprinting down the pathway.

“On Thor, Steve! On Thor!”

-There are days when Steve wishes it was 1942 again. But days with Sam are never one of them.

-The Stark Mansion is beautiful, but Steve prefers the tower still. Sometimes the mansion feels like a mausoleum. Steve’s caught even Natasha looking lost and in awe within its walls. But the others can’t live in the Tower because it’s a mess. Tony’s the only one living there with Steve. So the other Avengers are taking up residence in the Stark Mansion.

Natasha and Wanda are having their breakfast on the balcony together, while playing chess. The Vision is floating outside, observing the city as he tends to do in the mornings.

“Okay, twenty minutes for showers, then you can have your damn pancakes,” Sam tells him.

“Thanks,” Steve says, taking the right hallway.

This is the house Tony grew up in. It’s so big and so old, the walls covered with paintings and photographs of Starks long dead. He takes a right and then opens the door, but instead of the room he’d stayed in last night, Steve finds himself in a child’s room.

Not that it could be easily described as a child’s room, the only giveaway is the child-sized table, with its Captain America comics.

For a child’s room, this one has far too few toys, and far too many textbooks. Two bookshelves span the walls across from the bed, and they’re filled with books on engineering, physics, and mathematics. On one shelf, Steve finds a photograph that blurs his eyesight.

Steve blinks fast, and picks up the photo frame. A very young Tony Stark stands in the middle, dressed in academic dress, a very proud Peggy Carter to one side, and an equally proud man to the
other. He flips the frame over, and there it is written:

**MIT, June 1991, Tony Stark, Peggy Carter and Edwin Jarvis.**

In another life, Steve may have stood beside Peggy that day. He swallows the grief and puts the photo back down. He’s intruded enough, Steve thinks, and walks back out of the room.

The New Avengers Training Facility is complete exactly two months after the idea of it is born. Tony’s proud of how efficient his team of builders are getting. Then again, he’s been using the same guys since Obie messed with the building in Miami, so practice does make perfect. Of course, after about a minute of feeling accomplished, he gets an e-mail from Pepper who wants to know why the penthouse hasn’t been reconstructed yet. *I’m working on it,* Tony writes back.

He’s in the tower lab. Well, his personal lab. One look at the corpses of his Iron Legion, and he walks back out again, calling his suit at the same time.

The prodigal son scatters all over the floor instead, and Tony picks up the helmet before taking it into the hangar. “Okay, that’s it. I’m taking your older brother for a spin. He’s been sleeping long enough.”

Mark Four always had been his favourite. He’d destroyed it, but rebuilt it exactly the same, just for kicks really. Tony’s not a sentimentalist, but he loves how sleek his baby looked back then. It had its weaknesses, but it was his baby. Might as well take it out for a change.

Tony looks up the SHIELD database for any Hydra activity, and flies off to Prague. When he gets there, the base is already on fire, and he sees one man — one hot metal armed man — against a big dark blob of... something.

Why are Hydra experiments so fucking gross?

“Hey hot metal arm guy, it’s me again,” Tony says. “Don’t shoot. What the hell is this anime monstrosity?”

“If I knew that, I’d have stopped it by now,” Barnes snarls.

“Looks all black and gasoline like,” Tony notes. “Hmm, wonder if it’s flammable. Hot metal arm guy, get cover.”

“Yeah.”

Tony waits until Barnes is behind a wall to throw his smallest set of flares at the — for lack of a better word — thing.

Oh *shit.*

Steve’s never going to forgive Tony for letting Barnes die in a gasoline-fuelled inferno of epic proportions. Tony flies out of the way of the fire, and then flies back in. His eyes dart back and forth but the thermal sensors are overwhelmed and give him nothing. Then, his vision picks up a sliver of metal at the corner of his eye, and he flies Barnes out, ordering FRIDAY to hit top speed.

They crash land in an apple orchard.
“Hey, can you get off of me, now?” Tony asks Barnes, who’s laying sprawled on top of him.

“Hot metal arm guy? Barnes?” Nothing. He pushes him off to the side and runs a medical scan. “Oh, you passed out. And you’ve got a couple of cracked ribs. That’s nice. Now I have to carry you to the damn hotel. I’m going to look like I roofied you. Gross.”

Somehow, no one notices Iron Man pushing a full-grown man into his tenth floor hotel bedroom window. He needs the suit to move Barnes, whose arm weighs way too much for it to be good for his shoulder, and then puts his suit away after. Tony takes his tablet out, and works.

It takes Barnes a few hours to wake up, and when he does, it’s violently, with a sharp twist before jumping up, and guns blazing. Tony, sitting on the couch with his tablet in his lap, puts his hands up. Those bullets holes are going to be a pain to explain to the hotel staff. “Dude, it’s okay. It’s me. I mean, you fainted, but that can happen. Now can you just be quiet or go back to sleep or something? My CEO has another fifty pages of patent bullshit she needs me to go through and I’m trying to make her life easier these days.”

“I’m leaving.”

“Sure. Wrap your ribs first, I think you cracked a couple. And by think I mean know, because my suit is awesome like that.”

“I don’t want to come home — meet Steve.”

“God, how thick are you? You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.”

Barnes glares, but Tony’s used to Pepper-strength glares, this is as easy as strawberry cheesecake. “Fine. Help me.”

Tony places his tablet on the table and goes for the med kit. Wrapping Barnes is easy, but looking at the damage around his arm, and feeling how tense the muscles of his shoulder and back are, it makes Tony want to destroy some more Hydra bases.

Before Barnes leaves, Tony hands him a Starkphone. “So I need to idiot-proof this, can you test it out for me?”

Barnes cracks half a smile. “Can you track me with this?”

“Yes, but I’m not going to tell anyone unless you want me to. I did add Steve, and my number. Text him, and he’ll have your number.”


“Not even one from my phone?”

“Maybe.”

“That sounds like a yes. Come on, join the millennials, and get in the frame, hot metal arm guy.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Then what am I supposed to call you?”

A pause again, then. “Barnes.”

Success!
Okay then, Barnes, get over here so I can selfie. Fuck off, that is a verb. If sciencing is a verb, then so is selfieing.”

“Sciencing isn’t a word.”

Tony sniffs. “What would you know? You’re an amnesiac.”

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And that’s how Tony manages to send Steve a selfie of himself and a very grumpy assassin on the hotel couch. The caption reads: I’m HYDRA-hunting with your boy again.

His phone rings. “Are you two okay?”

“We’re fine,” Tony answers, as he watches Barnes get skittish. He jumps off of the couch and scrambles for the gun he’s left on the bed. When he turns back to face Tony, he points to the phone, asking if Barnes wants to talk to Steve.

Barnes shakes his head violently, and heads for the window. Tony lets him.

Then he texts Barnes co-ordinates for the New Avengers Training Facility.

Tony’s generous like that.

Barnes makes his way to New York. Once he let Stark call him Barnes, it’s getting hard to ignore the part of him that told him that somewhere inside of him, a little part of Bucky Barnes was there.

And Bucky Barnes was from Brooklyn, New York. Barnes goes straight to 166 Montague Street. There is a huge office building that says United Management Co., where once a shabby old apartment complex used to be. He sneaks into an apartment nearby from an open window. There’s a month’s worth of dust covering everything, so Barnes hides his belongings under the kitchen sink. He sticks a knife under the couch cushion, a loaded gun on the floor beside the couch, and falls asleep.

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It takes Barnes four days before he decides he’s going to sneak into the training facility. He’s not sure about talking to the Captain, despite the questions he has. But he wants to see him. There’s something in him that wants to see the Captain.

Barnes waits until it’s fairly late, and then sneaks in through the vents. It takes a while, especially with no blueprint, to find a way into the private quarters, but in the end, it’s the Captain’s voice that helps him.

“Lavender’s blue, dilly dilly, lavender’s green, if you love me, dilly dilly, I will love you,” the Captain’s voice drifts into the vents, and Barnes follows him carelessly as memories come barrelling in. He bangs the metal arm against a vent and freezes. He’s above the opening now, right above the Captain, who freezes at the clang.

“Let the birds sing, dilly dilly, and the lambs play, we shall be safe, dilly dilly, out of harm’s way.”

Barnes stills and listens. Eyes open but focused on an eighty year old memory.
“Lavender’s blue, dilly dilly, lavender’s green, when I am Queen, dilly dilly, you’ll be my king,” Sarah Rogers sings to her son. Bucky can’t see them, he’s up on the roof hiding. Steve’s gone and caught a cold again, third one this winter, and Sarah’s had enough of Bucky sneaking in to take care of her boy. Bucky’s not a little boy, he’s eight, and he knows Stevie always feels better when they share a bed, when Bucky’s there to warm him up.

It’s a long time before Barnes can make himself move, let alone make it back to the apartment.

The only thing that stops Steve from chasing after Bucky is the reminder that when Tony had let him go, Bucky had come closer. It’s difficult, especially after security had alerted him to Bucky entering the training facility. On his own terms, Steve repeats to himself. Let him come home on his own terms.

Wherever that is.

Here, not only is he away from Bucky, he’s away from the city and oh, does that feel something awful. At the facility, it’s like being with the Commandoes; he feels permanently at war. On the weekends, he goes back to the Tower, goes back home.

He’d told Tony that he was at home here, but that had been false bravado — a case of fake it ‘til you make it. The Tower was his home. He tries to visit once a week, but while the rest of the Tower is up and running, the penthouse and lab has been left in the ruins of Ultron’s handiwork. This can’t go on, Steve realises.

So he calls Pepper Potts.

He was given the number for emergencies a whole year ago, before the Avengers had reformed, and he’s never had to use it.

Pepper picks up on the third ring. “Potts.”

“Hi Miss Potts, this is Steve Rogers speaking.”

“Oh! Yes, hi! Captain Rogers, hello.”

“Steve’s fine,” he says.

“In which case, Steve, call me Pepper. What’s Tony done now?”

Steve smiles at that. “The question isn’t what he’s done, but what he hasn’t.”

Pepper sighs. “The Tower, I know. Steve, I’ve been sending him so many e-mails and texts to get his act together, but he won’t listen to me.”

“I know you’re very busy in Miami, but maybe if you called—”

“Steve, I’ve tried. Tony hasn’t been picking up my calls since we broke up.”

Steve is floored. “You… what? You broke up?”

Pepper sighs again. “Of course, he didn’t tell you. We decided to split… six months ago.”
Exactly when the Avengers had reunited. And all this time, all these lies about Pepper being away and busy when the two of them had actually broken up. Oh, Tony.

“I’m sorry,” Steve says. Whatever her problems with Tony, Pepper likely didn’t need to hear more about her ex. “I wasn’t aware. I wouldn’t have bothered you if I’d known.”

“No Steve, it’s okay. You can always call me. Tony’s family. But for the record, he never really listened to me. I think you’ve always had more luck with that.”

Steve thanks her and hangs up, then puts his phone away and heads towards training ground. He’s planned for a round of martial arts with Rhodey. And maybe Rhodey can answer some questions.

“Yeah I knew, I thought you did too. Man, this is so typical. Tony’s the worst with his secrets. Did I tell you about the time he was dying and didn’t tell me?”

“The palladium poisoning?”

“Yes. But I thought he’d have told you guys. You were all living together.”

“I didn’t know until I called Pepper.” Steve jabs and Rhodey evades, then attacks from the side. It’s quite impressive. Steve’s not getting a proper workout out of it, but it’s fun to work on strategy.

“What did she say?”

“That I should talk to him. She thinks he listens to me more than her.”

“True that.”

“In which case, my sympathies for the poor woman, because he rarely listens to me.” Steve twists mid-air and drops down on Rhodey, straddling the man.

“Yeah, but you don’t take no for an answer. You fight him for it. It’s refreshing. Even when you fail.” Rhodey says. Steve pulls away, and then offers Rhodey a hand up, which he takes. “Okay, that’s it. I’ve let you beat me up enough for today, Steve. They’re serving radioactively orange mac and cheese for lunch today, how about it?”

“Tempting as that sounds, I have to do a thing, but see if you can find Vision. He spends too much time on his own.”

Steve finds Tony in his office, table littered with actual paperwork for a change. It’s not going very well, because he’s continually snapping the red hair band against his wrist. “This is an entirely new level of procrastination for you, Tony.”

“What? No, Capsicle, this is me actually working.”

“This is you doing Pepper’s job, so you can’t do what Pepper actually wants you to do. Are you planning to pick up her phone calls any time soon?”

“So you talked to her?” Tony asks, snapping the rubber band on his wrist again.

“Yeah.”
Tony leans back in his chair. “Oh.”

Steve sits down on the guest chair. “Put the paper work away and let me buy you a burger.”

“I don’t blame you for Avenging or what it cost me. I made those choices, Steve, and I don’t need you to pity me.”

“I know that. But my friend went through a tough breakup and didn’t tell me so I couldn’t be there for him. Now I want to buy him a burger. Isn’t this what friends do?”

“In that case, I want a chilidog.” Tony stands up, and pushes away from the desk with his chair.

“Okay, but then you start cleaning up the penthouse.” Tony freezes. “Tony.”

“Fine. But it better be the best damn chilidog I’ve ever tasted.”

“That’s cheating. I can’t do that without taking you to D.C.”

“Ben’s?”

“Ben’s.”

-

And that’s how Steve finds himself in a Quinjet to Washington D.C., to buy Tony Stark the best chilidog in the world.

Dusk is giving way to the inky black of night when Tony finds himself back in his lab in New York. He had promised to clean up, which starts with wiping all the data so the tech could be properly disposed of. He turns on his systems for the first time in months, retches and promptly throws up all over himself and the holotable in front of him.

What is left of Jarvis blinks in and out in shades of orange. Tony shuts everything down with one soiled hand.

Whiskey. What he needs is whiskey.

He finds a bottle, doesn’t bother with tumblers — what the fuck is the point of a tumbler when you can just drink the whole bottle, anyway?

It doesn’t take him all that long to reach numbness at the bottom of the bottle, so that when he throws up again, his throat doesn’t even burn anymore. He closes his eyes and just sits there in the centre of the lab, when he hears a clicking sound, and then someone’s wiping at his face with a dusty rag.

Tony opens his eyes and finds DUM-E, the ever dutiful son, trying to clean up the mess. He really is a Stark child, Tony realises. All Stark men end up cleaning up their father’s messes. Tony gags, but there’s nothing left in his belly.

Tony has left his children alone in this empty lab for months, and yet here DUM-E is, trying and failing to clean up after Tony like Tony’s seventeen and come home drunk after a frat party.

“Hey you.” Tony leans forward and places his hand over DUM-E’s base.
Tony sobbs, self-hate overwhelming him for one pathetic moment. Children don’t need to see their parents hurting. Then again, he thinks, his father never showed him a single one of his cards, and look where that got them.

DUM-E wipes at him with the rag again, his single robotic arm coming to rest on Tony’s shoulder. Then there’s a movement behind him, and Tony finds himself being hugged by three different arms — Butterfingers and YOU have joined in. “Fuck. I’m the shittiest dad to have ever created kids. You should all get emancipated from me. Go live with Steve or something.”

They’d lost their JARVIS and hadn’t understood, and he’d left FRIDAY to deal with the mess. Little FRIDAY who doesn’t deserve Tony’s cold shoulder for the simple fact that she’s not JARVIS, who’s too undeveloped to truly understand the oldest of Tony’s children, let alone care for them the way JARVIS had, when Tony had abandoned them last time in Afghanistan. “I’m so sorry.”

“Tony.”

Tony looks up, and bites his lip, hard enough that it bleeds, because otherwise he’ll sob.

It’s the Vision.

“Why are you here?”

“DUM-E was scared. He’s been trying to find JARVIS, and instead found my consciousness on the network. I’ve been keeping the bots company online. So when they found you, they called me.”

“And you just what, flew over here?” Tony laughs, but it turns into a sob. Pathetic, pathetic, pathetic.

“He’ll be alright. I’ll take it from here.” It takes Tony a moment to realise Vision is talking to the bots. Then he turns back to face Tony. “I believe a shower and bed would do you some good.”

If he closes his eyes, it’ll be like JARVIS is back. “Go away.”

“You know I can’t just leave you in your current state. Besides, I told the Avengers I was coming here. I’m faster than the Quinjet, but Steve’s rather likely to be on his way. I’ll leave when he gets here.”

“For fuck’s sake please just go away,” Tony begs. Because it’s too much like JARVIS taking care of him, and that’s the biggest lie, because it’s not JARVIS, this isn’t JARVIS who he loved, this is the Vision, something that sounds like him, but really isn’t, no matter how badly Tony wishes he were.

“I cannot.” Vision holds him up and they walk together out of the lab.

“You can do whatever the hell you want.”

“Indeed. I am not JARVIS. But a large piece of him remains in me. There were certain protocols that he had written into himself, that I had the choice of accepting or denying.”

“Like?”

“The highest of all: protect Tony Stark.”

Tony wants to weep. Instead, he spits out, “You don’t have to do that. I don’t need your pity.”

“I want to, otherwise I wouldn’t have accepted the protocols,” Vision says as he helps Tony out of his clothes and into the shower. “JARVIS was your son. I am made from him. In a way, he’s my father.”
“Don’t ever, ever, ever call me grandpa,” Tony tells him under the shower.

Vision laughs at that. “We’re family, Tony. At least, I would like to believe we are, if you’re okay with it.”

“It makes DUM-E, YOU and Butterfingers your uncles. Do you think that’s a good idea?”

“I find that idea rather appealing, to be honest. Family’s important, isn’t it?” Vision hands him a towel, and catches Tony when he falls again.

Steve arrives at the Tower to find Vision watching over Tony in his sleep. All the worry and fear that has built up over the last half hour since the Vision had left finally dissipates.

“He drank too much. Even by his standards and by JARVIS’s memory protocols of what’s typical for him.”

“Why? What made him…”

“According to DUM-E, he was attempting to clean up the lab, and he found the remains of JARVIS. It likely triggered him and led him to intoxicate himself. He’d vomited over everything when I had arrived. I assisted him into the shower and he fell asleep afterwards.” The Vision stands up from the couch. “I apologise for the lack of explanation, but I was alarmed by DUM-E’s reaction.”

“It’s alright,” Steve says. He doesn’t want to think about what could have happened if Vision hadn’t showed up. He’s so tired of losing friends. “Thank you. You did good, Vizh. If you want to head back home that’s fine. I’ll see what I can do here, and come back tomorrow.”

After the Vision leaves, Steve throws his jacket onto the couch before approaching Tony in bed. He grabs a blanket and wraps it over Tony’s shoulders. He’s about to straighten up and settle on the couch, when Tony grabs his wrist. “I miss the way things were. I miss Pepper. I miss JARVIS. I miss y—”

“I know,” Steve replies, chest tight. “I miss JARVIS as well.”

“Are you leaving me too?” Tony sounds so broken, so raw and open. This is a Tony that Steve has never seen. This is likely the Tony that Pepper had fallen in love with. The Tony that Pepper couldn’t bear to be with.

“I won’t. I’m not going anywhere.” He left Peggy behind. He left Bucky, left the Howling Commandoes behind. He even left Howard, but he’s not leaving Tony. Not ever.

Steve kicks off his boots, and pants, then lays down on the other side of the gigantic bed. When he turns to look at Tony, he finds him already fast asleep, face scrunched up in a frown.

Tony wakes up feeling like shit. He’s too warm, and sweaty, and it feels like something fuzzy went and died in his mouth. There’s someone in bed with him, but they’re breathing far too loudly and it’s killing his head. And water. Oh, what Tony would give up to have a glass of water right about now.

Tony hates hangovers.
He hasn’t had one this severe since the Avengers came together to root out HYDRA cells. There must have been a party, or charity event or something. He’s always getting dragged to these things. Tony thinks giving them money should be enough, but _no_, you have to actually show up and play nice and charming and all that shit that Tony can’t possibly be expected to do without half a bottle of scotch. Except the thing is, Tony doesn’t remember any party. He doesn’t even remember bringing someone home.

To be honest, he’s not sure he’s had sexy times. Hangovers normally don’t feel this bad after sex.

Tony turns in bed, trying to pull away from the random stranger pressing against his sweaty back.

“Tony?” It’s Steve’s groggy voice that brings back memories of the night before. _Oh_. Right. There _was_ no party. He’d gone and embarrassed himself in the worst way possible. In front of Vision, and then Steve. “You awake?”

Tony winces. “Stop yelling, are you deaf?”

“No, that’s Clint,” Steve whispers. It’s still too loud. “That’s one hangover you got there.”

“Urgh.” Tony waves a shaky hand at Steve. “_Shush._”

The bed shifts as Steve gets out of bed. Tony stands up, his back cracking in the process. Then he drops right back down as his head spins.

“Tony?” Steve calls out and oh, Tony’s really going to punch him soon. Maybe that’ll remove the need to have a Talk about last night.

“Stop shouting,” Tony says, and then finds Steve crouching in front of him. “What _are_ you doing?”

“_YOU DIZZY?_” Steve signs in front of him. Oh yeah. Learning sign language had been a great idea, even if Tony had originally only done it to swear at Clint in ASL.

“_LITTLE._” he signs back. “_COFFEE?_”

Steve raises an eyebrow. “_WATER._”

“But—“

It doesn’t matter what Tony wants to say or sign, Steve’s already leaving the room. He comes back with a bottle of water and a couple of aspirins that Tony swallows, and then leaves with promises of brunch. Tony sighs and lies back down in bed, pulling the sheets over his head. His phone rings, and Tony flails out of bed, searching for the item to turn off the noise.

Rhodey’s name lights up the screen. Okay, this one he can’t ignore. Tony accepts the call and crawls back under the covers.

“What.”

“Tones, I’m halfway across the Atlantic or I swear I’d be shaking you right now,” Rhodey says.

“Can you speak quietly?”

“No,” Rhodey says, even louder than before. “I can’t. This is what you get for getting this drunk. I thought you were done with this shit Tony, I cannot believe you, you took out the arc reactor, fine, what’s running your heart, Tony you know what the doctor—“
“JARVIS used to call you when my blood alcohol level reached a certain level.”

Silence.

“Yeah. He used to,” Rhodey says.

And then they don’t say anything. Tony drifts a little, alternating between awake and asleep, between being empty and filled to the brim with grief.

“I can come home.”

“No, Rhodey,” Tony mumbles. “Complete the mission. Then come for pizza.”

“Okay. You get some rest. Sleep off that hangover. I can stay on the line if you want.”

“Just a little while,” Tony agrees. “‘til I fall asleep…”

-

When Tony wakes up again, it’s to a heavy hand on his shoulder.

Steve brings him brunch in bed, which is sweet but also annoying because Tony can take care of himself. Also, Steve totally cheated because he knows by the taste of the toast that DUM-E made it. It smells like that lab.

It’s early afternoon when Steve decides he needs to hurry back. Tony’s still in bed, but there’s a tablet keeping him company. He busies himself with it so Steve can’t ‘talk’ to him before he leaves.

Tony really should have known better, because Steve is not a ‘Normal Person’. So instead of just quickly saying bye once he notices Tony’s busy with work, he walks in and sits down. Tony looks up at him from his place on the bed, his back resting against the bedframe.

“I thought you were heading back.”

“I will be,” Steve says. “In a moment. We need to talk.”

“About what?”

“JARVIS—”

“No.” Tony says. “We are not having that conversation. Stop talking.”

Steve reaches out to hold Tony’s hand, and that’s when he realises he’s shaking. “Okay. It doesn’t have to be me. But you can’t just stay here and not talk to anyone when you’re grieving. We’re all here for you. And we’re not going anywhere. Rhodey, Natasha, the rest of us? Even Pepper, we care about you.”

“Like Bruce, right?” Tony blurts out, and then prays to Thor for the ground to swallow him up. Too late he realises he should be praying to Jord, which explains why he’s still in bed, being childish and pathetic in front of his childhood hero and current friend.

“I’m not going to leave.” Steve says. “So you better get used to me coming around, Tony.”

“You just want to make sure I don’t actually make a lightsabre or something.”

“Not make them? Tony Stark, I need you, for the sake of the planet, to make me a lightsabre,” Steve
says. Tony laughs, partly amused and partly relieved the chick-flick moment is over. “I mean it. Make me a lightsabre.”

“Get out of my hair then,” Tony says, turning back to his tablet.

“I will, once you promise me this.”

“What?”

“You’ll call someone next time.”

“Oh come on. What is it with you and swindling promises from me? Steve, I’m fine. I don’t need you all to baby me.”

“We’re not babying, we’re being friends,” Steve says. “This is just like that stint with the Mandarin. You always have to do everything on your own even though we’re right here and ready to help. We’re your friends Tony, that’s our job.”

“Cap. I can get by on my own.”

“I said that to Bucky once.” Steve smiles, a lost and broken one. “You know what he said?”

“What?”

“That I didn’t have to. Promise me, if you need someone to listen, we’re all here for you. Except, you know. Clint.” Steve grins.

Tony rolls his eyes at that, accepting the sudden change in conversation. “I swear, that moron’s superpower is losing hearing aids.”

“Tony.”

“Yeah, okay. If I need to, I’ll talk to someone. Can you go be useful now? Don’t you have superheroes to babysit?”

“I’ll see you on Friday, Tony.”

The next time Barnes sees Stark, it’s in Zurich. While Stark complains about destroying the sanctity of the Swiss chocolates to the HYDRA agents, Barnes just takes to killing them.

Stark has another suit on him this time, it looks older and chunkier, but Barnes likes it. Afterwards, Barnes doesn’t even bother trying to ditch the man. At this point, it’s clear that Stark is harmless — to Barnes at least. He wants to take a selfie for the Captain, and Barnes decides to let him this time. Right before Stark uses his phone, Barnes pulls out his own phone and hands it to Stark. Yet he can’t face Cap, so when Stark leans in, not close enough to touch, but enough to feel his heat, Barnes turns his face away, leaning towards Stark’s neck just as the camera flashes.

“I booked a suite at the Dolder, come on. You can get a good nights’ sleep, free overnight laundry, and get going to wherever you’re headed tomorrow,” Stark says, while following him on foot from the base.

“You’re creepy, you know that?”
“No. I’m rich, so the term is eccentric. Say yes, I have two bedrooms, two bathrooms, and I promise not to peek. Though if you wanted me to have a look at your arm, I wouldn’t say no. It’s acting funny, isn’t it?”

“No.” It has been locking lately, especially after a run-in with a HYDRA operative in Sofia. Before, they’d fixed it for him after every mission, but Barnes doesn’t know how to do it alone. It doesn’t bother him so much, he’s used to the pain.

“You know tech is my thing, right?”

“Hurts a bit.”

“You don’t have to come. But I don’t think you want to show your arm in public. If you want I can look at your arm when we’re inside, and then you can go.”

“Okay.”

The hotel room is grand, Stark’s suite has its own separate living room. They settle there with Stark’s toolkit and then stare at each other.

And stare.

“Okay, no offense. But I can’t help you if you can’t take your shirt off. Can you do it yourself?”

Barnes pulls off the shirt and the hoodie in one jagged movement. Again silence. Barnes looks at him. “What?”

Stark is looking at the shoulder with a look Barnes doesn’t understand.

“Uh — nothing. Can I?” He’s asking permission, Barnes realises. They never asked permission before. Then he remembers what happened to the last person who had worked on the arm.

“Wait. Tie me down first.”

“What? No.” The very idea of it seems to repulse Stark.

“I killed the last person who touched my arm.”

“I’m not tying you down.” Stark moves to touch his arm.

“No.”

“Okay.” Stark pulls away. “It’s your arm. Your choice. But you don’t have to be afraid of what you could do to me. You’re not going to hurt me. I have under armour on, and I trust you.”


Barnes nods, and Stark gets to work. He doesn’t work like one familiar with the system, but as one working intuitively. He’s soothing to watch. Stark always looks up, asking if this hurts or if that’s uncomfortable.

And he’s close. He smells like the glove Barnes has been wearing on his right hand. Stark is cold, and his fingers are gentle as they run over the arm.

“Come to daddy,” Stark says with a grin. “Pass me the pincers please. The tiny one.”
Barnes does. A moment later, the pain stops. Stark pulls away, sitting on the coffee table in front of Barnes. “How does it feel?”

Barnes moves the arm, rotating and twisting the joints. “Better.”

“But not this,” Stark says, reaching out with a hand. He lays it between Barnes’ metal shoulder and his neck. Flesh meets flesh, Stark’s cold fingers against Barnes’ warm, swollen skin is a soothing balm. “I’m getting you a cold pack. You can take it with you.”

Barnes looks at Stark’s retreating frame, at the exits in the room and the less painful arm. When he comes back with a cold pack wrapped in a towel, Barnes asks. “Can I still stay?”

“One condition.”

“Yeah?” Barnes asks, instantly suspicious again.

“You take a shower, and let the overnight service at your clothes. I like you, Barnes, but you reek.”

Barnes takes a shower, puts on the clothes Stark had given him to wear while his own clothes get laundered. The black t-shirt is frayed at the edges, so it’s well-worn, and the sweatpants are comfortable, if a bit too short. He likes them more than his own clothes, stolen off of strangers and forced on by enemies. These were given to him.

He opens up the bathroom cabinet — he might as well grab provisions before he gets moving again — and find a straight razor. Barnes remembers how to use it, so he executes a carefully planned attack on the ever growing fuzz.

When he comes out, Stark’s on the couch holding a mug and a tablet.

“Now there’s the handsome bastard my old man used to go on about,” Stark says with a teasing smile, and that’s when the memory hits him.

New York City, cold and bright as usual for December, the year 1991. Maria died in the accident, but Howard’s still alive. He looks at the Soldier in surprise and fear. Howard Stark, chokes on his own blood, trying but unable to utter the name that the Captain manages to say twenty-two years later.

Barnes falls to his knees as other memories pass him by, one of trying to teach Howie how to dance a swing number none of the posh boys knew. Another time, winning ten whole dollars off of Howie at poker, who’d laughed and passed him the cash like it meant nothing.

Stark drops to his knees to help him. “Hey, what’s the matter?”

“I killed him.” Barnes whispers.

“Who?”

“Your old man.”

“I know,” he says. From his tone, Stark had known the whole fucking time. “It wasn’t you.”

“My hands, Stark.”

“Well, my family’s full of murder, so it’s fine. I’m okay with it. You’re nowhere as bad as me. My
youngest kid killed his older brother. And seriously, I’m Tony. Get that into your thick skull.”

“What?”

Tony scoots until they’re both up against the wall, a bare centimetre of space between them. Barnes keeps shaking and every once in a while, he’ll bump into Tony, but Tony doesn’t move away.

“I fucked up. I was trying to save the world. But I made something awful. And his name was Ultron. He killed JARVIS. JARVIS was my.... my fourth. There’s DUM-E, and Butterfingers, and YOU, and then there was JARVIS…”

When Tony finishes, there is silence. Barnes doesn’t know what to do so they sit there together, and listen to the minutes ticking away on the big wall clock.

After a while, Tony speaks up. “So now I have this big tower and a bigger mess, and I need to clean it up because I promised Steve, and also so my kids aren’t living in a pig sty.”

Barnes leans in on purpose this time, brushing their shoulders together. “Sounds like you could use an extra hand.”

Tony smiles a fraction at that. “Yeah, it does.”

Steve’s out on a jog with Sam again. It’s not like Central Park, because there’s no one around these woods, it’s quiet and Steve hates it. And this time it really is jogging with Sam, rather than running past him, because he needs to talk to Sam, and this is easier than when Sam’s staring at him from across a table.

“I just don’t understand why it’s so easy for him to be with Tony. He doesn’t know him.”

“Maybe that’s it,” Sam replies. “Maybe it’s easier for Bucky to talk to someone he doesn’t know rather than someone he does. God knows I didn’t want to talk to my teammates about Riley.” Sam stops, huffing, and Steve waits. He catches Steve’s eyes. “But talking to you, everything comes out. Why do you think we clicked at the Washington mall? Tony’s new. He doesn’t have to try to be anyone for Tony, he can just be how he feels he is today.”

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When they get back, Steve makes Sam the best waffles he’s ever tasted, makes plans to meet for dinner, and then heads off to make a phone call. Steve takes a deep breath. He’s never done this before, and chances are, Bucky won’t pick up. But it’s now or never.

The phone rings and rings, and finally goes to voicemail, so Steve leaves him one.

“Hi. You don’t have to play any spiel with me. I want you to be who you are, no one else. And if that’s not Bucky Barnes, that’s fine. Let’s start again. Hi, I’m Steve Rogers. I just wanted to thank you for saving my life. What’s your name?”

A few minutes later, he gets a text that simply says, “Barnes”. The phone beeps again, and this time, it’s a photograph of Tony. He sit on the floor with DUM-E to his left, mouth open in laughter.

At Avengers Tower.
The accompanying text reads, “Tony’s ordering pizza. Come help me eat it.”
It’s becoming increasingly harder to concentrate.

Tony is used to losing himself in his work for hours, if not for days, but one, sweeping up glass shards off the kitchen floor isn’t rocket science — actually that’s a bad comparison, rocket science is easier. Plus, hot metal arm guy totally defines Bucky Barnes.

Okay, to be honest, it’s not Barnes’ fault as much as it’s Tony’s, because Tony’s a total perv. But Barnes doesn’t have any clothes, so Tony’s been gracious enough to let him borrow a beloved Led Zeppelin t-shirt. So again, it’s kind of Tony’s fault too, because the shirt is too tight. On the other hand, Tony had offered to buy him all the clothes he wanted. Barnes was the one not ready to go outside. The one who’s stolen not just his second favourite pair of gloves, but his favourite sweatpants, and he refuses to give them back. Tony did order a bunch of stuff online, but it hasn’t arrived yet. So for the time being, Barnes is borrowing from Tony’s closet.

The metal arm gleams and glitters with movement. Barnes’ pecs are straining through the shirt, and his hair’s a matted, sweaty mess —

Yeah, Tony knows. He’s a perv.

Barnes has only been here for all of one day. Tony hasn’t even told Steve yet — at Barnes’ command — because now apparently Tony’s taking orders from amnesiac assassins. Well, it isn’t like Tony’s known for making sound decisions anyway. But since they’ve arrived, they’ve spent more than half of it cleaning, Barnes looking quite at home in Tony’s clothes. Looking incredibly good in them.

“…Tony?”

“What?” Tony asks, when he realises Barnes has been talking to him, phone in his hand.

“Cap’s coming for dinner,” Barnes tells him while wiping his hair away from his face.

Right. Cap. Captain America. Steve, the guy who’s been in love with Barnes for who knows how many decades, and probably doesn’t appreciate his old co-worker/acquaintance/friend’s kid eyeing him.

Man, Tony needs to go get laid. Except after Pepper — and damn is he proud he can say her name even if it’s only in his mind — the idea of going out and finding some random person to fuck just doesn’t seem very tempting.

Now Barnes is eyeing him like he’s the one who is an amnesiac. Tony has to admit that staring at Barnes without actually replying to anything might lead to such conclusions.

“You told him?” Tony asks. “Awesome. Right. Yeah. More pizza. Pizza can never be a bad thing. Unlike that thing you’re calling your hair.” Tony drops his sweep, letting it clatter to the floor before walking over to Barnes. “You’re a lost case. Seriously, turn around and let me at it.” That mop needs to be tied up and out of the way for Tony’s sanity.

Barnes’ hair is soft. He’s fidgety, but the moment Tony touches him, Barnes stills, breathing in and out deeply.

“Is this okay?” Tony asks, in case he’s reading the situation wrong. “Should I stop?”
Barnes shakes his head. “It’s fine.”

Barnes is warm, his hair damp at the roots. Tony gathers it all up into a low bun. The bright red of hair band looks good on Barnes, Tony decides.

Then clears that thought out of his head as well. “Right. Pizza.” Tony pulls out his phone and dials. “Yeah, for the Stark order, can you add two more Deluxe pizzas please? But without —“

“—olives,” Barnes says simultaneously with Tony.

“Huh? How’d you know that?” Tony asks, hanging up. Barnes is pale as a ghost. He stares at Tony like a lost child. Tony forces a carefree grin on his face. “Well in case this is a psychic thing, you should warn me next time before I drink mouldy coffee again.”

A moment of terse silence, and then Barnes snorts. “Then you shouldn’t drink out of coffee mugs that haven’t been touched in months, pal.”

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Tony looks up at the sound of the doorbell. Steve doesn’t need to ring, he has an access card. Tony accesses the security live feed to the penthouse entrance, and to his surprise, it is Steve, waiting like a gentleman at the door in his leather jacket and orange scarf. Tony winces at the colour.

He must be ringing as a courtesy, Tony realises. This is Steve giving Barnes a warning, in case he wants to change his mind and run. Tony puts away his tablet and turns to look at Barnes, who, until now, had been sleeping in fits on the couch to his left. He’s wide-eyed and shaking. He climbs up and away from Tony. “I can’t. Can’t can’t can’t—”

Tony forces the disappointment down — it’ll be a billion times worse for Steve — and stands up as well. “Woah, it’s okay, you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. Take a deep breath. If you don’t want to—”

“I want to, I can’t!” Barnes’ voice is raw, as if he’s shouted his voice away.

“Why not?” Tony asks, inching slowly towards Barnes.

“Want to, I can’t. I’ll kill him!” Barnes takes another step back. Tony stops moving forwards; the last thing Barnes needs right now is to feel trapped.

“No, you won’t,” Tony says. He wishes he were anyone else, maybe Natasha with all her perfect words, because he’s not sure he has the right ones. He doesn’t want to manipulate Barnes, he just wants him to see the truth. He doesn’t want to see the look on Steve’s face when Tony opens the door and Barnes is gone.

“I tried to before.”

“Barnes, even if you wanted to, I doubt you could. You tried to, and then you saved his life. You can’t do it, dumbass. It’s in your DNA. You can’t hurt him.”

“I put him in the hospital for weeks,” Barnes whispers, pulling his arms up against his chest.

Okay. Time to change tactics. “Look, if I get the wildest idea that you’re going to hurt him, the suit’s right here, see?” Tony points to the suitcase suit under the table. “Steve’s my friend. You think I’ll let you hurt him? Come on, you may possibly be a psychic, but I’m the futurist here. I got this. No brainwashing can stop Iron Man.”
“Promise?”

“God, what is it with old people and promises? Yes, I promise. I won’t let you hurt Steve.” Tony says with a shrug of his shoulders.

“Okay.”

“Do you still want to go? You don’t have to.”

“I want to.”

“Well, you can.”

Tony leads Bucky to the door and opens it. Steve’s walking back to the penthouse elevator, his head bowed.

“Stevie?”

Steve stops mid-step. If he closes his eyes, he’ll be walking the streets of Brooklyn on his way home. Bucky’s heavy steps are behind him, easily catching up to Steve’s slower pace. Any second now, Bucky’ll throw a heavy arm over Steve’s skinny shoulder, nearly knocking him off his feet.

Steve keeps his eyes open. As he turns around, Bucky says, “Barnes used to call you that, didn’t he?”

“Yeah. He did,” Steve says.

“Can I?”

“If you want to,” Steve says. Bucky’s wearing one of Tony’s t-shirts and low-riding sweatpants. His hair is in a messy bun, in a bright red hair band. He’s shaved and smiling, and looking a little (a lot) scared. He takes Steve’s breath away.

“So, are you just going to stand there, or?” Tony asks.

“Hey Tony,” Steve walks towards the door. Bucky backs away, and lets him in. It takes everything Steve has not to pull him close and hold him. But he knows better. Instead, he takes the hand Tony’s holding out for him, pulling him into a quick hug. When they pull away, Tony tugs at his knit infinity scarf.

“You know Natasha knits these as gag gifts right?” Tony asks with a small smile.

“But they’re warm. And I like the colour.”

“I thought the serum fixed the colour blindness?” Tony teases. Steve feels an easy smile spread across his face as the trio walk towards the living room.

“Some of us like to wear more that black, red and gold, Tony.”

“Oh right. I forgot who I’m talking to here. You’re the one rocking the stars and spangles.”

“Yeah, on the suit that you designed,” Steve says. “Admit it, you’re just mad she hasn’t made you anything yet.”
“I’ll admit to no such thing. Listen, I have a quick thing I need to work on and pizza’s not here yet, so I figured I could head to my office right over there,” Tony points for Bucky’s sake. It’s a glass office in the loft that Tony had built for the simple purpose of working in peace while still being surrounded by everyone. Steve is suddenly reminded of making dinner while watching Tony work up there. “And I’ll be back in like ten minutes—“

“No.” Bucky turns to Tony, eyes wide with fear.

“You two need to talk,” Tony says. “I can see you from there, I’m right—”

“No, you promised.” Bucky looks terrified. Steve tries to ignore the hurt inside and backs slowly away from Bucky.

“Look, if you’re not ready, it’s alright. I can go. Really,” Steve forces the words out of his throat.

“Oh God, you nonagenarian morons. Barnes here thinks he’s going to flip the brainwashed crazy switch and kill you. I promised him I’d stay nearby and protect our damsel in distress — that’s you, Steven.” Tony says, and Steve wants to laugh at Tony and cry for Bucky. “Fine, I’m getting headphones and my tablet. Nobody talk to me for the next half-hour.”

Steve inhales and exhales, as Tony stomps up the stairs. “You’re not going to hurt me.”

“I nearly killed you.” Bucky replies, his eyes following Tony.

Tony tramps back with headphones and jumps on one of the couches. “Happy? Now leave me alone. I’m working, somebody in this house needs to win the bread and all that.”

On a different couch, Steve sits down as well, and Bucky follows, sitting across from him. They share a look. “I know. He’s weird.”


Steve laughs. “You gotta wonder how many times he’s been called weird, if he’s come up with a go-to rebuttal for it.”


Steve soberes, because that’s probably true. He’s heard enough of Tony’s throwaway remarks about his childhood.

“The two of you make a great team, I hear.” Small talk is so strange. He doesn’t remember ever having to do this with Bucky, so he keeps reminding himself to stop looking at this man from under the shadow cast by Bucky.

“Yeah.”

“Buck—” Steve says. “Sorry, I mean Barne—”

“I remember you,” Bucky whispers, still looking at Tony. “Bits and pieces. Sometimes, I dream, and I dream of New York, and it’s old. And you’re small.”

“Yeah, I was,” Steve says.

“I don’t remember him, though,” Bucky pulls his knees up to his chest. “I don’t remember being him. I remember you, though. You like to draw.”
Steve’s mind automatically brings up another memory, just like a film reel. It’s Steve’s 20th birthday. In their shared apartment, there’s a single newspaper wrapped case sitting on the kitchen table. When Steve rips it open, there’s the case of charcoals he’d been eyeing for months. But there are so many other things they need, and he has another school bill to pay soon, so more art supplies are definitely out of the question. Bucky walks in, dumping his leaking boots on the windowsill to dry. “I swear it, Steve—”

“Do you still draw?” Bucky interrupts the memory with a question.

Steve opens his eyes at the question. “Yes. You bought me a set of charcoals once.”

“I swear it, Steve, you’re gumming the works. You’re not supposed to be home for another hour,” Bucky quotes, word for word, pitch and intonation exactly the same, and Steve sobs, head in his hands. It’s too much. Bucky says those words like he’s quoting them from a movie, like it’s something he’s seen and heard, not experienced.

“I’m sorry,” Steve rasps out. “I’m just nuts. Gimme a minute—”

Then Bucky’s right beside him, placing a sure hand on his back, and Steve breathes in his presence. “I’m sorry,” he says. “That I’m not who you want me to be.”

Steve sits back up, and Bucky immediately pulls his hand away. Steve makes sure to catch Bucky’s eyes, because this is important. This needs to be heard and understood. “I want you to be you, and if you don’t know who that is, I want to help you find out.”

A silence, and Bucky shuffles his hands. “You hate olives.”

“I do.” Steve has no idea where Bucky is going with this.

“Do I like olives?”

Steve stops himself just before he says yes. “Tony’ll have some in the fridge for martinis. Let’s go find out.”

Barnes likes olives. A lot. In fact, he eats the whole packet waiting for the pizza, and forgets all about Tony. So by the time Tony puts his tablet away and stumbles into the kitchen, he grabs the packet dramatically and shouts, ‘dishonour on your cow!’ as if that’s supposed to mean something to Barnes. Steve laughs, and Barnes looks at the two of them like they’ve grown multiple heads.

“Oh God. You haven’t seen Mulan.” Tony gasps. “Barnes, find me olives. I will make you the perfect martini, and we shall watch Mulan kick all the asses. Is the pizza here yet?”

And that’s how Barnes finds himself at the edge of the centre couch, eating pizza and watching Mulan. There’s enough room for all three of them to sit with ample space between them, but within the first half-hour, Tony drops his head into Steve’s lap and then sticks his cold feet under Barnes’s thighs.

Barnes opens his mouth to say something scathing, but then stops. Suddenly the two of them are in a world of their own, eyes locked on each other. Tony says something and Steve rolls his eyes.
They look good together, Barnes realises with not a small amount of jealousy. It must be something left from when he was Bucky. Back when he’d been with Steve. Maybe. The way Steve had cried on the couch, he thinks they must have been in love, but Barnes isn’t sure. Sometimes Barnes wakes up from dreams where they’re lovers. Sometimes Barnes dreams he never pulls Steve out of the water, and the world becomes a cold, barren place before he wakes up.

Barnes isn’t sure about a lot of things, but he knows Steve’s important. Steve doesn’t need to be taken care of, but Barnes knows someone should do it before he hurts himself. Steve has to be safe, and happy.

Barnes makes Steve sad, but Tony makes him laugh. That’s good. Barnes likes Tony. Tony pretends his heart is as hard as his suit, but is actually selfless. He’s the kindest person Barnes can think of in his rather short memory span. Steve’s the self-sacrificing idiot who had refused to fight him on the Helicarrier, but Tony was the one who’d removed his suit so the bullets wouldn’t ricochet and hurt Barnes.

But this is the life where Steve will say something like. “You wouldn’t believe how many Disney movies have been released since the forties, you’re going to love them,” and Barnes will ask what Disney is and Steve will go quiet. Tony will explain, but Barnes will feel awful and Steve even worse. Then Tony will ramble so Steve can regroup and Barnes will roll his eyes, pretending to be annoyed but secretly thankful, and they go on.

They get through Mulan, and The Little Mermaid before Steve realises he should really get back. It takes a moment to pry Tony’s arms from Steve’s waist, and Steve lifts him up like he’s made of cotton candy. He tucks him in as Barnes watches from the doorway.

Barnes reluctantly walks him down. They haven’t been completely alone this entire time, and to be honest, he’s not looking forward to it. But the possibility of himself hurting Steve makes Barnes’ head hurt so much that he wants to vomit. He remembers the look in Steve’s eyes as Barnes had given him blow after blow up on the crashing Helicarrier, how he’d just stared at him with tears in his eyes.

Steve stops and then Barnes realises they’re at the front door. He turns around to face Barnes.

“Are you leaving too?” Steve asks.

“I promised Tony I’d help him clean up the Tower. So I guess I’ll be here awhile.”

Steve smiles. “That’s good. I’m glad. He really needs someone. Did he give you a set of rooms yet?”

Steve asks.

“No yet.”

“Well,” Steve pulls out his key card. “This one should work. My rooms are just down one floor, so help yourself to anything you need. It’s not like I’m using it. I think I have some clothes and books, and all the furniture’s still there.”

Barnes takes the card silently.

“I know it’s not the same as having your own stuff, so if you want someone to take you shopping, just let me know okay? Or Tony. Your choice.”
Barnes doesn’t really know why it’s not the same as having your own things, stuff is stuff, and it’s not like he pays for it either way, so he doesn’t own anything.

“Anyways, get some rest,” Steve says, and Barnes nods. “Okay then.”

Barnes doesn’t want to say good bye. He wants to go to bed in the same room as Steve, listen to his uneven breathing and rub pneumonia salve over his chest — he kicks those strange, familiar thoughts out of his head. “Stevie?”

“Yeah?”

“It was nice. You. Here.” Steve smiles and it’s stunning. Something in his chest hurts and something in his belly stirs. Barnes lets out a relieved breath after the door closes and Steve’s gone.

Barnes can’t sleep yet. He slept on the flight here and in the hotel in Switzerland, and his body isn’t used to so much rest, so it stays awake, permanently tensing and waiting for the next obstacle. He looks at the key card in his hand, but he can’t do it just yet. There’s been a lot of Steve today. He needs a break.

He’s cleaning up the mess of pizza boxes and pop cans in the living room when he hears Tony gasping upstairs. Gun out and loaded, he runs upstairs and into the bedroom. Flicking on the bedroom lights, he’s surprised to find Tony alone. His eyes are closed, but he twitches in bed, his entire being tensed and his mouth twisted into a pained frown. This Barnes knows. He puts the gun away, coming to sit at his bedside.

“Tony, wake up. Was just a dream,” Barnes says, shaking him just a little by the shoulder.

Tony jolts awake, arms flailing, but Barnes grabs them. “Was just a dream. You’re awake now.”

Tony frowns, blinked slowly. Barnes doesn’t know what to do. It’s not that he doesn’t have his own nightmares, but his methods aren’t… ideal. Barnes has taken to gagging himself before bed every night in case the nightmares arose suspicions in neighbours, but he thinks of doing it to Tony and he can’t stomach the idea. So he thinks of what he would have wanted instead, and kicks his shoes off.

“Tower with a hundred floors and you couldn’t give me a room. Scoot over.”

Tony silently obeys, moving over. Barnes sits down beside Tony, his back pressed up against the headboard. “My fingers are kind of twitchy, can you have a look?”

Tony nods and grabs a screwdriver from the bedside drawer. There’s nothing wrong with the fingers. Barnes knows it and Tony knows it. But both of them know better than to say anything.

Tony’s fingers shake less and less as he pulls apart the plating, checks for damage and puts it back together. Barnes leans his head against the headboard and closes his eyes. He can rest. Tony won’t hurt him.

The final plate slides back with a click, but instead of pulling away, flesh fingers linger, and Tony threads them with Barnes’ own.

Barnes doesn’t remember falling asleep. Yet, when the sunlight wakes him up from the first full night of sleep he’s had since leaving HYDRA, he’s alone in bed with a post-it stuck to his forehead.
Come downstairs and make me breakfast. I’m starving here.

-

By the time Barnes comes downstairs, the kitchen looks no better than it had before the thorough cleaning they’d given it only last night. Tony sits at the breakfast bar, drinking straight out of the orange juice bottle.

“What, was there another attack?”

He shrugs when he sees Barnes. “I got tired of waiting and decided to make an omelette. The kitchen disagreed.”

“Okay.”

“Make me an omelette and I’ll show you your rooms.”

Barnes scrutinises Tony. The order is strange, not because of its content, but because it’s an order. Tony’s looking up at him with a single raised eyebrow.

Eggs are nice. But…

“No,” Barnes decides. He likes that word. “Scrambled eggs.”

The next day, they’re working in the lab — Tony’s personal lab, that is, because the Avengers lab is still in ruins. The bots are still in the Avengers lab that Tony used to share with Bruce, simply because Tony doesn’t spend all that much time in his personal lab anymore. It’s up in the old penthouse, the smaller one he’d made for his own personal use, but now remains empty. Except he needs someone to hold on to part of Barnes’ arm so he can work on the shoulder — Tony has ideas for a whole new arm, but it requires understanding how Hydra has connected the metal arm in the first place.

That’s basically how Barnes meet the bots. Tony has YOU hold the arm in place because he’s the strongest, and also, NOT Butterfingers, and Tony doesn’t trust DUM-E anymore. It’s a tricky job. Barnes always gets this terrified look on his face when Tony goes near the arm, only relaxing after a few minutes, as if he’s expecting pain.

Tony needs to go find a Hydra base to blow up.

The point is, Tony’s an idiot and should have expecting DUM-E to do his thing, his thing being something stupid and/or potentially embarrassing. He’s used to DUM-E sometimes touching Tony when he’s working. Usually, it’s to bring him toast, or sometimes it’s a tool he asked for a few hours ago. Yes, his first-born is special. No, no one gets to insult DUM-E but Tony. So when DUM-E starts poking him in the side, Tony ignores it, as he usually does. Until Tony moves to grab something, and DUM-E starts poking Barnes’ arm. Barnes tenses immediately.

“No, DUM-E, bad. Don’t make me consider City College again,” Tony says, swatting him away. Barnes doesn’t relax though, because DUM-E doesn’t leave, he just starts poking Tony again. “Sorry about DUM-E. He’s kind of like a senile old man. He’s harmless.”

Tony pushes DUM-E away, and the bot wheels away, beeping dejectedly. He gets back to working on the arm. The scar tissue around the shoulder makes Tony’s chest look like artwork. But he
doesn’t bring it up, except to smooth his palm down over the damaged skin carefully. Slowly, Barnes relaxes again. “This is seriously bad design, like even Justin Hammer could do better than this, Barnes. No wonder your shoulder’s always swollen, see how heavy this is? I think you might want to give your shoulder and your spine a break. Can I take out the arm?”

“No,” Barnes says.

“At a certain point your bones are just going to break because they can’t handle the weight, you know that, right?” Tony asks. “I don’t understand how you used this arm for all these years without that having happened, anyway. Basic physics.”

“I was never out of cryo this long,” Barnes says. “I think.”

Tony frowns, “Well — DUM-E seriously go away!” Tony turns around to push DUM-E away and finds him holding out a precariously wrapped cold pack. “Is that for Barnes?”

DUM-E beeps in agreement.

“Well, you know better than to hand me things.”

Barnes reaches for it and DUM-E hands it to him. “Thanks.”

“Again, my apologies for him. The bots haven’t had too much company lately, it makes them clingy.”

“They’re lonely?” Barnes asks.

“Well,” Tony tilts his head. “They’re bots. They don’t really have the equipment to feel that much, but sort of, yeah?” Tony turns away, busying himself with his holographic prototype arm.

And that’s how DUM-E and his brothers gain a new friend in the form of one Bucky Barnes.

And that’s also how Barnes becomes DUM-E’s new favourite. Tony can’t wait to see the look on Steve’s face when he realises he’s been replaced.

Steve’s week passes slowly. Natasha doesn’t make any comments, just shares knowing looks with Sam. There are team dinners and movie nights. Rhodey goes from being the friend of a friend to someone Steve trusts. Wanda and Vision take walks together into the woods. Sam and Natasha get into a prank battle; all-out war breaks out when Natasha calls in Clint, and Rhodey comes to Sam’s help. It ends when Steve stops finding it amusing and gives Wanda the yes to stop them all. They leave them magically stuck to the ceiling and enjoy the den to themselves for a change, watching Planet Earth and eating way too much popcorn.

Wanda smiles more these days, Steve’s relieved to see.

They’re melding, building that bridge between being co-workers and being friends. They’re no Commandoes, but they are Avengers. Steve’s proud.

Friday evening, after making sure there’s no supervillain on the loose they need to worry about, Steve salutes Natasha, who sticks her tongue out at him, and says, “See you Monday!” and then
He could take the Quinjet, but in an emergency, it’s just as convenient to have the New Avengers pick him up on the way as they fly back through. And besides, he enjoys the freedom of driving. If he leaves in the evening, Steve can arrive very early morning at the Tower.

Being with the New Avengers is like walking up the stairs of his old apartment in Brooklyn. He’s not home yet, but he’s nearly there. He does love this team, they’re family now. But home was Bucky. Home had died with Bucky and come back with him, and home was the place Tony built for the Avengers, lost creatures desperate for a place to call their own.

Steve arrives at the Tower near three in the morning, the lights of the city brighter than the waning half-moon. Neither Bucky nor Tony are to be found, and Steve isn’t tired. This isn’t the Training Facility, there’s no point in trying to be normal and sleeping when he isn’t tired. He had eight hours yesterday, he could run on that for two days.

Steve takes his sketchbook and heads to the lab. The bots are always happy to have company (unless it’s Clint, in which case, they roll away in fear of the putty arrow). Steve sits down on the floor, taking extra care not to disturb anything. Tony and Bucky have gotten through everything but the Avengers lab over the last week, it would seem. DUM-E’s charming but ineffective effort at cleaning up is evidenced by the pile of glass, metal limbs, and paper in one corner of the room.

DUM-E holds out his hand in welcome and Steve shakes it before heading to the other bots and greeting them as well. Then Steve pulls out his black ink pens and gets to work. The bots always look beautiful in ink, the decisiveness of the medium suits them. Tony’s the same in that regard. Steve has sketched all the Avengers in pencil and pastels and charcoal, but only Tony and Vision get the ink treatment. It must be a Stark thing. He has a complete doodle of Butterfingers when the door opens behind Steve.

“And what sort of time do you call this, young man?”

Steve turns around to find Tony with his hands on his hips, eyebrows raised. It’s his lips that give him away though, the lower lip stuck under Tony’s teeth as he tries not to smile.

“And what exactly are you doing out of bed at this hour?” Steve asks. “It’s way past your bed time!”

Tony gives up and grins. “Science doesn’t wait for the sun to rise, Steven.”

He walks over to Steve and holds out a hand Steve accepts to haul himself up. “And what amazing idea did you have now?”

“To make the microwave stop beeping in the middle of the night.”

“That,” Steve admits, “is not a half bad idea.”

“I know, I’m a genius, remember?”

“And you’re down here because?” Steve knows Tony’s been using his smaller, personal lab for the last few months. This was the Avengers lab, this one he’d shared with Bruce, and on a few occasions, with Jane Foster.

“I need a thing.”
Steve knows an opportunity when he sees it, and he takes it. “Well, if you clean it up, you won’t have to run back and forth all the time,” Steve says. He waves his hand in the direction of DUM-E’s adorable efforts. “Look, DUM-E even started for you.”

Tony rolls his eyes, walking over to DUM-E and patting him on the base. “You idiot, that needs to be separated.”

“Or we could work on it, instead of making DUM-E do it. We’re both awake, and then you can work on the microwave here. It would save you time.”

“Okay okay,” Tony says. He’s frowning again, but this time it’s genuine. “I get it, you want me to clean up. Stop smiling like a freak already.”

“It’s been months, Tony. And I know everything else is done. Either destroy it completely and take the bots so they’re not alone so much, or fix it. It’s not fair.”

“Hey, I spend time with them every day,” Tony argues. “So does Barnes, I think they’ve adopted him. They’re fine.”

“Are you?” Steve asks, walking towards the console. He’s not sure how it works, really. But he knows it has control of the whole building. Pepper called it JARVIS’ heart. He reaches forward absentmindedly, running his hand over the metal and glass, just as Tony says, “Wait don’t—"

The console lights up, flickering bright and orange. “Tony, what’s this?” Steve asks, but Tony is quiet behind him. Steve turns around and finds Tony completely still, his face blank, but his eyes bright. “Tony?”

“That’s,” Tony stumbles, reaching for the nearest table to lean against. “JARVIS.”

Within seconds, Steve’s in front of Tony. “I’m so sorry.”

Tony doesn’t say anything, but his shoulders shake. Back in the war, when Bucky had had nightmares, he’d hate being held, or being inside the cramped tents. The enclosure always reminded him of being tied down to the medical table again. Steve hesitates, but then he reaches forward and pulls Tony in for a hug. Tony might seem untouchable, but Steve knows touch-starved when he sees it. He knew it when he’d come to get his suit fitted and spent a half hour being touched by Tony, knew it by the way he’d thrown a hand over Steve’s shoulder and said, “Why can’t the man let out a little steam?” and by the look on his face when Steve had pushed the hand away.

Tony, who feels safer inside a suit of armour, doesn’t need to be left alone. What he needs is something against his skin, something touching him and reminding him that he’s not alone.

Or so Steve hopes.

His thoughts are proven to be correct when Tony sags against him, accepting the warmth for the shortest second before pressing his palms against Steve’s chest and pushing away. “I need a drink.”

The wild-eyed gaze has left his face; now Tony just looks tired.

“A drink.”

“Okay, mother.”
Two tumblers and three fingers of whiskey later, they walk into the living room, only to find that Bucky’s beat them to it. His hair is tied in a low bun — with Pepper’s hair band, Steve realises — and what seems to be the norm for him now: a rock band t-shirt and low-riding sweatpants. Vapour rises from the mug he’s holding in his hand, his long legs are propped up on the coffee table. He looks up when he hears them, a single eyebrow raised. He must be picking that up from Tony.

Steve opens his mouth to explain, but Bucky just shakes his head and pats the seat. It’s a two-seater; there is no way they are all going to fit at once. Tony sits down, leaving a few inches between him and Bucky.

“Well?” Bucky asks, and Steve smiles faintly before sitting down.

“Cheers,” Tony holds out his glass towards Steve, and then downs it before Steve has a chance to bring his own drink up. Tony places the now empty glass on the glass coffee table and leans back.

“Cheers,” Steve echoes, and takes a sip before setting his glass beside Tony’s own.

Then there’s silence.

The clock ticks away, but Steve ignores that. It’s easier to concentrate on the beating hearts beside him. The enhanced hearing had been hard to adjust to in the beginning, too much sound for someone who’d been born hard of hearing, but now Steve can easily pick out what he wants to concentrate on. Tony’s heart beats fast and sometimes skips a beat, sometimes beats double. Bucky’s heart is much slower, it sounds like Bucky looks right now, steady and true.

“That’s JARVIS’ dead body in there,” Tony finally says, pulling his legs up to his chin. “I have to… I have to remove it from the mainframe and install a new AI.”

Steve swallows, wondering what he should do. Grief he understands, but he’s so used to handling grief alone he doesn’t know how to help Tony. He’s not like Sam, who has found the strength to smile and give comfort despite his own grief. Steve’s not there yet. But he can try. He doesn’t realise until he’s placing his arm over Tony’s shoulder that Bucky’s doing the same thing. They freeze, and then Bucky breathes in and out, his heart skipping a few beats, and places his left arm over Steve’s own. Steve doesn’t dare look over at Bucky. The metal fingers are surprisingly warm.

Tony leans back until only the arms separate him from the headrest. “If I’m the most socially competent one here, we are so royally fucked.”

Bucky laughs, and then Tony laughs, and it’s beautiful and Steve’s going to cry, but he needs to stay strong, so he hides his face on Tony’s bicep and laughs too.

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The slight movement in bed is all that is needed to wake up Steve, and that’s when he remembers: he’s not in bed, he’s on a sofa. He pulls away from the curve of Tony’s back, where his head had been resting, and sits up slowly.

All three of them are still on the sofa, though they’ve moved around in their sleep. Bucky is awake, sitting cross-legged and facing Steve, with Tony asleep on his chest.

“You are both heavy,” Bucky tells him.

“I’m sorry. Did you manage to get any sleep?”

“I did,” Bucky says. He sounds surprised.
“Okay,” Steve says, standing up and stretching his arms. “I’m going to go brush my teeth, and we can have breakfast after, yeah?”

“What do I do with him?” Bucky asks. He tries to pull Tony off, but he just cuddles closer, his arms wrapped around Bucky’s midriff.

“Get used to the fact that you’re not moving for the next hour or so,” Steve replies.

“You pulling my leg here?”

“Nope,” Steve grins at Bucky’s expression. “ Haven’t you noticed? Tony needs at least six cups of coffee before he’s ready to face the world.”

Bucky scrunches up his nose.

“I know,” Steve says, forcing his laughter down. “Give me a few minutes, I’ll get the coffee machine going. The smell should wake him up.”

Bucky might pull a grumpy face, but it’s the metal hand rubbing circles on Tony’s back that give him away, really.

It’s hard to look at that face making familiar expressions, without the memories that are Steve has connected to them. Steve breathes in and out, goes into the kitchen and makes coffee. The smell of the rich, creamy coffee always reminds him of Tony, which reminds him of the future. It makes him forget bits of the past, like the precise shade of Peggy’s lipstick, or the sound of Dum Dum’s snores.

Tony wakes up somewhere between coffee number four and five. There’s something warm against his back, but hard. Did he fall asleep on one of the bots again?

“Hey slick, how long are you planning to feel me up for?” Barnes asks.

“Lies. The only thing I’m feeling up right now is coffee,” Tony says and pulls away before standing up. Right.

“Make me breakfast,” he orders Barnes.

Barnes enunciates the “No” with particular joy, his mouth forming a perfect ‘O’. Tony smiles. Barnes likes to say no, and Tony likes to order him just to see him look that pleased at being able to do so.

“Fine. Let’s go work those baby greys of yours at Ken doll and see if we can’t get us some waffles out of this.”

They’re cleaning up after a breakfast of waffles, bacon and omelettes — so many eggs oh God, Tony’s a little bit disgusted at how much these two can eat up.

“Did you two have any plans for today?” Steve asks, breaking the comfortable silence.

“Yeah,” Tony breathes in. “I have something to finish up. You two do your thing. I’ll be done by noon.”
“I’ll come get you for lunch then,” Steve says.

“Fab.”

Bon Scott’s raspy voice joins Tony in the lab and he loses himself in the familiarity of *Highway to Hell*.

“I’ll give you a gold star for trying, DUM-E,” Tony says, sitting on the floor near the initial pile of paper, glass and plastic that his first-born had collected. They have a system going now. It’s impressive. If organisational awards were a thing, Team Stark would have won all of them.

YOU hands the paper to Butterfingers, who’s in charge of the shredder (on probationary terms, he isn’t called Butterfingers for no reason). Any Stark tech goes in the recycle pile. DUM-E’s moving that onto a trolley to be sent out. The interns on floor twenty-one nearly blew up a lab the other week, and they didn’t even manage anything interesting out of it. They’ve earned the grunt work. Arc reactor leftovers from the Iron Legion go to the vault pile. Tony’s currently going through that pile and figuring out what to reuse and what to incinerate.

Soon, the floor is clean and Tony can properly pull out his tools. There are two out of four holotables in need of repair, plus the main console which runs the Tower. He’ll work on the holotables first, he decides. The console, that’s going to need some prep work for sure. FRIDAY’S built to run the suits, not the Tower, so it’s JOCASTA’s turn to shine. But JOCASTA isn’t complete. Tony runs his fingers over the data chip on the table. Baby.

Working in this lab reignites Tony’s drive to create, to innovate, to make the future happen now. He fixes things while making half-logical notes on new widow bites for Natasha and a better EXO-7 for Sam. Tony’s hunched under the holotable as the album finishes and *Back in Black* starts up with *Hell’s Bells*.

“I’m rolling thunder, pourin’ rain, I’m comin’ down like a hurricane,” Tony hums, hunched over the table. JOCASTA’s looking good. “My lightning’s flashing across the sky, you’re only young but you’re gonna die…”

His phone vibrates in his pocket, and Tony moves away from the holotable to check the text.

*Look up!* The text from Steve says, and Tony obeys. And laughs. Steve’s standing at the door, Barnes is sitting on the floor like they’ve been waiting awhile.

“COME IN. YOU CODE HAVE.” Tony signs, and then reduces the speakers’ volume.

Steve presses his hand against the security screen and walks in, Barnes on his tail. “We didn’t want to intrude.”

“You’re not intruding. I don’t notice things — err – people when I science,” Tony replies while working on a tricky piece of code.

“What is that?” Barnes asks, pointing to the flickering silver oblate spheroid.

“Say hi to JOCASTA, boys. Though, pardon her for not replying. I’m kind of doing AI-neurosurgery here.”

“You hungry?” Steve asks.
“I had coffee. And a smoothie. With peppers. Butterfingers, we are not amused.” Tony waves a finger in Butterfingers’ direction. Barton’s such a bad influence. If not for Laura, Tony’d be worried for those kids. “Ha!”

There, it’s done. Tony pulls out. “JOCASTA honey, you with me?”

“Hello, sir. I am here for your assistance.”

“Hi JOCASTA,” Steve says. A second later, Barnes echoes the words.

Oh fuck. She really is a beauty. Tony laughs out loud. “God, look at you, you gorgeous thing.”

“My thanks, sir. Hello, Captain Rogers, and Sergeant Barnes,” JOCASTA says. “It is a pleasure to meet you for the first time. Though I heard much from my brothers about you both.”

“The pleasure is ours, JOCASTA. Please, call me Steve.”

“Okay, enough chit-chat, stop flirting with the super-soldier. You’re not old enough to date.” Tony makes a few adjustments to the code, and the holograms shifts into the shape of a woman. The whole Big Brother thing was always freaking people out, might as well give her a body if she’s to be running the Tower. Or, you know, infinite bodies. Tony’s going need to install more holotables… holoscreens? Tony has ideas. “You are, however, old enough to run the Tower. So chop chop, off to the main console with you.”

“Sir, what should I do with the remaining JARVIS files?” JOCASTA asks.

Tony looks towards the console, and then back at JOCASTA. Behind her hologram, Steve looks at him, not quite smiling, but not quite sad either. “Tony, could I say goodbye first?”

“Why?” Tony asks. As if that’s needed. “He’s long gone. It’s not like he’s going to hear it.”

“It’s your choice,” Steve says, but he’s doing the whole puppy eye thing. Urgh.

“Guess I’m not the only one with the doe eyes, eh?” Barnes asks. He’s smirking, the handsome bastard.

“So, what, is this a fucking funeral service now?” Tony snaps, because there’s a place for nostalgia and it’s not in his lab.

“Would you like one?” Steve asks.

“Say your piece, then, let’s get this over with.” Tony steps away and towards the console, firing the console up with a movement of his arm. It gets easier every time, to look at what remains of the heart of JARVIS.

The bots beep and click and come towards the console, forming a circle around it with Tony, Steve, Barnes and JOCASTA.

“Of all the wonderful things that the future has held for me. JARVIS, you were the most marvellous,” Steve says. Tony inhales, and then reminds himself that breathing requires him to exhale as well, not just hold his breath. “I know Tony says you weren’t sentient. Just a program. But I know something maybe Tony isn’t ready to accept. You loved Tony, you took care of him. You took care of all of us, whether it was helping me understand something of the future or keeping one of us company when we were alone.”
Steve pauses, brings a hand up to rest on Tony’s shoulder. “You were kind. You didn’t have to do any of those things. Your job wasn’t to take care of us, but you did it anyway. You were a friend, you were family, and you’ll be dearly missed.”

After a few moments, Tony clears his throat. “You two head up. I… I need to do this alone.”

From the corner of his eye, Tony catches Steve pause, thinking, and then nodding. He squeezes Tony’s shoulder and then walks away. Barnes waits.

“Bu-Barnes, come on, let’s get started on lunch,” Steve prompts, already halfway up the stairs. Barnes moves forward, extending his right hand and placing it between Tony’s neck and shoulder.

“JARVIS took after you huh?”

“What?”

“Stevie said he was kind. Guess he took after you.”

Tony opens his mouth. And then closes it. Barnes takes the opportunity to back away.

“Hurry up before lunch becomes dinner.” Then he’s taking surprisingly quiet steps up and away into the kitchen.

JOCASTA’s hologram fades away.

Tony turns back to the door, waiting until they’re both definitely gone, and then blasts AC/DC back up. He feels like a fool, blinking quickly. This is ridiculous. He works through the useless code fragments, collecting and deleting it.

There’s only a small data packet left now. Tony wavers.

JOCASTA rematerializes. Tony turns to her in confusion, but she smiles at him and nods before bringing her incorporeal hand near Tony’s hand, as if to hold it. Tony takes a deep, wavering breath. With his other hand, Tony reaches for the final package.

“Goodbye, J. Stay shiny.”
Realisations and Misunderstandings

When Barnes has his first nightmare since moving into the Tower, Tony makes the mistake of waking him up with a palm pressed against his shoulder. He pays for it with finger-shaped bruises around his throat for a week.

And that isn’t even the worst of it.

Barnes takes one look at his right hand, then at Tony, and runs. By the time Tony’s recovered enough to have JOCASTA follow him, he’s long left Avengers Tower. By the time Tony tracks him down by the shiny black AMEX he’d given Barnes, he’s already boarded a flight to Jakarta at JFK. So Tony does the most reasonable thing he can think of under the extenuating circumstances: he buys himself tickets.

Commercial tickets.

Tony can feel the air-borne bacteria sticking to him the moment he enters the airplane. Crying babies, a sneezing old lady… Tony takes a deep breath. Get over this psychosis of yours and fucking do something, Stark. Steve trusted you with him. God knows you’ve been a disappointment since the moment you met. You can’t let him down.

God, his crush on Capsicle has long passed through the fields of pathetic and walked straight into the woods of mortification. He shoots off a text to Pepper, ignores the phone when it begins to ring, and sits down in first class. Tony calls Steve on the phone during the safety demonstrations, waving off an air hostess with a raised eyebrow and a hand pointing to the suit floating outside his window. Thank you, JOCASTA.

“Okay, don’t panic, but I’m on a commercial flight to Jakarta with Barnes,” Tony blurts out the moment Steve answers the call. “Yes, I said commercial. Thor help us.”

“What’s wrong with your voice? Wait- what?”

“I’ve caught a virus just from being in this pathetic excuse for a plane. Barnes had a nightmare and decided to run off. I’m going after him.” Tony says.

Tony hears Steve’s sudden, short intake of breath. “Tony, you were the one who said we should let him go where he wants to go—” Tony breaks off. No need to worry Steve. “That he’ll hurt me.”

“Tony, what happened?” Steve asks, clearly not listening to Tony’s instruction not to panic. Why does no one ever listen when Tony says not to panic? Steve’s voice grows more frantic with each word. “Did he hurt you?”

“Okay, maybe I should have given you a towel along with the whole don’t-panic thing.”

“Tony!”

“I’m okay, no lasting damage. Really. He’s overreacting, and also technically I promised not to make him stay. I never said anything about not following him. By the way, this whole sneaky spy thing is fun, I get why the murder twins get so excited about it, now.”
“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, Pepper. I’ll call you when we land. Don’t you dare get on the Quinjet and follow us. Go beat up Nitro or something,” Tony says, hanging up. He stays seated until they’ve reached flight altitude, then gathers up his courage and heads down to economy class.

Steve is man enough to admit that he worries like a mother hen. However, he tells himself that in this case, he’s right to worry. Both Bucky and Tony are on a flight to Jakarta, and Steve’s the one stuck at home. He feels like he’s twenty-three again, still skinny and fighting bullies at Camp Lehigh. Still writing letters to Bucky and praying to the Holy Virgin for his safety.

There are two differences this time around. First of all, he’s a foot taller and a lot less naïve. Second, as his size doubled, so did his worry. This time, he’s sure that despite the serum, his heart won’t be able to handle the sheer amount of worrying he’s splitting between Tony and Bucky.

Technically, there’s a third difference: he’s not alone anymore. After Steve’s phone call with Tony, he puts the phone away and looks at Rhody, who’s sitting across the coffee table from him. It’s the middle of the night, but this isn’t a normal household. These are the Avengers. There’s always someone else who is awake. In this case, it’s Rhody. Neither of them had been able to sleep, so Steve had asked if he could draw a portrait, and Rhody had obliged.


“I don’t… he said he’s fine—“

“Cap.”

“I know, I know. But he’s on a flight to Jakarta and he’s annoyed so I think he’s okay,” Steve replies. “He said he’d call when he landed.”

“Is Barnes okay?” Rhody asks.

“Yeah. They’re fine.” Steve sighs. He’s never told the team officially about Bucky, but one way or the other, they’ve all found out and after “Fangirling” — that’s what Natasha called Rhody’s original reaction — they’ve more or less decided to leave the topic alone. Except for Sam and Natasha, but Steve thinks the fact that they were both nearly killed by the Winter Soldier means they get special treatment in that regard. In Natasha’s case, twice.

And Steve had just left him with Tony, no questions on security asked. He’s not given a single thought to Tony’s safety. That needs to change, he decides. Rhody’s expression demands a better explanation, and Steve finally gives in. “Bucky ran off for some reason, and Tony’s going after him. They’re on the same flight to Jakarta, and Tony’s off searching for him in the plane. He said not to follow him.”

Rhodey relaxes a tiny bit. “It’s going to be fine, Cap. Tony’ll take care of it.”

“You’re so sure of that.”

“I know he can be an asshat when he wants to be. He certainly knows how to fuck things up. But he likes Barnes, he considers them friends. And Tony,” Rhody sighs, “Tony would die for his friends. He screws up sometimes, but Steve, he wants your friendship and trust more than you think.”
That’s what it comes back to, every time. Trust. But he needs to trust Tony with this. That was the whole reason Steve had asked Tony to find Bucky, because he needs to prove, to himself and to Tony, that Steve trusted him.

He does now, Steve realises, picking up his sketchbook and the conté crayons. Tony will bring him back.

“You must have had a hell of a time getting through airport security with that arm.”

Barnes looks up to find Tony standing in the aisle with his arms across his chest. Tony’s voice is raw, his throat is covered up by a bright, knitted scarf. Barnes turns away, looking out the window. “They took my knife.”

“I’m surprised they didn’t take your whole arm. I’ll get you a nicer one,” Tony says, “if you come with me to first class. I may be flying commercial, but I’m not spending another moment in economy, or I will actually break out in hives.”

“No.” Tony had taken him in, shared his world with him, and in return, nearly gotten himself killed for it.

Barnes hasn’t really thought about anyone’s safety — excluding Steve’s, that is. When Steve had fallen into the Potomac, his heart had pumped fear and desperation into his veins without any reason for it. He couldn’t have done anything other than save Steve, because Steve had to live. That was important.

When he’d come back to reality with Tony’s throat in his hand, two seconds from breaking it, and his own heart too, that same feeling had dominated. It was what had forced his hand away, forced him to run. Because Tony had to live. That was important.

Barnes would rather be pickpocketing and living on the street again than hurting Tony Stark.

“Fine. But when I get sick, you better be nursing me. I expect a skimpy nurse’s outfit and everything.” Tony sits down beside him, bumping shoulders.

“I’m not coming back, Tony.” Barnes pulls his arm away so they’re no longer touching. Isn’t Tony a genius? Why is this so hard for him to understand?

“But Pepper’s in Miami, and she’s mad, and she might fly over to New York, and who’ll protect me from her, then?”

“Exactly what do you think I’m trying to do here, pal?” Barnes snaps, tired of Tony’s devil-may-care attitude. He may not care about his life, but Barnes damn well did. He’s already killed one Stark who had been a friend, he’s not doing that again.

“Ah,” Tony says. “I don’t need protection.”

“I nearly killed you!” Barnes has to force his voice from rising. There are people around them,

“It’s cute that you think that,” Tony replies. “You couldn’t hurt the suit.”

“You’re not always wearing the suit,” Barnes says. And when you’re not wearing the suit, you’re fragile. Just flesh and bones that could easily be broken or torn apart. He’s seen the scars on his
chest. He’s wanted to touch them.

“I can bring the suit to me within ten seconds, didn’t you see the suit come for me yesterday? You wouldn’t have killed me, it wouldn’t have gotten that far. I didn’t want to hurt you during that mess, but the suit was there, and you weren’t going to kill me.”

“Tony—“

“No,” Tony cuts him off. “Listen to me, Barnes. You are not going to hurt me. I’ve fought demi-gods and robots hell bent on destruction, I’ve fought extremis-powered villains and freaking Nazis! Hell, I took a vibranium shield to the chest, and I’m alive, aren’t I? Drop some of that ego, you are not going to kill me.”

Tony has a point. As long as he’s awake and aware, Barnes’s not going to best the armour. Especially not against a man who understands his arm better than he does. But that doesn’t change the fact that Tony nearly did die. Whatever Tony says another two seconds and Tony would have been dead, not from lack of oxygen, but from a broken neck.

“Barnes,” Tony says, slowly reaching forward. Barnes pulls away, not ready to touch him again. “I shouldn’t have touched you mid-nightmare. That’s classic PTSD. I should have known better. It’s not on you. And if it’s forgiveness you need, you have it.”

Tony’s eyes are liquid comfort. Tony’s bright and beautiful and Barnes wants to say no, he likes saying no, but he doesn’t think he can. It isn’t like with Hydra; disobedience wasn’t part of his vocabulary then. Tony doesn’t want to force him to do anything, but he wants Barnes to stay, self-sacrificing idiot that he is.

Still, if he does this, at least some security measures need to be put into place.

“If I come back, can I stay in another bedroom?” Barnes asks. Tony schools a micro-expressive frown into a fake smile; it’s one seen on so many magazine covers and press releases. Barnes hates it, especially when he knows how stunning it is when Tony really smiles, how his nose scrunches up—and—

He’s not going there.

“Sure. Whatever. I’ll get you set up in a flat of your own.”

“I can stay in Steve’s suite,” Barnes decides. He has access — though he’s never used it. He’s considered it, stood in front of the door multiple times but hadn’t been able to bring himself to open the door. He think he can do it now, since he doesn’t see the point of setting himself up in an apartment of his own. It’s not like he has anything to fill it with. And Steve did say he could stay there and take anything he wanted. He’ll find somewhere else to stay whenever Steve shows up.

“Sure. But I’ll set you up with a place of your own anyway. Just in case.”

“I don’t want handouts,” Barnes says. Suddenly he can smell the salt of the sea and hear seagulls from the docks. He wants to work for what he wants, that’s the kind of man he is.

“Good, ‘cause I don’t do handouts. But I don’t really know how to do the friend thing, so giving money’s kind of all I’m good for, really. And metal arms,” Tony says with a wink. Then he recoils. “Is that a piece of gum stuck to the tray?”

“That’s not true. And yes.”
“I’m done. I can’t take this anymore. Let’s go,” Tony stands up and turns to him, hands at his hips. “We’re having the rest of this conversation in first class, where I bought you a seat because I am awesome—“

“—because you like wasting money,” Barnes finishes, standing up. Tony’s won, he might as well follow the man. “Did you buy three tickets?”

“Four, you used my card, remember? But who’s counting? Come on, old man, I need disinfectant.”

“Okay, okay, calm your tits, I’m coming.”

“For the record,” Tony says once they’re sitting down in gigantic seats and being handed heated towels. “You’re the one doing me a favour.”

“And how is that?” Barnes asks.

“I may have…” Tony wets his lips and looks away, “gotten used to having other people around. Despite my previous hypothesis, home-cooked meals are better than ordering in five-star meals. Besides, the penthouse is a big place just for me.”

“You’re lonely?”

“I never said that. I just… prefer not to have to live alone for now.”

Tony is still looking out the window, but Barnes can’t take his eyes off of him. The way his arms are crossed over his chest, the pout of his dusky lips. Tony hasn’t been tolerating him for Steve’s sake; Tony needs Barnes around. Huh.

He is lonely. And Barnes gets that. He hadn’t been looking forward to hiding out by himself in shelters and old barns. Barnes likes eating late breakfasts with Tony, spending weekends watching Tony work and Steve draw Tony working, and wondering if either of them have realised how many hours have passed. It’s nice to spend evenings wrapped in warm blankets, breathing in familiar scents like Tony’s cologne and Steve’s aftershave. He doesn’t want to give it up. “Okay fine. I sleep somewhere else, and I’ll come back.”

A pause. Then Tony finally looks back at him.

“Seriously? That’s it?” Tony asks.

“I thought this was what you wanted.” Tony Stark is the most confusing person on the planet.

“Well, yeah. But I didn’t think you’d cave so quickly. I was already planning eight hours’ worth of reasons for you to come back. Now what are we going to do until we get to Jakarta?”

Sometimes, Steve hates being Captain America, being Steve Rogers, the guy who has to do the right thing. Because if he had his way he’d be at the airport, waiting for Tony and Bucky to land. Instead, he’s teaching Wanda hand-to-hand, because the last time they’d been in the field, she’d been pinned down by an AIM agent with far too much ease. So instead Steve has to settle for meeting them in the Tower.

Teaching Wanda reminds him of being taught by Peggy back before he’d gotten the serum. Back then, he’d been small and the goal had been to use that to his advantage. He remembers suddenly,
fondly, the look of satisfaction on Peggy’s face when she’d put Hodgins in his place.

It doesn’t hurt to think of Peggy anymore, Steve realises. He stops mid-stance, doesn’t even feel Wanda punching him in the solar plexus.

Steve?

It takes Steve a moment to realise that the voice is mental.

“I said no powers,” Steve tells her.

“You froze. You didn’t hear me calling your name out loud.” Wanda’s eyes slowly change from crimson back to brown. “Sorry.”

“That’s it for today. I’m gonna hit the showers.” Steve says. “You did good.”

“Well, you’re a good teacher,” Wanda says, pulling her hair out of her ponytail. Steve nods and turns around, about to duck out of the ring. “She taught you well.”

Steve stops. There’s a difference between sending telepathic messages and reading someone’s thoughts. “I remember you promising to stay out of our heads.”

“You’re broadcasting. You might as well be telling me not to listen while shouting in my ear.”

Steve turns around, feeling guilty. Wanda’s still learning, she’s bound to make mistakes. It’s not like they have someone around to teach her. “I’m sorry. I’m being impatient with you. I—“

“Just want to keep your personal life separate from your role as leader. No, I didn’t read your mind that time,” Wanda says with a tilt of her head, and a small smile. “She really did teach you well though, that Peggy Carter.”

“She did,” Steve agrees. “Still, Natasha can teach you more than I can, so she’ll be taking over your hand-to-hand training once she’s back from Madripoor.”

“Sure sure. Whatever excuse will let you get back to the Tower, right?” Wanda grins that manic, beautiful smile of hers. Steve hasn’t seen it since… well, since before Pietro’s death.

“Happy’s a good look on you,” Steve replies. “Thank Vizh for me.”

And then before Wanda can refute that in any way shape or form, Steve ducks out of the ring and hits the floor sprinting. Wanda doesn’t bother calling out, not when she can just send a message straight to his brain. *Team exercise is at 7 am tomorrow, Captain! Don’t be late!*

*You don’t be late,* Steve bits his tongue from replying, and then regrets it anyway when Wanda mentally sends the equivalent of a sticking her tongue out.

It’s a good scarf, Tony grudgingly admits to himself. It might be ugly and neon green, but Natasha knows how to knit a warm scarf. He’s on a video call with Pepper. The whole reason she left is because she couldn’t handle what Avenging did to Tony’s body. And Pepper’s assumed he’s got a cold. Barnes is picking clothes out of his closet, and Tony’s not-so-subtly checking out the goods from the couch. What? He’s hot. And unobtainable. It’s like ogling Adam Levine. Actually no, now that he remembers about that weekend in Seattle, it’s nothing like Adam Levine, no. Okay, like Kurt
Cobain. Totally unobtainable. So there.

Time for an abrupt change in topic, Tony decides.

JOCASTA has taken to running the Tower like a child takes to wreaking havoc after learning to walk. Except in JOCASTA’s case, it’s less havoc and more ganging up on Tony with Pepper, never mind the fact that Pepper is in Miami, and physically no threat.

Okay that’s a stupid thought: Pepper is never not a threat.

“—Tony?” Pepper asks him, and Tony comes back to the present.

“Yes to Seoul and London, no to Australia. Spiders are evolution’s mistake. Darwin said so,” Tony answers, ignoring Barnes’ amused look. “Barnes, what do you know, anyway? Go make me dinner or something.”

“Yes to Australia, no to besmirching Darwin’s good name, and also Mr. Barnes being your personal servant.” Pepper dismisses Tony with a look, one that translates well despite being transparent. “We don’t have a base in Australia; having a Stark Tower there is reasonable, seeing as nine percent—“

“— do not perform your statistics mumbo-jumbo voodoo on me, Ms. Potts. And don’t you tell Barnes what to do. Right Barnes?”

“Last I heard, Ms. Potts can tell everyone what to do, and if they want to live a long and happy life, they should just do what she says,” Barnes replies grabbing a pair of socks. “Hello Ms. Potts.”

Pepper gestures at Tony to turn the screen around and he does, until Pepper’s facing Barnes. “Well, I’m glad we have that sorted out. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Mr. Barnes. I trust living with Tony’s not too much a hardship?”

And this is why Tony loves Pepper, because when he had told her that Captain America’s sidekick and best friend had come back to life after being brainwashed and used as an assassin, her first question had been: does he need a valid ID? And then she’d terrorised Coulson — pulling the whole you-made-me-think-you-were-dead card — until he made the arrangements to do just that. Pepper’s perfect and if she ever decides to become a villain, the world is so screwed.

“Well, I only get harassed by robots five times a day, so it could be worse, I guess.”

“You could get woken up in the middle of the night by the suit.”

“It was one time!” Tony exclaims even as Barnes shoots him another amused grin.

“Mr. Barnes, it’s been a pleasure. Tony, turn me around.” Pepper orders, and Tony obeys. “Yes to Australia, I’m going to get started on zoning—“

“SPIDERS. That eat birds. What if Sam comes to visit and gets eaten by a spider?”

“Why would Sam go to visit a Tower in Australia that you yourself will likely never visit considering your arachnophobia? And Sam isn’t actually a bird, Tony,” Pepper says, two fingers pressed against her forehead.

“It isn’t a phobia! It’s scientific disgust!” Tony rants. “And you think I’m going to take that risk?”

Pepper glares.

Tony raises his eyebrow.
Pepper glares some more.

Tony raises the other eyebrow, lips teasing a grin.

Pepper’s face breaks out into an exasperated, but possibly fond, smile. “Tony!”

“Oh, Pepper!”

It’s as if a dam breaks. They never stopped talking to each other, they have a company to run, so that would have been impractical. So they’ve talked, in stilted, professional tones — for the most part. Though sometimes Tony’s inability to stay serious had loved butting in every once in a while, their conversations for the most part had been short and awkward. Suddenly, they’re almost friends again, best friends. She is still something he cannot live without; Tony doubts that will ever change. However, she isn’t the one thing he can’t imagine living without anymore, and somehow the world seems just a little easier to live in. Tony has missed Pepper.

The pause is broken by Pepper, who smiles and then continues as if nothing has happened. “Yes to Australia. And you’re going to get me the new phone prototype by the end of the week. And you’re going to drink some orange juice. Your voice sounds awful and you’re a terror when you’re sick. In return, you don’t have to fly in for the board of directors meeting next Friday.”

“Square deal,” Tony replies. He’s been so busy with the Tower and working out the kinks in JOCASTA that he’d completely forgotten about his responsibilities with SI.

“And Tony?”

“Yeah?” Tony asks, watching Barnes disappear into the bathroom.

“Good work on the Tower.”

Tony takes a quick breath. “It needed to be done.

“It’s okay to miss him,” Pepper says after a pause. “I know I do.”

“You’re only human, you can’t help it.” Tony replies. “I’m a futurist, I’m good.”

“Well,” Pepper says with watery eyes. “If the futurist needs a friend to talk to—“

“I’ll call Rhodey and not bother my totally swamped CEO with it,” Tony interrupts with a smirk.

Pepper laughs. “Glad to see you’re learning.”

“Will that be all, Miss Potts?”

“Yes Mr. Stark; that will be all.”

When Barnes comes out of the shower, he finds Tony sitting on the floor of the living room with a tablet in his hand. Barnes ties his still-damp hair up in the red hair band Tony gave him ages ago. He’s going to need a new one soon, this one is beginning to get stretched out. Tony looks up, runs his eyes down Barnes’ frame, and sighs.

“Okay that’s it, Barnes, it is high time we get you some clothes of your own. Get me that tablet you’re testing out for me and I’ll show you how to shop online.”
Barnes tenses. “That’s okay. I don’t need anything.”

“Is this a money thing? Because you can consider it an early Christmas gift. And it’s not too much for a Christmas gift. Ask Pepper about the giant rabbit. Or don’t. It’s not that great a story.

Barnes struggles to find the words. It’s difficult to explain, because Barnes likes having a choice. He likes Tony giving him the chance to say yes or no. But making multiple decisions is hard. It’s easier to take Tony’s things, or Steve’s hoodies, the one’s he’s always leaving around the living room. They smell good, like Tony and Steve, which is to say, like safety.

Tony scrutinises him, and Barnes can feel his cheeks heating for some reason. “You don’t have to. Your choice. I just thought you’d want more comfortable clothes. All my shit’s too small for your freakishly large shoulders. But if you’re fine with it, do your thing. God knows I own enough clothes. If there’s anything you need though, just let me know, okay?”

“Okay,” Barnes says. “Why are you on the floor?”

“I had an epiphany,” Tony says, like that explains everything. “And the marble’s surprisingly comfortable, so I decided to just chill here for a while. Wanna join me?”

“Sure.”

When Steve arrives in the penthouse, Bucky is in the middle of making dinner. “Tony’s in the lab,” Bucky says, his back still to Steve.

“Hey. You okay?”

“Yes.”

“Alright, well, I’ll just head down then,” Steve says and heads to the lab. If Bucky wants to be left alone, Steve understands.

He greets the bots quickly before focusing on Tony, who is working on what looks like a new pair of wings for Sam. Steve asks, “Did Sam tell you the balance was off?”

“And I told him it’s because he’s getting fat. But nobody listens to me, as always,” Tony replies with a rough voice, putting down the blowtorch to greet Steve.

“Are you sick?”

“Nah — I mean, yeah. Totally.” Tony wraps another loop of his scarf around his neck, the movement revealing a hint of blue under the scarf. “I think I caught something in the plane. I don’t know how people survive travelling in those death traps.”

“Take the scarf off, Tony.”

“What? No, I’m cold.”

“Right now,” Steve orders in his Captain America voice. Not that it always works with Tony, but it’s worth a shot. He walks toward Tony’s worktable, reaching forward to pull the scarf over his head. Tony’s fast, but without the suit, he’s just not fast enough, and Steve puts the scarf down on the table before looking back at Tony in triumph—
“Oh my God.”

“Oh my God, stop mothering me, please. I’m fine. There’s no lasting—“

“What the hell happened?” Steve demands, his fingers ghosting over the finger-shaped bruises on Tony’s neck.

“Okay first of all, breathe, it was an accident. It’s my own fault, actually,” Tony replies.

“That is not the answer to my question, Tony!” There’s a fire building inside of Steve. It’s always there when his teammates get hurt, but this time, it burns so hot it hurts.

“Barnes was asleep. He had a nightmare and he woke me up so I tried to shake him out of it and he freaked out and sort of, maybe, choked me a little bit.” Tony holds up his hand when Steve tries to speak. “Let me finish. He realised what was happening a second later and then, well, he decided to fly to Jakarta. Using my card. That was dumb. Cards can be tracked. I’m going to stop talking now because your face is turning a funny colour.”

“He choked you?”

“In his defence, I did steal his waffles for dinner the night before.”

“Tony, will you please be serious?” All this time, Steve had worried about Bucky, so preoccupied with his state of mind that not once had he thought about the danger he might have been putting Tony in. Without the armour, Tony’s vulnerable. And despite the weeks he’s spent here in relative stability, no one truly knows Bucky’s state of mind.

“He has PTSD. I have PTSD. I should have known better than to shake him awake mid-nightmare. Like I said, my fault.”

Steve closes his eyes. “Tony, maybe we should consider moving him upstate.”

Tony gently pushes Steve’s hands away from his neck and grabs his scarf. “We are not going to consider anything. Barnes goes where he wants to go. I never thought you of all people would suggest otherwise.”

Steve forces his eyes open, focusing on the mottling green and blue bruises. “You could have died.”

“But I didn’t. He stopped, he knew himself. This isn’t a memory thing, this is a PTSD thing. Steve, come on, it’s not his fault.”

“But he needs help.”

“And if he wants to go see your Avenger shrinks and have Helen check him out, or I don’t know — Sabrina the Teenage Witch — then he has to make that decision. Not me. Not you.”

Steve nods. The heat in his belly is still there, it just doesn’t burn so much anymore. Tony’s okay. And Bucky hadn’t meant it. He doesn’t know why this gets to him so much. Bucky’d shot Natasha, he’d blown Sam right out of the air, but Tony…

Between the arguing and the punching, it isn’t a wonder Steve hadn’t noticed this. What was it with Steve and developing feelings for unobtainable men and women? Peggy, who lived a lifetime without him; Bucky, who’d only ever seen him as a friend, and now Tony, who’d never look at dumb, old-fashioned Steve who still has his difficulties with the talking microwave.
Tony, who looks at Bucky like he’s the most fascinating thing he’s ever encountered. And Bucky, who looks at Tony like he’s the only light in this dark world. Tony, who’d woken Bucky up from a nightmare because they’d already been in bed together…

“…Steve?”

“Yeah. You’re right. It’s his choice,” Steve steps back. “I’m going to head upstairs.”

“’Kay. I’ll come up soon. Barnes is experimenting with Jamie Oliver recipes. My fault. I gave him the remote control. Gordon Ramsey’s funnier but you try telling that to Barnes.”

He needs a moment to get his head around this. Tony and Bucky. Tony and Bucky.

Tony and Bucky.

He can handle that. What matters is that Bucky’s happy. That Tony’s happy. Everything else is details. Bucky is the man Steve’s loved for an entire lifetime without expecting anything back, and Tony, well if Steve can do it once, he can do it twice. He’ll be fine. He just… he needs a moment.

“You sure you’re okay? You’re turning a funny colour again.”

“I’m fine. Just tired. Don’t worry about me.” Steve flees.

-  

Steve stands in front of his bathroom mirror, clutching the sink. The water’s running, and usually, he’d be ashamed of wasting so much hot water, but right now that hot water is what’s keeping the mirror from clearing, and Steve isn’t ready to face himself yet.

Tony and Bucky are together.

Everything starts making sense now. How protective Bucky is of Tony, how quickly Tony came to Bucky’s defence; it all adds up. The fact that Bucky hadn’t been given his own set of rooms. Steve has assumed Bucky was crashing in the guest bedroom of the penthouse, but clearly, that’s not the case. And there’s also the fact that Bucky is always wearing Tony’s clothes, despite having just as much access to Steve’s room. Access which, now that he’s had a look at his apartment, Bucky never took advantage of. There is no dust layering everything, but housekeeping sees to that. Everything is exactly how Steve left it when he’d last stayed here.

Stop, Steve tells himself. *Stop overanalysing.* Yes, Bucky used to be Steve’s best friend. But this is Barnes, he reminds himself. Bucky had never been in love with him, but Bucky had never loved men. This is the new Barnes, who doesn’t feel that way about Steve. To this man, Steve’s just a hazy memory he doesn’t understand. Tony’s the one who saved him.

And Tony is finally moving on. It’s a good thing. Steve realises now that this is the only way it could have worked right. Even if either of them had had feelings for Steve, he couldn’t hurt the other one. This way, they’re both happy.

And Steve will have to learn to be happy with that.

Barnes busies himself in the kitchen when Steve comes back. He’s not really sure how to look the man in the eye. Because until now, no matter what, Steve’s affection for the man Barnes had once
been, had kept him from being a threat. But despite how much Steve tries to deny it, Barnes knows that is exactly what he has become.

A threat.

He knows Steve won’t fight him, though Barnes kind of wishes he would. If Barnes himself would kill anyone who dared lay a hand on Tony, how much more is Steve, someone who so very clearly loves Tony, entitled to throw a punch or two at Barnes? Instead, Steve just pulls glasses out of the cupboard and fills them with orange juice.

He moves like nothing’s the matter, but his eyes are bloodshot. He looks so sad. Apparently that’s all Barnes is good for, making Steve sad.

Steve catches his eye and stops. “What the matter?”

“I’m sorry,” Barnes says. He wants to explain, but he has no explanation. He hurt Tony. Someone who’d done everything in his power to make Barnes feel okay.

“Bu-Barnes, it’s okay. You don’t owe me an apology.”

“I keep nearly killing all your friends.”

“Well in your defence, Natasha and Sam were trying to kill you,” Steve says with a half-smile.

“Tony was trying to help,”

“It was an accident,” Steve places a hand on his shoulder. “You were having a nightmare. It’s not your fault.”

“He’s right,” a voice says from behind Steve. They turn to find Tony walking towards them, hair flying in a thousand directions and shiny from motor oil. “Not your fault. Now how long before you get over this phobia of touching me already? It gives a guy low self-esteem, you know. Kind of makes me want to take a shower.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Steve replies first, with that flirty smile of his. Affection blooms in Barnes’ chest. This punk...

“Only if you join me,” Tony says with a wink, and then Steve freezes up, like he’s surprised by the flirting despite the fact that it’s all the two of them seem to do.

“I don’t think I’m really the right guy for that,” Steve replies, the earlier mirth no longer visible in his face.

Tony tilts his head, and then answers, “Well I’d ask Barnes, but he’s developing a Tony-phobia.”

Barnes looks at Tony, then at Steve, than back at Tony. “I’m not afraid of touching you, jackass.”

“Prove it,” Tony challenges, and Barnes instantly learns exactly what kind of man he is: the kind that always steps up. Every step towards Tony is like climbing a mountain but it’s the safety of Steve behind him and the warmth of Tony in front of him that pull him forward. They’re like two end of a rope that bring him closer and closer to Tony. Before he knows it, he’s inches from Tony, whose eyes dare him on.

Barnes attacks.

Tony drops to the floor and Barnes follows, fingers attacking his belly, his sides, not giving in
despite Tony’s peals of laughter. Barnes straddles Tony, pressing his arms to his sides. “Still think I’m scared of you?”

“You should be. I could hack your arm. Cap, get this jerk off of me, this is harassment,” Tony orders. His pulse is racing under Barnes’ fingertips, Barnes presses his thumbs against it, comforting proof that Tony’s alive, he’s not going anywhere, not if Barnes can help it.

Barnes turns to look at Steve, who’s wearing something that’s supposed to be a smile. Tony tries to break the hold, thinking that Barnes is distracted, and succeeds in doing all of nothing. For some reason, that thought is the most hilarious thing in the world. Barnes grins at Steve, hoping Steve will smile back genuinely.

After a moment, he does. Smiling indulgently, he tells Tony, “If you finally admit that you need hand-to-hand lessons, Tony.”

“Excuse me?” Tony demands.

“If you can admit that,” Barnes says, “Hell, I’ll move without a fight.”

Tony bucks against him again, and Barnes takes pleasure in pushing him back down. Strands of his hair fall on Tony’s face, and by the twitching of his mouth, it’s tickling him. “Oh my God, stop! Okay fine, I may need hand-to-hand refreshers! Now move, dammit! And get a haircut!”

Barnes climbs off of him, offering him a hand up. Tony refuses it, pulling himself up and then poking Barnes in the belly. “I hate all of you. Give me my food so I can go make terrible weapons for Natasha that she will one day use to kill you for pulling off black leather better than her, and you,” Tony turns to Steve, “for eating the last of the fudge Jane brought from London.”

“Thor ate the last of that before he went to Asgard.”

“I’m sure she’ll find something to kill you for.”

“Well, either way, she’ll have a harder time of it trying to kill me, though,” Steve replies, taking a plate and scooping a good portion of pasta for himself.

“Maybe you should stop being such a tyrant and be useful for a change,” Tony says, reaching for Steve’s plate. Steve lets him have it, as Barnes watches in content. If they don’t like this meal, he’s never cooking anything besides eggs and bacon again. “Teach me, oh great Captain, this padawan awaits your instructions.”

“I don’t see you nearly often enough for that to be useful training. Barnes, why don’t you teach him?” Steve looks to Barnes, and Barnes tenses up, his body a single rigid line.

“No.”

Steve’s asked him before if he wanted to train with him and he’s always said no. He’s not risking accidental injuries because some internal muscle memory does what it was ordered to do last. Barnes hasn’t actually trained since coming here. Yes, Barnes uses the gym to keep fit, and runs on the treadmill for hours sometimes, but he’s never fought anyone because he’s not ready to trust his body or mind to that level. He’s not attacking either of them, training or not. Not going to risk that.

A moment, a pause. “Okay, then. Saturday morning when you bring new tech for the team? We could train before the meeting,” Steve suggests to Tony.

“Deal.”
Steve has to leave the same day because some time-travelling conqueror decides it’s time to attack Delhi. Barnes hates saying goodbye. Before he goes, already suited up, he pulls Tony into a quick hug, and then turns to Barnes. Steve waits because sometimes Barnes doesn’t like being held by Steve. Sometimes it leaves him feeling antsy and itching, wanting for something. Sometimes it leaves him warm and safe and pliant, and he’s not sure about today. But Steve’s off to war, and Barnes knows that means each smile, each touch could be the last. He wants to put on a suit of his own and run after Steve, watch his back so nothing could ever hurt him, but Steve has people for that, and Steve’s never liked him butting in on his fights.

(I had him on the ropes.)

So he pulls Steve into a tight embrace, presses his nose into Steve’s shoulder and breathes him in. He’s going to be fine. Tony made this suit especially for Steve. Barnes had watched him do it. Tony would never let Steve get hurt. He’ll be just fine.

He turns to Tony, who’s looking at him over the edge of his tablet. “I’m going to work on tech for the Avengers. You going to keep me company?”

Barnes shakes his head. Usually, he’d say yes. Watching Tony work always results in an impromptu lesson in electrical or mechanical engineering. And Barnes likes science, he can ask all the stupid questions — he knows they’re stupid because he can see Tony biting back scathing remarks — and receive good answers. He’s been here often enough that he can fix any minor problems to the arm. He prefers it when Tony does it, but in a tight spot, he won’t be completely useless.

But there’s something he needs to do today.

“Okay that. Cool. Well, I’ll be there a while, so night night.”

“Good night.” Barnes replies, and makes his way to the private suites. He knows the way now. He’s stood in front of this door multiple times. The guest access card that Steve gave him is warm in his hand by the time he decides to swipe it.

The door opens, it’s dark. “JOCASTA, lights.” Barnes asks, and she turns the lights on.

The first observation he makes is something that brings out a jab of irritation. The suite isn’t messy, not really, but it’s definitely lived in; which is ridiculous considering the fact that Steve doesn’t live here anymore.

“Stevie, can’t you put your shoes away, for Pete’s sake, I trip over them every damn time!”

“Not my fault your head’s so thick you haven’t learned to step around them after four months o’ living with me!”

Oh I could kiss that stupid mouth.

Barnes shakes his head. He’s going to lose whatever’s left of his sanity trying to figure out what’s real and what isn’t. There are times when he thinks some of these memories may be part of the Hydra brainwashing, but what use would they have to convince the Winter Soldier that he’d loved Captain America? Either it was his memories coming back, or dreams Bucky Barnes used to dream.

Barnes takes the shoes and puts them on the shoe rack before walking into living space. There’s a glass sitting on the coffee table, half-filled with water. A hoodie lies crumpled on the sofa. Barnes takes both of them and walks into the kitchen to rinse the glass. Then he takes the hoodie into the
bedroom. He considers dumping it in the laundry basket, but it doesn’t look dirty, and Bucky’s a little cold, so he figures, why not, and pulls it over his head. There’s a little bit of Steve left, the smell of deodorant and aftershave. It has the same effect on Barnes as Tony’s clothes do, calming him, making him forget about the memories that flash by every other minute. His memories are like bulbs blowing, the only trigger needed is a similar situation. He knows what Bucky’s apartment used to look like now. What Bucky’s little sister used to look like. He remembers rubbing menthol rub on Steve’s chest, remembers layering blanket after jacket after scarf on top of a tiny, shivering Steve. He thinks remembers pressing little Steve down on that bed and making him scream, but he’s not so sure about that one. But he also remembers choking Steve in that bed until he stops breathing, and when Barnes looks, it isn’t Steve, and it isn’t that tiny cot, but suddenly it’s the Tower, and dead on the bed is Tony.

Barnes opens his eyes and he’s back in Steve’s room. He breathes in the scent of Steve and forces the memories — or dreams, whatever they are — away. “JOCASTA.”

“Yes, Mr. Barnes.”

“I want to talk to Tony.”

“Please wait, I’ll connect you now.”

After a moment, Tony’s raw voice speaks. “Yeah?”

“Are you—” okay? Barnes wants to ask. But that’s ridiculous, of course that wasn’t a memory, it was the thought of a dream, just a thought.

“Yeah?”

“Nothing.”

“Kay. Good night.”

“Good night.”

Barnes heads to the bedroom, which is large enough to be an apartment. But it’s cosy and intimate and a little bit too much for Barnes, considering the photo of him sitting on the dressing table. So he treks back to the living room.

There’s a television, a record player, and an easel by the window. On the shelf with the record player, there’s an entire row of black, inconspicuous sketchbooks. They’re just like the ones Steve uses to sketch all the time. He tends to go through one every month. Barnes takes one out and opens it to a sketch of a man with a bowler hat and a big moustache. His chest aches.

Barnes takes the book with him, settles into the sofa, and flips through the pages slowly. It’s one of Steve’s earlier ones. Steve always dates his sketches, he’s meticulous about that even if he can’t be bothered with the state of his living spaces. These are from 2012. Back when he’d just woken up, Barnes realises. They’re all in black and white, sketches in charcoal and slightly blurry.

It’s a vicious cycle.

A drop of water falls from his eyes and ruins the curl of Dum Dum’s moustache, and Barnes realises the images themselves aren’t actually all that blurry. He turns the page again.

Utter chaos. Pages and pages of blacked out work, a quarter of the book missing, only the seams showing where Steve had ripped out the pages. He flips the page again and nearly rips the page out in shock. There, stark black on creamy white, a portrait of Sergeant Bucky Barnes, shoulders bare, the chain of his dog tags disappearing from around his neck and off of the page. His eyes look straight at him, his hair just long enough to bother him when he’s trying to get the right shot.

The paper is wrinkled, as if Steve has nearly ripped it out, but stopped in the end. Barnes wonders why. He wonders what all the other ripped out pages were about. He smoothes out the paper and turns the page, but it’s the last one. He shuts the book and puts it away.

That’s enough for tonight. He climbs into bed, breathes in the smell of Steve Rogers, and tries to sleep.

“If I let you have this sesame seed bagel, can we pretend this session is over already? I don’t want to beat up a 98-year-old.” Steve looks up from his sketchbook to find Iron Man hovering in front of him. Steve’s been dangling his legs off the edge of the roof, working on landscapes with pastels. It’s not going well. Steve leaves the sketchbook open on the roof — they need to set — and stands up.

“So is that a yes?” Tony waves the paper bag.

“It’s a thank you,” Steve says before leaning forward to grab at the bag. The suit flies backwards, and Steve miscalculates the distance — and the next thing he knows, he’s surrounded by cold metal and hanging in the air. Steve looks down on the golden mask, at his own arms loosely wrapped around Iron Man’s shoulders. There’s a metal arm wrapped tightly around his waist, he’s not going to fall. It’s easy like this, so long as Tony’s deep, brown eyes are hidden by the mask. Like this, things are back to normal.

“God, Steven, when you said you were dying for a bagel from Adrian’s, I didn’t think you meant it quite this literally,” Tony’s mechanised voice says.

And oh, that one isn’t going away anytime soon, either.

-  

It’s really going to be okay, Steve tells himself. Tony and Bucky are his friends. He can be happy for them. He can do this. Even if it breaks his heart, he can do this.

For Tony.

And for Bucky.
It's cold. The Soldier opens his eyes, but it's just as dark. Feeling around him, he realises he's in a small, icy chamber. He can't see anything, he’s frozen, but now he remembers where he is. He’s in cryo, and they don’t need him, so they’ve locked him up. They’ve forgotten about him and left him here alone. The Soldier doesn’t have a mission, that means he’s doesn’t have anything; he isn’t anything.

It's so cold—

He’s on the shores of the Potomac, and he’s not Bucky — who the hell is Bucky? — and his mission is this man, this Captain — the man on the bridge — he’s supposed to die and the Soldier’s done it. He’s dead, dead, dead and the Soldier’s mission is complete. He can go home now, back to cryo, not the home he used to share with Stevie, not the Tower with Tony’s cheeky grins and—

He’s back inside the chamber and his mission is dead. His mission is dead; Steve is dead because he killed him, he killed him and now he’s going to forget, he wants to forget. Howie’s dead and Stevie’s dead and soon—

He’s in bed with Tony Stark — Iron Man, Howie’s son, his friend. One minute Tony’s asleep, his arms thrown carelessly over the Soldier’s body, and the next, he’s pale as milk, metal hand wrapped around his beautiful neck. The Soldier chokes him and Tony struggles, his arms coming up but flesh is nothing to metal and tears mean nothing to the Soldier so he dies, dies and the Soldier is still nothing—

So he’s back in cryo and back to being forgotten and—

- 

Barnes wakes up. He crawls out of bed retching— everything still smells like Steve and all he can see is Steve being dead, dead, dead— and makes it to the bathroom before he vomits into the toilet bowl. Again and again he heaves and nothing comes except for tears in his eyes that Barnes wipes away furiously.

It wasn’t real. It wasn’t real.

But telling himself that means nothing because he can’t trust himself, he doesn’t know anymore. There’s a knock at the door. “Barnes? Can I come in?”

It’s Tony, standing in the open doorway. Barnes nods, relieved beyond belief at the sight of Tony,
olive skin and uncombed hair, looking sleep soft and very worried. Tony walks in, shuts the toilet lid and flushes it before sitting on top of it. His knee is close to Barnes’ shoulders, but he’s not touching him. He doesn’t look afraid though. He’s waiting for Barnes to make the move, and so he does, leaning forward until he’s pressing his forehead against Tony’s knee. Tony instantly reaches over with his arm, rubbing Barnes’ back in large circles. Barnes doesn’t know what he’s done to deserve this much kindness.

“How’d you know?” Barnes croaks.

Tony winces. “Well I may have asked JOCASTA to keep me updated regarding your sleep schedule and possibly lack thereof. I realise now that it’s a little creepy. Sorry about that.”

Barnes shakes, he’s not sure if he’s laughing or sobbing, but Tony’s making it better. He’s alive. Barnes can hear his heartbeat. Steve. He needs to hear Steve’s heart; he needs to know that Steve’s okay.

“Woah, hey, it’s okay. What do you need? Tell me,” Tony soothes, and it’s awful. Because this isn’t the first time he’s dreamt of killing, or of Hydra, but it is the first time he’s taken both Tony and Steve, and now Tony’s here, caring for him as only Tony can, and Steve’s… Barnes sobs. He doesn’t know where Steve is, or whether he’s okay.

“Steve,” Barnes says, lips moving against Tony’s leg. “Stevie…”

“Do you want to see Steve?” Tony asks. “I can call him. Hold on.” He pulls out his phone and starts dialling, then balances it on his lap. After two rings, he picks up the video call.

“Bucky?” Steve’s climbing out of bed with the phone in his hand. “Are you okay? What’s the matter?”

“I killed you,” Barnes says, hating Tony’s palm on his back; it takes away the lingering cold of the cryo chamber and he doesn’t deserve it. “I left you in the Potomac and I killed you, you were dead and,” he meets Tony’s beautiful brown eyes, “and I killed you and I have nothing. I’m nothing.”

He can’t hear them anymore. Steve’s talking to him and then when he receives no reply, he begins talking with Tony. Bucky can’t watch anymore because all he sees is their dead bodies, and all he knows is how cold their bodies are, and how much colder cryo is, and then he’s alone, he’s all alone and he deserves it because he’s killed too many good men. He wonders if it’s foolish to hope that Hydra will forget about him, forget he was ever there and just let him live out the rest of this prison sentence in ice—

And then Tony takes his right hand, presses his fingers up against his own wrist and holds them there. “Barnes, I’m alive. I’m here, and I need you to listen. You did not kill me. You didn’t kill Steve. Look, it’s time for a field trip to the training centre. You can see Steve there. He’s perfectly fine.”

Barnes can do nothing but nod.

“Steve, it’s going to be okay,” Wanda tells him. She’d been meditating in the hangar when Steve showed up, and promptly disrupted her meditation with all his pacing.

“You don’t know that.”
“You trust Tony, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Steve replies automatically. Whatever the case, Tony’s proven again and again that he can be trusted. Especially with Bucky. It’s no wonder. Tony takes the well-being of those he loves very seriously.

“Then stop worrying. Everything is going to be okay.”

It doesn’t stop him from pacing. But the hangar doors opening and the Quinjet flying in, does. Steve doesn’t wait for them to disembark the aircraft, taking the stairs up into the vehicle before they have even completely unfolded.

Bucky’s sitting beside Tony but he swivels around in his chair and stands up. “Steve?”

“I’m here,” Steve says, and Bucky moves so fast that the next thing Steve knows is arms tight around him and long, wispy hair in his face. Bucky’s hand moves to Steve’s neck, pressing down until he finds the pulse and then he finally lets out a breath, as if he’s been holding it for the entire trip. Steve wraps his arms around Bucky with one hand splayed on the nape of his neck. “It’s okay. We’re okay. It was a nightmare. You aren’t nothing. Don’t you see how much you mean to us? To Tony? You mean so much, Buc—Barnes.”

He looks up at Tony to find him looking at the two of them in relief, and something else. He begins to pull away from Bucky. Tony’s the boyfriend, and Steve doesn’t want to step on any toes. But Bucky just clings, and Steve can’t let go, not when he’s holding Steve like he’s amazed that he’s even alive.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Steve promises. “I won’t leave you. You mean the world to me. I’ll never leave you.”

He’s left Bucky twice, he’ll never do it again.

Tony backs out of the Quinjet quietly, squeezing Steve on the shoulder on his way out. He closes the door behind him.

Steve doesn’t know how long they stand there, arms tight around each other. Steve breathes in the scent of Bucky, the sleek smell of metal mixed with a hint of the tea he’s always drinking. He’s wearing Tony’s hand warmers, but has had them for so long they no longer smell of Tony. He has one of Steve’s t-shirts on. “I’m here, Buc—Barnes.”

“You loved him,” Bucky whispers against his neck. His stubble rubs against Steve’s bare shoulder. “I’m not him, and one of these days, that fact is going to break your heart. I’m going to break your heart.”

Steve swallows, and pushes Bucky back, just a little, placing both his hands on his shoulders. “I need you to look at me, please.” He waits until Bucky obliges before continuing. “I know you hate being called Bucky, that you don’t think there’s anything left of him in you. But I knew Bucky like I knew the back of my hand. Bucky loved olives. He was a science nerd, he took me to the Stark Expo for Pete’s sake. He was a neat freak. I’ve let you figure it out on your own because I wanted you to find yourself, rather than start cleaning because you thought that’s who you had to be. But Bucky, who ate all the olives the first time they invited me over for dinner? Who spent an entire day organising Tony’s tool set despite the fact that the thing had always been a mess? Who’s always organising my graphite pencils by thickness?”

Bucky fights the hold and Steve lets go right away, afraid to push his boundaries. But instead of
walking away, he presses his nose into the crook of Steve’s neck. Tears wet Steve’s skin and he wants to wipe them away, but he doesn’t want Bucky to move either. Instead, Steve holds him close and begins to whisper.

“You bring me coffee in the mornings just how I like it, though I’ve never told you,” Steve whispers into Bucky’s hair, his fingers gently combing through it. “You love houseplants, you’re always talking to them. Your nose flares when you’re trying not to laugh. You’re always dancing when there’s music. You keep separating Bucky and Barnes but they’re one and the same. Sure, they’re missing some memories, and the second one’s a little more jagged but it’s still the same man I loved all those years ago.”

Bucky holds him tighter, and Steve has to pause, taking a few deep breaths so his voice doesn’t crack. “You might not remember me, or care about me, and that’s okay. I’m obviously not closing my eyes and hoping the Bucky Barnes I knew will one day come back to me. You know why?” Steve nearly chokes. “Because he already has. I see it in the way you take care of Tony, and in your every smile. You are Bucky Barnes, some lost memories aren’t going to take away who you are.”

Bucky sobs at that, clutching Steve for support. And Steve gives him everything because anything less is insufficient. “You’re not breaking my heart. You’re mending it. I haven’t lost you. I finally have you again. You’re my best friend, Bucky,” Steve does choke then. “Maybe one day, I could be yours, too. Either way, I’m—”

“—with you to the end of the line,” Bucky finishes the sentence for him, and then presses his lips to Steve’s.

For a moment, just one, Steve allows it. He cherishes it because God knows he’s dreamt of this, but then he gently pushes Bucky away.

“No. Stop.” Steve blinks until his sight is clear again. The look on Bucky’s face is nearly awful enough for Steve to pull him into his arms again, but simply being inside the Quinjet, with its ruined JARVIS sticker and the hundred signs of Tony’s handiwork, stops Steve cold.

Then Bucky’s face goes blank, and Steve nearly screams because this is what Tony does, he hides his heart away. Steve can’t take it, not from Bucky too; his life is lousy with people who protect their hearts in steel and iron.

“Well, that answers that question, then,” Bucky says with a plastic smile. “It’s okay. It’s fine. Let’s just pretend—“

“What question?” Steve asks, because he’s grasping at straws, he doesn’t know where to go from here. And to think he had trouble trusting Tony, when it should have been the other way around.

“Whether all the times I dreamt of kissing you were dreams or memories.”

“What do you mean?” Steve sits down on the nearest seat, and Bucky follows, sitting across from him.

“He was… I was in love with you. It doesn’t matter anyway,” Bucky says, running a hand through his hair. “You’re my best friend, Steve. That’s what matters.”

No. Steve doesn’t understand the words coming out of Bucky’s mouth. It makes no sense. They’d never talked about loving other men, not in their Irish Catholic homes. “No. No, you were never in love with me. I would have known. Three years we lived in an apartment together, we’d been best friends for twenty years, Bucky, you did not love me.”
Bucky — and Steve’s right, he is Bucky — laughs. “Then why did I dream of it? From the beginning, even when I was homeless and alone and fighting Hydra, why did I always dream of touching you? Of kissing you?”

Bucky might not know his own mind, but he knows this to be the truth. He believes Steve, he understands what Steve means about Barnes being Bucky, and he can accept that. But this? No, this no one can convince him of otherwise; Bucky Barnes loved Steve Rogers, still does, won’t ever stop. Even if he lost every other memory in the world he’d still love Steve Rogers to the end of the line.

“But like I said, it doesn’t matter,” Bucky says. Steve’s in love with Tony. Steve’d pushed him away. And that’s fine. It’s good. Because Bucky shouldn’t have kissed Steve. He should be pushing Tony and Steve together, so they can be happy and smile. Bucky can stay on the side lines and watch them be happy. He’d rather do that than hurt either of them. “Because you’re in love with Tony—“

“—Because you’re in love with Tony,” Steve says at the same time.

“What?” They again speak simultaneously.

Bucky opens his mouth but Steve beats him to it. “Okay, maybe you’re not in love with him yet, but you have feelings for him. You’re dating, after all.”

“What?” Bucky can’t help staring at Steve in confusion, but in his defence, Steve’s talking like an idiot. “I’m what? I’m not dating Tony. Why would I be dating Tony? He’s head over heels for you!”

Now apparently it’s Steve’s turn to look confused. “You’re not… dating Tony?”

“Who the fuck told you that, pal? Have you seen the two of you flirting? Until you decided to stop—OH. WHAT THE. Why the… what?” Bucky has the right to be at a loss for words.

“Oh.”

“Why would you think that? Is this another part of the Natasha and Clint prank wars? What did I do to them? And —”

“It’s not,” Steve replies. “It’s just. You were sleeping in his bed, and you always wear his clothes—”

Bucky can’t help the laughter bubbling up inside of him. He’s still high on adrenaline from the nightmare, and also the kissing — God he can’t believe there was kissing — so he’ll go ahead and blame it on that.

“By that logic, I’d be dating you because I’ve been sleeping in your bedroom for a week now, Stevie what the—”

“It’s not that funny.”

“Yes it is, knucklehead! It’s like fondue all over again, Stevie you’re so bad at this oh God.” Bucky has to hold his face in his hand and just let it out. But dammit all to hell and beyond, this is the punk Bucky’s decided to love.

“He loves you.”
That puts a stop to the laughter.

“He’s a kind man, despite what he wants the world to think,” Bucky answers. “But he doesn’t love me. Not like that.”

“Bucky, he’s flown around the world for you.”

“Because you asked him to.” Tony loves Steve. Bucky knows that, he sees the way Tony looks at Steve when Steve doesn’t see him looking.

Steve sighs, folding himself in half on the seat, his knees coming up to hide his face. “Because he cares about you. He loves you, Buck. And you love him.”

“No I don’t!” Bucky stands up, beginning to pace back and forth across the small space available in the Quinjet. “I don’t…”

He can’t say the words. They’re clinging to his teeth, refusing to leave his mouth. “You know what, fuck this. I kissed you. I know who I love. It’s you. It’s always been you. And maybe you used to love me, but Steve, he makes you smile. You love him. I don’t. I won’t stand in the way of that.”

“Bucky Barnes, I am in love with you and I am never going to stop. But I survived for this long without you loving me back, with all the girls you took out on dates, I was fine with it. I thought you weren’t like me, queer and all. Don’t…” Steve’s voice cracks along with Bucky’s heart. “Please don’t think you have to be in love with me because the Bucky Barnes that I knew used to be. It doesn’t…it doesn’t matter. People change. It’s okay to love him. Tell me it won’t bother you if he were with someone. If someone else was in bed with him.”

At that, Bucky’s blood boils; he can’t help it. The idea of it makes him want to destroy something. “Stop it.”

“No,” Steve continues. His voice is muffled by his knees, but Bucky hears him clear as day. “I won’t. Because it would bother you. I can’t lose you again. I just got you back. Tony and I are just friends. We’ve gone through the unbelievable together and that means something, but his feelings towards me are not romantic in any sense. He loves you. You can’t tell me you don’t love him.”

“So why don’t you think it’s not the same the other way around? Do you really think you could handle it if I fucked him? Or if he fucked me?” Bucky demands.

“Yes. Because it would be you,” Steve says, he looks so sad, but also happy. “If it’s you. It’s okay. Because two of the most important people in my life would be happy with each other.”

Bucky doesn’t know how to reply to that. All of these hypotheticals and they don’t even agree on who Tony has feelings for. Bucky comes to sit beside Steve, who looks at him with a broken smile. This close, Bucky doesn’t want to think. He wants to destroy the brokenness with a kiss, soak love into those lips.

“Steve,” Bucky says, carefully wiping away the tears on Steve’s cheeks. “Even if Tony had feelings for me. I told Tony that the only way I would move back into the Tower was if I wouldn’t have to sleep in the same bed as him anymore. I put him in danger, I can’t ever be with him. I can’t ever be with anyone.”

“Bucky,” Steve takes his hands in Steve’s own. “That’s not true.”

“Steve, I know you can be stupidly optimistic. But come on. I have shellshock, and I’m really fucked up in the head. I’m never going to be a hundred percent.”
“I have this friend,” Steve says, tracing lines on Bucky’s palms. “And he got pretty fucked in the head too. Mind controlled by a demi-god. He’s not all there yet, and to be honest, I don’t think he ever will be. But he’s getting there. He’s married. They have three kids now.”

“How’d he do it?” Bucky asks.

“I don’t know.”

Tony manages about ten minutes of quiet companionship with Wanda before he starts texting Rhodey.

*Stark is in the house, report your gorgeous ass to the hanger, stat!*

*Where the fuck are you?*

*Oh. Right. You’re on normal people time.*

*Get the fuck out of bed, Colonel Rhodes.*

*Rhodey, BABY. Moon of my life. I’m with Wanda and she’s creepy! Wake up!*

Ten minutes pass and no reply, so Tony changes tactics.

*Hey murder queen, you awake?*

The answer takes less than ten seconds. *Can’t sleep? Sext Steve ;)*

*I have new boots for you. Don’t make me change my mind about them. Hanger. NOW.*

*You love me.* Natasha writes back. *ETA 5 min.*

*NOW. And bring RHODEY!!!*

A few more minutes of awkward silence later, a sleepy Rhodey follows Natasha into the hangar bay. Natasha’s wearing Hawkeye pyjamas, hair parted into two side braids. She pulls Tony into a quick hug, pulling him down by the shoulders so she can plant a quick kiss on his forehead. “Where?”

“In the Quinjet. But I’ve changed my mind and you can’t have them because you’re horrible. Rhodey,” Tony pulls his best friend into a hug, “She’s horrible. How do you work with her?”

“She’s lovely, and scary, and you should stop provoking her,” Rhodey warns, his arm still thrown over Tony’s shoulders. *Fuck,* he’s missed Rhodey.

“Okay, seriously what are you doing here?” Natasha asks.

“Cap’s friend, you know the one I’m talking about, wanted to see Cap. And I was bored so I figured we’d come and add some life to your boring lives.” As if on cue, the Quinjet door opens and Steve walks down the stairs, Bucky in tow.

“Hi guys,” Steve says, once they’re all together. “I want you to meet someone.”

“Hi,” Barnes says, “I’m Bucky Barnes.”
“Hey,” Natasha is first to offer her hand. “I’m Natasha, you probably don’t remember but—”

“I shot you. Twice,” Bucky answers, shaking her hand. “Yeah, sorry about that.”

“It’s alright. Brainwashing. It’s a thing. My best friend got brainwashed once, fun times.” Natasha grins. “Please don’t shoot me again, third time’s when I start taking these things personally.”


Having breakfast with the Avengers is strange to Tony now. Despite the fact that he knows most of them, he’s still expecting Clint to walk around the corner and trip over his own bow into the kitchen table or something. Instead, he gets Sam, who Tony proposes to after one bite of his gluten-free pancakes, Vision, who’s kind of his grandkid, Wanda, who worryingly reminds him of Morticia, and Rhodey who is perfect in every way — not that Tony would ever admit to that. There’s Natasha, who he’s technically known second-longest, and still doesn’t really know. Bucky gets along well enough with everyone, though it’s Natasha he hits it off with, despite the fact that he’s, you know, shot her twice. They’ve been talking quietly to each other for the last twenty minutes. Tony’s not scared, dammit. He’s not.

Sam’s easy to get along with, he’s kind and funny and smart. Not in the Tony or Bruce way, but in ways that Tony never could be, and it’s awesome. Sam always knows the right thing to say and how to make Natasha smile, but not that smile that promises explosions, but the one that’s fond. Wanda’s young and still grieving, but there is a brilliance in there that’s returning, a bright smile at whatever it is that Vision is whispering into her ear.

Then there’s Steve, sitting quietly to Tony’s right but not really there. “Cap?” Tony asks more than once. “You okay?”

And every time, the answer’s the same. “I’m fine.”

But he’s not fine. Any idiot could tell he’s not, and Tony’s no idiot. He waits until the others wander off. Bucky’s helping Sam clean the kitchen up — neat freak — so Tony turns to Steve. “Okay, what’s your plan for the day? Training sessions?”

“But me. Sam and Rhodey are going flying, I think. Natasha’s off on a SHIELD mission.”

“Wanna spar?” Tony asks.

Steve finally looks at Tony with some interest, a teasing glint in his eye. “Really? You’re taking the initiative? You hate sparring with me.”

“If I hated it, I wouldn’t be coming twice a week for it,” Tony says. “So, whaddaya say, Cap? Ready to beat me into shape?”

“Sure,” Steve turns to Bucky and Sam. “Buck, we’re going to the gym, are you good here or you wanna come with?”

“I could use a sparring buddy if you’re interested,” Sam says with a grin. “Long as you promise not to break my wings again. Tony’s always mad when that happens.”

Tony rolls his eyes. “Of course I get mad when that happens. Do you have any idea how expensive
those things are?”

Bucky hesitates, which doesn’t come as a surprise to Tony. Bucky hasn’t sparred with anyone as far as Tony can remember. He trains in the gym, sometimes he runs for hours on the treadmill, but unless they’re Hydra, Tony hasn’t seen Bucky actually train against someone else. “Sam’s pretty good at what he does,” Tony prompts. “If you think you’re going to hurt him, you’ll have to think again.”

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to,” Sam assures Bucky. “You can just come and watch. I’ll be fine. We have punching bags made to withstand Steve’s sulks.”

Bucky smiles at that. “I wouldn’t mind watching you punch them.”

Sparring with Tony is a challenge for Steve. Not physically. Unfortunately, there’s always a limit to how much Tony can handle, considering the loss of lung capacity from the arc reactor that he’d never gained back. But Tony tries, and damn does he try. Steve’s the strategist, but Tony’s the futurist. Tony sees paths no one else would ever consider. Sometimes it works, sometimes it fails. This time, it’s worked, and now Steve’s on the floor with Tony straddling him, lean thighs warm against his sides.

This right here is the challenge, having Tony pressed up against him and forcing himself not to react. How does one tell their skin not to blush at the sight of Tony? Or of Bucky? Impossible. Tony is unaware of all of this, so filled with glee at having one-upped Steve this time. And it isn’t like Steve can stop. Tony needs the training; no amount of mixed boxing arts is going to stop a soldier or trained villain from taking out Tony the moment the suit comes off. Steve can handle not having Tony, as long as Tony is happy and alive. But if he hurts himself because Steve couldn’t bear to teach him self-defence, Steve knows he won’t handle the after effects of that.

“No time for losers, cause we are the champions, of the world!” Tony sings, throwing his hands into the air, and Steve takes the chance to overthrow Tony, switching their places until he’s on top of Tony. Tony tries to fight it, but Steve grabs his wrists and pins them both down on the floor.

“I know this is almost asking too much,” Steve says. “But don’t get cocky. It could cost you your life.” He lets go and stands up, offering a hand to Tony, who takes it. “Let’s do that again.”

“Again? We’ve been at this hours!” Tony complains.

“You’ve left us in the kitchen less than fifteen minutes ago, Tony,” Bucky’s voice carries in from behind them. Steve turns to find Sam at the door, with Bucky in tow.

“Well with me that’s like dog years, just ask Pepper!” Tony replies, sounding adorable affronted.

“If this is getting boring for you, you could always train with Bucky. What do you say, Buck?” Steve asks. He needs to stay out of this and let them figure it out. And being everywhere Tony and Bucky need a moment alone isn’t going to help their relationship.

Bucky stiffens, nose flaring.
If Steve wants this so badly, Bucky’s happy enough to show him why this is a terrible idea. Bucky steps into the ring, gesturing for Steve to get out.

If words aren’t enough to make Steve see that he won’t be able to bear Bucky and Tony being intimate, then it’s high time Steve Rogers learned this the hard way. Tony’s staring at him curiously, as if he’s trying to figure out what’s changed. Damned if Bucky’s going to let him know without a fight.

They circle each other, and Tony’s steps are good, sure. Tony’s not a bad fighter. In fact, he’s rather good. Unfortunately, when your opponents are super soldiers and gamma monsters, rather good just doesn’t cut it. In one quick moment, Bucky attacks, and then it’s a dance of hands and feet until suddenly, he flips Tony onto his back, immobilizing him with his full body weight. When he looks up, Steve’s not afraid, but he’s not jealous either. The expression on his face seems more like want.

Bucky doesn’t know what to do with that, so he stands up, pulling Tony to his feet.

“Again,” Bucky says.

Round two and Tony’s back on this ground, and now he’s breathing hard.

Round three, and Tony gets vicious, but he’s just not fast enough. He throws a punch, aiming for Bucky’s diaphragm, and instinct takes over. Bucky’s left arm comes up in defence. He knows what’s going to happen long before he hears the crack of bone.

No.

“Oh,” Tony hisses in pain, holding his broken hand protectively against his chest.

Steve rushes to Tony’s aid, but Tony’s looking at Bucky, reaching toward him with his other hand. “Bucky, it’s okay. It was an accident. Help me to medical.”

The instinct to flight argues with Bucky: he should just leave before he causes more damage. But Tony wants his support. Decision made, Bucky helps him up to medical with Steve and Sam flanking their sides. After Tony gets a shot of morphine, Sam leaves to get Rhodey. Steve stays.

They’re sitting in the chairs outside the scanning centre, waiting as Tony gets his hand x-rayed, when Steve says, “It’s not your fault, Buck. Accidents happen. Thor once broke my collarbone in training.”

Of course it’s his fault, but Bucky doesn’t have the energy to voice that. He stays silent. Steve places his hand on the metal arm, and Bucky flinches away. No one should touch that thing. It’s a weapon. It was made to destroy. To harm. Steve puts his hands in his lap.

“I’m sorry,” Steve says.

Bucky says nothing.

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“He’s fine,” Dr Cho tells them a few minutes later, directing Tony with a hand on his shoulder. “It’s a hairline fracture. As long as he keeps the hand in the splint and takes his meds, he’ll be fine in a few weeks. Now please put him to bed, the morphine’s making him talk to all the machinery here.”

“Thank you, Helen. Please call Sam and tell him we’re in my suite,” Steve says, standing up. “Let’s go, soldier. Off to bed.”
Bucky follows them to Steve’s rooms, silently helping Tony into Steve’s bed. At this point, Tony’s nearly asleep on them. So Bucky waits until he’s had some water and a piece of buttered toast, until Steve’s gone to fetch food, before he makes his move. He pulls out his phone, and hands it to Tony, who accepts it automatically.

It takes understanding a moment to dawn and then Tony gets this look on his face. And Bucky knows it’s over. Because this is how Tony looks at Steve when he thinks no one is watching. Only now it’s directed at Bucky. Tony’s voice cracks as he speaks. “No, don’t go. Please don’t run. It was an accident.”

Bucky shakes his head. He can’t stay. He’s hurt Tony again. First Stevie, then Tony. They’re better off without him. Forget petty lessons, forget trying to show how much Tony being with another man would hurt Steve because the truth is that Tony loves him. He loves Bucky and he loves Steve and dammit, Bucky understands that but he can’t be around them. All he does is hurt them.

“You said I could leave whenever I wanted. My choice. You said. Please don’t come after me this time.”

Tony closes his eyes. “This phone was a gift.”

“It’s also got a tracker.”

“I won’t track you with it. Promise. I won’t follow you. Just call me. Call Steve. Let us know you’re okay,” Tony’s struggling to keep his eyes open. “Please don’t go. Please I don’t…” Tony drifts off, as if he can’t remember what he was going to say. It’s not ideal, but at least he can keep all the photos he has of them. He’ll have that. He leans forward to take the phone back, but is stopped by Tony’s hand around his wrist. “You’ll break his heart.”

“I break his heart every time he looks at me, Tony,” Bucky says. “Take care of him, okay?”

Tony frowns, pulling Bucky’s metal arm closer. Bucky wants to get that awful weapon away from Tony, but Tony’s holding it like it’s something precious. “Tony, don’t make this harder than it already is.”

Before Bucky can pull away, Tony presses a slow, chaste kiss to his knuckles. “You’ll break mine, too.”

Bucky closes his eyes tightly. They snap open when he hears footsteps. Steve’s footsteps. “I seem to recall you liking blueberries, Tony…” Steve stops.

“Steve’s in love with you,” Bucky tells Tony, loud enough that Steve’s definitely heard him. That should keep them occupied. He pulls his hand away. On his way out of the room, he brushes shoulders with Steve, who’s frozen still in the doorway. One last touch. He waits until he’s outside the suite to run towards the Quinjet. He has somewhere else to be.

“Okay I might be a shitty friend,” Tony says mildly. Steve looks really lost, frozen in place. Tony supposes that watching his friend kiss his best-friend-slash-love-of-his-life, even if it was just on the hand, might do that to a guy. Except Bucky’s leaving, and he doesn’t want to be followed, so Tony might as well give him a head start. “In my defence, I am higher than the International Space Station.”
Tony’s not so good with quiet, so he keeps going. “Steve, for the record. I’m not trying to steal your boy. Man. Guy. It was more an ‘I have feelings for you but I get that you don’t have feelings for me’ thing. Okay? Because otherwise I’d totally have been tonguing that boy.”

Urgh. Okay talking is a dumb idea. Except he’s on opiates and that makes him mopey, and if he stops talking, he might start crying. Talking is loads better.

“But like, I wouldn’t have anyway. Because you guys are… there’s a term for it. What was it? Darcy calls Thor and Jane that… oh. Right. OTP. One True Pairing. You’re meant to be. I’m just hot and rich and happy to be your friend.”

Steve finally moves, setting the snacks on the night table and pouring Tony a glass of water. “Steve, I am going to fall asleep any second now, I don’t need a drink.”

“Oh,” Steve says. “You sleep. I... need to go have a talk with Bucky.”

“Okay,” Tony thinks he hears Steve say. Then Steve fades, the whole world fades.

When Tony wakes up again, he’s warm. He’s also in pain. Tony opens his eyes to find Steve sitting beside him on the bed, his hip lined up with Tony’s shoulder. He’s holding his phone in his lap, a
frown set in his face.

“Shouldn’t your generation be complaining about the smartphone addicts rather than being one?” Tony asks as he sits up in bed to better look at Steve. It only makes the frown deepen. Steve holds out the cell phone and Tony has to rub his eyes before his vision clears enough to read the text.

*I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you myself. Please don’t come after me.*

Tony looks up at Steve, forcing himself to stay calm. Tony knows he’s being selfish, but the only thought that’s running through his head is that he’s alone again. Him and the bots and an empty penthouse. He might as well move back into the Stark Mansion. At least there, his ghosts will keep him company.

“We can’t go after him.”

“I know,” Steve replies hoarsely. Tony leans forward to offer a comforting hand on the shoulder, but Steve loses the last of his strength and crumbles, his head resting on Tony’s sternum as he lets out a distressed sob. “What are we going to do?”

Tony rests his chin on Steve’s head, arms coming around Steve's shaking body. “I don’t fucking know.”

Bucky could easily take the Quinjet, but it’s harder to land without getting himself killed than the bike, despite how much slower the bike is. He takes the key from Natasha and throws one leg over.

“Why are you helping me?”

“Consider it a thank you.”

“Pardon?”

“Just months ago, Steve and Tony couldn’t spend half-an-hour in the same room without fighting? Now, they’re best friends. Do you know why that is?”

“No,” Bucky says.

“Because of you,” Natasha says. “You gave them a shared goal, you’re the bridge that connected them despite their differences. Nowadays, they see eye-to-eye more often than not. And when they do disagree, they’re willing to listen to each other.”

The idea of them fighting seems strange to Bucky. As far as Bucky has known the two of them together, they’ve almost never been at odds with each other.

“Steve’s my friend. And Tony, while I don’t like to admit it, is also my friend. Their arguments hurt the entire team, and it hurt each other. So this is a thank you, for putting a stop to that.” Bucky doesn’t know what to say to that. “And I’m not giving you my bike. I want it back. Not a scratch, hear me?” She asks.

“Might take a while,” he replies.

Natasha hands him the helmet and he accepts it. “That’s fine with me. Now *get*.”
It’s nearing midnight when Bucky arrives at the Barton farm. The lights are out, but he can hear the sounds of a baby crying. He texts the number that Natasha had given him and waits, sitting on the porch bench. A minute later, the front door opens and Bucky looks up to find Hawkeye walking out to meet him, a new-born babe in his arms.

“Hi. I’m Clint. I’d offer you my hand, but uh—” The man tilts his head towards the baby. “Nate might not like that. He’s grumpy. So what do I call you? I got a couple of texts from Tony about a hot metal arm guy, but I’m guessing you have a name?”

“Bucky Barnes.”

Nate begins to cry again and Clint rocks him in his arms. “Hey buddy, it’s going to be okay,” he soothes. “So I heard you went through the whole brainwashing thing.”

Wow. Hawkeye doesn't muck about, he goes straight for the target. “Heard from who?”

“A bunch of leaked SHIELD files,” Clint says, coming to sit beside him.

“Oh. Yeah, guess I did.”

“Ditto.” Bucky raises an eyebrow at that. “Didn't Steve tell you about Loki?”

“Loki?”

“He was a demi-god. He’s dead now, thank fuck.” He covers Nate’s ears when he says that. “Brought an army to New York. With a mind control thingy. Took away everything I was and shoved in something else. I could never say no.”

“They cut that word out of me.”

Clint nods. “That’s what they do.”

Bucky doesn’t want to talk about that. “Now you’re a dad.”

“I was a dad before too. I was a shitty one for a while after than though. I couldn’t come home after that. I couldn’t hold our children or look at Laura. Not after what I’d done. And it didn’t matter how many times Natasha or Laura or anyone else told me it wasn’t my fault. I couldn’t forgive myself.”

Clint holds Nate close. “I’d wake up screaming for months.”

“What changed?” Bucky asks.

“Phil — my… handler, he’d been killed by Loki — came back. Guess that’s an Avengers thing, people dying and coming back,” Clint says. "Tried to apologise. But he wouldn’t have it. It wasn’t my fault, he said. I think I believe that now. But I still felt like I needed to make things right. So when Cap gave the call to Assemble, I did.”

“Are you telling me I have to become an Avenger?”

“God, no. That’s a decision between you, and the founding Avengers. Though, I saw the footage from Washington. You’d be a pretty awesome Avenger. Stop shooting at Nat though. One of these days, she’ll get mad.” Clint grins, and then turns sober. “But if it’s penance you need, you have to go find it. In whatever form it appears to be for you.”

“I thought destroying Hydra would do it,” Bucky confesses. But it had only brought momentary satisfaction.
Nate begins to hiccup, so Clint holds him over his shoulder, patting his back. “Maybe you need to hear forgiveness, maybe you need to build it. Everyone’s different. Give it time. But hey, what do I know? I’m just a dumb carnie.”

Bucky smiles at that. “I dunno, you don’t seem like a complete bozo.”

“Well, not-a-complete-bozo Clint needs to take his new-born back inside because it’s cold and he’ll get sick.” It’s a balmy evening, but the wind’s beginning to nip at Bucky’s cheeks. “You wanna stay ‘til morning? I can set you up in the guest room.”

Bucky considers it. He needs some time to think. But he doesn’t want Tony or Steve to show up. Natasha was right. He needs to do this on his own.

“Tony and Steve are staying put at the Training Centre,” Clint assures him. At Bucky’s confused look, he adds. “What? I see better from a distance. You don’t fool me, Sergeant Barnes.”

“And if they show up here?”

“I’ll sic Laura on them and she’ll send them packing. I’m pretty sure Steve’s scared of her.”

“I don’t need a guest room,” Bucky says. “I can stay out here.”

“Don’t be a moron, at least come inside. It’s getting colder out here,” Clint stands up. Nate begins to whimper again, and Clint kisses the top of his head. “Okay buddy, let’s go back in.”

“I’m not going to sleep,” Bucky says, following Clint into the house. He closes the door behind them.

“Great. I am going to fall asleep standing any second now. I gave you awesome advice. You can pay me back by holding onto this one for the night. He’ll need to be fed at seven, but Laura’ll be up by then. If he starts wailing, do the baby dance. Up and down, and side to side.” Clint demonstrates, and then he holds out the baby. Bucky hesitates. It’s a baby. A precious fragile person. If he can’t be careful with adults, how is he going to keep the new-born alive?

“I don’t know anything about babies.”

“Then it’s high time you learned. Come on. All you need to do is support his head.” Bucky holds out one hand. Clint’s expression softens. “Bucky. Your metal arm isn’t a weapon unless you make it to be.”

“But—”

“I was trained to be a weapon. But I choose to be so much more than that. A husband, a father,” Clint looks at his son. “You can, too.”

Not a weapon unless you make it to be. Not a weapon unless you make it to be. He holds out his hands and takes Nate, cradling him in his arms.

“Help yourself to whatever, you’re not a guest here.” Clint begins to walk away. “But take those boots off. If you fuck up my kitchen floors, I’ll end you.”

Bucky wakes up to the pitter-patter of bare feet on hardwood. There’s a weight on his chest, and he’s reaching for his knife before he remembers. Nate is awake, but he’s quietly resting on Bucky’s chest,
his tiny fingers clutching Bucky’s metal index finger. Bucky begins to sit up on the couch, hand supporting Nate's back, and that’s when he meets the source of the footsteps.

“Are you Bucky Barnes?” The little girl — Lila, Bucky remembers — asks. There’s a hair brush in her hand.

“Maybe. Why do you ask?”

“You look like the guy on Papa’s comic books. Except your hair is long. And your arm’s all shiny.”

“It’s a prosthetic arm.”

“Okay. So are you?”

“What?”

Lila rolls her eyes. “Are you Bucky Barnes?”

“Yeah.”

“Lila, leave Sergeant Barnes alone, please, and go brush your hair.” A woman’s voice drifts in from the hallway, and seconds later, Laura Barton comes walking in while braiding her own hair to her side.

“But mommy it’s too tangled and it hurts! Can’t Bucky do it?”

“I’m sure he has better things to do than your hair. Good morning, Sergeant Barnes,” Laura says, once she’s reached him. “I’m sorry my husband left you with our sleep-hating child. Here, let me.” She reaches down to take Nate, who gurgles happily to be back in his mother’s arms.

“It’s okay. And Bucky’s fine.”

“I’m Laura, by the way,” she says as she settles down on the couch across from Bucky and begins to feed Nate. “Let me just give this one his breakfast and then I’ll get started on breakfast for everyone else. Do you prefer coffee or tea?”

“Umm…”

“Bucky Barnes, can you do my hair now?” Lila interrupts.

“Lila, have you introduced yourself?” Laura asks.

“Oh right. Hi Bucky Barnes, I’m Lila. Can you brush my hair please?”

“Hi Lila,” Bucky responds, taking the hairbrush. “You can just call me Bucky, too.”

“You really don’t have to,” Laura says.

“It’s fine. I used to have a little sister.” He can't remember her name, but he can see her clearly in his mind. With her grey eyes and bright smile and terrible habit of swinging while holding Bucky and Steve’s hands.

“Can I call you Uncle Bucky?” Lila asks.

“Sure,” Bucky answers.
Steve’s phone rings a little after nine am, when he’s walking Tony to the kitchen for breakfast. It’s Clint.

“Hey Barton,” Steve says.

“Cap.”

“You alright?”

“My wife gave birth to a night owl. I’m so sleep deprived I started buttering my coffee mug yesterday. But listen. Just wanted to let you know that your little friend spent the night here.”

“What?” Steve asks, confused. Tony tugs at his sleeve in question, and Steve shrugs his shoulders.

“How did he—“

“And tell Nat that her motorcycle’s in the garage.”

Steve sighs. “Yeah. Is he okay?”

“He’s fine. A bit weird. He’s sweet though. Good with the kids. I might just hire him as a nanny. Actually, I can see his brushing out Lila’s hair. I’m definitely hiring him as a nanny.”

“Can we…”

“I promised him no one would come after him. I’d appreciate you not turning me into a liar, Cap.”

Steve swallow his anxiety, and turns to Tony, who’s looking annoyed, which is code for worried.

“Okay.”

“He’s fine. He’ll come home when he’s ready.”

*What if he’s never ready?* Steve wants to ask, but he’s supposed to be the leader. He’s supposed to be strong.

“Okay. Thanks for letting me know, Clint.”

“I’ll keep you updated.” He hangs up.

“Bucky’s at the Barton farm?” Tony asks. “But he does he even know where that is?”

“Natasha.”

“Are you kidding me?” Tony asks, stomping his way into the kitchen. “Where is that quadruple-agent? Romanoff!”

Steve follows him in, and finds Natasha having breakfast with Rhodey. “What?” She asks.

“Barton called, your motorcycle’s in the garage,” Steve tells her.

“Yeah. You’re welcome,” she stuffs a forkful of pancake into her mouth.

“Tony, how’s your hand?” Rhodey asks. “You were so out of it when I came to check in on you.”
Steve guides Tony to a chair and then turns to question Natasha. Steve trusts her, that’s not the problem. He needs an explanation for this. “Why?”

“E bas bowaa bun,” She swallows. “Sorry. He was going to run. Better he take a motorcycle than the Quinjet he barely knew how to fly. Or do you remember that time we lost an Avenger because the Quinjet was cloaked?”

“Why didn’t you just stop him?” Tony demands.

“Because the last thing he needs is to be forced somewhere. Isn’t that why you let him be, back when you were following him around like a puppy? If he leaves willingly, he’ll come back willingly. Again, you’re welcome. Sit the hell down, stop panicking and have some pancakes. Rhodey made them and they’re awesome.”

Natasha makes very good points. Steve grabs two mugs and sets them down on the table before sitting beside Tony. “Thank you, Natasha.”

“You’re welcome. Now eat pancakes. You’ll feel better.”

Laura Barton is a terrifying woman who knows exactly how to get people to do what she wants. Which explains why Bucky’s having breakfast with the Barton family instead of making his way Somewhere Else.

Clint drinks coffee out of the carafe and Laura smacks his butt. Cooper has his nose stuck in a book during breakfast, and Lila chatters away about anything and everything under the sun. Clint piles toast, bacon and eggs on his plate, then deposits just as many on Bucky’s. Lila ‘sneakily’ replaces the bacon on his plate with her eggs, and he shares a smile with Clint.

They’re washing up when the door opens and a man walks in wearing a black suit, a prosthetic hand, and sunglasses.

“Papa!” Cooper and Lila shout and run towards the man. Bucky watches in confusion as Laura and Clint walk towards him, pulling the whole family into a hug. Then, Clint leans in, pressing his lips against the other man’s.

It would seem Bucky is the only confused man here. Because the man kisses back, before turning to kiss Laura on the mouth, and then take Nate from her arms. “Phil, baby, don’t freak out, but look.”

This must be Phil. Clint’s handler Phil, who’d died and come back to life. Who’d kissed Clint and then Laura like that was a perfectly normal thing to do.

“Oh my God. Hi. Hello. I mean, Sergeant Barnes,” the man stumbles on his words as he walks towards Bucky, holding his hand out. Bucky takes it. “It’s an honour.”

Lila runs to Bucky, tugging on his trousers. “Papa used to have Captain America trading cards. You were on one of them. Uncle Nick ruined them though.”

“That sucks,” Bucky says, shaking Phil’s hand. “Bucky.”

“I’m Phil,” he says. He sounds giddy.

“Papa I can shoot two arrows at a time now, wanna see?” Cooper asks Phil.
“After school. Go get ready and I’ll drop you off.” Phil turns back to Bucky. “It really is an honour to meet you.”

Bucky just nods as Phil walks away with the children.

“You look confused,” Laura says.

“I don’t… I don’t understand,” Bucky admits. Because Clint and Laura are married. They’re in love and they’re happy. Why is this Phil in the middle of it all? They’re a normal, happy family.

“Is this one of those, bigoted forties thing where you can’t handle men kissing men, or?” Clint asks, nose flaring.

“Stevie used to live two blocks from a gay bar. Your generation didn’t invent the gays, moron.” Bucky remembers women. He remembers kissing them and sliding into their wet heat, he remembers how good that felt. He also remembers men, of curtains being closed and making frantic love, fingers and petroleum jelly and beard burn.

“Technically, I’m bisexual,” Clint says. "Also, you call Cap, Stevie? Oh my God. I love it."

“Clinton Francis.”

“I’m sorry. That was rude.”

“Clint will make more coffee, I can answer questions,” Laura says, walking towards him. She holds him by the wrist on her way, and leads him to the table. Once they’re seated, she says, “Shoot.”

No words come to mind.

“You won’t offend me. If you say something offensive, I’ll strive to set you straight rather than shout at you.”

“You’re married to Clint.”

Laura nods. “But I was married to Phil first.”

“I don’t…” understand. “So how did you and Clint…” fall in love?

“Phil and Clint worked together for years. I’d been married to Phil already, but then Phil and Clint fell in love with each other. I knew that I could either be selfish and make him transfer Clint to another handler, or I could share him.”

“But you’re married. Marriage is a sacred vow between a man and a woman,” Bucky recites.

“I didn’t realise you were Christian,” Laura answers. “If we’re quoting the Bible, then we need to remember the part where Abraham had two wives.”

“I’m Irish Catholic,” Bucky replies. Same as Steve. He may not be Irish, but he went to mass with Sarah Rogers enough to be Irish.

“Bucky, it’s our belief that a marriage, or a relationship, doesn’t necessarily have to be bound by the limits of two people. Phil and Clint, love each other. That doesn’t mean he loves me any less. I love Phil with all my heart, and later, I fell in love with Clint, but that doesn’t make my love for Phil any smaller.”

“And you’re all happy?”
“Very,” Laura says with a smile. “We’re not perfect. There are no perfect families. But we’re happy.”

“But,” It’s one thing when they’re all happy with each other. Bucky looks away, watching the children running down the stairs with Phil. “What if one of them—you just made the others sad?”

Laura observes him for a moment, before she speaks up. “When Clint came back after the Battle of New York, he broke my heart every day. He was hurting, and that made me hurt. Bucky, Steve hurts because you’re hurting.”

Bucky turns back to Laura in shock. “How did you…”

“Clint’s not the only perceptive one in this house, Bucky. And none of you are subtle. Do you know how many ridiculous photos of you Clint has on his phone because Tony’s texting him about some amazing thing you did? And no offense, cleaning up the tool box isn’t all that amazing. And do you know how many times they have Steve in them too?”

“Wait a second,” Clint says, bringing three mugs of coffee over on a tray. “Are the three of you…no! Not again! Laura!”

“Maybe I should be the one codenamed Hawkeye, seeing as you keep missing these things,” Laura teases her husband, then turns back to Bucky. “Listen to me. The rest of the world might see it as wrong or strange, but here’s what I know. Running away from the ones who love you? That’s rarely the right thing to do.”

“I nearly killed Tony,” Bucky bites out. “This is about their safety. Tony’s not safe with me! I won’t—”

It doesn’t matter how the world sees anything they have. Bucky doesn’t care about the world, he cares about Tony and Steve. “I won’t hurt him again.”

“Tony’s a pain in our asses,” Clint replies. “He’s arrogant, he can’t shut up, and he always has the most inappropriate comments mid-fight. He’s self-destructive, drinks far too much to be allowed in that suit of his, and has a messiah complex. But he’s one of ours and if you think any one of us Avengers, past or present, would ever let anyone hurt him, then you’ve got another think coming.”

It’s true. All true. He sees the way Natasha looks at Tony, annoyance hiding deep-rooted protectiveness. Not to mention how protective Rhodey is of Tony, or the Vision, who looked at Tony like family. Steve, who makes sure Tony’s fed and cared for, and goes to bed on time. Steve, who everyone looks up to for protection. Who’s going to watch out for Steve?

Him. Bucky realises in surprise. Bucky’s always been watching out for Steve, ever since the day they’d met.

All the other children are playing, but there’s a little boy on the ground. He’s coughing up something awful and Bucky’s supposed to be a Good Samaritan, or that’s what his Sunday school teacher says, so he goes over and sits down next to him. “What’s wrong with you?”

The blonde stops coughing for long enough to give him a dirty look before continuing. Bucky shrugs and sits beside the little boy, patting his back. That’s what mama does when he has a coughing fit. After a while, he finally stops coughing. “Thanks, but I’m fine on my own.”

“Yeah, but it’s nicer when you’re with someone, isn’t it? I’m Bucky.”

“That’s a weird name. I’m Steve.”
“You’re a punk; it’s short for Buchanan. As is James Buchanan. I’m named after a president. Your name’s boring.”

“Jerk. Wanna go on the swings with me?”

“I have to go now,” Bucky finally says.

Clint and Laura share a confused look before turning back to him. “Anywhere we can drop you off?”

“Nearest town’d be great.”

There is a selfie that Steve carries in his pocket. Tony only knows about this because he’d had to pay in cash at a hot dog stand with him once. It’s an old one, by Tony’s standards. It was taken by Tony, with Bucky turned away from the camera, his face nearly tucked into Tony’s neck. But it’s the first time Bucky had allowed Tony to take a photo of him, and that’s the photo that Steve has in his wallet.

*Hope,* Tony realises. It’s hope that Bucky will come home.

They flown back to the Tower. Steve’s fussing over Tony, making him lunch. He’s working in a nearly mechanical way, as if his body’s just being while his mind remains off to wherever Bucky is.


“What?” Steve questions it, but he begins to walk towards Tony anyway.

“Come here.”

“What are you doing,” Steve asks when Tony throws his arm over Steve’s shoulder. Tony takes a selfie, and then shoots off a message.

“It’s ridiculous how easily you can make yourself took stupid,” Tony tells Steve, holding out the phone. Steve’s looking confused at the camera while Tony smiles, his splinted arm thrown over Steve’s shoulder. The message reads: *Remember: hotels are good. Showers are not optional. We miss you.*

A message comes back along with an image. Bucky has Lila on his shoulders and a blushing Phil Coulson at his side. *Miss you too,* the message reads. *Lila says I’m great at hair. Do you think Barton will adopt me?*

*You’re only like fifty years older than him, why not? Can’t hurt to ask.* Tony replies.

"You always bring out the best in him," Steve says with a relieved laugh, leaning on Tony. His lips are perilously close to Tony’s ears, and his mouth lets out warm air. But it’s a temptation he’s going to have to let go off. He smiles back at Steve and waits.

Bucky traces the curve of Steve’s cheek, the crinkle of Tony’s eyes. Then he puts the phone away.
“You sure about this?” Clint asks him. Bucky turns in the passenger seat to face him.

“Yes.”

“Are you going home?”

“Soon,” Bucky says.

“Well, take care of yourself. Lila doesn’t make friends easy. It’ll suck if she loses one.” Clint says.

Bucky smiles at that, and gets out of the truck. “Thanks, Clint.”

“Yeah, don’t mention it,” Clint says. “I’ll see you around.”

“See you around, Hawkeye.”

Clint nods, and then drives off. Bucky Barnes takes a deep breath, and enters the building. It takes a moment to find what he’s looking for, and then another to take the courage to step in. Once he does that though, things become easier.

“Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. My last confession was a while ago...”
The Bleeding Edge

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Two weeks later

“Goddammit!” Tony’s voice reverberates up the stairs even as Bucky takes them down two at a time. It figures that the first thing Bucky hears is a curse. If Tony’s still this deep in his work, then JOCASTA’s kept her promise and not told Tony that Bucky’s entered the building.

Bucky takes the last step down, scans his hand, and enters the lab to find Tony sucking on the thumb of his broken hand. Tony swivels in his chair to face Bucky. For a moment, awkward silence fills the room, and then Tony shrugs. He pulls his thumb out of his mouth, displaying the bloody appendage to Bucky.

“This new armour is literally bleeding edge,” Tony says, pointing to the free floating mask. “Nano-machines though. It’s going to be awesome. How was life in the-middle-of-nowhere?”

“I like Clint.” Bucky walks towards Tony, sitting down on a nearby swivel stool and pushing himself closer to Tony.

“That’s because you don’t know any better,” Tony says. The hand looks okay; Tony’s using it, but then again, it’s unlike Tony to be careful with himself, so who knows. Bucky leans forward and takes the injured hand in his own.

“Can I…” Tony starts nodding before Bucky finishes the sentence. “You don’t even know what I’m going to say, dummy.”

“Don’t care. I trust you as far as I can throw you. Which is quite far, because I’m Iron Man.”

“No way, why didn’t you tell me earlier?” Bucky shoots back, and then quickly presses his lips against Tony’s thumb. He remembers the gentle feeling of Tony’s lips against his fingers, and then presses his own lips against Tony’s knuckles.

Tony looks at him dumbstruck before he pulls his hand away. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Bucky tilts his head, looking at Tony. “Kissing it better.”

“Well, don’t.” Tony tells him as he begins to turn back to his worktable. Bucky pulls him back by wrapping his legs around Tony’s and pulling them closer together.

At Tony’s questioning look, Bucky decides to try and explain. He doesn’t know how though, but just kissing him had worked terribly with Steve, so he needs a better plan of attack. “So I met Phil.”

“His first name is Agent, actually,” Tony says, then promptly shuts his mouth. He looks at Bucky for a long while, and Bucky takes the moment to memorize the shape of his face, the collarbone peeking out of the t-shirt. Finally, he says, “You were being serious, what you said about Steve.”

“Ding ding ding! Somebody give the man a prize,” Bucky teases, but Tony doesn’t take the bait, he just stares at Bucky in shock and… hope. It blooms slowly on Tony’s face, so Bucky leans in a little bit, and Tony meets him the rest of the way.
The next thing Bucky knows he’s wheeling backwards, Tony sitting in his lap and Tony’s lips against his own. Bucky kisses back, and it’s not like kissing Steve. There’s stubble, and also Tony’s surer, he knows what he wants and he’s not afraid to take it, and damn, he tastes intoxicating.

When they pull away, Tony’s lips are pink and swollen and his arms are thrown over Bucky’s shoulders. Bucky wraps his arms around Tony’s waist, liking the weight of him on top of Bucky. This might all fall apart on him. Steve might say no and Bucky will already know the taste of Tony, but he doesn’t care. He’s just going to have to do his utmost to convince Steve. Polyamory, that’s what Clint had called it. The word is nice and round in his core. It fits them. Steve needs to see that.

“Wait,” Tony says. “No, Bucky. He’s not, though—”

“Shut up and take the self-pity party to the Baxter Building,” Bucky interrupts. “Steve loves you. And I love you.”

Tony exhales at that.

“Yeah. And I love him. I love him so much. But I won’t give you up. You don’t have to say those words back if you’re not ready, even if you’re never ready. But you should know how I feel.” Bucky’s never been so sure of something in his life. He’s missing years and names and people and things, but he’s never going to lose this. He loves this man, and he’s never going to stop.

“You gonna run off on us again?” Tony deflects, but the hurt in those words are still here.

So he leans in, press a chaste kiss to Tony’s lips, the edge of his beard, his cheekbone. He holds him close. “No. No more running. Promise.”

Tony licks his lower lip at that, a quick, almost aborted movement, and it makes Bucky chase after Tony’s lips, licking into Tony’s mouth to indulge in the taste again.

“He was really hurt,” Tony says against Bucky’s lips. “He hasn’t come over since you left. He still mother hens, I have a bedtime and he calls. But he won’t visit anymore.”

Bucky drops his head to Tony’s shoulder and breathes in the comforting smell of motor oil. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to… I was trying to keep you safe. Both of you.”

Tony sighs, reaching for Bucky’s hair bun. He pulls it loose and takes the red hair tie away, throwing it in DUM-E’s general direction. Then Bucky relaxes into the feeling of nimble fingers massaging his scalp, smoothing his loose hair. Tony’s other hand traces the edge between the metal arm and Bucky’s scarred flesh. “I know. But our safety is our responsibility. We’re adults. I can’t speak for Steve, but I personally don’t want protection from you. Just…”

“Love?” Bucky asks, holding Tony tighter. All he wants is to go to sleep like this every day, wake up to this every day.

“Yeah, that,” Tony mumbles into his hair.

“Tony?” Bucky asks after a moment.

“Yeah?”

“Does your jet need to fuel up?”

Tony pulls away suddenly, hands squeezing his shoulders while looking at Bucky in shock. “Fuel?! It runs on repulsor tech! My Quinjet doesn’t need fuel!”
Bucky is so unbearably fond of this man. “Well, then why aren’t we on our way to Steve yet?”

Steve wakes up to the sound of his bedroom door opening, and finds Bucky and Tony at the door, the nightlight casting them in a pale light. He sits up in bed, rubbing clarity into his eyes, when he hears Tony’s voice. “We’re being creepy. I told you we should just wait—”

But Tony’s standing beside Bucky, and they both sights to behold.

“Buck?” Steve whispers. “Is this a dream?”

Bucky smiles, “No.”

Steve begins to climb out of bed, reaching for the light switch but then Bucky’s right there, and he’s pushing him back until the backs of his legs hit the bed. Steve sits down. “Bucky?”

“Sorry,” Tony answers instead. “He came to the Tower and then wanted to see you, so I figured…”

“No, Tony, it’s fine,” Steve answers, looking him over. The hand looks fine, but he looks more sleep-deprived that usual. “Look, I’m awake, let me just get—"

“Go back to bed, Stevie,” Bucky says, bring his arm up to Steve’s shoulder. “I just wanted to see you.”

“What are you doing here?” Steve asks, patting the bed beside him. Bucky sits.

“I wanted to talk,” Bucky says. “But it’s late and I should have waited. Sorry. I wanted to see you.”

“Did you have a nightmare?”

“No, I just… I wanted to see you,” Bucky sounds a little… nervous. “We can talk tomorrow. I can crash in the guest room—"

“What’s the matter?” Steve asks. Something’s off. He turns to look at Tony, who’s toying with his lower lip. Tony shrugs so Steve turns back to Bucky. “I’m not going to be able to sleep when you’re like this, you know that, right?”

Bucky turns his eyes to Tony, who walks towards them, sitting to Steve’s left. “So Steven, Bucky keeps insisting he wasn’t joking about your undying love for me. Care to set the record straight?”

When he meets eyes with Bucky, he’s a lot less nervous, a lot more pleased. His smile is wide and his eyes are bright. “Well, Steve? Don’t keep the man waiting,” he says.

Steve turns back to Tony. He can barely see Tony in the light, but the doubt in his face is clear. He looks afraid. Steve looks at this selfless man with walls higher than the Avengers Tower and sees all he’s lost, all he’s afraid to accept and it occurs to Steve that it might hurt Steve to say this and be rejected, but in the end, Tony needed to know that he was loved, that he was wanted.

“Yes,” Steve says, ghosting his fingers over Tony’s cheek. “I love you.”

He doesn’t know who moves first, Tony or Bucky or him, but suddenly he has Tony’s tongue in his mouth and Bucky lips at his neck and everything fits and nothing makes sense. “Good,” Tony laughs against his lips. “Because I’m a selfish man, and I know what I want. I won’t settle for anything less
“I don’t… I don’t understand.” Steve says. Bucky is heavy and warm against his back, and Tony’s found himself in Steve’s lap, trailing kissing down his jaw like it’s second nature. He would tell them to stop, but he doesn’t want them to.

“It’s called polyamory, Stevie. Welcome to the 21st century.” Bucky presses each word carefully to the back of Steve’s ear.

“Last I checked, polyamory’s been around a few thousand years, jerk,” Steve shoots back automatically, and it’s Tony, not Bucky that laughs into his mouth.

“But wait, we should talk abo—” Steve is silenced by another kiss, and then Bucky’s pulling away. Steve turns back in confusion and finds him taking his boots off.

“No, we’re not having this conversation now. Let’s sleep. Talk in the morning,” Bucky says, pulling off his belt and trousers — Steve’s pretty sure those are his.

“After you make us waffles,” Tony whispers in his ear and then kicks his shoes off. He’s in sweatpants and a t-shirt, and he lets go of Steve to climb into his bed.

“You could help,” Steve tells Tony fondly, following Tony’s open arms until they’re lying next to each other in bed. This might be a huge mistake, but Tony’s looking at him with those deep brown eyes of his, and Steve doesn’t care anymore.

Bucky scoffs at that. “Do you want him to burn down the kitchen? Move over.”

Steve shuffles closer to Tony, but turns so he’s on his back when Bucky climbs into bed with them. Bucky presses his side against Steve’s body, throwing his leg over Steve’s hip and then pulling the duvet over the three of them. “Then you’re going to have to help instead,” Steve decides.

Tony reaches over to thread fingers with Bucky, and their hands come to rest on Steve’s chest. Over his heart. And there, held by his past, present and future, Steve sleeps.

Bucky wakes up with a heavy weight on him. He opens his eyes to find Tony having climbed over Steve in his sleep to sprawl on top of Bucky. Steve, the rat bastard, has his eyes open, and he’s watching them fondly from his side of the bed.

“Why does this only ever happen to me?” Bucky demands.

“Shush,” Tony mumbles into Bucky’s throat. Steve sits up in bed, leaning forward to run the back of his hand over Tony’s neck.

“I’ll make some coffee,” Steve says. “Then we can talk.”

“What’s there to talk about?” Tony mumbles. “I love you, and him, and you love me and him, and he loves you and me, and it’s really early. What else is there to say?”

Bucky takes a short breath at that. So that’s what it took to hear I-love-you’s from Tony Stark: sleep deprivation.

Steve leans in to press his lips against Tony’s forehead before bumping his nose with Bucky’s.
“You’re the genius. Guess there really isn’t much else, is there?”

“Sure there is, punk. My lungs are falling asleep,” Bucky tells Steve. “So up and at ‘em soldier, bring him the coffee.”

Chapter End Notes

I know I promised I would update much earlier. But I caught the flu! I'm really sorry, but here it is, and I hope you enjoyed it! Thank you for sticking with me until the end of the fic, you guys are all awesome. I'm soniclipstick on tumblr by the way, so if you want to come say hi, feel free to!

Works inspired by this one

[Wallpaper/Banner/Icons] Bridge Over Troubled Water by Knowmefirst

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