Seize Yesterday

Summary

In 2017 the Earth is about to end. In 1987 Howard Stark might have the answer. The solution seems simple, except Tony has the worst of luck, and he might just be stuck.

In which Tony hates magic, time travel, babysitting amnesiac assassins and being seventeen.

Notes

Written for the WinterIron Holiday Exchange for missdreadwrietes over on tumblr, who wanted, among other things, time travel. Here you go, and Happy Holidays. Thank you so much to Potrix for taking the (huge amount of) time and effort to beta this. Without them, you'd have stumbled over who knows how many sentences that only ever made sense in my own head.

The notes for this one is going to be fairly long, so I'm going to put them in the bottom of the chapter and let you get on with it.
See the end of the work for more notes.
"There has to be a safer way to do this," Cap said, staring at Strange's device with open distrust.

"It's our best choice," Strange said.

Tony rolled his eyes, plopped himself into the chair. "Appreciate the concern, Cap, but out of everyone in this room, which one was at the time A) old enough and B) awake enough." He flashed a smirk, still couldn't find it in himself to inject the same kind of warmth into it that he might have a year or two ago. "Not to mention having access to almost endless resources and Howard Stark?"

Cap snapped his mouth shut, but didn't look particularly happy about it. "We should've sent Fury," he said at last.

"Yeah, well, when we had that chance, we weren't desperate enough to try, were we?" Tony asked.

Cap turned to Strange. "Can't you at least send him back a bit further?" He glanced at Tony. "You must've gone home for Thanksgiving."

Strange tapped the stack of journals sitting on the table. "These are all we've got to go on," he said. "And they say Stark Senior's epiphany came on December seventeenth. At Thanksgiving, he wouldn't have had the answers we need. Any accidental changes Stark makes to the timeline might prevent his father from having that epiphany in the first place. The timing is tight, but it's our best bet."

Tony flashed Cap a crooked smile. "I trust Aunt Peggy," he said. "How about you, Stevie Wonder?"

Cap grit his teeth, looked ready to object again.

Tony barely held back a snarl. "You're not worried about me at all, are you? You think I'm going to kill him. Fuck, probably think I'm going to use the command phrase to make him kill himself."

"You hate him," Cap replied, something barely restrained right there in the back of his voice.

"Yeah, well," Tony said. "You know my reasons. But I won't. I promised her."

"And you've never broken your promises," Cap said.

Tony squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, mostly so he wouldn't end up accidentally breaking his hand on Cap's jaw. "Who paid for the army of lawyers that got the charges dismissed?"

"And yet he's still in prison," Cap said.

"For shit he did after he stopped being brainwashed," Tony said, forcing the words out through gritted teeth. This was going to become a screaming match for the ages within a few moments if he let it. So he didn't. Holding himself tightly in check, he turned to Strange. "Do it."

Strange nodded. "Once you've done what you need to do, it'll take you back here." Then he was holding one of his amulets, chanting some spell or other, and Tony could practically feel his mind disconnecting from his body, could feel it being flung back, back. Fuck, he fucking hated magic.

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Slamming back into his body hurt worse than fighting the Hulk. He reached up, grabbed his head
and held on tight, tried as hard as he could to make his skull stop feeling like it was about to explode. Somewhere on the other side of the room, something moved. Someone breathed. Tony yelped in alarm, and fuck if that didn't feel like it was splitting his skull apart all over again. He twisted around, tried to get a look at the intruder, except the bed was fucking tiny, and he went crashing to the floor, legs tangled up in his own sheets.

A bedside light turned on. "Tony, what the fuck?" groaned a voice that sounded suspiciously like Rhodey's. "Are you kidding me? What's your damage, dude?" A pause, and then the good old exasperated Rhodey voice. "How much did you have to drink last night?"

Well, fuck, this did feel like pretty much the worst hangover ever, and that light had to be some kind of laser, the way it was cutting open his eyeballs. "Rhodey, what are you doing in my bedroom?" Tony groaned.

"Our dorm room. You're wiggin' out, dude," Rhodey said, and okay, yeah, that sounded like an introduction to thankfully extinct bad eighties slang, which was-- Fuck. Strange's little trick had actually worked, what the hell?

"Rhodey, what date is it?" Tony asked, squeezing his eyes into his temples, and God, was that-- Oh hell, that was the fucking mullet he'd spent the past thirty years trying to suppress every memory - and photo - of.

"Fuck'n A, Tones." Rhodey sat up on his own tiny bed, rubbed the back of his hand over his slitted eyes. "Are you all right? Did someone slip you something?"

"No," Tony said quickly. "No, I'm good. I've just got a headache like you wouldn't believe. You." He frowned, looked up at the Playboy calendar hanging in its place of honor on the wall. 1987, indeed. "I just remembered I've got a paper to hand in, and I couldn't figure out if. Today or tomorrow?"

"It's Wednesday," Rhodey said. He blinked. "Well, I guess since it's way past midnight, it's actually Thursday. The seventeenth."

Tony squeezed his eyes shut. The crazy bastard had actually done it. He let out a long breath, pulled himself up off the floor and collapsed back down onto the frankly rather uncomfortable bed. "When's the alarm?" he asked.

"Eight," Rhodey said. "Go to sleep, Tones. You might be able to run a whole day on fumes, but we aren't all teenagers anymore."

"You don't know the half of it," Tony muttered, but he did pull his sheets back up to cover him and do his best to go back to sleep. Eight should give him plenty of time to get to Long Island before night, and trying to drive while his head was pounding like this probably wasn't a good idea anyway.

"G'night, dweeb."

"Night, barf bag," Tony replied, grimacing internally at the word choice. Fucking eighties.

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The eighties sucked. The tech was useless. Tony had no suit and no car of his own, and talking his way into getting to rent one when his driver's license refused to stop claiming he was seventeen years old was fucking tedious. The model he did finally get his hands on, probably more thanks to his last name than anything... Long story short, it sucked.
By the time he made it to the stretch of Long Island road where his parents had been killed - would not be killed, oh, whatever, time travel was damn confusing. Either way, it was already dark. How the fuck was this his life? Looking for the most highly trained sniper in the world on a rural stretch of road with plenty of foliage for cover and the ocean to camouflage sound, in the dark, without the suit, JARVIS or even a shitty pair of infrared goggles? Fuck all, he'd be happy with just a damn beach bum metal detector right now.

As it was, he was going to have to try to put all the years he'd spent squabbling with Cap to some kind of use. Tactical thinking wasn't Tony's best trait, genius or no. He was too prone to taking things as they came, to improvising and thinking on his feet. It wasn't a bad thing. Fuck, the combination of him and Cap was why the Avengers had lasted as long as they did, even with a fleet of spaceships hanging in the sky above them. And when Cap wasn't there, he had JARVIS's input. Right now, he could've really used either. He stopped, sucked in a deep breath. He pulled on his frankly ridiculous leather jacket, got out of the car and took a moment to make sure it was well hidden. Then, silent as he could manage, he shut the door behind him and tried to take in his surroundings, tried to scope out the best sniper spot. If this were an Avengers' situation, where would Cap tell him to put Hawkeye?

Tony glanced down at his watch, momentarily grateful for the eighties' love for all things glow-in-the-dark. If it had been a digital watch he wouldn't have even dared lighting it. For someone as sharp as the Winter Soldier, it would've been too damn obvious. 7:43 PM. He had eleven minutes. Eleven minutes to find someone who'd been a trained assassin for longer than Tony had been alive. Fuck this shit.

He glanced around himself, tried to catch as many details as the darkness allowed. On the far side of the road, the land rose. Not much, but enough to give a higher vantage point. A few trees ensured a thickening shadow. Even if it wasn't where Barnes was hiding, it would give Tony a better view. Pulling the jacket - which, frankly, did nothing to warm him - closer around himself, he took the final few steps to the road and darted across it, hoping he looked enough like just some random teenager up to no good that had nothing to do with the HYDRA mission that Barnes would ignore him. The hairs on the nape of his neck rose. He could practically feel that pair of cold, dead eyes on him. It wasn't until he was back in the shadows that he felt like he could actually breathe again.

The cold breeze beat at him again, made him shudder and try to huddle deeper. His face felt irritatingly cold. He missed his beard, and was kind of annoyed by the fact that he was still a few years away from being able to grow a decent one. Well, in this timeline anyway. No way in hell was he going to live out years as twink Tony in the eighties all over again. That had sucked enough the first time around. He just needed to find Barnes, stop him, then follow his parents home, get Howard to spill what he knew about the Tesseract and the Infinity Stones and he'd be right back in the future where he belonged.

Rather than order his mind and help him keep his head in the game, those thoughts lodged themselves in his throat, sharp and cold and painful. Might be where he belonged, but not really any less sucky than the eighties. He shut the thoughts away before they could get to him, before his breaths could start coming too fast, before it could all hit him. He'd been surviving like that for months now. He could keep doing it at least long enough to get the job done. He sucked in another breath, quiet as he could manage, glanced at his watch. Seven minutes left to go. Tony crouched down, made sure to keep low as he began to creep up the side of the small hill.

Somewhere off to the side, he heard the faintest click. Tony froze, heart hammering in his chest. Despite the cold, he felt a bead of sweat trickle down the side of his face. He'd have given damn near anything to have a repulsor right now. Even a gun would've been an enormous step up, and that was despite the fact that no amount of training had managed to make him good with one. Just, something.
Anything to feel a bit less vulnerable, a bit less like a stupid, weak-limbed seventeen-year-old trying to sneak up on a professional killer who'd lived longer than Howard and been active since more than a quarter of a century before Tony was born. He kept still, didn't even dare to breathe, but fucking hell, his heart wouldn't stop hammering and there was no way in hell Barnes hadn't heard him. Slowly, all too aware of the time running away, Tony counted down from a hundred. Glanced at his watch. Two minutes left. He was going to have to start moving.

Tony clenched his hands into fists to stop them from shaking. This version of his body didn't handle adrenalin all that well yet, and all the danger centers in his brain were blaring. He drew in a shuddering breath, took a cautious step forward, and another, and another. Just another few steps and he'd be at the crest of the hill. He put his foot forward, set it down, shifted his weight. He felt the snap before he heard it, the hard outline of a fallen twig, the give and the break. And then he heard it, louder than a gunshot. The shock went through him, made him gasp and shudder. His heart was pounding harder than a race horse, somewhere in the vicinity of his throat where it most definitely did not belong. Fuck. Still, he somehow managed to keep his breathing even and mostly silent, took another step. One minute left, which, shit, he couldn't let this go wrong, couldn't have come this far and not get the answers he needed. He couldn't--

There was no warning at all. One moment, he was walking, alone, and the next the cold muzzle of a gun was pressed against his temple. Tony froze, stood stock still. One wrong movement and he was dead. He was too damn frightened to even feel that surge of boiling rage Barnes always brought out in him. Out of the corner of his eye, Tony could see the approaching headlights of a far too familiar car. He had to act now, or Barnes would simply dispose of him and shoot up the car exactly like he had the first time around. Tony didn't want to even begin to guess what would happen to him if he got himself shot up in his past body. Couldn't be anything good. Tony sucked in a sharp breath. Then, "Vo-syem a-deen dva pyat shest. Stend vniz i zhdu zakazy." The Winter Soldier froze, arm lowering until the gun was aimed at the ground. Tony turned to face him, took in the muzzle and goggles, the matted hair and metal arm. "Been a while, Barnes," Tony muttered before turning his gaze back to the road, intent on watching the car get by safely.

The headlights were getting closer, piercing through the darkness. Soon enough, Tony could make out the old Rolls Royce, could imagine Jarvis and his parents inside. They'd ride past. In a few minutes they'd be back in the beach house. All Tony would have to do was ditch Barnes, follow them and get Howard to talk. The car came closer at a pace that felt almost slow. Probably had something to do with Tony's elevated heartbeat and the adrenalin still flooding his system. The car came closer, was just passing them. A flash of light blinded Tony for a blink of a second. His vision came back a bare moment later, but everything was different. The car was swinging from side to side, swerving wildly, picking up speed. Another flash, as if something was ignited, and Tony was rooted to the spot, could do nothing but watch as the engine exploded and the car went crashing into a tree.

No sound had ever seemed louder.

For long moments he couldn't move, could do nothing but stand there and watch, mute, breathless, as flames licked around the wreck. And then the rage struck, flying into him, and he was turning around, grabbing the front of Barnes's tactical uniform, pressing himself up close and personal without a shred of fear. "What did you do?" he shouted. "What the hell did you do?"

Barnes blinked. "Nothing," he said. His voice was flat, perfectly even, inflection muffled by the muzzle. "My evaluation is that the target has more enemies than us. Means a higher chance of a clean getaway. We should return to the rendezvous point and await extraction, sir."

Tony gritted his teeth. Barnes was telling the truth. As far as he knew, Tony was now his CO. He
had no reason to lie. Biting down the urge to growl, he shoved Barnes away from himself and set off running, straight back down the hill towards the wreckage. Too soon, he could feel the heat of the fire, feel it licking at his clothes and his skin. He pressed on, made his way closer, one arm up to shield his eyes. Smoke turned his throat scratchy. Some far corner of his brain told him what was left of the car was going to blow, that there was still fuel enough left for another explosion, that he needed to run in the other direction, needed to get to safety. He told it to shut the fuck up, focused on the slap of his feet against the ground, let the sound and feel of it keep him grounded, distracted from the mess in his head. A huge part of him was urging him to forget all about what he'd come here to do, just focus on saving his mother, saving Jarvis, even Howard, if he could, and to hell with all the rest.

His eyes stung, and he knew it wasn't all from the smoke. He swallowed around that months-old hurt, pushed it down deep where it belonged, and forged on.

A figure was crawling out of the car, slow and labored, faltering once before picking itself back up. Tony rushed closer, bent down. That was... Fuck, that was Howard, the way Howard would've looked if he'd crawled through a fire, which, well, he had, and fuck, Tony needed to get his brain on straight right this moment. "Dad?" he asked.

Howard looked up, his haggard face sooty, his white hair singed. "Tony? Tony, what are you doing here?" He doubled over. A ragged cough tore through his frail body. When he looked up again, his eyes were wet. "Tony... Maria and Jarvis, they're. They're..."

Tony swallowed, squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. "I know, Dad," he said. "I know." And he did. Fuck it, he'd had God knows how many years to process this, move on. It shouldn't be hitting him so damn hard right now. He took a deep breath, tried not to cough from the smoke. "Dad, I need you to tell me what you found out about the Tesseract. The, the Cosmic Cube. Whatever. What is it you found out?"

Howard frowned, blinking. And Tony got it, all right? He wasn't acting like his seventeen-year-old self right now, but screw that. He needed answers, needed them fast, needed to get the fuck out of here. Some of that must've shown through on his face, because Howard actually fucking answered him, "It's a doorway, Tony," he rasped, stopping to cough again. "Doors open both ways. They open both--"

Before another word could be spoken, someone grabbed Tony, and then he was being thrown over a muscled shoulder and was bouncing every which way as his ride - Barnes, of course it was fucking Barnes - ran for the hills. They barely made it fifty paces before the explosion tore through the night, throwing them both forwards and to the ground. Tony landed on his back with a muffled thump, felt all the air go out of him. He curled up on himself, coughing, did his best not to look at the blazing inferno the Rolls Royce had become.

"Sir," Barnes said, stepping into his line of vision. "We should return to the rendezvous point before the emergency responders show up." His hand was extended.

Tony considered knocking the hand away and pulling himself to his feet, but his whole body ached and Barnes was right. They did need to get a move on. Grudgingly, he reached up and clasped the offered hand, letting Barnes haul him to his feet. "You know where I stashed my car?" he asked. At Barnes's nod of confirmation, Tony set off. "Let's get out of here."

It wasn't until he was behind the wheel that he had time to stop and wonder what the hell he was doing. He should've left Barnes on that field. Everything was a hell of a lot more complicated with a Red HYDRA assassin in tow. And fuck it, fuck all of this. Howard hadn't had any answers, or, if he did, he hadn't managed to tell Tony, which made this whole damn thing pointless. And not just that,
but he still had to figure out the answers, or he'd be stuck here. In the end, gritting his teeth, he set the course for the beach house. Maybe Howard's study would hold some answers.

He sped up the driveway and came to a stop, wheels screeching, in front of the house. It wasn't as ostentatious as the Fifth Avenue mansion where Tony had spent most of his pre-boarding school childhood. Tony liked it better, despite the extra bits of forced proximity, had been grateful when, around the time he started at MIT, his parents had made this their primary residence. He pushed that thought away, bundled it into the back of his head along with everything else he didn't have time for right now, opened the car door and stepped out. He was halfway to the front door of the house when he realized Barnes was still sitting in the car behind him, military-style stiff-backed. Groaning, he turned back around, jogged back to the car and fuck, every bit of his body hurt. He was going to be a fucking bruise tomorrow. He threw open the car door, leaned in. "Get out. Go... secure the perimeter or whatever it is you're good for, and then make yourself scarce somewhere inside. No one sees you. Understood?"

Barnes gave a sharp nod, opened the passenger-side door and slid out, disappearing into the shadows within just a few steps. Tony rolled his eyes, turned back and walked up to the door. It took a long moment to remember the password that went with his thumbprint on the frankly ancient electronic lock, but then he pressed it in, opened the door and stepped inside, turned on the lights. The past rushed out to meet him, a plethora of sights and smells he'd forgotten decades ago, had preferred to leave behind along with the house when he donated it to the Maria Stark Foundation.

Tony let it all roll off him like water on a raincoat and made his way to Howard's study. He let himself in, picked the lock to the liquor cabinet with practiced hands, pulled out an aged Bowmore, cracked the seal and poured a few fingers into a tumbler before plopping down behind the desk. He rolled his shoulders, sighing at the pop he earned, held up the scotch. "To Dad, for being as fucking useless as ever," he muttered. Still, the stinging in his eyes after he threw back the scotch had very little to do with the strength of the liquor. He put the tumbler away, opened the drawers one by one until he found Howard's stack of notebooks. Then he leaned back in the chair and got as comfortable as he could for a long few hours of reading.
The sound of the door falling shut behind Steve was oddly muted. Tony thought it should've been louder, a proper slam at least. This, this silent walking out... It sat as a counterpoint to the dread rolling through his stomach, which he couldn't even explain. It wasn't like anything had gone wrong yet. He just had to read the Accords. He had to understand what this was all about. He'd get why this was necessary, why this was something they needed to support. Ross had given them a week, after all. A week was long enough to read through the documents, understand the situation, the implications of it all. Tony had to believe that. He sat down, letting out a sharp breath as he took in the people who remained in the room. His eyes caught on Romanoff, widened. That-- That, he hadn't expected.

Rhodey cleared his throat, caught Tony's attention momentarily. "I'll talk to them," he promised. He got out of his chair and stopped to squeeze Tony's shoulder on his way to the door. "You know I'm with you."

Tony nodded, let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Thank God for that, at least. Whatever happened, he'd always have Rhody, and that was a hell of a thing too; he couldn't count the number of times he'd have fallen apart without Rhody, in the past few months more than ever. "Thank you," he said. "And listen, you know if things get heated, I've still got a room set up for you in the Tower."

Rhodey nodded, gave him another squeeze and moved out.

The Vision was next, with a look on his too-human face Tony could just barely read. He didn't say anything, but then he didn't have to. Tony knew, somehow, in some odd way he couldn't explain, that right now, for all everyone kept saying to the contrary, right now the Vision was more JARVIS than anything, and Tony trusted JARVIS more than he trusted himself. He breezed out of the room, feet barely seeming to touch the ground. And then Tony was alone with Romanoff.

"I'd have thought you'd be first in line to follow Cap out," Tony said, voice a bit raspier than he'd have liked. "You know, with being best buddies and taking down the last agency that had oversight over us and all that shit."

Her movements when she slid into the chair across from him reminded him of some great African hunting cat, graceful and deadly, but he didn't sense more hostility from her than he usually did. Maybe less, even. "You almost sound like you wanted me to," she said.

Tony shrugged. "Not really," he said. "Then again, I didn't expect Cap to walk out either."

"That happened," Romanoff said, raising one perfectly plucked eyebrow. "Don't act so surprised, Stark. It was always going to happen." She was silent for a moment, laced her hands together on top of the table. "Sooner or later, it was going to be us against the world, with no one else who got it. Cap least of all." She shrugged her deceptively delicate shoulders. The only thing that gave away
that she felt even a little of the upset he did was a slight tic in her jaw.

"It's not 'us against the world', though," Tony protested. "There's Rhodey, Vision... Even the government's on our side for once."

"Government's scared," Natasha said. "Rhodes... He's loyal to you, not to the law. He doesn't have to understand what this is about. He probably doesn't. Doesn't matter. He's always going to have your back, and being a career officer doesn't hurt. And The Vision. Whatever he claims to be, at the core of him, he's still JARVIS. He may not always agree with you, but he's always going to want to keep you safe. That doesn't mean they understand." She sighed. "They may not be as naïve as Cap and the others, but." She looked up at him, met his gaze, and this was probably the most open he'd ever seen her. Direct and sharp, nothing kind or gentle about her right in that moment, but still something he recognized, something that struck a chord of understanding in the pit of his stomach, something instinctive. "Tony, none of them have had to make the choice to deliberately sacrifice someone they love for the greater good. None of them look in the mirror and see something terrible enough to understand that we need to be controlled, that if left to our own devices, we could end everything. So yeah. In this, right now, we're pretty damn alone."

Tony sighed, squeezed his eyes shut. Frustration ran through him because fuck it all, why was this so hard to understand? Hundreds of dead civilians, in Sokovia, in South Africa. In America, every single day powered people took the law into their own hands and played judge, jury and executioner, never mind that they weren't infallible, that they made mistakes. And Steve still didn't get it. Tony loved his personal fucking freedom, but he wasn't green enough to think it was worth any price, especially when other people wound up being the ones who had to pay for it. How was that so difficult for the rest of them to see? How could someone like Cap, who claimed to be all about morality and protecting the innocent, fail to see that? "It fucking sucks," he said at last.

"Yeah, well." The smile Natasha flashed him was all steel and determination, nothing soft about it. "Let Rhodes and the Vision have a try now. I'll talk to him as well. Maybe it will all still turn out all right." She didn't look like she believed it.

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Tony snuffled awake, yawning and stretching and fuck, was that-- Had he fallen asleep on a desk? And if he had, why was his back not hurting? He blinked once, twice, opened his eyes fully. And most definitely did not scream at the sight of the Winter Soldier standing at attention next to the door in Howard's beach house study. "Fuck," he got out, before forcing himself to stop, take a moment to catch his breath. "Don't do that. Don't just stand there. You're creeping me out. At least, fuck, go to parade rest or something."

Barnes shifted to parade rest.

Tony groaned out loud. Then he shook his head, squeezed his eyes shut, went through all the shit that had happened since Strange sent him back. He looked down at the notebooks, swallowed down the temptation to just throw a teen tantrum and shove them all to the floor. No help. No fucking help at all. They were chuck-full of paranoia and quantum mechanics theories that seemed to be getting increasingly crazier the later the entry date. All of it corresponded perfectly with Peggy's notes and her concern for Howard's obsession with the Tesseract, but none of it provided any of the answers Tony'd been sent here to find.

Clearly, Howard had figured out the potential wormhole capabilities, if not how to utilize them - thank fuck for small favors. And he'd been clear-headed enough to reach the same conclusion Selvig had, that a door could open from both sides. But all things considered, he'd known less about the damn thing, let alone the rest of the Infinity Stones and that fucking gauntlet, than even Cap did back
in the present. So this whole thing, this whole plan, their last resort, was for nothing. His breath was
coming too fast, suddenly, and he was beginning to feel clammy with cold sweat and-- He needed to
clear his head somehow. And he needed to stop smelling like smoke. "I'm going to go grab a
shower," he said. "You-- You've got that crazy metabolism thing, right? Grab some breakfast or
something." With that, he heaved himself out of the chair and went upstairs.

He cleaned himself off quickly, and took great pleasure in being annoyed all over again when he got
to the part where he had to wash his hair. Much easier to think about bad hair than every other thing
that had already gone wrong in the span of one day. When it came time to get dressed again, he
stopped short for a moment in front of his closet, stunned and horrified by the contents of past Tony's
wardrobe. Tight, ripped jeans that were too short in the leg. Turtlenecks. Jean jackets. Fucking
eighties. In the end, he picked out the stuff that hurt his eyes least, put it on and went back
downstairs. A heavenly aroma came out to greet him. "Oh, God," he said, walking into the kitchen,
picking a mug out of the cupboard and pouring himself a serving. "You made coffee. Of all the
things I'd have thought you might do with that order, this is about the least nutritious and the most
perfect."

Barnes had taken off the muzzle and goggles and was apparently halfway through a mug of his own.
"Caffeine will help me stay alert," he said. "Missions don't often take this long."

Tony nodded, beat down his habitual unease at being in close proximity to Barnes. The phantom
feeling of punches and kicks raining down over him did not help matters. "You should eat as well,"
he repeated, not entirely sure why he gave a fuck. Well, probably the same reason he hadn't just left
him behind last night. With the ease of long practice, he suppressed that thought. His dreams were
one thing, but in his waking hours, he needed a clear mind. He took a deep breath, tried to focus. If
there weren't any answers to be found here, why the fuck wasn't he back in the present yet? The only
answer he could come up with was that there might still be something he could do here, something
he wouldn't be able to do once he got back.

Suddenly, it struck him. "The Tesseract," he said out loud. "What was it Thor said? Every time it's
used, it sends a signal out, saying that Earth is ready for a higher form of war. And yet nobody
actually comes for it until twenty twelve. Is it really that fucking simple?"

Barnes looked at him with absolutely zero interest before turning away to make himself a sandwich
that seemed to consist of all the blandest, most nutritious foods he could find.

"I need to talk to Aunt Peggy," Tony said. "Barnes, eat up and go shower. I'll see if I can find some
clothes that fit you. Drop the muzzle and shit. Try to stand out less."

Barnes, as it turned out, was damn fast at pretty much everything, and about ten minutes later they
were back in the car. Barnes didn't really stand out all that much less, even by eighties standards
since, well, Tony's family didn't really own any clothes in size Super Soldier, but at least he was
slightly less creepy goth now. Honestly, Tony had kind of preferred it before, when he didn't feel
like the resemblance around the nose and mouth was punching him in the stomach every time he
looked at Barnes.

To distract himself more than anything, he reached out and turned on the car radio. Found himself
actually humming along a few moments later. Barnes paused his automaton routine for a moment to
look at Tony like he was absolutely crazy. "Yeah," Tony said. "I don't really like Bon Jovi much
either, but this is a pretty decent song."

"You're not very old, are you?" Barnes asked.

Tony cocked an eyebrow. "One thing you and I have in common this time around, Barnes: We're
both a hell of a lot older than we look."

Barnes's frown was almost childlike in its confusion. "My designation is not 'Barnes'."

Tony rolled his eyes. "I'm your CO," he said. "If I wanna call you Barnes, I'm gonna call you Barnes." Then he turned up the volume, not in the least interested in having conversations with confused assassins.

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Traffic had been bad enough that it was the middle of the afternoon by the time they reached DC. Late afternoon by the time Tony had maneuvered them through the city traffic to Peggy's South DC house and parked the car outside. For a moment, he considered leaving Barnes outside and not giving his godmother a heart attack, but he couldn't risk it. This close to the Triskelion, or whatever office they had back in the... now, there was no way Peggy was the only S.H.I.E.L.D. agent in the area, and no way to tell which ones were actually HYDRA. And sure, the chance of any of them being high-ranking enough to know anything about the Winter Soldier was low, but for all Tony knew, Pierce could be Peggy's next-door neighbor. Okay, he'd have probably remembered that, but still. Where the fuck even was Pierce in 1987? Either way, leaving Barnes in the car was just too fucking risky. Tony didn't give a whole lot of fucks what would happen to the bastard if he got caught again, but he did care about not having the Winter Soldier siced on him before he could get back to the present. "Come on," he finally said. "We're going inside. She's a friendly, so don't attack."

Barnes nodded, got out of the car and followed him up to the front door. He stepped aside, back still annoyingly stiff as Tony rang the bell. "I'll be there in a minute," a familiar voice called from inside, and an unexpected stab of pain went straight through the pit of Tony's stomach. Fuck, had it really only been a year since Aunt Peggy died? He hadn't gone to the funeral, had been too tied up in politics. Had never managed to find the time to sit down and just process, and fuck-- He sucked in a sharp breath, kept himself together by the skin of his teeth. A moment later, the door opened and there she was, not the sickly, frail woman she'd become in the end, but the bastion of strength and stability he remembered from his childhood, just a few grey streaks in her hair and enough wrinkles on her face to make her look distinguished, but not old.

"Tony," she said, startled, and Tony didn't even stop to think, stop to remember how old he was or what was and wasn't proper, just threw himself in her arms and hugged her tight. "Tony, I was just about to go join the team searching for you," she said, arms wrapping around him, pulling him close. "What's going on? Where have you been?"

Tony sucked in a breath, forced himself not to tear up at the scent of her perfume. With some difficulty, he extracted himself. "Can we come inside?" he asked.

At the 'we', her eyes flashed to Barnes. Between one breath and the next, she went white as a sheet. She nodded weakly, stepped back into the house. "Of course," she said, voice damn near breathless. "Come on in, Darling." Her eyes flickered back to Barnes before she looked away, shoulders straightening inside her jacket. Tony followed her inside, signaling for Barnes to follow. The door fell shut behind them with a faint click. Peggy turned back around, dark eyes still much too large for her face. As if she'd seen a ghost. In a way, Tony supposed she had. "Tony, what's going on?" she asked. "Who's that man?"

Tony sucked in a deep breath. "It's a long story," he said. "Really long, and you wouldn't believe me if I told you." He sighed. "You know Barnes," he added. "Although I'm guessing he's a bit different than what you remember."
"Tony, what are you-- Did you even hear what happened to your parents? What is-- Barnes?" She stopped, shut her eyes, pulled herself together visibly with that show of strength Tony had spent most of his life trying and failing to imitate. "Tell me what's happening."

Tony opened his mouth. Snapped it shut. Because, well, fuck. How was he supposed to explain any of it, let alone without completely screwing up the timeline? Well, more than he was already planning to. How the hell was he supposed to even explain Barnes? With as mad as life had gotten after he'd first built the suit, the story of Bucky Barnes hadn't seemed so out there, but in this world, before it all went to the bizarre kind of hell Tony called his life, even that bit seemed impossible to put into words. Finally, he reached out, gripped her hand and squeezed, the way she had so often for him when he was younger. "Aunt Pegs, do you trust me?"

Her bewildered gaze flickered to Barnes for a moment before her eyes focused on Tony again. "Of course," she said.

"Good," he said. "Because everything's kind of crazy right now, and. Well. I guess I should start by saying that HYDRA survived."

"Sir," Barnes objected.

Tony gritted his teeth. "Shut up, Barnes, we're defecting." He quickly turned back to Peggy. "Well, he's defecting. I was never HYDRA." At the sound of shuffling behind him, he turned around, met Barnes's gaze straight on. "Don't even think about it, Buckaroo. Aunt Peggy will kill you with a stapler. Also, I'm offering you a pretty sweet deal here. No more chair, no more mind wipes. It'll be like a vacation." He narrowed his eyes. "And if you're still trying to go for your gun, I know more than the one command phrase."

Some strange, complicated emotion that seemed to be at least one part fear and two parts confusion crossed over Barnes's face before he inclined his head. "Sir," he said.

Tony sighed again, turned back around to Peggy. "Okay, this must all seem really confusing," he said. "But yeah, Barnes survived. HYDRA jacked him up on some shit. They've been brainwashing him and using him as an assassin since. And... You think I'm crazy, don't you?"

Peggy was shaking her head, movements slow, but she wasn't going into shock or some other such shit. How the hell had Tony forgotten how strong she was? "I'm guessing Howard trusted you a lot more than he let on," she finally said. "With things he didn't even feel he could tell me." She let out a breath. "Let's go sit, Tony. I don't handle shock as well as I did twenty years ago." She wrapped her hand delicately around his forearm, steered him into the living room. "With us, Sergeant," she called over her shoulder, and Tony heard the steady footsteps as Barnes followed them. Soon enough, he and Peggy were on the couch and his hand was cradled in her smaller ones again, and it hurt like hell, sitting here with her on this couch where he'd spent so many hours of his childhood, hurt far more than the deaths he'd witnessed last night, had decades to get over. "What did Howard tell you, Tony?" Peggy asked softly.

Tony let out a shuddering breath, grateful beyond words for the explanation she'd fabricated for him. "HYDRA," he said, because he needed that sub-plot over with. She wouldn't let him focus on anything other than that before she got her answers. "Infiltrated S.H.I.E.L.D. since the beginning, through Zola among others. Zola's stashed in a computer under Lehigh, by the way. Carson is in on it. Pierce. I don't really know any of the other big names. Didn't pay that much attention. You can trust Fury, though. And Coulson. If Coulson even works there yet. If not, recruit him. And Hill, even though she's a pain in the ass."

Peggy was frowning at him, but he knew her well enough to know she was filing everything he'd
just said away for later use. "Howard told you this?" she asked.

Tony shrugged. "I guess he's been sniffing them out for a while," he said. "They tried to kill him for it."

"Oh, Darling, you really didn't hear?" She reached out, stroked a lock of his ratty hair out of his face. "Sweetie, I'm so sorry. Your parents, Jarvis... They were killed last night--"

"Yeah," Tony said. "Yeah, I know. I was there. I was trying to stop HYDRA from--" He stopped, shook his head, tried to get it all straight. "I did stop HYDRA," he said. "They sent him," he added, throwing his free hand back to point in Barnes's direction. "Only, because the universe is a big horrible joke, someone else had the same idea. I'm guessing Stane."

Peggy blinked. "Stane? Your father's business partner?"


She nodded. "Yes, Howard has been obsessing over that lately."

Tony returned her nod. "I need it. I need it so I can get rid of it."

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"You remember the coordinates?" Peggy asked, even as she kept him hugged tight against her. Not that Tony had any room to speak. He was hugging her back just as tight, unsure he'd ever be able to let go, sharply aware of the fact that this would probably be the last time he ever saw her alive.

Tony nodded against her shoulder, parroted the numbers dutifully. "Thank you for trusting me, Aunt Pegs," he muttered, and he hated how choked his voice sounded, how tight his throat felt.

She took a gentle half step back, reached out and stroked her knuckles down his cheek. "Take care of yourself, Darling," she said softly. The small smile on her lips trembled minutely before she got herself under control and let go of him. She reached down, picked up a bag and pushed it into his hands. "Food, some cash," she told him. "One of Howard's non-lethal guns."

Tony swallowed, shifted the bag to get a better grip. Tried not to think too much of the care packages she'd pressed into his hands when he'd had to return to boarding school after the holidays years and years ago. He managed a smile for her. "Love you," he said. Then he turned around and walked towards the car, stowing the bag in the backseat.

"Barnes," he heard Peggy say, "if you let that kid get hurt, I'll hunt you down and kill you, Steve's best friend or not." In the rearview mirror, Tony saw her reach out and squeeze Barnes's hand, oddly tender considering the words she'd just spoken. Barnes, when he slid into his seat, mostly just looked spooked.

Tony turned the key, heard the engine hum to life. Had to restrain himself to keep from running back out of the car and throw himself back into Peggy's arms and not let go again. Fuck it, he wasn't a kid, whatever he looked like. He was forty-six fucking years old. Couldn't fix things by hiding in Aunt Peggy's skirts. He drew in a steeling breath, turned on the blinker and drove away. "At least they haven't moved the Sandbox to Morocco yet," he said. "Pretty sure Morocco sucks in eighty-seven."

Barnes didn't react, didn't do much of anything at all, really, for the next two hours. Then, suddenly, he turned to Tony, frowning. "Who was that?" he asked.
Tony cocked an eyebrow. "Aunt Peggy?" He reached out to turn down the volume of the radio. "You'll have known her as Agent Carter. She worked with you when you were in the Howling Commandos. Dated your best friend." Barnes, as expected, only looked more puzzled, and Tony gave a mental shrug. It was a hell of a drive to Nevada. He didn't really have anything all that much better to do than recount all the countless World War II stories he'd heard from various sources throughout his childhood. It was always nice to have a captive audience when he was talking, even if that audience was Bucky fucking Barnes.

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They hit Kentucky before Tony grudgingly admitted to himself that to keep driving right now would probably be up there on his list of dumb choices. He was pretty sure Barnes could probably drive a car, but Tony doubted he'd get a wink of sleep that way. He'd never been good at relaxing with someone he didn't trust behind the wheel, simple as that. Besides, Barnes was running on even less sleep than him, and even with the whole serum situation, he was going to have to crash at some point. Annoyed with the delay, Tony pulled in at the first the best motel, got a room and went straight to bed after ordering Barnes to get some sleep in the room's other single.

Tony had barely shut his eyes before all the doubts he'd kept down throughout the day assaulted him. What had his actions changed about the future? What would the things he had still planned do to the world? What would he be returning to? And what did that even mean for him? Time travel was barely understood scientifically, with too many theories out there to count. So what did magical time travel mean? Would he even be able to-- No, no. He wasn't going to think about that. He was going to keep his head on straight, do what he needed to do, and then Strange's magic spell bullshit would pull him back home. Simple as that. Tony focused on evening out his breaths, tried to think of one of Bruce's old meditation techniques, anything to calm his brain enough to get some damn sleep, and fucking finally, he began to feel the exhaustion creeping up on him, warm and heavy like a woolen blanket, and--

"You really aren't going to put me in the chair?" Barnes asked, voice soft and childlike, and Tony wanted to punch his stupid face.

Tony gritted his teeth, could feel sleep begin to slip away from him. "I may not like you," he said. "Don't mean I'm gonna torture you."

For long moments, Tony actually thought he might get the peace and quiet he'd needed in order to get some rest. Then, "What does 'like' mean?" And how the fuck was it that this version of Barnes, still indoctrinated and without having seen Rogers, was actually more talkative than the modern version? Tony had the worst luck.

Tony sighed, let himself actually take in the question. What did like mean? How could anyone not know? Liking and disliking were such visceral things. How did you even explain it? How could Barnes not know? Suddenly sick to his stomach, Tony shifted, pulled the sheet around himself more tightly. HYDRA had erased everything that made Barnes human taught him only the things he needed to know to be a functioning weapon. A weapon shouldn't know the meaning of liking and disliking. In fact, it was probably better that it didn't. The thought was nauseating, even when applied to someone Tony wanted to punch most of the time. Still, the least he could do was try to figure out how to answer. "If you like something or someone, it's. I guess it's when it makes you feel good, or warm, or. Happy, I guess. You'd choose something you like above something you don't like."

A beat passed, but this time around Tony was very aware of the fact that the conversation wasn't over, that he might not have managed to give an answer Barnes was even capable of understanding. Either way, he probably wasn't going to be allowed to go back to sleep any time soon. "You like
Agent Carter," Barnes finally said. "She made you feel happy, even when she made you upset." It wasn't constructed as a question, felt slow and faltering, like a toddler attempting to understand math. "And you don't like me. But you left her behind and took me with you. Why?"

Tony cringed because, yeah, leave it to him to give an explanation that had so many openings for holes to be poked through it. Who in their right mind would ever expect Tony Stark to explain feelings anyway? "Decision-making is pretty complex," he finally said. "Only kids really have the luxury of choosing stuff based on likes and dislikes. You have to be practical about things too. Aunt Peggy has important stuff to do back in DC, and she can't be implicated in the things we're about to pull."

"It was a tactical decision," Barnes said. "I was more useful." He was silent for so long that Tony almost thought he was going to let it go and let them get some sleep, fucking finally. Then, so softly Tony barely managed to make it out, "A lot of people find me useful. I don't think anyone likes me."

Tony winced. He hated this, absolutely hated it. The last thing he wanted was to feel sympathy for Barnes, let alone kinship. And still, all he could feel right then was recognition, acknowledgement of how many times he'd felt that exact thing. "Yeah, well," he finally muttered. "Life sucks."

Barnes didn't say anything after that. Didn't mean it was any easier to go to sleep.
Chapter 3

"I find this music... odd," Barnes said the next morning after about a hundred miles of driving. Tony'd had to change the channels a few times to keep it on a station he liked (he missed digital radio so much. And MP3s. And FRIDAY and his personal music library), but was pretty content to have Metallica streaming out the speakers.

"Not a heavy metal guy?" Tony asked, cocking an eyebrow. He found Barnes marginally less irritating today, which, in itself, was disconcerting. He'd spent so long hating Barnes that not wanting to punch him in the face made some strange sort of fear bubble through his stomach because, fuck, not hating Barnes meant that... meant that... What? That Natasha had mattered less? That that friendship somehow wasn't valid? He was being stupid, and he knew it, but Natasha had been gone for such a short time, had gone in such a way that he was more defensive of them than he probably should be, especially given the fact that this was nineteen eighty-seven and Barnes hadn't done... Hadn't done anything yet, well, not anything that Tony should hate him for. Which made, well, fuck. Tony sucked in a deep breath, focused on the road ahead. Last thing he needed right now was his own head spinning in circles.

"I don't..." Barnes frowned. The sound of his voice pulled Tony back into the present, grounded him, which was also annoying, but the look on Barnes's face was once again so confused, so childlike, that Tony felt like an utter shit for being annoyed. "I don't not like it," Barnes finally fumbled out. There was a strange sort of relish in his voice when he used the word 'like'. "I just..." He grimaced. "It's odd, is all."

Tony sighed. "How about this, Grandpa? I give you twenty minutes of golden oldies, and then you give me back radio control?"

Barnes blinked. "I don't know what you just said," he said.

Tony reached out, carefully changed the channel several times until something that sounded like old-school jazz was coming out of the speakers. A moment later, he realized he'd just doomed himself to twenty minutes of this shit and fought down the urge to groan out loud. "Can't believe your generation actually liked this crap," he said. "Cap still listens to it constantly, and then he acts all offended when someone calls him 'old man'."

Barnes blinked.

Tony sighed and turned back to watching the road, which was probably for the best. He was a damn good driver, but only when he was actually watching where he was going. It was sometime in the middle of the second song (15 minutes, 34 seconds before Tony could change the channel back) that a strange, choked sound from his right made him glance at Barnes.

Barnes was staring straight ahead, eyes vacant. His cheeks were streaked wet with tears. "It hurts," Barnes said, Adam's apple bobbing on a swallow. He turned and looked at Tony, something heartbreakingly desperate about him. "Why does it hurt?" And fuck him for that. Tony wasn't prepared to be dealing with a human being when he was supposed to be dealing with the Winter Soldier.

"My best guess," Tony said. He realized he was gritting his teeth, forcibly unclenched his jaw. "It reminds you of something. You probably don't remember specifics, but our brains store stuff in weird ways, so even if you can't remember events, you might be able to remember emotion. Something about the song triggered it. Sense inputs can do that, I hear."
Barnes squeezed his eyes shut. "Make it stop?"

A sadistic corner of Tony's mind urged him to ignore the request, to let the song keep playing, let Barnes keep experiencing whatever it was he was experiencing right now. Would probably be for the best, even, from a neurological memory-recovering psychology kind of standpoint, but Tony wasn't a fucking therapist, and he especially wasn't Barnes's fucking therapist, and watching the Winter Soldier cry was just fucking embarrassing. He reached out, switched back to the station he'd been on before, relaxed back in his seat at the sound of a familiar riff. "This is more like it." He frowned. "Back in Black could literally be your song. I think I'm jealous. I've got theme song envy, Barnes. I need to listen to Iron Man now. We're staying on this station until they play it again."

Another glance to his side revealed another confused look, which at least was better than the heartbroken one from before.

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"Who are you?" Barnes asked that night when they were ensconced in another motel, each with a paper bag of fast-food from the nearest drive-in.

Tony frowned. He had introduced himself, hadn't he? He had to have at some point, or at least done something to make it pretty obvious. Except, he realized, he was in eighty-seven. He wasn't the Tony Stark of SI, wasn't Iron Man. Sure, Tony Stark was still a fairly well-known name to other people in eighty-seven, but possibly not to a sheltered, brainwashed, amnesiac assassin. Huh. "Tony Stark," he said. "Which probably doesn't ring much of a bell. You used to know my dad, though. Before." He grimaced, shrugged. "Before the chair," he finally said.

Barnes didn't respond for a moment, focused on peeling the paper back from his cheeseburger with a delicacy that was kind of shocking to see in a beefcake with a cybernetic arm. "I never thought there was a 'before the chair'," he said. He looked up for a moment, eyes lost. They had flecks of green in them, Tony realized. Disturbingly familiar. "I guess I never thought there was anything except what I knew."

Tony bit into his own burger, chewed slowly in an attempt to buy himself time because, well. Fuck. That was a lot more insight than he'd expected this early on. Or, well, ever. Still, objectively speaking, Barnes actually thinking for himself was probably a good thing. So long as thinking for himself didn't turn into an attempt to kill Tony, the way it had - would? - in the future. "That's how it is for a lot of us," he said after a while. "Stick to the routine, what you know. Don't question stuff. It's easier than facing up to the effect you've got on others. Until something happens and you have to start thinking. We can't all be born with unshakable morals and certainty."

Barnes's head cocked to the side. Something seemed to flash through his eyes for a moment. Then he shrugged and took a bite. His eyes widened almost comically and he chewed so fast Tony could see the moment he almost choked, somehow managed to swallow after all only to go straight for the next bite, moaning around it.

Tony bit back a laugh, swallowing down his own mouthful. "Good thing we're not in public. That sound was downright obscene."

Barnes's brows furrowed, creating a tiny crease between them. He finished chewing and swallowed, this time without nearly killing himself. "Huh?"

Tony rolled his eyes. "Guess it's been a while since you ate anything you actually liked," he said. "Please, go back to having sex with your food. I'm going to see what's on TV."

Barnes glanced down at the burger in clear confusion, then back at Tony. "I'm not having intercourse
with the burger."

Tony had to fight hard to repress the urge to physically facepalm. "Oh, God, just eat your food, will you?" He stuffed the last bit of his own burger in his mouth, chewing as he went looking for the remote. He picked it up, swallowing down the food. "Huh, so I guess they did give you sex ed. Not sure what that says about HYDRA's ability to prioritize." He plopped back down on his bed, arranged himself in a position that was about as comfortable as he was going to get on the shitty ass mattress and turned on the TV.

Barnes blinked. "You're right," he said. "That is odd. Doesn't seem like very useful knowledge."

This time, Tony couldn't stop himself. He burst out laughing, grateful he hadn't gotten around to picking his soda back up. He hated snorting fizz out his nose. "You say that now," he managed at last. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you were more virginal than Cap."

Barnes had apparently changed tactics and decided to ignore Tony in favor of his burger, which, yeah, fine, that was totally all right. Tony was going to watch TV anyway. He turned his attention to the screen, which was damn shitty and pretty fucking old even by eighties standards. He had to change the channels a few times to get anything more than a visual of the Alaskan weather forecast. And then there was a huge picture of Howard and lines about 'nation mourning a hero' and whatever other rot, and Tony was just about to change the channels again. "That was the target," Barnes said, voice slow and confused again. "Was he someone you knew?"

"We both knew him," Tony said, managing a nonchalant shrug. "Howard Stark. My father."

Barnes was frowning, seemed caught in an intense kind of silence Tony didn't really know what to do with. "I'm sorry," he finally said, something wondering about it, as if he didn't understand what he was saying, let alone why.

Tony swallowed. "Yeah, well. Wasn't your fault." He turned off the TV, kicked off his shoes and crawled under the covers, couldn't help but feel like something inside him was trying to shift, painfully. "I'm gonna see if I can catch some shut-eye," he said. "See you on the other side."

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"I hate this," Tony said, swallowing painfully. "I hate fighting them."

"You think I don't?" Natasha asked, hands nimble and careful as they cleaned out the gash down the side of his face, began to apply butterfly bandages. "You think they don't hate fighting us? Tony, it's all a mess right now. That doesn't mean you let Rogers kill you."

"What would you have me do?" Tony asked. "Repulsor him in the face?"

"Yes," she said. "If it's that or let him bash your skull in. If it comes down to you and Rogers, you have to choose you, or this is all over, and it'll all be for nothing."

Tony gritted his jaw, tried not to wonder how it had come to this, tried not to rage about Rogers's fucking stubbornness and complete inability to compromise, tried to just find a moment of calm in the middle of it all. "There'll still be you," he said.

She stroked her hand through his hair, stepped in close enough to wrap her arms around him. "No one is going to follow the Black Widow," she said. "You're the one who has to stay alive, Tony, or we've already lost."

Tony had to swallow again, let himself be held, tried to find some comfort from the sound of her
heart beating under his ear. Wondered when she'd become his fucking rock. "Sometimes I think we lost the moment the negotiations fell through."

She patted his cheek, took half a step back. "Sometimes I think we'd all be in a much better place if you and Rogers had stopped dancing around each other sooner and found a convenient vertical surface instead."

Tony snorted in amusement at that one. "I doubt I would've fit next to the stick in his ass," he said. The slight ache still lingering where she'd poked was nothing he couldn't live with. He'd let go of that months ago, before it had a chance to become something crippling.

She shrugged. "I really did think the two of you would've wound up together, once upon a time," she said.

Tony rolled his eyes. "And then Ultron happened," he said. "He was never going to trust me again after that." He let out a breath. "And he'd have still been enough of a sanctimonious asshole to start a war because he felt his civil liberties were being infringed upon." He leaned back and reached up to poke at the bandage. Natasha slapped his fingers away before he could touch. "Maybe in another world."

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Tony fished a pair of Stark tech night vision binoculars out of Aunt Peggy's backpack. He was on his stomach, hopefully pretty well hidden behind the shrubbery that seemed to cover most of the Nevada desert floor. Barnes was a handful of feet to his right, similarly covered, and what was wrong with Tony that Barnes's presence was suddenly reassuring? Tony shook that thought off, took a moment to go over the information Peggy had given him one last time.

They were there a bit earlier than Tony had expected, which was down to Barnes. Tony had accounted for the extra travel time having no FRIDAY and GPS would create, but apparently the Winter Soldier with a map and a compass was almost as good. Which, well, Tony supposed he should've expected that. There had to have been covert ops and shit he'd been involved with, not just the typical attack dog point-in-the-right direction kind of stuff Tony preferred to think was all he was good for.

In the end, the time didn't really mean all that much. It was late in the evening on the Sunday before Christmas. According to Peggy, there'd be a skeleton crew of guards. At most one or two scientists. Thankfully, the practice of having scientists and researchers pretty much live in the Sandbox hadn't been instituted yet. Most of the guards would be stationed outside, since their paygrade wasn't high enough to see what was going on inside. The challenge wasn't so much getting in and getting his hands on the Tesseract as it was doing that without using deadly force, and Tony would very much prefer to avoid that. Last thing he wanted was to be slung back to the present and right into the middle of some new disaster he'd inadvertently created by killing someone vital.

He held the binoculars up to his eyes, carefully focusing in on the front of the bunker. He didn't immediately catch sight of any guards, which didn't mean the coast was clear. This was S.H.I.E.L.D., not some amateur hour university lab or something. It would've been a hell of a lot more reassuring if he could actually see them. More than a little annoyed by his own incompetence, he passed the binoculars to Barnes. Barnes took them out of his hand without even looking in his direction, intent on the view ahead. Just moments later, he pointed a finger to the left of them, movements small and contained so he wouldn't catch attention from anyone else. Another moment ticked by, and Barnes pointed out two other guards that Tony couldn't make out no matter how hard he tried. Then a final signal, clearly more significant than the others, towards what Tony had assumed was simply the face of the steep rocks going up behind the bunker. This one, Tony could
actually make out, even in the darkness. Some kind of watchtower, glass windows that glinted in the moonlight.

Barnes dropped the binoculars silently to the ground, reached behind himself for the modified rifle he'd yet to let out of his sight since Tony picked him up. With quick fingers, he screwed on the sniper scope. Tony felt his own heartbeat pick up as adrenalin began to pump through his bloodstream.

"No fatalities," Tony hissed, trying desperately to keep his voice low and get his point through all at once.

Barnes flashed him a flat stare. "I know," he said. Then he got the rifle into position and lowered his head, staring into the scope. He wasn't using a stand, none of the general gear to keep the rifle stable, yet it didn't shake so much as a millimeter.

Tony frowned, thought the situation through again, then felt his own eyes widen. "Stop," he hissed. "You can't just-- If you're going to shoot to injure, someone's going to sound the alarm. They've all gotta have talkies - radios."

Barnes let out a huff that might've been a shout of frustration coming from nearly anyone else. "Gimme your stunner," he said then, sounding oddly different than he had before.

Tony cocked an eyebrow. "All right, Brooklyn." He dug into the pack again, came out with the stunner he was half certain Aunt Peggy had mostly given him for last-ditch protection against Barnes, and handed it over. "This doesn't work long-range," he added. "You need to be within twenty feet."

Barnes nodded, strapping the rifle back on and weighing the stunner in his hands. "How long's it last?"

"Should last fifteen minutes," Tony said.

Barnes gave a firm nod. "Stay here," he said, and then he melted into the shadows. For the next three minutes, Tony neither saw nor heard him, didn't see or hear much of anything. His pulse pounded and his palms grew sweaty and what the fuck was wrong with him? He'd been in far more charged situations than this before. Fact, he was pretty sure he hadn't even been this nervous flying the nuke through the wormhole. Then again, he had been the one flying through the wormhole. He'd probably have been a wreck if it had been one of the others. Control issues, then. No fun. Still, he kept himself taking deep, controlled breaths, kept the anxiety under control until, finally, Barnes showed back up. "Clear," he reported, handing back the stun gun.

Tony checked the safety, then stuck the gun in his waistband, got to his feet and set off toward the Sandbox with Barnes close behind, covering him. Real gun, this time. With just the moon for light, every single fucking step felt ominous, like someone might step out in front of them and blow everything to hell. Even that, though, was not quite as disconcerting as the fact that Tony wasn't nearly as scared as he'd been a minute ago when he'd been alone, waiting for Barnes to return. There was something seriously wrong if Barnes was making him feel safe.

The lack of fear, though, made room for something else, something more like what he was used to feeling during battle. He was hyper aware of everything around him, the cool night air, the crunch of the sand under the soles of his shoes, everything on high alert. The same zone that always helped him react just that tiny bit faster to things even if it left him drained and exhausted afterwards. It also slowed everything down, made the short walk to the bunker almost unbearably long. Somewhere off to the side, the wind ruffled up some of the bushes. The sound made goose bumps rise up on Tony's

Reaching the actual bunker was a relief. So was fishing out the screwdriver Peggy had also been nice enough to provide, cracking open the keypad for the lock and cross wiring it. The door slid open with a slight screech. Tony winced at the sound, let Barnes pass him and proceed inside. Tony followed in his footsteps, still uncomfortably unsettled. They passed through what looked like an empty garage with room for maybe a couple dozen cars, reached an elevator, which Barnes vetoed wordlessly, pulling open the door to the staircase instead.

They emerged into a dimly lit hallway lined with clearly marked doors. Shivers ran down Tony's spine. He wished he could be certain what they were up against, technology-wise, if they'd triggered a silent alarm or something, but the thing was that Tony had forgotten more about outdated technology than most people ever knew. And S.H.I.E.L.D. had never played by the rules of what should exist. Either way, the need to get this over with fast sat sharp and tight inside him, urging him forward. He scanned the plaques next to the door, drinking in numbers and letters until he reached the one Peggy had mentioned. He repeated the screwdriver trick. Then he gritted his teeth, put one hand on the stun gun in his waistband and pulled the door open, expecting flashing lights and squealing sirens.

Nothing happened.

Tony sucked in a sharp breath, unsure how long he'd held off on that, shut his eyes for the barest moment, just to ground himself. Then he stepped inside, looked around. He didn't dare turn on the light for fear of setting something off, so there wasn't much of a choice other than to make do with what was coming in through the door. Even the dim, spotty lighting was enough to make out that the last person who'd used this lab was Howard. It wasn't anything big, was simply in the smallest details, the way things were arranged, the way Howard's habits for easy access were so clearly visible when he squinted at it just right. Tony swallowed around the sudden, inexplicable lump in his throat. With some difficulty, he ignored all that, walked to the containment wall in the far end of the room. Through the bulletproof glass, he couldn't see much except a single worktop and some kind of tightly sealed chest. Looked about the right size.

He found the door, winced at the sight of yet another keypad. This one was definitely going to be wired to something nasty. Thank fuck Howard wasn't as clever as he tended to think. Tony had been around seven years old when he'd figured out which numbers Howard consistently used in his password. The trick had simply been not to use it so often Howard found out he knew it. Not that that particularly mattered anymore. Quickly, he pressed it in. Again, there was that terrible moment of waiting for the alarms to start blaring, that coat of sweat breaking out on his skin as worst-case scenarios raced through his mind. Tony sucked in a sharp breath. The lock clicked, and Tony exhaled on a shuddering sigh. "Valkyrie crash date," he muttered, mostly just to calm himself down. "Works every time. You'd think it was my birthday, or his wedding date or something like that, but no, dear old dad has to go with the day Cap went Capsicle on everyone's ass." He pushed the door open, stepped inside. All it took was a quick peek in the trunk to confirm its contents. He immediately slammed it back shut, picked it up and went back into the main room.

Barnes fell back into step with him when they returned to the hallways, pressing a hard pace as they made for the exit. Tony was about to reach out and grab the handle of the door to the staircase when he realized he was staring directly into the lens of a fucking security camera. He froze, mouth going dry as his stomach plummeted towards his feet. "Oh shit," he said. "Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit." Cameras was one of those things JARVIS took care of for him, something he hadn't had to worry about once since Afghanistan. God, how fucking stupid could he be? "They've got us on film."

Barnes frowned. "When you didn't say anything about dismantling the cameras, I assumed that was
the plan," he said.

Tony tried to breathe around the spot where his pounding heart seemed to have lodged itself in his throat. "Yeah, I guess we both need to work on our communication skills," he said. "How long until the guards wake up?"

"Six minutes, give or take thirty seconds, before the first two wake up," Barnes said. "The others will come around soon after."

"Shit," Tony spat. He squeezed his eyes shut, forced himself to calm down, get his head back on. He could not afford to panic right now. "We need to find the video bank, and we need to find it fast. Fuck, there's probably a security guard up there watching us. Why the hell hasn't he come after us yet?"

Barnes grimaced. "The control room has to be down a floor. I'll go take care of it," he said then. He stepped past Tony, gripped the door handle and pulled it down. Just then, the door burst open, amplifying the momentum of Barnes's own motions and sending him staggering back. Tony whipped the stun gun out of his waistband, held it up in front of him. Why the hell were his hands shaking? Fuck, he hated this baby body's reaction to adrenalin.

Barnes went into action the next moment, grabbed the first man through the door and threw him into the opposite wall. A sickening crunch pierced the air, and Tony hoped to God Barnes remembered the 'no fatalities' rule. More men poured through and fuck, if this was a skeleton crew, Tony was glad as fuck he wasn't here on a Tuesday afternoon. Tony pinched one eye, took aim and shot off two charges. The first one missed, but then second one had one guy go down cold. Which seemed kind of unnecessary when he looked at the pile of (hopefully just) unconscious security guys ringing Barnes, who was barely breathing hard. "You know," Tony muttered. "They might've come up with a new name for it, but steroids are still steroids."

"Don't know whatcher talkin' 'bout," Barnes said, bending down to pick up a baton one of the security guards must've dropped somewhere along the way. He weighed it in his hands and gave a nod, sticking it nonchalantly in his belt.

"Okay, probably tone down the Brooklyn about now. I'm a New Yorker and even I am having trouble understanding you," Tony said.

Barnes cocked an eyebrow. "I'd say that makes us even." He stepped over one of the guards, opened the door. "Wait in the garage," he said. Then he disappeared downstairs. Tony grimaced, but headed up to the garage. He hated how fucking useless he was, hated that he hadn't been able to take the suit back here with him. He sure as fuck wasn't telling anyone how many times he'd needed Barnes to save his ass once he got back. Rogers would never stop smirking.

He emerged into the garage, looked around for a moment before ducking behind one of the cars, trying to get out of sight. He glanced down at his watch, winced. Not nearly enough time left. Fuck, but he didn't want to know how this would go if the guards were awake once they got out of here. Who knew what they had up in the tower? Last thing he wanted was to be ducking machine gun fire all the way back to the car. He bit back the urge to tap his fingers against something, tried to force this annoying, adrenalin-fuelled restlessness out of his body. He was experienced enough to know giving into shit like that could kill a guy, and that was not part of the plan.

Tony gripped the hilt of the stun gun again, to ground himself more than anything. Gripped it hard enough that the smooth metal of the hilt dug into the palm of his hand. Fuck, give him his suit and an alien army over this any day. Biting his lip, he glanced down at his watch again. It was getting tight, really fucking tight, even as the second hand looked like it was crawling through molasses, horribly
slow. Barnes needed to hurry the fuck up or A) they would have a really hard time getting out, and B) Tony would go fucking crazy. He forced himself to stop watching the watch, turned his gaze to the door hiding the staircase.

A noise made him jump, until he realized it was the damn studs on his jacket scratching against the car. Even knowing that's what had caused it, though, it was still an effort to calm his breathing back down, to unlock his body from where every single muscle seemed to have tensed up. And somehow, despite the shittiness of the past few minutes, he still was completely shocked when the door finally opened and Barnes stepped out. Tony jumped, and then he couldn't get his stupid fucking legs to work, just barely managed to propel himself to his feet.

Barnes crossed the garage with long, fast strides. "C'mon, gotta go," he said, voice pitched low. When Tony still couldn't seem to get his legs to work, Barnes gripped his arm and hauled him towards the exit. Tony stumbled the first few steps before his legs finally found their groove and got going, urged on by the bruising grip Barnes's cybernetic hand had on his biceps. And then they were running for the doors. Barnes reached out, pressed the button that should be sliding the doors open and letting them out.

Nothing happened.

Barnes pressed the button again, and still, nothing happened.

Tony spat out a curse, pulled himself free and walked up to the control panel. "Someone has to have put the place on lockdown," he said, casting another glance at his watch. They did not have time for this. He handed the Tesseract container to Barnes, pulled the screwdriver out of his pocket, got to work opening the panel. Forcing his fingers to be steady, to not fumble, was a bigger struggle than it should be and fuck, what was with this frightened baby body and its stupid responses? He finally got the panel off, took in the wires and circuits exposed. "Fucking-- Someone made this deliberately complicated. Thanks a lot, Howard."

"Can you do it?" Barnes asked.

Tony inhaled sharply. "Yeah. Yeah, sure. Just gotta give me a moment."

Barnes gripped the back of his shirt, pulled him back and away from the panel. Then he pulled back his bionic arm before punching through with more power than Tony had ever seen even Cap exhibit. Sparks flew. For a moment, the lights flickered around them. The whining of wrecked electronics filled the air. "That's a moment," Barnes said. He shook out his cybernetic arm with a hint of a grimace, which, yeah, he'd probably gotten a shock or two there. He shoved the box back at Tony. Then he reached out, gripped the seam between the two portions of the doors and pulled. This time there wasn't even a hint of a grimace. The squeal told Tony he hadn't managed to take out the lock completely, but it was enough for them both to squeeze through. The doors pushed back shut behind them, which was oddly reassuring. With the wrecked panel, it would take a while for anyone not on steroids to get through.

Tony glanced down at his watch again. "Shit," he said. "One minute at the most."

Barnes nodded, gripped Tony's arm again. "Run," he said, and then he did, and Tony forgot everything about shaking him off almost as soon as he thought of it. Barnes was halfway dragging him, pushing a higher pace than Tony could've ever possibly reached on his own without the suit. Tony almost lost his footing more than once, between the sand and the vegetation and the breakneck pace.

"I'm not normally this useless," Tony felt compelled to inform in between panted breaths, clutching
the Tesseract tight with his free arm.

Barnes simply grunted in reply, propelling them forward with another burst of speed that had Tony stumbling over his feet to keep up. And then he heard that all-too familiar rattle of machinegun fire starting up behind them.

"Holy shit," Tony spat, barely staying on his feet as Barnes abruptly changed their direction, keeping their route winding and unpredictable, which would've been a good thing if Tony had been able to predict it. As it was, he was pulled off his feet half a dozen times, felt like he was being swung through the air like a fucking ragdoll. His heart beat a ragged tattoo against the inside of his ribcage and his brain was swimming in so damn much adrenalin he felt drunk on it. Some part of him wanted to laugh and cry all at once and fuck, he couldn't remember the last time he'd been this frightened.

Fucking finally there was another outcropping straight ahead. The car should be behind there if that hadn't gone to shit too. The fire from the guard tower paused a moment, then started up again, the sound of it nearly deafening despite the distance. They should be out of range soon, shouldn't they? Tony got solid footing for a moment, hoisted the Tesseract up higher so he wouldn't drop it, and then Barnes was tearing him off the ground again, making straight for the rocks. And then, fucking finally, they were out of range of the guns, with the rental car growing visible ahead.

They rounded the corner of the outcropping. A single shot rang out. A strangely metallic ping echoed in Tony's ears. Barnes stiffened. Tony turned to stare at him, realizing belatedly that the sound had come from the bullet ricocheting off the cybernetic arm. Even in the dim moonlight, Tony could make out the change in Barnes, or, really, the reversal of small, gradual changes from the past few days. What he was left with was a stiff, masklike face, eerie stillness and eyes that were so fucking empty it would be less scary if they'd been full of hatred. This wasn't Barnes he was looking at; this was the Winter Soldier. The Winter Soldier turned towards the source of the gunshot, every single movement saturated with coiled brutality and superhuman strength. He was on the guard hiding behind the car in one fluid movement. The single extra shot the guard managed to fire went wild. Moonlight glinted off a blade. And then everything was quiet.

Tony leaned over, hands on his knees, panting. His stomach turned. All he could see for a moment was another room, another time, those same empty eyes and a still form sprawled on the floor. And blood. So much fucking blood. He spat out a mouthful of bile, sucked in a harsh breath, kept his eyes open wide, tried to stay in the here and now, in the situation, tried not to let his memories overlay it, overshadow it. It felt like it took forever before he got himself back under some semblance of control. He made himself straighten up, surprised for a moment when his back didn't protest the rapid change. He took in the situation. The guard wasn't moving. Neither was Barnes, who seemed to have frozen, still bent over him. They needed to get the hell out of dodge before someone else decided to come after them. Tony gritted his teeth, walked over and gripped Barnes's flesh and blood arm, gave him a shake. "C'mon," he said. "We gotta go."

Barnes gave a slow nod, blinking and shaking his head as though he was just coming awake. For a moment, Tony wanted nothing more than to leave him there, but that would only result in a hell of a lot more people getting killed. Instead, Tony opened the passenger side door and guided Barnes inside. He tossed the Tesseract onto the backseat and got into the driver's seat, turning the key in the ignition and stomping down on the speeder. The car whined at the rough treatment. Tony gritted his teeth, changed gears. Somewhere behind him, he heard the roar of another engine. He took a moment to glance at Barnes, who was staring at nothing, eyes unreadable. His hands were stained red.

"You good to take out the engine of whoever's in pursuit? Or tires? Something?" Tony asked, feeling, strangely, more uncertain about Barnes than he had since meeting him in this time period.
Part of him couldn't shake the primal fear that the next time he looked, he'd get a face full of Winter Soldier again, and this time find himself on the wrong end of a gun barrel.

Barnes blinked, gave a weak nod. Then he unclasped his rifle, opened the car door and pushed most of his torso out the gap. Tony heard the sound of a single shot fired, and then Barnes was back in his seat, door shut, looking down at the grubby red hand stains on his weapon. Out the rearview mirror, Tony saw the off-roader following them skid to an uneven halt, veering to the side. Busted tire, then. Tony floored it, determined to put as much space between themselves and whoever got sent after them next.

It was another ten minutes before they hit something more than a dirt track, and another fifteen before they saw another vehicle, but then the road interweaved with another one, and soon enough there was enough early morning traffic that they stood some chance of blending in. Tony finally allowed himself a tiny breath of relief, and a moment to glance over at Barnes.

Barnes was still staring at his blood-stained rifle, his dirty hands, not a movement or a peep of sound coming from him. Then, as if he could feel Tony's eyes on him, he looked up, eyes wide and frightened. "Who am I?" he asked.

Tony swallowed, and fuck, he still had no idea what to do with any kind of sympathy for this man, wasn't sure how he was capable of feeling it at all. "You're James Buchanan Barnes," he said at last. "You go by Bucky."

Barnes's Adam's apple bobbed, and Tony wasn't sure he'd ever seen anyone look so lost before in his life. "And who's that?"

"You grew up in Brooklyn, best friend with an annoying little shit called Steve Rogers. You were a sergeant in World War Two, elite sniper." Tony sighed, returned his gaze to the road. "That's really about all I know. I wasn't around back then. I never knew you."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Barnes's small, resigned nod.

Tony winced. Then he forced his mind into less depressing gears, glanced in the rearview mirror at the box holding the Tesseract. He wasn't done yet.

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Tony pulled the car to a stop fifteen minutes off the highway, a couple hours out of Las Vegas. The sun was just coming over the horizon, turning everything an eerie reddish gold. It might've been beautiful if Tony had been in the mood for that. He reached behind himself, pushing up on his tiptoes to get between the seats and scoop up the Tesseract. He fell back in his seat, Tesseract in his lap, allowed himself a moment to just take in the whole situation. In just a few moments, it should all be over. The anticipation was like a vise around his gut. He glanced to his right at took in Barnes, all muscles and straight back and lost eyes. Something inside him stung at the sight. Part of him resented his own inability to hate the man. Tony had never been good at holding grudges, but losing his grasp on this one still felt like a betrayal. Even so... "If I disappear," Tony said, "or start acting like an actual kid with no clue what's going on, you should get rid of the car. Go to Vegas and take the bus back to D.C. Peggy will find some way to help you. There's cash in the bag."

Barnes frowned, slowly tilting his head up to look at Tony. "Where are you going?" he asked.

Tony shrugged a shoulder. "Pretty difficult to explain, that," he said. "Either this works, and I turn back into baby Tony, or it doesn't and you'll think I'm crazy enough to get away from anyway." He opened the car door, stepped out into the sand, and started walking. Not far, but enough that the car
shouldn't be in danger. He heard steps behind him, turned around with a cocked eyebrow. "You sure you want to see this?"

Barnes stared back at him. "This doesn't seem safe," he said.

"Probably isn't," Tony agreed. "Stand back a bit, would you?"

Barnes just took another few steps closer, until he was right at Tony's shoulder. "This feels familiar," he said, a strange tone to his voice.

"Trying to summon Einstein-Rosen bridges and Norse Gods?" Tony said. "Or feeling strangely compelled to look out for crazy guys smaller than you? Because if it's the last one, you do have a history."

Barnes didn't answer.

When the silence had dragged on for a few moments, Tony gave a mental shrug. Then he raised his head, sucked in a big lungful of air. "Heimdall!" he shouted. "Heimdall! Tell Odin to stop leaving trash on Midgard! I've got an Infinity Stone I'd like him to take off my hands!" He let his shoulders slump. "Probably won't be as instantaneous as when it's Thor doing the calling," he said. "Probably need to vet me or something. Still..."

"You're right," Barnes said. "That didn't seem like a very sane thing to do."

Tony cocked an eyebrow. "I never claimed not to be crazy," he said. "Then again, this is really only crazy if it doesn't work." He let himself plop down on the sand, suddenly utterly exhausted. His shoulder throbbed from Barnes dragging him around and his head was spinning, coming down from the adrenalin rush and the load of endorphins it had to have been spewing all over the place not that long ago. "FUCK, I need to sleep," he muttered, blinking his eyes open. He hadn't even felt them slide shut. He pulled his legs closer, picked some lint off the ripped knee of his jeans. His knee was pale and teenage knobby under the fabric. Fuck, but he missed his old body. Even with all the aches and pains and the grey hairs and scars and age markers, it was more solid, more durable than this flimsy, skinny thing. Nearly five days on the road had given Barnes a full beard. Tony, meanwhile, barely had a shade of annoyingly soft stubble. Even with all the shit that lay that way, all he wanted, suddenly, was to go home.

"I'm startin' to think nothin's gonna happen," Barnes said, and there was the accent again. Tony was starting to take that as a good sign. Definitely better than the fugue state of the past few hours.

"Let's cross our fingers something will," Tony said. "I'm not hanging onto that thing, and I don't really think dumping it back in the ocean will make much of a difference in the long run. Howard tracked it down in the forties. Won't take anyone long these days."

Five minutes later, even Tony was beginning to think nothing would happen. He was about ready to give it one last try, scream his head off all over again. Then again, that might very well turn out to be useless. Maybe you needed to be Asgardian for Heimdall to even hear you. That didn't fit either, though. Thor kept insisting that Heimdall heard and saw everything, had assured them that they could always get in touch with him through Heimdall. Which might've been useful if not for the fact that Thor wouldn't meet Tony for another twenty-five years.

Fuck.

Plan B. What was the plan B? Tony bit down on his lip, took a moment to think. Probes. Space probes, preferably ones that were set to leave the Solar System. Sending it to Jupiter or some such
would probably still lead Thanos to Earth in the end. Using the Slingshot program - actually using it, and not just for storage - was out of the question, since all data suggested that the Infinity Stones could survive being shot into the sun. So, probes. He racked his mind for a moment, went through what he remembered about the space program.

Well, fuck. The Voyager probes both left ten years ago, and the next probe that would be set to leave the Solar System wouldn't be launched until 2006. He remembered that one, had done some consulting on it. It was way too far in the future. He was not okay with having to spend the next nineteen years in the past. Something in the pit of his stomach knotted up at the thought, tight and cold and painful. He could accelerate it all, of course. If he put all his mind into the space program, he could probably get New Horizons launched in five years instead of nineteen, but even that was so far in the future even thinking of it was making him sick. No, he was not going to watch it play out like that. He wasn't going to let it.

He pushed back on his feet, threw his head back, sucked in a deep breath. Opened his mouth. An explosion of sound threatened to tear Tony's ears apart. A prism of solid light struck the ground in front of him, bright enough that he was blinded for a moment.

"What the fuck!" Barnes shouted, and Tony felt a momentary stab of panic. Last thing he needed was for Barnes to be frightened into the Winter Soldier and the absolute carnage of an Asgardian being attacked by a super soldier and choosing to fight back.

Tony turned back to Barnes, gripped his forearm and pressed down, used his other hand to reach up and grab hold of Barnes's jaw, forcing him to stare straight at Tony. Tony kept his grip tight for long moments, ignoring whatever was going on behind him, giving Barnes a small shake whenever his focus seemed to be flickering back to the Bifrost. "Look at me," Tony said, making sure to keep his voice steady. "Barnes. Bucky, look at me. This is not a threat. They're friendlies. They're friendlies, do you hear me?" One last shake to make Barnes's eyes meet Tony's all over again. And finally, bit by bit, Tony could feel bunched muscles begin to relax under his hands. Barnes exhaled, let his eyes drop shut for a moment. He nodded, head lolling into Tony's hand for a brief second before he straightened and took a step back. Tony took a breath, turned back around.

The woman who stood in the middle of the knotted design on the ground looked middle-aged, her hair up in an elaborate style that left a long tail of it trailing down over one shoulder. Her dress was regal, but there were enough metal details that Tony couldn't shake the feeling that it was camouflaged armor. It took another moment to place the resemblance. Then Tony let out a relieved breath. "Lady Frigga," he said. He walked up to her, bowed and kissed her hand, falling back on the ridiculous etiquette lessons his parents had once made him take. God, he felt like an idiot.

She looked at him, eyes narrowing just slightly. Tony felt a shudder go through him. She wasn't looking at him, she was looking inside him, and fuck, Tony'd been exposed to magic often enough that he knew what it felt like. He still hated the shit. "I apologize for the intrusion, Lord Stark," Thor's mother returned. "It is not often a Midgardian knows to contact Heimdall, let alone the word 'Infinity Stone'." She was silent for a moment, regarding him with eyes that were strangely warm. There was no feeling of magic this time, so there was that at least. "You are out of your time," she said. "Your ally the sorcerer transplanted you clumsily. I'm not certain the parameters are as he intended."

Tony frowned. "What do you mean?" he asked. A slash of worry went through him.

"I cannot fix it for you without endangering you," she told him. "You must do what you came here to do. The rest should fix itself in time."
"Yeah," Tony said, blinking slowly. "That's what I'm trying to do. I'd be really happy if you could take the Tesseract back to Asgard a few years early. It's been causing us a lot of problems here."

"So I see," she said. She held out a hand and Tony was quick to hand over the box. She leaned in, kissed his forehead. "I see how you regard my son," she said, voice going gentle. "He will be lucky to have a friend like you." She straightened. Tony's brow was strangely warm where her lips had touched it. "Do not be quick to dismiss second chances," she said at last. "For yourself or others. You may gain more than you lose." Then she turned her face skyward. Instinctively, Tony stumbled a few steps back. A strong metal hand caught him before he staggered completely. "Heimdall!"

Frigga called.

The Bifrost descended, and a moment later Tony and Barnes were alone once more.

Tony shut his eyes, waited for the magic to hit him, waited for Strange's spell to take him home. He gritted his teeth, set his jaw in preparation for the pain he remembered all too clearly from last time. He'd done what he came back to do. He'd found out what Howard knew, never mind that it wasn't a hell of a lot. He'd gotten rid of the Tesseract. He'd done everything he could think of to get the job done. Any moment now, Strange's magic would take hold of his mind, sweep him back to the present. Any moment now.

"Listen," Barnes said. "I'm not sure what just happened, or what the hell you think is gonna happen, but sittin' around with your eyes shut don't seem like a good solution."

Tony swallowed. How the fuck did you ask for more time because you were pretty damn sure a magic spell was about to beam you thirty years into the future? Besides, it wasn't like Strange's spell couldn't find him on the move. Staying here probably wasn't a good idea. Even shitty eighties satellites might've been able to pick up on the disturbance the Bifrost had to have caused, and S.H.I.E.L.D. was probably still tracking them. Sure, he could travel from a prison cell just as well as anywhere else, but. He swallowed. Aimless. Uncertain. He was supposed to already be gone. "Got any ideas?" he asked.

Barnes shrugged. "Not sure what the problem is," he said. "But it seems to me we needa go somewhere and lay low for a bit." He reached out, clasped Tony's shoulder and gave a quick squeeze. "C'mon."

Tony gave a tired nod, let himself be led back to the car. He barely took note of it when Barnes maneuvered him into the passenger side and took the driver's seat for himself, putting the car into gear. Bit by bit, Tony felt himself drift off.
Tony jerked awake when the engine cut out. He glanced around himself, jumped at the sight of Barnes in the driver's seat. How the hell did that happen? Tony didn't sleep with just anyone behind the wheel. And then the events of the past few hours slammed back into him. He shouldn't be here. He should be back where he belonged. Tony sucked in a harsh breath, ran a hand over his face. "Where are we?" he asked, trying to keep his voice from slurring too badly.

"Outskirts of Las Vegas," Barnes said. "We needa dump the car, get off the radar. After that, I sure as fuck hope you got a clue, 'cause none of the safe houses I can think of in the area feel particularly safe to me."

Tony nodded, tried to kick his brain back into gear, tried to make himself think of something other than **wrongwrongwrong**, something other than how he shouldn't be here. "Yeah," he muttered. "Yeah, dump the car." He pushed himself out of the seat, opened the car door and staggered out, somehow even more exhausted now than before he'd slept. He took a moment to rub a bit more sleep out of his eyes, then made his way around to the trunk of the car. He popped it open, pulled out Peggy's backpack, took a moment to rifle through it and pull out some of the cash, sticking it in his pocket. Would get them too much attention if he had to go looking for it when he needed it. Then he held it open. "Any weapon you can't conceal in your clothes," he said. Which was risky as fuck. A single frisking and they'd be done for. Or the people trying to do the frisking would be done for. Either outcome wasn't something Tony particularly wanted, but he was also pretty damn sure nothing came between Barnes and his weapons. "You can even carry the bag. We're going to need to find you gloves too. That--" He nodded at the cybernetic. "Not very discreet."

Barnes nodded, dumped in the rifle and a couple other weapons Tony didn't want to look at too closely. "Should prob'ly get my hands washed too," he muttered before zipping up the bag and slinging it over his shoulders.

Tony glanced at the dry blood still caked in the creases of Barnes's hands and fingers, real and metal alike. He winced. "Yeah, sounds like a plan." He glanced around himself for a moment, took in the situation. Welcome to Suburbia. "Find an empty house," he said. "Wash your hands. Get some gloves. I'll look for a bus stop."

Another brisk nod, and Barnes was off.

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"Where're we goin'?" Barnes asked, eyes jumping in every which direction, probably mapping out exits, entrances, potential sniper nests, everything else there was to see about a big, crowded public building. It struck Tony, suddenly, that he hadn't been acting much better than HYDRA. Sure, he hadn't put Barnes in enforced hibernation or wiped his mind or done any of the other terrible stuff that had been done in that fucking chair. He had used him, though. Without getting any real kind of real consent. Fuck, the last thing he needed was feeling guilty over Bucky fucking Barnes.

Tony stuck his hand in his pocket, fisted a wad of cash and handed it over. "You can go wherever you want to," he said. "It's-- You've been jerked around by God even knows who for the past forty-some years. You get to make your own decisions now."

Barnes took the cash from his hand, stared at it for long moments before pocketing it. When he met Tony's eyes again, his expression was that heartbreaking brand of utterly lost again. "Where are we really going?" he asked, and this time there was a plea in the back of his voice. His words were
perfectly pronounced again, stiff and unnatural.

"You could head back to DC," Tony said carefully. "Peggy will help you any way she can. For Cap, if for no other reason. You'd get to be." He paused, almost laughed at the absurdity of it all, but really, nothing about this was laughable. "Free, I guess. It's time, isn't it?"

"Where are you going?" Barnes asked.

Tony gave a small shrug. "Taking the bus to L.A and to Malibu from there. My godfather's got a house there. Going to lay low there for a while, figure out what happens next."

Barnes's arm shot out, lighting fast. His fingers wrapped around Tony's wrist, as if he would physically stop him from leaving. The grip, though, despite the fact that Tony flinched from the suddenness, was utterly gentle, as if Barnes thought he was holding something frail. Well, a normal human wrist of the teenage variety might very well seem frail to him. "Can I--" Tony looked back up at Barnes's face, saw the bob of his throat, the flash of desperation in his eyes. "Can I come with you? It's just. I don't know nobody else. I ain't got nobody else. I." For a moment, his face looked a fraction of a moment away from crumbling. "Can I come with you?"

In a movement that surprised even Tony, he took a step closer and wrapped his arms around Barnes's neck. For a moment, Barnes stiffened in his hold. Then slowly, bit by bit, muscle by muscle, he relaxed, arms coming up to encircle Tony's torso, face digging into Tony's ratty hair. Barnes exhaled slowly, and it was all surprisingly unawkward. The lack of awkwardness, somehow, was what made it uncomfortable pretty quickly, and soon enough Tony was patting Barnes's shoulder and pulling back. "Guess we're going to Malibu, then," he said.

Barnes flashed him a smile, quite possibly the first real smile Tony had ever seen on his face, and it was fucking stunning. Tony hated himself a little for thinking that, but it wasn't really debatable. He was pretty sure that was just an objective observation. "Guess we are," Barnes said, and the smile had made it all the way to his voice, which was really just unfair.

Tony took another step back, stuffed his hands in his pockets and made his way towards the ticket booth.

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Tony's pillow was trying to buck him off, which-- what? He opened his eyes, blinking against the last rays of the sunset, which were suddenly right in his eyes. "Wha--gah..." He squeezed his eyes shut before forcing them back open. "Whas goin' on?"

"When's our stop?" Barnes asked, and Tony had to blink again. What the-- That wasn't a pillow. That was Barnes's shoulder, which, yeah, just not right.

Tony reached up and rubbed at his eyes. He really needed a proper night's sleep soon. "We just passed it," he said, keeping his voice low enough that hopefully no one without super hearing would be able to listen. "Probably for the best. Harder to track and shit." Not that Tony particularly relished the thought of the walk, but eh. Still, probably about time to get up and get moving.

The bus came to a stop a few moments later and they spilled out. Or stumbled, in Tony's case because, well, apparently even being a teenager couldn't make his body figure out how to do the whole waking up quickly thing. Might've even made it worse. Which, given what little he knew about teenagers, actually probably made sense. He really was not relishing the thought of the five or so mile walk ahead of them. Still, he let Barnes set the pace, because his whole military march thing seemed kind of like a better option than the snail's crawl Tony would've instinctively gone at in this
It was difficult not to let his mind circle right back to all the questions, all the things he couldn't figure out. The panic at the knowledge that he was still here when he shouldn't be. In the end, he just let it at him, let the thoughts swirl and confuse him and bog him down as he tried to figure out what piece of the puzzle it was he was missing.

Barnes must've slowed the pace at some point, since the panting and stabbing side stitch Tony had been fighting for a while abated. Which, what the fuck? Okay, he did know he hadn't been making a point of exercising in college, but still, how the fuck was his seventeen-year-old body in worse shape than his forty-six-year-old one?

The realization was mostly a periphery thing, though, flashing through the corners of his mind for a moment before he let it flutter away. He needed to figure out how the fuck he was still here, what the hell was going on. What exactly was it Strange had said? How had he worded it? 'Once you're done'? No, that wasn't it, not precisely. 'Once you've done what you...' Tony frowned, squeezed his eyes shut for a moment to fish the correct sentence out of his memory. 'Once you've done what you need to do'. That was it, wasn't it? Well, fuck it, Frigga had been right. Unless the spell itself was a hell of a lot more specific than that, it was all pretty loose, wasn't it? So what the hell was he supposed to do? What else was it he needed to do? Who even set those parameters? Did Strange decide what he 'needed to do'? Did Tony? Fucking hell, this was why magic should always come with an instruction manual.

"Is this it?" Barnes asked, and Tony blinked back to awareness of his surroundings. Somehow, he must've actually managed to make the right turns, get them to the right place, because, yeah, this was it. It was painfully, incredibly familiar, right from the nighttime view of the Pacific to the rocks and stones around them. This was the old house, of course, before Tony inherited it, accidentally blew it up and had to rebuild it, but it was still the plot of land where he'd lived for the better part of his life.

"This is it," he agreed. "Uncle Tim won it off Howard in a drunken poker game back in the late sixties, or so the story goes." He crossed the remaining few feet to the front door. "When Howard found out he just put the key under a rug when he was out, he installed this." He reached out, took a moment to feel along the bricks before he felt the telltale groove. He pressed it, and the fake brick beneath it shot out, revealing just enough of a hollow to hide a key. He pulled it out. "Now, we just gotta hope Tim hasn't had a locksmith around lately because he forgot where to find the hidey-hole again," he said, sticking the key in the lock and letting out a sigh of relief when it slid in and turned easily. He reached to the side, pushed the fake brick back into place and stepped inside, turning the alarm off and walking farther into the house. The scent of bourbon and cigar smoke curled around him like a warm hug, and Tony inhaled, feeling at ease for the first time in days.

"Where is your uncle?" Barnes asked, glancing around the darkened rooms for a moment. When Tony made for the kitchen, Barnes followed, light on his feet and without so much as a stumble despite the fact that he'd never been there before.

Tony frowned, trying to remember back to how things had been the first time around. "Actually, he's probably in New York helping out with the funeral arrangements. Funeral was on Christmas Eve - will be on Christmas Eve." He pulled open the fridge and liberated a couple of beers before pulling out some takeaway containers, opening them and taking a sniff to make sure they were still good. Thank fuck Tim had been an avid fan of takeaway for nearly as long as the concept had existed in its modern form. "I'm guessing he'll be back Saturday or Sunday," Tony added, fishing through the cabinets for plates before dumping the food out and sticking it in the microwave. "Probably spend Christmas with Peggy and their whole gang."
Tony had to pause, swallow, because suddenly the original Christmas of eighty-seven was stark in his memory, no matter how much of a haze it had been the first time around. Everything had been confusing and frightening, he'd felt tossed into a too-big world with no lifelines, though to this day he couldn't say if losing his parents or losing Jarvis had done the most to cause that. He'd been more than ready to just spend Christmas in a drunken coma, but Peggy refused to stand for it, had dragged him back to DC with her and made him endure a week with her, Angie, Tim, Morita and Jones. He was pretty sure they'd been all that had kept him from going insane before he could return to MIT. "Or he might go spend it with his sister. Who knows?" He shrugged, got the beers opened and handed one over before continuing on with the meal preparations. At least Barnes wasn't asking uncomfortable questions about why Tony wasn't headed for the funeral himself. He'd sat through that shit once, and even all these years later, he wasn't sure he could do it again. Whether he'd gotten in too much trouble to show his face in public or not was really mostly a secondary consideration.

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Tony pushed the empty plate away and leaned against the back of the couch, feeling full for the first time in what felt forever, and actually comfortable. For a short moment, a part of him insisted that maybe it wasn't so bad here. Maybe going back wouldn't be for the best after all. He pushed the thought away. Of course he had to go back. He was needed there, whatever changes had happened. He had to go back, but it wasn't like it was something he could force. He'd just have to wait for Strange's magic to do its thing.

"You've been very quiet today," Barnes said suddenly, breaking the silence before forking his last bit of Chinese into his mouth and pushing away the plate.

Tony cocked an eyebrow. "I was asleep most of the day," he said. "Besides, I can do quiet. I can do quiet so well you wouldn't know what hit you. I've been quiet for hours while we were on the road. I've been--"

Barnes finished chewing, swallowed. "You've been quiet when you're asleep and when you've got music blaring. Even then, you'll talk to yourself every few minutes--"

"Lies," Tony interjected. "I certainly don't talk to myself..." Barnes's expression made him stop and clear his throat. "...every few minutes. Every few hours, maybe, but not every few minutes."

Barnes shrugged. "I like it," he said. "It's grounding. Means I don't get lost in my own head." He shifted slightly, seemed unsure what to do with himself on an actual comfortable piece of furniture. "You don't have to tell me," he added. "You just. You were very quiet. Didn't seem very happy either."

Tony sighed. "I could tell you, but you wouldn't believe me," he said.

Barnes burst out laughing. "Just today I watched you send a glowin' blue cube to the other end of the rainbow," he said. "Which." He paused a moment, narrowing his eyes in thought. "Surprised me less than it should, I think. Listen, I." Another pause, another frown, as though finding actual words for what he was thinking was difficult. It might be. "I don't remember much. I don't think I got the same frame of reference for strange as the rest of the world, not that I'd really know. I just. I don't think there's really anythin' you could tell me that'd be too strange to believe."

Tony stayed silent for long moments, debating with himself. Then he gave another shrug. If Barnes did wind up deciding he was crazy and leave, that wasn't such a big loss, not really, whatever cold, strange shudders that thought elicited. Even if he went on and tried to tell others, they'd only think he was crazy too. Besides, it wasn't like it would really hurt anything, even if people did know. "You ever hear about time travel?" he finally asked.
Barnes turned, just a fraction, just enough that he was facing Tony directly. "I--" His brow furrowed, that tiny crease between his eyebrows becoming visible again. "I wanna say that I know what it is, and somethin' about both our names, but to be honest, I ain't got a clue, except for what's already pretty obvious from just the name of it."

Tony let out a burst of laughter, couldn't have held it in if he tried. "Anthony 'Buck' Rogers spontaneously got sent centuries into the future in those comic strips, though, so that's not really relevant here," he said. "Far as I know, time travel into the future isn't even possible, because time is fluid and the future keeps changing and all that shit. I researched this before going through with it, and I still don't understand the half of it."

He let out a breath, dug his shoulder blades deeper into the cushions. "In fact, time travel, as I know it, doesn't really work like it does in any of the books or movies at all. Actual physical time travel might not even be possible at all. Just thinking about the amount of energy it would take to move a living person that far through the space-time continuum is... Not what I'm supposed to be talking about." Tony winced, because, yeah, you didn't start talking relativity theory and quantum mechanics with someone whose biggest point of reference was Buck Rogers. Except Tony kind of had, and he was a little bit surprised that Barnes hadn't spaced out yet. "One thing that is apparently possible is magic, and please don't ask me about that; I prefer to pretend it doesn't exist as often as I can. Magic gives me a headache. It's just... energy transfer and messing with the laws and physics kind of just--"

Barnes put a hand on his shoulder, gave a quick squeeze and effectively ended Tony's aimless rant. "You said something about how we're both older than we look," he said then. "Didn't you?"

Tony nodded, just the tiniest bit relieved about being put back on track. "Like I said, physical time travel can't be done, at least not in the next thirty years or so. However, magic apparently makes it possible to transplant your present-day mind into your past body."

"Seems to me things'd have to be pretty damn bad for a guy like you to go putting your faith into methods you don't trust," Barnes commented.

Tony snorted. "You can say that. And it's a long story, too damn long to tell all of it. But that thing we sent off this morning - the Tesseract, or the space stone - not only nearly caused the destruction of the world once, it also helped draw the attention of some seriously powerful people out in space, and where - when - I come from, they've got us surrounded and are just about to sacrifice us all to the literal incarnation of Death. We stumbled over some of Peggy's notes, which turned us onto the fact that my dad had been studying the Tesseract just before his death and had made some kind of discovery, and we were pretty damn desperate for anything that could help with the shit storm we were trying to stave off. I was best positioned in this time to track Howard down and get him talking, so Strange, our 'Sorcerer Supreme', or whatever he's going around calling himself these days, sent me back here on the caveat that when I get the job done, I go back. Turns out, Howard knew about as much as Jon Snow."

Barnes looked perplexed.

"Nothing," Tony said. "He knew nothing. But I figured if I got rid of the Tesseract, that might solve the problem, or at least delay the whole 'world is ending' gig. So, I got rid of the Tesseract. And I'm still here, which makes absolutely no sense. So yeah, been kind of deep in trying to figure that out."

Barnes didn't respond for long moments, a thoughtful frown taking over his face. Then, "You said you can't travel forward because the future is fluid, right?"

Tony nodded. "'Always in motion, the future is'. That shouldn't be a problem in this case, though, because I'm still tied to my own future. I've got my mind here, sure, but my mind should still retain
some kind of link to my physical body in my present. Like a lodestone."

"Well, maybe if all you did was get some information and then go back," Barnes said. "You didn't, though. How much have you changed while you were here? I mean, I know I can't be that important, but I was probably doin' somethin' pretty different than this in your original... Whaddaya call it?"

"Timeline," Tony supplied. He winced. "You were pretty important, actually. And I've definitely been screwing with your timeline."

"Pretty sure you changed it for the better," Barnes said. "But that ain't what I'm tryin' to say. I'm tryin' to say that maybe if you changed things that are important to your history, maybe your future don't exist anymore."

Tony swallowed, then shook his head. "No. Nope, doesn't hold. Time paradox. If my timeline doesn't exist, I can't have gone back here. It doesn't work like that."

"Didn't you just say that you don't understand how it all works?" Barnes asked. "I ain't pretendin' to either. But goin' on what you've said... And there's magic involved and all. But say I shoot a grapple gun. It gets wedged in nice and good. If I cut to rope and destroy the gun, the grappling hook still exists, and it's still gonna be right where it lodged."

"Fuck." Tony reached up and pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to stave off the threatening headache. "No one ever told me you were fucking smart," he said. Because Barnes had a point, a damn good one too, no matter how much Tony wanted to dismiss it. It wasn't bulletproof, no, but it was a possibility, and one Tony hadn't dared allow himself to stop and think about before now. But what if it was true? What if there really wasn't anything left to go back to? What if--

"Hey," Barnes said, throwing Tony's train of thought off track again. Thank fuck. "So how old are you actually?"

"Forty-six," Tony said. "And don't you dare laugh, Grandpa. Pretty sure you're around seventy."

Barnes just flashed him a crooked smile.

Tony let out a breath, reached up and raked a hand through his own hair. Fucking rat's nest. He really should get it cut soon. "If it's gone, though..." he muttered, but fuck, he couldn't even bring himself to complete that sentence.

"Then you'll have lost your whole world, and you won't even really know what is real and what's not," Barnes said. There was a strain of self-deprecating humor in the back of his voice that made Tony feel a bit like an asshole for some reason he couldn't seem to quite grasp.

"If my history isn't real anymore," Tony said. His throat was feeling tight now. It was just one theory, he reminded himself. Just one theory out of many. Barnes and the nagging voice in the back of Tony's head could still very well be wrong. Somehow, Tony had missed something about the parameters. "Am I real?"

Barnes just looked at him for long moments, his eyes intense even under the gloom from where neither one of them had bothered turning the lights on yet. "You're the realest person I remember meetin'," he said. "I mean, I get flashes. When you tell me about somethin' I should know, I'm beginnin' to recognize it. But it's all flat, like cardboard cutouts, or a film reel. You're human; you're all technicolor. I don't get you half the time. I don't know where I stand with you, but. You have different sides to you. You're a full person. You're real to me."
Tony swallowed, had to look away for a moment. How the fuck was that a sore spot, and how the fuck had Barnes maneuvered it so easily? Tony had spent a good portion of his life trying to be something other than a cartoon figure for others' entertainment, before, at some point, giving up and just following their expectations. It was only in the past ten years or so that he'd realized he wanted to be more than that, needed to be more than that. Trouble was that by then, with a lot of people, it was too late. He was what he was in their eyes, and nothing he did could change that.

And, he realized suddenly, with the man sitting next to him, trying his best, for whatever reason, to help him, Tony was just as guilty. "You too," he said finally. "In that, in that other timeline, I spent a lot of time refusing to see you as human, refused to see you as a person because of, well, past stuff. I was wrong, though." He took a breath, finally met Barnes's eyes again. Fuck it, he hated this stupid talking-about-feelings thing, but after what Barnes had said, Tony probably kind of owed him this much. "You're. As 3D as anyone. And here, now, I feel like I'm ghosting through a world that shouldn't exist anymore, and everything's. Flat and see-through, I guess. You're not."

There was that smile again, heartbreakingly beautiful despite Barnes's grimy face and bearded jaw. For a moment, an absolutely idiotic idea flashed through the back of Tony's head. He dismissed it immediately, broke the lock of their gazes. A beat passed, and then a metal hand was grasping his jaw, tilting his head gently back up to meet Barnes's eyes. "Thank you," Barnes said. He didn't let go, kept staring at Tony. His gaze flicked downwards, and all of a sudden, Tony was very much aware of the fact that he probably wasn't the only one having idiotic ideas. Barnes leaned in, just a bit, just enough that they were breathing the same air, that Barnes's eyes and the play of light and shadow across his pale face was all he could see. Then Barnes was tilting his head to the side, closing what little distance there was between them, and pressing his lips against Tony's.

For a moment, something warm and heady curled through the pit of Tony's stomach, making his gut feel tight and his breath come short. His lips buzzed. Then he got himself under control, pulled back and broke contact, turning his face away. He sucked in a sharp breath, pushed his hair out of his face and turned to look at Barnes, trying to figure out what the hell he was supposed to say, how to deal with this whole fucked up situation.

Barnes's eyes were shadowed. Tony was half certain that even if every light in the room had been on, he wouldn't have been able to read him, and part of Tony gave a sharp pang at that. On the other hand, what the hell was he supposed to have done? Just gone with it? Even if Tony hadn't been nearly a decade out of his days of random sleeping around - and something told him that's exactly where they'd have ended up if he'd gone with the flow - Barnes had just come out of a brainwash, still had so many basic human things he didn't understand. Two things Tony had always been clear about when it came to sex: informed consent and making sure he wasn't taking bigger advantage of his partner than they were of him. Well, that and the fact that it had to be good for both parties, but that was kind of irrelevant here. Barnes got up, breaking Tony's train of thought, made his way over to the patio door. For long moments, he just stood there, outlined in moonlight, and Tony felt a sudden surge of attraction followed immediately by the realization that he really was utter scum.

Tony got to his feet as well, but couldn't seem to figure out what to do next. Go stand next to Barnes? Right now, distance felt like a better option. But he couldn't just stalk off either. As much as he loathed the feelings thing, and talking about it especially, he couldn't just leave it at that. "Barnes?" he said, and then realized he had absolutely no idea where to go with that. Even if he did get Barnes's attention, what was he going to do with it? Where did you go from awkwardness like this when it wasn't with someone you could just blow off and avoid for the next few years?

Barnes raised his metal hand, rested it against the glass. His shoulders were hunched stiffly in on himself under his borrowed clothes. "Don't call me that," he finally said.
"What?" Tony asked, more than a little perplexed. "Barnes?"

Tony could barely make out Barnes's nod in the gloom. "Yeah."

"But that's your name," Tony said.

Barnes shrugged. "Maybe," he said. "But you sound like you're bitin' into a bad apple half the time you say it." Suddenly, he turned back around, and Tony wished like hell he'd thought to turn the lights on at some point. Faces were as important as words when it came to hearing what someone was saying, and with the only available light behind him, Tony couldn't make out a single one of Barnes's features, let alone his expression. He took a few steps closer, and despite the remaining distance, Tony suddenly felt crowded, way too aware of just how much damage Barnes could do to Tony's weak baseline human body if he ever set his mind to it.

Tony gritted his teeth, mind suddenly flashing with memories he'd have rather left behind. Thinking about those things hurt, the kind of hurt that never failed to make his defenses flare. And just like that, he could feel the anger coursing through him, white-hot and agonizing. "What do you want me to call you then, huh?" he asked, and he barely even recognized his own voice, didn't realize he'd made the choice to step forwards until his feet were already moving. "Winter Soldier? Asset?"

And then Barnes was right there, in his face, and Tony wasn't sure which one of them had closed the distance. "What did I ever do to you?" Barnes spat, but he didn't sound confused or hurt now. He sounded every bit as angry as Tony felt, and suddenly Tony's self-preservation instincts were kicking back into gear. If this came to actual fighting, he wouldn't stand a chance. And somehow he still couldn't make himself put distance between them, couldn't force himself to stand down. And then Barnes's hand had gripped the front of his shirt and Tony was pulled to his tiptoes, felt his feet damn near leave the ground. Tony could feel his shirt pulling painfully tight over his back and shoulders, stretching and digging into his skin. He could hear his own pulse hammering in his ears. His hands came out, sheer instinct, to grab onto Barnes, have something solid to keep hold of. His fingers brushed against something cold and metallic, and before he knew quite what he was doing, he had one of Barnes's smaller guns in his hand, safety off. He lifted it, narrowed one eye, took careful aim.

Tony's hand was shaking, he realized. The kind of uncontrollable shaking that meant he wouldn't have dared fire a repulsor even if he'd invented them yet. He should just shoot, should just get it over with. He should've done this the first time he'd ever laid eyes on the Winter Soldier, should've definitely done it when he'd-- Tony swallowed around the lump in his throat. His vision was getting blurry, and fuck. He'd been too soft so many times already, always too soft to do the really tough things, even when he knew it was right. He drew in a shuddering breath, forcing his own hand steady.

"Tony," Natasha had gasped, red already staining her lips. Her punctured lung, everything else that powerful slash had ruined, was becoming more visible by the second. Her face was turning the color of chalk. "Tony, don't. Don't go after him. Don't kill him. I only existed because of him in the first place," she whispered, voice almost gone now. "Tony, he's..."

Tony swallowed, let the muzzle of the gun drop as he choked on a sob, and how the fuck had this happened? Why was he breaking down now when he hadn't even been able to cry at her funeral? He shook himself free, took several quick steps backwards, let himself slump against the wall as every bit of strength seemed to flee his body.

Barnes stared at him for long moments. Then he turned and walked out through the patio doors, disappearing into the night.
Tony pinched his eyes shut, forced himself to keep steady, keep breathing. Then he flicked the safety back on the gun, stuck it in his belt and made for the workshop. He doubted he'd be getting any sleep that night.
Chapter 5

The workshop dated back to when Howard had owned the house. Before MIT, Tony had loved it. The one workshop in the world he got to have free rein over. After the explosion, he'd salvaged as much of it as he could, rebuilt it into the workshop in his new Malibu house. His primary one, until just a few years ago. But even before the rebuild, he'd spent hours here. Days, when he could get away with it. Tim had let him have the run of it whenever he came to visit. He'd built countless things here that had seemed damn near unbelievable at the time.

Now, it all looked impossibly small, and dark, and dirty. The half-finished projects laid out of the workbenches were little better than scrap, a child's toys. All of a sudden, Tony had no idea why he'd come down here. What was he going to do? Build himself an armor? An arc reactor? It wasn't that he couldn't do it. It was that he would have to build all the building blocks first, right from software and AI and internet to the fabrication machines and 3D printers. Even if he'd had all the materials necessary, even a copy of the Mark I would take months, years to build. The bots weren't even here. They were up in the student lab at MIT, and Tony had no way to get to them.

He wasn't sure how long he stood there, just staring at his childhood projects, completely uncertain. What was he even supposed to use the armor for? What was he meant to do here? He let out a long breath that sounded strangely like a pained moan to his ears. What the hell was he still doing here? Squeezing his eyes shut for a moment, he ran his hand over his face before making his way on unsteady feet to the couch Tim had put down here after he'd found a much younger Tony asleep on the workbenches once too often. He collapsed down onto it, elbows on his knees. Let his head drop into his palms. Fuck, why was he still here?

Something was digging into his hip. The gun, he realized. For a moment, he tried to keep thinking about the time travel situation. It nagged at him, was always there in the back of his mind, but somehow, somehow this whole fucked up situation with Barnes was chasing it back into the darker corners. Fuck it all. He shouldn't be letting this bother him. He should be happy as a fucking clam or whatever the hell the proverb was, should be relieved to have seen the back of Barnes. Except somehow, for the first time since he'd returned to the eighties, he felt completely, utterly alone. He didn't understand it. He couldn't make head or tails of any of it, not right now, not with his head buzzing and swirling from everything that had happened tonight. And shit, but he was tired. So fucking tired.

He was barely aware of pulling his legs up onto the couch, of lying down and curling in on himself. Head going numb from the sheer volume of impressions and information, he fell asleep.

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"Ow," Tony said. "Owow fucking ow."

"Either stop being a baby or don't get your nose broken," Natasha said, no nonsense as she gripped his nose and pushed it back into alignment.

Tony barely bit back a scream. The pain made his stomach roil for a moment, made his vision turn white around the corners. "Dude has a metal arm, Nat," he said. "Seriously, I'm lucky I got away with this. If it hadn't been for the armor..."

"Then maybe you shouldn't let yourself be cornered by a man with a metal arm," Natasha said.

Tony snorted, winced at the fresh wave of pain that followed. "Would be a hell of a lot easier if he
weren't Cap's fucking attack dog." He sighed. "I am so damn tired." He swallowed. "Half the time I just want to leave this whole mess behind and run off somewhere and just--" He shook his head, let the thought go. Dreaming was rarely productive, especially with the current situation.

Natasha flashed him a small smile. "Maybe once this is all over, we'll have earned a vacation," she said. "Got a private island somewhere we can head off to?"

Tony sighed. "In a perfect world, maybe," he said. "The same one where getting the band back together at any point once this is all over, if it's ever gonna be over, is actually possible. In this one, I think we just have to accept that retirement happens before vacation and that death is more likely than either one."

Her eyes narrowed just a little, head cocking to the side as she regarded him, eyes too sharp for comfort. Still, at this point, he didn't much care about her propensity for seeing through him. Unlike everyone else who'd ever gotten that close to him, she didn't judge. She probably understood it all too well. "You do that a lot," she said at last. "Talk about perfect worlds and different lives, like you've already given up on this one."

Tony shrugged, swallowed, suddenly that much more unsure. He had never really stopped to think that through, had never really noticed that somewhere along the way he'd stopped dreaming about how incredible the future could be and relegated his dreams to other realities. "I haven't given up on the world," he said at last. That much, at least, he was pretty damn sure was true. "If I had, I sure as fuck wouldn't have put myself in a situation where Barnes could get the upper hand."

She stayed silent for long moments. Then she gripped his hand, laced their fingers together and squeezed, and fuck, Tony was pretty damn sure something as simple as nonviolent physical contact shouldn't feel so incredible. "I get it," she admitted at last, plopping down on the couch next to him with a lot less grace than she was capable of. "People like us, we don't get to have it all. That's who we are, Tony. The mission always comes first. When you've got as much red in your ledger as we do, when you owe the world that much, that's just the way it has to be."

Tony swallowed, squeezed her hand to acknowledge her words. "Maybe," he said slowly, letting his head drop to rest on her shoulder. She tolerated it, ran her slender fingers through his hair. "But maybe not. There's more than one way to repay a debt, isn't there?" He swallowed, tried to steady his voice, hated how much it sounded like he was pleading. "One day, this war will be over, somehow. And there'll be new heroes, new policies in place. Maybe we'll have left enough of a good mark on the world."

She sighed. He felt her shake her head. "Not for us," she said. "How many times have you retired now? We wouldn't be able to stop and still live with ourselves. You had the choice to leave this life behind, be happy with Pepper. You lasted until S.H.I.E.L.D. fell before rebuilding your suits. I fantasized about running away with Bruce, but when it came down to hurting him and saving the world or being happy with him, I made the same choice you did."

"We should elope," Tony said, and he could feel some actual humor behind it this time when his lips tucked into a smile. "On the way to that island. Wouldn't have to be alone, whether or not either one of us is in any kind of state to actually love another person, and no one would be in a position to lay blame when one or the other of us eventually decided to come out of retirement. I bet the sex would be awesome too."

She burst out laughing, loud and deep and honest, and that sound settled and calmed something inside him he couldn't quite put his finger on, made him think that maybe, just maybe, he'd be strong enough to go out and do it all again tomorrow. "The world isn't that fucked up yet," she told him.
He kissed her cheek and pulled himself back on his feet. He had a faceplate to repair.

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Tony woke with a lump in his throat and a crick in his neck. His hands were still shaking at the memory of the dream. Dream of the memory. Whichever. Slowly, he pulled himself into a sitting position, ran the back of his hand over his sleep-crusted eyes. He ran his hands through his hair, screwed his eyes shut, took in deep, steady breaths, the way he'd learnt to do when his anxiety had been really bad in the first few months after New York. Slowly, carefully, pulling on months of practice, he pushed thoughts of Natasha from his mind, kept his breathing slow until his pulse began to relax as well.

He needed normal, or as close to it as he could possibly get. He needed to wash off all this grime, see if he could get some caffeine inside. He took another moment to pull himself together, regain a bit more control. Then he pushed himself to his feet and made his way upstairs and into the room that had been his for as long as he could remember. For a moment, he just stood there, took in the sight of a space that had been his so long ago, that he hadn't seen in decades. Rolled his eyes at the Captain America poster, cracked a smile at various framed photos of Tim and Peggy, the rest of their little gang and significant others. The one from the twenty-fifth anniversary of VE Day showed Howard with the rest of them, his arms around Tony's heavily pregnant mother. Tony tore his gaze away, pulled off his ruined clothes and made for the bathroom.

He wasn't sure how long he stayed in the shower, fighting to stay in control of his own mind, keep the memories at bay. Natasha's name kept flashing through his head, tried to force its way past his lips. Tony did his best to push it away again, focused utterly on soaping himself up, rinsing off, kept his mind on the simple motions of stepping out of the shower, toweling off. He walked up to the mirror, wiped off the steam. The face that stared back at him was a stranger's. Tony swallowed down the sudden lump in his throat, squeezed his eyes shut, suddenly frantic. The next moment, he had a pair of scissors in his hands. He wasn't sure where he'd found them, if he'd been running through the house naked without realizing, or if it had always been in the bathroom. It didn't matter. He reached out, gripped the first messy clump of hair and cut. Kept going and going until the disgusting eighties mullet was gone. Next came the razor, the same one Tim had used to teach him to shave decades - or a year, depending on your definition - ago. He couldn't create a goatee out of nothing, but he could get rid of the uneven scruff. Could comb out what remained of his hair. Go into the bedroom and find some clothes - not the horrible eighties rocker kid clothes he'd insisted on wearing the last time he was at this point in the timeline, but a pair of slacks, a nice shirt.

He returned to the mirror, hands clenching around the cool porcelain of the sink. It was still wrong. His hair was a choppy mess, his face was bare. He didn't even look the way he had when he'd actually been this age. His eyes were off, too confused, too fucking wrecked. But something about it, something about himself... It felt more right, somehow. The best he was going to get at this point in time. He let out a long breath, held onto the feeling of being marginally in control. Then, slow and methodical, he cleaned up the bathroom, scooped up the disgusting clumps of chopped-off hair, cleaned up the sink, threw it all in the trash. Keeping his steps measured and even, he walked back into the bedroom, scooped up the gun and pushed it back into his waistband. It felt wrong, cold and hard and sharp, kept him too much on guard, but he let it stay anyway, couldn't stand the idea of how much weaker, how much more vulnerable he'd feel without it.

He walked into the kitchen, found put the coffee on and fished a TV dinner out of the freezer, put it in the microwave. For minutes, he just stood around waiting, kept focusing on keeping his mind clear, on staying in control, on not spiraling the way he had for the first few weeks after Natasha. Fuck knew he wasn't grateful for Thanos and his whole damn invasion, but ironically, that whole thing might've actually saved his life. Now... now was different. He didn't know what he was
supposed to do, couldn't make head or tail of anything. What was he supposed to do with a teenage body in 1987? What was he meant to do here beyond what he'd already done? That, that aimlessness, uselessness, that would be the end of him if he wasn't careful. He breathed in deep, held it for a moment, let it back out before setting up a rhythm that might become subconscious after a while. Keep it together. Keep it together.

The microwave pinged. The coffee was done. He poured himself a mug, scooped whatever the food was supposed to be onto a plate and took it all with him to a table, tried not to notice the silence of the house too much, the emptiness of it. Somewhere below the cliffs, he could hear the crash of the surf, the constant rhythm of the water striking rock. The sound made him shudder, made him think of caves and dirty lukewarm water in a rusted bucket. Of helicopters and missiles and watching his home crumble around him. He pushed that away. The old nightmares didn't hold much sway anymore, not with the new ones patched on top. He picked up the coffee mug, took a long sip, let the warmth seep into him, let himself imagine the rush of caffeine even though he knew it would be a few minutes yet before it kicked in. Slowly, slowly, muscle by muscle, he was relaxing, the dream drifting back out of reach, where it belonged.

By the time he was done eating and halfway through his third coffee, he felt almost like himself again. Enough that the Barnes situation was bothering him again. Somehow, at some point during the whole mess that was last night, he'd fucked up. Tony was no good on his own, and Tim wouldn't be back for days yet. No matter how much part of him resented it, he'd needed Barnes. He'd needed him to even get this far, to accomplish what he already had. And now he needed him around just to keep his own fucking mind from fracturing. Worry came close on the heels of that because one thing was storming off, but Barnes had been gone the whole night and all morning. Where had he gone? Did HYDRA get their hands on him again? The thought made Tony feel cold all over despite the coffee. Or what if Barnes had returned of his own volition? There was no way in hell he could've kicked all his programming in just a few days, and this time was even more foreign to him than it was to Tony, who'd at least lived through it once before, who at least had some kind of network to rely on, even if it consisted mostly of people he'd watched die of old age over the following decades.

And fuck, yeah, those thoughts weren't exactly doing him a lot of good either. He needed to do something, keep busy somehow, or he didn't want to know what would happen. Something simple, something that he could complete in just a few days, some kind of project to keep his mind and hands occupied, and hopefully, in the process, he'd figure out why the hell he was still here. Some of his best logic reasoning happened while he was busy with other stuff. That was how it had always been. Shouldn't be much different now, right? Right. He hoped.

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"James."

"Ow! Fucking hell!" Tony dropped his tools and clutched at the knee he'd smacked against the underside of the worktable. "Ow," he repeated. "Don't startle me when I'm trying to make tiny circuits." He let out a breath, glanced down at the wiring to make sure nothing had broken before turning back to face the intruder. Barnes. Tony would go down denying the ridiculous assertion that he collapsed onto a chair from sheer relief, but he did find himself sitting. "You know James isn't my name," he said.

Barnes shrugged. "It's mine," he said. "I'd like it if you'd call me that."

Tony blinked, looked him up and down and concluded that he was still in one piece. Filthy and messy, but one unharmed piece which, yeah, Tony kind of felt a lot lighter at that conclusion, even if part of him was still a bit conflicted about that whole thing. "I don't think I've ever heard about you
going by 'James'," he said. "It's always been Bucky this and Bucky that, or Barnes."

Barnes - James - shrugged. "And I do remember some of that," he said. "But I don't..." He lifted his hands as if to gesture, then let them drop. "I remember some," he said then. "I remember a bit more every day, but none of that feels like me. I don't feel like Bucky. I just-- James, please?"

Tony nodded. "Yeah, sure," he said. "It'll take some getting used to, but I can do that, if it's what you want." He managed a small grin. "So, where've you been?"

Another shrug. "Out," he said. "Needed to do some thinkin', clear my head a bit. I took a walk."

Tony frowned, glanced down at his watch, then back up. "You took a twenty-hour walk?"

"I may have slept at some point," Barnes said. "I guess I just." He grimaced, and that uncertain look was back on his face. Tony hated that; it made him feel uncertain too, and he already didn't know what to do with the situation. Sure, he'd wanted Barnes to come back, but he hadn't made any plans for what he'd actually do about it. Everything was still a hell of a mess after everything that had gone down. "Whatever it is they shot me up with," Barnes said - James, James, Goddamnit, Tony really needed his brain to get that memo; he didn't want another fight on his hands. "I don't know, I think better on my feet, and. Movin', it helps."

Tony nodded. "Yeah, Cap's the same," he said. "Excess energy from the serum or something. He turned into even more of an asshole if he didn't run something crazy, twenty miles or some shit, every day." He took a breath, shifted on the chair, suddenly pretty damn uncomfortable. "Listen, about last night--"

James shook his head. "I overreacted," he said. "I ain't some dame who can't take a rejection. Don't worry 'bout it."

Tony managed another smile, more than a bit relieved that he didn't need to go into consent and feelings and all that nasty stuff. He'd always hated those conversations. Pepper probably would've left him for that alone, even if she hadn't been driven to it by the utter fury of finding him building a new suit. And a bunch of robot sidekicks. Still, he couldn't quite help the flash of guilt that went through him, somehow convincing him that giving an explanation anyway might be for the best. "It's not-- You're not bad to look at, all right?" he said. "And you don't seem like a bad guy. It's just, a week ago you were brainwashed. Legitimately killing-machine programmed-like-a-computer brainwashed. A few days ago, you asked me what 'like' means. You're not--"

"Tony," James said, and he was pointedly not even looking in Tony's direction at this point. Something that might actually qualify as a faint flush covered his pretty fucking incredible cheekbones. "Let it go. I did."

Tony coughed. "Yeah, okay."

James glanced at him, gaze sweeping up and down in a manner that kind of negated what he'd just said, and okay, yeah, maybe Tony did like that a bit too much, and fuck, he'd be feeling a healthy dose of guilt over his own damn feelings the next time he took the time to examine it further. And shit, he was driving himself into the spiral again, wasn't he? "Are you disguised?" James asked, pulling him right back out of his head again.

"Huh?" Tony asked, rather intelligently.

James reached up, tugged slightly at his own tangled hair. "Your hair," he said. He frowned. "Should I cut mine too?"
"That is totally your choice, which I will not interfere with in any way, shape or form," Tony said. "You're rocking the hobo look, though."

James blinked. "Half the time, you open your mouth, and I don't got a clue what's coming out of it."

Tony snorted. "I make perfect sense," he said. Then he reached behind him, pulled out the gun and tossed it at James. "Catch," he said belatedly.

James, predictably, did catch it, took it in with one, sweeping glance. "You should keep that," he said then. "You might need it."

Tony flashed him a grin. "Why? I've got you to protect me now."

James rolled his eyes. Then, "If you were gonna do it, you should've done it yesterday. I ain't gonna make it that easy for you again."

Which, yeah, okay, Tony could admit that there had to have been at least some element of James letting him take the gun and aim it at him, because fuck knew the Winter Soldier could've disarmed and killed Tony in less than a second. He didn't want to know what it said about either one of them that he hadn't. "I'm not gonna do it," he finally promised.

James turned the gun over in his hands. He hadn't made a move to pocket or otherwise hide it yet, and Tony wasn't really sure what to do with that. He had a feeling he should be a hell of a lot more nervous than he actually was. "Why?" James asked.

"Why am I not gonna do it, or why was I considering it in the first place?" Tony asked. He sucked in a deep breath, but it wasn't enough. Suddenly it was all there again, the dream, memory, every single thing that had been flashing through him last night, this morning. His eyes were burning pathetically, and he turned on the chair, facing away. He couldn't quite bear to face anything or anyone right now, let alone James.

"Both, I guess," James said. His voice had gone shaky, unsure, and part of Tony hated that, not the weakness or the vulnerability, but the knowledge that he'd been the cause of that. Somehow, he'd managed to get James to trust him, and the evidence that he'd broken that, even with the circumstances being what they were, was strangely painful.

Tony took a moment, mulled his words over. It felt important, right now, not to screw them up, not to be misunderstood. Finally, he inhaled sharply, trying to steady himself. "In my timeline," he said finally. "Everything pointed to you being my parents' killer. Later, after Cap recovered you, you killed someone else, someone important. For no good reason. There was a superhuman Civil War, which, in hindsight, seems idiotic, but. We were having a conference, trying to talk things out for the umpteenth time, Cap and I. The civilian casualties were stacking up too high. Something had to give, and Cap got in a shouting match with... someone on my side. It got intense. And then suddenly you went into Winter Soldier mode or some shit, jumped over the table and cut her open from collarbone to stomach. She died."

"Fuck," James muttered.

"Yeah," Tony agreed, voice cracking, and yeah, shit, he hated that, hated how little control he had, how fucking pathetic he was being. "Thing is, though, that was another timeline. Another reality, basically. And you, this you, the guy who's in front of me right now... You didn't do that. I saw for myself that you didn't kill my parents here, whatever might've originally happened. And you've never even met--" He choked on that and fuck, what was so wrong with him that he couldn't even say her name anymore? "So I was dealing poorly with anger at a person who's not you, and a lot of
misplaced guilt for actually liking you, for giving you a shot, and I was going to take that out on you, and that wasn't fair. So I didn't do it."

James didn't respond for a long time, long enough that Tony turned back around and squinted through a veil of tears he'd rather not admit was there to make out James's slumped form. "Maybe you shoulda done it anyway," James finally said. "I may not have killed those three, but there's gotta be hundreds of people out there whose loved ones I've killed. Maybe it would be best." He snorted out a laugh that sounded choked and hysterical and not at all laugh-like. "Maybe I deserve it."

"No," Tony said, shaking his head as if that could make the word sink in deeper. "No, I've got plenty of issues that I need to stop taking out on you, but here's one thing that I never bothered to admit to myself, here or the first time around: You didn't do any of that."

James cocked an eyebrow skeptically, and maybe in some parallel universe that would've been funny. Here it was fucking heartbreaking. "Of course I did," he said. "I don't remember much of it, just flashes, really, and no good way to know what's real and what ain't. But I do know I've done some pretty fuckin' horrible stuff."

"No, I've got plenty of issues that I need to stop taking out on you, but here's one thing that I never bothered to admit to myself, here or the first time around: You didn't do any of that.""}

Tony shook his head again. "Who's the murderer?" he asked. "The gun or the guy who pulled the trigger? Because HYDRA got you good, James. You didn't have a will, didn't have a voice. They erased so much that you weren't anything other than what they put in your head. You were a weapon. They were the murderers."

James snorted again. "If you believed that, you wouldn'a picked up the gun," he said. "Not unless some part of you still thinks I'm a time bomb that needs defusin',."

Tony sighed. "Like I said: my issues, not yours." He reached up and rubbed a hand over his eyes. "And I don't think you are. I don't know if it's a time issue or whatever the hell else, but you seem more 'there' than you ever did in the other timeline, even after years away from HYDRA. Maybe I didn't notice; I didn't exactly take the time to get to know you that time around."

James's smile was wry and shaky, but it was there. Somehow, Tony had managed to put it back there, and that made him feel strangely stronger than he had for a while. "Maybe that's it exactly," James said, and Tony couldn't help but think he meant something completely different with that than Tony had. Within moments, James's face grew somber again. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry you lost her."

Tony tried to smile, but he was pretty sure it came out looking like a grimace. "Yeah," he said. "Me too." He sucked in a deep breath, and he felt back in control of himself, back in control of the darker corners of his mind. Thank fuck. "Go shower," he said, trying to load some levity into his voice. "You stink. After, you should probably go find some of Uncle Tim's clothes. Mine sure as hell aren't gonna fit you."

James nodded. Then he walked over and pushed the gun back into Tony's hands. "Keep it. Sometimes I gotta shower, and I'll be able to shower longer if I know you've got an actual weapon on you." Without waiting for a response, he disappeared up the stairs.

For a long moment, Tony couldn't do much except just sit there, staring at the gun. Then, with a huff of air, he pushed it back into his waistband and returned to his project.
Chapter 6

By the time Tony was done setting up the things he needed to build the microchips, his stomach was growling so loudly even he was getting distracted. He sighed, put down his tools and materials and set off upstairs to find out what other atrocities his uncle had hidden away in the freezer. One TV dinner in and he was already hating it.

He came into the living room, stopped short at the sight of Barnes - James, fucking shit he needed to get that through his head - staring at a framed picture. It was a mock-up of a World War II era photo of the Howling Commandos. Tony had lost count of the number of times he'd stared at that picture while listening to Tim's stories getting more and more outlandish until he was pretty sure the Grimm Brothers were more honest storytellers than his godfather. "Hey there, Jim-Jam," he heard himself say, coming over to stand next to the other man. And shit, why hadn't this occurred to him sooner? He should've stuffed one of those photos in James's face the moment they set foot in this house. "Find something interesting to look at?"

James cast him a quick glance before his eyes were drawn back to the photo. "Is that me?" he asked, pointing at his pre-Winter Soldier self in his Commando uniform, iconic blue coat and immaculate hair and all.

"Yup," Tony confirmed.

James's eyes narrowed. "Why does your godfather have this?"

Tony grinned, pointing out one of the other figures. "That's him," he said. "Uncle Tim."

James blinked, head cocking to the side as he took in the sight. Then, "Why the hell do I wanna call him dummy?"

Tony burst out laughing, couldn't quite help himself. "For whatever stupid reason, he thought Dum Dum would make for a really cool soldier nickname," he said. "You'd have known him as Dum Dum Dugan. I named my first bot after him."

There was a look of almost childish excitement on James's face when he turned to look at Tony again. "So I did recognize him? These are actually real memories?"

Tony shrugged. "I wouldn't be able to verify. Pretty sure that man and storytelling is the definition of stretching the truth." He glanced at the picture again, kind of stunned, with the perspective age brought on, that they could all look so happy in the middle of the European war theater. Tony was pretty sure none of the Avengers would've been able to look like that by the time he left his own time behind. Cap definitely didn't grin like that anymore. "You can ask him yourself in a few days."

James's mouth dropped open as the connection finally clicked. "I knew your godfather," he said. "I knew that Peggy woman, didn't I?" His face scrunched up in thought. "I don't think she ever liked me much."

"She always said you were too full of yourself," Tony said with a small shrug. "Sorry, don't kill the messenger and all that."

James reached out, came within inches of touching the photo version of his old self before dropping his hand. "It's hard to imagine bein' the kind of guy who had reason to be," he said slowly, and there was the melancholy, out in full force again. "Hard to imagine bein' that guy at all," he added, dropping his gaze.
"You know," Tony said, swallowing, and shit, why did they keep ending up in these feelings situations when it was damn obvious neither one of them was any good at it? "Take it from someone who's got experience. Some of the time, it doesn't matter that much who you used to be. What really matters is what you can make of yourself going forward."

James's head cocked to the side. "From experience, huh? You don't seem all that great at takin' your own advice."

Tony looked back at the smiling faces in the photo. They were all grimy, all a bit thinner than they strictly should be, and yet the smiles looked so damn real. "Yeah," he said. "Maybe you're right. I do know, though, that the me who was full of himself, he was an utter asshole, and he wasn't much happier than I am now. Definitely not a better guy." His stomach, of course, chose that moment to growl again.

James's smile held the barest hint of amusement. "Hey," he said. "How 'bout we find somethin' to eat?"

Tony nodded, turned away from the photograph, and walked towards the kitchen. "Sure thing, Brooklyn."

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The next morning, Tony made his way into the kitchen yawning and rubbing at the sleep crust in his eyes. He'd managed a good fucking sleep for once. No nightmares, no dreams at all that he could remember. Just sweet, amazing sleep, and fuck but he'd needed that. Wasn't sure he could've stood another episode of waking up with Natasha so sharp in his mind so soon. Slowly, he made his way towards the coffee machine, still only half-awake, and his eyes definitely weren't working yet.

"Coffee's already done," Barnes - James, dammit - said. "Here."

A nice, warm mug was pressed into Tony's hands and he sighed, draining the cup, and ow, fuck, there went the top layer of skin on his tongue. Apparently it took years of practice before it was possible to do shit like that and not hurt yourself. He didn't quite manage to bite back a whimper, opening his mouth wide for a moment to get cool air on the burn. Still, he handed the mug back. "More?" he asked hopefully, though it came out sounding a little bit strange.

The mug was removed and something cold was put in its place. "Got a feelin' this'll be better for you right now," James said.

Tony blinked his eyes open to find... a glass of water? He flashed it a glare but downed it anyway and okay, yeah, that did feel kind of good. "Thanks," he said. He glanced up at James, did an actual double-take. "Well, don't you look different?" he asked.

James shrugged, ran his fingers through his newly short hair. The expression on his face was damn near sheepish. "Seemed like a plan, after a look at that picture," he said. "My memories didn't all magically return overnight. Surprise." He rolled his eyes, but it seemed good-natured, so Tony didn't worry too much. James turned around, walked to the fridge, opened it and pulled out a yoghurt. "Seems like you'd do best with something cold right now," he said. He placed the yoghurt and a spoon on the table before returning to cooking an absolutely enormous meal for himself. Smelled good, but eh. Tony was never really all that hungry first thing in the morning anyway.

Tony blinked down at the yoghurt, confused for a moment. "Did you go grocery shopping?" he asked.
"Yeah," James said. "Don't worry. I cut my hair first, wore a glove and one of your uncle's hats--"

Tony burst out laughing. "You wore one of Tim's bowlers?" he asked.

James gave him a mock-exasperated look, and Tony was momentarily struck, all over again, by just how much he'd changed in how little time, how much he acted and looked like a, well, like someone who hadn't been brainwashed for longer than Tony had been alive. Well, he supposed this version of James hadn't, unless Tony's physical age was what counted, and-- Fuck, he was going to give himself a headache. "The point is," James said, voice slow and pointed. "I know how to blend in. This place was in serious need of some actual food. And I still had the money you gave me for a bus ticket. Spent it on groceries. Now eat."

Tony rolled his eyes, peeled off the foil. "Bossy," he muttered before scooping up a spoonful and sticking it in his mouth, sighing as the cool temperature soothed the burn on his tongue.

"I got a feelin' I'm used to lookin' out for little punks who don't know how to take care of themselves," James remarked.

Tony looked up. "You remember that, or did I tell you?"

James shrugged. "Not sure, entirely," he said. "But I'm pretty sure that photo, the guy you called Rogers, that ain't the Rogers I knew."

"Yeah, true," Tony agreed. He had seen Cap's before-pics after all. "So, morning person. Good to know."

James rolled his eyes. Again. Seemed like that was becoming a thing now, and why was it that everyone Tony had ever known always wound up rolling their eyes at him at some point? Excessively, in most cases? "You know, I got to thinkin' 'bout your whole... time... thing," James said. "And I know I ain't got the background. I think I finished high school. Just. Maybe."

"Spit it out," Tony said, taking another mouthful. "We both know you aren't stupid."

"Well, the parameters were pretty damn loose, right?" James said. "You were supposed to be sent back when you'd done whatever you had to do. Except who decided the mission? Did your sorcerer friend?" He paused a moment. "Or did you? Because if it was you, maybe you got to thinkin' 'bout somethin' that didn't have a whole lot of anythin' to do with Howard's plans. Maybe you accidentally gave yourself another mission entirely, or a secondary one anyway. So maybe you needa try to remember exactly what you were thinkin' 'bout when he cast that spell."

Tony froze, mulled that thought over slowly and carefully. "You're a fucking genius," he finally said. "And I'd know, being a card-carrying member of that club and all. Fuck." He paused, thought the theory through again. "I mean, it may not be it, but it's more than I've had to go on before. Shit, I can't believe I didn't think about this before." He paused again, tried to think back to that moment just before the spell hit, just before the near-physical tearing when his mind had left his body. What had he been thinking about? What was he always thinking about? Natasha. Except that wasn't a mission, that wasn't anything usable. A person without an action attached wasn't a mission at all. He sighed, felt the sudden optimism flee him again. "Yeah, that doesn't really help all that much."

James shrugged. "Just a thought," he said. There was a strange look on his face as he plated his breakfast and sat down across from Tony, somewhere between relieved and disappointed, and, oddly, Tony almost thought he felt those same emotions reflected in himself.

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As it turned out, when they weren't doing the feelings thing and Tony managed to keep his head clear and in the right timeline, James was really good company. He did like perimeter checks more than any normal person should, but he chatted well enough, and he was extremely good at sitting on the workshop sofa and listening as Tony babbled about technology and miniaturized circuits, antiquated technology and the current annoying lack of a proper digital infrastructure. Sometimes he even made more of those kinds of comments that made Tony stop and blink because, fuck, Cap's World War II-era undereducated Brooklyn buddy really should not by any rights be so fucking smart or have that level of intuitive understanding of the things Tony spewed. Most of the things Tony was spewing, by the way, concerned stuff that hadn't even been invented yet in this timeline. Meanwhile, Cap back in the old timeline still hadn't quite figured out the more intricate details of how to work a microwave oven. Either way, being stuck in one place and unable to leave could've been a hell of a lot worse. Tony would've expected it to be a hell of a lot worse. James made it bearable, and wasn't that something Tony had never thought he'd ever find himself thinking?

So, a nice day or two passed, and, okay, Tony was maybe a bit too aware of James, had somehow apparently managed to evolve the ability to sense whether he was in the room or not and whether Tony had his attention - mostly, James was and Tony did. And sometimes, when there was just a bit too much physical proximity, Tony's fucking skin tingled in a way he was pretty much determined to blame on teenage hormones. Still, it was nice. It was nice for the rest of Wednesday. It was nice to have a recipient to his blabbering as he coded the software on Thursday morning and ran through the bugs on Thursday afternoon. It was definitely nice when he was being coaxed upstairs for dinner Thursday evening.

Tony's life had been sadly lacking in homemade meals. Well, that wasn't really true. Jarvis had cooked for him often, before boarding school and MIT and everything that came after, and it wasn't that Tony had ever doubted for even a moment that Jarvis cared about him. He liked to think Jarvis and Anna would've been just as kind, would've still cooked him dinners and read him stories, if Howard hadn't been paying them. Most of the time, he believed they would've. Thing was, though, he had no way to be sure. He never would. And homemade meals cooked by people who weren't on his payroll, those were rarities in his life. He was pretty sure he could probably count them on his fingers and toes without going double. So needless to say, Tony had a tendency to get kind of excited about home cooked meals. That, he was pretty sure, was why he found himself standing on his tiptoes at James's side, almost close enough that they were touching, staring in avid fascination at whatever was going on inside those pots and pans. "I never knew you cooked," he said.

James gave one of those crooked grins that made some corner of Tony's mind that had apparently been taken over by teenage hormones strangely giddy. "Me either," he said. "Apparently I do. Either that, or we're both going to die from food poisoning."

Tony rolled his eyes. "You mean I'm going to die from food poisoning. You'd get a mild tummy ache, tops." He narrowed his eyebrows but couldn't quite keep the smile off his face. "I see what this is. This is all an elaborate scheme to kill me, and I'm going willingly to my doom because fuck, that smells good."

James was still grinning as he kept stirring the food. That was a good sign, at least. Sure, he'd recognized humor for days now - hell, he'd responded to it, sort of, even before he was recognizing it - but this was a definite sign of improvement. In the beginning of the week he'd have looked horrified as he tried to convince Tony no such plot was afoot.

"Well, I know it's not an inherent Great Recession skill," Tony said. "Cap couldn't cook to save his life. Either that or he really was trying to poison me. Can't really be sure about that one."

James cocked an eyebrow, still not quite looking away from the food. "I have this strange feelin' that
"This ain't the first time I've been tryin' to put some meat on a set of skinny bones," he said.

"Anyone ever tell you you might be a secret troll?" Tony asked. Then he snorted. "Figures," he said. "You were probably the breadwinner and the breadcooker of that bromance." He frowned. "I have a feeling at least one of those words isn't an actual word. Never mind." He inhaled again, let out a sigh. "Seriously, when is this gonna be done?"

"Can't rush it," James said.

"It's vegetables and chicken," Tony said. "Vegetables are supposed to have some bite. Right?"

"And chickens are s'posed to be a bit pink?" James countered. He turned his head just enough to face Tony, and suddenly Tony was hyperaware of how close they were standing. James's breath brushed over his face and Tony felt his own exhale catch in response, felt a tiny wave of adrenaline shudder through him. This was such a stupid idea, such a-- James really had perfect lips, all the more so now that they weren't hidden behind a full beard. Full and pink and Tony couldn't help that annoyingly school kid style wanting to know whether they were as soft as they looked. Shit, he really had been looking for a while now, hadn't he? He was pretty sure he'd been looking for quite a bit longer than was strictly appropriate. He tried to clear his throat, but somehow all that came out was an uneven huff of breath as he managed to wrench his gaze back up to meet James's eyes. James was looking straight back at him, eyes hooded but intent, strangely soft with it. He exhaled again and Tony had to swallow. He needed to look away, or step back, or-- James was leaning in closer, bending his neck just enough to put their face at the same level. His lashes fluttered down for a moment, then back up. Then he closed the distance between them.

At the very last moment, Tony found there wherewithal to turn his face to the side, felt the kiss catch his cheek, just to the side of his mouth. The skin was left tingling and too-hot even as he took a step back. "Sorry," he muttered, and he was staring at his hands, he realized, couldn't bring himself to look away from them, look up and face James.

James cleared his throat. By the sound of it, he'd returned to his cooking. "That dame," he said at last, the slow, careful timbre of his voice completely at odds with the Brooklyn slang. "The one that I, that the other me. That he killed, in your other timeline." He paused again, and Tony could hear the click as he swallowed. "Was she your wife?"

Tony swallowed, shook his head. "No," he said, managed a small laugh that didn't really sound right even to his own ears. Well, fuck, they'd managed to go a whole thirty-six hours without entering feelings territory, at least. There had been that. Those had been thirty-six beautiful hours, truly. Tony was sorry to see them go. He took a deep breath, made himself look up. James was so difficult to read by voice alone, and the situation felt delicate enough all of a sudden that Tony needed to be sure he was reading things right.

"You musta liked her, though," James said. His eyes were distant, as though he was searching for something somewhere in himself, the way he sometimes did when Tony said something he felt he should be able to understand but had lost the context for. "A lot."

Tony squeezed his eyes shut, because suddenly this all just hurt too much. His eyes were stinging and his throat was too tight and he hated that shit, hated how close he suddenly was to falling back over the edge and into another episode that would leave him shaky and crippled for hours. "I loved her," he said, because even if he hadn't loved her the way he had Pepper, had never truly entertained those kinds of thoughts about her, using less strong words felt like it would trivialize what had been the most important relationship in his life for some of the worst months of it. In so many ways, Natasha had become the ground under his feet. Losing her had left him in a freefall.
James frowned. His lips moved without sound. He was mouthing the word 'love', Tony realized, as though trying to taste it out, chase some meaning he couldn't quite grasp. He blinked, then met Tony's eyes again. "What's 'love' feel like?" he asked.

Tony laughed again, despite himself, and it sounded terrible even to his own ears, broken and terrible and full of little shards that would cut anyone open if they came too close. God, he missed those beautiful thirty-six hours of no talking about feelings things. "I don't think anyone has ever asked me that question," he said. "Fuck, I doubt most people think I'm even capable of it. You know, of loving people." He breathed in through his nose. "Hey, is it just me or is something starting to smell burnt?"

James immediately turned back to his food, swearing up a storm under his breath as he rescued his pans and pots and began to transfer the food unto the waiting plates. "Go sit," he ordered before ladling generous helpings of gravy on top of everything.

Tony, for once, did as told, plopping himself into a chair while he tried to keep his head calm, his breathing and pulse even. Tried to focus on the here and now, keep the memories from swamping him. He made himself watch as James finished plating, brought over the plates before returning to the cupboards for cutlery and the fridge for beers. He tried to work up some kind of appetite. The food still looked and smelled delicious, but his stomach was turning and it was all he could do to keep himself under control.

James sat down across from him and Tony took a moment to just thank whatever powers may be that he hadn't actually let anything happen between them. James might be out of a lot of the brainwashing for some mysterious reason Tony still couldn't divine for the life of him, but HYDRA had still left so many gaps and holes, not just in his memories, but in his knowledge, in his understanding of how the world worked, about how people worked. Trying anything with him, how would that be better than getting it on with a kid or someone too drunk to know what they were doing?

James looked up from where he was already several forkfuls into his food. "Eat," he instructed. "Food'll get cold. You can tell me after."

Yeah, Tony still wasn't looking forward to that, and what the hell would become of a world where he of all people was the person responsible for teaching the Winter Soldier about feelings? Fuck. Still, he tried to eat, managed several forkfuls of slow careful chewing and even more careful swallowing before his stomach rebelled so much he was surprised he managed to keep what little he'd eaten down. "This is really good," he said. "But I'm really not feeling very well."

James looked up, eyes wide with concern. Shit, he still hadn't learned to regulate that either, had he? Showed too much of it, the way a small child might before they learned about moderation and about putting a bit of distance between themselves and the world. Completely missing the kind of shielding ability Tony had learned at such a young age he couldn't remember not knowing it. Not that it had ever done him much good. Ever since Afghanistan - even before, if he were honest with himself - he'd fucking sucked at it. "I promise I didn't poison it," James said, and it was so fucking guileless, so fucking... God, Tony didn't even know. Didn't have the first clue what to do with it.

"I know you didn't," Tony said, dredging up a smile from somewhere. It felt like it was on the verge of clawing its way off his face. "This is just. It's. I'm going to microwave it later." He dropped his gaze, stared at his hands. Shifted his gaze to the beer bottle. Not nearly strong enough. Fuck, but it had been a while since the urge to drown himself in scotch had been this strong. "Listen, I'm probably the worst person you could've asked about love. I don't really do feelings the way most people do, and I'm not going to sugar up the answer."

He paused, drew in a deep breath. "Love never feels the same twice. It depends on where you are in your life, it depends on the person you feel it for. Sometimes it's the best thing in the world, warm
and comforting and safe, like wrapping yourself up in a fluffy blanket. Sometimes it's like clinging to a broken saltshaker. It cuts you open and the salt gets in the wounds and it hurts like a motherfucker, but you can't bring yourself to let go, because that's even worse. It can be so many things in between as well, but it's a full spectrum. Never something as simple as hope and strength and truth or whatever other pretty labels people've given it over the years. Sure, it can be that, but pain and loss and loneliness and rejection are just as much part of it.

James frowned at that, silent for long moments. His fork, with a piece of chicken on it, sat unmoving in front of his face. He blinked a few times, and then, strangely, he hummed. It was slow and uncertain and a couple of bars at most. "Every cloud must have a silver lining," he finally said, still slow and wondering. "Wait until the sun shines through."

Tony swallowed, managed to roll his eyes. "Yeah, they were lining up the lies back in your day as well, Grandpa. Sometimes love bites, life's a bitch, and then you die." He clamped his mouth shut over whatever sound it was that was going to try to follow it, could feel it building in his throat. His eyes were stinging again.

"You ain't dead yet," James said, voice strangely gruff.

"No," Tony agreed. "I'm not. I do know a few people who would've testified to that truth on their dying breath, though." He sucked in a deep breath, ran the back of his hand over his eyes, reined himself back in. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm being a whiny little brat. You've... I can't even imagine all of what you've been through. I'm being an annoying little drama queen in comparison. If you want to believe in, in silver linings and sunshine, you've more than earned your right."

James had gotten out of his chair at some point while Tony wasn't looking, and now, out of nowhere, he was wrapping an arm around Tony and helping him out of the chair. "C'mon," he muttered. "We'll heat the food back up later." With that, he led Tony into the living room, found one of the old-man blankets Tim had stashed away absolutely everywhere, and then Tony found himself on the couch, wrapped in a blanket that smelled of his godfather with James's arm tight around him. It still felt stupid, and weak, giving into the sorrow when what James had been through was so much worse by comparison, but for once, for just a moment, the comfort had been offered and Tony was going to take it. If he didn't, he wasn't sure how long he was going to stay on his feet. So he turned his face into James's shoulder, breathed in the scent of cooking and metal and sweat, and let his focus narrow down to the sensation of the heavy, grounding weight on his shoulder, the warmth of the blanket, the hard, strong side pressed up against his own. Let himself concentrate only on breathing.

In and out.

In and out.

In and out.

In and...
Tony woke with no memory of falling asleep. It was slow and soft and warm, the best end to the best nap he'd had in months. Years, probably. He kept his eyes shut, sighed out an exhale at the feeling of gentle fingers carding through his hair, at the almost instinct-driven feeling of being warm and safe. He wanted to bottle this moment, soft-edged and perfect, and keep it with him, something he could enjoy even when he came to fully and the world began pressing in around him again. He turned slightly, breathed in James's scent again, and wasn't even conscious enough to feel bad about how much he liked it, how settled it made him feel. James's hand made another pass through his hair, and Tony couldn't help but push up against it, trying to bring that feeling closer, encourage it to keep going forever.

James's movements paused for a flicker of a moment before starting back up, fingers digging in that tiny bit harder that made it so damn good Tony would've purred if that had been something he was physically capable of doing. Tony felt the warm puff of James's breath across his face, and then the gentle press of chapped lips against his temple, his cheek. Then there was a sigh that sounded distressingly like "I'm sorry" before James pulled back a bit, just enough to put some measure of distance between them, and Tony felt the last bit of that fuzzy, sleepy, precious bubble he'd somehow managed to exist in for a few moments burst around him.

It should be a good thing, right, that James was finally starting to recognize boundaries and the fact that they were not to be crossed? So why did Tony feel like such a complete and utter asshole all of a sudden? Movements still blurry, he lifted his head, looked at James, whose eyes were averted. The expression on his face was strange, some mixture of dejection and guilt, and Tony couldn't stand that, couldn't let that look stay on his face. "Hey," he said, voice still more than a bit gravelly with sleep. Carefully, he reached out and cupped James's cheek, turned his head until they were facing each other. "Look at me," he instructed, keeping his voice soft. Didn't want it to be mistaken for an order, even though James hadn't shown any signs of being compelled to follow Tony's orders for days now.

After what felt kind of like forever but was probably no more than a few seconds, James finally looked up, let Tony catch his eyes. He looked so damn vulnerable and something in Tony screamed at the wrongness of that. He may never have known Bucky Barnes in his heyday, but he'd heard enough stories to know that the man in front of him should be brash and cocksure, absolutely confident in his own worth and abilities. And yeah, there was a chance some of that guy was gone for good, but the James left behind should still be a hell of a lot more sure in his own skin than he was right now.

Tony swallowed, fought for a few moments to get the words lined up right in his head, get them as clear as he could. "You know it's not that I don't want to, right?" he asked. He heard his voice crack in there but forced himself to stumble on regardless. Fuck, who the fuck had ever thought it was a good idea to put a guy like him in charge of someone else's emotional wellbeing? How did he end up in a situation like this? Talking about emotions tended to make him break out in hives and yet, this once... How could he not? "Somehow, you've gone and grown on me, you know? You're... Really fucking important to me, okay? But that's why I don't want to fuck you over. And I would. You're--"

James shook his head. His features had morphed into something damn near unreadable. His eyes were still an open book, though, flashing back and forth between indignation and something
frighteningly close to hope. "I'm a grown man, Tony," he said. "Yeah, I know they messed me 'round. Yeah, I know there are some things I should get, that I don't. I may need some shit explained to me, but I'm not some kid you need to protect." He paused, sucked in a deep enough breath that his chest expanded with it. Tony was tempted to break in, say something, but he wasn't sure what, and something in James's eyes deterred him from even trying. "Sure, I may not quite know what love and all that shit is, but somewhere in this fucked up brain of mine, I'm pretty sure I know you don't need to love someone, or even understand what that means, to want somethin' with 'em. You don't always gotta have a plan with every single thing." He paused again, wet his lip, and fuck, but Tony couldn't help the way his own eyes darted down to follow the path of the tip of James's tongue, couldn't help the way his pants tightened ever so slightly at the sight. "Sometimes you just gotta go for what feels good, and the clearest, best thing I remember in my life is kissin' you."

Tony swallowed, sucked in a breath that seemed to get stuck halfway down his throat. What did you even say to something like that? Tony sure as fuck didn't know; no one had ever really said anything like it to him before. And sure, James's scope of things he remembered from his life was admittedly narrow, especially considering how long he had actually lived, but. But. At some point, Tony kind of had to decide how he saw James. Intelligent adult or a child incapable of giving consent, an equal he could respect or someone he had to look out for. And when it was set out like that, the answer was kind of obvious.

He couldn't both be continuously in awe of James's intelligence and refuse to acknowledge his ability to make his own choices. Which really just left the question of what Tony wanted because, fuck, it was easy enough to say that he'd want it if it was a choice he could make. Another thing was actually making that fucking choice. Could he really go along with any kind of a relationship with someone he still saw in his nightmares, never mind that he knew this James and the Barnes from his own timeline weren't quite the same person? Could he-- Except James had kind of answered that too, hadn't he? You don't have to love someone, or plan everything out in order to go for something that simply felt good. A truth Tony had once taken to the extreme, and then promptly let go of completely.

Tony took a breath, met James's eyes again, and there was that swoop as the bottom of his stomach dropped out, that tightening in the pit of his belly, and fuck, how was it actually legal to be that attractive? Fuck it. Everything in Tony's life had pretty much sucked for a while now. If he could get a few moments of actually feeling good, would that really be such a fucking horrible thing? No, it wouldn't. He needed this, needed something that didn't feel like shit, if just for a little bit.

The moment he'd made the actual decision, some dam inside him seemed to damn near break, and he was leaning in, tilting his head to the side and pressing their lips together, and he couldn't remember the last time he'd wanted anything this badly, to the point where he was all but burning with it. And James didn't seem better off. His lips parted under Tony's, and Tony was swallowing down his moan, tracing the tip of his tongue along the same path James had taken himself just moments ago, chasing some imaginary taste. He felt James push the blanket out of the way, felt those strong hands settle on his hips, fingertips digging in, and Tony was shuddering at the sensation, groaning as he licked into James's mouth, traced his gums, his teeth, the roof of his mouth, mapping it all out in his head. He needed this to last, needed to remember it. God knew when he'd get to feel good again.

Tony slid his hand back, tracing James's jaw, the line of his sharp cheekbone before digging his fingers into a handful of rich, thick hair. Even with a good portion of it cut off, there was still more than enough to hold onto, and Tony couldn't get enough of the feeling of it sliding between his knuckles, catching on his fingers. His other hand was moving almost without his volition, going on instinct alone, finding James's hip, pushing his shirt up and out of the way, sliding up to find the soft, warm skin underneath, and fuck, that was intoxicating, enough to steal away what little breath he'd had left.
He couldn't remember the last time he'd been this close to another human being, had allowed himself this, and suddenly it wasn't enough, wasn't nearly close enough. He broke the kiss, panting, pulling at James's shirt. After a brief moment, James got with the program, shucking his shirt before making short work of Tony's. Tony didn't even have the wherewithal to care when he heard fabric rip somewhere along the way, just dove in again, catching James's lips under his own, wrapping his arms around James's solid frame, pressing in close until their bare chests were flush against each other. And that, that was fucking wonderful, the heat and slide and nearness of it, the feeling of someone else's pulse beating against his own ribcage. He groaned into the kiss, ran a hand up James's spine to tangle in his hair again.

James was giving as good as he got, his flesh and blood hand cupping the nape of Tony's neck while the cybernetic one traced abstract, maddening patterns against the skin on Tony's back and side, the coolness of the metal making Tony moan and shudder and press impossibly closer. He tilted his head to the side, sucked James's bottom lip into his mouth and nipped at it, damn near embarrassingly desperate to get as much response, as much of a reaction as he possibly could. James obliged, groaning and shuddering against Tony, metal hand tightening on his waist for a moment, hard enough that Tony would probably find finger-shaped bruises there tomorrow. He didn't mind one bit. In fact, if anything, that thought kind of just made everything headier, made Tony damn near dizzy with it. He let go of James's bottom lip with a gasp, thrust his tongue back into James's mouth only to feel James's full lips close around it, suck.

Almost despite himself, Tony felt his own back arch, felt how the involuntary motion brought them even closer together. A shudder went up his spine and heat was pooling in the pit of his stomach. The first coat of sweat was springing up on his skin, made everything that much hotter, headier, and fucking hell, he was so hard it hurt, and how had he not noticed that before now? He broke the kiss, panting, sucking in breath after breath that didn't seem to do a single thing to clear his head. Not that he particularly wanted it clear right now. He moved his head down, mouthing along James's jawline. The late-night stubble tickled his lips, the texture somehow serving to make it all the more real, less fuzzy around the edges, bringing everything into sharp relief, and shit, Tony needed this, needed it so fucking badly.

He managed to get his feet up onto the couch in a motion that hopefully wasn't as clumsy as it felt, nudged James into following his example. They somehow collectively lost their balance somewhere along the way and Tony found himself splayed over James's chest, face mashed into the crook of James's neck, and he didn't mind that, not one bit, sucked the nearest patch of available skin into his mouth and set about decorating it nicely. Wouldn't last long, serum and all, but something about the thought of it still sent a fresh wave of arousal through him.

James arched up in response, head thrown back to reveal an impossibly long, strong neck. His hand settled against the small of Tony's back, fingers pressing in in small, uneven motions that were almost as soothing as they were likely to make Tony spontaneously combust. Breathing in sharp through his nose, Tony maneuvered a leg down between James's thighs, sought out hardness to answer his own. He let go of his mouthful of flesh to release a mostly involuntary groan at the feel of it. James was as hard as Tony felt, long and thick against Tony's thigh, hot to the touch even through several layers of clothes. It didn't even take a conscious decision to grind down. Fuck, it would've damn near been criminal not to, and James responded beautifully, arching up, rubbing back at the pressure as a long hoarse groan spread through the room. Tony couldn't stop himself from stretching up and catching the tail end of that damnable sound between his own lips, mashing their mouths together in another kiss. Very little finesse left at this point, more teeth and tongue than soft lips and slow exploring.

Both James's hands were on him now, mapping out the dips and rises of Tony's ribs and spine, leaving fucking trails of fire along his skin before settling on his hips, thumbs digging into the hollows above his hipbones at the exact angle that made him gasp and buck, coherent thought
deciding to take a temporary leave of absence. James firmed his grip, guided Tony into a series of undulations that brought delicious pressure and friction to his trapped dick. Judging by the keen snaking out of James's throat and into Tony's mouth, he was far from the only one affected by that. Then Tony was rolling his hips, fast and hard, more breathing against James's lips than actively kissing him at this point, and fuck, he was going to come in his pants from a dirty through the clothes grinding session like a fucking teenager. Soon, too. He could feel it building already, the tightening in his belly, in the way his balls were pulling up close and tense, in the way his heart was galloping away and white noise was filling his ears and he couldn't even get close to catching his breath. Too fast, too soon, and fuck, what the hell was even happening to him?

James arched up into him again, meeting every roll of his hips and fuck, too damn fucking good. Tony was pretty sure his eyes would be crossing if they were open, pretty damn sure he should be embarrassed about how this whole thing was going on, but he couldn't quite find it in himself to care. All he could do was keep going, way too far gone to stop at this point, toes curling in his socks and thighs trembling around James's leg. One of James's hands came back to the back of his neck again, fingers digging into a scalp as he pulled him into another searing kiss while thrusting his hips up, and fuck, that was that. Tony heard himself let out some string of babbled words, couldn't actually make out their meaning, and his hips were snapping, out of his control as he shot inside his own boxers, vision going blank for a moment before he collapsed on James's chest.

Long, strong fingers carded through his hair even as the chest under him kept rising and falling at a rapid rate. For a moment, Tony couldn't really do much of anything except lie there, drowning in the sensations, as his pulse and breathing returned to rates that resembled something normal. And then he felt his cheeks begin to heat up steadily, going on and on until his face felt like it was on fire. Tony had never tended towards feeling embarrassment, which meant that when it did strike, it was always unexpected and had an annoying tendency to turn him into a bumbling idiot. He swallowed, forced himself to not hide his face or creep away or any of the other dumb things he kind of really wanted to do. He cleared his throat, raised his head. Winced a little when the movement made him simultaneously aware of James's still hard dick pressed against Tony's thigh and the increasingly uncomfortable wet spot in his own boxers. "Er, yeah," he managed. "Sorry about that. I swear I don't normally have an issue with premature ejaculation and. Well, that was kind of humiliating. I'll just--"

"Hey, Dollface," James said, and his voice was surprisingly gentle despite the gravel of arousal at the back on his tone. "You may be forty-six, but that body of yours ain't. I wouldn'a lasted nearly that long when I was... however old you are." He winced. "Probably shoulda asked 'bout that beforehand."

Tony felt himself crack a grin at that, oddly settled. When had anyone ever been able to do that with just a few words? He took a deep breath, made himself meet James's eyes again. They were hooded, pupils blown to a point where barely any of the iris was still visible. A bead of sweat had caught on his top lip and he was so fucking gorgeous Tony felt his pulse start to pick up pace again at just the sight of him. Damn near impossible to resist the sudden temptation to lean down and lick away that bit of sweat. So Tony didn't try, relished the salty taste on his tongue and James's answering sigh, the steady hands still holding him close. Tony stretched up again, just that tiny bit more settled in his own skin. "I can, you know. I can blow you, or give you a handjob or-- Did that slang even exist in your time?"

"I think I can catch the drift," James said, a small, amused smile tugging at the corner of his mouth, and Tony had a momentary feeling that this all probably shouldn't be quite as comfortable as it was
Tony rolled his eyes. "Point is," he said. "I can get you off. Just tell me what you want." And there was another clenching in his gut, another whisper of arousal at the thought of that, of taking James apart with his hand or his mouth, watching him squirm and--"What was that?" he said when he realized James had been speaking, because, shit, there was no way he’d heard that right.

"I said," James said, and apparently he figured it was his time to roll his eyes, because he was. Liberally. "I want you in me."

Tony swallowed down a moan at that. Fuck, he thought he might actually cry with regret. Break down and fucking sob, just like that. "Yeah, that would be pretty awesome," he said. "Except the chances of me getting it up again tonight are pretty close to zero."

James burst out laughing. "Again," he said. "Your mind might be forty-six, but I think it forgot to tell your body." He pushed his hips up, and Tony let out an involuntary gasp at the pressure.

Tony blinked, glanced down, then back up. "Holy fuck," he said. And fuck, how was it he kept getting surprised by this kind of stuff? "You know, I think I managed to forget some of the perks of being a teenager somewhere along the way. This is." He paused, rolled his hips against James's and barely bit back a moan. "This is fucking incredible. This is. Shit. Yes, yeah, let's do that."

James stretched up, pressed a quick kiss to the corner of Tony's mouth. Then he pushed himself into a sitting position, hardly even seeming to even notice Tony's weight, got his feet on the floor and pushed himself upright. Tony just barely managed to keep from taking a tumble, wrapping his arms around James's neck, beginning to lower his wobbly legs, which, yeah, okay, might not be the best idea. He was pretty sure his knees would give their best rubber impression if given half a chance. With a mental shrug, he wrapped them around James's hips instead and clung on, and no, he had never made a habit of letting himself be manhandled, even back when he'd slept with men on the regular, but this was surprisingly nice. The fact that James didn't seem the least bothered by his weight made another zap of arousal jolt through him.

And hey, the position was not at all a bad one either, not by a long shot. Tony quickly identified the mark he'd left on James's neck earlier, leaned in and latched onto the skin, intent on keeping that blemish there for as long as possible. James let out a groan against his temple, hands gripping his thighs and keeping him close and Tony couldn't not take advantage of that closeness, rolled his hips another few times to elicit another groan. James's fingers tightened, probably adding another few bruises to the collection, and that really should not be as fucking hot as it was.

"Careful," James muttered, staggering under another one of Tony's assaults. "You want us to make it to a bed in one piece, you gotta stop doin' that."

Tony grinned, lifted his head just enough to latch onto James's jaw and sweep his tongue over the flesh caught between his teeth. He did hold off on more undulations, though, even though that was fucking difficult. Didn't need more than one premature ejaculation in one night.

And then, after what felt like half an eternity, they were in Tony's bedroom and James was depositing him on the bed. Tony wasted no time in getting out of his pants and soiled boxers, toeing off his socks before looking up to take in the sight that was James getting out of his own clothes, and yeah, he was pretty sure plenty of people out there would be willing to pay good money for this view. Every single inch revealed was another revelation of brutal, efficient musculature and strength, and Tony was damn near salivating even before James shucked his boxers and let his purpled dick bounce up to rest against his stomach at a slight angle. "You're fucking gorgeous, you know that?" Tony asked.
The grin James flashed him had probably meant to be cocksure and confident, but he was still too much a mixture of James and Bucky and everything in between to quite pull it off, and somehow it looked just this side of bashful, striking enough to suck the breath right out of Tony's lungs. "Not exactly bad yourself," James returned, voice closer to gruff than smooth, but the sound of it still went straight to Tony's dick. And then, fucking finally, James was climbing onto the bed next to him, pressing in close and stealing a kiss that somehow turned so long and deep it left Tony gasping and dizzy, intellectual systems threatening to take a dive straight offline all over again.

He had a hand tangled up in James's hair again, with no memory of how it had gotten there, and the other was trying to feel every single bit of bare skin presented to him. His fingers traced over tight muscles and smooth skin, and the feel of it, all that leashed power, it made his heart pick up pace until he could hear the beat of it in his own ears, could feel his dick twitch and jump in response. James was no better, hands everywhere, creating those trails of fire that made Tony light-headed and so damn desperate he felt like his own skin didn't even fit anymore.

Tony let his hand slip down, following the contours of James's body, the muscles along his side, the V where his hips dipped down. His abs jumped at the touch, and Tony couldn't help but trace the dips and shallows there, the sweat-damp smooth skin and the coarse, short hairs that led down further until he could wrap his hand around the prize. James groaned and bucked into the grip, the slide only barely helped by the amount of sweat they'd built up between them. He was heavy in Tony's hand, hot to the touch, and fuck, there was always something heady about this, about having another man's dick in his hand, something about it that could make him feel damn near high, and this was far from an exception. Tony gave a few experimental tugs, ran the pad of his thumb over the slit and got another involuntary thrust of James's hips in return.

James had broken the kiss somewhere along the way, was panting raggedly against Tony's lips, and Tony wasn't much better off, could still feel that need curdling in the pit of his stomach, even before James gripped him by the hips again, pulled him on top as he rolled onto his back, legs parting just enough for Tony to wedge his hips between, and yeah, this was good. Was so fucking good Tony felt dizzy with it. Far enough gone - again, already, fuck - that it took him a moment to realize James was talking again. He caught the tail-end of something about Vaseline, though, and that was more than enough to jolt him into gear.

"Society's moved past the Vaseline stage," Tony informed, somehow managing to keep his voice somewhat steady. "I think that's mostly something girls use when they're being too cheap to buy lip balm at this point." Still, he maneuvered around until he could reach out and fumble open his bedside drawer. "Just gotta hope Tim didn't confiscate my stash for a cheap laugh. Again," he added, rifling around for a moment, and dammit, James wasn't making this easier by any means, stretching beneath him to follow the movements of his hands, inadvertently rubbing their dicks together in a way that was entirely too distracting. Tony tried and failed to bite back a moan even as his hand closed over the tube. "Condoms are probably expired," he added. "But I can't get you pregnant, you can't get sick, and I'm clean. Still be less messy."

James shook his head. "Just get on with it," he said, and his voice was appropriately slurred now, the sound of it shooting straight to Tony's balls. It wasn't an instruction he needed to be given twice, at least, moving back down the bed until he was kneeling between James's parted knees, fumbling open the tube and squirting lube onto his fingers while James hurriedly stuffed a pillow under his own hips.

Tony bit his lip, hesitated for a moment for absolutely no reason he could positively discern other than, possibly, temporary insanity. "You know, you might be more comfortable on your front," he said.
"Tony," James said. "I ain't a virgin and I ain't gonna break. Get on with it."

"Bossy," Tony muttered, but still, that had apparently been the push he needed because suddenly it felt like the most natural thing in the world to reach out and carefully trace a finger along the cleft of James's ass and circle his rim, savoring the sounds that were already beginning to well out of James's mouth. He gave a careful push, not enough to breach, just testing reactions. James's rim actually fluttered against his finger, and that was probably another thing that shouldn't be nearly as hot as it was. Definitely enough for Tony to put more strength behind the next push, though, and he was damn near moaning along with James as his finger slid home. His dick twitched jealously and this was going to end up amounting to something pretty close to self-torture if he didn't figure out some way to keep himself distracted.

He bent down, wrapped his lips around the head of James's dick and gave a good, long suck, filing the filthy moan he got in return back for later use. He kept half his mind on stretching James out nice and ready and the other half on giving the best damn head he'd given in years. Which, to be fair, wasn't that high an order. It had probably been something like a good decade since the last time he'd taken a man to bed, which might go some way towards explaining why it all felt so damn heightened. That and the teenage hormones. But probably mostly the male part. Tony had never really bothered much about things like the Kinsey Scale and shit. A person was a person and either they were attractive or not, but there were still differences, ways he could behave with men that he couldn't with women and vice versa. While it wasn't like he needed either way around to live, he had damn well missed this, the weight of a dick on his tongue, the feeling of coiled strength, the scent and taste of the sweat and musk that turned him on like a motherfucker. Something about the knowledge that he could be physically pushed off and overwhelmed had always done something to him that might not be entirely healthy, but screw that. Right now he was all down for enjoying the moment.

Tony opened his mouth wider, took James in deeper while he worked in the second finger. And okay, fuck, this age was apparently before he'd lost his gag reflex, had to be careful about that. Still, he pressed his tongue against the throbbing vein on the underside as he bobbed up, started setting a good rhythm.

He was just getting the third finger in when James gripped him by the hair, pulled him off his dick. "Gonna come if you keep that up," he said, seeming to push the words out in between panted breaths. His face was flushed, pupils so blown barely any color showed through. His chest was rising and falling like a bellow and Tony felt his own dick give another twitch, near painful at this point, at the sight.

"Not up for testing your recovery time?" Tony asked. Even he could hear his voice had dropped a few notes, and by the look on James's face, that was definitely a good thing.

James let out a groan, thunked his head back into the pillow. "Not tonight," he said, pulling his knees up closer to his body. A slight keen escaped his lips when Tony found his prostate, gave it a friendly little rub. "I hate to repeat m'self here," James said, and his voice was the furthest thing from steady at this point. "But fuckin' get on with it."

"Okay, okay," Tony said, but he did not at all manage the air of exasperation he was going for. Which, well, fuck it. Who cared? He took a breath and what the hell was this? His teenage body somehow adding his mind or something, because he sure as fuck wasn't supposed to be this damn awkward or, or nervous about sex. Yeah, had to be. Stupid fucking teen hormones. Sooner he grew out of those, the better.

"Tony," James said, and despite the fact that he was still panting, there was a small smile on his face
now. "You know you don't have to act all smooth, right?"

Tony rolled his eyes. "I know," he said. "I'm not actually a fucking kid, no matter what the fuck I look like. I just--"

"Come here," James said. But rather than give Tony a chance to comply on his own, he gripped him by the shoulder and pulled him up, aligning their bodies and okay, yeah, the manhandling was still a hell of a turn-on. And then James was pulling him down for a kiss and that, that was fucking amazing as well, slow at first, just a series of pecks. Tony wasn't sure which one of them took it further, but suddenly it was deeper, longer, and James was tracing his tongue along the seam of Tony's lips until Tony's mouth dropped open on a gasp. Then James was thrusting his tongue into Tony's mouth, teasing out contours and tastes and spots with seemingly direct connections to Tony's dick that even he had only vaguely known existed, and fuck, yeah, that was good.

Slowly, Tony felt the heat build back up, licking through his guts until he was back to damn near panting for it, and then James had somehow got his hands on the lube and was pumping his slicked up palm along the length of Tony's dick. Tony was groaning into the kiss, more than ready to take back a bit of control. He reached down, nudged James's legs further apart, and James went with it, still kissing Tony like he needed it to breathe, and that, that was fucking wonderful, that was... Tony was used to being in relationships, sexual and emotional, where he was well aware of the fact that he needed his partner more than they needed him. This, even if it was just a small moment, whether it was an illusion created by the situation or... fuck, whatever. Point was, it went straight to his fucking head, and he was somehow simultaneously hyperaware and fuzzy around the edges, everything fast and slow and sharp and soft and confusing and incredible as he lined himself up and thrust forward.

James moaned against his lips, one hand tangled in Tony's hair and the other wrapped around his waist, keeping him strangely grounded. Tony squeezed his eyes shut against the tight, clenching heat. Then he pulled back and kept himself under enough control to keep his thrusts short and careful, opening James's body up the rest of the way until he could bottom out. He felt more than heard the long moan leave his mouth as his hips pressed against James's ass, and then James was squeezing around him, and it was all Tony could do to keep from coming right then and there. Again. Yeah, he would not live down two of those in one night. He sucked a breath in through his nose, kept still for a few moments to let them both get used to it.

James's fingers tightened on the nape of Tony's neck, pulling him back down, and Tony didn't even realize he'd broken the kiss until they were at it again, sloppy and uncoordinated and so fucking good. James shifted under him, probably trying to find a more comfortable position, and Tony made some sound that was embarrassingly close to a whimper at the flex and squeeze of James's inner muscles around his dick. Tony honestly didn't mean to bite down on James's lip, but that was something that kind of sort of happened despite his best intentions. Judging by his reaction, James didn't seem to mind all that much. He lured Tony's tongue into his mouth, gave it a sharp nip and suck, and then he was wrapping one long, strong leg around Tony's hips, pulling him impossibly deeper, and yeah, okay, maybe Tony should just take that hint and get moving.

Tony pulled back until the head of his dick was catching on James's rim, thrusting back in experimentally a few times until he found the angle that made James's back bend and his fingers dig in to leave even more bruises along the length of Tony's body. He kept that angle, and somehow, together, they got a pace going that was sharp and deep without being brutal, and James was bucking up to meet him, muscles clenching around him, seeming to pull him in deeper, and fuck, that was so mind-numbingly good Tony was pretty sure coherent thought was on the verge of becoming a foreign concept.

For what felt simultaneously like forever and no time at all, all Tony was really aware of was heat
and sweat and straining muscles, the slapping sounds of flesh hitting flesh, of James beneath him, around him. His gut was pulling tight and something somewhere inside him was aching in some strange way he didn't know the words for. They'd given up the kiss, neither one of them coordinated enough for it at the moment, and Tony was mostly just licking and biting at whatever skin was in front of his mouth, the salty musk of fresh sweat overwhelming his taste buds, heightening the whole thing that much more.

James was back with the wandering hands thing, and that was wonderful, that was awesome, every touch grounding him and sending him soaring all at once, and there was no way this was going to last very long. He could feel the edge already hovering on the corner of his consciousness, but he wasn't ready for that, not at all, not now when, for once, everything actually felt good. James was breathing against his temple, heavy, panted breaths, and he was all strength and heat and a kind of vitality Tony didn't really think he was familiar with, and he was pretty sure he wasn't talking out loud this time, which was damn good, because. Well, Tony's brain-to-mouth filter sometimes utterly vanished when he was having sex, and he was pretty sure this whole train of consciousness was a bit too weird to share, which. Well, he wasn't sure he had the breath for talking at the moment anyway.

James let out another groan, sending another spark of arousal through Tony's whole body, an unending circuit of feedback that at least pulled Tony's mind back from the momentary lapse into weido-land and into the game where it belonged. And fuck, he wasn't sure how much more of this he could take before he'd find himself crashing straight back over the edge. Wasn't going to happen that way, though. Not this time. He was going to make James come first, if it fucking killed him. He pulled back again, let the head of his dick catch on James's rim, stayed just long enough to feel James's heel beginning to press down on the small of the back, hear the first beginnings of a whine. Then he thrust in, deep and hard, set a new pace, slightly faster, rotating his hips every few thrusts, and James was there with him within moments, meeting him with powerful bucks of his hips. His hands had gone still, fingers digging in where his hands rested.

"Tony," James said, and there was barely any voice left, mostly just a hoarse whisper. "Tony, lemme see you."

So Tony did, pried his own eyes open while he worked a hand in between them, wrapped his fingers around James's dick and began to jerk him to the same rhythm that he was snapping his hips. As he was watching, James's head fell back, digging into the pillow. He let go of Tony with one hand, reached behind him and gripped the headboard instead. His eyes were half-lidded, his long lashes casting shadows over his face. His mouth hung open, lips dark and swollen and Tony had rarely had any one person's looks get to him so much and so often in such a small span of time, but fuck it that wasn't what was happening.

He twisted his wrist on the upstroke, ran the pad of his thumb over the head of James's dick, letting it slide through the dripping precome. James's hips snapped up against him, his back arching, pressing their chests together, and Tony could feel his own thigh muscles trembling at the effort of staying back from the edge. James's inner walls were rippling around him, gripping him tight and pulling him deeper and Tony was half convinced he could feel every contour, absolutely everything. His gut tightened. His balls were drawing up all over again.

It wasn't a magical moment, nothing like that, just the cause and effect all coalescing into a conclusion that was quite a bit stronger than anything Tony could pull out of recent memory. He gave James's dick another tug, and James froze beneath him for one long moment, muscles going tight around Tony's dick, clamping down like a fucking vise, and then he was shuddering through his orgasm with a wordless shout that went straight to Tony's head. Tony followed him over the edge barely a second later, panting and groaning as he rode it out, head bending and lips finding James's, mashing together gracelessly. Then he was collapsing back onto James's chest, boneless and panting
and shaking through the aftershocks, warm and more relaxed than he'd been in ages long before his heart rate even began to return to normal.

James's fingers carded through his hair, surprisingly steady, and his lips brushed over Tony's cheek and that, if anything, was the magical moment, if such a thing existed. That wasn't to say that there were any magical revelations or realizations or any shit like that, just that it was the first truly good, calm moment Tony could remember experiencing in, fuck, probably since Afghanistan.

Tony had lost too much track of time to even attempt to figure out how much of it had passed before he got enough of a grip of his own body to roll off James and onto his back, and even then it was all he could do, for long moments, to just lie there and stare at the ceiling. "Okay?" he asked, and fuck, he sounded absolutely wrecked, didn't he?

James let out a low chuckle. "Don't flatter yourself. Little thing like you couldn't break me if you tried." He turned his face towards Tony, pressed another kiss to the corner of his mouth, effectively taking the sting out of his words. "I'm fine," he added. "I'm fuckin' great. That was good."

Tony felt a grin tug on his own face, felt some tiny beginnings of tension he hadn't even noticed bleed right back out of him, just like that. "Good?" he asked. "That was awesome."

James snorted. "We can do better," he said.

Tony let out a low chuckle, couldn't seem to stop grinning even as he pushed himself up into a sitting position and onward to his feet. "Let's try that out sometime," he said before managing to stagger to the bathroom on legs that were damn near coltish beneath him. He found a flannel, got it wet and washed himself off quickly before returning to bed and handing it over. "We should probably go for a shower," he said.

James waved him off before going about wiping himself down. "Later," he said.

Tony couldn't quite stop himself from leaning in and stealing another quick kiss, and fuck, was it even healthy to be this kind of giddy? Whatever his current birth certificate said, he wasn't actually a teenager, and the whole thing with the moods and hormones was getting kind of disturbing. Although the recovery time was a pretty nice bonus. As if in agreement, his dick gave another tired twitch, and Tony mentally shook his head. No more tonight, or he'd end up sleeping in too late and getting behind on his project. He glanced at his watch, felt his eyes widen. "Well, fuck," he said. "Merry Christmas."

James laughed, long and low and rich, and Tony kind of wanted to bottle that sound and sell it. Or, you know, alternately, just keep it close by forever. Since when did sex turn him into such a fucking sap? "Sure is," James agreed. "This is gonna have to count for my present, though," he added, tossing the flannel back through the still open bathroom door. It actually landed in the sink. Damn snipers. "In between HYDRA and letting you take me on the run, I didn't get a chance to go Christmas shoppin'."

"I can live with that," Tony said. "Pretty good present, actually. Definitely going to the top of my next wish list." He lay back down, squirmed around a bit to get comfortable only for James to wrap an arm around him and pull him back in. "I like your sense of humor," he added then, not really sure why he was saying shit like that out loud. "Could you not turn it back off? Like this you a hell of a lot better than zombie you."

"Me too," James agreed, maneuvering them both until they were on their sides. His arm stayed slung over Tony's ribs, and on some impulse he couldn't quite understand, Tony caught his hand in his own, laced their fingers together, let himself relax into the embrace. Who knew what the rest of
Christmas Day held? For now, he'd take the bit of 'merry' on offer.

Chapter End Notes

Public service announcement: That concludes the first half of the story. Unfortunately you'll have to wait a bit for the second half. I'm going off-line until the 25th, and then I'll start posting again as soon as the final edits are done. Happy holidays everyone. Hope you have a really great time of it.
That took a few days more than planned. Sorry about that. Christmas can be a pretty busy time. Thanks again to Potrix for the amount of work and hours they put into polishing this off, and for all the sweet/funny comments in the margins. The rest of the story will be posted over the next couple of days. Sorry about the delay again. Hope everyone had a great holiday. And now, onwards ;P

The next morning, Tony woke briefly to the sound of the shower being turned on. Dozed off again and came to for another few moments to mutter a sleepy affirmative when James informed him he was doing another perimeter sweep. He kind of drifted off again, but couldn't quite manage it entirely. Behind the curtains, the sun was rising and the sky was getting annoyingly light, and Tony was the kind of person who could really only be woken that many times before he couldn't fall back asleep. Mumbling under his breath, he rolled out of bed, grabbed a shower himself and went through the motions of a mostly unnecessary shave before emerging into the kitchen. There was fresh coffee in the pot and boiled eggs and a fresh sandwich in the fridge and Tony spent a moment blinking at that in confusion before sitting down to eat the food on offer, feeling strangely warm in a way he couldn't quite explain.

In the end, he gave up attempting to explain it. Grab whatever happiness you could, don't question it, and hold onto it for as long as possible. If last night had taught him anything, it was that. And honestly, he was kind of beginning to think it was something he needed to teach himself to live by if he wanted to stay sane. So, be happy and don't question it. Sounded damn good, actually. He let his lips tuck up into a small smile that felt halfway unnatural on his face for the first few moments. Then he picked up the coffee pot and a mug and headed downstairs to the workshop.

He was halfway through the next phase of his project when he realized he wasn't alone down there, glanced away from his work and had to blink a few times to adjust to the way the magnifying goggles, well, magnified everything. A slightly blurry version of James entered his vision after a few futile sweeps. He was leaning against the wall, a strangely warm smile on his face that Tony couldn't help but answer. Something swooped through the pit of his stomach, just a moment of it, warm and comfortable and heartbreakingly sweet. Suddenly all too aware of how ridiculous he must look, Tony reached up and pulled off the goggles, putting them down on the nearest worktop. "What's up?" he said, and yeah, okay, that just made him feel ridiculous, which was the last thing he needed when he'd hopefully just stopped looking it.

James's smile widened into a grin that crinkled up the corners of his eyes, made Tony hyperaware, all over again, of just exactly how gorgeous he was, and fuck, he could feel all those damn teenage hormones racking up into full giddiness mode, which had been a horrifying enough thing when he was actually seventeen. "We never actually got 'round to eatin' yesterday," James informed. "I just heated up the leftovers. Didn't even blow up the microwave." He nodded his head toward the staircase. "C'mon. Lunch time."

Tony nodded, and somewhere in the back of his mind he was kind of surprised by his own lack of resistance, but eh, who cared? Christmas and all. "Sure," he said, putting away the rest of his stuff
and walking over to where James was standing, nudging him just slightly with his shoulder. "How long were you watching me?"

James cocked an eyebrow. "Not so long that the food's gone cold," he said, and Tony was kind of stunned, just for a moment, by how close that came to a frank admission, and how little that bothered him. Rather, it made that burst of heat swoop through his stomach again, and what even was that? "C'mon," James said again, wrapping an arm around his shoulders and guiding him playfully upstairs.

The food still smelled heavenly, and this time around Tony actually thought he might even have the appetite for it. Understatement, as it turned out. Tony had forgotten, somewhere along the way, just how much food he'd been able to put away as a kid, and the fact that it tasted damn good didn't hurt one bit. He was pretty sure he made sure to point all that out, enthusiastically and repeatedly, too. Positive reinforcement and all that. If he wanted more food like this, positive reinforcement was probably the way to go.

Something was working, in any case, since James was grinning and joking with him throughout most of the meal. Toward the end, though, some of his enthusiasm seemed to dim a bit and the smile slid slowly off his face until Tony was downright worried.

"What is it?" Tony asked, putting his fork and knife down to focus properly on James.

James slowly finished chewing the food in his mouth, swallowed it with a click, and Tony was not doing anything creepy like watching the way his Adam's apple bobbed with the motion or anything remotely like that, not at all. James picked up his glass, drank the rest of his chilled water and put it down, face damn near unreadable, and the concern was back, brutally beating down the attraction. "I was thinkin' 'bout your whole... time situation again," he said then. He stopped, swallowed, and Tony felt his own brow furrow because he was getting more and more certain he wasn't the only one who was nervous, and that was not nearly as reassuring as it should be.

"Yeah?" Tony nudged, trying his best to sound encouraging.

"If your--" James stopped again, grimacing, and Tony didn't know why this was so difficult for him, but he didn't like it one bit. "Listen, you never spelled it out, but it was pretty obvious what your answer was when I asked what you were thinkin' 'bout when they sent you back." Another pause. James shifted slightly in his chair, obviously uncomfortable, and now Tony was kind of not feeling so comfortable either. For whatever reason, thinking about the future, that whole timeline, returning to it... It didn't feel as good as it should, and although he couldn't really explain it even to himself, James was the last person he wanted to discuss it with, even if he was the only one who knew. "And I was thinkin', if you set the parameters of that whole thing, maybe you set yourself the mission of savin' her. Only, I'm not. I'm not--" He stopped again, turned his face slightly until he was looking past Tony and out the window behind him. "Does that mean I'm still gonna kill her?"

Tony blinked, because, fuck, yeah, he hadn't really thought about that angle. At all. "I doubt it," he said then. "I mean, you really do seem to have a better handle on it than you ever did then, and." He shrugged. "So much might've already changed." He stopped again, shook his head, tried to think the whole damn paradox through, and fuck, time travel would never not give him a headache, would it? "I honestly have no idea how this whole thing works, but for what it's worth, I don't think you would."

"So if you wanted to save her, but the whole... Winter Soldier factor doesn't play into it," James said, and Tony clearly hadn't done a very good job reassuring him, because he was still uncharacteristically restless in his seat, still wouldn't look Tony in the eye. "Maybe it's somethin' else. But I got no clue what it is you'd wanna save her from, if it ain't me."
Tony got up, picking up the empty plates and cutlery and dumped it all in the sink, not so much because that was normally a thing he did - it really, really wasn't. It was just that he always thought best when he was in motion and it was a pretty good excuse to start moving without seeming like he was moving away. He reached up, raked his fingers through his hair, probably leaving it a horrible mess, as he tried to approach the problem from this new angle. If it was all about Natasha, but not strictly about saving Natasha from dying, then what was it? He came to a stop in front of the doors leading from the living room out to the pool area, leaned against it for a moment, let the coolness of the glass sink into his palms.

He didn't hear movement at all, didn't realize James had got out of his chair in the first place before he sensed the heat of him by his side, within reaching distance but not touching. "What was she like?" James asked, voice strangely hoarse, hesitant.

Tony sucked in a sharp breath, let his eyes slide shut. "Strong," he said. "Clever, kind, even though she'd have probably killed me for badmouthing her like that. So fucking strong." He let the breath back out, opened his eyes. If he squinted, he could almost see her, but somehow, being here, being so far away... For once, it wasn't overwhelming. It still cut, it still hurt like hell, but right now, right in this moment, he wasn't going to break down from it. Maybe later, he would. Right now, the warmth of James, the strength of him so close, it was giving Tony the strength, in some odd way, to stay on his own two feet. "Broken," he admitted. "She was... I don't really understand the whole thing, where Red HYDRA ends and the KGB Red Room begins, don't know if it was infiltration, the way it was with S.H.I.E.L.D., or if they were always the same thing. Doesn't really matter, I guess. Either way, the same people who had you, or some of them anyway, they were the ones to raise her."

James sucked in a sharp breath, and out the corner of his eye, Tony could see his shoulders hunch inwards, as if his first instinct at the direction the conversation had taken was to make himself as small as possible.

"She got out," Tony said. "Pieced herself back together, but. Ledger dripping red. Which I never blamed her for, don't get me wrong. She did less damage to the world than me, overall, and for a more understandable reason. But sometimes I guess a person can just be broken so badly that it's like a Ming vase or something, you can see that it's beautiful, that it should be something priceless, but it's been cracked and repaired so many times, and there are shards missing, and you know nothing will ever really fix that." He sucked in a shuddering breath, let it out slowly, and yeah, okay, now he was skirting the limits of what he could take. He stuck his hands in his pockets to keep them from trembling, tensed his muscles to keep from losing control.

"So maybe that's it," James said, and he still sounded off, wrong in some way Tony couldn't even begin to put his hands on. "Maybe you didn't want to save her from dyin' so much as you wanted to save her from livin' the way she did."

Tony blinked. He reached out and pushed the glass doors open, walked out past the deck, straight to the edge of the cliff and plopped down. Far below, the waves were crashing against the jagged rocks, and part of Tony shook and withered in fear of it despite the fact that he was fine with heights. Sometimes fear was just like that, illogical. He knew without looking that James had followed him, was standing right behind him, probably ready to reach out and snatch Tony up if he lost his balance.

Tony shook his head, shook off the distractions he kept piling on himself, made himself stop and really think it through. Natasha had meant the world to him, yes, but he had never been blind to the fact that she wasn't all right. Probably even less all right than he was, even when she was more functional. He didn't really have to look far to see the signs. There'd been enough conversations about lost souls and whether or not 'people like them' were owed anything at all that it was kind of hard to overlook. Maybe she had been right. Maybe Bruce had been the final drop for her, in a way
Pepper hadn't been for Tony. That even losing Natasha might not have been. Maybe she really was past the point where she could believe there might be anything better out there, and it broke Tony's heart to think about it.

So what was it, then? If he went down this logic trail, took the road signs James had handed him, what was it his thought of Natasha in the moment he'd been sent back had meant? Really, if this whole line of thought made any sense at all, there was only one answer that followed. He didn't want to save Natasha from dying. He wanted, as fucking horrible as that sounded, to save her from becoming the person he'd known. Not because she was a bad person - he'd fucking loved her, more Rhodey love than Pepper love, maybe, but that didn't make it any less, and he'd loved her just as she was, damage and all - but because the person she'd been had hurt her. Because she'd been in pain every fucking day, however good she was at not showing it, in ways even Tony probably couldn't comprehend. Because when she'd died in his arms, he'd seen more than a single note of relief in her eyes.

And all of that would just be a tragic story, a horrible thing he could do nothing about. Except he wasn't in that world anymore. Where he was, Natasha was... He had to make some quick calculations there, and the answer was kind of staggering. In the here and now, Natasha was three years old.

"Does it make me a horrible fucking person if I want to deal her another hand?" he asked.

James sat down next to him, close enough, this time, to press their shoulders together again, and Tony couldn't help but lean into him, borrowing that tiny bit of strength. "Comin' from someone who'd have given a lot to have been dealt a different hand," James said, voice soft. "Not at all."

Tony didn't know how much pain Natasha had already been through at this point in history, how damaged she might already be, but there couldn't possibly have been any intense training yet. No graduation ceremony. No red in her ledger, not yet. Maybe he could give her a chance to grow up into someone who was capable of hope, of joy, of feeling enough love to let it supersede the obligations she felt she had, even if it meant they'd never even meet, even if it meant she'd never be the rock that got him through the Civil War. Maybe that was the answer. And all of a sudden, Tony wasn't sure he'd wanted an answer at all.

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"So, what is the plan?" James asked hours later when they were sat down for dinner. It had gone dark out, and Tony's head was kind of spinning, partly from the Natasha thing and partly from squinting at tiny things in the workshop after he went down there to keep working on the project and, you know, keep from having another panic attack.

Tony finished chewing his food, glanced up. Something in the air between them had changed in some strange way Tony didn't really have the EQ to understand, but it left him unsettled. Probably James as well, considering the fact that there had been a lot less casual teasing between them this meal than usual, and that even the silences had gone from strangely but nicely relaxed to the kind of tense Tony would've expected a week ago, but which felt beyond alien now. "I don't know," he said, shrugging one shoulder. "Pretty sure figuring out how to sneak into the Soviet Union and kidnapping a KGB asset is going to take more than an afternoon, even for me."

James gave a sharp nod, the single motion betraying every inch of his military training. Even his back was held too straight, and what the fuck was even going on here? Tony wished he was the kind of guy who knew how to ask that sort of question, but he really, really wasn't.

"You don't have to come with me, you know," Tony heard himself say, voice a lot smaller than he'd
have wanted.

James's gaze snapped up, eyes locking on Tony's for a moment. For just a flash of a second, Tony thought he caught something insecure, almost vulnerable, in the grey-blue depths, but then it was covered right back up. "D'you want me to?" he asked.

Tony let out a breath, couldn't help the wince. He hated having questions turned back on himself that way, hated being put on the spot. The answer was pretty easy, though, all things considered. "It would be a hell of a lot more difficult without you," he said. And, of course, there was the fact that if Tony didn't have that much time left in his timeline, he kind of didn't want to spend it on his own. Plus, there was maybe a tiny, dumb part of him that didn't just not want to be alone, but more specifically didn't want to be without James.

Still, it seemed enough to get another nod out of James. "Then I'll come," he said simply, and even those words seemed charged, as if there were other words behind them that Tony was somehow supposed to divine and was just too dim to make any sense of.

After dinner, Tony returned to the workshop while James insisted on doing yet another perimeter check. He might've said something about reading some book or other he'd found in Tim's shelves, but Tony's head was already back in engineering and planning and just so full of white noise it was hard to pay proper attention. When he dragged himself off to bed hours later, the door to the guest room was shut and Tony's bed was empty, and he had to beat down a strange note of disappointment. One time thing, then. He could live with that. Wasn't like he'd expected anything else, right?

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Tony barely made it back to the mansion before the rage exploded somewhere inside him, made him scream into the faceplate of the suit, lash out hard enough to put his gauntleted fist through the wall. He sucked in a sharp breath. His jaw hurt from where he'd been clenching the muscles too hard. Squeezing his eyes shut, he let his head drop forward, the metal of the faceplate thunking against the wall. The rage was evaporating as fast as it had appeared, leaving him so fucking exhausted he just wanted to sleep, sleep and somehow fool himself into believing that when he woke, this would all be over.

He didn't hear the door open behind him, didn't realize he was no longer alone in the expansive entrance hall before a small, slender hand settled on his armored shoulder. "Come on, Toshenka," Natasha said, voice soft and soothing, and when had he learnt to read her gruffness as gentleness anyway? "Get your hand out of the wall. The Cap Parade already wrecked the Tower. We don't need you finishing the job with the mansion."

A strange smile/grimace hybrid tugged on Tony's lips. He let himself be pulled back and carefully extracted his gauntlet from the wall before sending the armor off to Howard's old workshop in the basement, which was the best he had at the moment. He let out a sharp breath and crossed the floor to the sofa arrangement his mother had put so much pride in installing what felt like a lifetime ago.

"What's got into you today?" Natasha asked, sitting down across from him. She'd found a first aid kit somewhere and was dabbing at a cut in her arm. Tony would've offered to help, except he already knew the answer to that one. Apparently his repairman's skills only extended to tech. "As skirmishes go, that wasn't even a bad one. Honestly, separating the protestor camps almost felt like old times. Ceasefire for a day."

Tony sighed. "Rogers's kind parting words got me in a bit of a mood," he said, because there really wasn't any point beating around the bush with her. She'd get it out of him either way, and it always
felt better when he didn't have to spend hours trying to figure out if he'd been manipulated or not. Strange that shit like that should make him that much fonder of her. "Thank God Howard isn't around to see you now." He huffed out a breath, and the walls of the mansion seemed, for a moment, to be closing in around him. He'd never been comfortable here, even as a child, but today it was somehow worse than ever. "Rhodey and the Vision?" he asked.

"Rhodes is making nice with the military," Natasha said. "The Vision is trying to bring Maximoff around to his point of view, again. It would be more effective, I think, if he didn't care more about you than the actual conflict." She paused a moment, put down the wad of cotton wool and patched on a neat row of butterfly bandages. "Don't tell me you're actually letting Rogers get to you."

Tony let out a shaky breath. "Thing is," he said, "he has a point. Howard would've had a few choice words about going up against Captain America. He would've been on their side, just for the principle of the thing. He'd trust Rogers's judgement above mine, every single time. God knows he did when I was growing up." He tried, and failed, to smile. "What does it say about me that my father would've sided against me?"

Natasha didn't say anything out loud for a moment, but she did mutter something under her breath that sounded oddly like 'I know a thing or two about how that goes'. "You don't know if he'd do that," Natasha she finally said. "Still, I know it's fucked up. But I guess that's why they're calling it a Civil War now."

Tony swallowed. "What if they're right, though? What if we've got this whole thing all wrong?" He reached up, rucked a hand through his hair. It tangled painfully around his fingers. When was the last time he'd bothered to get it cut? "What if we're all skewed by our pasts? Maybe you and I need to be registered and controlled, but does that mean we should make the choice that everyone else does too? Do we--"

"Tony," she said, voice soft. "We're on the right side, here. And we didn't make the choice that the Accords are necessary. Representatives of the people of the whole damn world did. We just agreed." She reached across the mostly decorative crystal coffee table, gave his knee a squeeze. "Don't start doubting yourself now. Cap's an idealist, and sometimes that makes him naïve. You and I have seen enough horrible shit - done enough horrible shit - to know the world isn't that black and white. Freedom is all well and good, until it starts impacting other people's wellbeing. Remember why you're doing this, and keep that in mind next time Cap tries to mess with your head."

"How about you?" Tony asked. "Are you all right?"

She shrugged. "Got a bit too up close and personal with Barnes's knives," she said. "His footwork is impressive." There was a bitter note to her voice that he didn't understand. As much as he couldn't stand the Winter Soldier, Natasha seemed to veer back and forth between what looked like a very personal sort of bitterness and complete disregard. Asking about it had only gotten him complaints about bikini seasons, which was pretty much the long-winded version of 'don't go there', so he was leaving that sleeping dragon alone. Still, it worried the shit out of him. She dredged up a smile. "Did you ever stop to think that maybe it's just that the world's been lying to us? Maybe the golden generation is all comprised of assholes."

Tony cracked a grin at that. "Eh," he said. "I knew a few good apples, once upon a time."

Chapter End Notes
Thanks so much to everyone who’s been kind enough to take the time to read and subscribe, bookmark/rec, leave kudos and comments. It means the world to have people show so much interest after all the time that went into this beast.
By the time lunchtime rolled around the next day, Tony was beginning to think James had up and vanished again. He hadn't been around in the morning, hadn't come down to drag Tony out of the workshop, and when Tony walked back into the kitchen a bit past noon, nothing had been disturbed. He set the coffee to brewing and fixed himself a pretty subpar sandwich, tried not to think about the tight knot of worry that was starting to bunch up in the pit of his belly, making it impossible to properly focus on anything else. And okay, sure, Tony had been subjected to enough psychology articles throughout his own history of PTSD - and thanks for that helpful little maneuver, JARVIS - to know that mood swings and avoidance was often part of the whole deal, but this didn't feel like that. James didn't seem like he had mood swings as such, more like something had just. Gotten to him, somehow, in some way Tony didn't even begin to get, and it bugged the hell out of him. And not only because it had been a fucking long time since he'd felt as lonely in an empty bed as he had last night. He wasn't that much of a selfish asshole, though how the fuck he'd start feeling lonely after a single fucking night of not being alone was beyond him.

He managed to put that whole stream of thought on mute, or at least on very low volume, even if he couldn't seem to turn it off completely. He finished chewing through his sandwich, poured the coffee into a pot and took it back downstairs with him, intent on getting back into the swing of his project. He wasn't sure how, but somehow he got absorbed enough that he jumped what was probably a straight foot into the air when he heard a familiar voice holler his name from upstairs. Immediately, he put down everything he hadn't already dropped in shock, made his way upstairs in record time only to find Tim on the floor, bag dropped off to the side. James was sitting astride the elderly man, wicked-looking knife held against his throat. "Who are you?" James was shouting, words too clipped and precise, damn near monotone despite the volume. "Who sent you?" And yeah, no, that wasn't James. That was full-on Winter Soldier, and shouldn't that shit be getting less and less of a thing by now?

Tony pushed the confusion away, walked through the room with determined steps. "James," he said, keeping his tone as confident as he could. He put his hand on James's shoulder, squeezed. "That's my Uncle Tim. That's Dum Dum Dugan. Would you please get off him, Brooklyn?"

For long moments, James didn't move at all. Then, with a strange little shake, all his muscles looked like they were unlocking at once. He exhaled long and deep, and Tony didn't miss the way his head drooped low for a moment before he picked himself up, the knife disappearing back off to where he'd been hiding it in the first place.

"Where've you been all day anyway?" Tony couldn't help but ask as he pushed past James and stretched out his hand to help Tim back on his feet. Tim took the hand with a groan and pulled himself upright. Tony damn near toppled over at the weight and fuck, he really needed to get some muscle tone on these scrawny bones sometime soon.

Tim pulled Tony in for a quick hug, kept his arm around Tony's shoulder for a while more. "What the hell, Sarge?" he asked.

James blinked another few times, looked momentarily like he had a headache, and Tony made a mental note to look up some head shrink who specialized in POWs. Or brainwashed ex-cult members. Or both. James clearly wasn't doing quite as well as Tony had thought, and while that, for whatever fucked up reason, didn't particularly make him fear for his own safety, it did make him worried. How the fuck was James going to take care of himself when Tony was gone if he was still fighting down an evil alter ego? "Sorry about that," James finally said, voice still too clipped and
words still too pronounced. The tone was more himself, though. "I guess I got. Spooked."

Tony had to almost physically restrain himself from going to him and-- What? What was he going to do? James had made it pretty damn clear that aside from that one-time Christmas-comfort thing, there wasn't anything going on between them. And sure, if it had been Rhodey in anything like this kind of situation, Tony would've known what to do. Probably. Maybe. Either way, the point was that he couldn't do that either. How the hell did people remain friendly with one night stands anyway? He turned to Tim instead. "I'm guessing Aunt Peggy gave you some warning," he said.

Tim turned his face toward Tony, though Tony wasn't idiot enough to think that a good portion of his attention wasn't still on James. Then again, so was Tony's. Fair was fair. "She did say there was a good chance you might be hiding out here," he said. "She said you might have him with you. Coming from anyone else, I wouldn't have believed a word of it. I'm still not entirely sure I believe it."

Tony nodded. He definitely understood that. James did tend to give people some pretty good shocks with the whole being-alive thing, no matter the timeline.

"You stole the Cosmic Cube," Tim said, turning it into something that was somehow both question and statement all at once. At least it wasn't nearly as accusatory as it would've been if it had come from, say, Howard.

Tony shrugged. "You know enough about that thing that there's no way in hell you aren't in the leaving-it-in-the-ocean school of thought anyway," he said. "I just put it somewhere even better."

Tim let out a breath. "I hope you did. That thing was always bad news." He let Tony go, reached into his breast pocket and produced a cigar, stuck it in his mouth and lit up, and yeah, there was that old familiar Uncle Tim smell. "Just wish you hadn't gotten caught on camera," he added. "You of all people should've known better."

Off to the side, James made some odd, distressed sound Tony had never heard from him before, and Tony's attention snapped immediately back to him. He'd crossed the distance before he even realized what he was doing, gripped James's shoulders and squeezed. "Hey," he said, softening his voice automatically. "Hey, Jim-Jam, what is it? Talk to me, Brooklyn."

James squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, shoulders slumping under Tony's hands. His chin was almost level with his chest. "That was my job," he said, sounding oddly like there was a crack going straight through his voice box. "That was my job," he said, sounding oddly like there was a crack going straight through his voice box. "I was supposed to take care of the recordings."

Tony felt something inside him squeeze tight and painful. Without thought to their audience, he stepped in closer, nudged James's forehead with his own as he thought the whole thing through. Fuck. It was the eighties. Everything was still analog. There wouldn't be a central memory bank the way Tony was used to. Well, sure, there would be a VHS recorder in some central spot, but more than likely every single individual camera would've also held its own tape, and it would be up to some janitor or security guard or someone to change the tapes every once in a while. Taking out the bank would've made absolutely no difference if the recordings were all in the individual cameras. Shit, he really needed to remember how fucking dark ages the technology was in this decade. "That's not on you," he said, giving James's shoulder another squeeze. The faintest shudder of relief went through him when James's hands came up to grip Tony's upper arms in return, clutching on for some sort of support Tony could really only hope he was managing to give. "That's on me. I made a bad call. I didn't think the situation through, and I'm sorry."

James let out a thick breath, and for long moments he didn't move at all, so neither did Tony. Fuck, right now he couldn't even bring himself to care about what kind of weird twilight-zoney picture they
must be presenting to his godfather. He just needed James to find his feet again, be strong again, because Tony didn't know what to do if he didn't. Then, slowly, James was nodding, eyes sliding shut again. He let out another long breath, bumped their foreheads together in a quick, gentle motion before he stepped back.

Tony, for whatever weird reason, thought he almost felt his own spine straighten a bit as he turned back towards Tim. "How big a part of S.H.I.E.L.D. is after us right now?" he asked.

"Well," Tim said. "Bucky wasn't identified, so there's that. I guess no one thought to connect a kid like that to a World War Two special ops officer who's listed as KIA." He took a puff of his cigar. "You, on the other hand..." Another puff, and if had been nearly anyone else, Tony would've thought they were trying to buy time. Not Tim, though. Tim had always told it to him like it was, for better or worse. Including one memorable occasion when Tony had been seven and whining about how Howard hadn't made it to a science fair and Tim had simply squeezed his shoulder and told him his dad was an asshole. "Peggy's keeping them too busy for it to be a full-scale operation. Depending on who survives her weeding out, though, you might have some high-ups coming after you fairly soon, who'll be willing to do a hell of a lot of damage to find out where that Cube is."

Tony winced, and winced again when he sensed that James was tensing back up. He reached out without looking, caught James's wrist and squeezed. "So that doesn't sound too good. No hope everyone who cares about the Cube is HYDRA?"

"Doubt it," Tim said. "Between the holidays and the major review Peggy is putting everyone through, though, we should have a few days before you need to ship out of here. Enough time to set up a proper exit."

Tony let out a breath, more than a little relieved that they wouldn't have to run right this second. He wasn't done planning, wasn't done with his project, and. Well. Shit might be awkward, but if he were completely, painfully honest, he might not be entirely ready to do some shit that would get him sent back to the future right this second.

"Why don't you head back down to the 'shop, kid?" Tim said, reaching out to ruffle his hair. "Let me and old Bucky here have some grown-up talk?"

Tony snorted. "If you're going to shout at him for getting me in danger, don't bother," he said, flashing a quick grin. "It was the other way around."

"He does have an unfortunate habit of stubbornly following little punks into danger on the not so off chance that they end up needing him to haul their asses back out of it," Tim replied, giving Tony a gentle push in the back. "Get going, squirt."

Tony glanced at James, who straightened his back ever so slightly and gave a quick nod in return. Tony gave his wrist one last squeeze before heading back to the stairs.

***

Okay, so Tony wasn't going to even try to deny the fact that he was kind of curious about what was going on upstairs, but he managed to get back into the rhythm of his work well enough, and with extra urgency this time. They were probably going to have to clear out in a couple of days max, and he needed this to be done beforehand. Still, he was wrapped up in it all enough that he did drop what he was working with when he realized he had an audience. He glanced up at where Tim was standing, cocked an eyebrow.

"Dinnertime," Tim said. "I got pizzas from that place you like. Come on up."
Tony nodded, attention already beginning to slip. "Be right there," he said, turning back to the absolutely shitty excuse for a computer that was, for now, the most advanced technology in the workshop. "Just gotta finish these last few lines of code."

"Five minutes, Tony," Tim warned before walking back upstairs.

Approximately five seconds later, at least that's how it felt, a hand wrapped around his upper arm and tugged. "C'mon, Tony. Pizzas are gettin' cold," James said.

Tony looked mournfully back at the flashing screen and the terrible program running on it. "But the code," he started.

"I'll still be here after we've eaten," James countered, giving another tug. "C'mon, we been waitin' for twenty minutes."

"Can't possibly have been twenty minutes," he muttered, but he did allow himself to be steered to the stairs and up into the living room.

Tim flashed him a grin, held up a piece of Tony's favorite pizza and took a big bite, chewing it slowly and annoyingly. "That was surprisingly painless," he told James when he'd swallowed. "He's usually kicking and screaming at this point."

Tony glared at him, plopping down onto the couch. "Am not," he said, reaching for a piece of pizza and biting into it with relish.

James shrugged. "He ain't that much trouble," he said, and there was a certain fondness to his smile as he glanced at Tony for a brief moment before looking away again. There was still a strange sort of air between them, but at least James seemed more relaxed now than he'd been since, well, some point fairly early yesterday, probably.

Tim snorted. "Clearly you haven't tried to put the three-year-old version of Tony Stark down for a nap when he was determined to take his new radio-controlled car apart and put it back together even better."

Tony rolled his eyes. "Maybe you shouldn't have given me a new toy right before nap time," he said. "Sorry, but that one's on you."

James looked back and forth between the two of them, frowning, as if there was some kind of disconnect, or he was trying to solve a puzzle except there were pieces missing. Then again, Tony supposed that must be what it was like. Tim couldn't be more than a couple of years older than James's chronological age, yet here he was, wrinkled and leathery, hair and moustache faded nearly white while James still barely looked like he'd hit his thirties. And Tony, even though he didn't quite look as old as he really was, was still the son of a guy who was born months after James, if Tony's memory of the whole chronology thing served him right. It had to be pretty damn confusing to be confronted with that whole deal as obviously as this. Probably wasn't made easier by the fact that they'd... fooled around. In hindsight, perhaps not the best plan, even if Tony's stomach still insisted on that annoying little swoop every single damn James looked at him in a certain way.

Tim seemed to pick up on the strange mood, but in true and tested Tim style, he simply ignored it pretty much completely, filling up every possible space with chatter that Tony listened to with half an ear, too distracted by too many different things to be completely there. Finally, he finished eating and licked his fingers clean in a habit Tony had picked up from him before he could even remember, and then shed decades ago, around the fifth time it had resulted in accidentally ingesting motor oil. He leaned back in his arm chair, swung his feet up onto his old man stool. "So, squirt. What's your
Tony shrugged, finished chewing his mouthful and swallowed. Honestly, he wasn't entirely sure how much it would be smart to divulge. He did not have the patience to try to explain everything, wasn't sure he'd be believed even if he tried, and the last thing he needed was for Tim to try to commit him because, fuck, Tim was his legal guardian at this point, wasn't he? Him and Aunt Peggy. They'd been the first time around, anyway, not that Tony had had much cause to notice back then, what with MIT and turning eighteen less than five months later. "I'd have thought you and Aunt Peggs would've had some kind of elaborate plan for if I ever got myself in this degree of trouble," he said.

Tim returned his shrug. "Maybe," he agreed. "But we're also realistic enough to know that if you don't agree, you'll just flee the coop and do your own thing. So I'd like to know what your plans are. Maybe we can meet in the middle."

"I'm guessing I'm going to have to leave the country," Tony said. "Temporarily, anyway."

"I'd say it depends on what the situation in S.H.I.E.L.D. ends up being," Tim said. "But it's likely."

"Is there an exit strategy I need to know about?" Tony asked, "Or are we pantsing it?"

Tim let out a laugh. "Come on, kid, you really think someone as paranoid as your old man would've left you without an exit strategy?" he asked. "You've got fake passports for half a dozen different nationalities, and one that's borderline real. There's a Swiss bank account with enough money for Howard to start over or you to live comfortably for the rest of your life. You're set, kid. But that doesn't mean you don't have choices."

Tony frowned. "'Borderline real,' he repeated. "What does that even mean?"

"Means it was established around the time you were born. A full alternate identity that's been homeschooled but has been for doctor's visits, tests, everything. It's fool proof," Tim said.

Tony blinked. That probably wouldn't have gone over in the modern world. *Probably*. He wouldn't really know, had never really cared to play the shelf babies and secret identities games. But this wasn't the modern world. This was 1987. Everything was still paper and analogue. There were no digital databases. If the paper trail existed, and the right files had been filed in the right places... It would be like that person really existed, and it would probably carry over when everything did eventually get digitized. "What is it, then?" he asked.

"Antonio Estefano Carbonell Martinelli," Tim said, and Tony let out a groaned 'really?' because, seriously, fuck Howard for naming Tony's secret alter ego after Captain America. "Split citizenship."

"Spanish and American, I'm guessing," Tony said.

Tim agreed. "Is your Spanish still up to snuff?"

Tony just had to cock his eyebrow a little bit and stare back. *Of course* his Spanish was up to snuff. Way back when, his mother had insisted on it, and then it just ended up being more and more useful for business the more wealth the Spanish speaking world managed to accumulate. He nodded, and somewhere in the back of his mind there was a disbelief that was pretty damn impossible to overcome. Sure, Howard had always been a paranoid bastard, but Tony had always been under the impression that that paranoia extended exclusively to Howard himself and his various inventions. It wasn't that this whole thing would've been hard for him - what with the built-in like to Aunt Angie and the ease of communication that came with that, this had Aunt Peggy written all over it - but the
fact that he'd even thought to... Tony was going to need a while before that even sank in. So, that
gave him an exit, but... "What about James?" he asked.

Tim hesitated for a moment, looking back and forth between Tony and James as if uncertain. Then
he nodded. "We can't possibly get him anything as bulletproof as your alternate identity," he said. "A
standard falsified passport of most any nationality should be doable through S.H.--"

in their records." He took a deep breath. "I'm not sure you get how bad the situation is--"

"Tony," Tim said, reaching out and putting his hand on Tony's shoulder. "I get that Howard got
spooked. For good reason, obviously. But I sincerely doubt this goes nearly as deep as he's
convinced you it does."

Tony gritted his teeth, reminded himself that having to go through adult condescension was kind of
the price he had decided to pay when he decided not to tell them about the time travel thing. "It goes
deeper," Tony said. "Did you even root out Zola yet? Nothing to do with James can be anywhere on
file. HYDRA would go to pretty terrible lengths to get him back, and I'm not going to help them."
He shut his eyes for a moment, reached up to rub at the skin between his eyes, hopefully warding off
the headache he could feel building. Finally, he peeled his eyes open and fixed Tim with an even
look. "Please, please take this seriously."

Tim looked back for long moments, eyes searching. Finally, he gave a sharp nod. "I'll call up Jackie
Falsworth," he said. "She's with MI6 these days. Just might be able to help you without it getting
back to S.H.I.E.L.D."

Tony nodded, felt his shoulders relax. He didn't remember them tensing in the first place. It sounded
like a good solution, though. He'd never had much to do with the Falsworths, had met 'Uncle James'
maybe a handful of times in his life and Jackie and Brian even less, but from everything he'd ever
heard, they were good people. Trustworthy.

"Falsworth?" James asked, face scrunching into the expression Tony was beginning to recognize as
the one he almost always wore when there was some memory niggling at him that he felt he should
have already grasped.

Tim got up and crossed the floor, returned a few moments later with a framed black and white
WWII-era photograph of the Howling Commandos. "James Falsworth," he said. "Monty. He was in
our unit. Jackie's his daughter, born back in the early fifties if I remember right."

James blinked, then gave a slow nod, eyes stuck to the photo. His expression went distant, damn
near vacant for long moments. Then another nod, sharper. He got up. "I'm going to go check the
perimeters," he said, speech a little bit too precise again, and Tony felt his stomach clench. He missed
that stupid Brooklyn brogue. James was gone before Tony figured out a single thing to say, though,
leaving Tony alone with his godfather.

"Britain, then?" Tony asked.

Tim shrugged. "Seems as good a place as any until you can figure out where you want to go from
there." He was silent for a moment. He shifted a little, leaned back in his chair, fished out another
cigar and lit up. "You sure you want to take him with you, kid?" he asked. "Don't get me wrong, I'd
feel better for it. But it might not be the best thing for him."

Tony bit his lip, turned the question over in his mind. Then he felt his face fall into a frown. "Why
wouldn't it be good for him?" he asked.
"I know you, Tony," Tim said. "And I know Buck. And I do have eyes in my head." He let out a breath. "Listen, it was never exactly publicized, and normally I'd say it wasn't my secret to share, but these are... pretty extraordinary circumstances. No matter how much Bucky enjoyed vertical dancing with the ladies, when it came to the horizontal stuff, he was always very much a man's man. If you get my drift."

Tony nodded, and fuck, they weren't going to have the gay sex talk now, were they? Too late for that shit. "I know," he said.

"Tony, are you sure--"

Tony rolled his eyes. "Tim, I'm not a baby. I know."

Tim's eyes widened. He took a long puff off his cigar, tapped it against the side of a conveniently placed ashtray. "Then you should probably give it that much more thought," he said. "He ain't in a state to be toyed with, kid. And it's pretty damn obvious that you mean more to him than he does to you. If you take him with you, you're cutting him off from nearly anyone who's ever known him. He'd look out for you, sure. But he ain't right, squirt. You'd have to look out for him too." He rolled his eyes. "You know? Cannot believe I'm finding my kid godson saying that kind of stuff about one of my army buddies."

Tony let out a breath, fought down the temptation to banter back because, really, it was a lot to think about, no matter how wrong Tim was about this whole thing. Tony cared about James, a lot more than he wanted and probably a good deal more than he should, given the whole situation. James was the one who'd had enough after one night together. Even so, Tim did have a point. Tony could ask James to stay here, where Tim and Peggy could keep an eye on him, help him get the help he needed. If Tony did take him with him this whole stunt ended up working, who even knew when or where Tony's current mental self would slam back into his future body and leave James with the real seventeen-year-old Tony Stark? Probably somewhere inconvenient, in the middle of asscrack nowhere, Eastern Europe. Tony would be able to find his own way, no matter his age. He'd leave himself a note, put it in a pocket or something. He wasn't worried about that part. But what would it do to James to take him away from the rest of what little support system he had and then stick him with an honest to God teenager? Except that wasn't a decision that had to be made yet. "He wants to go," Tony said. "And there's still Falsworth in Britain. Not like he'll be all alone without any other member of the golden generation nearby, whatever I do. Besides, anywhere is better for him right now than the States with S.H.I.E.L.D. having a great upheaval and any smalltime HYDRA lackey looking for a weapon to help get back at them. If he still wants to go when we head out, I'm not gonna stop him."

Tim looked at him, long and considering, old eyes more serious than he usually ever was. Then he gave another nod. "Like I said, it does make me worry less about what kind of messes you're going to get yourself into," he said at last. He puffed out another lungful of smoke, and with the scent of it everywhere around him, Tony, in some weird Pavlovian response, couldn't help but relax into the couch. "If you don't go mucking it up, it might even be good for him," he added.

Tony cocked an eyebrow. "Oh?" he asked.

Tim grinned. "Hard to say if it's nature or Cap-induced nurture, but one of the most basic facts about Bucky Barnes is that he needs to be needed. He needs someone to look out for, more than nearly anyone I've ever met. Like I said, it might come from growing up with Cap when he was still a sickly little idiot who liked getting his ass handed to him for fun. Honest to God, I'm not sure Bucky ever really knew what to do with Cap as a big idiot who did the ass handing himself." He paused, put out the cigar and picked up the glass of bourbon Tony hadn't even noticed earlier, drained it in a
long gulp. "He handled himself fine, of course, but it was war. He was a soldier. He had something to fight for, something that mattered, even if it wasn't all wrapped up in one person needing him anymore."

Tony frowned. "Were he and Cap ever..." He grimaced because, yeah, no, not a mental image of Rogers he had wanted. Sure, Rogers was hot as hell, even a blind person could tell as much. Enough that once upon a time, Tony had maybe thought... Not enough to make up for his personality, though.

Tim laughed long and deep, full-bodied. "No," he said. "God, no. They were like brothers. Sure, Rogers was, was like you... what do you kids call it these days, bisexual?"

Tony snorted. Did not want to linger at all on the strange sense of relief he could feel. "Don't even try to pretend that term hasn't been around longer than either of us have, and that you didn't look it up when I was twelve and had that ridiculous crush on Han Solo," he said. "Angie and Peggy beat you to that talk anyway."

Tim took his turn rolling his eyes. "Whatever the case, I know we were all a bit worried what would happen to Bucky when the war was over. He was obviously never going to be happy settling down with a nice lady and having a few babies, but he'd be just as unhappy alone, and Steve didn't need him to look after him anymore." He shrugged. "It sounds horrible, I know, but I think most of us sometimes thought that maybe it was a good thing he didn't make it out. There was nothing for him to come back to."

Tony sucked in a sudden breath, felt it stutter through his throat. His stomach was tight and painful, and suddenly he was seeing parallels, too damn many of them, to the future. Cap had finally managed to recover Barnes just around the time of the Accords, and Barnes had followed him straight into battle. But he had never showed signs of being the man Tony was coming to know now. Then again, if Tim was right, why would he have been? Waking up in a world where nearly everyone you knew was dead had to be tough enough. Knowing you'd been brainwashed and used as a weapon for the enemy, that your ledger was dripping red, that made it ten times worse. But if the only person who remained from your past was someone who didn't really need you at all anymore, being thrown straight back into a war you may not be all that sure about, being tacked on as an afterthought, having someone who'd once depended on you acting like they were the one who had to take care of you now... If what Tim had said was true, no fucking wonder Barnes had never recovered.

"You're good for him," Tim said with a strange, half-cracked grin. "Because God knows you can't take care of yourself to save your life. Left to your own devices, you'd either starve to death or blow yourself up, and that's without even considering what would happen to you in an actual fight." He paused a moment. "And all the rest of it."

"All the rest of it?" Tony echoed, though he wasn't really sure he particularly wanted to hear the answer.

"For a spoilt rich kid," Tim said, "you got used to getting by on very little of everything that mattered at a very young age, and getting what little you absolutely couldn't do without wherever you could. Peggy, Angie and I, and all the rest of them... We've done our best, but it's not like we could just steal you away or anything like it." He was silent for a moment, was at least not looking directly at Tony right now, thank fuck. Tony wasn't sure he'd have been able to stand direct eye contact right at that moment. "You need more than most people, at this point. And Bucky, I'm thinking, has more than the average person to give."

Tony swallowed, throat still heavy and head swimming with far too much stuff he couldn't stand to
think about. "I need to head back down to the 'shop," he said. "Got something I need to finish up."

Tim waved him off, gripped his arm and gave it a quick squeeze as Tony passed him on his way back downstairs.

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Tony sat back on his stool, letting out a long, exhausted breath. He stretched out his arms, listening in satisfaction to the pops in his shoulders. Fuck, but he was happy he didn't have to deal with the kinds of aches his future body suffered after a long workshop session. He glanced down at the two metal bricks on the table, more than a little annoyed by the whole thing. But given the fact that he'd had to start from scratch, this was still something. On par with early naughties technology, at least. Thereabouts, anyway. Which, in this day and age, was about all he could aspire to without a hell of a lot more time and materials. He groaned, and somehow that turned into yawning and yeah, okay, he should probably see if he could get a few hours in before some asshole vet or other called him up for breakfast.

He shuffled up the stairs, rubbing tiredly at his face, exhaustion hitting him over the head, and why the hell was he so tired anyway? His memories of being a teenager included more all-nighters than he could count, and he'd been no worse off for it, had attended lectures and wiped the floors with his professors' asses after 72 hours awake. Maybe sleeping patterns and the need for rest had more to do with mental age than physical. Fuck if he knew. Had to suggest the study subject next time he ran into a sleep researcher, for shits and giggles if nothing else.

Finally, he reached the door to his bedroom, walked inside. His bed was still empty. No surprise there, which did absolutely nothing to explain the slight sting of disappointment he couldn't quite help but feel. He shook it off, stripped out of his clothes and crawled under the covers. What the hell had he expected anyway? The thought of anything beyond a bit of physical fun between him and James was ridiculous. It was all just circumstances anyway. Isolation coupled with a shared sensation of being stuck out of time. Clearly, given the evidence he'd been presented with today, it didn't really take more than a slight lessening of the isolation for James to decide he wanted very little to do with Tony after all, whatever Tim had had to say about the matter.

Fuck, wasn't like it mattered anyway. A few weeks, a month at most, however long it took to extract Natasha and get her to safety, and Tony would more than likely be gone from this timeline. His seventeen-year-old self would have more than enough new shit in his life to catch up with without throwing a barely de-programmed brainwashed assassin into the mix. Tony felt his stomach clench up at the thought of returning, some strange mixture of apprehension and longing. The future might be shitty, but it was his. Things made sense, in a way they didn't here, even with a fleet of alien spaceships poised to turn the Earth to cinders. And whatever the advantages of being a teenager was, he did sort of miss being himself.

Somehow, despite the churning in his mind, he must've fallen asleep at some point, at least enough that he started away at the loud banging on his door. Swallowing down a curse, Tony pushed the covers aside, staggered to his feet. He nearly fell over in his attempt to put on pants and a shirt simultaneously, but somehow made it in one piece. Then he stumbled to the door, pushed it open and made his way into the living room. Tim was there, in his pajamas with a lit cigar stuck in his mouth, and James too, although either he was the fastest, neatest dresser ever, or he simply hadn't been to bed at all. Tony's eyes immediately zoomed in on the newcomer, narrowed for a moment. Then he breathed a sigh of relief. "Hey, Carter," he said. "Can't remember the last time I saw you outside Aunt Peggy's house."

Matt Carter gave him a good-natured eye-roll, and Tony tried again to remember if he was Peggy's
brother or half-brother or nephew or... Okay, fuck, he was confusing himself again. This was why he didn't like it when Peggy had other people over. "You shot up fast, Stark," he returned, and Tony had a feeling he was about to get his hair ruffled which, yeah, nope, wasn't going to happen. He was an adult, damn it. He took a quick step out of reach and slightly closer to James. Which was all well and good because Matt seemed to sober again a moment later. "Peggy sent me," he said. "Carson's taken control of S.H.I.E.L.D. and chances are they'll be here looking for 'the fugitives' within hours." He used honest to God finger quotes, which, yeah, no. People stopped doing that for a reason.

Tony frowned. "Carson's HYDRA," he said, and okay, everyone had probably figured out as much by now, but still.

Carter nodded. "Peggy's working on it. Got some guy named Fury with her. She'll get it back under control, but in the meantime, you two are highly wanted people. Got an exit strategy ready?"

Tony cocked an eyebrow at Tim, who let out a sigh. "Not for a fully fledged manhunt," he said. He paused for a moment, took a deep puff off his cigar. He tapped ash straight onto the floor this time. Then he sighed. "Tony, Howard got drunk once and told me there's a self-destruct function in this house. You happen to know how to trigger it?"

Tony blinked. "The whole house?" he asked, and he probably sounded a bit dumb, but this house wasn't supposed to blow up for years yet.

"Yes," Tim confirmed. "It's insured. You know how to trigger it?"

"We're gonna fake dyin'?" James asked. He should've sounded incredulous, a voice in the back of Tony's head insisted, but instead he kind of just sounded like he was at a moderately interesting briefing.

Tim nodded, turned to Carter. "You think you can get to one of the bigger morgues and get us a couple of John Does about the right sizes?" he asked.

Carter blinked, which, yeah, paper-pusher. Then he nodded his head sharply. "I'll be back within two hours," he said. He looked back and forth between the three of them, still blinking, as though the whole thing hadn't quite caught up with him, and Tony had to wonder how the hell he was related to two women who could kill him with both hands and a leg tied behind their backs.

"Say hi to Sharon for me," Tony said. Hell if he remembered how old Sharon was supposed to be at this point. Probably somewhere in the late toddler stage. Thought that counted, anyway, and Tony did like Sharon. He'd been forced to go to a few tedious birthday parties, ages ago it seemed like, and he disagreed with her taste in men and the taste in politics that came as a direct result of said horrible taste in men, but still, when she wasn't wearing the Cap-cap, she was good people.

Carter nodded distractedly, and walked out the door.

Tim turned to look at Tony and James. "You've got five minutes to pack," he said. "And Tony, I really need to know how to make it blow."
Chapter 10

It was just starting to get light out when they arrived at the small private airstrip Tony recognized all too well. He'd done a few overhauls on it since the eighties, of course, but it was still, recognizably, Stark Industries. "You don't think they're going to notice there's a bird missing?" Tony asked. "Or be able to figure out where it went?"

"I oversee this strip, in case you forgot," Tim said. "I'll have a very busy morning, what with a pair of fugitives blowing up my house and accidentally catching themselves in the explosion. It'll be a while before I realize one is missing. When I do, of course, I'll report it stolen." There was a strange sort of grin on his face that Tony wasn't sure he'd ever seen outside of photographs. The old Dum Dum Dugan smile, all daring and mischief. A strange sort of pain jabbed through Tony's chest at the knowledge that he'd never gotten to see it more often, that he'd probably never see it again. Tim handed over a piece of paper with a set of coordinates. "Land it here," he said. "It's a couple hours outside Paris. I called Dernier. He'll get rid of the bird and give you a ride to de Gaulle. Monty should have a plane waiting to take you to the motherland from there."

Tony nodded, dug through his own pockets for a moment before finding a note on his own. He handed it over. "If you need to get a hold of us," he said.

Tim glanced it over, frowned. "This is a Stark Industries number," he said.

Tony nodded. "It's the main number to the nuclear research department."

Tim cocked an eyebrow. "You haven't had a nuclear research department for the past fifteen years."

Tony flashed him a grin. "Exactly," he said. "But the number was never discontinued. I just hijacked it. Should be a while yet before they patch up that hole."

A full-belly laugh exploded out of Tim's mouth, and then he was reaching out, pulling Tony in close for a hug. For long moments, Tony let himself melt into it, tried not to think about the fact that this would probably be the last time he saw his godfather outside of faded pictures. "You sure you can handle the bird?" Tim asked.

Tony nodded and pulled back, drawing in a sharp breath. "You really think Howard would stand for a Stark not knowing how to fly a measly little plane?" he asked, and did not mention any of the heaps of piloting experience he had built up in the intervening years. "Make sure you squeeze the insurance companies. It's a good house."

Tim nodded, squeezed his shoulder. "Take care of yourself, squirt," he said. Then, damn him, he reached up and did the hair ruffle before Tony had time to jump out of reach. Tony flashed him a scowl and headed off to prep the plane, letting James and Tim say their own goodbyes.

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By the time the car came to a halt, presumably at wherever Falsworth lived, Tony was so worn out it was all he could do to stumble through the halls, kick off his shoes and take a nosedive into bed in the room he'd been assigned. It wasn't until the next morning he realized that for all that he and James had spent the whole of the last however long they'd travelled together, they'd barely spoken ten words to each other beyond what had been necessary. Strange observation to have, really. It was something Tony should've learned to expect, had learned to expect, from a really fucking young age. The list of people who could handle him in larger doses was small, always had been, and he wasn't
sure why he'd gone and stupidly expected something more than that from James. Besides, he reminded himself, with everything else that was happening, it was for the best. Didn't mean something somewhere in his chest didn't knot up a bit at the thought.

He took a deep breath, decided he'd better go through the stuff he clearly hadn't noticed yesterday. He sat up in bed, looked around himself. The wallpaper was old and cutesy, even for eighty-seven, but that might just be the English-ness of it all. Out through the window, he could see snow making its slow, lazy path down from the steel grey clouds. Was also to be expected, Northern Europe and all. It wasn't until he'd cleaned up and dressed and actually stepped out into the rest of the house that he realized 'house' wasn't an appropriate word at all. This was a manor, hands down, big and regal and old enough to easily put the Fifth Avenue mansion to shame. Huh. He didn't remember anyone ever saying anything about Falsworth having money. Oh well.

Halfway down the stairs, he had to stop, take a few breaths. His head was going in every which direction, lingering and skipping in beats he didn't understand, and right now everything was just a bit too dreamlike. He didn't like it. With reason, as it turned out. Natasha took that opening to push to the fore of his mind, bringing him crashing back into reality, and fuck, yeah, okay, so this was real. He was in England, was supposed to figure out how to get ready for an incursion into the heart of the Soviet Union. Well, not really the heart. He knew the exact coordinates of the Red Room training base, from Cap's whole mission to find out everything that had happened to Barnes until he could actually lure out Barnes himself. The base wasn't in the heart of it, was closer to Siberia than to Moscow, but it was still a hell of a mission with no suit and no AI to protect him.

And with that already pretty overwhelming task came all the questions. Did he really have a right to do this? Would she even have wanted him to? Was this coming too close to playing God? Was he somehow devaluing who she'd been, what she'd meant to him, if he wanted to give her a happier life? He didn't know. Fuck, didn't have a clue how to answer any of that. But he was already a good piece of way down that path now, and he wasn't sure he'd be able to turn back. What was there to turn back to? What did he have here? Rhodey and the bots, sure, if he could somehow re-establish himself as an actual living person and not start a manhunt, and Tim and Angie and Peggy and all them, but it wasn't a good life. It hadn't been. There was a reason he could barely remember the nineties.

Not that the future was much better.

He tried to take a breath. Failed. Managed to suppress the urge to sit down right there on the stairs, let his legs fail him, let himself fucking sob or something, because he was fucking stuck and he had no clue what to do except keep going. Sometimes there were no good options, no matter how much brain power he put behind shit. So, if he couldn't make everything less shitty for himself, well, he'd do it for Natasha, playing God or no. He'd deal with the fallout and the conscience stuff and all that later. Finally, he managed a breath, let it back out again. It almost didn't sound like a moan. He was back in control, though. He could do this. What the hell else was he supposed to do? Stay at someone else's mercy in an English mansion while the only person who knew his situation, might have some way of understanding it, was busy avoiding him and hating his guts? Yeah, no. Wasn't going to happen. Get up and keep going. That was what he'd always done. It had gotten him this far, even if right now that didn't seem very far at all. What the hell else would he do anyway? He wasn't built to sit down and give up. So he wouldn't. He'd--

"Good morning, Anthony," a voice said, and Tony whipped around, breath coming in a little too fast until he recognized the wiry, old man behind him.

"Uncle James," Tony returned, because, well, it was the only damn thing Tony had ever been told to call the man, and he might not have a reputation for being very polite, but even Tony knew better
than to accidentally do something to offend his host when he had a way not to. Even if the host was a former Commando, and those were supposedly notoriously hard to offend. Cap excepted. Cap was notoriously easy to offend and-- Things had to be pretty bad for Tony to be rambling inside his own head, didn't they?

James Falsworth gave him a bright smile, clapped his shoulder. "You're a bit old for that," he said. "Aren't you?" And yeah, okay, that was a pretty cultured accent. Or it might just be British. Tony wasn't sure, really. "Call me Monty." He gave a broad smile that hinted at some of the same steely mischief Tony had seen in Tim's eyes right before he got on the plane. "Come on, now. Breakfast should be ready in a jiffy, and you do need some meat on those bones. Jackie will be by later to discuss the situation with you and Bucky both."

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"Agent Falsworth," Tony greeted, flashing a brief glance at the empty chair next to him before looking back at the woman across from him. She was somewhere in her mid-thirties, and must take after her mother's side of the family, judging by the blond hair and blue eyes. She held herself like most other agents Tony had known. Well, not that strange Hydra/KGB quality James and Natasha both exuded, where you couldn't help but think they could kill you with their pinky, but still with that strange mixture of attention and confidence and coiled tension. He was pretty sure that all shouldn't put him at ease, but it kind of did, even if he couldn't say why.

"Mr. Stark," she returned. "Or Carbonell, I suppose. It might be better if you start getting used to that." She paused, didn't fiddle or squirm or anything, just seemed to look him over, and Tony very nearly did squirm. He knew what picture he presented. He wasn't fully grown yet, had barely hit five foot six, and despite the muscles he'd built from a young age courtesy of the special Stark brand of manual labor, he could still more accurately be categorized as scrawny than even sinewy or lean. "My father tells me Mr. Dugan believed you had something beyond just escaping the manhunt in mind."

Tony frowned. "I thought we were supposed to talk about getting James some papers," he said.

She shook her head. "We don't advertise it, but my father does still have enough clout within the agency to get that taken care of. I'm fairly certain he's ironing out the details with Barnes as we speak." She leaned back in the chair, keeping her hands on the table in what Tony had learned long ago was an entirely disingenuous attempt from most agents to look non-threatening. Sure, he could see her hands, but he couldn't see any of the weapons experience had taught him to expect she was probably hiding elsewhere. Misdirection, if anything. "So why don't you tell me what it is you plan to do?"

Tony considered keeping his mouth shut. Might be better if no one knew any details. Then again, James might be spilling everything to Falsworth a few rooms away, or wherever the old geezers had gone. Besides, he didn't have unlimited funds. Even if he got to the Swiss bank account, even with plenty of money, getting in and out of the USSR was no easy feat. As much as he hated to admit it, he might end up needing help. Might turn out better if he tested the waters now, rather than keep one secret too many. "The KGB and HYDRA, or HYDRA in the KGB, or..." He grimaced. "Honestly, I'm not sure how they're structured in the Eastern Block. What I do know is that they have an academy where they train agents from a very young age, subjecting them to torture and brainwashing." He bit his lip for a moment. "I'd prefer to take down the whole operation, but there's one girl there I especially want out."

Her brows drew together, the motion delicate, and for a moment she read more blue-blood than agent. Tony would know. He'd spent his life being looked down on by old money. Nouveau riche
wasn't a label you ever shook, no matter how often you were the smartest person in the room. Tony had never given a truckload of fucks about that, but something about it still always rankled the tiniest bit. "Why?" she asked, and yeah, welcome to waters that were a hell of a lot harder to navigate.

Tony folded his hands, couldn't help but shift in his chair as his brain kicked up a gear. No way in hell he could tell the truth. More than likely, he'd end up institutionalized. Even if she miraculously believed him, who was to say that wouldn't just end with him being locked away in some government basement being asked to give out information? He wasn't dumb enough to think any intelligent intelligence agency would let him go if they knew he knew the future. "Her father was a friend of my dad's," he finally said, keeping himself relaxed. "I promised him I'd get her out."

"Doesn't really seem like something any sane man would task his seventeen-year-old son with," she said.

Tony shrugged. "My dad wasn't really the textbook definition of sane toward the end," he said, and that wasn't even a complete lie. "Besides, I'm a lot more competent than my age would have you think." He took a breath. "Listen, she's half American, okay? And S.H.I.E.L.D. is compromised. HYDRA has its sticky fingers in most of the American intelligence pies. Isn't there some kind of... NATO thing or whatever that could get you to help?"

"Half American half Soviet?" she asked. At his nod, she sighed. "Even if you had the authority to invoke the treaty, that child is officially a Soviet child if she was born in the USSR to a Soviet mother. I couldn't help if I wanted to. The Soviet Union isn't exactly stable right now, and provoking them could have consequences none of us want to live with."

Tony nodded, swallowed. That was pretty much what he'd expected. Then he frowned. "What if they captured a British soldier, held him without trial and against his will, experimented on him and tortured him?"

"Barnes is still an American no matter how many honors the British army - and Royalty - doled out during and after the War," she said. "Besides, even if we do follow that argument, that means we can take them to the Hague. Not that we can invade their country and kidnap their children. And that's what it would be, Carbonell. In the eyes of international law, not to mention their own, it would be kidnapping. My hands are tied."

Tony sucked in a deep breath, nodded again. It was what he'd expected, after all. Maybe not what he'd hoped for, but he'd expected it. He didn't remember all that much about the specifics of the Cold War, no more than everyone else in his generation. And, of course, the added insight into the arms race that came with being Howard Stark's son, but he did know enough to know that relations were so strained that no one had the guts to do much of anything.

"I can't help you," she said. "Not in any official capacity."

Tony narrowed his eyes, easily picking up on the distinction. "And unofficially?"

"The idea of small children being used like that is terrible," she said. "And my father has never given me any reason to doubt that Sergeant Barnes is a great man. I'll see what I can do, off the books." She looked him up and down again. "If you're serious about this, though, you're going to need to be able to handle yourself hand to hand."

Tony kept himself from rolling his eyes, if only barely. What was it with secret agents and their desire to spar with him? He probably had 'easy target' written all over him in some language only secret agents could decipher. And fuck, it wasn't like he hadn't trained with them his whole life. Like Peggy would've left her godson incapable of defending himself. Fat chance. It was just that every
time he met a new one, they seemed to have some new punishment to dole out. Still, his last secret
agent sparring partner had been the Black Widow. He wasn't a complete noob. "If you're asking to
spar," he said, "lead the way."

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Tony really fucking hated this stupid little body. Not only was he small and weak, but all the muscle
memory that had come from nearly a decade of fighting in one way or another was gone, out the
window. Poof, just like that. It fucking sucked, especially since it kept landing him on his ass.
Nothing was working right. His head couldn't remember the tricks Peggy had taught him once upon
a blue moon, and his body couldn't get a handle on the grueling training of his later years, and
somehow all that came together and clashed and made him worse at everything than he'd ever been.

Jackie had taken extreme exception to his utter incompetence, which somehow translated into daily
sparring sessions that left him winded and sore and increasingly despondent because, fuck, what
good was he going to be on any kind of op if he had no armor and couldn't hold his own even
slightly?

The only upside to the rigorous training program Jackie had apparently decided to waste her
Christmas holidays on was that when he went to bed each night, he was too exhausted to take much
note of the gaping emptiness of it all. And the time he didn't spend training, he spent bent over maps
and every piece of information he could get on the specific area where the Red Room training facility
was, and what the state of the late eighties Soviet Union was, trying and trying to come up with a
plan that might somehow not only not get them killed but actually work. He'd have probably been
buried in a workshop too, given half a chance, but the closest thing the Falsworths had was a garage
full of cars, and sure, it might be relaxing to take a few of them apart and put them back together, but
even if that hadn't been a kind of impolite thing to do, it also didn't help propel the plan onwards in
any kind of way.

Somehow, though, between training and planning and research, he managed to keep himself busy
enough that he could pretend he barely noticed how much he wasn't seeing of James. He'd glance
out the window sometimes, and see him walking the grounds, either alone - probably doing his
endless perimeter checks - or with Monty. He'd stumble towards the kitchen sometimes in full-on
zombie-mode and recognize James's voice through the door, only to walk inside and find no one
there but the requisite kitchen staff. Still, around New Year's Eve, when the family left for some big
fancy soiree or other, he had to face up to the fact that they'd been here for the better part of a week,
and he and James hadn't exchanged even a single word.

Something about that realization set him off in some way he couldn't even explain. Even as anger
roared up through him, some part of him could only feel resignation, and yet another part was
shriveled up and aching somewhere inside him, and it was all just too damn much, was enough to
make his head spin and his chest feel too tight even as all he wanted was to scream and punch
something. That last one was a worryingly Cap-like tendency that Tony wasn't entirely sure he liked,
but on the other hand, Cap had at least showed through example how one dealt with that one. True,
Tony wasn't sure killing heavy bags ever actually did much of anything for the big guy, but it had to
at least be better than sitting around and stewing in it.

And that was how, on New Year's Eve, he found himself changed into the workout gear Jackie had
gotten for him a few days earlier, standing in the gymnasium and attacking the heavy bag with
everything he could think of. Happy's training mixed with half-remembered bar brawls, Natasha's
tough but patient coaxing and Cap's far brusquer and much less frequent snapped commands about
keeping up his guard. As if from far away, he was aware that somewhere beneath the wrappings, his
knuckles were aching, and that he was missing at least every third punch, that his combinations were
laughable and that nothing, absolutely nothing, was working. His throat was closing up, and he could almost pretend it was just that he was out of breath from the physical exhaustion, but fuck, if he were completely honest, he had rarely in his life wanted to curl up and cry as badly as he did right now.

He ignored the additional presence for the first while after he became aware of it. Was only fair, wasn't it? James had been going out of his way to ignore Tony, hadn't done a damn thing to automatically earn Tony's attention the moment he showed up. Still, he could feel James's gaze on him, like a niggling, physical weight, and he was missing more and more punches now, wasn't even attempting combinations or any kind of finesse, and fuck even knew why Cap had ever liked this. It didn't help one shitty little bit. He caught the swinging bag and turned around to face James. "Wanna spar?" he asked. "Turns out, time displacement and body swapping, even when you're swapping with yourself, completely fucks up your ability to fight."

James gave a small shrug, eyes on some elusive spot behind Tony's shoulder. "Not really," he said. He straightened up from where he'd been leaning against the wall, sauntered over with a kind of forced casualness Tony recognized all too well. Fuck that. What reason did James have to put on the same kind of masks with Tony that Tony wore for the press? Before Tony could even finish internally sputtering about that, James had reached him, reached out and grasped his hands. He was unwinding the wrappings carefully, fingers deceptively gentle. Tony let out a hiss when the fabric came loose from his bruised knuckles and cool air washed over them. "Maybe you should use gloves with the heavy bag," James said. His inflection was some strange in-between thing. Not his Brooklyn twang, but not quite the clipped, precise thing that seemed to come with adrenalin or Winter Soldier inducing situations either.

"They didn't have any I liked," Tony said. Only the full gloves, rather than the fingerless ones he was used to. Besides, and he could admit this to himself at least, there might've been a part of him that had wanted to feel it. He pulled his hands back when James held onto them too long, not so much because he didn't like it as because he just didn't know what the fuck to do with it. And yeah, no, this was enough. He couldn't stand this anymore, and since he was clearly the adult here, he was going to have to do something about it. He turned, looked straight up at James and kept looking until James finally acquiesced to meet his eyes. "What did I do? Why are you so pissed off at me?"

James actually flinched, a real, full-bodied flinch. "I ain't," he said, but he was no longer meeting Tony's eyes.

Tony felt his face do something strange, felt like a grimace, but not quite. Felt disturbingly like the kind of expression your face got caught in just before you burst into tears. "What is it, then?" he asked. "You'll talk to Monty. I know you spar with Jackie too. Hell, you'll talk with the kitchen staff. So what is about me? Why am I not good enough anymore?" He winced at that last bit. That had not been what he'd meant to say, and he hated the tone it had come out in. Made him feel too small, too vulnerable, and since when had he given James the power to hurt him anyway? Didn't seem to make much of a difference. Obviously, he had it.

James sighed, folded his arms over his chest. Tony could almost see the near-physical wall being built right back up between them. Something inside him physically hurt at the sight. What was he supposed to do, though? What could he do? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. He could just try to shut it off and move on. He'd been how old when he'd taught himself that? Not very. After all, there weren't that many kids who were willing to be friends with a scrawny boy several years younger and a few dozen IQ points smarter than themselves. "Tony," James said, and he was dropping his arms again. Tony beat down the part of him that wanted to light right back up at that, quick and vicious. He wasn't going to fuck himself over by actually hoping for God even knew what.
Tony shook his head, turned away. "It's okay," he said. "I get the message." He sucked in a deep breath, reached out and grabbed his towel. Closing his fingers around it was a fresh lesson in utter agony, but who even cared? If anything, it was good. Physical pain had always been easier to deal with than any other kind. Keeping his movements casual by pure will more than anything else, he slung the towel around his neck, let it catch at least a bit of the sweat that was soaking out of his hair and into his clothes. "I'm gonna go grab a shower. Don't feel like you have to wait to eat until I'm ready. We both know you don't want to, and you shouldn't feel obliged just because someone screwed you over with the Gregorian calendar."

A strong hand closed around his shoulder, held him back just as he was about to stop walking. "You didn' do nothin'," James said. His voice was pitched low, and there was something there, in the back of it, that Tony thought for a moment he almost might be able to understand. He let it go. What did it even matter? "You're-- Don't say shit like that. You're alright. You're a swell guy, okay? You saved my sorry ass. You're the only reason I got this far." He paused, and yeah, there was definitely something in his voice, but Tony just. He couldn't. He was so fucking tired, and he couldn't keep trying to keep up with everyone else's thoughts and feelings and shit anymore, not when his own head didn't even make sense to him half the time.

"James, just stop," Tony managed, pulling in a sharp breath. "You don't have to explain yourself, and you definitely don't have to butter me up. You don't owe me anything, and I'm used to this, okay? I know I'm an asshole and that I'm not usually that high on anyone's list of people they'd like to be around. It's fine. I'm fine. Just." Another breath, and he found the strength to pull out of James's grasp and take a few steps away before turning around to face the other man, plastering a smile on his face. "And I know how it works. I'm not as young as I look. You're all awkward because we slept together, and I get that. I should've seen that coming and I should've--"

James squeezed his eyes shut. "Stop pretendin' you can read my mind," he said. "You can't. I can't either half the time. And that's it. I have so much shit to work through I feel like I need a shovel half the time. And I need time for that. Space. I feel like I've earned that at this point."

Tony nodded, kept his back straight. "Sure you have," he said. Then he turned back around. "Shower time," he called over his shower. "Happy New Year's, and all that." Before he could change his mind and go back for more punishment like the idiot he damn well knew he was, he stalked out of the room, up the stairs and into his own guest room as fast as he could manage without breaking into a run. It was either that or asking why James needed space from him when he clearly didn't mind other people around, and Tony wasn't curious enough to turn masochist about it. He really, really wasn't. He shucked the towel and the sweat-drenched clothes, got in the shower and breathed a sigh of relief, feeling marginally safe, for just a moment, from God even knows what.
Chapter 11

"My uncle served in the Diplomatic Service with Sir Bryan Cartledge sometime back in the seventies," Jackie said, leaning back in the chair across from him. She was holding herself in a far less agent-y way than back when he'd first met her. Of course, that might be down to the fact that she now knew how easily she could take him out. "I was able to get the two of you temporary positions on the embassy, so that takes care of the visas," she said. "Of course, you cannot be waltzing around in KGB training facilities with papers that say you work for the British Embassy, so those papers, tickets, visas, passports, everything, need to serve as separate identities. We cannot be taking any responsibility for you if you're caught."

Tony nodded his understanding. "Thank you," he said because, yeah, even without backup and a plan B for getting out, this was a hell of a lot more than he could've reasonably asked for. Of course, half the papers she was getting ready might turn out not to be necessary. He didn't like the niggling feeling he was starting to have that when he left Britain, he'd be leaving James behind as well, but all signs were starting to point in that direction. He'd have to rethink all his plans if this wound up being a one man op, and it would be a hell of a lot more difficult, but he couldn't stop now. That option was off the table. Besides, who knew, James might still be planning to come along. Tony really should ask him. It was just that he didn't particularly want to hear the answer.

"I've got separate papers for when you're in the country," Jackie continued. "Sergeant Barnes passes for Russian without a problem. You said you speak it, but with a distinct accent. I've got you down as having a speech impediment, but otherwise as a Soviet citizen from a family within the party with enough clout to move around freely but not enough to be well known."

Tony snorted. "I thought the whole point of communism was that no one had more clout than others," he said.

She rolled her eyes. "Show me one communist regime in the world that's actually good at being communist," she said. "Either way, these are the papers you'll be using inside the USSR. A contact of mine has scrounged up a car, which will be left for you an address I'll be giving you later. Basic weaponry will be in the car." She pulled out an envelope, pushed it across the table at him. "Here are the papers, and a few different passports you can use as options for the child. Most toddlers look alike, so it shouldn't be too hard, but there are a few different ages and colorings, just to be on the safe side. Depose of anything you don't need anymore."

Tony frowned. "This is starting to feel more and more like a briefing," he said. "When do we head out?"

"Tomorrow," she said. "The car leaves from here just past noon. You'll be in Moscow early in the morning the day after tomorrow." She paused a moment, looked at him intently. "Don't miss your flight out. You don't want to be caught in Moscow without valid visas."

Tony wasn't entirely aware of what he answered or how he excused himself, just knew he needed to get out of the study, and a few moments later he was.

Tomorrow? Tomorrow. Fuck. For a second or two, he could barely breathe, could feel the weight of it all pressing down on him. He wasn't ready. He didn't have all the plans done, had wasted too much time trying to memorize roads and escape routes and not nearly enough on figuring out what he was actually going to do if he managed to get inside the facility. When he managed to get inside the facility. He needed-- He wanted more time, but what he actually needed was to know the parameters, and there was one question he needed answered in order to get that right, no matter how
much he didn't want to hear the answer.

He stood still for a moment, uncertain, before making good time up to the wing where James's guest room sat right next to his. He knocked a few times, just long enough to confirm that James wasn't there. Then he was making his way back downstairs and into the kitchen where he sidled up to the cook, who at least tolerated him even if she didn't seem to have taken quite the shine to him she apparently had to James. "Have you seen Sergeant Barnes?" he asked, feeling strangely awkward, and all the more so when she looked at him strangely. And why shouldn't she? With the way they'd been acting, no wonder the whole fucking house thought they were strangers.

"He went outside, for a walk," she finally said. Tony noted that she wasn't tagging on the 'sir' he'd heard her use for James, that she was looking at him the same exact way some of the hired servers had at his mother's soirees when he was too young to understand that he was being a pain in the ass. Didn't even matter right now. Wasn't like he'd be seeing her ever again, after tomorrow.

"Thanks," he called over his shoulder. He was just about to head for the door when he remembered that he wasn't in California anymore. It wasn't exactly warm out. Hissing out a frustrated breath, he headed back upstairs, dug into the supplementary wardrobe the Falsworths had been nice enough to supply and pulled on coat, boots, and a hat, and then he was heading back downstairs. Everything inside him felt wound too tight, and fuck, he hadn't even really let himself truly consider what it would mean if James chose to stay here. And now, well, now it was damn near all he could think about. Would Tony even be able to pull this off on his own? Would he make it out all right? The questions made something inside him coil and quiver. The anxiety would only get worse if he stopped to let himself consider the utter sensation of loss at the thought of it. Of having to say goodbye after things had gone to hell, after he was out of time to fix it. Not that he'd know where to start anyway, with the knowledge that he would never again see James in a timeline where they didn't hate each other's guts.

He shook his head, forced those thoughts away before they choked him. He rounded the side of the building, leaving clumsy tracks in the half-melted snow, and made it into the garden. It would probably be beautiful in the summer, lush and manicured. Even now, despite the steely clouds and the threat of more snow heavy in the air, the dark, naked branches against the backdrop of endless white was strangely enthralling. It didn't take long to find another set of tracks and follow them deeper into the garden and into the small patch of forest or orchard or whatever it even was. He followed a path that would've been invisible if not for James's tracks.

Finally, he broke free of the branches, reached some kind of small brook. Snow and ice clung to the sides of it, but it must be warm enough - or the water moved fast enough - that the middle of it was still running freely. Another hundred feet or so away, a small, ridiculously refined bridge crossed over to the other side. In the middle of it, leaning on the rail and apparently staring into the water, was James. Tony didn't bother either keeping quiet or announcing his presence. He had no illusions that James didn't already know he was there. Instead, he simply trudged the rest of the way there, tried not to sound like a stampeding elephant as he stepped onto the bridge and finally leaned out over the water next to James. He swallowed down the lump that had suddenly formed in his throat, glanced to the side.

James didn't look back, wasn't really acknowledging his presence at all, and even though they were easily within touching distance, Tony wasn't sure he'd felt farther away from him since he'd first been presented with the muzzle of his gun close to three weeks ago now.

Tony looked away, didn't know what to do with just staring at James's impassive profile, glanced down at the water. In the winter setting, it looked as cool and colorless as the sky. Tony clenched his hands around the rail, tried to ignore the way his still ever so slightly bruised knuckles complained
about the cold, the way his fingertips were starting to sting. What was he even supposed to say? 'I have the tickets. We're leaving tomorrow'? Yeah, right. They were long past the stage of Tony spitting out instructions and James following them. In the end, the words came unbidden, long before he was ready for them. "You're not coming with me, are you?"

James finally glanced at him, and Tony felt it before he even caught the movement out the corner of his eyes. He couldn't stop himself from turning back to meet that gaze. There was something about James's eyes, his whole expression, that Tony couldn't read at all. "No," he finally said. He looked back down at the water. "Monty's found some people who might be able to help me get rid of the rest of the whole..." He shrugged, coat coming up to nearly cover his ears for a moment before his shoulders fell again. "I'll get to be alone in my head again, get back on my feet." He let out a breath. A cloud of foggy air formed in front of his face, dissipating within moments.

Tony nodded, swallowing. Tried to pretend, at least to himself, that his eyes weren't stinging and his throat and chest weren't pressing tight and painful all over again. "Be good for you," he said, somehow managing to keep his voice steady. His stomach actually physically hurt, and what even was that? What was-- Tony never became dependent on people this damn fast, especially people who didn't give two shits about him when they had a choice. He wasn't that much of a sucker. At least he never used to be. "What're you gonna do after?" he heard himself ask. "When you're all rehabilitated and everything?"

James shrugged again. "Maybe I'll look up Tony Carbonell," he said. "See if he could use a bodyguard."

Tony snorted. "You won't like him," he said. And that, well, that was beyond true, wasn't it? James already couldn't stand being around Tony when he didn't have to. The actual late-eighties version of Tony? God, no, nope. He'd drive James mad within a day.

Suddenly James was turning towards him, full-bodied now, hands coming up to grip Tony's shoulders. Tony jumped in surprise, tried to think of the last time they'd actually touched. Came up empty-handed. Headed. Whatever. "You don't gotta go either," James was saying, and now there was definitely something in his eyes. His eyes were wide, a small frown forming between his eyebrows. He looked damn close to pleading, and something inside Tony cracked a little, even as the only emotion he could recognize within himself was utter confusion. "Stay here. With me. Tony, don't go." His voice cracked on that last bit.

Tony felt himself choke up in response. Probably didn't help that he'd been halfway there already. "James," he tried, and he was well aware the he sounded like a strangled cat, and what the fuck was with this anyway? He didn't do these kinds of emotional overdramatic scenes, not without a lot more flare anyway. Except apparently he did, because he could not seem to stop himself from reaching out and putting his own hands over James's, squeezing, uncertain if he was trying to reassure or just trying to ensure James wouldn't let go again.

"Please," James said, and Tony could see the near physical effort it must've taken to get that word out. "Stay. I'll go to those doctors. I'll get better, and then we can go anywhere, do whatever you wanna do." He paused, and Tony drank in the sight of him as he visibly pulled himself together, stood a little bit straighter, a little bit stronger. The metal of his hand was freezing beneath Tony's fingers. Neither one of them let go.

"I do, though," Tony heard himself say. "I do have to. I-- shit." He looked down for a moment, and then James's arms were around him, pulling him in, and Tony was digging his face into James's flesh and blood shoulder, wasn't sure if he'd ever be able to extricate himself. "I owe her."

"Were you ever happy?" James asked. "In the other timeline? Were you ever happy? Because that
sh*t you said-- I get that love hurts sometimes, but it ain't supposed to feel like you're holding on to shards of glass and cuttin' yourself, and life ain't supposed to make you panic and stop breathin' for no good reason, and-- Tony." There was a strange note to Tony's name this way around, a million other words behind it that Tony doubted either one of them knew how to give voice.

Tony squeezed his eyes shut, focused on just breathing. Because sure, he'd been happy in the other timeline, in fits and starts, brightly and briefly or longer but more warily, with a never-ending sense of doom. Then again, maybe that's what happiness was. Who was to say? No matter how much sense James's words made on the surface, Tony doubted James knew more about the subject than he did. "That's not what matters," he said. "I have a duty--"

"To one person?" James asked. "What about the rest of the world? Think about what you could do this time around. You may have bought time by sending away the Cube, but that's a band-aid. Think about how much you can do when you already know what's coming."

"You aren't fighting fair, are you?" Tony asked, but something about that warmed him. He couldn't remember the last time someone had tried to manipulate him because they wanted him around more. Wasn't sure it had ever happened. Then again, maybe he was reading all this wrong, and-- Tony sucked in a breath, lifted his head and met James's eyes. "Why the sudden interest?" he asked. "Seems you've spent nearly two weeks going out of your way to avoid me. That's a hell of a change of heart."

James swallowed with an audible click. Tony watched his Adam's apple jump. "You saved me," he said then. "And for a while there, you were everything human I knew. You were my whole fuckin' world. And you were always doin' somethin', headin' for some goal I couldn't even understand. And that didn't even matter. I was happy to help. Until it started gettin' clear that your end game was gettin' away. Maybe not from me, not really, but that didn't change the fact that the end result would still be you gone and me left behind, and I couldn't--" He stopped, dipped his head forward until his forehead was pressed against Tony's. Tony could feel the heat of him even through the knit of his hat. "I didn't know what to do with that. I didn't want to get so tangled up I couldn't let go." The breath he let out ghosted over Tony's face, a trembling, fragile thing, and Tony had to squeeze his eyes shut because this hurt, hurt a hell of a lot more than he'd have ever expected, if he'd known how to expect anything like this in the first place. "Turns out I failed pretty badly," James concluded.

Tony sucked in a sharp breath of his own, tried to sort through all the shit he was feeling. Relief mixed with pain mixed with a savage kind of longing. And that ever-present selfish voice in the back of his head was screaming at him to take this, to grab on and never let go, because happiness was just as rare as James had said, and a guy like Tony couldn't really afford to let it slip through his fingers, could he? Besides, James had a point. Tony, with his adult mind, with all the knowledge he had gained through decades of living in the future, could push technology forward, could accomplish things people in his own time had barely started dreaming of yet even in his own time, in far less time than would've ever been possible in the original timeline. He had a chance, had the time, to set up defenses, to get the world ready, so that by the time Thanos arrived they'd be able to push him back. Natasha would've told him to do it, whatever the cost to her.

Then James was pressing closer, sealing his lips over Tony's, and all thought, all the rationalizations and internal arguments, went right out the window. With a sound he had never even realized he was capable of, Tony pressed back, parting his lips for James's tongue, wrapping his arms around James's neck, breathing him in, drinking him in, holding on tight. This, fucking hell, this was what he'd wanted every single time he'd allowed himself a split second's hope of not finding his bed empty every night, every time he'd walked into a room after hearing James's voice on the other side of the door. This closeness, this connectedness, and fuck, how could he have ever been meant to let that go?
James's cybernetic hand came to rest on the small of Tony's back, a reassuring, warm pressure even through the thick layers of clothing. Tony felt himself be drawn slowly closer - by that hold or by his own will, he wasn't entirely sure - until they were flush against each other. Tony could feel the way James's chest expanded against his own, the way James's free hand came up to cup Tony's jaw, tilting his head ever so slightly to the side and knocking his knit hat askew all in one go. And somehow, all he could do in return was hold on, fucking cling, and try to tamp down the damnable fear that this was all going to be taken away too.

Tony let his mouth open wider, heard himself groan into it when James's tongue curled around his own, close and warm and utterly delicious. There was a different sort of quality to the whole thing this time around, something Tony couldn't quite put his finger on, just knew that somehow there was no struggle this time, no contest, that it was as easy to fall into this as breathing, and that he never wanted it to end.

James broke the kiss, pressed their foreheads back together. His breath wafted over Tony's lips, warm and uneven, and Tony found himself swallowing compulsively, uncertain what it even was that was going on inside him. He didn't let go of the handfuls of James's coat clenched in his fingers, didn't dare do anything to move them further apart, didn't want to. And the moment he'd caught his breath, he leaned in, caught James's lips again, half aware of the fact that his eyes were stinging and his cheeks hurt with the cold and utterly unable to explain why. The kiss was slower this time, a barely there press of lips for long moments, breathing each other's air, barely delving inside, and it was doing things to Tony he had no words for, so damn good it ached.

Later, he wouldn't be able to explain how they got back inside, where the time the walk between the bridge and the manor house should've taken had disappeared off to. He didn't even care, not really, not when the end result had him standing in his guest room, coat and boots shucked, hat finally knocked all the way off, and James's hands pushing his shirt aside to trace nonsensical patterns over the skin of his back. The contrast between the freezing metal and the warm flesh and blood was startling, creeping through Tony's body and making him squirm, goose bumps breaking out all over his skin.

James dived in to swallow it, sealing their lips back together and pulling Tony closer. With fewer layers between them now, Tony could feel the heat of him, bright as a furnace. He'd never noticed, back in California, but with the Northern European climate, it was clear as fucking day that James ran hotter than any normal human being had any right to. After the walk through the snow, that only made Tony cling tighter, try to get closer until James broke the kiss, eyes fucking twinkling as he flashed a grin.

Tony let his own face pull into a frown in response. "What?" he asked. It came out sounding breathier than he'd actually meant it to.

James shook his head. "Nothin'," he said. He pressed his broad smile against the corner of Tony's mouth, hands gently pulling Tony closer. Tony let go of his indignation - it had only ever been minor anyway - and allowed himself to melt into the embrace, to just let himself feel not alone for the first time in, fuck, too long. Let himself, for just a single fucking moment, forget everything he'd piled on his own shoulders and just, just feel good.

Tony was so gone on the closeness, on the strange, light feeling coming over him - relief, it was fucking relief, after his stomach had been knotted up for days, and it was fragile, so damn much, because stopping to think about everything he still had to do would smash it to bits - he was only half aware of the clothes they were letting fall to the clothes around them. And then James's chest was pressed against his own, blazing warm skin to skin, and Tony could feel the way his ribs expanded and contracted with every breath, could fool himself into thinking he could make out James's pulse
beneath muscle and metal.

After the cold and the layers, everything was somehow enhanced, like his body had become hypersensitive. Every tiny brush of skin against skin sent shudders through Tony's body, left him breathless and already so turned on he was aching with it. His hands were still clutching James's shoulders almost desperately. Lifting his head for another kiss, Tony slowly released his grip. He might not be able to leave bruises on James's body, or make them last very long anyway, but that wasn't an excuse to do it, not right now. Right now, things were supposed to feel good and the last thing he wanted was to cause pain, whether or not James minded. He fought off tiny finger cramps he hadn't even realized he'd managed to get, and smoothed his palm down the long, strong muscles of James's back, reveled in the heat of him, the smoothness of his skin, the tangible power lying just underneath.

James let out a shuddering breath against Tony's lips, and Tony took the opening to lick into his mouth, nothing deep or messy, just a slow, thorough exploration. He ran his fingers along James's hipbones, brushing whisper-soft over the hollows, swallowed down the vibrations of James's barely audible groan. Then, keeping his movements unhurried, consigning every sensation, every touch, to memory, he grabbed hold of James's belt buckle, undid it carefully. Couldn't quite help the way his own groin tightened when he felt James's arousal, warm and hard even through his pants and underwear. He pressed down the heel of his hand, smiled into the kiss when he felt James's dick jump against his palm.

And that, apparently, was all that was needed to make James take charge again. James's hand dug into the hair at the nape of Tony's head, pulled him closer and tilted his head, sucking on his tongue until Tony was dizzy with it. He could feel what little muscle tone he had on his stomach jumping as James ran his metal knuckles along them, down to open Tony's fly along with his own, and then they were pushing each other's pants out of the way, and James was walking him backwards. As if from far away, Tony felt the backs of his legs hit the side of the bed. With barely a moment's thought, he let go of his balance, let himself go tumbling, completely certain, for a moment, that if there was anything behind him that could harm him, James would catch him before impact.

He landed on a soft mattress in the middle of the carefully done covers - courtesy of some maid or other Tony didn't really care to think about right now. Let his head fall back against the soft surface. He tipped his head up, looked up at James, felt his lips pull into a smile, completely of their own volition, and that felt fucking amazing too. It wasn't often he got to smile without having to think about it first.

James crawled onto the bed, crowding Tony up towards the headboard. Tony went willingly, scooching up until his head was in the pillows and he could reach for James again, smoothing his fingers into soft, thick hair - someone had clearly touched up on his choppy cut somewhere along the way, just like they had for Tony. James went with the slight tug, pressed a kiss to the corner of Tony's mouth, his cheek, the fucking tip of his nose, and that was so ridiculous Tony couldn't help but let out a small laugh even as something uncoiled inside him, warm and soft and large enough that it would be overwhelming if he let it get that far. James pulled back just a little, eyebrow cocked. "What?" he asked, perfectly mimicking Tony's voice from earlier.

Tony rolled his eyes and stretched up to steal another kiss, feeling stupidly silly and caring not at all.
"You're ridiculous," he said, and somehow didn't feel like he might've just ruined everything with a few misplaced words.

James's grin grew wider. "You're gorgeous," he said.

Tony let out a snort. "C'mon, I look ridiculous. We both know that. You should see me in ten years."

"Can't wait," James said, and before Tony had time to even begin to process those words, James dipped his head down and pressed his lips against Tony's, tongue pressing into Tony's mouth and stealing away the better part of Tony's processing abilities in one fell swoop. Tony sighed into it, felt a shiver race down his spine when James's hand pushed behind his head, threaded into his hair and nudged his head up into a better angle.

Tony let his fingers trail back down James's nape, down his bare back, following the nubs and dips of his spine until he couldn't reach any further. James was lying half across him, and come to think of it, that was kind of a ridiculous position when they could get so much closer and everything could feel so much nicer. Tony broke the kiss, sucking in a sharp mouthful of air before gripping James's hips and tugging. He was under no impression that he could forcibly move James anywhere he didn't want to go, which probably made the strangely victorious surge that went through him when James followed his nudging kind of out of place, but who the fuck even cared at this point? James rewarded him with another kiss on the nose, and Tony felt his whole face scrunch up in response. "Stop that," he ordered through peals of laughter he couldn't even seem to control. "You're making me feel like some adorable furry baby animal. Not cool."

James just grinned at him, happy and beautiful with it, and Tony was pretty damn sure he could look at that face for hours without getting bored. "Well, you ain't furry," James said.

Tony slapped his arm ineffectually and then strong, clever fingers were dancing along his sides, digging in, and Tony couldn't help the nearly hysterical laughter that bubbled out of him, couldn't help the way he was squirming and writhing and fuck. "Not fair," he managed to get out.

James let up on the tickling, leaned down for another damned kiss to Tony's nose as he dropped his hips down into the cradle of Tony's thighs, rubbing them together through pants and underwear and ripping a startled moan out from between Tony's lips. James's mouth, thankfully, latched onto his jaw next, found a sensitive spot with ridiculous ease and set about sucking and nibbling at it until Tony was writhing again, for far more pleasurable reasons this time. And every fucking movement brought them rubbing back together, put pressure and friction on Tony's dick until he was arching up, one hand clinging to James's hair, holding his head in place. Then James was pulling his hips up again and Tony might've let out an honest to God whine at the loss until he realized James was shucking his pants and moving in on Tony's. And then it was just ridiculously incredible, the way James's dick slotted in next to his, the way every slide of their bodies against each other felt like fucking Heaven, the way Tony couldn't seem to catch his breath no matter how hard he tried.

Tony hiked up a leg, wrapped it around James's waist and felt a whoosh of air go out of him when that just made everything that much more wonderful, that much more intense. The feeling of heat and muscles against him, above him, brackets him in, was enough to make him go light-headed, to hear the white noise of his own thumping blood in his ears. And then James was shifting, sliding down his body, and Tony wanted to object, but the friction was still making him light-headed, still felt so damn good. Strong hands gripped his thighs, guided his legs to rest over James's stupidly broad shoulders, before sliding backward to cup Tony's ass, lift him up. For a moment, Tony felt unbalanced, hanging there, with only his shoulders and his head actually touching the bed, but there was that strange sensation again, that deep-down almost instinctive belief that James wouldn't let things go to shit. And then he wasn't thinking at all, because that was James's tongue tracing the cleft
of his ass, licking a hot, wet stripe over his rim. "Fuck," Tony breathed out, dick jumping. "How'd you know I showered today?"

James didn't answer, which, perfectly all right, he had a damn good excuse after all. He did pull his head back a fraction, thumbs digging into Tony's buttocks, spreading them apart, and then there he was again, blowing a soft breath over the saliva he'd left. Tony felt himself shudder in response, breathed out a moan. And then James's tongue was following that same pace again, and one more time, and Tony would go fucking mad if he kept this up much longer without any further progress. He might've been babbling something to that effect, one hand clenching the pillowcase beside his head, the other still somehow tangled in James's hair. He supposed he could've tried pushing or pulling or guiding somehow, but for whatever reason, he didn't feel the need to, still felt that strange sense of trust, this time guided by an odd belief that James was going to get him where he needed to go, even if he was taking his damn time about it.

Tony was on the verge of outright begging when James finally moved to the next step, the tip of his tongue tracing around and around and around Tony's pucker, which felt like it was attempting to tremble apart against the touch. Tony let his eyes fall shut, dug the back of his head into the pillow. His mouth was still open, letting out a steady stream of babble, and Tony didn't even try to keep track of what he was saying. It was either nonsensical or embarrassing, and frankly he had other things he'd far rather occupy himself with right now. Specifically, the way James's tongue was going pointed, was probing more than tracing by now, and fuck, it was all Tony could do to push back against the teasing touches. And then James was thrusting his tongue into Tony's body, and it was so fucking good that for a moment Tony was pretty sure he'd whited out.

For endless moments, his whole focus narrowed down to the feeling of that tongue thrusting in and out of him, pausing to trace his rim and lure another whimper past Tony's lips. He could feel saliva dripping down the cleft of his ass, cooling rapidly in the air. The shivers that went through his body at the almost random bursts of cold only served to enhance the rest of it. He was vaguely aware of the fact that he wasn't talking anymore, was reduced to a few simple modes of communication that seemed to range from whimper to moan to keen and no further than that.

James's hands tightened their grip, and then he was guiding Tony's body into a rhythm that went counterpoint to the thrusts of his tongue, and it was all so damn maddening Tony wasn't even sure how he hadn't come yet. Then there was a finger alongside James's all too clever tongue, pressing in and out, slowly opening him up, making small, random-seeming brushes against his prostate that Tony would pretty much swear were not accidental in the least. Tony felt his dick jump against his stomach in response, felt the way his muscles bunched and shuddered in response to the stimulation, and it was so damn close to being too much he was on the verge of sobbing with it, thighs trembling against James's shoulders. His toes were curled so tight he was certain they'd end up cramping and everything inside him was wound so fucking tight he felt like a human spring, ready to jump apart at any fucking moment.

James pulled his face back and Tony opened his eyes for a moment, glanced down blearily and got a shiny, wet smirk in response. He didn't have the brainpower to make any kind of quip or even to kindly request James get back to work, and then there were two fingers, eased along by saliva, pressing inside him, opening him up, scissoring and drawing mad, feather-light patterns over the nubs of his prostate that made Tony buck up, spine damn near snapping. He could not remember ever feeling so sensitive, ever reacting so damn much to another human being, couldn't-- And then James was dipping his head down again, licking around his fingers, doing amazing fucking thing with his tongue that made Tony think he'd have to write his own dictionary to have the slightest chance of properly describing it.

Another fingertip traced lightly over his prostate and Tony could feel his balls drawing tight, feel the
edge plummeting towards him. "Unless you want me to come right now, you need to stop," Tony somehow managed to warn, voice jumping all over the place. He managed to let go of James's hair, gripped the head of his own dick instead and pressed down just enough to hurt, just enough to stave off the orgasm that was already making him shake.

"Maybe that was the plan," James said, but he was pulling back, drawing out his fingers and moving up for a kiss. Tony reared up to meet him, parting his lips to the assault. The taste of musk and sweat rushed him, threatened to bowl him over, and it shouldn't be so fucking hot to taste himself like this, but it always had been and getting it off James's tongue only heightened it. James's hands had lowered him down carefully, were running up and down his flanks, stopping to explore every time Tony reacted more to one spot than the previous one. James broke the kiss, traced his lips down Tony's jaw, stopping for a moment to pay attention to the spot he'd found earlier. "Slick?" he asked, voice muffled against Tony's skin.

"Top drawer," Tony answered, throwing his arm ineffectually towards the nightstand. "Brought it with me. Figured-- Might as well be optimistic, right?"

James flashed him a quick grin before leaning over him and, by the sounds of it, fumbling the drawer open. "We could do with some of that," he agreed. "Good thinkin'." Another few moments of rifling through the contents, and Tony had a moment of attempting to remember if he'd put anything else in that drawer and whether any of it was something he should be embarrassed about. He drew another blank, let it go, and then James was back, sliding down along Tony's body all over again. Tony heard the pop of the top coming off and then the fingers were back, colder now and sliding more easily than they had with the saliva. Tony was groaning, bucking into it almost immediately, damn near fucking himself on those fingers even as he felt their metal counterparts wrap around his dick and give a few strong tugs that had him so close to coming he had to bite his lip to keep from crying out.

"The 'I'm about to come' bit still applies," he warned, the words coming out wobbly, stumbling all over each other.

"So come," James said, looking up at him from behind dark lashes, pupils blown and cheeks flushed pink, and Tony was pretty sure that wasn't entirely fair either. "We both know you recover quick."

Tony blinked. "I'm not sure if you're mocking me or not," he said. Then James twisted his wrist and yeah, really, there was no choice left. Tony felt his eyes roll back, mouth dropping open on a moan as his orgasm wrenched through him. For a moment, he felt like he hung suspended in mid-air, floating, weightless, even as waves of pleasure broke over him, took away thought and left him warm and panting and gasping with come painted in streaks along his stomach and chest. And fuck, maybe he should be worrying about the pattern that was emerging here. Last thing he wanted was to be selfish in bed. And then that thought was gone, blown out the window completely when a third finger joined the two already inside him, skimming over his prostate and making him shudder, overly sensitive but too damn boneless to do a thing about it except lie there and wait until the discomfort died down and left a slow, comfortable kind of pleasure in its wake.

James kept going with the three fingers for long moments, stretching up to lick Tony's skin clean and yeah, okay, that... Really, really fucking hot. And with three thick fingers moving inside him and a superhumanly warm tongue lapping up his semen, it really was no wonder the fucking teenage hormones kicked in and had him at half-mast in what couldn't be more than a few minutes.

"Fuck," Tony muttered. "You're trying to kill me, aren't you?"

James snorted, chin resting on Tony's hip for a moment. His slight evening stubble scratched against Tony's skin, drew another moan from Tony's mouth. "Seems kinda counterproductive," he said. "I
mean, I ain't no great tactician or anythin', but I can still think of much better things to do with you than killin' you."

Tony felt his lips tuck into another one of those strange, unplanned smiles. He reached down a hand, pushed the wayward locks of hair out of James's face. "And what would those be?" he asked, well aware that he was flirting in the stupidest, most obvious way possible, but honestly, he didn't have the brain power for anything more sophisticated right now. Besides, some things called for obvious, and if he hadn't scared James out of bed yet, there was a pretty good chance he wouldn't be able to at all.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" James asked. Then, slowly, he was pulling his fingers back out and Tony was biting down a gasp at the feel of it. James crawled back up his body, leaned down and pressed their lips together. Tony reached up, cupped his jaw and brought him closer, tracing the tip of his tongue along the seam between James's lips for entrance, which was granted a bare moment later. Slowly, carefully, he licked into James's mouth, sought out the salty-bitter taste of his own come, felt his stomach clench and his dick fill up a little bit more by the second.

He was vaguely aware that James was fumbling with the lube again, slicking himself up, but right now, he had other things to pay attention to, let himself slow down just enough to savor the sharpness of James's jaw against his palm, just how soft his lips, even winter-chapped, were against Tony's own, the weight and feel and heat of him. And then James was gripping him again, guiding Tony's legs up around him, pushing Tony's knees up high on James's ribcage, and Tony had a brief flash of thought that maybe he should feel uncomfortable like this, exposed, bent almost in half. Then again, it was difficult to feel uncomfortable in any way with a guy who'd just had his tongue up your ass. And then Tony felt James reach between them, forearm brushing against Tony's dick along the way, and Tony moaned into James's mouth, felt his eyes slide shut while James took himself in hand and guided the tip of his erection to Tony's entrance. Tony felt it bump against him, catch on his rim, blunt and wet, with lube or precome or both, felt a shiver of anticipation go through his whole body. He lured James's tongue into his own mouth, sucked around it, felt James's hips jerk against him.

And then James was pushing in. Tony breathed through the first bit of resistance, the sudden give when his own body, still relaxed and pliant from James's mouth and fingers and that pretty incredible orgasm, opened up for him. There was a moment's discomfort, and he must've clenched or something, because James froze above him, breaking the kiss. Tony blinked open his eyes, lids oddly heavy, met James's concerned gaze. "'M okay," he managed, word coming out slurred.

James cracked a small smile that morphed back into a look of utter concentration just a moment later. Then he was pushing again, and the discomfort was still there, but this wasn't exactly Tony's first rodeo. He knew to relax around it, wait for it to get really good, and then James bottomed out and Tony felt the slight twitch of his hips even as he held himself still, giving them both time to adjust. Tony stretched up enough to press a lingering peck to James's lips, let his head drop back into the pillow. There was always this strange moment where everything was surreal, where the sensation of being so open, so full, took up his whole world. With James, it was magnified. The utter heat of him seemed to come right from the center of Tony's body now, radiating outwards, and it felt beyond strange, in the best possible way.

James shifted above him, head dipping down until their foreheads were pressed together. Tiny beads of sweat shone along his hairline. His mouth was open on a small 'o', eyes impossibly wide. "Fuck," he groaned, sucking in a sharp breath.

Tony let out a short laugh, and it didn't feel strange or uncomfortable or awkward or any of the other things laughing while having sex usually indicated. He was... comfortable, in a way he couldn't quite explain. Didn't hurt that the shaking his laughter caused made James squeeze his eyes shut and
breathe out a moan. He shifted just slightly, and Tony became abruptly aware of the weight of him, inside and out, above him and in the center of him. He wasn't sure what took his breath away the most, the thought or the feeling of it. "You can move, you know," he said, and his voice had dropped an octave or two without his conscious decision. His mouth was oddly dry. He flicked his tongue out to lick some moisture into his lips.

James's lips crashed down on his again, slow and shallow but still so damn good, and then James was pulling out, shifting his weight just slightly, and thrusting back in. The angle wasn't quite right, but it was still fucking amazing. The weight and drag and heat of him inside took Tony's breath away, made his pulse sky-rocket, drew gasped breaths and panted moans out of his mouth.

"Fuck, you're warm," Tony said, pressing the words into James's lips.

James smiled against him. He shifted again before thrusting once more, and this time he was right on the money. Tony felt his own spine try to bend as he arched off the bed at the jolt of it. And now that James had it, he didn't seem to have any plans of letting it go any time soon. He set up a pace, slow and deep, every drag of his dick inside Tony's body precise and delicious. What felt like tiny electric sparks went through Tony's whole damn body every time James jabbed against his prostate, and heady, heavy pleasure pulsed out from the base of his spine, wrapped around him, threatened to drive him out of his fucking mind. A hand was pushing in between them again, making for Tony's dick. Tony gripped the fingers, flesh and blood, and guided them away with a soft squeeze.

"Not that I don't like my dick touched," he managed, and yeah, he was sounding slurred again. "I really, really do, but I think this might be one of those times I don't actually need it." And he loved the way it felt, those few times when he'd been able to get off without it, the pleasure less sharp, less centralized, far more full-bodied and so fucking intense he had, on one memorable occasion, actually blacked out.

James pulled back and looked at him for a moment, and yeah, there was that bit of male pride that always made Tony want to snort until he remembered he'd probably pulled that face a few times in his life as well. Instead of commenting, he pulled James down, brushed their lips together again before he had to let go and throw his head to the side as a particularly good thrust made him squirm and gasp and see double. James followed him down, latching onto the hollow just below the point where his jaw met his neck. His teeth came out, scraping against the sensitive skin there, and Tony felt his whole body jump in response, could feel his own pulse pumping under James's lips. Then James was upping the pace, and Tony could barely keep up, barely keep his body moving into it. His muscles clenched around the intrusion, around the countless sensory inputs, which only seemed to make James's hips piston that much more powerfully.

Tony's mouth was open again, he realized, releasing a string of nonsense he couldn't have kept up with if he tried. He doubted James could make any sense of it, but at least it didn't seem to deter him in the slightest, not judging from the powerful thrusts and the warm hands leaving trails of fire all over his body. The pleasure was gathering inside him, focusing and tightening and pulsing outwards. And then, without warning, James's hand was making the trek south again, along Tony's flank and hip and inward. It bypassed his dick, stopped to massage his balls for a brief moment that made Tony's whole body jolt and shudder. And then a long finger was rubbing against his perineum, running counterpoint to the rhythm of his thrusts.

Tony was squirming, gasping. The string of words had devolved into a long, broken mewl. He couldn't think, couldn't seem to even control what the hell his body was doing. His focus had narrowed down to the two-pronged attack on his prostate, to the relentless, ceaseless pleasure of it. He was vaguely aware of his head flopping from one side to the other, of his hands falling limp at his sides, of his eyes damn near rolling around behind closed lids. His stomach was coiling in on itself in
the best possible way. He was probably sobbing, couldn't be sure; all he could hear were the
deafening echoes of his own pulse thundering in his ears. James didn't let up, drove him higher and
higher, closer and closer to the edge, and for a moment, Tony hung there, suspended. Then he felt
his own body jerk, clamp down before he shuddered through his orgasm, gasping and keening,
hands coming up to clutch at James's shoulders.

James dipped his head down, pressed their lips together. His finger was still rubbing, milking Tony
of every last drop he had to give. His thrusts had slowed, gone deeper and more languid again, but
something about the tenseness in his shoulders, the way he held himself, made it damn obvious he
was close as well. And that, even with at least ninety per cent of his brain still mostly out of
commission and his body still thrumming, was something Tony would never not see as a challenge.

Tony dug his heels in, helped bring James in even deeper, thrust by thrust, clenched around him
every time he drew back. He threaded his fingers through James's hair, tilted his head for a better
angle and thrust his tongue into his mouth, seeking out all the little spots he'd found before, all the
ones that had made James moan and squirm. Kept it all up until James was shuddering apart on top
of him. Tony ran his hands up and down James's heaving back, let himself drink in the feeling of the
jumping muscles, the broad strength of it. Finally, James collapsed, maneuvering himself to the side,
which was probably a good thing. He wasn't exactly lightweight, although part of Tony was
strangely disappointed that he didn't get to feel what it would be like to be properly pinned down by
that amount of warm, hard muscle.

Next to him, James rolled to his back, still panting. "Alright?"

Tony rolled onto his side, put his head on James's shoulder. He couldn't seem to shake the silly grin
he could feel stretching his face. Right now, he didn't even care. "Great," he said. Sure, there was a
bit of soreness, and it would all get pretty uncomfortable in a moment or two when he started
leaking, but for right now, 'great' was a pretty damn good descriptor.

James turned his face towards him. His grin looked about as silly as Tony's felt. He was gorgeous
with it. He leaned in, pressed a soft, languid kiss to Tony's lips, wrapped an arm around him and
pulled him closer. "Good," he said. He let out a yawn. "Shower?"

Tony shook his head, settled in closer. His whole body felt warm and heavy. He didn't want to
move, ever. "In the morning," he slurred, letting his eyes slide shut as he threw an arm over James's
chest.

James pressed a kiss to his forehead. "In the mornin'," he echoed.
"Tony," Natasha gasped, red already staining her lips. Her punctured lung, everything else that powerful slash had ruined, was becoming more visible by the second. Her face was turning the color of chalk. "Tony, don't. Don't go after him. Don't kill him."

Tony combed her hair out of her face with shaking fingers, could not believe what he was seeing. For months now, she'd been his rock, been the only one who'd truly understood why he'd taken the stance he had, why it was so fucking important. More than that, she was his friend, and he had so desperately few of them, and he couldn't believe-- A sob caught in his throat. He couldn't seem to catch his breath no matter what he did. "Give me one good reason why," he said, and somehow his voice came out clear and precise, her words about not showing any weakness at the negotiations somehow still propping him up.

She reached up with one bloody hand. Her fingers were too cool against his skin, were probably leaving a trail of blood where she stroked her knuckles over his cheekbone. She was fighting for a smile that only wound up looking grotesque. More blood leaked out the corner of her mouth.

Tony was half aware of Cap and Barnes somewhere off to the side, of Cap's arms wrapped around Barnes, restraining him. The rage was building, ice and fire wrapped together, deep in the pit of him. For right now, it was in check. Natasha still needed him, even if there wasn't a damn thing he could do for her.

"I only existed because of him in the first place," she whispered, voice almost gone now. "Tony, he's my father."

Tony couldn't answer. The words didn't register, didn't penetrate. All he could do was keep holding her, keep cradling her against his chest, even as her chest stopped moving, as more and more heat drained from her body. At long last, biting back a sob, he made himself lift a hand and gently close her eyes. As he carefully lowered her back to the floor, he felt the rage finally start to rise, burning through him, strong enough that he wanted to scream, wanted to tear everything around him to pieces.

The suit responded without him ever making a conscious decision. He felt it assemble around him, felt the repulsors charge up without him ever giving a conscious command. He turned his head, glanced at the two soldiers behind him through the HUD. He didn't know if they'd heard. Didn't care. "Get out," he heard himself snap. "Get the hell out of here right now."

He didn't know if it was something about his tone, or if it was the sight of Natasha Romanoff dead on the floor. Something had finally gotten through Cap's thick skull. He nodded at Tony, something unreadable in his eyes, and dragged Barnes out of the building. Tony shot a hole in the wall, launched himself out and away, away, away.

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Tony woke up to a metal hand stroking up and down his back, a pair of warm lips pressed against his forehead. He jerked against the hold, blinking around the tears already running down his cheeks. He let out a shuddering exhale, pulling out of James's arms with probably more roughness than was strictly warranted, but he couldn't spare any energy for gentleness right now, had to keep himself focused on keeping himself together, on not falling apart. He could still feel that rage, feel it boiling through him, and for a moment he wanted to punch James in the face, wanted to find one of his countless concealed fucking weapons and use them to rip his throat out. "Isn't real," he heard himself
whisper through panted, half-sobbed breaths. "Isn't real." And it wasn't. Not anymore. It had been real, real as anything, but that was a different timeline, a different world. Natasha was alive. Not his Natasha, but a younger, less damaged version. The James whose nearness he was still aware of was not *that* Barnes, had never raised a hand against her.

Tony pulled himself to the edge of the bed, staggered to his feet. He still couldn't get his breathing right, couldn't-- "Tony," James was saying. Out the corner of his eye, he saw James getting to his feet as well, staying a careful few feet clear. "Tony, what's going on?"

Tony shook his head, sucked in another shuddering breath. He was getting dizzy, his legs weak and strangely awkward beneath him. When he managed to exhale, it came out on a sob. "Gimme a moment," he managed, groping around for a second until his hand found the wall. He let himself sag against it, still struggling to get a proper breath.

"You needa breathe," James was saying, coming closer with slow, careful steps. He stopped to turn on the lights. Then his hands were on Tony's back, stroking gently. "C'mon. In, and out. In, and out."

Tony let his eyes droop shut. Somehow, without being able to figure out how it even worked, his lungs were starting to work again. James's voice turned into a hum in his ear, a mantra, and bit by bit, his breathing began to feel normal again. A moment later, the light-headedness dissipated and he was beginning to think he might actually be capable of rational thought again. Carefully, he pulled himself free of James's hands again, reached up to tug at his own hair, uncertain for long moments. Packing. He needed to get packing. He blinked a few times, managed to get himself some focus. Then he walked back to the bed, pulled the suitcase he'd brought from Malibu out from underneath it.

"Tony--" James's voice actually cracked, and Tony made himself turn around to face him. His eyes were wide in a way Tony hadn't seen before. Something about the way he held himself reminded Tony inescapably of a wounded animal. "You ain't still gonna go?" James asked.

Tony swallowed. His throat was going tight again, for a whole different reason this time. Something inside him felt like it was physically wrenching itself apart. Fuck, but he wished he could just be selfish about this one thing, but he couldn't. Natasha had given her life for him. All Tony was giving up for her was a dream. A beautiful, wonderful dream that had barely even been born yet, one he wished he could live in for the rest of his life. But he couldn't. He owed her better than that. "I have to," he said.

James's hands hung loosely at his sides. His eyes were still too wide, painful to look at, so Tony looked away, returned to the packing. "Why?" he heard James ask from behind him.

"I owe her," Tony said, crossing the room to open the closet and start pulling out the clothes he'd need to bring. And slowly his hands faltered as another realization shook through him. Natasha's last fucking words, the ones he'd never quite registered, never quite allowed to penetrate. What had it mattered at that point anyway? Natasha had been dead. It had made no difference. Yet here, now, suddenly it mattered a whole hell of a lot. He turned back around, made himself look James dead in the eye. "There's something I gotta tell you."

James was still holding himself oddly, shoulders hunched as if trying to make himself smaller, which was just plain wrong. James should never look small, or weak, least of all because of Tony. "What?" he asked, and there was still a tremble there in the back of his voice that Tony couldn't stand to hear.

Tony opened his mouth. Shut it again. How the hell did you even say shit like this? How did that work? How did you change someone's entire world with words, without breaking something in the
process? Tony wasn't good with words, not really. Or he was, in his way, but he wasn't good with people, and sometimes that meant he chose the worst possible words, and-- What the hell was he supposed to say? Then again, what could he say that was worse than saying nothing? "She's your daughter," was what eventually came out. "Natasha. The girl I'm trying to get out. She's your daughter."

James froze, to a level Tony had never seen anyone freeze before, inhumanly still. Tony could follow it with his eyes as the blood drained from James's face, as he started moving again only to gape for air like a fish taken out of water. Then he shook his head. "No," he said. He shook his head again. "No. You're-- Are you tryin' to mess my head 'round? Tony, I ain't goin'. I'm--"

Tony shook his head, took a few steps closer to James, reached out and gripped him by the forearms. James shook him off, crossing his arms over his bare chest. "I'm not trying to get you to go," he said. "I just-- You deserved to know."

James's eyes squeezed shut. He shook his head again. "No," he said. His voice was steadier now, sharper. "No. If this was true, you da told me weeks ago. You da told me when we first talked about her. You da definitely told me before we slept together. You would not have kept quiet right up until you needed my help to save her."

Tony took a deep breath. Let it back out. He could argue this, could argue this for the rest of the fucking night, but what difference did it make? He had no proof, had absolutely nothing except the word of a dead woman from what was looking more and more like an alternate universe. He couldn't even explain himself in any real way. What was he supposed to say? 'I just never thought of her as yours'? Fat chance. Fact was that no matter how you looked at it, Tony had - perhaps not maliciously, but still - kept something major to himself that should've been shared. "I'm not lying," he said at last. "But I'm not gonna ask you to go either."

James shook his head, breath shuddering audibly. Then, motions fast and efficient, army-trained, he was putting his clothes back on and stalking towards the door. He was gone before Tony had a chance to object, to even properly comprehend everything that had just happened.

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The thing was, Natasha Romanoff was one of those people you didn't think of as having parents, as coming from somewhere. She just was, an entity onto herself, existing somewhere outside the normal parameters of reality. At least that's what she'd projected, for as long as Tony had known her. And she'd done a hell of a job of it too, because even as he got to know her better, even as they began to grow together, understand each other, part of him had still seen her that way. Fantastical. Other. And yeah, there was something not quite right about that, he was well aware of that. And it wasn't an excuse. It was just... The only explanation he'd been able to come up with over hours and hours of wracking his mind. It wasn't enough. It wasn't a good enough reason for having kept a secret like that, even if he hadn't done it maliciously, even if he hadn't even stopped to realize he was doing it.

And that, really, led to only one conclusion. He was in the wrong. Deeply in the wrong, and there was nothing he knew of that could possibly make up for that. He should've told James long ago, and thoughtlessness didn't really count for anything. Motivation didn't count for anything, because he was still wrong to have done what he did. To have not done what he should've. And none of that changed the fact that somewhere inside him it felt like something had shattered, shards of it entering his blood stream, tearing him up from the inside out. Hey, no one had ever accused him of not being a drama queen. Still, he couldn't help but glance down at his watch in some kind of dumb, breathless hope.

"You should go," Jackie told him, nodding toward the idling car. The driver was glancing out at
them with a look of polite impatience that was so British it might've made Tony laugh on a better day.

"Not yet," Tony said. His words were steadier than he'd have thought he'd be able to manage. Then again, everything about him was steadier than he'd have expected. He wasn't sure what he'd have expected, really, just. Not this, everything somewhere deep inside sloshing around in painful turmoil, but all of it staying well below the surface, as if someone had erected a wall between the inside and the outside, bullet proof glass. Or a one way mirror, maybe. He could look out, but no one else seemed able to look in. "I said I was leaving at one, so I'm leaving at one."

"It is one," Jackie said.

Tony shook his head. "It's two minutes to," he said. He opened his carry-on bag, made sure everything was in order, including the spy-style false bottom and the extra sets of papers hidden underneath.

She sighed. "You shouldn't go," she finally said. "You shouldn't be going at all, and especially not on your own. It's one thing when you've got a former Soviet operative at your back, but now?" She reached out, gripped his shoulder and squeezed. "I should be locking you up in a dark hole and throwing away the key. Better than sending a seventeen-year-old off to die."

Tony glanced up at her, considered her for a moment. Then he shrugged. "You won't," he said. "Because you know wherever it is you end up putting me, I'll figure out how to leave and go anyway. And you know I'm a hell of a lot more likely to get myself killed without what help you have been able to give me." He forced a smile he didn't feel. "I'll be fine." He wasn't sure he would be, not if he were completely honest. But then he also wasn't really sure how much that mattered. He didn't really have a lot to look forward to in any timeline. If he could at least get Natasha out, maybe something good could still come off this whole misadventure. He glanced down at his watch, bit back a sigh. "One O'clock," he said.

She nodded. Gave his shoulder another squeeze. "Take care of yourself," she said.

Tony forced another smile. "I'll try," he said. "And thank you, really. You've given me a fighting chance, at least." He reached up, gave her hand a squeeze in return before removing it from his shoulder. He reached out, pulled open the door and tossed in his bag before lowering himself into the seat, doing up the seatbelt and shutting the door behind him. "Go," he told the driver.
Chapter 13

Tony had been in Moscow before (later? Not in the Cold War era anyway), but that had been for business, with bodyguards and flashing cameras and five star hotels, endless meetings, vodka and beautiful women. This... was nothing like that. Moscow was still beautiful, of course, probably always would be. Something about the air, though, felt heavy, oppressive. Or maybe that was Tony's own apprehension bubbling up, clouding his view of things. And he was apprehensive, a whole hell of a lot more than he'd prefer to admit.

For all the years he'd been in the game by now, this was not a situation he'd ever been in, not really. He was alone, without a team, without any allies, any backup available. He was planning to drive through enemy territory and walk into an enemy base, without his suit, without JARVIS or FRIDAY, with only a few terrible examples of Stark tech and a few standard weapons at his disposal. Tony was not trained in black ops, he was not a soldier, or a spy, was not trained or built for anything like this. If he were completely honest with himself, the chances of him needing the plane ticket back to England were miniscule. And he shouldn't be scared. How many times had he stared hopeless situations in the eye without blinking? He'd lost count somewhere along the way, and still, this time around he felt wrong-footed, scared. In over his head.

What would happen if he died in his seventeen-year-old body? So far this whole magical little time travel thing had proven that paradoxes weren't as much of a thing as people liked to make them out to be, but he hadn't exactly tested out the dead in the past thing. And even if the paradox didn't end up being a, well, a thing, what would happen if he died? He snorted. Way to over-value his own importance. He wasn't an idiot. He wasn't the only choice for someone to go back, no matter how much they'd all pretended. He was simply the most convenient, the most expendable one. Probably didn't hurt that there weren't a whole lot of people left out of the ones who'd sided with him during the Civil War, but he knew it wasn't even just that. It was just that he was the one who was the least important to everyone else at that point, personally and tactically. So, if this was going to be his last hurray, well, he might as well do it properly. He'd already established there wasn't really anything left to stick around for, here or in the future. Sure, if he could get out alive, that would be preferable. It wasn't like he had more of an active death wish than he ever did. It just... wasn't a priority.

Still didn't explain why he felt like he'd woken up on the wrong side of the bed.

Tony sucked in a breath, showed his papers to the Embassy guards and walked out. He'd already wasted one night in a plush bedroom when he should be trying to be as quick about this whole thing to be, but he hadn't exactly tested out the dead in the past thing. And even if the paradox didn't end up being a, well, a thing, what would happen if he died? He snorted. Way to over-value his own importance. He wasn't an idiot. He wasn't the only choice for someone to go back, no matter how much they'd all pretended. He was simply the most convenient, the most expendable one. Probably didn't hurt that there weren't a whole lot of people left out of the ones who'd sided with him during the Civil War, but he knew it wasn't even just that. It was just that he was the one who was the least important to everyone else at that point, personally and tactically. So, if this was going to be his last hurray, well, he might as well do it properly. He'd already established there wasn't really anything left to stick around for, here or in the future. Sure, if he could get out alive, that would be preferable. It wasn't like he had more of an active death wish than he ever did. It just... wasn't a priority.

Still didn't explain why he felt like he'd woken up on the wrong side of the bed.

Tony sucked in a breath, showed his papers to the Embassy guards and walked out. He'd already wasted one night in a plush bedroom when he should be trying to be as quick about this whole thing as possible. If he did end up having a chance of coming back, he'd better not miss his flight, after all. Thirteen days left, now, to get there, grab Nat and get back. Tight schedule. He could make it, though. He had to.

He walked some ways down the street, fished the note from Jackie out of his pocket and read the address, squinting a little at the Cyrillic. He read Russian well enough, just preferred not to. Always gave him a headache. The instructions were clear enough, though, and he followed them to the letter. Pulling his coat more tightly around him against the frigid air, he moved through the streets, tucking the international papers discreetly into an inner pocket and closing a gloved hand around the Soviet ID for easy access.

He crossed the first two streets he came across, took a left, and then he was walking into the alley where the car stood waiting as promised. He had to stop and bite back a half-hysterical laugh. A Lada. They'd given him a fucking Lada. God, how did they expect him to get anywhere in Russia in January in that piece of crap? Tony sucked in a sharp breath, calmed himself down. He'd make it
work. That's what he did, after all.

A quick trip to the nearby tobacco store earned him a pack of cigarettes he might actually end up smoking with how fucking jittery he was feeling, and a set of car keys. And then he was back in the alley, trying to look like he was exactly where he was supposed to be, doing exactly what he was supposed to do. He pulled the key out of his pocket and stuck it in the door, turning it. Let out a breath of relief when it actually clicked open. He sucked in another breath in a vain attempt to bolster himself. Then he dropped into the driver's seat and shut the door behind him, put the car in the ignition.

Great, fucking great. It was a manual. Of course it was. It was a Lada, of course it was a manual. And it wasn't that Tony didn't like manual gears. He preferred them most of the time, but here he was going to be driving in bad terrain for long stretches of time, and for the sake of his left foot if nothing else, he'd really have appreciated automatic gearing. He let out a sigh, put it in reverse and glanced over his shoulder to make sure he wouldn't ram directly into someone.

There was a knock on the passenger side window.

Tony jumped halfway out of his skin, managed to step down on the brake before he did anything stupid, like cause an accident in the middle of Soviet Moscow with fake papers and a car that supposedly had weapons hidden somewhere inside it. He looked at the window, let out a breath of relief. His pulse didn't stop pounding even as he stretched over to pull up the lock. "Thought you were staying in jolly ol' England," he remarked.

James shrugged, sliding into the passenger seat. His demeanor was too stiff, and he was carefully not looking at Tony. "I figured you'd have to be pretty damn desperate to come up with a lie like that," he said. "Which would mean there's more to this whole thing than you been tellin'. Or it was the truth." He gave a strange shrug. "Either way." He let it trail off, gave another shrug.

Tony swallowed around the stream of words that wanted out of his mouth. None of them were the right ones, and he could so easily just end up making this whole thing that much worse. Although, honestly, how much worse could it get? "I appreciate it," he finally said.

James still utterly refused to look at him, and no matter how much Tony told himself that didn't hurt, it didn't stop being a lie. "Didn't come for you," James said. That, and nothing else.

Tony gritted his teeth, forced himself not to reel from the impact of that blow. Instead he looked over his shoulder again, made sure the coast was clear and backed out of the alley.

***

James didn't say another word before hours after nightfall, when Tony was beginning to get tired enough to get distracted by the snowfall. Even then, it was only to tell him to pull over and swap places. Tony did manage to get some sleep. It wasn't much and it was uneasy at best, left him no better rested than he had when he'd moved into the passenger seat in the first place. He couldn't shake the icy knot of something that sat heavy and uncomfortably painful in the pit of his stomach. Could not shake the lump from his throat.

He made himself focus on the advantages. It was a good thing James was here. The chances of actually getting Natasha and getting out alive had just skyrocketed. The deadline was so much easier to handle with a second driver. James being here was a good thing, really. It would just be a much better thing if he'd talk, or, or do anything other than just stare straight ahead and pretend Tony wasn't even there. And yeah, okay, Tony got it. He'd made his bed. He had to lie in it. That whole thing. Whichever metaphor he used, though, it still sucked. It sucked and it hurt, and-- And Tony had
to stop being a damn teenager about it. Whatever he looked like, he wasn't actually a kid. He was going to have to stop thinking like one.

And yet, on his third turn behind the wheel, it was still somehow all he could think about. The snow had let up, for now anyway, but the drifts and piles and the frankly sorry state of the roads meant they were making really fucking slow progress. It was mind numbing. There was nothing to distract himself with, no ammo at all to use on his own fucking mind and get it to stop lingering.

"We need another vehicle," James said.

Tony jumped, turned his head to look at James and very nearly took them off the road in slow motion. James's metal hand shot out, grabbed the wheel and brought them back on a straight course. "Sorry," Tony muttered, tried to shake off the lingering pins and needles from where James's arm had brushed his. "Didn't expect to hear your voice."

James shrugged, still didn't look at him, and fuck, how was it that he could somehow reduce Tony's estimation of his own value to nothing without even trying? "We're goin' too slow," he said. "We need a vehicle with a four-wheel drive. Weather's only gonna get worse."

Tony nodded. The movements felt jerky, uncontrolled. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, sure. If you think so." He narrowed his eyes, kept his sight on the road even as he mentally called up his memory of the maps he'd studied. "There's a town a couple hours ahead," he said. "I was gonna avoid it, but we can probably find something there." He didn't like the idea of stealing a car from people who probably couldn't afford to lose it, not one bit, but on the other hand... Natasha came first. This once, she had to.

As it turned out, James was a damn good car thief. And to be perfectly honest, Tony was kind of grateful, a few hours later, to be able to have something to do in caking mud over the license plates and using one of James's knives to cut enough holes in the floor that their food and weapons could be stashed. It was a distraction, and right now, any distraction was something he looked forward to. Fuck, honestly, as unsure as he still was about how the whole fight would actually go down, he was kind of just reaching a point where he couldn't wait to get there, just to have something to do that wasn't sit in a car seat and wallow.

And somehow it was still another two long days of endless snowfalls, silence, monotony and boredom interspersed with gut-wrenching thoughts and attempts at reconciliation that a look at James were enough to abort before Tony finally pulled into the trees a few miles outside the facility. "Couple of hours left till bedtime," he commented. James flashed him an incredulous look that Tony couldn't help but file away, treasure. "We should probably wait here. Judging by what Natasha told me, we make life a lot easier for ourselves if we wait until the girls have been put to bed. If they're handcuffed to the bedposts-" James winced at that, at least. "-at least they won't be able to fight us." Tony turned to look at him, felt that all-too familiar tug-and-stab in his chest. "I didn't lie to you, you know."

James cocked an eyebrow. "Logic would kinda have it that either you lied by omission to begin with, or you lied outright later," he said. "Either way, you did. And I'm still leanin' toward the latter. I'm gettin' back more and more memories, and none of them, absolutely none, include anythin' that could... result in what you're sayin'."

Tony sucked in a breath, squashed down the urge to reach out. James wouldn't respond very well right now, not judging by the ugly mix of rationality and emotionality in his voice. It hurt just to listen to it. "Modern medicine means you don't have to screw someone for there to be a baby these days," he said. "All they need is a small sample."
James blinked. Then, bit by bit, the color drained from his face. A muscle jumped in his jaw as he dropped his gaze down to glance at his hands. Tony heard the shudder on his next inhale. Then he looked up, eyes straight ahead again. "Won't believe it till I see it," he said.

Tony swallowed. "If you don't think there's at least a chance I'm telling the truth, why did you come?"

James glanced at him, the barest fraction of a second. "I think I was always gonna come," he finally said. "No matter what I told you. Didn't need you claimin' your old flame is my daughter. That just... mucked everythin' up."

Tony sucked in a sharp breath, turned to look straight at him. "You think-- What?" He shook his head. "No. No. Natasha and me, we-- It was never like that. Never. James, she was my friend. My best friend, toward the end there. She was the only one who got it, the only one on my side because she actually believed what I did, because she knew the things I did. She--" He shook his head again. "It was never like that."

James cocked a disbelieving eyebrow. "You loved her," he said.

"And I told you," Tony said. "There are different kinds of love. The-- She was my teammate, and my friend, and yeah, of course, she was gorgeous. She has your genes, what else could she be? But we never, never--" He stopped talking, shook his head. "Maybe in another world, where we weren't both so broken we'd have only wrecked each other more, but. At that point, I think what we had was too important for both of us to risk messing it up like that. So yeah, I loved her, but I was never in love with her." He sucked in a deep breath. "And I'll find you proof. You gotta wanna know."

James's Adam's apple bobbed. Then he shrugged. "That's your business," he said. "Doesn't really make much of a difference, does it?"

"For the record," Tony said. "Those TV shows where someone sleeps with two generations of the same family? Always grossed me out."

James didn't answer for long moments. He let his head drop back against the back of the seat with an audible thump. "Doesn't matter really, does it? Makes everythin' a bit less disgustin'. You still lied, though, whichever lie it was." Another long moment's quiet. "I'm gonna trust you for the duration of this mission. After... I don't know that I can. Guess it depends on... fuck even knows what."

Tony squeezed his eyes shut, tried to let the hurt roll off him. Didn't really work. Because that did hurt. Sure, the list of people who'd ever trusted him was pretty damn short, and James hadn't been on it very long. He shouldn't care, should be used to it. He probably just wasn't a very trustworthy person. It still stung. "But for the mission?" he made himself ask.

James shrugged. "I'm no strategist," he said. "I never was. I always needed someone to point me in the right direction, even before HYDRA." A strange, bitter sort of expression twisted his lip back for a moment. "And I ain't got all the intel. I need you for this as much as you need me."

It was a struggle, suddenly, to keep himself steady. Tony stuck his hands in his pockets, let them clench somewhere out of sight to keep them from shaking. He nodded. "Not my area of genius either," he said. "I'll do my best." He took a deep breath, then he nodded towards the glove compartment. "I stashed something in there. Can you hand it over?"

James nodded, popped it open and took out the small bag, pressing it into Tony's lap.

Tony sucked in a breath, made his hands unclench and slowly extracted them from his pockets. Then
he zipped open the bag and took out the phones he'd spent most of Christmas building. "There's no signal out here," he said, "But they have radios built in as well, so they should work for short-wave transmissions, help us keep in touch. There are a few other gadgets there as well, mainly in this one." He held the slightly bulkier one up and put it in his pocket. Then he pulled out the other phone and the headsets, handed one over. "About ready?"

"Tell me what I'm ready for, and I'm good to go," James said.
The adrenalin was already pumping through Tony's whole body when he watched James get into position with the sniper rifle, watched him take aim through the scope. His whole body felt jittery, and honestly, at this point he wasn't sure whether it was the nerves or James. It wasn't exactly a secret that he had a huge damn competence kink. He pushed that thought away, made himself focus on the situation, get his head firmly in the here and now. Squinting through his own binoculars, he spotted the cameras aimed at the gate, the keypad, the barbed wire on top of the wall, ran the calculations in his mind. "Once you take down the guard, we have to assume they'll know something's wrong. It shouldn't take them long to mobilize some kind of response, so we'll have... I assume a maximum of one minute to get through the gate and into cover, or we'll be sitting ducks."

"We should get closer," James commented. "Closer the range, the shorter we'll have to run."

"Closer the range, the larger the risk that he'll spot us, raise the alarm and find some way to fight back. Facility probably has some kind of lockdown procedure as well. We need the element of surprise." Tony hadn't imagined he'd ever miss Cap. Right now, sad as he was to admit it, he kind of did.

"What about your... radio thing?" James asked, still staring intently through his scopes.

Tony shrugged the coat more tightly around himself. The utter freezing cold would get to him pretty damn soon if they didn't get moving. James showed no signs of letting it bother him, but then he probably wasn't acclimatized to the States either, plus he had the serum fighting for him. "It's got one weapon, and that weapon fires once. I need to save it," he said, and the shudder that ran through him at the thought of that had nothing to do with the cold.

"Okay," James said. "Get ready to run."

Tony nodded. He sucked in a deep breath, tried to make his muscles relax, tried to get ready. His hand went into his pocket of its own volition, closed around the Swiss army knife he'd convinced James to give up earlier. It was all going down now. After weeks of agonizing about it, nearly a week spent crammed into shitty cars staring at snowfalls... It all came down to this, right here and now. "Ready," he confirmed.

Through the silencer, Tony barely heard the snap of the rifle. It was only when the barrel of it dropped that he realized he needed to get moving. And then it was jolting through him, veins swimming with adrenalin. His feet were pounding beneath him. His pulse pounded in his ears. Now. It was happening now and it didn't feel quite real, but with the frigid air around him, the wind in his face, the weight of a pistol in his belt and everything else in his pockets, it was enough to keep going.

James, of course, was far faster than he was, caught him up within seconds. He gripped Tony's arm and propelled them both forward. Tony pushed away the inappropriate little spike of attraction that even a business-like touch could apparently provoke these days. He focused on his feet instead, on keeping them moving through the snow. Couldn't fall down, couldn't mess this up. The walls loomed up ahead, seemed enormous, insurmountable. God, what must it have been like to grow up behind those? The thought flashed through his mind and was gone again the next moment.

And then they were at the gates. James pushed the guard out of the way. Tony caught just the barest
glimpse of the bullet hole perfectly on point at the very center of his forehead. He sucked in a sharp
breath, fished out the Swiss army knife. He flicked out the screwdriver. For a moment his fingers
fumbled, trembling with adrenaline. They felt large and clumsy and fuck, he couldn't flake out now.
He'd known how to use tools like this since he was a toddler. He knew how to use one now. He
sucked in a deep breath, got the panel open. He flicked the knife shut, dropped it back in his pocket
and pulled out his phone, connecting the wires between it and the touchpad and started up the
decoding program he'd coded what felt like forever ago at this point.

The numbers flashed across the screen, becoming fixed one at a time, far too slowly.

7

An owl screeched somewhere in the woods all around them.

2

James was breathing far too loudly behind him.

9

Was that movement from the other side of the gate? Fuck, he hoped not. His foot was tapping and
his breath was coming too fast. His heart threatened to race all the way out of his chest.

0

Why the fuck didn't people ever stick to four digits? Would make a big fucking difference for Tony's
nerves right about now. He dropped his free hand down to his belt, wrapped his fingers around the
hilt of the pistol, let the freezing weight of it settle, reassuring, against his palm.

3

Tony squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. He was definitely hearing something now, raised voices.
Footsteps muffled against the snow. Shit, but he wished he knew what the actual distance between
the gate and the building was, what the inside of the compound looked like. They could be walking
right into fuck even knew what, and he would have absolutely no way to prepare.

7

The gate began to swing open. Tony caught a brief glance of what looked like an old Russian manor
house, regal and austere. He caught movement out of the corner of his eye, felt his body begin to
gear up to do something, even if he wasn't entirely sure what. He just-- "Get down," James shouted,
interrupting Tony's train of thought. Then James used the same hand he'd been dragging Tony along
by to throw him to the side.

Tony landed face first in a snow drift taller than he was, and had to spend several long moments
freeing himself enough just to turn around and spit out his mouthful of snow. And just like that, he
was served a perfect front row seat to the spectacle that was James Barnes in action, easily visible
in the eerie light of the moon and snow. James wasn't 'poetry in motion', the way Tony had heard
some people describe Cap or Natasha. Rather, he was all raw strength and brutality, as powerful as
he was efficient. There was a strange, unhurried quality to his movements, even though Tony could
tell, intellectually, that most of the time he was moving faster than most normal humans could ever
even dream of. It was how self-assured it all looked, maybe, like he knew he was going to win either
way, and thus had all the time in the world. In any other situation, Tony might've sprung a chub just
from watching, but the snow and the crack of gunshots and broken necks, the spay of blood, all that
kind of put a damper on it.
It couldn't have been more than a minute - probably a lot less - when James was left standing alone with nearly a dozen bodies scattered around him. He walked toward Tony, then, fast and purposeful, and Tony felt a moment's instinctive fear - who wouldn't, faced with a perfect predator? - before James's hand closed around his forearm and hauled him the rest of the way out of the snow. He wasn't even breathing hard. It was another moment before Tony had enough control of himself to assess the situation properly. "We should probably get moving," he finally said. "If anyone's watching from the windows, they know you're here now, and if they know who they're dealing with, they might have some tricks up their sleeve to make life a hell of a lot harder for us."

James nodded, looking around for a moment, seeming to drink in their surroundings in one sweeping gaze. "I've been here before," he observed, toneless. At least he was still speaking Brooklyn. Tony would be a hell of a lot more concerned if he weren't. "Let's go." Without waiting for Tony to agree, he began moving, hauling Tony along by his arm again, and Tony really did need to build himself a suit if he made it out of here and stayed in this timeline. He was getting tired of being treated like a rag doll every time the situation tightened around them.

The thick, old oak doors were no match for James's cybernetic arm, and just like that, they were in. James had let Tony go somewhere along the way, and Tony tried not to linger on that. He pulled his phone out again, started up another program. "Blocking their radio communication," he said. "I hope. You cut the phoneline?"

"You know I did," James said. He dug into his own pocket and came up with the headset, putting it on. Tony followed his example, let out a small sigh of relief as the small nubs, specially designed to block one specific frequency, settled into his ears. "C'mon," James added, his voice slightly muffled now, through the tech. He started down the hallway and Tony set off after him, felt like his legs were working overtime just to keep up.

The fluorescent lights flickered overhead, a strange contrast against the old building. Party posters and slogans lined the walls, sitting alongside paintings of ballerinas, and Tony bit back a gasp. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was walking through a haunted house, something nightmarish and not quite real, something that, in his time, didn't exist outside of Natasha's memories. It was oddly like walking through the darkest corners of her mind, and Tony didn't like that one bit. It made him jumpy, made him feel like frigid fingers were tracing their way up and down his spine, leaving shudders and goose bumps in their wake.

Tony reached down, wrapped his fingers around the hilt of his gun again. He pulled it free of his belt, kept his sweat-damp fingers wrapped tight around it. He couldn't stand how eerily quiet everything was, like they really had walked into something dead, something from the past, despite the guards James had had to mow through to even get them this far. "I don't like this," he muttered.

James didn't so much as look at him, kept his gaze rolling along their surroundings. He probably wasn't missing a single thing. Then, suddenly, he gave a sharp nod, as if in response to some suggestion Tony had neither given nor even heard. "C'mon," he said again, taking a left when another hallway broke off from the first. There were stairs leading up, small and narrow, as if in direct opposition to the grand opulence of the double staircase they'd passed in the entrance hall. The halls themselves seemed to be narrowing, and Tony suppressed a sudden sliver of claustrophobia that tried to sneak up on him. They must've passed into the old servants' quarters somewhere along the way, and--

James opened a door, gun up and ready. After a moment, he walked through, waved Tony along behind him. They emerged through what looked like it had once been a camouflaged entryway, back into stripped down opulence and grey/red propaganda. Tony spotted a security camera up ahead. How many of those had he missed as they passed through? They must be everywhere. The Soviets
had liked the idea of big brother more, even, than post-9/11 America did. Would. Whichever.

"They're watching us," Tony muttered. The words came out more breathless than he'd have wanted. "Place like this has to have more guys than the ones we ran into."

"Course they do," James agreed. "In the barracks. We only had to deal with the night shift." He stopped short next to another stairwell, frowning. "I've been here before. I can take those guys, but I can't tell you where to find the kids. Haven't been to that part of the facility."

Tony nodded. "Go," he agreed. He frowned. "Just, maybe... Don't kill everyone? There has to be some adults around if the girls are going to survive, and we can't take them all with us." That was still something that stung, and sometimes he couldn't help but wonder just what Natasha would think of him if she knew he'd save her and leave the rest of them behind. She wouldn't have approved. Good thing she wouldn't know, then.

"Tony," James said, casting him a quick look. "I've seen some of those kids in action. We ain't talkin' innocent little babes here. These are enemy operatives, and they're dangerous as hell. We should kill them too and be done with it."

Tony sucked in a sharp breath, shook his head. "We aren't killing children," he said, keeping his voice as firm as he possibly could. Because that was it, that was the decision, no two ways about it. He'd already done God knows how much shit he'd never be able to forgive himself for. Actively killing little girls was not going on that list. "Go," he said. "Keep your radio turned on."

James nodded. Then he turned on his heel and vanished around the nearest corner. Tony sucked in a breath, looked around himself. Where, in a huge ass old manor house, would you put a dormitory? He shook his head. He was thinking about this wrong. Don't think about it as a manor house, think of it as any other facility. Training facilities would be downstairs and outside, for the sake of structural integrity if nothing else. Chances were the dormitories were upstairs. Chances also were that any labs or shit they had were in the basement. Tony shook his head. First things first, and Natasha was still the priority.

He picked up his pace, jogged to the staircase and took it upstairs. He kept his hand wrapped securely around the gun, kept his own movements as quiet as possible. Randomly running into someone wouldn't have been much of a problem with James there, but on his own he had a considerably smaller chance of surviving a confrontation, so it would be a hell of a lot better if he could just avoid one.

Upstairs, he began to open the doors he came across. Every single time his hand closed around a door handle, his heart jumped into his throat. He was drenched in nervous sweat, and fuck, he really did not need to revisit that particular feeling he got just before a heart attack. He was supposed to have a strong heart these days. Fuck.

There were what looked like classrooms. A few supply closets. Big institutional bathrooms. There were only a few doors left in this wing, which meant either he'd taken a wrong turn, or he was just about there. Tony bit down on his lip, tried to keep breathing normally. He raised his gun, got it into firing position, hoping to God he'd be able to fire it better than during that whole fiasco with Killian and Extremis. Then, carefully, he wrapped his hand around the handle of the second to last door, opened it and glanced inside. He tried to squint through the darkness. For a few breathless moments, he couldn't make out anything. Then slowly, bit by bit, the room came into view. He heard a soft snore. The dimensions were wrong. Too small. Another snore, even as Tony froze. Cold sweat broke up all along his body. The snoring stopped.

Fuck. Fuckfuckfuck. Knowing his luck, their governess or whatever the hell she was would be a
graduate of the program herself. Actually, he was pretty sure Natasha had said she was. Which meant he was dead. So, so dead. He didn't dare breathe as he slowly pushed against the door. No way he was getting away with this. No way in hell. If whoever was in there was a trained agent, he was done for. The light leaking in from the hallway would be enough to give him away, even if he wasn't making any discernible noise. Slowly, inch by inch, he pushed the door the rest of the way shut. It fell into place with a click that seemed to echo through the stillness. Something like a sob gripped him by the throat, made his gun hand shake.

He wanted to run away, wanted to hide, or *something*, anything to get himself out of this mad situation that Natasha would've beat his ass for even contemplating to begin with. No. He sucked in a slow, careful breath, forced himself back to something resembling calmness. He was Tony fucking Stark, whatever his papers ended up saying. He finished what he started, every single time. He was mulishly stubborn enough to compete with Captain America. He'd been through hell and back more times than most people ever contemplated. He could damn well get this done. He let the breath back out, doing everything he could to stay silent as he made his way to the next door.

A floorboard creaked under his foot. Tony froze again, shaking like a fucking leaf. He was going to give himself a heart attack at seventeen if someone else didn't manage to kill him off first, God damn it.

"Stop making so much noise," someone said in his ear, the words barely louder than a breath. Something inside Tony relaxed a fraction. He'd half forgotten about the radio connection, that was how silent James had managed to stay. "You breathe loud enough to wake the dead."

"Sorry," Tony muttered.

"Quiet," James hissed. "On with it."

Tony took another steadying breath, nodded into thin air. Then he gripped the next doorknob and turned it before he could think twice about it. He pulled the door open, wincing when it creaked.

There was movement inside. For long moments, that was all he could make out through the darkness. Then, slowly, the curtains became visible, backlit by the moonlight. He could see the shadows of the bars behind them. And then, bit by bit, white bedding and several sets of eyes staring at him. They weren't screaming, at least. There was that. He'd be so screwed if they did. And any moment now, they would. He reached for the phone. Pressed the button. Repressed the urge to vomit all over himself. The eyes were still staring. The girls were still watching, but he knew that if the lights were on, he'd see blackened veins, see the same fear on them that he'd felt years ago, when Obie ripped his heart out. Fuck, but he hated doing this. Still, it was the option that didn't make him a baby killer, just as he'd known when he installed it.

He bit down around the wounded sound that wanted to escape his throat, stepped inside and shut the door behind him. Then, with nausea still high and thick in his throat, he walked deeper into the room. He stopped at the first bed and glanced down at the girl who lay there, frozen, staring up at him with wide eyes. He didn't know a whole lot about what sizes children were supposed to be at which age, but this one was definitely too big to be three. Swallowing, he moved onto the next one, and the next, and the next, doing his best not to look at their eyes or the cuffs around their left wrists. They were all too big, all too damn big, several years too old.

Tony left the room, shutting the door tight behind him. Fuck. If she wasn't there, where was she? She was here. She had to be. She'd been born and raised here, spent her entire life here up until her graduation. So if she wasn't in the dormitory with the older girls, where-- He bent over, hand gripping the wall, and did his best to breathe through the nausea, stay on his feet. It wasn't over yet, not by a long shot. He just had all the rest of the massive fucking manor house to look through.
He heard movement, somehow, before he saw it. He spun, the training kicking in, even if his movements were clumsy. The silencer muffled the shot he got off before collapsing back against the wall behind him, panting. His heart was beating so damn hard he thought it might explode, and he was on the verge of either vomiting or sobbing or passing the fuck out, and this, these kinds of missions... Yeah, he'd been right. He wasn't made for this, not at all. He wasn't--

"Status?" James barked in his ear, voice still impossibly quiet.

Tony squeezed his eyes shut for the barest moment, used the memory of that voice to ground himself. "Unharmed," he said. "I don't have her yet. You?"


Tony took another careful breath, nodded to himself. "Affirmative," he said. Then, slowly, he made himself lift his head and look. An elderly woman lay on the floor, bleeding heavily from Tony's lucky shot to her throat. Her white nightgown was soaking through with crimson. She was trying to get up, mouth working. Probably trying to sound the alarm, scream, something. All that came out was blood. At that sight, Tony did have to turn and try to spit the bitter taste out of his mouth. Sure, he'd killed before. It tended not to be so bloody or close range or fucking horrifying, though, God, and--

"Madame?" a small voice asked from inside the room, tight with fear. Tony's heart jumped. Immediately, he stepped over the dying woman and into the room. Again it took a moment for his eyes to adjust enough to make out the second bed in the room, smaller, with a tiny form on it. The handcuff shone in the moonlight.

Tony swallowed down the hope and the fear, just as strong, of having that hope dashed. "Natalia?" he asked.

A tiny head turned toward him. A set of wide eyes stared at him. "Da?" She started to say something else, probably more Russian, but fell silent, tiny, pearly teeth biting down on her bottom lip.

Tony breathed out a sigh of relief. For a brief second, he felt as though all his strings had been cut. He didn't remember crossing the room, didn't remember putting the gun away or using the Swiss knife on her handcuff or lifting her up, drawing her as close to his chest as he dared. Fuck. Natasha. "I've got her," he said, and that was when he realized he could hear sounds of fighting in his ear, hear James's harsh breathing, shots and heavy impacts. He needed to get moving. Except he didn't know the direction to take. He gritted his teeth, straightened his spine and walked out of the room, shielding the child's eyes when he stepped over the now definitely dead woman.

The fluorescent lights flickered overhead, washing the color out of everything. Not that there had been much to begin with. Tony shifted his grip on the child. He couldn't bring himself to think of her as Natasha. Same building blocks, sure, but not Natasha, not yet. Not ever, hopefully, for her own sake. She had brown hair, where he had half expected red, barely half a shade lighter than James's, which, yeah, that made sense. Tony shook his head, brought himself out of it. Now was not the time to be deeply weirded out by the fact that he was holding the three-year-old version of one of his best friends.

He couldn't explain his obsession with getting to the labs, really, hadn't been able to properly put it into words for James anyway. It wasn't just that he stubbornly wanted to prove Natasha's origins to James, not anymore. It was the scientist in him, maybe, wanting information. And it was the part of him that couldn't stand the fact that James had been used like he had - not only as a weapon, but as breeding stock - and would prevent it from happening again if he possibly could. More than anything, right now, it was a gut feeling that told him it was absolutely fucking imperative he get
there and find out absolutely everything he possibly could.

"If you've got her," James said in his ear, "clear out."

Tony bit his lip. It would be safer, it definitely would, and he should do as he was told, should absolutely make sure he got this little girl - Natalia, he could call her that - out of here before the situation heated up. Except nothing good ever came from ignoring his gut. In fact, most of his best choices, best inventions, had come from following it. "Negative," he said. "There's something I need to check out first." He blocked out James's protests, glanced down at Natalia again. She wasn't very old, but he doubted someone who could grow into Natasha Romanoff had ever been stupid. And these people, whether they were HYDRA or KGB or both, they were clearly obsessed with the serum. The little girl in his arms was proof enough of that. And that meant they'd have definitely been doing tests on her, to see what a second generation super soldier could teach them. "Natalia," he said, swopping to broken Russian with a slight wince. "I need to take you for a check-up. Can you point me to where they normally take you?"

Natalia looked at him with large, serious eyes. Tony wasn't sure why she wasn't more scared. Too used to strangers, maybe. Hopefully that was something that could be changed. Not very healthy in a little girl. Finally, Natalia nodded and pointed a small, chubby finger back down the hallway.

"Spasiba," Tony said. He forced a smile on his face, did everything he damn well could to look self-assured, like everything was perfectly all right. He did not want to scare her. "I'm going to put you down now;" he continued, still making an effort to keep his Russian as smooth as possible. "And you can--"

"I speak English, you know," Natalia said. "Madame teaches us. And we get to watch movies too, sometimes. They're in English."

Tony nodded, more than a little grateful for that help at least. His Russian wasn't terrible, but it was far from good, as Natasha had made sure to point out the few times she'd heard him speak it. "Okay," he said. "That's really well done, Natalia." He took a breath, tried to pick the thread of what he'd been trying to say back up. "I'm gonna put you down, and then I want you to stay right behind me and tell me which direction to take. If I tell you to hide, you hide. And now we have to be really quiet. Understand?"

She nodded. "Is this a test?" she asked. Her eyes grew wide again, but with something like excitement this time. And yeah, that, that was kind of scary, the fact that testing was apparently already a thing she was used to. At least she seemed to regard it as more of a game than anything else.

"Yes," he said. Then he put her down. His hand immediately went down to wrap around the hilt of the gun again. He kind of hated the fact that he felt safer that way. "Status?" he asked James.

"Situation under control," James answered. "The barracks are clear. I'm coming back to the main building."

Tony let out a breath. "Understood," he said. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. Then he nodded to himself and set off, walking as fast as he thought Natalia might be able to keep up and still be able to be quiet. Which was no problem, as it turned out. Tony was still the one making all the noise, no matter how hard he tried not to.

Natalia would whisper a direction every once in a while - not right or left, which was probably good; Tony was pretty sure knowing right and left at that age was just weird. After what felt simultaneously like half an eternity and no time at all, they had descended two staircases, and they
were definitely in a basement of some kind. Even if the stairs hadn't been clue enough, Tony thought he'd have known. The air wasn't as damp as it could've been, but it was definitely cooler. Every single sound seemed to echo and reverberate around them. It made his skin prickle with nerves.

"Is there usually someone at the door?" he belatedly remembered to ask, glancing back over his shoulder at Natalia who was still following in his footsteps like a faithful little shadow.

She nodded, looking very determined and serious now. Tony could see Natasha in her all too well. Natalia might still think this was all a game, but Tony supposed he shouldn't be surprised no incarnation of Natasha Romanoff would ever back down from a challenge, let alone want to lose a game.

Tony returned her nod, drew in a breath. "Are we getting close?" he asked, keeping his voice even quieter this time around. If there was a guard, he did not want to prematurely alert them.

She gave another nod.

Tony bit his lip again, glanced around himself again.

"I've taken out the observation room," James said in his ear, startling Tony all over again. "It was empty, but at least no one will be watchin' now."


She nodded and scurried off. A moment later she was out of sight, and Tony was pretty damn sure he'd need scanners to find her. He straightened his spine against the odd sense of dread that made his skin break into goose bumps. Shifted his damp grip on the gun. Then he walked the twenty feet that was left of this stretch of hallway, stepped around the next corner, gun held up and ready in front of him.

The guard was standing in front of what looked like a set of blast-proofed doors. He was looking around, half paranoid, speaking into a radio. He wasn't getting an answer. Tony didn't wait for more observations, let himself jolt into action. He took aim. Shot. The bullet pinged off the doors. What felt like a bucketful of ice water drenched through Tony's whole body. He ducked back behind the corner, breath already coming too fast. His heart hammered in his chest. This was-- Shit, he shouldn't have missed that one. One chance. You got one chance to shoot first, and now he was up against someone older (physically) and stronger and probably far more well trained than himself.

A bullet bit into the wall on the other side of the hallway. Tony was pretty sure he jumped half a foot into the air.

"Tony, status," James barked.

"Natalia's hidden. Took cover. Guard just shot at me. Fine though." He couldn't seem to get his mouth to work right, couldn't seem to construct any kind of sentence that did anything to explain the situation. Nausea washed over him again, probably from fear this time. Fuck, it wasn't like this was the first time he'd been shot at. It was just that he normally had the armor and a team. Shit. He needed to unlock this situation, and do it fast. He sucked in a sharp breath, forced himself back under control. "I'm cutting comms," he said. Then he shifted the gun until he was holding it in one hand, pulled the phone out of his pocket.

"Tony." James's voice was sharp, but the brief pause before he said anything else gave away some sense of uncertainty that only made Tony that much more scared. "Location?"

"Basement," Tony said. "I think I'm under the west wing somewhere." Another deep breath. He
glanced around the corner. Winced. The guard was definitely trying to get closer. Tony fired off a shot just to make him stay back. "Cutting comms now."

"Affirmative," James replied.

Tony pulled up the phone, quickly keyed in the last command he'd ever get to use on it. He unplugged the headphones, pressed the final button. Then he threw the phone into the hallway ahead of him. Counted down in his head. Then there was a slight pop as the charge went off. Moments later, bright light flooded out past the corner, a flash of it. Tony squeezed his eyes shut. Brightly colored afterimages flashed across his eyelids, and he hadn't even been looking in that direction. He waited just a moment for the magnesium light to die down to acceptable levels. Then he rounded the corner, gun up, and shot off three bullets in quick succession. At least one of them must've gotten the temporarily blinded guard. He went down with a cry. Tony swallowed, glanced down at the sad remains of the phone he'd spent days building. Communications would be open to the outside world now, and his link with James was cut. He had to move, fast.

He walked forward, paused to make sure the self-destruct had been done properly. Gave himself a mental pat on the back when he concluded the Soviets would be able to pull precisely nothing useful from the wreck. Then he kneeled by the dead guard and poked around for a few moments before his hands closed around a set of keys. "Natalia," he called, putting away the gun. "You can come out now. The coast is clear." He glanced down at the body of the guard, which had finally stopped moving, stopped breathing. "Keep your eyes shut, sweetheart. Let's see if you can follow my voice." She'd have heard the gunshots, of course, or at least the one the guard had fired off. Unlike Tony, he hadn't been using a silencer, but that did not mean Tony was going to let a tiny child look at a corpse. He kept speaking, unsure as to what he was even saying, just tried to give her some kind of auditory anchor to follow. And then, finally, a small hand closed around his sleeve. Tony picked her up, pulled her close, and breathed out a sigh of relief he hadn't even realized he was holding in. "Well done, sweetheart. So good. You did so good." He smoothed down her hair with a careful hand before walking to the door and unlocking it one-handedly.

At first glance, he could've almost been convinced all he'd walked into was an infirmary. Honestly, it might very well have been, if he hadn't known exactly where he was. Through one of the side doors, he was almost certain, he'd be able to find the chair they'd used on James, find rooms far more menacing than the one he was currently standing in. He had no desire to step foot in any of those, especially not with a little kid in tow. Instead, he carefully looked over the signs in neat, machine-written Cyrillic outside the various doors until he came across one that said 'files'. He'd start there. Afterwards, he would find out where they stored biological material and figure out some way to destroy the samples. First things first, though.

The door was locked, but the Swiss knife made quick work of it, and then he was standing in what seemed almost like an extremely clinical version of a study. He bypassed the less interesting parts and went straight for the expansive filing cabinets, setting Natalia down and instructing her not to leave the room or touch anything. He could feel her curious eyes on him as he picked yet another lock with quick motions. Then he was pulling open the drawers, wishing for a computer, or some kind of filing system he might stand a chance of understanding.

It took several minutes he wasn't sure he had to waste until he had pulled out the thick file on the Winter Soldier Project. He leafed through the papers quickly, ignoring mission reports and medical files until he found a reference to something that looked more promising. A bit more rifling around and he came up with another file. He very nearly gagged. Fuck, they had actually had the gall to come right out and call it a breeding project, and just the first few lines were enough to make him feel sick to his stomach.
He'd thought he knew how obsessed these people were with super soldiers, but clearly he didn't know the half of it. They'd started their attempts as early as the sixties. Failure after failure after failure, and Tony wasn't sure he could ever show this to James, wasn't sure what it would do to him. What was clear was that the attempts at breeding more super soldiers had left a trail of bodies almost as long and wide as the Winter Soldier himself. Woman after woman - volunteers, supposedly, but Tony wasn't so sure - dead from internal injuries when the fetuses proved too strong, and the fetuses themselves too young to be viable. Somehow, their obsession had kept them going for two decades despite the heaping pile of failures. Natalia was the first success, although at that point she could probably more likely be called a freak accident. She was still born months premature, and her mother - a KGB agent by the name of Aliana Romanova - had died in childbirth. There were pictures.

Tony had to look away, then, and bend over, heaving. He was horribly aware of Natalia's eyes on him, of the fact that she was watching him damn near fall apart right in front of her eyes. Somehow, that, the knowledge of his audience, was the only thing holding him together. Somehow, he kept from vomiting, managed to straighten out and return to the file.

Natalia and the knowledge that it was possible had apparently only made them that much more determined. Another few of those horrible photos came up, and he distracted himself, stole a moment's break, by finding Natalia's file as well, putting it on the desk so he could take it with him. Sure as fuck wasn't leaving it there. Still, no matter how much he just wanted to pack it all up in the briefcase sitting conveniently on the chair and get the hell out and never read or see any of that terrible shit again, his gut - when it wasn't busy rebelling - was telling him he had to keep going. And so he did, slogging through more horrors that made the Alien franchise look tame by comparison. And then--

He heard himself gasp, didn't remember making the sound. Felt his eyes widen. He blinked them deliberately before reading over it again. "Second success," he muttered, felt another wave of horror rush through him. Suddenly frantic, he emptied out the briefcase and stuffed in the files. "Carry this," he told Natalia, pushing the too-large bag into her small arms, and then he was rushing out of the room with his little shadow right on his heels.

Hands shaking, he scanned the signs on all the next doors before he reached the one that said 'питомник'. 'Nursery'. Tony gulped in a lungful of air that did absolutely nothing for how lightheaded and wrong-footed he was feeling. Then he picked the lock and pushed open the door, pulling up his gun and holding it at the ready. "Stay here," he told Natalia. Then he walked inside.

He went for the nurse first. Felt slightly bad for walking right up and shooting her in the head. She had to be an agent of some kind, though. Okay, maybe not, or he wouldn't have been able to do it before she'd woken and broken his neck, but she'd definitely done some kind of horrible stuff, or knew of horrible stuff that had been done here, or-- He cut that train of thought off before it got away from him. Stuffed the gun back into his belt. It wouldn't do him much good at this point anyway. Out of bullets. He carefully didn't look at the corpse, simply scanned the room again until he found the crib.

The baby was tiny. Tony kind of imagined all babies were, but then again he had never really been within touching distance of one, and fuck, what the hell was he supposed to do? The tactical thing, the clever thing, would be just to leave it, like all the older girls, to-- But he had the serum, and that was not something KGB or HYDRA could be allowed to keep hold of. That, and he was James's son, and whether that mattered to James or not... Tony couldn't leave him here. Simply couldn't. But he also needed a way to move around, himself and a toddler and a baby and probably a shitload of baby supplies, because the only thing Tony really knew about babies - aside from support their head or you kill them - was that the smaller they were, the more stuff they needed. He sucked in a deep breath, returned to the bed and lifted up the sheets and blankets to cover the dead nurse's face. Then
he turned on the lights. "Come in," he told Natalia. "See if you can find a blanket or sheet or something. Not off the bed."

Natalia flashed him a look that said maybe she wasn't all that impressed by his intelligence, and damn, but that was familiar. Then she raised a small hand and pointed at a shelf. "This was my room," she told him.

Tony blinked, nodded, didn't process it. He wasn't sure he had space in his brain right now to process anything except the task straight ahead. When he did find the time, he'd probably have a nervous breakdown, or another heart attack. "Thanks," he told her before walking over and picking several blankets up off the shelf. He handed her one. "Can you wrap this around yourself?" he asked. "Like a robe or dress or something? It's going to be really cold soon."

"Are we going outside?" she asked, sounding far too excited considering just what the temperatures were out in the freezing night air.

"Yeah," Tony answered. He spread one blanket out over the floor and began to pick things off the shelves. Diapers, he thought those were. Bottles. Cans of formula. Good thing he found those. He was pretty sure even super soldier babies couldn't eat grown-up food. Once he couldn't fit any more on the blanket, he tied off the ends and stuck his arm through the impromptu satchel. Then he picked up another blanket and spread it out, picked up the baby - careful, careful, don't break it - and wrapped up the tiny person. He wouldn't have any free hands to fight with, he realized when he maneuvered the bundled baby into the crook of his arm. Would be better to carry something on his back, but he didn't have any way to tie it securely without wasting even more time than he already had. He was going to have to risk it.

What had happened to the baby in the other timeline, he couldn't help but wonder? Then he pushed the thought away. Better not ask questions if you didn't want to speculate on the answer. "Come on," he told Natalia. "We're going."

They returned to the main infirmary just as James burst through the doors. James stopped short, simply caught up in staring at them. Then he shook his head, like a dog shaking off water. "C'mon," he said. "We gotta go."

Tony shook his head. "We gotta get rid of your genetic material," he said, quickly scanning the rest of the door signs. "That one," he finally said, pointing. "Destroy everything in that room, and you should be in the clear."

James looked, for a moment, as though he wanted to ask questions very badly. Finally, he gave a sharp nod and punched open the door, walked inside. He emerged maybe a minute later, looking unnaturally white in the face. He was carefully avoiding even looking at the children. "Stay behind me," he instructed. Then he led the way out.

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully I'll be able to put another chapter up tomorrow, but the day might just be too hectic, volunteer work pretty much from I get up until I go to bed. Otherwise, I should be able to put up the final chapters over the first and second of January. Sorry it's all taking so long.

Thanks so much to everyone who's reading through this monster of a story, and for the bookmarks, recs, subscriptions, kudos and especially the comments, which have been
like a bunch of extra little Christmas presents.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the wait. I went out of town and stupidly forgot to send myself the edited file. I'll post another chapter later tonight, and the final one tomorrow. Enjoy :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony still wasn't sure how it had happened, how they managed to just walk out without more resistance. Was definitely not sure how they made the trek back to the car with two tiny children in tow. All he knew was that he was strapped back into the passenger seat, arms wrapped securely around the baby bundle, Natalia curled up in her blanket on the backseat. And he was very close to having that damn breakdown. He couldn't think, couldn't even seem to move, could just sit there and let the car bump him around as all those damn pictures flashed across his mind's eye.

Those fucking photos. He didn't think he'd ever be able to forget them, even if this all ended and he returned to his own timeline. They flowed together, superimposed over one another, grotesque and unreal and yet the realest fucking thing. His stomach turned again.

"Tony," James was saying. "Tony," and there was something about his tone that hinted it was far from the first time he'd been trying to get Tony's attention.

"Huh?" Tony said, blinking as he slowly made his head turn around so he could face James.

"There's a car comin' at us," James said. "Don't go gettin' shell shock on me now."

Tony blinked again, tried to shake off that odd fog of surreality that seemed to have settled around him. His head felt fuzzy. It felt like it took forever before he could make himself focus on the road ahead, long and straight, mostly covered in snow. And there, headlights. "Fuck," he breathed.

"KGHYDRA?"

"No idea," James said. "We gotta take them out." He looked around himself. "Take the wheel."

Tony shook his head, tried to get dislodge the last few spider webs that seemed to be crowding his brain. "What, no. We don't know that they're after us. We can't just go shooting innocent people. James."

James shot him a quick glance over his shoulder before returning to what he'd been doing before, which was apparently some odd acrobatic feat that included steering the car with his knee while he reached behind the seat to where he'd stashed his rifles. Fuck, they should not have put Natalia with the weapons. Clearly they sucked as adults, and fuck. Fuck.

Tony had to bite back a peal of hysterical laughter. He couldn't anymore, just. If he got out of here, he'd get to live his life out in a padded cell or some shit like that, he was pretty sure of that around now. "James," he repeated. "You're gonna make us crash with two babies in the car."

"Take the wheel, then," James snapped, and Tony reached out without thought, somehow managing to hold the baby with one hand and grab onto the wheel with the other.

"We've killed enough people tonight," Tony hissed, glancing over his shoulder to make sure Natalia
was still asleep. "If those people are innocent, we can't just--" The crack of a gunshot cut him off, and then the glass was spiderwebbing in front of his eyes, turning opaque and threatening to give way. He glanced over his shoulder, let his eyes seek out the spot where the bullet had lodged in the back of the seat, thankfully more than a foot away from Natalia's head. "Fuck," he spat. "Definitely not innocent."

James spared him a simple look that said 'told you so' probably a lot better than words would. "Get down," he ordered. "Keep the wheel straight. Then he was frantically rolling down the old, horrible side window.

Tony ducked down, bowed his torso over the baby, who took that exact moment to start wailing. "Natalia," he head himself shout. "Get on the floor." Another shot cracked at them, whizzed close enough that Tony was certain he'd find the bullet lodged in his own head-rest. Then he heard the rat-at-at as James returned fire. Full-blown panic seared through his body, made it damn near impossible to breathe. The baby's wails made him want to cry.

"You can get up," James said. "I've got the wheel."

Tony slowly got back up into a seated position. His hands shook so hard he damn near dropped the screaming baby. Then he had to clamp his mouth tightly shut to keep from screaming. On the road, straight ahead, was the burning wreck of the car James had taken out, and how the hell he'd managed that with a rifle, Tony didn't even want to contemplate. James swerved sharply, taking them off-road for a moment and Tony had to tighten his arms around the baby bundle. When they were safely back on the road, he took a deep breath, steadied himself. Glanced over his shoulder. "Come on up, darling," he told Natalia, hoping to God this whole thing hadn't frightened her nearly as much as it had him. He was trying to save her from trauma, damn it, not pile more on top.

Slowly, Natalia's small face came into view. Her grey-green eyes were huge and scared and her face even paler than it should be. "Is it still a test?" she asked, voice trembling.

"Yeah, sweetheart," Tony told her, forcing his voice to stay even. "It's still a test." He wished there was something he could offer her, something he could do to comfort her, but his arms were already full of screaming baby, and how did people ever handle having more than one of these anyway? "It's okay to be scared," he added. "But you've done really well. You're very brave." A small smile peeked through on her face, flushing away some of the fear from before. Tony couldn't help but notice that James was staring at her through the rearview mirror, Adam's apple bobbing. He wasn't sure what that meant, just knew it had better not precede another breakdown. There were already more breakdowns going on than he could handle.

"The baby smells," James noted, voice strange and reedy. "Needs its diaper changed."

"Him," Tony corrected. "It's a him. Borya, if you can believe it. Feel free to change that, if you want."

James's eyes focused very hard on the road ahead. "We need a new vehicle," he commented.

Tony swallowed, and for a moment he felt so out of his depth he could've broken down sobbing with it. So many damn things they needed, and no immediate, obvious way of getting it. With the holes in the front window, it was not only damn near impossible to properly see the road - James was probably leaning heavily on the serum to keep them steady - but it was also about to become a freezer inside the car, and James might be able to handle that. Tony couldn't, not for long. The children definitely could not. And that was without counting on the other stuff they needed, like rest and food and clean diapers. Fuck. "Turn around," he said.
James turned to look at him, eyes wide and shocked. "What? No."

"We need another car," Tony said. "There's gotta be at least a few to pick and choose from back at the facility."

"They've also got to have mobilized by now," James said. "It's a waste of time."

"If we drive the whole way, we're less than twenty minutes out," Tony said. "You know it's the smartest choice here."

James looked at him for long moments. Then, finally, he nodded. "Risky," he commented, but he still turned the car around.

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James pulled off the road a few minutes out from the facility, drove it into cover where the trees were thickest. Then took a moment to check his weapons before giving Tony a quick nod. Tony didn't have to ask what he was doing. Part of him thought he should be objecting, should insist on coming along. But there were two kids with them who sure as fuck weren't going to survive on their own. The baby needed a diaper change, and Tony had heard Natalia's stomach growl more than once already. And Tony was so, so tired, and so fucking shaken. He'd probably be more of a burden than a help. Honestly, he probably had been for most of this whole disastrous fucking trip. So he returned James's nod and watched him vanish into the darkness.

For long moments, all Tony could really do was sit there and breathe and try to keep the pieces of himself tacked together. He was pretty damn sure a strong wind might take him apart. In the end, it was more the fact that he couldn't stand to hear the baby scream anymore. "Honey, can you find me a diaper?" he asked Natalia. Hopefully she knew what a diaper was. She should, shouldn't she? Couldn't have been that long since they were a fixture of her own wardrobe. Maybe they still were. At what age did kids stop wearing diapers? "Do you need a diaper change?" he asked.

"No," she said decisively. "I'm not a baby." Then she handed him something that was decidedly not a diaper, but rather some large white piece of cloth, and what the fuck even was that? Oh, hell no.

"Fucking eighties," he heard himself mutter, because suddenly the already difficult task seemed damn near insurmountable. He really did want to break down and sob now. "Fucking cloth diapers. How do you even--" He cut himself off and took several deep breaths, which did not help the situation one bit. The baby was rank enough, by now, that you didn't really need a super soldier nose to pick up on the smell. He wanted to open the door, air out, get more room, but he was pretty sure babies had fucked up immune systems. He didn't know if that still applied to super babies or not, but he wasn't about to risk it by stripping the thing out in the open in the middle of a freezing Russian winter night.

It still took several more moments before he could bring himself to do it. Then he pulled himself together, pretended this was all a really long, horrible dream, put the baby in Bucky's seat and proceeded to peel away its layers. He got to the diaper, and the smell was taking over the whole fucking car. He doubted Natalia would still be hungry after this, although food was probably still going to have to remain pretty high on the agenda. Despite the disgust churning through his stomach, he took a moment to make sure he was absolutely certain how to wrap and construct a diaper, mapping out diagrams in his head from looking at the one the baby was already wearing. Then he got down to business.

He was still frantically washing his rapidly numbing hands in the snow outside the car when he heard the engine of another vehicle pulling to a stop outside their position. Immediately, Tony
ducked down, holding his breath. There was no way to be at all sure that was going to be James, and Tony really didn't want to have to deal with any other options. Breath tight in his throat, he snuck the few steps back to the car and opened the door just as he heard the other vehicle's engine cut. Heart hammering, he reached into the backseat and closed his fingers around the hilt of a gun. Hopefully this one was actually loaded. "Shh," he told Natalia as he brought the gun up in front of him, trying his best to cover their position. He should probably get behind the car, but that would leave the kids way too easy to get to.

"Tony," James called, and Tony felt his whole body go lax, for just a moment, with relief. "We gotta move everythin' over from the old one."

Tony nodded sharply, took a deep breath and made sure the safety was on the gun before sticking it into his belt. "Okay," he called back, winced when he realized his voice was shaking. "You get out all right?"

"Still in one piece, ain't I?" James said, stepping into view. Tony blamed the fact that the next few minutes were spent frantically transferring everything from one car to another and wedging a box in behind a seatbelt to make some kind of baby seat substitute for the fact that it wasn't until they were back on the road that he noticed the blood seeping out of James's flesh and blood shoulder.

"Not quite mint condition," Tony said. Controlling his voice was still a whole hell of a lot more difficult than he'd have preferred.

"I've had worse," James said. "It'll be healed up soon enough. Bullet went clean through."

Tony nodded, and couldn't quite suppress the way his stomach insisted on turning again. "Should've let me drive," he said.

James barked out a laugh. "You think I look bad?" he asked. "You look worse. You're pale as a fuckin' snowman. Get some sleep. I'll let you take the wheel in a few hours."

Tony thought he might've muttered something about feeding the children, but honestly, at that point everything was becoming oddly liquid around him, heavy and blurred, and his thoughts were coming through so damn slowly he felt like he'd never reach any conclusions for anything. In the end, the best idea would be to take James's advice on this one, just this once. Except before he could quite get that far, the radio let out a scratching sound and Tony felt himself jump, panting with the shock of it, and fuck, his nerves were so far outside his clothes at this point that a heart attack really was starting to seem pretty damn likely.

Oh yeah, the radio in a KGHYDRA vehicle would probably be set to the glorious Red HYDRA station, which must be what they were picking up. Some man was speaking in Russian, something about fugitives and road blocks and all sorts of other shit Tony's mind was simply too sluggish to quite catch the meaning of. James turned the car off the road just as Tony felt himself blink off into sleep.

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Tony was vaguely aware of the fact that the car stopped moving a few times over the next hours, and of James and Natalia moving around him, getting food, getting a thicker blanket, changing the baby's diaper again (that was going to become a thing, wasn't it?), and even, once, a longer stop to melt snow and mix formula. He didn't come to completely until some time around sunrise. Which, given how far north they were, was pretty damn late in the morning. He blinked a few times, wondering what they had stopped for this time until he realized James had the hood open and was using the heat of the engine to melt more snow, a can of formula open next to him. Natalia was eating out of a can
with her fingers, still looking unaccountably chipper, if a little groggy. The baby was crying softly in its box.

Tiredly, Tony turned around until he could reach the backseat and stroke his fingers carefully over the baby's chubby face, hoping against hope that it would calm down. Then he frowned, glancing out the windows again. The sun was coming up from the wrong side. That, or they were going the wrong way. The driver's side door opened and James slid in, handing Tony the bottle before he reached behind him and somehow got the baby out of the box without hurting it. "Feed him," he ordered. "We'll swap once he's full. We can't afford to lose more driving time."

"Not if you're insisting on taking us north-east, we can't," Tony agreed, blinking down at the baby for a moment before he managed to shift everything around so that he had a decent hold on the baby burrito and could still bring the bottle to its tiny mouth. Said tiny mouth latched on and began suckling away happily. "Why are you insisting on taking us north-east?"

"Road blocks," James said. "We might've been able to gun through, but those two are even more breakable than you are. We can't keep taking dumb risks. I'm takin' us around the area they've got blocked off. Another few hours and we'll be able to make the loop."

Tony swallowed, and suddenly the situation seemed that much clearer to him. Painfully so. They might've gotten away from the facility, but if they missed their plane, their visas ran out and none of the aliases they were using for this journey would stand up to scrutiny. They'd be stuck in the far larger trap that was the USSR itself. And sure, it would only be, what, a year and a half now? No, that was the Berlin Wall. The Soviet Union didn't fall until '91, which was still three fucking years away and yeah, no, he was not sticking around pretending to be a Russian for that long. He needed to get Natalia to safety, whatever ended up happening afterwards. "We're running out of time," he said.

James didn't even look his way as he gunned the engine and drove on. "I know," he simply said. "It's better than gettin' caught."

At this point, depending on how much time they ended up wasting... With limited supplies and a pair of breakable kids, Tony wasn't sure that much was even true anymore.

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James was the one to finally verbalize it, the evening before their flight was set to leave, "We ain't gonna make it," he said. Toneless and slow, sounding about as exhausted as Tony felt, and God, was Tony exhausted. He'd give anything for a bed right now, and a chance at a few days' uninterrupted sleep, and the promise to never have to hear a baby scream again. Fuck. Right now, he wanted so badly to be back in his own timeline it hurt, no matter how terrible a time he'd had there. Being killed by Thanos had nothing on Russian winters.

A blizzard had stopped them from making any progress whatsoever for the past day and a bit. Tony didn't even want to know what could've happened to them if they hadn't lucked out and stumbled upon an old hut, or fishing cabin, probably, judging by the dusty, ancient equipment stashed in heavy wooden trunks. Even inside, it was freezing. They had a fire going in the fireplace, but that did very little to compensate for the fact that the whole place was so draughty Tony could feel the freezing wind through layers of clothes and blankets. They were maybe a day out from St. Petersburg - Leningrad, Tony mentally corrected - but no matter how quick the train lines were, they might as well be in China. Tony doubted they'd be able to leave the cabin at all for another day or so. "What happens now?" he asked.

James looked up from where he was mixing yet another bottleful of formula - at least Tony had
somehow managed to more or less accidentally get his hands on enough of that to last for a few
weeks. The diaper situation was worse. Tony's hands were still only just coming back to life in a
burst of pins and needles from washing them in frigid water. "You're the planner," James said.

Tony bit back a snort, because that wasn't funny, it really wasn't. "My plan got us stuck here in the
first place," he said.

James shrugged. "I think Jackie Falsworth gets to take some of the credit for that," he said, screwing
the lid back on the bottle and picking up the baby to feed him. Tony wasn't sure what to make of
how James was with the kids. He was good, which shouldn't be surprising. Tony was pretty sure
he'd had younger siblings, once upon a time. Probably still did, back in the States, though they'd be
older siblings now. Or something. Either way, James was technically good, knew what to do, how to
handle himself, but he did most of it with a strange kind of detachment Tony clearly wasn't
managing, as evidenced by the fact that Natalia was curled up in his lap. He was pretty sure she was
napping, but not at all certain. It wouldn't be unlike her - neither the kid nor the grown-up version - to
snoop just for the sake of snooping.

"We can go north-west," Tony said after a while. "Try to make it past the border into Finland. From
there on we could theoretically go anywhere. Welcome to the West and all that."

James cocked an eyebrow. "You wanna try to sneak past the Soviet border with two kids in tow, one
of which is still young enough that he has no concept of what it means to stay quiet? I may not know
a whole lot about how the world works these days, but even I get that that's a long shot."

Tony sucked in a breath. "We can go to Moscow, get into one of the embassies. Seek asylum."

"We'd have to be able to prove our lives are threatened," James said. "Not sure that's as easy as it
sounds. And you're the only one here who can prove he isn't Soviet."

Tony frowned. "In case you forgot, I faked my death too. My papers are as flimsy as yours."

"The ones you got with you, sure," James agreed. "But Dum Dum was talkin' about that... what did
he call it?"

Tony breathed out. How the hell had he forgotten about that? "Howard's shelf baby," he said. He
swallowed. "Yeah, if it's as good as Dum Dum said, I'd be able to walk into either the Spanish or the
American embassy - Spanish should be easier, less conflict with the Soviets, I think - and say I lost
my passport." He glanced at where James was feeding the baby, took in the slump to his shoulders,
the shadows under his eyes that even the serum hadn't been able to keep at bay. "That would get me
out, but it's no help for the rest of you. So not an option."

James snorted. "You should just take it," he said.

"And let the three of you be picked back up?" Tony spat. "Then what the hell even was the point of
coming here in the first place? I'm not about to let HYDRA reactivate you, or do whatever the hell
they had in mind for those two."

"Yeah, I ain't sure I'm really selfless enough to tell you to do that either," James agreed. For some
reason Tony couldn't explain even to himself, that sounded oddly like a lie. "What you can do," he
said. "Is get yourself out and get help."

Tony felt his eyes widen. "And leave you here? How long until they find you?"

"It's the best choice in a shitty situation," James said. "This way, we've all got a chance. I'll stay here
with the kids. You take the car to Leningrad, and the train down to Moscow. Get yourself into the
Spanish embassy and contact anyone you think can help."

Tony opened his mouth to protest, then let it slowly fall shut. He couldn't shit on the plan until he came up with a better one, and to be honest, he wasn't sure he'd be able to. "I could take the baby with me," he offered. "Might be able to spin some story about him being mine. It won't work with Natalia. I'm only fourteen years older than her. But with the little one, there's a shot."

James shook his head. "Too risky," he said. "We ain't got papers for him at all. You won't get on the train with him, and if the Spaniards decide your story doesn't hold up, he goes back to the Soviets. Safer to keep him here."

Tony squeezed his eyes shut. He hadn't felt this fucking powerless since Natasha died in his arms. He hated this feeling, absolutely hated it, and even more than that, he hated the fact that James obviously didn't really believe he'd be able to get help. "You gotta give me time to send someone," he said.

James nodded. "I will," he said. "I'll give you until the supplies run out, unless there's no other choice but to run. And then I'll head toward Finland. But I'll give you as much time as I can."

Tony returned the nod, feeling like complete and utter shit for the decision he'd just allowed to be made.

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Three endless days later, the world had cleared up enough to get moving, and Tony was sitting in the car wondering just how the hell seventy-two hours could feel simultaneously like half an eternity and no time at all. The key was in the ignition. Everything he didn't desperately need had been moved to the cabin, a few specific documents excepted. He was supposed to get going now, get to Leningrad before sunset and catch the train as soon as possible. The quicker he got moving, the better the chances that the supplies wouldn't run out. And yet something was preventing him from turning that key and getting the fuck out of there.

He glanced over his shoulder, at the ramshackle little hut. The slight wisps of smoke rising from the chimney made him more nervous than he cared to admit. That wasn't what was holding his hand so damn still, though. No, the thing that sat icy and heavy in his stomach, making it damn near impossible to start the car, was the irrational - or maybe all too rational - feeling that once he left, he'd never see any of them again. Wouldn't see Natalia - or Natasha. Wouldn't see the damn baby - fuck it, he might even end up missing the screaming. Wouldn't see James. That last one wrenched through him, more painful than he'd have expected. A lump sat tight and heavy in his throat. His eyes stung. It felt damn near physically impossible to move away, especially with things still so wrong between them.

Sure, it was getting better. They still worked together just fine, and throughout the mission they'd been able to communicate without fighting. They'd been almost friendly with each other these last few days. Distant, maybe, but friendly. And none of that was enough, because the wrongness still sat so fucking heavy, like a wall between them, and Tony couldn't fucking leave it at that, not when he was about to run the risk of never seeing him again. He pulled the key out of the ignition, opened the car door and walked back to the hut, pulling open the door.

James looked up from where he was cleaning out one of the rifles. Tony hoped he would have enough ammo, and then that thought vanished, so small and insignificant under the rush of everything else that was bubbling through him in that fucking moment. He wasn't aware of moving his feet, of crossing the floor. All he knew was that suddenly he was cradling James's face in his hands, relishing the rough texture of the beard that had grown out through their time in the USSR,
the warmth of his skin, the solidity of him. Tony swallowed, had to squeeze his eyes shut for a moment so they wouldn't start leaking. "I'm sorry," he said, heard his own voice crack. "I shouldn't have lied. I shouldn't have dragged you here when you didn't wanna go." James's hands had settled on his forearms, but they simply rested there, made no move to push him away. Made no move to draw him closer. Hands trembling, Tony leaned in and pressed their lips together, soft, reverent, and he never fucking wanted to move. He held it just long enough that he could move back before he'd have to find out whether James would've pushed him away once the shock wore off. "I love you," he heard himself say. Then he turned around and walked away, feeling simultaneously lighter and a thousand pounds heavier.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again for the subscriptions, bookmarks and recommendations, and for taking the time to leave kudos and especially comments. Those have put so many smiles on my face, I can't even tell you.
Later, Tony remembered the journey from the hut to Moscow as a blur at best, a blank space at worst. He couldn't recall what he'd thought or felt or anything, could only remember the overwhelming exhaustion. When he got to Moscow and realized that there was no Spanish fucking embassy, he very nearly broke down and cried. Great. How the hell had he passed history again? Spanish Civil War, extreme-right fascist regime vs. extreme-left fascist regime and just. God, history was a mess, and it still was even years after Franco's death. Apparently, both countries had given diplomatic immunity to too many spies, and now there was no fucking embassy.

He went to the American one instead.

He had to wait in line for what felt like half an eternity, and then he had to spend nearly two hours trying to explain the (fake) situation before they finally believed his story enough to let him at a phone. He pressed in the first number he could think of, every muscle in his body taut. His breathing was getting out of control again. Who the fuck even knew what was going on back home? HYDRA might've managed to take over S.H.I.E.L.D. nearly three decades ahead of schedule. His hand shook so badly he nearly dropped the phone. His eyes stung so bad he had to squeeze them shut to hold in the tears, and what was even happening to him? He'd been through worse than this whole romp in his life, hadn't he? So why the hell was this the thing that was getting to him so fucking badly?

"Peggy Carter speaking," a cultured, well-loved voice said on the other end of the line.

Tony bit back a sob. "Hey, Aunt Peggs," he managed. "How are things?"

"Tony." Judging by the sheer amount of relief in her voice, she must've known he hadn't just been holed up in a manor in England this whole time. He shouldn't be surprised, really. Aunt Peggy had always had a way of knowing every damn thing whether he wanted her to or not. Right now, he was grateful beyond belief. He heard her sharp inhale, the soft sigh. "Things are good," she said. "Everything's still a bit chaotic, but management's back in place."

"Good." Tony let out a sigh of relief. "Good. That's good." He let out a long breath. "I'm in Moscow," he said then, before she could ask. "I need my papers. My birth certificate or something. Do you have it or is it with Tim or one of my tias?"

"I'm assuming," Peggy said, "given your age, that you need an escort?"

Tony let out a groan. "Yeah," he said. "That too."

"I'll send one of your aunts. She should be there within the next twenty-four hours."

Relief rushed through him. Even if he had to suffer the company of one of his overbearing tias, it was still-- It was a way out. It was good, a good thing. "Listen," he said, remembering to use some kind of code at the last moment. Someone had to be listening in, or Peggy would've been a lot clearer. "James is hosting a moving-away party soon. He was wondering if any of your colleagues wanted to join him."

"You'll have to talk to your aunt about it when she gets there," Peggy said. "She'll get it back to me. I'll be ready to buy the tickets, though."

Another surge of relief. "Thanks," he managed. Off to the side, some clerk or other was flashing him an impatient glance. "I think I have to go now. I'll talk to you soon. I can't wait to see my tia."
"I'll make sure to let her know," Peggy said. "Take care, Tony. I love you."

"Love you too," Tony said, and it came out sounding horribly like a sob.

The next thing he was aware of was being put in a room and finally, finally getting to sleep in a real bed.

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Tony passed the next day or so in a haze. He managed a few hours' sleep. At least he thought he did. He dozed, maybe. It was hard to tell, and it was absolutely stupid not to get some proper rest now that he finally had a chance. He just couldn't seem to, as if some part of him was still stuck in that ramshackle little hut with James and the kids, wearing his nerves on the outsides of his skin and hoping to God that they wouldn't be found.

There were questions, at some point. Why was he in the USSR? What had he been doing there? What kind of visa had he held? How had he lost his papers? He wasn't sure what he'd even answered, mind drawing a complete blank when it came to staying focused on the proceedings. 'Shock,' he thought he heard someone say. 'Baby operative' and 'not cut out for the job' and something about how someone should tell Spain to get on top of their intelligence agencies and make sure they only sent people trained and ready for the job. Tony let it go, let them think whatever they wanted to think. Spain would deny everything, obviously, which was what they'd have done even if it were true. The embassy making up his story for him, intentional or not, was probably the best he could hope for at this point.

It felt simultaneously as if time dragged on forever and flew by in a flash, not dream but not quite real either, which was probably why he was so damn shocked when a very real person walked through the door. He was on his feet within a moment, and suddenly, all at once everything was slamming into him, turning real and sharp, cutting him from all sides. "Aunt Angie," he managed, and then he was all but falling into her arms.

She caught him, drew him close, pressing a kiss to his cheek. The familiar scent of her perfume flooded his nose, and fuck, he was crying, wasn't he? "Hey, darlin'," Angie was saying. "Come on. It's alright. It's alright."

Tony let out a breath that sounded too much like a sob for his liking. "Thank God you're here," he managed, finally feeling on even enough keel to straighten up and stand on his own. "I thought she'd just send someone random. I mean, this isn't exactly top priority."

"It's pretty high up there for her, I gotta tell you," Angie said, reaching out to smooth down his hair. "Thank God you got rid of the mullet."

"You said you loved the mullet," Tony shot back, feeling so much more at ease already, feeling, shit, as if he could actually breathe again. He felt safe, for the first time in fuck only knew how long.

Angie cocked an eyebrow. "Darlin', I lied." She ran her knuckles over his cheek and dropped her hand. "You needed someone to tell you it looked good, though. And it clearly wasn't going to be your parents, or Peggy. And I think Tim outright laughed when you came home with that head o' hair last Christmas. Pretty much struck him off the list."

Tony felt his lips tuck into a smile, unaccountably touched. "Thank you," he said, and was safe in the knowledge that she knew him well enough to know every small thank you behind the big one. He sucked in a breath, took her arm and led her to the nearby couches - more decorative than comfortable, but they were a surface to sit on, and Angie wasn't a young woman. "What about
James?” he asked then. “Can Aunt Peggy get anyone there?”

Angie gave him a smile that was far too knowing for his comfort. "They're en route to Stockholm,” she said. "They'll move on from there when they know where they're going. Do you have coordinates?”

Tony gave them to her, and felt as if, for the first time in ages, he could breathe again.

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Tony wasn't entirely sure how the whole passport thing worked. He hadn't paid much attention to that kind of thing back in his own timeline, and he sure as hell didn't know the inner workings of that system back in the eighties. He was pretty sure it involved using his (fake) birth certificate to get an emergency passport that was actually just a document with a few stamps on it that was only a passport because everyone said it was. With that in hand, he let Angie take him to Spain, where he handed that in and was promised a Spanish passport as soon as they could make it. "When are we leaving?” he asked when they were settled into a suite in a decent Madrid hotel.

"We're gonna go to Switzerland in a few days," Angie said. "Get you Howard's emergency funds. Then we'll find you a nice apartment somewhere around here. You should probably start thinking about preferences."

Tony swallowed. "No going home, then," he muttered. Which, really, he'd have known if he hadn't been so exhausted only a fraction of his brain seemed to work properly, and even that bit, he was pretty sure, wasn't operating at full speed.

Angie sighed, and pulled him down on the couch with her. He followed her gentle tugs, let her draw him down until he was lying with his head pillowed in her lap, her small, strong fingers carding through his hair, just like when he was a kid. And God, how long had it been since he'd last had this? "In a few years, maybe,” she said. "When Tony Stark's faded enough in people's minds that they won't immediately think of him when they see you. When you've aged and changed enough that you can reasonably pass for just a cousin. HYDRA's still out there, and there are plenty of even the good guys at S.H.I.E.L.D. who'd do anything to get back whatever it was you took."

Tony nodded. At some point, there would be something to feel about that, some way to react. Right now he just couldn't. He couldn't anymore. He was tired in a way he hadn't been even after Afghanistan, when there'd at least been other things to throw himself into. It probably wouldn't even matter in the end, wouldn't affect him. When Natalia was safe, chances were Tony would return to his own timeline. The thought alone made him feel even more exhausted than he already was. "You'll tell me when they're safe?” he asked.

"Yeah, Darlin’. I'll let you know the moment Peggy tells me they got your sweetheart back all right," Angie said, and those words, even with her best tone of humor infused, hurt so much more than they should've.

It was another agonizing three days before the call finally came in. Angie spoke quietly with Peggy for several long moments before handing him the receiver. Tony couldn't bring himself to sit down, could feel urgency and nerves bubbling through him, so different from the lethargy that had been the only feeling he'd truly been able to muster up since leaving the hut. He carefully wrapped the curly phone cord around his finger, then back off, then on again. "How are they?” he asked, couldn't bring himself to waste time on niceties.

"En route to England," Peggy said. Tony could hear the smile in her voice. "Safe and sound."
Tony bit back a sob, dropped into the chair when his legs gave out beneath him. Of course, James would be going back to England and the plans he'd made with Falsworth there. "Can you get me a plane ticket?" he asked. "I need to--"

"Tony," Peggy said, cutting him off in that gentle way of hers. "Barnes said to tell you he doesn't want to see you."

And just like that, everything shattered. Tony wasn't aware of the rest of the conversation, if there was a rest of it. All he was aware of, really, was wrapping his arms around himself, trying to keep in an overwhelming kind of pain he didn't have words for, one that felt poised to tear him apart. Biting back sobs. Just trying to hold himself the fuck together. He should've expected this, he reminded himself. He'd lied to James, by omission maybe, but he'd still kept something important from him. He'd hurt him. James had every right not to want to see him.

It might've been hours later that it hit him, really, truly hit him. Natalia was safe. Tony was still here. He was stuck here, in a timeline that sucked just as much as the one he'd come from. There was nothing left to work toward. Nothing.

"There are documents," he heard himself saying the next day, looking at Angie without seeing her. He felt like a sleepwalker, and it was for the best, really. If he woke up, it would only hurt worse. "In my bag. If he needs to prove paternity, even if it's just for an adoption agency or. However the hell that even works. I'm guessing DNA testing isn't really a mainstream thing yet. But, unless he asks, don't let him see. No one needs to see that shit."

Angie just pulled him close and didn't let go for hours. It didn't make anything better, not really, but maybe it kept things from getting worse.

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It was the easiest thing in the world, once Angie went back to the States and left him with a high-end Barcelona apartment and a bank account full of Howard's money, to fall straight back into his old, tried and tested, coping mechanisms. Once he left the airport, he headed straight for the first bar he could find, got smashed and went home with a woman who was probably around ten years too old for his current physical age. He woke up sick to the stomach, with a pounding head, and made his way back to his own apartment, got shitfaced again, and waited until evening to do the whole thing all over again.

He called Peggy and Tim and his tias often enough to make sure no one sent a rescue party, and otherwise did his very best to distract himself from the truth of the matter. He was alone, in a decade he'd hated the first time around, and the only people who gave two fucks about him either thought he was dead, or would be dead of old age or struck down by Alzheimer's soon enough. There were no more goals, nothing left to work toward, just the day to day rumble, and the only way to keep his head above water was to marinate his brain as often as possible.

It did help, in a way. It kept him from thinking. It kept him from breaking the fuck down. It didn't stop him from feeling the painful, ragged emptiness that threatened to eat him up the moment he stopped long enough to consider it. Stopped him from remembering that although he couldn't see the point of it, he had more years ahead of him than he'd had in ages. It wasn't life, but it was an existence he was familiar with, knew how to handle.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Antonio!"

Tony shot up in bed and bit back a whimper at the pain stabbing through his head. He wanted nothing more than to lie back down, hide under the sheets and grab another few hours of sleep. Judging by the pained moan from next to him, Whatsername from last night agreed. Tony began to lie back down when that voice, the exact tone of it, caught up with him. Oh shit, that was Tia Lupe, and she did not sound happy. He scrabbled with the sheets for a moment before getting on his feet. There was a brief sense of vertigo that had him damn near keeling over, and he had to suck in a sharp breath to keep his stomach halfway steady. He fished a pair of boxers up off the floor and pulled them on hurriedly, added on a pair of pants and pulled a shirt over his shoulders. He could button it on his way down. He stopped to shake Whatsername's shoulder. "Up," he told her, switching into seamless Spanish. "You gotta go."

At first, her face scrunched up into an indignant frown, but something about his expression must've gotten to her, because a moment later she was getting out of bed and picking up her own clothes as well.

"Don't let her see you," Tony added. Then he left the room and ran down the stairs, fingers fumbling at his buttons and probably doing them up wrong. He came to a halt in front of his aunt - his mother's aunt, technically, but still - and took in the black, traditional mourning clothes, the precise, steel grey bun of her hair, her dour demeanor, and felt more like a kid than he had since he showed up in this timeline. He swallowed, leaned in and let him kiss her cheeks before leaning back in the vain hope that she hadn't smelled the alcohol on him - or, good God, the sex. "Morning, Tia," he said, wincing when he heard the roughness of his own voice. A steady headache was pounding behind his eye sockets.

She looked him up and down for a moment, dark eyes sharp, and Tony couldn't help the sudden sense of shame, the conviction that she knew absolutely everything. It probably didn't make it any better that Whatsername was doing a particularly bad job at sneaking out. For a moment, Tony wanted nothing more than to scream at Lupe, tell her to get her nose out of his business, that none of this had anything to do with her. It was how he'd lost touch with her last time around. He couldn't bring himself to do it. He was exhausted, so damn exhausted, and his head was throbbing and his stomach hurt and he couldn't stand watching another person walk away from him. "You should be ashamed of yourself," she said, somehow managing to make the words sound sharp even in Catalan. "On your mother's birthday, no less." She paused, and under the stern outrage in her expression there was something else that he did not want to try to identify, something that made the hollow inside him echo and ache. "Go get dressed," she told him then. "We're going to mass and lighting a candle for your poor mother."

Tony frowned. "It's not my mother's birthday," he said. "Her birthday's in March."

"Oh, Tony," Lupe said. For a moment he thought she'd reach for him, but then her hand dropped. He couldn't look at her face, couldn't stand what he saw there. "It is March."

By then, it was easier just to go upstairs and put on the single suit Angie had made him buy before she left, submit to whatever it was Lupe wanted from him. Try not to be bowled over by the fact that it was March and that he barely remembered more than flashes of the past month and a bit.
He wasn't nearly drunk enough to sit through mass, wasn't drunk enough to get through the day at all, really, and so the whole thing turned into an agonizing exercise in keeping his mind as blank as he could. He did everything he could to not think about James, wonder what he was doing, if he was getting better, settling in and getting the help he needed. Did everything not to feel that heart wrenching sense of loss, of something missing. He shouldn't be so fucking broken up over a man he'd really only known for a bit more than a month of his life, should he? He tried to think about Natalia instead, wonder where she was, if she'd gone to a good family. The idea of a British Natasha was vaguely hilarious, but somehow all he could really focus on was the fact that he would never get to know her, never get to have her in his life, never again have her with him, as his friend, as the fucking pillar she'd been.

He tried to think about the other timeline instead, but even that left him breathless with guilt. What was happening there? Were they trying to get him back? Aside from Rhodey, he wasn't sure anyone would care, and that wasn't really what mattered. What mattered was that in the world he'd left behind, the sky had been full of Thanos's armada, the whole world on the brink of destruction. Did that world still exist? And if it did, there had to have been something more he could've done, something he should've been able to get back there for, and instead he was stuck here, absolutely helpless, with not a thing he could do, and--

By the time mass came to an end, it was all he could do to keep his breathing even and his eyes dry. He felt claustrophobic, even in the enormous space of the cathedral, pressed into a corner by his own thoughts. He needed a drink so damn bad he would've stolen the altar wine if he had thought, for a second, that he would be able to deal with an angry Tia Lupe. Instead, he let her lead him to one of the side altars and lit the damn candle, biting his lip bloody as he did so.

Outside, after, she gripped his elbow. "Come on, nen," she said. "We're having lunch."

Tony had to bite down a moment of near panic at that declaration, shook his head. "No," he said. "No. I need to go home. I--"

Her fingers tightened around her elbow. She stepped closer to him, dark eyes flashing. "I know you're hurting," she told him. "You lost your parents. You had to leave your home. But your mother would be disgusted if she saw you now." She took a breath, and for a moment Tony thought that maybe she had a hard time keeping it together too. Tony hadn't stopped much to think about the deaths of his parents, because it had already happened so damn long ago. For Lupe, though, it was recent, probably still an open wound. His mother had meant the world to her, he knew. "She always told me what a good boy you were," Lupe continued. "How much you would accomplish one day. How much you dreamt about creating a better world. So quit feeling sorry for yourself, and be the son she saw. Don't waste your life, nen. Don't waste it."

For a moment, all Tony could see was the imploration in Yinsen's eyes as the light faded from them. All he could feel was the phantom weight of an arc reactor in his chest, and the absolute certainty that he had a place in the world, a task, a purpose. His hands shook, and suddenly everything was crashing over him, heavy and painful and impossible to drink away. "I don't know how," he told her.

She took him back to her stately old apartment, put him to bed in a guest room that still held signs of his mother's presence, and let him stay curled up under the covers, sobbing or shivering or just staring off at something he couldn't quite make out, for nearly a week. When he made it back out of the room, it was under his own power.

Maybe there was a reason he was still here. Maybe there was still a job to be done. Sure, it may all be just a quirk of fate or magic - Strange probably hadn't understood that spell nearly as well as he'd made them all think. It may be that he'd changed things so much already that his original timeline had
ceased to exist, or that this new one had diverted so much he was essentially trapped in a parallel universe. He didn't know. He probably never would. And in the end, what did it matter? He was stuck where he was, no way to get back. And there was work to be done. Hadn't he been thinking that long before he went after Natasha? Hadn't James made sure to tell him so? Tony, with the knowledge he had, could push technology forward at an exponential rate. He could do his part to make sure Earth would be ready when Thanos did come. And Thanos would come, even if getting rid of the Tesseract delayed it. Earth was too delicious a morsel, ripe for the altar of his sick love affair with Death.

In a lot of ways, his life was exactly as it had always been, with a bit less superheroing and a lot less celebrity and scandal. He was alone, but it didn't matter. Everyone always left, but it didn't matter. He woke up feeling like shit and went to bed struggling not to cry himself to sleep like a fucking baby, but it didn't matter. What was it he'd told James? Life's a bitch. That didn't mean he got to stop. If he had the ability to do something, then he would.

He sold the apartment and bought a house to get more space, got his hands on the machines and tools he needed. By June, he had a working prototype and enough investors to put a cellphone into production that would revolutionize the market (it might only just be a slightly better than something like the Nokia 3210, but then the Nokia 3210 wasn't supposed to come out for another eleven years). It didn't feel like much, but hopefully it would be the first step that would eventually lead him to something that would make a real difference.

He expanded his workshop. And he worked. And worked. And worked some more, frantic with it half the time because, fuck, if he stopped, he was half scared it would all come crashing down around him again. If this was all he had left, at least he'd do it well.

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The sound of the doorbell rang through the loudspeakers, startling Tony away from the precision welding. He fumbled the welding torch, let out a yelp when the flame came into contact with his hand. After another moment of fumbling, he got the damn thing turned off, glanced down at his burnt palm with a wince. Great. Just fucking great. Grumbling under his breath, he found a nearly clean rag, put it under the cold tap and wrapped it around his hand, hissing at the contact.

The doorbell rang again.

Gritting his teeth, Tony pulled off the goggles and smoothed his hair into some semblance of order. Had he ordered food? He must have. God knew no one else came to see him these days. Unless he'd somehow gone and missed a meeting, which. Actually wasn't that unlikely. Shit, he was going to have to construct a working AI one of these days. Or get an assistant. He shook his head, blinked a few moments to clear his vision. When did he sleep last? He shook that thought off as well, and walked out of the workshop, made his way to the front door and opened it.

His hand went lax. The rag dropped to the ground. Fuck, his whole body went lax. The only thing that kept him standing was slamming his good hand against the doorframe, propping himself up. For long moments, he couldn't get his brain to work at all. Couldn't fucking believe it. He swallowed, and suddenly the past seven months were slamming into him full force. Every fucking second of being alone, every moment of wondering about him, whether he was doing all right, whether he missed Tony even a fraction as much as Tony missed him, and-- Tony swallowed again. "What are you doing here?" he heard himself ask. His voice was hoarse. He wasn't sure if it was from exhaustion or something else, didn't want to examine it too deeply.

James gave a small shrug. His whole expression was oddly hesitant. "I was wondering if you needed a bodyguard," he said then. For a moment his mouth quirked into a smile, but it dropped off his face
as fast as it had appeared, leaving behind something almost apprehensive. "I'm sorry," he said then, making as if to turn around. "I shouldn't'a-- It's been months, and--"

Tony bit his lip, and there was a part of him that wanted to slam the door shut in the hopes that he'd inflict even half as much pain on James as he'd spent every single fucking day feeling. What was the point, though? It might give him some momentary satisfaction, but it wouldn't help, not really. Besides, there was another part of him, a larger one, that was pathetically desperate to make James stay, to hang onto this moment whatever it took. "I don't," he said. "Not really. Not yet. I'm kind of shoveling in the cash, though, so it's probably only a matter of time. And I do pride myself on thinking ahead."

James flashed an uncertain grin. It stayed in place longer this time. "Yeah?" he asked. He glanced behind himself and Tony followed his eyes to the taxi. Natalia was there, hands and face practically plastered to the window.

Tony smiled at the sight, despite himself. The expression felt beyond foreign on his face. "You kept them?" he asked. "I thought for sure you'd..." He trailed off, wincing. He did have some tact.

James shrugged. His Adam's apple bobbed on a swallow. "There comes a point in a body's life," he said then, "when losing even one more person is too much to get over. I guess I reached that point."

Tony sucked in a breath, tried not to let those words mean too much. He couldn't put it all out there. Not again. Not if he wanted to stay even remotely functional. "How's--" He stopped, cleared his throat. "How was England?"

"Cold and rainy," James said with a shrug. "Not really my kinda place. One more day and I think my arm woulda started rustin'." He let out a breath. "Besides, with the whole Franco debacle, apparently Spain has some really great head shrinks. I got a referral and everythin'."

Tony let out a short laugh, and he hated that it was like this, so strange and distant and stilted. He didn't know what to do with the situation, didn't know what to-- He couldn't stand the thought of watching James get back in that taxi, of taking the kids and driving away, but he also didn't know how he could have them here, like this, and not go mad with it. So maybe he did have to put something out there. "Listen," he said, and his voice shook, and his hands shook and his burn hurt like a fucking bitch. His stomach felt like it was trying to twist into knots. "I'm really not a fan of setting myself up for disappointment, so. The job is yours either way. But was that the only reason you came?"

James looked at him, long and searching. And then, between one breath and the next, he'd closed the distance between them and his hands were cupping Tony's face. For a moment, they just stood there. Tony couldn't seem to catch his breath, couldn't figure out how to convince himself that this was real. Then James leaned in and sealed their lips together, and Tony may have practically sobbed into it, but that didn't matter, because he was tasting salt and those weren't his tears. James's metal arm wrapped around his waist, held him tight, strong and sun-warmed and solid and so fucking safe. Tony wrapped his arms around James's neck and clung on, didn't want to ever, ever let go. James broke the kiss for just a moment, caught Tony's eyes. His lashes had clumped together, and he looked damn near exactly how Tony felt. Elated and heartbroken and relieved and scared and-- "I love you too," James said.

Tony pulled him in for another kiss, and for the first time in forever, he was damn near certain he was exactly where he was meant to be.

Chapter End Notes
Bit of a cheese factor at the end there, but eh... We've earned it ;P
Thanks so much for reading through this whole monster of a story, and thanks for all the bookmarks/recs, subscriptions, kudos and comments. You guys have made my day so many times throughout this fic.
I may revisit this 'verse at a later date. Not for a full-fledged sequel, but to tie up some of the threads left dangling and give a few glimpses into the future of this alternate universe. Can't give you a time for it, though.
623 should resume posting this Friday.

End Notes

This story pretends Civil War has already taken place and takes off in the middle of the Infinity Wars. Both of those events, of course, are not canon-compliant, since we don't really know what's going to happen yet. I finished the rough draft on the same day the CA:CW trailer came out, so this story has very little to do with what happened there. Events in the Civil War (or some version of it, completely made up) are referred to and inform much of Tony's view on some of the other characters.

The Iron Man franchise has a difficult time keeping its own timeline straight, so I decided to ignore some of the set dates and go for what I felt like. In this story, Tony was born in 1970. In December of 1987, he's still at MIT, though whether he's there for a master's degree or, well... He's just still there. Also, in this story 1987 is when Howard and Maria died.

This story utilises mostly MCU canon and speculation, but does also borrow a few elements from the comics, like the existence of Jackie Falsworth and the Howling Commandos being honourary British Army, but plays fast and loose with that, as I haven't read the comics and can't really pretend to know what I'm talking about.

I could've chosen to utilise several warnings here, like character death and underage, but choose not to because everything is either canon or dead/too-young-except-not-because-time-travel. On that note, I did find this story extremely difficult to tag, so the tags may change in time.

This story is, in all, nearly 90K long and will be posted over the next few days. I chose to use chapters because I feel that structure fitted best.

Sorry for rambling on, and very well done if you read that whole thing. Thanks for taking the time to read, and feel free to ask or comment if there's anything that doesn't make sense to you. Happy Holidays, everyone.

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