To Need is Not To Want

by Brixon

Summary

All his life Tony has been used as a means to someone's end. Always someone's tool in a game. Carelessly thrown aside, once they had no longer use of him. He keeps it bottled up because, because he's Tony Stark. But he's always had this desire that one day someone would come who would stay because they wanted and needed him. He thought he had that with the Avengers, but after everything with the Accords and everyone leaving after Civil War that hope of having something of his to stay was gone.

Despite being burned constantly, Tony still has this wanting. So when Ryder, an old college friend, comes back into his life and actually seems to want to stay because he wants AND needs Tony, Tony is beyond thrilled. Because Ryder is staying. It doesn't matter if the bruises stay too.

But what happens when the Avengers return and Tony finds himself wondering once again exactly what he wants and what he needs.

Notes

Originally this had 15 chapters, but I am re-doing it. Story will follow the original story line with Tony struggling with the need vs. want. However, it has changed greatly. Only things that remain are some conversations.
Hopefully you all enjoy this new take on it. See you all next Saturday. ;) 

Also apologies for any mistakes. If one is particularly bothersome please feel free to let me know.
It had been nearly six months since Steve had sent that letter and phone. Six months since he had a semblance of normalcy in his life. And now here he was in his lab looking at the one thing he had left to destroy, but couldn’t. Everything in his lab had been broken because he finally figured out that everything that came into contact with him became dangerous or destroyed. Rhodey had told him it was time to rebuild, but Tony hadn’t been ready to. This destruction, this fragmented mess was a beautiful reminder of why Tony couldn’t be Tony anymore.

Though he thought maybe he could go back to being Tony if he finally resolved his issues with Rogers and fellow company. He just could never actually pick it up and call.

But for the first time since he got that phone, his fingers hovered shakily over the call button. He wanted to call Steve to tell him…

*To go fuck himself and everyone else that sided with Rogers?*

*To never come back?*

*How Steve could he do this to someone he called a friend?*

*Why he didn’t reach out to him to help?*

*Why didn’t he tell him?*

He didn’t know exactly what he wanted, but it wasn’t this. He had spent most of his life trying to stay out of unhealthy relationships. His relationship with the Avengers was the epitome of an unhealthy relationship (at least according to Pepper) and he shouldn’t want to go back. He shouldn’t want Steve to tell him about how much he messed up. He shouldn’t want Clint to yell at him for breaking up him and his family. He shouldn’t want them to blame him.

He shouldn’t want any of this.

But yet he did. Because if they’re yelling at him or berating him at least they’re here. He had thought the Avengers would be the ones to stay. That after all of this mess they would make their way back to each other. But they hadn’t. He didn’t know why he expected the Avengers to be the ones who would actually stay.

His father left the moment he took to the bottle. Drinking his way to oblivion was better than facing his son.

*As he constantly reminded me*, Tony whispered angrily to himself.

His mom left him as soon as Tony was old enough to walk on his own.

*She never asked me to come, Tony thought eyes blearing. I would have come. Every single time. She should’ve asked me to come with her and dad on that trip. Maybe then I would’ve died with them as I was probably supposed to. That night could’ve save-*

He abruptly stopped those thoughts from circulating in his mind. He already had enough going on in his mind.

Even though Jarvis had died of natural causes, he still left. His absence was the worst, Tony noted.
Pepper left because he could never be enough…or perhaps he was always too much for her. He couldn’t blame her. They’re still great friends even though they don’t see each other too often. It’s fine.

Rhodey left to go back home. Tony told him that he should be with his family on his road to recovery. Tony wanted to imply that he was Rhodey’s family, but he didn’t want to be greedy. Rhodey still had people in his life who loved him. Those people could help heal his heart. Tony could only try to heal his legs.

The Avengers left…

There’s not even a single reason he could come up with besides everything being a reason. Tony should’ve just let Steve continue his little odyssey to find his fallen war friend. He should’ve accepted that and maybe things wouldn’t have turned out into such a giant mess.

However, no matter how many times he tried telling himself if he had done all these things he would have probably still eventually wound up by himself. The simple fact that he was Tony Stark was enough to give people the reason to leave him.

So he should be okay that people never stayed.

So he looked at the phone and turned it over. Tony stared blithely at the blank walls in his lab and tried quenching down the burning in his throat. That usually had led him to hours of crying and screaming at the ceiling.

He couldn’t throw a fit over people who didn’t stay. He should have taken all of the words that people often told him. He should have realized the moment his dad suggested his mom abort him that he would never had someone who wanted him. I mean after all if my own dad never wanted me, how could I expect anyone else to? Tony questioned to himself, fingers rubbing over his collarbone.

“Tony! I swear, if I were to die right now I’d come back to life just to ensure you would never inherit Stark Industries,” he seethed angrily, hard calloused fingers wrapped tightly around my arm.

” Goodness, it’s not even that serious. All I did was dabble with a few things in my lab, might I remind you.”

That must have set him off because next thing Tony knew he felt a blinding pain sweep against his eyes. There was a dull ringing and a high pitched cry coming from the pot on the oven. Or was that Tony?

“Your dabbling could have cost me hours on building that new weapon, Tony. Sometimes I wonder if you were created just to piss me off. I told your mother we should have aborted you, the second she told me she was pregnant.”

“Dad,” he mumbled brokenly, hand immediately going to touch his eye, where it was no doubt already swelling.

“I am not your dad. I am not your father. The only thing I am to you right now is the roof over your head and you may not have that for much longer.”
But despite all of his words of Tony being a disappointment that no one would ever be around, he still hoped someone would actually stay because they wanted and needed him.

So when Ryder, who Tony thought could actually fulfill this hopefully desire, came back into his life he welcomed it with open arms.

He had just sent Rhodey off and was on his way to grab some coffee. Rhodey had mentioned before he left to get some nutritional food in him.

“Tones, seriously go get something to eat. When I come back, I don’t want my friend looking as though he’s a skeleton,” Rhodey joked, while trying to adjust the weight on his legs discreetly.

Tony winced as he noticed the movement, but said nothing. It would bring up the same argument with Rhodey saying it was not his fault and Tony believing anything but that.

“Okay, mother hen. Now go. I can’t have Mama Rhodes calling me and asking where her son is,” he easily answered back. At Rhodey’s inquiring gaze, he relented saying, “And I’ll grab something to eat before I go back to work.”

The two of them hugged tightly, both promising to call each other once a week even if only for a few moments. Tony tried wiping at his eyes discreetly, while Rhodey had walked away. Once he was finally out of his sight, Tony motioned to Happy.

“Hey mind driving me to Leauna’s? I heard that breakfast is an important meal of the day and I’m going to try it,” Tony told Happy as he slid into the backseat.

Happy smiled amusedly and set out to drive to Leauna’s.

Leauna welcomed him brightly arm stretched wide. “Anthony! Sweetheart how have you been? Haven’t seen you come by since that little fiasco you all had. Oh let me get a good look at you.”

Leauna clicked her tongue against the back of her teeth and frowned. “You been eating? And I don’t mean coffee. That is not a food that has nutritional value.”

Tony looked down. “It does too have nutritional value,” he said childishly.

Leauna narrowed her eyes at Tony in silent disagreement. “Yes and pigs fly. You sit down at the counter sweetie. I’m going to fix you up a nice plate and maybe I’ll put aside some peach cobbler for you, yeah?”

Tony smiled warmly at her as he was lead to a table. “Thanks Leauna. You’re the best. And do you mind making something for Happy?”

“Of course, anything for my sweet one,” Leauna replied, the corners of her eyes crinkling. As Leauna left to go in the kitchen, one of the waitresses came to Tony with a cup of coffee. Tony barley managed to say thank you until someone bumped into his chair knocking both his and the gentlemen’s coffee onto the ground.

“Oh, sorry that’s my bad,” the gentlemen apologized looking Tony up and down to see if there was no damage. “I’d offer to buy you another cup of coffee, but I only had cash on me and I spent it on my coffee...that I just spilled.”

The man looked down dejectedly at the puddle of coffee at his feet. Tony took the man’s
preoccupation with glancing at the spilt coffee in order to look at the man. He was a little rugged, a look that some people achieved with hours. However, on him it seemed as though he quite literally rolled out of bed looking like that. And it worked wonders for him.

His black hair seemed soft to the touch and the longer strands seemed to curl around the nape of his neck. The man brought his gaze up and made a motion to go grab some napkins. He turned around briefly and raised his hand telling Tony to wait.

Tony continued admiring the man and the way he pulled in his bottom lip in frustration as though he couldn’t believe this happened to him. He suddenly felt an aching of nostalgia and want.

Steve sometimes did the same-

Immediately, Tony was brought out of his gawking. He felt his heart stop and his hands grow warm. Taking a deep breathe, he plastered on a smile as the man came back and bent down to clean up the coffee.

“It’s not your fault,” the man said so easily assuming that Tony had thought him spilling the coffee was his own fault. “Trust me. I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

Tony was shocked to hear those words come out of someone else’s mouth and not his. Even though he’s saying it wasn’t his fault about the coffee.

“The name’s Ryder Deaver,” he said standing up with a wad of used napkins.

“What?” he screeched taking in a longer time to look at the man.

Ryder Deaver?

College friend Ryder?

Tony could not believe his luck sometimes. He was ogling his ex-college friend who dang the years had certainly treated him well.

“Ryder?” he said aloud. “I cannot believe you’re back here. I thought you had stayed in Africa for the past few years. I didn’t know you were back.” He finished off lamely.

“Tony?” Ryder questioned eyebrows raising high into his hairline. “Wow, you certainly haven’t aged a bit...definitely should’ve recognized you on sight. And at Leauna’s...somethings just don’t change,” he said laughing. “I didn’t even know...I mean I didn’t really look at the news. I wanted to get back in touch with you, but you know I was doing work in Cameroon, Ghana, and other places. Didn’t really have access to my phone. But crap wow its crazy bumping into you again like this.”

“Well I’m no billionaire, but I do have some money to spend on handsome guys such as yourself. So I know this may sound presumptuous, but I’m free later this evening if you wanted to grab some dinner and a cup of coffee,” Ryder said motioning back to the empty cup of coffee. “Maybe catch up on everything, yeah?”

Tony stared at him not exactly sure what to say. Playboy Tony Stark would have rendered Ryder speechless with a “You won’t be able to make my coffee in the morning after the night I’ve had with you.”

But that playboy Stark wasn’t there. Alert the authorities playboy Tony Stark was gone from the building. So Tony just stared blinking slowly. Also sure he had flirted with Ryder...but nothing ever
serious in the form of a relationship ever came out of it. Even though he had hoped for something more back when he was a fresh-faced teenager and soon young adult that had always been out of the question. So this...this was awkward. This should be awkward. But maybe this was how things should be.

Everyone had left, but his old college friend was entering his life again.

Was this the world finally giving him a break.

Ryder seemed to take this as a rejection and quickly added. “I’m not broke so I could definitely afford the meal. Probably not at some fancy restaurant...though I have some money saved that we could use if that’s something you prefer. It was supposed to go toward my sister’s medical bills, but like I can take a few dollars out to take someone like you out. Because I mean wow it is completely necessary to pull out all the stops for you, like when that guy during sophomore you bought out the whole carnival for you and-”

Is that how people often saw Tony? Did he ramble unnecessarily like Ryder had? Though he had to admit it was charming and rather endearing. So Tony saved the poor fool from further embarrassment.

“Yes, we can go out for a coffee or whatever. Plus despite being a billionaire I actually prefer eating at places like Leauna’s,” he said hoping Ryder would understand. “I’m sure we can grab a nice meal like old times, yeah? Catch up.”

Thankfully he had understood and Tony had left Leauna’s with a full stomach and a date for Saturday night.

Tony reflects back to the night and remembers that he should have probably gotten something to eat. Rhodey had found a way to get FRIDAY to tell him when Tony wasn’t eating enough. Tony was still trying to find a way around this.

He stared at the phone once more and faintly let the voice of the newscaster travel into his ears. The lady brought up his name and then mentioned Ryder’s. Soon a few pictures popped onto the television. Tony’s face had been hidden by Ryder’s shoulders as though Ryder was shielding Tony from the cameras.

Of course the cameras never truly get the entire picture.

It had been one month since Ryder had asked him on their date. Everything had been going so well so it was a surprise when Ryder cornered him on the side of a building. The two had been walking back from a date at a club and Tony expected that soon the two would part ways as they had done so before. Tony would get into his car and Ryder would watch him leave before going in search of his own.

Ryder had decided to break the cycle that night.

“Tony,” he whispered lips mouthing at his collarbone. Fingers traveled at the waistband.

“Wait no,” Tony interrupted. “I think we should um cool things down before it gets too heated you know. Plus this is um...in public. Ah...anyone could see us and take a picture.” He gestured toward the people crossing the street.
“Are you ashamed to be seen with me?” Ryder questioned. “Is this weird? I mean I know sometimes it’s hard to transition from friends to…us and well we did have a few years since we last saw each other.”

“No, stay. Stay please. I’ll…I’ll,” Tony stammered, eyes widening as Ryder motioned for him to continue. Tony swallowed. He pulled back and pushed himself against the wall. “It’s just I’m trying to clean up my reputation and it won’t help if it looks like I’m having sex outside the movie theatre where there are kids.”

“Tony I can’t stay, if you won’t let me touch you. Every time I try you push me away. I’m not saying that we have to have sex right now. I know it’s early and you’re right this probably isn’t the best place. But eventually, right?”

“Of course,” Tony nodded hurriedly. “Of course, I just-We can do this later? Yeah.”

Ryder sighed dejectedly and pinched the bridge of his nose. He grabbed Tony by the neck, causing Tony’s head to be forced down to Ryder’s chest. Hot air passed Ryder’s lip as he spoke softly to Tony.

“We can do this later Tony. I’m not pressuring you okay? But you have to know as my boyfriend there are certain things to be expected yeah?”

His fingers tightened around Tony’s neck and Tony let out a startled breath. There was a distinct sound of a camera going off, but Tony hadn’t paid much attention to it. He was too focused on the fingers digging into his neck.

He nodded.

Ryder pulled his head back and kissed him on the corner of his lips.

“Good.”

And so Tony had put on a brave face and accepted what he would have to do to make the only person, he had left in his physical presence, to stay.

Tonight was the night. Ryder had been so patient with him and he stayed. No matter how many times Tony gave him reasons to push him away, Ryder stayed. So Ryder deserved this…he deserved Tony to give himself to Ryder.

He accepted that Tony needed time to get used to Ryder. But it had been four months since they had reunited and it was good now.

When Ryder entered Tony’s bedroom, he was met by Tony laying languidly over the bed. The silk sheets barely covered anything Tony wasn’t willing to show yet. He took great pleasure in how Ryder dropped his bag and his eyes widened upon seeing Tony’s current state.

“Paging Dr. Ryder,” Tony sultrily said pushing himself on his elbows to look Ryder directly in the eye.

Ryder scrunched up his nose and laughed softly. “Perhaps the doctor role play may work better on someone who isn’t a doctor. I’d rather prefer I didn’t have to play I was treating you for heart
surgery. I have enough patients to fulfill that fantasy. How about it just be you and me. No doctor. No genius, no billionaire, and no playboy. Just Tony and Ryder, yeah?"

“Don’t forget philanthropist.”

Ryder ran his fingers down Tony’s elbow. “How could I ever forget? It’s not as though someone doesn’t remind me every day.”

“That someone sounds amazing.”

“He is,” Ryder offered honestly smiling warmly at him and gosh if he hadn’t missed that. Just that someone looking at him as though he was the reason for their happiness. Looking at him as though he was more than just something they wanted, but he was something they needed.

He was good with feeling needed. People’s needs never went away, but people’s wants on the other hand always did. He had dealt with people wanting him for certain things at certain instances, actually desiring him but it never worked. Eventually need outweighed want and they had to find something that they needed to sustain them.

But hopefully just this once, someone could want and need him. Maybe Ryder could.

Eventually clothes were shed and Ryder and Tony found themselves tangled around each other. Tony’s eyes kept going to the door Ryder left open and he felt a sort of quiet unease. He knew no one would barge in because no one was here.

He had been working on getting the Avengers and supposedly reformed ex-assassin back home, but he didn’t know when that would happen. It could be today...he ignored the feeling of happiness at the thought of their return. It shouldn’t matter they wouldn’t be coming back for you. So he left the door open. Though his eyes checked the door everyone once in a while.

Ryder’s echoing voice broke him out of those thoughts.

“You’re doing so well baby,” Ryder rasped. He brought Tony closer to himself and bit at the underside of Tony’s jaw. Tony let out a ragged sigh and flit his hands around Ryder’s back not knowing where to settle.

Tony had thought Ryder’s patience with him would extend to him having patience with him in bed. But he didn’t. Tony had been with a few men in his past, but it had never hurt like this. Perhaps it was because he was tense and just needed to relax a little. He tried relaxing his muscles a bit, but this only brought Ryder closer and deeper. Tony felt pain shoot up his spine and tried stifling a moan. Ryder deserved to enjoy this. He didn’t want him to stop because if he did he may think Tony was broken and he would leave.

Plus if there was one thing Tony was good at it was sex. So why was this so difficult? He had to show Ryder how good he was at this so he wouldn’t want to go to anyone else.

“Ah, can we change positions babe?” Tony harshly whispered. “It hurts a little.”

“Yeah, of course,” Ryder agreed easily placing his hands on Tony to put him on top. Tony was knocked a little off balance, but was saved by Ryder softly keeping him upright.

Tony smiled down toothily at Ryder and adjusted himself on Ryder’s lap. Experimenting with the new position, Tony gave a few rolls of his body noticing that it was easier. Okay, he could do this. He felt the warmth starting to settle in the bottom of his stomach and rolled his body to meet Ryder’s movement. Now this...this he was good at.
But then the pain came back. It came back with such a force Tony had to arch his back to help alleviate the pain. Ryder mistook this for pleasure and arched of the bed as well seeking to pull himself in deeper.

“Wait…wait something’s…something’s wrong,” Tony whispered softly.

Ryder didn’t hear him or at least that’s what Tony would continue telling himself.

“Ryder,” Tony whimpered pawing at Ryder’s flushed chest.

Ryder kept thrusting in and out even more viciously taking Tony’s hands on him as an encouragement. His heart thundered inside his chest and his eyes settled at the point where he and Tony were joined. He continued to rock upwards into Tony and dig his nails into the skin so hard it pierced him.

He could see Tony’s mouth moving, but he wasn’t listening to him. Ryder had always believed the bedroom wasn’t meant for words, it was meant for sensations and touch only.

Tony felt tears travel down his check and he tried wiping them away in frustration. It had been a while so maybe he should’ve been stretched out more…maybe added some more lube. But Ryder was so excited…and wait had he been prepped?

Tony’s mind wandered and he thought he remembered fingers circling around him and then in him, but he doesn’t know…he doesn’t know. But this hurt and it kept hurting and he kept saying to slow down.

“I…” he swallows around a ball of saliva, “I can give you a blowjob instead. I’m good at those.”

He added a cheeky smile and let his hands travel down slowly past Ryder’s navel.


He heard that.

“Ryder really this doesn’t feel good right now. Can I just give you a blowjob and we can try this again later. It really hurts and I think if I just prep myself more it’ll go better next time,” Tony tried getting in all at once, hands reaching out to stop Ryder’s movement.

“Do you always talk this much during sex?” Ryder questioned. “I mean I’m used to my partners moaning and screaming and stuff. But I never knew people could actually like you know talk as if they’re at a ball game.”

“Oh,” Tony softly uttered. “I just…I just wanted to tell you…I’d be more enjoyable…this would be more enjoyable for you if we both were comfortable. So what do you say big guy let me get my pretty mouth around your cock.”

Tony hoped that he said this in a manner that exuded confidence.

“Is it the biggest?”

Tony was not new to this. People he had been with before had sometimes asked him this. He knew how to feed into their egos.

“Oh, yeah definitely. So big I’ll be feeling you for weeks. Might have to give all my presentations standing up…which Pepper constantly tells me I should be doing anyways.”
“No, I mean like the biggest in your band of heroes. I always wondered how I would measure up against Earth’s Mightiest Heroes, you know.”

“What?” Tony said taken aback. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, it’s just you know I was finally catching up on what I’ve been missing. The newspapers went around that you were like the Avenger slut being passed around. And like I get it fine piece of self like you, who wouldn’t want a slice. Plus doesn’t really leave a whole lot of time for dating, so you’re probably like the safest bet seeing as though you’ve had the most luck with guys and girls.”

He tried channeling in his camera ready smile for Ryder. He had been pretty good at that and it brought attention to his lips. He could do this. He was pretty good at knowing what was being circulated in the news about him. But he never heard about this. He briefly wondered if the others knew.

“I never slept with them. It was rumors. Most of the things in the news about me usually are,” Tony responded trying discreetly to get Ryder to soften his touch on him. “We respect each other on this team. There’s no Avenger orgy happening” But were they even a team anymore?

“Oh, that’s a shame. Always imagined Steve, America’s Golden Boy, getting off on you. You know that whole repressed 40s thing…a whole lot of people imagined it. But guess they were missing out,” he chuckled. “I’m glad I didn’t though.”

“Yeah,” Tony mumbled, throat thick with brimming emotion. Why had Ryder brought this up? He cleared his throat to get rid of the ball of emotion settling there. “So can I suck you off now or what?”

Ryder’s eyes darkened and his cock twitched inside of Tony. Tony held his breath hoping Ryder would take the suggestion. Suddenly, Tony was placed on his back and Ryder’s cock was resting heavily on his lips.

“Goodness give a guy a warning, huh?” he teased, but opened his mouth for him.

“Ah, crap never leaving you, if only for this mouth alone,” Ryder said all smiles. “Want this forever. Yeah? Can’t I have this with you? I need this, baby please.”

He tilts his head back as Tony hums around him. Tony smiles brightly and it doesn’t matter that he’s just as rough in his mouth as he was in his ass. It’s okay. It’s okay because Ryder said he wanted this and that he needed him. Tony didn’t think at the moment that Ryder was just talking about the sex. Tony wanted to believe Ryder was talking about him. Maybe eventually he’d get him to feel that way about him.

So he pulled back a little Ryder’s precum settling warmly on his lips. “Yeah, you need me? You want me? Then show me.”

Ryder cursed and did exactly that.

The memory coldly circulated in his mind as he tried paying attention to the news. He only managed to focus on it because they were mentioning the Avengers’ return to America.

“And so now there are preparations to be made for the Avengers to come home?” one reporter said.

“Yes, because we actually want a group of criminals…”
“No, they are not criminals. You know Tony Stark has been working with everyone involved including the UN on a way to have the Avengers pardoned. I believe that they will be allowed entrance to America in two months give or take. At least that is what resources claim Tony Stark has said.”

“And what of the Tony Stark? He just faded into the background with his new little boy toy Ryder Deaver?”

“Ah, yes Ryder Deaver,” one person laughed. “I feel sorry for that poor man that has to be saddled with Tony Stark. Doesn’t he know how much world of pain he’s in from not only associating with him? The Avengers surely did not reap any benefits from being associated with Tony Stark.”

“Oh Danvers you fool,” another reporter said laughing.

“Seriously, Karen I wonder how much pain Tony has inflicted on Ryder. His ramblings enough are a great source of pain,” Danvers joked.

Tony Stark? Causing Ryder pain? Oh if only they knew and saw the bruises Tony had to look at in the mirror for the past few weeks.

Since the first time Tony and Ryder had slept together, Tony’s nights and morning had been rather uncomfortable veering toward painful. Tony had tried insisting that Ryder ease up on things, but Ryder didn’t seem to mind. So like most of his days now, Tony looked in the mirror as his gaze settled on the bruises scattered all over his body.

He had remembered Ryder bringing back his men and women to their college dorm. He watched as they walked into the room smiling and excited for what was going to happen next. Tony would then go out into the dorm’s study room and waited fifteen minutes before heading back. Whoever would come out would like slightly tired and he was pretty sure some of them left crying. When he came back, Ryder would already be asleep a smile curling on his face.

But they always came back smiles and all. He wondered how and why they did it. He wondered why he did it.

Ryder came behind him and mouthed at the handprint on the left side of his neck. “How could anyone ever leave someone like you? You take it all so well.”

Tony tried not to grow warm at his praise. It wasn’t good praise he told himself. Ryder pushed Tony back into the counter and looked over Tony’s shoulders smiling at the bruises he could see painting over his skin.

Ryder loosened the towel around Tony’s waist and Tony fearfully realized that Ryder had not dressed himself before coming into the bathroom. Tony ignored the countertop digging into his hips as Ryder pushed forth and then in. Ryder ignored the gasps of Tony and placed a burning hand on his lower back.

“Slower Ryder. Please, I’m still a little…a little sore,” he rushed out at one particularly hard thrust. The pleasure had since then been removed and Ryder had told him it was okay. It was okay not to feel the pleasure at time…at least he still felt something. It doesn’t matter that something was pain. He should feel pleasure by making Ryder feel good. That was an accomplishment one could feel pleased about.

“Never gonna leave you,” Ryder said voice muffled against Tony’s shoulder. “Who could leave
“I don’t know,” Tony had wanted to say. “Perhaps if I knew they wouldn’t have left.”

But Tony didn’t say anything. He didn’t say anything further as Ryder continued to seek his pleasure in Tony’s body. He didn’t even say anything when Ryder visibly took delight in the handshape bruises on Tony’s body or the other scars he got from accidentally pushing Tony too hard into a window or accidentally losing his grasp on an object so it scarred Tony.

He didn’t say anything when Ryder bit too hard at his neck that it drew blood or when Ryder had felt too tired to stretch Tony properly before entering him. He didn’t say anything, when Ryder constantly asked about the Avengers and what he had done so wrong to get them to leave the freaking country. He didn’t say anything when Ryder had banged his head against the window to help it get into his freaking mind that he needed to stop flinching from his touch in public.

“But it was so hard not to, when you constantly only raise your hand to me in anger. I forget that sometimes you mean it to comfort. I’m sorry,” he had thought to himself.

He didn’t say anything at all.

He was used to not saying anything at all now.

Because when he did say something everyone left.

“Speak up against his father. Broken nose and dad is gone. Tell mom to divorce her dirt bag husband. Stared blankly at before leaving. Tell Obadiah weapons business isn’t what he sees SI as. Tries to kill him and then he leaves. Tell the Avengers about the Accords and how it would benefit us. Civil War and everyone remaining leaves,” Tony listed off in his head

So no, he wasn’t going to say anything as Ryder’s hands grow tighter and movements grow harsher.

Because this right here…this was Ryder staying.

But here he was finally after months of being with Ryder and he was contemplating calling Steve… because he didn’t want Ryder to stay. He wouldn’t need him to stay once the Avengers were here, even if they didn’t like him. He could pretend that they wanted to stay and that they needed and wanted him. He could pretend…it would be far easier than pretending not to be in physical pain every waking hour of the day.

So here Tony was staring at the phone. He wanted to tell Steve how he was hurting. He wanted to admit to him that he wasn’t okay and that he wanted all of them back. He wanted them to come back not just because he got a deal to pardon them, but because they wanted to come back home.

He yearned to have them here with him and maybe he wouldn’t need Ryder as much. Maybe then he’d have people he could at least pretend to want him, but wouldn’t cause him to go into work feeling bruised and not able to sit down at conference meetings. However, he should be thankful he has Ryder who he doesn’t have to pretend with. He knows what he was getting himself into with Ryder. He needed to be thankful.

Doesn’t mean that stopped him from wanting them back…he’ll even accept Bucky.

I’ll accept them all, when they come back, he thought to himself. It’s just will they accept me? Do I deserve that acceptance?
He shouldn’t want them to push Ryder away, when they came back. He shouldn’t want them to come and protect him from Ryder. Perhaps they wouldn’t even care. They probably wouldn’t care because Tony deserved what Ryder did to him. Maybe they wouldn’t even notice. But why should he want them to? He doesn’t know which is worse.

He looked at the phone placed in his lap and sighed. The lady on the television said they would be arriving back in America in two more months. She didn’t say if they were coming back to the Tower Tony made sure was ready for them when they returned. So Tony placed the phone in the box he’s kept it in. He locked it and placed a few files over it.

He couldn’t call Steve and tell him when he comes this time he should stay…that they should all stay. It wouldn’t be fair to make them do something they don’t want. So it’s okay if they didn’t even come back here to him. He could make them a Tower separate from the one he had renovated. He had been optimistic when he started remodeling. But now…maybe they wanted a place where he wouldn’t be. He couldn’t make them stay with him.

But it is okay, Tony kept telling himself.

Because at least Ryder stayed. It doesn’t matter if the bruises stayed too.
As promised here is your Saturday update. Enjoy and please feel free to leave a kudo, bookmark, comment, etc. :) As always apologize for any possible mistakes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The air that whipped around his face was colder than what Steve had grown used to. It was definitely a change to the warm weather in Wakanda. However, Steve welcomed this brisk cold with open arms because this was home. They were finally going back home.

“Man, I should have brought a jacket,” Clint said while rubbing his arms. His teeth clattered and he tried drawing closer to Natasha, hoping she would take pity on him and give her the extra blanket she had stored in her bag.

“I told you to bring a jacket, but like a child you refused. Deal with the consequences and learn from them,” Natasha claimed bringing her bag closer to her body.

Bucky let out a soft chuckle that nobody besides Steve could hear. Steve brightened at the sound, but decided not to draw too much attention to it. If he did, Bucky would no doubt try hiding it again. Bucky said Steve always became this overexcited puppy every time Bucky portrayed another emotion than brooding and deep reflection. Bucky had wanted him to stop looking at him like that because it had made him feel like Steve was constantly waiting for someone to come back, who was used to exchanging jokes and laughing. And Bucky wasn’t that guy anymore…at least not completely. But Bucky hadn’t wanted to give Steve false hope of “his” Bucky returning.

And Steve had accepted all of that fairly well. He figured it was better to accept this Bucky standing in front of him than pushing him away in favor of waiting for the guy that fell off the train.

Bucky noticed Steve made an aborted gesture to tilt his head at the sound of him laughing. He was thankful Steve hadn’t brought attention to it and at the same time he found it all very amusing. He almost wanted to say a joke and it was on the tip of his tongue.

He just felt free. He finally felt something he never thought he could have again. He knew that Tony had a great deal to do with his progress in Wakanda. He wondered if the others knew about his part in all of this.

Despite the genius not being in Wakanda, Tony’s voice would waft in and out the room while the doctors checked his status. He assumed T’Challa had not known at some points Bucky was awake and aware when he was on a conference call with Tony.

Bucky’s ear picked back up on the argument that Clint and Natasha were having, while he himself tried to stop from shivering from the cold. The cold hadn’t brought many good memories to his mind. Looking at Steve, whose shoulders were tense, Bucky could see Steve felt the same about the cold.

“But Natasha,” he said, drawing her name out in a name. “I’m coooold. Have mercy.”
Natasha rolled her eyes good-naturedly, while reaching into her bag. She threw it toward his face which Clint immediately wrapped around his body. He let out a contented sigh and smiled brightly at Natasha. The corners of her lips lifted and she continued walking to the entrance of S.H.I.E.L.D.

Nick Fury had gotten in touch with them before they landed in America and had laid out heavy instructions to meet with him as soon as they reached land. Clint had complained profusely saying all he wanted was to go home to Laura and his kids. Steve had been sympathetic. If Steve had left someone he loved for six months with no contact and it was his fault for that lack of communication, he would grow mad.

But that’s exactly what had happened to him, wasn’t it?

A nudge to his ribs brought him out of his thoughts. He turned to face Bucky who was now looking at him with concerned filled eyes.

“You alright?”

“Yeah, Bucky I am,” Steve lied.

But if there was one thing Bucky had never forgotten was this.

Bucky never forgot how to tell when Steve was lying.

As much as he wanted to understand what was wrong and why he felt compelled to lie to him of all people about not being okay, he kept his mouth shut. He had observed this look in Steve’s face every time he would look at the cellphone in his hand as if waiting for someone to call.

Bucky hadn’t questioned what the phone meant and neither did anyone else. Steve hadn’t known whether to be thankful or not. Sometimes he wanted someone to talk to about all of this mess with Tony…but the one he really wanted to talk to would never pick up that phone.

These thoughts traveled through his mind as they entered S.H.I.E.L.D. everyone was still a little wary of placing themselves in this building, but they had nowhere else to go.

Sam had lagged behind, talking in hushed tones with Wanda. Clint unwrapped himself from the blanket and gave it back to Natasha who had narrowed her eyes as if expecting a threat. Bucky walked beside Steve and focused his eyes on anyone who walked near them.

None of the agents had said anything to them. They only offered short nods and hesitant smiles. Steve tried offering one of his own back. When an agent grimaced in response and quickly walked off, he figured that his smile was less to be desired.

They all took the elevator up to the conference room where Fury was supposed to have been waiting for them. The ride was silent and tense with nerves. Once the elevator dinged, they all stepped out and quickly faltered with who was waiting in the conference room.

“Coulson?” Clint brokenly whispered. “You…you were dead. What-”

Natasha crossed her arms angrily over her chest. She titled her head in agreement with Clint’s question.

“It’s a long story,” Phil murmured tiredly. He looked at all of the Avengers and motioned for them to sit down. “Perhaps I’ll tell you later, when things have cooled down. But please take a seat.”

Steve took the time to notice there were more faces in the room. Nick Fury was in there as was Maria
Hill. However, the two faces that surprised him the most were the appearances of Vision and Pepper. If anyone else felt his same surprise, they hadn’t visibly shown it. Nick Fury looked at all of them and clasped his hands together on the mahagonany desk. He took his time to look at all of them before opening his mouth to talk.

“You all created a royal fucking mess, you know that?” Fury exclaimed in a voice so low that was bridled with anger. “It’s like you all just decided to see how much we can screw things up and had a contest.”

“With all due respect sir this started with Tony’s refusal to listen to my concerns about the Accords,” Steve said leaning forward.

“Are you serious? So it wasn’t about you playing hide and go seek with your little assassin buddy?” Pepper spoke out, but was calmed down by Phil gently placing a hand on her shoulder.

Bucky pulled his shoulders toward his neck as if being reprimanded and Steve became angry with Pepper making Bucky feel this way.

Steve grit his teeth together. He was tired of people blaming Bucky. “This is not Bucky’s fault.”

“Of course not,” Pepper whispered. “Tony has told me that on multiple occasions.”

“What?” Bucky rasped surprised.

Pepper waved the question away and motioned for Fury to continue talking. Fury nodded gratefully at her and pulled out a few packages.

“The Accords will be signed. Tony has reformed it, while keeping in mind your concerns. Listen when you have people in authority there has to be a means of keeping them checked. You will still have full agency over your actions, but there needs to be some sort of rules. The people normal day civilians are weary of an authority who can essentially do anything they want without repercussions. They have seen that played out in the past and it never seemed to go well for the normal citizen.”

“We have agency without regulation. We don’t need this and maybe you should stop listening to Tony. He has a very biased opinion of all of this,” Steve said softly in hopes of Pepper not getting offended on the sake of her friend.

“And you all don’t?” Phil questioned honestly.

“Rogers be quiet,” Fury said.

“And why isn’t Tony here? Too chicken to man up and face what he’s done wrong? That’s what we’ve all been doing for the past six months. And he’s been here doing what? Just in his lab going over the Accords and playing with our lives,” Clint angrily protested.

“Barton and Rogers.” Fury said his name lower and with more anger. “I cannot physically be here. Because if one of you let something stupid like that come out of your mouth again I am going to kill you,” Fury gritted out.

“Didn’t know you like Stark so much,” Clint muttered darkly. “Might be why he was the one got to stay here, while we were out in exile. Playing favorites?”

“Barton.” This time it was Natasha who hissed out Clint’s last name.
Fury’s eye grew bright with anger. “I’d like you to remember Barton that Tony is not the reason you had to run off in exile, but he is the reason you are back here. Do not keep putting the blame on him because you are unwilling to be an adult and accept the repercussions of your actions. Do not talk about the man who has been protecting your family, when you’ve been fighting in a battle that didn’t even involve you.”

Clint clenched his jaw and turned to face the wall. Natasha sighed deeply at the childlike behavior of her friend.

“So I advise you start looking at the course of your own actions first.”

Steve’s cheeks grew warm. It was true in part. Clint had been driven out of retirement for something he could have easily ignored. Steve should have told Clint to stay home with his wife and kids. He had no business in seeking out Clint’s help. It was his fault for having Clint direct all of his anger at Tony. It was always easing placing blame on someone who couldn’t defend themselves.

“How long do we have to look at the document?” Natasha questioned, briefly skimming the words. From what she could tell there were a lot of protections for them that weren’t there before. Perhaps some of what Steve and Natasha had mentioned to Tony made its way into this decision making.

“You have a month. Any questions, comments, or concerns may be met with me and I will try making the adjustments with Tony,” Pepper told her.

“Why do we have to go to you and not Tony first?” Sam questioned eyes looking up from the revised document.

“Because last time that happened there was a war,” Pepper said warmly in contrast to the coldness in her eyes. “He doesn’t need the stress right now. So I will be helping him out with that and it may be better to do it with someone you are not personally tied to right now. Vision?”

Vision turned to Pepper and then to Wanda. “Yes, Ms. Maximoff. Tony has told me his concerns of your powers. It is with my understanding you do not have complete control over your powers. Would you like to finally have access to developing your gifts and maintaining them in a healthy manner?”

Steve looked toward Wanda who was smiling softly at Vision.

“If that is quite alright with you Ms. Maximoff,” Vision addressed. “I believe it would do you good to gain more control of your powers in a safe environment not around a lot of people. We would be traveling the world seeking out people with similar powers to yours. Tony has enlisted the help of Dr. Strange. We would both like to help you in your journey

Wanda looked hopefully at Steve for permission. Steve knew that Wanda had missed the presence of Vision something great. However, he was still wary of leaving Wanda out of his sight. Vision took this hesitance of Steve’s approval.

“Her progress will be monitored. You may have daily check-ins and will be alerted to our location every 24 hours. Wanda will not be required to do anything she is uncomfortable with, but know this Steve she needs to control her powers. You will not be doing her a great service, if you allow her not to be trained.”

Steve nodded his head and Wanda smiled even brighter.

“Perhaps we may discuss it more privately,” Vision suggested. “Then we can make arrangements, while the rest of the Avengers discuss their own plans of return.”
“Of course Vision,” she whispered his name warmly. Before the two left the room, Wanda leaned over Steve to press a quick kiss to his cheek. “Thank you Steve. I promise I’ll keep in touch.”

“You had better,” Steve said. “Make sure you dress appropriately for the weather wherever Vision takes you.”

Wanda shook her head good-naturedly and followed Vision out.

“Ugh, you’re such a dad,” Clint laughed.

The tension slightly broke in the room for a few seconds, before Pepper looked back toward them seriously.

“This has been a hard year, yeah?” She looked toward all of them as if drained by their mere presence. The others looked at each other in silent agreement. “Look, I am not putting the blame on you all. I understand that this was just a very unfortunate situation heightened by emotions.”

She made it a point to stare at Steve who if possible had shrunk lower in his seat.

“I hate to admit this, but everyone screwed up and was screwed over in various degrees. However, Tony…” She broke off to clear the lump in her throat. “This betrayal. This absence has screwed him over in many more ways than one. None of you bothered to get in touch with Tony and make sure how he was doing. How he was trying to help maintain your image, while his was constantly demeaned in order to help the civilians trust you all.”

Steve wanted to argue the same about Tony. He had sent a letter and a phone, but Tony hadn’t called. He wanted to tell Pepper he tried, yet he couldn’t deny that right now he felt like he hadn’t tried at all.

“I say all of this because Tony has decided to welcome you all back to the Tower. He realized that it became a home for all of you and that’s where you would all like to go. He has created a floor for all of you. Each of you have been given your own floor, but if you want you can all live on one floor together. There are four bedrooms on each floor.”

“Wow, that’s actually pretty amazing,” Sam admitted. “You’ll have to tell him I said thanks. While I would love to be back, I think I need some time back with my family.”

Pepper grinned and nodded. “I’ll pass that along.”

Sam smiled back in thanks.

“Anyways Tony is opening up his home for all of you in hopes that you all forgive him. He often makes these gestures to seek out the approval or forgiveness from someone. Sometimes he isn’t even aware he’s doing it,” she said glumly. “He has such this forgiving nature, when in all actuality no one should be forgiven. And yet he has this silly belief that he’s the one that needs to be forgiven. Mind telling me what for?”

“Was it for Ultron?”

“Was it for the Accords?”

“Was it for simply being Tony Stark?”

Pepper rattled off the questions back and forth and noticed with a quiet happiness how they for once were just listening...well until Clint spoke up.
“We didn’t mean to make him feel all the blame for that,” Clint said silently finally taking in part of what he had done.

“Exactly. You didn’t meant to. It wasn’t a conscious thing. It was unconscious,” Pepper realized, eyes widening with the realizations she just made. “Which means that somewhere deep inside of you all, you really think that Tony isn’t fit to do what he was doing long before the Avengers came along. You all collectively set out to blame him for anything wrong that happened due to the Avengers because you all never thought he deserved to be an Avenger. You all never trusted him.”

Pepper looked as though the wind had been knocked out of her chest. She stumbled briefly hands placed firmly on the smooth mahogany desk. She wonderd how Tony always managed to see the best in people. Him seeing the best in people always managed to bite him in the rear end. Pepper had made a conscious decision a long time ago that she would protect Tony. She reflected bitterly on the night that Rhodey and she had seen Tony have his first breakdown since he was 23. And it was all because of them.

“I don’t know how to help him, Rhodey,” Pepper cried into his shoulder. “He keeps pushing me away and I… I’m afraid that he’s…”

She’s interrupted by a loud string of curses and things being thrown against the wall. Pepper can feel Rhodey flinch behind her, and feel the slight twitch of his body as though he was about to move, but reconsidered the action. The screams and cries were insistent and became louder with each growing second.

Another second something was broken, followed by a sharp cry of pain coming from someone’s throat. The cry was then muffled by something.

Pepper immediately broke off in sobs, clutching the arms of Rhodey in grief. “I know we’re adults… and we should be able to handle this. But at what point does it become too much, Rhodey? Why does this always happen to him?”

Rhodey hummed in the back of his throat, not yet ready to speak, instead allowing Pepper to get everything off of her chest in that moment. The both of them kept an ear out to listen for any more noises inside Tony’s room. They didn’t know whether to welcome the silence or be afraid of it.

“He…I can’t handle Tony like this. I don’t want to see him like this, hurting and I can’t do anything to ease the pain. He keeps having these nightmares of Siberia and he won’t tell me what happened. But I know something bad happened there. I can’t handle him pushing me away anymore. I’m at the edge of the cliff and with one more push, I’m afraid that I may just succumb to the ocean’s water.”

Rhodey’s face was set in a grim expression as he ran his hands over Pepper’s back. He took a moment to think about what Pepper just said, his eyes hardening and a resolution was set in his mind. “Then we don’t let him push us away.”

Pepper sniffled and looks up at him through wet eyelashes. “What?”

“We don’t push him away. We push away those who hurt him, yeah?” Rhodey looked down at her smiling briefly. “We do everything we can to make sure that no one hurts our friend, right?”

Pepper nodded tiredly, energy drained from having cried for hours outside of Tony’s bedroom where he had locked himself in it. “Yeah, we push those away who hurt him. Promise.”

“Promise,” Rhodey solemnly agrees.
And with that agreement became many years of pushing away those who hurt Tony. Unfortunately, sometimes they had more failures than success.

Before Pepper could remember the events that had locked Tony in his room that night six months ago, she was brought back to the present situation at hand. She raised her hands to her face and was not shocked when she felt wetness gathering on her cheeks. But before any of the others tried acknowledging this, Pepper wiped her face angrily.

I made a promise.

I’ve failed on so many occasions.

Pepper sighed tiredly, talking to the Avengers was draining the energy out of her. She smiled sadly at them all, wondering just how bad things had gotten in such a short amount of time. She used to admire these heroes and praise them on how they made Tony into a better man. She thought they were all changing him for the better, giving him a life purpose again. Admitting that she was wrong, once again, sent a sharp flicker of pain through her body.

“Tony,” she said voice breaking softly. She cleared her voice and rubbed irritably at her wet eyes. “All he wanted was to be a part of a family. This family. Brothers, sisters, friends, comrades, and hell even loved ones” she hints with eyes, eyes flickering to one person in particular so quick that no one could know who she directed that statement to. “Though I’m not sure of that anymore,” she whispered more to herself, than to the others.

“And you denied him of that,” she settled. Her mouth quivered as she struggled to compose herself. A sigh escaped her lips and she turned her face to look toward the ceiling. “But Tony is always going to be my family. Mine and Rhodey’s.”

“He is family,” Natasha softly says, disagreeing with Pepper.

“Family wouldn’t have left him alone in Siberia,” Pepper bit out.

Natasha looked curiously at Steve and Bucky. She had known very little of what happened and decided to leave it alone. Maybe she should have prodded further into what actually happened.

“But Tony always had this extra place in his heart for all of you. And I know all it would take is a simple we need you Tony to help us out, and he would smile and forgive and welcome you back with open arms,” Pepper laughed bitterly. “Because that’s Tony for you. And I want to yell at you until I’m blue in the face and you understand just how selfless and caring Tony is, when you all have done nothing to deserve his kindness. But frankly I just don’t have any more anger to yell at you. I just feel disappointed in you all.”

No one argued with Pepper this time.

“But I have to protect the family I have. So I’m begging please just please if you’re not going to be the family Tony needs you need to deny his offer to live at the Tower. I can’t see him go through this another time.” The toil of all of this unravels as a sob breaks through her chest. “I can’t. I won’t.” She brought her face down setting her jaw and straightened her shoulders.

“So please, don’t destroy the little bit of family I have left. Because next time Rhodey and I might not be fast enough. And I’d really hate to be giving you this speech again, when I would also have to make time for making a eulogy.”
Everyone’s face looked stricken at the implication and made no moves to talk. They hadn’t know things had gotten this bad. Pepper straightened her shoulders and nods her head twice. Pepper bit her lip.

“But if you accept I need you to do me a favor. I can’t believe I’m asking this,” Pepper groaned.

“Of course anything,” Steve readily agreed.

Pepper looked slightly taken aback. She quickly gathered herself and alternated between which Avengers she was looking at.

“Tony’s boyfriend Ryder has been staying with him for the past few months. He’s an old college friend of Tony’s.”

“I thought you and Rhodey are his only friends,” Sam said. “That’s all he ever talks about. Never mentioned a Ryder.”

“He having never mentioned Ryder is exactly why I need this favor. I won’t tell you everything about Tony and Ryder’s friendship in college. All I know was it was great for the longest then things turned toxic. Friends growing apart and all that, but I always felt it was more.”

Bucky hung onto her words and paid attention to how Pepper straightened her shoulders to make her seem larger. Bucky admired that about her. She didn’t cower in the face of former assassins and super soldiers. She brushed a few straying strands of her hair behind her ear and for the first time looked at them with a hint of desperation.

“Ryder’s been the only one that has been the main person in Tony’s life so far, besides Peter and little strawberry,” Pepper softly whispered.

“Peter and little strawberry?” Clint whispered to himself.

“So if you all decide to live with him again I need you to keep an eye on Ryder for me please. Look I do not trust you all, but in some manners I trust Ryder far less. Just keep an eye on him for me and let me know how Tony is doing. I’m not able to monitor Tony 24/7 anymore because I’ll be in England for a few months. Also Rhodey’s been with his family, while he heals.”

“How…how is he,” Sam said looking down at his hands, before looking at Pepper.

“He’s doing better,” Pepper replied shortly. “Well that is all I have to say for now. Do not make me have another talk like this with you all or you will come to soon regret it. Coulson, Fury, Hill.” She waved goodbye to them and exited the conference room with only a grace that Pepper Potts had.

Nick looked at all of them who had various degrees of confusion, anger, and shame expressed on their faces.

Nick stood and said to them all, “Well it looks like you all have a decision to make. Don’t make the stupid one.”

With the exception of Wanda and Sam, the Avengers entered the newly renovated Tower. Steve marveled at the lines of the building. His eyes traveled at the softness of some of the lines that
contrasted with the sharp jagged edges of some parts of the building. Steve yearned to grab his sketchbook and wondered briefly if he could take some time away to buy one.

He looked over to Bucky to see how he was faring. Bucky looked straight back at him with the barest of smiles and knocked his shoulder into his.

“Stop staring, punk,” he joked easily as if this was something he know did. “I’m pretty sure the building will still be here tomorrow.”

Natasha let the corners of her lips lift in a semblance of a smirk. “Bucky’s right. Plus I don’t know about you all, but I’m ready to go inside and see just what Tony’s been up to since we left.”

Clint rolled his eyes. “If we see him. He’s probably still holed up in his lab. Be surprised if he comes up to give us a hearty welcome.”

Natasha looked after Clint as he continued walking to the building. Steve had wanted to say something against this, but he knew it was true. Tony had always placed his lab time before team time anyways. What would be different from then to know? However, he had hopes that Tony wouldn’t go running to the lab as soon as he saw them.

He had some things to say to Tony just as much as Tony probably wanted to say some words to Steve. But Steve had listened to Pepper and he felt going forward he would try listening to Tony.

Steve would be very welcoming of Tony’s words and then he would steer him toward the right direction. He had a month to persuade Tony to get rid of the Accords. At least that is what Pepper had seemed to imply. He looked at the rest of his teammates and decided that for them he would be the one to help Tony see the downsides of the Accords. Sure there may have been changes made, but at the end of the day it was still a restriction on their powers. If only Tony could understand this…but he couldn’t because he was Tony Stark.

Something in his mind seemed to want to be brought to the forefront. Pepper’s words from their meeting a few hours ago echoed in his mind, but he pushed it back.

He would help welcome Tony back into their family. He would as soon as Tony understand that to be a part of this family was also accepting Bucky. The other Avengers had understood this addition, so Tony surely would adjust his actions accordingly.

His thoughts stayed with him until they had entered the entrance of the building. Their codes were still the same and the others were extremely grateful for this.

Natasha let out a breath of relief and seemed to have a little bit of tension leave her shoulders. Clint looked at everything and was probably noting the changes. Bucky silently took in everything all the while waiting for the resident genius to make his appearance. Steve was waiting for the same thing.

They had all journeyed to the kitchen and wanted to see if Tony would pass by. Once a few minutes had passed without seeing Tony, Natasha asked, “FRIDAY is Tony in the-”

“Whoa, it’s you all are actually here? Tony hadn’t thought you would all come here, but wow he’s going to be surprised,” a man rushed out. “You know you all seem more extremely human than when you are on tv.”

Everyone soon took defensive stances. The man backed up and raised his hands. “Okay everyone let’s calm down now.”

“Who are you?” Clint gritted out.
“Ummm, I’m Ryder. Tony’s live in maid,” Ryder joked. But upon seeing no one had laughed, he cleared his throat. “Ah, his boyfriend. You can get Tony to vouch for me, when he gets back.”

“Look just tell him to come up from his lab so we can talk,” Steve said crossing his arms over his chest.

Ryder’s eyes followed the action and Steve felt the need to drop his crossed arms. Lamely he crossed his arms behind his back and ignored the noise of disappointment escape Ryder. Ryder shook his head.

“No, he actually just went to the orphanage. He’s usually back around five. So you only have two more hours…so we can all just wait here until he comes back. Get to know each other. So what is your-”

Natasha stabbed a dagger into the countertop and leaned close to Ryder. “No questions. We’ll just wait.”

“Ummm riiiiight,” Ryder said wearily looking at all of them.

“Natasha,” Steve warned her. They couldn’t threaten just normal day civilians. Natasha sighed and took her dagger out.

“Do you have food? I’m starving?” Bucky questioned trying to lessen the ever growing tension in the air.

Ryder’s eyes brightened. “Yeah! Tony cooked last night and we have like some crazy mad leftovers. Come on sit down I’ll warm things up.”

“Tony cooks?” Clint softly asked Natasha.

Natasha shrugged and just watched Ryder flit around the kitchen grabbing Tupperware. Bucky, Clint, Steve, and Natasha all sat down at the kitchen and waited for the food and for Tony’s return.

It was time for things to get back to normal…or as normal as things were.

Chapter End Notes

So...you could all probably tell I just needed some way to get Wanda out of the story because she's not my favorite to write. So it was probably rushed. I love Sam, but I wanted to focus on this core group.

Bruce and Thor may be making appearances later though. See y'all next Saturday.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

It's that time again! Hope you enjoy this chapter. Also I am including Miles Morales in this story. However, his background story will be altered to fit this story.

And as always apologies for any mistakes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony smiled to himself as all of the children ran to go play with the toys he had brought for this week’s visit. Karen, who was the owner of this orphanage shook her head at Tony.

“Tony you are going to spoil these kids,” she said sitting down at her office chair. “Each of them probably have five toys to their name.”

“And they deserve ten times more, but you limited me to gifts only one every two months” Tony assured her. “But how are things going around here. Everything up to code and what not? Nobody harassing you or the kids?”

Karen smiled indulgently at Tony. “Tony everything is fine just as it was fine the last time you came. You have done so many great things.”

“Ah, stop it. I’m pretty sure I’m the main reason these kids are in the orphanage,” he tried saying it lightly, but Karen’s sad grimace told him he did not succeed.

“And I have told you many times to stop thinking like that,” Karen told him. “Where’s Peter by the way? I made him the apple cobbler he’s been consistently asking me about.”

Tony smiled. “Well I can take it to him.”

Karen raised her eyebrows at him. “And I’m sure he would never receive it.”

Tony raise his hands in defense. “He’s at Michelle’s. They’re studying at Leauna’s for their academic decathlon or something of the sort. Peter thinks it’s a date.”

Karen laughs softly. “Oh he is too precious. He does realize that the whole group will probably be coming, yes?”

“I have no idea. It’s Peter.”

The two share laughter that is Peter’s pining. “But I’ll tell him you have a cobbler waiting for him and he’ll probably swing through.”

Without a second passing, a warm body was quickly thrown into his lap.

“Baba!” a raspy voice coughed.

There was only one person who called him baba. One time they had watched a movie about this guy who gave toys to his neighborhood every day for a week. His name had been Bába de la Rose. Tony
was forever grateful they hadn’t been watching a movie about Santa Claus. His figure could not suffer that greatly. He looked down into the brown eyes of the four year old that had stayed close to him ever since he first came to Karen’s orphanage.

When he had first come in today, he was disheartened that he wasn’t met with Miles throwing himself into Tony’s arms. He wondered if he had been adopted. He wanted to push down the happiness he felt, when he realized that he hadn’t been.

*That’s not fair Tony. You should want them all to be adopted. Don’t be selfish,* he told himself.

“Sorry he heard Mr. Stark was here and wanted to come out of his bedroom,” the nineteen-year old volunteer, Jaime, said. “I tried reaching him, but those little legs have some speed on them. I can take him back to his room now.”

Jaime reached to grab Miles, but stopped when Tony waved at him.

“That’s alright Jaime. I’m happy to see him,” Tony replied, settling Miles onto his lap. “I’ll keep him for now. Thank you.”

Jaime nodded and closed the door to Karen’s office.

“Miles what did we tell you? You have to stay in bed until you get better,” Karen sighed. “You won’t get better unless you rest.”

“What’s wrong with him?” Tony asked as Miles body rocked with coughs. He pat his back and looked to Karen for an answer. He wasn’t sick last time Tony visited and Tony made sure to visit at least once a week.

“With the weather changing and people coming in and out looking to adopt it seems this little one has contacted pneumonia. And we’ve had doctors come out and the help you’ve sent is great, but it’s still hard taking care of one kid when you have so many to watch after, you know? I mean we’re not neglecting him and we’ve been helping him recover, but sometimes I think it would be better if he had a family whose sole purpose was providing for him and taking care of him when he’s sick.”

“I’ll do it,” Tony quickly interrupted her.

Karen’s eyes widened. “Tony. I’m not sure…”

“No, you need someone to take care of him until he’s recovered. I have the resources. I could get him an appointment to make sure everything is fine. Once he’s up to code, I’ll have him back here healthy and ready to go. Unless…I mean you’re right I’m probably not fit to take care of a kid. Probably can’t really take care of myself.”

“Tony do not put words into my mouth. You know that your time at this orphanage has proven that you can take care of twenty children at a time. I am just worried you may not have the time. The pneumonia Miles has right now isn’t contagious so you’re fine in that aspect. It’s just I heard the Avengers were coming back pretty soon and I know you’ll be dealing with them.”

“Miles will be my top priority. I assure you,” he promised to her.

Karen appeared to contemplate this before nodding. “Okay, well since you’re not adopting you don’t have to fill out a whole lot of forms. However, since we are releasing him into your care there will be a few things you have to fill out. Are you okay with going with Tony for a few days Miles?”

Miles’ eyes brightened considerably and he nodded excitedly. He held onto Tony closer and rubbed
“Goin’ home with you baba?”

“Yes.”

“To stay?”

“Yes, I’m going to take care of you until you get better bambino. Then you can come back here and play with your friends.”

“Kay. Can I bring Snuggles,” Miles said in reference to his stuffed penguin.

“Of course you can.”

Karen’s eyes looked concernedly between Miles and Tony. Karen would never dare say anything to Tony right now, but she had always assumed eventually Tony would adopt Miles. Now never say she had ulterior motives for agreeing to let Tony bring Miles home, when she would have never let any other person do the same. But maybe this would bring Tony to the decision he’s clearly been contemplating since he came to her orphanage.

Once everything had been handled at the orphanage, Tony told Happy to drive them back to the tower. Miles had not stopped mumbling little incoherent sentences, since they left.

“And baba then we can have cookies. Ms.K said ‘m getting big so I can watch the…the,” he broke off into some cough and tried to recover to speak some more.

“Bambino slow down.” Tony rubbed his chest and grabbed a cup so he could cough into it. He hated how Miles was feeling so bad, but hopefully things would clear up.

“Cookies?”

“Yes we’ll have cookies later, okay? Close your eyes and go to sleep.”

“Not sleepy baba. I’m fully cont…cocertu…coinsci…”

“Conscious?” Tony couldn’t help laughing once Happy started laughing over Miles mispronunciation.

“Yes,” Miles said all the while closing his eyes and slowly falling to sleep.

When they had arrived at the Tower, Tony thanked Happy and turned to grab the bags full of Miles’ stuff Karen had left him with. Tony was careful to keep an eyes on Miles who was still asleep in his arms.

As he walked into the building, he went straight to the kitchen to place Miles’ medicine in the medicine cabinet. Upon reaching the kitchen, he was startled when he saw his former teammates sitting down and staring at Ryder who was leaning against the countertop.

He looked at all of them gathered in the kitchen with food splayed before him. He watched as they all turned their eyes to focus on him with layering expressions of anger, resentment, tiredness, and things of the like.

“Sorry, I was going to call you and tell them you were here, but then I figured you were on your way home pretty soon so,” Ryder said to him and looked at the kid in Tony’s arms.
“Since when did Stark get a kid,” Clint whispered eyeing Tony.

Ryder seemed to share the same sentiment, even hooking his arm around Tony and whispering harshly, “We’ll talk about this later.”

Miles at this moment decided to wake up and slap Ryder hand away from Tony. “No touch baba.”

Tony distanced himself from Ryder. Miles stared at Ryder and wrapped his plump arms around Tony’s neck. Tony hoisted Miles further up on his hip and looked silently. Ryder’s eyes widened and he clenched his jaw from the pure disrespect that kid had just shown him.

“Look Tony if you have some free time maybe we could discuss things and hopefully begin to move toward a solution for how things will be run,” Steve offered.

He was not ready to do this. Nope. Not today. He had forgotten to practice in the mirror so he was not prepared. So nope not happening today. This will not be the list all the way Tony is a major fuck up and how we can solve Tony’s problems game.

Apparently he said this aloud because Clint snorted. “Of course and we should plan things on your own term?”

“Look I know we have a lot to talk about, but I’m not ready to talk today. Plus I need to take care of a sick kid right now. So excuse me. I think you all have had a few long months. A good night’s sleep may do everyone good. If you have complaints, let me know. And we’ll hash everything out like adults tomorrow.”

They all looked as though they were about to say something, but Ryder chose that moment of silence to speak up.

“Tony is being particularly courteous right now and he is not asking a lot out of you. He has had a long week and I believe you all have had a few long months. A good night’s sleep may do everyone good. So do as Tony suggested and you all can reconvene tomorrow evening,” Ryder said with such authority that Tony was brought back to those days in college, when Ryder would argue with his professors about a possible grade change.

Steve opened his mouth to say something, but Bucky touched his elbow and tilted his head to the side. “He’s right. It’s been a long flight. We all need sleep.”

Everyone seemed to nod their head in agreement and make their way to their floors.

“Stark,” Natasha said.

Tony turned to face her and mentally tried shielding his expression. “Yes.”

“It’s good to see you again. And thank you for opening up your home to us.”

“It’s yours just as much as it is mine,” he said and without a second glance to her, he was being led away to his floor with Ryder.

Ryder and he had not said anything since leaving the kitchen. Tony decided to place Miles in his guest bedroom and set the child monitor in his room. He gave one look back at Miles before cracking the door and heading to his bedroom.

He barely had the chance to place the other monitor on his shelf before Ryder pushed him onto the bed. Ryder began unbuckling his belt and pushing his jeans to the floor. Tony placed himself on his
elbows and looked at Ryder.

Ryder’s eyes never left his as he pushed down at Tony’s chest.

“Umm, not that I’m not all for sexy times, but now isn’t that great of a time…so”

“Open,” Ryder rasped out.

Tony swallowed thickly and obediently opened his mouth for Ryder.

“Who told you to get a kid?” Ryder said running his fingers around Tony’s open mouth.

“I didn’t get a kid. I offered to watch Miles until he recovered from pneumonia. It’s not like I adopted him or anything.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me,” Ryder hissed as he straddled Tony’s hips. He pressed his wet fingers against Tony’s hips and scratched at the soft skin there. Tony let out a hiss and tried pushing Ryder’s hands away from him.

Ryder only dug harder until he pulled his hands away to push his boxers down. His cock sprang up and Tony’s eyes rolled back in hopes that for once Ryder would be gentle this time.

Ryder crawled onto of Tony’s body and settled his onto Tony’s chest just shy of his arc reactor, while placing his cock on Tony’s bottom lip.

“Get off!” Tony rasped struggling to breath. “My chest…’m can’t breathe.”

Ryder refused him and even pressed his hips harsher against Tony’s chest. He rocked his hips forward pushing his cock deeper into Tony’s mouth. Ryder let out a pleased moan as Tony chocked and gasped for breath every time he would pull out.

He forced himself to go deeper and crooned to Tony, “Can’t believe you got a kid without my permission. But it’s okay you’ll make it up to me. You already are just letting me take you like this. Gosh Tony if I had known how good you were, I would’ve taken you back in college.”

Ryder leaned back cock slipping out of Tony’s mouth. Tony tried inhaling a large breath of air before Ryder pushed his hips forward again. His breaths came out in heavy spurts as Ryder continued moving against Tony’s chest.

He looked at Tony with heavy lidded eyes and with one hand began to unzip Tony’s pants. Tony shook his head at him. Ryder tilted his head in response and removed his hand.

Tony breathed out a sigh of relief that was cut off by Ryder placing his cock back into Tony’s mouth. Tony hummed in the back of his throat in pain as he felt the corners of his lips burn. Ryder looked down at him this time and looked at him angrily.

Tony had gotten used to rough sex. He had just thought Ryder liked it like that and Tony would eventually get used to it.

This was different.

This…this was a punishment.

After what seemed like a few more minutes, Ryder sharply pulled himself a way and rubbed himself before he spent himself all over Tony’s face. Tony weakly pushed at Ryder once he was done and leaned over the bed to dry heave.
Ryder looked at Tony with a semblance of disgust as though he wasn’t the one to blame for Tony’s current state. Tony tried curling up into the corner of the bed and reached his hands to wipe of the cum that was beginning to dry on his face. He heard Ryder zip up his pants and walk toward the edge of the bed. He placed a hand on the back of Tony’s thigh and it took everything in him not to flinch. Tony held still as Ryder slowly massaged his thigh.

“Clean yourself up Tony. You look a fucking mess and we have guests. And for goodness sake tell that fucking kid to stop coughing,” Ryder replied thumb smoothing over a point of tension in Tony’s thigh. “When does he leave? Already feel like he’s been here forever.”

Tony tried keeping his mouth shut just so the soothing touch wouldn’t leave him. He had liked Ryder when he was like this. But he was talking about Miles and Miles did not deserve that. Howard had treated any sickness of Tony the same way Ryder was doing. He would be a fool if he let anyone else do the same to another kid, especially when Tony was taking care of said kid.

“He’s sick. His body is trying to break up the mucus. I could have helped him, but you wanted to come up here and reprimand me. For what? Bringing a kid home for a few weeks because the orphanage he’s at doesn’t have the time or resources to do so? Plus I don’t need your permission to bring a kid home. This is my home and I can welcome anyone I want to in this house. We are not married and I certainly do not belong to you in a way that you feel you can-”

The sharp pain in his cheek interrupts him before he is able to say anything else.

“You…you promised no marks that would be visibly. You pr-promised,” Tony said rising from his curled position to look angrily at Ryder.

“What are you going to do now cry and bitch like a baby? We already have one in the house for a few weeks. We don’t need another. I’m going out. I’m on call for the night shift. When I come back from the hospital please look somewhat decent,” Ryder said.

Ryder left him and Tony tried stifling a sob into his pillow. He numbly walked to his bathroom and tried to quickly shower all the while monitoring and listening to Miles. Tony tugged on a long sleeve shirt and some sweatpants and went to Miles who was now starting to cry out for him.

“Shh, I’m here now,” he said picking up Miles.

Tony wandered into the kitchen bouncing a crying and coughing Miles on his hip. Miles’ face had grown red due to all the force he was exerting to cough. Tony’s heart tugged and he wondered if he had been the best choice to take care of Miles until he recovered.

“Shh sweetheart. I know it hurts. I know it hurts, but we’re gonna get you some medicine that will make you feel all better okay?” Tony whispered and attempted to keep his tone light. He knew they had medicine for this, but there was still this fear of whether he was doing things right.

“Hurts baba,” Miles coughed into his shoulder.

Tony’s heart continued to ache. Is this how parents felt when they’re kids got sick? If so this was an awful feeling. Tony was certain Howard had never felt this, when Tony had gotten sick all but three times.

“I know bambino, but we’re going to take some medicine and we can watch cartoons okay.”

“Cookies?” Miles asked and turned his wet eyes to Tony. “Cookies?” He questioned again.

“After you take your medicine okay.”
Miles nodded and rested his head on Tony’s shoulder again. Tony went toward the cabinet where he had stored all the things the doctor told him he needed to make sure Miles would recover. A voice quickly startled him causing him to nearly lose his grasp on Miles.

“What’s wrong with your face?”

“What’s wrong with yours?” Tony tensely bit back to hide his surprise at the winter soldier lounging in his kitchen.

Bucky narrowed his eyes at him in a way of repeating his question.

“Lab incident. Get used to seeing my face like this, though I assure you I’ve been told the marks add to my ruggedly handsome good looks,” Tony said.

“Listen Little Stark Steve and I got into a lot of rough mishaps back in my day. So I think I know that isn’t simply a lab incident.” He raised his index finger and waved it to the spot on Tony’s cheek.

“Back in your day?” Tony laughed. “Also I’m not a little Stark and what happened to silent winter soldier thing,” Tony said. “And to be frank you’ve never seen what my lab looks like so…can’t really be a fair judge of what lab accidents do to my face.”

Despite all instincts telling Bucky to probe deeper into the reason for the reddening and beginning to bruise mark on Tony’s face, he remained silent in thought. He couldn’t say anything. For all he knew Tony did run into something in the lab. He hadn’t known the man very long, but the others often spoke about how clumsy Tony was.

Miles looked up to see what was taking so long for his baba to get him cookies. His eyes settled on the other person in the room. “Baba, cookies?”

“Yes, cookies. Medicine first, okay?” Tony shivered when Miles let out another cough. “Okay, so two teaspoons of this. Is that right? This looks like a lot. Okay, now I just have to pour this and…okay so I definitely do not have the three arms to do this.”

“Look hand him over to me, while you get the things ready,” Bucky told Tony arms outstretched. “I took care of Steve way too many times to know how to handle someone who’s sick. I’m pretty sure there was a point he was smaller than this one of those times I took care of him.”

Tony’s eyes widened at his arms and Bucky instinctively drew his arms back. He had forgotten that although his arm had been replaced in Wakanda what they represented was still death. He had killed Tony’s parents with these arms.

“No, no,” Tony quickly stuttered out. “Ummm, here. Just be careful. And if he starts coughing too much take him to the trash can. He probably just needs to get some mucus out.”

Miles resisted Tony passing him off to Bucky and voice his complaints. “No.”

“Nice articulation sweetheart. I just need Bucky to hold you while I get your medicine ready, okay? Can he hold you for just a few seconds,” Tony asked. Miles narrowed his eyes at Bucky and allowed him to hold him.

Bucky really prayed he didn’t drop this kid. Miles squirming to get away from him certainly hadn’t helped, but he was beginning to settle. He kept his eyes on Tony as though making sure he wouldn’t leave.

Tony murmured, pouring the medicine into the spoon. “Okay, so medicine. Coughing medicine?
Goodness, this stuff looks disgusting. I could probably make something that tastes and even smells better. FRIDAY put that on the list of things to do.”

“Would you like for me to place this as a top priority sir?”

“Yes FRIDAY.”

“Above or below putting a waterpark in the tower?”

“FRIDAY I do not appreciate your cheekiness,” Tony said briefly smiling at his AI’s personality. If there was one thing Tony was extremely proud of was his creations and their ability to have personality. “Alright Miles open up.”

Miles opened his mouth and allowed Tony to pour the medicine down his throat. Miles’ puckered lips would have been hilarious, if Miles hadn’t tried spitting the medicine back up. Tony quickly grabbed a spoon to slip the fallen medicine back into Miles’ mouth. Again Miles tried spitting it up.

He did this a few more times, before Miles started laughing. Tony turned shocked eyes to Bucky who was looking on with amusement.

“Kid, I am trying to make you feel better and you are doing this all to spite me,” Tony laughed. “Swallow it this time. Swallow or no cookie. Got it?”

Miles laughed and this time swallowed all his medicine. “Cookie?” He made grabby hands at Tony and snuggled closer to him, once Tony picked him back up again.

“Yes two cookies mister,” Tony said grabbing the cookie jar. He looked back to Bucky who suddenly looked so small in the kitchen.

“Know you’re probably down here because you couldn’t sleep so want to join us? I offer cookies and a cartoon show that will no doubt put you to sleep in a few minutes. Or it will merely agitate you so much with the whole waiting a minute to get the answer, when a kid the age of two knows the answer in five seconds. But they’re like where’s the apple. And I’m like it’s fucking,” Tony quickly looked down at Miles hoping he wouldn’t remember that word. Karen would kill him, when he brought back Miles cursing up a storm.

“It’s freaking,” he corrected, “behind you. Like we see it. So you in?”

Bucky looked at his tea that was beginning to grow cold and shrugged his shoulders and wordlessly followed Tony into the den. Tony sat down on the couched and cued up a cartoon. He handed Miles one cookie and Bucky another. They all sat in a comfortable silence with the cartoon in the background.

As Miles eyes fluttered closed, Tony shifted so that his back was against the arm rest. His knees were tucked under him and he kept a hand running up and down Miles back. The coughs were less frequent now, but Tony still kept a check on it.

The television continued to play whatever cartoon was on and Tony continued to shift. He was trying to find a comfortable position that wouldn’t disrupt Miles’ sleeping. Having found none he settled uncomfortably with his legs bent under him.

Bucky seeing this discomfort rolled his eyes and gently grabbed Tony’s legs.

“I am warning you. I have a kid in my possession. It would not do good to kill me right now so…” Tony continued to ramble on, but stopped when he realized Bucky was just placing his legs on top
of his lap. Now Tony was able to fully stretch out without being in slight pain.

“Not killing you here. Too many cameras,” Bucky said dryly.

Tony stared at him wide eyed and wide mouthed. “Was that a joke? Please tell me that was a joke?”

The corners of Bucky’s lips lifted slightly. Tony smiled widely. “Okay dark humor. I can get with that.”

A few more minutes passed with this cartoon of fish creatures singing a song about being friends. Bucky remained slightly intrigued by this little song-filled cartoon show. Everything was so bright and Bucky felt he needed a bit of brightness right now. As he was getting further interested in the show, he felt Tony’s heavy glare focused on the side of his forehead.

“What Stark?”

“I don’t blame you, you know? I mean at first I hated you and everything you represented. Like you were the reason my parents died. But I’ve had a long time to think things through and I realized you aren’t to blame and it wasn’t fair for me to place blame onto your shoulders.”

Tony sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose with his unoccupied hand.

“When I built Ultron, I was doing that because my mind had played a game on me and showed me my greatest fear,” Tony whispered. “And that created a lot of bloodshed. I created a lot of bloodshed based on what was happening up here,” he said tapping his temple.

“And after everything with Ultron, I tried getting in touch with families and friends of everyone who was affected. I was trying to get in touch with them because I wanted their forgiveness. I wanted to know I hadn’t just written Merchant of Death onto my tombstone,” he chuckled.

“And I know it’s not the same. You were brainwashed for like 70 years and you had no agency in your decisions. I figured it wasn’t fair to seek forgiveness, when I couldn’t forgive someone who didn’t even need forgiveness. So I don’t blame you. I blame Hydra. I am sorry for placing everything on you. That wasn’t fair of me.”

Tony refused to meet Bucky’s eyes while he was saying any of this. Instead he trained his eyes on the point where his ankles were crossed on Bucky’s lap.

Bucky opened mouthed to say Tony shouldn’t have said any of those things to him. He was to blame. He didn’t deserve anyone’s forgiveness certainly not Tony’s. But he couldn’t…he couldn’t say these things because he desperately wanted them to be true. Steve had often told him it wasn’t his fault, but that was Steve. Steve who refused to see Bucky as anything, but the Bucky who fought beside him and grew up with him.

But hearing that it wasn’t his fault from someone who was directly affected by his actions…that made his chest lighten. Bucky just didn’t know if he deserved to feel this. He wanted to tell Tony so, but Tony kept on talking.

“And thank you.”

Bucky momentarily stiffened in his seat before

“For getting Steve to come back. The others would have never came back, if it weren’t for him. And I know Steve was only going to come back, if you were. So thanks umm for that.”
“Stark.”

“Nope, don’t say anything. I just wanted to get all of this off my chest and I’ve been practicing in front of my mirror for weeks and my mirror never said anything back. So like just…don’t feel like you have to say anything, okay?”

Bucky did as Tony asked and did not say anything. Instead he turned his attention to the cartoon and paid attention to the heartbeats of the two individuals resting beside him. Tony was quick to follow Miles into sleep. It was nearly two hours later, until Bucky fell asleep.

Bucky woke up, breath catching in his throat. He immediately looked at the two sleeping people on the couch and made sure they were okay. Once seeing that nothing had happened to them, Bucky relaxed his shoulders. Bucky shifted until he was comfortable and placed a hand on Tony’s ankles. Before his eyes drifted shut, he saw Ryder coming into the den.

Ryder’s eyes briefly scanned over where Bucky’s hand had been resting on Tony’s upper calf. Bucky discreetly placed his hand back in his lap, hoping to himself that Ryder wouldn’t get upset. He had only been living here barely for a day. He didn’t want the Tony’s boyfriend to get upset at him even if Tony had seemed to be genuinely welcoming.

“Come on Tones get up baby,” Ryder quickly added on the endearment to make his words seem softer. “You’re going to get a crick in your neck with it hanging off of the couch like that.”

Bucky turned and Ryder was right. His neck had been hanging off. If Bucky had been paying attention, he would have maneuvered Tony’s body to a more comfortable position. It was probably best Ryder had come.

Tony languidly stretched his body, arms wrapping themselves around Miles. His bleary eyes settled warmly on Bucky. Ryder didn’t seem to miss this and placed a hand on Tony’s shoulder.

“Come on let’s get to bed. I’m sure Miles also needs to be placed in a bed,” Ryder said.

Tony quickly grew aware of where he was at and threw his legs off of Bucky’s lap. He stood up being mindful not to shake too much. His cheeks reddened in embarrassment as he leaned in to Ryder’s grasp.

“Hey ‘m sorry. Went to sleep,” Tony sleepily murmured into Ryder’s chest. Ryder chuckled softly and began to lead Tony away to the elevator.

Bucky, who had turned his attention back to the show they had been watching before he fell asleep, missed the way Tony clung tighter to Miles as Ryder wrapped an arm around him. His ears had turned back to the cartoon, which was now playing some type of frog movie. This meant he missed whatever Ryder had said into Tony’s ear.

However, he didn’t miss the way Tony fearfully whispered, “You know I’m not like that anymore Ryder.”

Bucky settled into his seat and closed his eyes. He figured Ryder just needed to be assured that Tony wasn’t trying anything with him. That was something Ryder certainly did not have to fear happening. But he understood that some partners just needed the reassurance.

He faintly remembered watching a couple bicker over this, while he was waiting for his mark. He remembered the guy assuring his girlfriend that he wasn’t checking out the waitress. After a few minutes of talking, the guy leaned over to offer her a chaste kiss and the girl accepted it softly bringing him closer.
Bucky figured Ryder just wanted the same thing and there was no shame in that. At least that’s what he had thought.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for the comments, kudos, and bookmarks. It makes my heart happy to see y'all enjoying this. :)


Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Y’all this chapter physically drained me. So after this Chapter 5 is going to be the fluffiest thing, fluffier than cotton candy because...well just read and you'll see why.

I'm off to take a nap.

(And apologies for any mistakes...from now on just keep this in your head 'cause I am going to stop adding it to the notes lol.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After nearly two weeks of taking care of a recovering Miles, Tony could no longer use him as an excuse to avoid the Avengers. While he was worried that Miles still had a mild case of pneumonia for two weeks, Tony used this to spend time with the child and not the grown children downstairs. However, once Miles had slowly gained back his energy and appetite Tony realized he couldn’t hide with them on his floor forever.

Miles especially wanted out of Tony’s floor and sought to explore. He had looked at Tony with big eyes and a heavy pout that should definitely be illegal and asked Tony if they could go play downstairs with the others.

He knew it was selfish to think that he was the only hero who Miles admired. He couldn’t exactly monitor the teenage volunteers’ stories of the mighty Avengers. Even though the rhetoric had changed to take in the fact that they were still exiled, until recently, the volunteers regaled the children with the times they fought cohesively as one unit.

Tony had wondered how Miles figured out that the people downstairs where the Avengers. He was pretty sure Miles may have overhead him on the phone discussing the Avengers’ presence with Pepper. He had thought Miles was asleep, but he guessed wrong seeing how as the next morning Miles asked if he could play with Captain America.

And how could Tony lie to a kid?

Surely, no one would believe a kid if he were to tell someone Steve was Captain America?

So he took Miles downstairs, one arm holding onto a slowly developing energetic kid and the other holding two toys to keep the child entertained.

“Miles slow down sweetheart. You’re still a little under the weather,” Tony said trailing quickly behind Miles. “Bambino.”

Miles stopped abruptly and looked at Tony. “Fine baba. No sick anymore.”

A cough.

Tony raised his eyes at the kid and Miles smiled sheepishly trying to cough discreetly into his stuffed penguin. “Yes, you are. Stop running or I will have to pick you up.”
Miles quickly decided to walk slower because for the past few days he hadn’t let Tony hold him.

He had told Tony rather seriously, “No baby. ‘M grow’up baba. I can walk.”

So Tony knew that the threat of picking him up would serve its purpose. The two walked slower and if it was because Tony wanted to drag out the walk to give him time to gather his thoughts…well no one would be the wiser. When they reached the living area, Tony scanned the room to find everyone already sitting down patiently waiting for Tony’s arrival.

Tony felt the attention of them all and tried straightening his shoulders to make it appear that he was completely fine. He turned toward Miles and handed him his toys and the Starkpad, which was now playing some cartoon. He put the headphones over Miles’ ears, making sure to adjust the sound so it was fine. Tony had often kept the volume high.

While the child played, Tony turned back to the Avengers, plus Bucky…

_But is Bucky an Avenger? Have they had discussions over whether to allow him into their initiative or not. It would be highly hypocritical for Natasha to send a do not recommend for me and then to recommend Bucky. Though I’m pretty sure they would. After all I am probably the worst candidate for a superhero. I’m surprised they’ve let me on this team._

At least that’s what Tony was thinking as he took a seat opposite from all of them.

Or crap…maybe this will be part of the discussion. Tony had fought for the Accords and ramifying it to fit everyone’s needs…but he hadn’t fought much for claiming himself as an Avenger.

_Do I want to be?_

_Well, I damned sure worked hard enough for these Accords._

All the while Tony’s thoughts circulated in his head, a frown was marring his features. Bucky assumed all of this was directed toward him and Steve leaned forward to rest a heavy hand on Bucky’s shoulder.

Tony was looking tentatively past all of them to see if she had arrived. He had made sure she knew when to arrive, but maybe he got the times or dates wrong. Tony only prayed he didn’t. He didn’t really want to have to discuss the Accords by himself.

He wanted to start this off with a good start a chance to actually move forward.

“So Tony finally going to tell us what’s so great about the Accords or are you going to hide off in your lab again and wish all of this away,” Clint sneered.

_Shit. Well there goes that good start._

Tony figured he would stall for a moment and maybe give a few details of the Accords. Surely, they would listen to him for a little bit if he sounded reasonable. And Tony was always reasonable.

“Well Barton one of the benefits of the Accords is that we will be able to protect your family and friends,” Tony began, fingers moving to his chest, a habit he just still couldn’t break off. “It will make sure that those closet to you will be offered safety in the chance of something going wrong. It will also make sure that your family is not indicted on any charges if you-”

“Really? The Accords can keep our family and friends safe?” Steve questioned, stopping Tony’s sentence. “The Accords wouldn’t keep my family safe. Wouldn’t have kept my friend safe…the only
Well, if Tony had forgotten what it felt like when Steve hit Tony’s chest with the shield, he certainly remembered now. The fingers at his chest shortly lost its rhythm before he began a steady tapping once more.


“But you did. You agreed to the original,” Clint pointed out.

“Exactly! But I fucking have the ability to change Barton. I’m not stagnant in my decisions. Look I’m not saying I was completely wrong nor completely right. Neither of us were and that’s what led us here. But I am here to compromise. Why can’t you see this?”

“It doesn’t seem like much of a compromise, if we only have basically two weeks left to decide,” Steve argued. “That’s not compromising?”

“But rejecting the Accords completely is a compromise?” Tony yelled heart beating faster and his throat beginning to burn.

“Don’t act like it is” Steve put forth.

Tony’s eyes began to blur and he felt the air slowly begin to leave his chest. He hadn’t had an attack like this since…He had moved on. He had went to his appointments and he was done. He shouldn’t be brought back down to this dark place because of some questions. He could keep this together.

“What if the restrictions on our powers mean the next time we need to get approved for a mission a civilian gets hurt? Miles gets hurt? What if this all happens because we simply weren’t given the go ahead by our warden?”

Miles. He was going to be sick. He wanted to turn to face Miles, but he didn’t want to move because if he did he would break this frozen state of being that was the only thing helping him from collapsing.

“Clint,” Natasha's startled gasp. “Stop.”

“And that would have been your fault. Again. You wonder why all your family is gone? It’s because you make decisions like this without any guidance.”

“Exactly that is why we need someone making sure we have that guidance that I didn’t have,” Tony spat eye, breathing coming out in harsher pants. “It’s like you’re just trying not to listen. I need to fix those hearing aids for you?”

Clint gave out a dark laugh. Something in the back of his head was begging him to stop, to tell him there was no way of coming back from this.

But then he turned toward Steve and saw silent acceptance and eyes telling him to keep going.

“Just answer me this and we can be done.”

Clint don’t do this, a voice whispered to him. He told the voice to be quiet.

“Would the Accords have saved your parents, if they were to have existed? Would the Accords had saved you from that cave in Afghanistan? Would the Accords have stopped the death of many
innocents done by your hand? Can the Accords forgive all the red you have left behind in your wake?"

Bucky went still beside Steve and he turned his eyes toward Tony.

A feeling so deep overwhelmed Tony. It was this feeling of nothingness, but it felt so heavy inside him. It spread throughout his entire body and a sob threatened to ease itself out of his throat, but he swallowed it back. His eyes had lost their focus and the tapping at his chest grew frantic and he felt himself lean over in the chair struggling to breathe.

*Merchant of Death.*

*Kids killed.*

*Mothers losing their spouses.*

*Soldiers coming back in pieces.*

*Because of me. Always because of me.*

*My fault.*

*Merchant of Death.*

He was back in his dorm, when he got the news his parents died. He was back in Afghanistan, when he realized Yinsen was dead and wasn’t coming back. He was back in Siberia with a broken arc reactor and the knowledge that his…that Steve had hidden the truth about his parents’ death.

He was back there. He was back there. He was back there.

And he couldn’t find himself back into this living room because somehow all of those memories were easier to face then tuning into Clint’s questioning and Steve’s silent acceptance.

*Merchant of Death.*

*Families losing their homes.*

*People losing their source of employment.*

*Bodies being dragged against the red stained concrete.*

*Because of me. Always because of me.*

*My fault.*

*Merchant of Death.*

“Clint stop it,” Natasha hissed.

“No, Stark’s made it clear where he stands. He’s not going to budge if he doesn’t realize what is at stake.”

“Steve tell him to stop,” Natasha gritted out.

Steve turned sharp eyes to her. “Why should I?”

Natasha whipped her head to the side as though she had been slapped.
This wasn’t the same Steve.

And if this Steve didn’t find his way back to the Steve she knew and pledged to follow, then Steve would soon face worse things than 70 years of frozen ice. She would make sure of that.

“Because if a man followed you out of retirement, he would follow your instructions to just be quiet,” Natasha rasped. “Tell him to stop.”

Steve squared his shoulder and looked away from her. He clenched his jaw. “This needs to happen for Tony to understand. If he realizes that this negatively affects him, then he’ll reject the Accords. He always looked out for himself. I’m just disappointed I didn’t try Clint’s way before.”

“You asshole,” Natasha bit back at him quickly pushing herself to her knees in front of Tony.

Taking his hands in hers, Natasha placed them on top of his knees and then drew his face close to hers. “Come on Tony. Come on breathe with me Stark. Don’t let them have this power over you,” she whispered.

Tony still struggled to breathe and Natasha was growing desperate. “Please Tony I can’t help you, if you don’t breathe. Come on follow me.”

Tony shied away from her touches and tried pulling away from her. He needed to get out of here, but he just couldn’t move.

Death.

That’s all I’m good at.

Just ending things.

What if Clint is right?

What if Miles is next?

And I thought about adopting him?

The Merchant of Death can’t have a family.

At this moment Ryder came down hoping to say goodbye to Tony before he left for work. However, as soon as he saw Tony’s hand tapping at his arc reactor and his eyes glazed over, he dropped his briefcase and walked slowly toward Tony so as to not frighten him.

“Shh, breathe with me Tony,” Ryder said gently pushing Natasha aside. “Come on sweetheart. Let’s start naming things in the room yeah. Adjective and noun? Red hair. Ugly painting on the wall. Really? I know billionaires buy things to just boast that they have a priceless picture, but Tony that frankly looks like ass.”

Tony’s breathing was still harsh and ragged, but his eyes were beginning to gain focus.

“Okay, preoccupied child. Red and gold headphones. You think you’re cute, right? I don’t like kids very much, but I have to admit its adorable seeing him with Iron Man headphones. Soft thighs,” Ryder softly muttered so as to not let anyone hear.

But Steve heard.

Steve’s hand twitched on the part of the couch he had rested his hand on. He looked at Ryder’s hand
rubbing slowly circle around Tony’s knees and speaking to him softly.

Steve looked on angrily, even knowing that he had no reason. He wasn’t the one to pull Tony out of these attacks whenever he stumbled upon Tony having one. He wasn’t the one who go to match his breaths with Tony. He wasn’t the one to hold Tony’s wrists and rub circles into the smooth skin there and bring Tony’s body closer to his as an excuse to calm him down, when actually he just wanted to be closer and that was the only time Tony allowed him to be.

He should be helping bring Tony out of this. Ryder had no-

*But I’m the one that pushed him there. I kept him there. I did this. I did this. I did this.*

Steve gasped shortly and felt the weight of his actions hit him. His mouth opened, but he couldn’t find it in himself to answer.

Tony twitched a little and looked down at Ryder’s hand. Surely, he wouldn’t…not here? Tony’s breath quickly picked back up again as Ryder slowly ran has hands up and down his leg. Thankfully, Ryder sensed this change and drew back instead placing his hands back into Tony’s.

“Dead idiots,” Ryder pointed out looking briefly at the Avengers and managed to get out watery laugh out of Tony. “There’s my guy. Okay, soft couch. Though we really ought to get a new one. Okay, feel like participating? Green cup.”


“Bet you hate that. I’ll make you a hot cup of coffee later,” Ryder promised leaning back from Tony. “You good?”

Tony didn’t feel good at all, but he nodded his head anyways.

“How’d you do that?” Natasha addressed him rising from her kneeling position beside Tony to rest her bottom on the back of her heels.

Ryder shrugged. “My devilishly handsome charms?”

Natasha raised an unimpressed brow at him.

“Look there better not be another time,” Ryder stressed. “But if he does have an attack where I’m not available just talk to him and get him to listen to you going on about just small things. Adjective and noun is just one mindless conversation, but it’s simple enough that your brain is confused as to why this new information is being sorted in, so it takes the times to address this new onslaught of thoughts while storing away the thoughts that were brought to the forefront causing it anxiety,” Ryder explained.

“You good babe?” Ryder questioned.

Tony nodded and smiled wearily at him. “Th-thanks.”

Bucky looked toward him. “Steve?”

“I…” Steve uttered his eyes suddenly feeling heavy. He shook his head at Bucky and pursed his lips together.

“You need me to stay?” Ryder questioned eyes scanning Tony’s face for an answer. Tony shook his head. “Okay, well I’m going to go get ready for my 3 o’clock surgery. Text me if these guys do
anything to upset you.”

He left with a chaste kiss at the corner of Tony’s mouth before leaving the building. On his way out, a lady bumped into him looking harried.

“Sorry I am later Mr. Stark. Traffic was hectic, but FRIDAY let me right on up hope that’s okay,” a frantic woman rambled walking quickly toward them, trying to brush back her straying curls.

“Who are you?” Steve questioned looking at the women who had suddenly entered the room.

“I am here to provide legal counsel and to soothe out and question and concerns you all may have in regards to the Accords,” Isa said soothing out the wrinkles in her skirts.

“Why exactly do we need legal counsel especially from someone who is not involved with our situation? Tony is telling us since he’s the one who’s been advocating that we sign the Accords,” Steve began looking briefly at Tony, who was still trying to gather himself.

“You need legal counsel especially for that reason. All of you are rather close to the Accords. There is an emotional closeness that will prevent you from viewing things holistically. Tony felt that if he were to discuss things with you all, you would not listen. From your refusal to look me directly in the eye I am guessing I am correct,” Isa pointed out. “And from the fact that Tony looks like he’s being brought out of an attack I know I am correct.”

She looked at him in a concerned manner and he tried waving of the concern. “Tony,” she mumbled settling down her briefcase and taking out the Accords. “What happened?”

“I’m sorry Isa…Isa I have to go I can’t…just tell them what you…I can’t be here. Please Isa,” he quickly scrambled to grab his Accords packet and sign in a rushed manner. He was used to doing this so it was completely legible.

Isa turned fiery eyes toward the other individuals, but said nothing to them. Instead she choose to look at Tony and address him.

“I am so sorry you had to deal with them alone. I meant to be here on time. Please forgive me,” Isa exclaimed looking at Tony wearily.

Tony went to grab Miles and settled him on his hip, despite Miles trying to be put down. Eventually he gave up and just settled on Tony’s hip, and laid his head on his chest.

“It’s not your fault. I should have realized a long time ago that I stopped being anyone they cared about back in Siberia.”

Tony left the room to whispered question of what happened in Siberia. Good, Tony thinks darkly. Let Steve tell them that.

As soon as Tony left the room, Isa was going to give these people a reality check and give them all hell.

Miles had settled in his play pen that Tony had built in his lab. He originally didn’t want Miles to be in the lab, but he really needed to do work. So he built the best freaking play pen known to men. He should really start his own kids’ stuff company.

He distinctly heard a ringing go off on his StarkPad and ignored it thinking it was part of the game
Miles was playing. So when Rhodey’s face immediately showed up on the screen before him his face immediately paled.

“Shit,” he whispered to himself.

He quickly went over to Miles and saw that the kid had accidentally accepted an incoming call from Rhodey and transferred it to the screen above him. Miles looked between the two screens where Rhodey’s face was displayed and began to frown trying to understand what was happening and why his game had stopped.

“Baba?” he questioned pointing at the game.

“Tones when did you adopt a kid?” Rhodey questioned.

“I didn’t,” he said grabbing Miles from the play pen and walking back over to his work station.

“So you kidnapped a kid?”

“No, I did not kidnap a kid-”

“Okay…so how did you acquire a kid?”

“Babysitting,” Tony said as he placed Miles on his lap and fixed the game for him. “He’s from Karen’s orphanage and was sick so I volunteered to watch him for the past few weeks so she could focus on all the other kids.”

“So that’s what Pepper meant when she said you would be watching over your little strawberry. I was going to ask her why on earth you were watching a strawberry, but I’ve known you long enough to know that would be completely possible.”

Rhodey laughed shortly as Tony gave him an unamused glare.

“Ah, so you’re going to eventually adopt him,” Rhodey said. “Well, I’m thankful that your kid was the one to finally answer my call, seeing as how you’ve been ignoring me.”

“He’s not my kid,” Tony told Rhodey. “Bambino let me lower the brightness. Hold on Rhodey.”

Rhodey sighed.

“Okay, Rhodey. My sunshine. My honey bear. The straw to my berry. The apple to my pie. The peanut to my butter.”

Rhodey glared at him with the same potent stare that Mama Rhodes would send him. Tony immediately stopped messing around with the game Miles was playing with and placed his attention back toward Rhodey.

“You’re been ignoring my calls. I even tried seeing if Pepper had been in contact with you, but no surprise there you’ve been shutting us out.”

“And I would have kept so, if it weren’t for that darn meddling kid,” I joked looking at Miles. “Okay, I’m seriously sorry for not calling, but like I’ve been busy. I was eventually going to return all of your messages.”

“Look Tony you can’t shut us out. Pepper and I are always here for you, but we can’t help you if you don’t tell us what’s wrong. Is it Ryder? Did he do something? Is it the Avengers? Is it the company? Come on man just talk to me. Just talk to me.”
Tony chewed at the insides of his cheek and looked at the papers scattered across his desk. “They came back.”

“They?” Rhodey furrowed his eyebrows back together. “They came back to the tower? Why didn’t you tell me? Does Pepper know? Do you need me to come back?”

“This is exactly why I didn’t tell you Rhodey. I knew you would react like this.”

“Like hell I would. Tony those people are toxic. I thought we agreed they would adjust to being back in America somewhere separate from you. It’s not your responsibility to help them acclimate back into their old lives.”

“Yeah, but they didn’t have anywhere else to go,” Tony tried arguing.

“The Marriot hotel would certainly have rooms for them,” Rhodey sneered.

“Rhodey.”

“I’m serious.”

A few moments of silence passed between them and Tony wondered if he should tell them everything else. If he should tell him about Ryder. Rhodey had just told him not to shut him out, so maybe he should let them in. Tony struggled for a moment to breathe and debated internally, if this was the time to say something. Maybe if he had someone on the outside telling him to get out of this relationship and tell him he didn’t deserve this…that there were other people to fill the void of making Tony feel wanted and needed…

His heart thundered with the idea of him confessing of the bruises left behind, the stinging words slapped against his face, and the nights of hoping Ryder would get the night shift.

He tilted his face down and opened his mouth.

“Ryder is-”

He whispered softly, but his voice was too soft for Rhodey to register that he said something. So Rhodey opened his mouth to say something to break the silence.

“Well did they sign the Accords?”

Tony breathed in harshly.

This had to be a sign.

Tony wasn’t meant to tell anyone.

He was fine.

He allowed himself a few moments to gain back control of his thoughts and berate himself for even thinking of telling Rhodey about Ryder. It wasn’t a big deal.

“No, they didn’t sign yet. They still have at least two more weeks to decide.”

“Okay, did they say thank you for pardoning their criminal asses.”

“They’re not criminals.”
“Wouldn’t need to be pardoned, if they weren’t.”

“No, they didn’t say thank you.”

“Did they ask for forgiveness?”

“Umm… no. At least not yet, but that’s okay. They’ll eventually get there. We’ll get there. Why are you asking all these questions? You’ve been cooped up in your house for too long?”

“No, I am just trying to put things into perspective. It’s just hard to imagine you welcoming them in with open arms and forgiving them. I thought you brought them all back in hopes of getting the Accords signed.”

“But that’s okay we still have time. Natasha may sign, I think. Oh hey you know, Bucky and I had a nice conversation full of the warm fuzzies. I forgave him for you know killing my parents during his brainwashed lifestyle. It was really great. You know forgiveness really clears up your conscience and sets you free. I mean Howard’s crap about never forgiving anyone was stupid probably why he had no one around him. No one came to his funeral, but there were a lot of people at mom’s. She forgave. She forgave Howard for a lot of stuff she shouldn’t have.”

His quick rambling was cut off by Rhodey’s enraged shouting.

“Excuse me? You what? You forgave Bucky Barnes! Tony he killed your parents.”

“I fucking know that Rhodey. You don’t have to remind me, when I see that video playing itself in my head fucking etching itself into my brain,” Tony rasped. “I know that, but it doesn’t change the face that they’re still dead. It just changes how they died. I’ve had years to deal with this.”

“You may have had time to deal with your parents being killed in an accident, but you haven’t had the time to rationalize that your parents were murdered by the guy you are currently playing host to.”

“I know that Rhodey. I was their when Zemo showed us that Golden Globe’s worthy film,” Tony sneered. “But how would me keeping this anger and unforgiving nature in me helpful? How would anyone want to stay around me, if I can’t let go of my anger toward them, huh? Please tell me.”

“Tony.”

“What Rhodey?” Tony screamed. “What do you want to hear from me? You want me to tell you I blame Bucky for everything that has gone wrong in my life? You want me to tell you how I still have nightmares of Rogers raising his shield to me? I can’t fucking get that out of my head and every time I see him I can’t stop seeing myself in Siberia. But everyone wants to wish this away because it’s too hard to deal with. That’s what we do Rhodey. We push things around until they’re not seen anymore. So no I am not going to be that emotional person on the team. Natasha had already placed Tony Stark not recommended. I do not need to give her anymore reasons to think I’m not fit.”

“Tones.”

“I don’t have time to be fucking angry. I don’t have time. Because every time and then Rogers will see me as some unforgiving asshole. I mean how can the Merchant of Death not forgive someone who was fucking brainwashed, huh? How can the Merchant of Death be holier than thou?”

“Tony you’re not being fair to yourself.”

“Because if me saying I forgive them gets them to stay, I’ll keep telling them I forgive them. It’s fine. Eventually they’ll forgive me for whatever they think I need forgiveness over and it’ll be okie
dokie.”

“Tony…” Rhodey whispered

“No, you wanted to know so that’s that. So just stop. Stop with the whole questions and I need therapy. Because I’ve been going, but I’m not a fucking head case. And could you just imagine seeing that in the news? Headline: After providing counsel for the Tony Stark, the therapist has to go find her own therapist.”

“You don’t need them as your family. Tony we’re your family. Pepper, Rhodey, Happy, Peter, your soon to be adopted kid. You don’t need this in your life,” Rhodey pleaded.

“I know that and you’re the best family I have. But Pepper’s off in England and you’re off recovering because of me,” Tony choked out, tears now running freely down his cheek. “And it’s fine. I love you all and I know distance won’t change that, but they were becoming to be my family and I want them back. I need them back Rhodey.”

He said this with such desperation and Rhodey reared back at the sound of desperation and just pure loss in his friend’s voice.

“Tony I’m going to be frank here. I just don’t know how you all can recover from this,” Rhodey admitted looking at Tony who began to slouch in defeat. “I’m not saying this with bad intent. It’s just you have put all your efforts into forgiving these people, when they don’t extend the same courteous. Especially considering how Steve led them on this wild goose chase for the man that murdered your only living family.”

“They didn’t…don’t know,” Tony whispered into the palm of his hand.

“What?” Rhodey questioned, fulling having heard the question but needing to make sure what he heard was correct.

“They don’t know that Barnes killed my parents. They don’t know that Steve pushed his shield into my arc reactor and that he almost fucking killed me. They don’t know what I had to do to get Ross to agree to the reformed Accords and for the civilians not to see the Avengers as some ungoverned militia.”

“Damn it Tony.”

“It’s not his fault. And it’s not Steve’s I guess. He was trying to protect his only family-”

“Tony you have to stop placing everything on your shoulders. This was a messed up situation all around. Rogers fucked it up even more, but that has nothing to do with you. Tony please just stop telling yourself that you are to blame.”

Miles at this time had woken up in Tony’s arm and leaned forward. He narrowed his eyes in a fashion that Rhodey recalled as Tony trying to figure something out.

“No make baba sad,” Miles said at Rhodey then turned to Tony. Plump fingers rain across wet cheeks. “No cry baba. Bad man,” he directed back at Rhodey. “No cry baba. Shhh, shhh no cry.”

Tony laughed at the ridiculousness of this all. He was being comforted by a four year old. Rhodey seemed to share the sentiment and began to laugh as well.

Miles looked confused at the change in his baba’s expression, but after a moment’s pause he smiled brightly and clapped his hands together. He started laughing as well. Tony pulled in Miles closer and
kissed his cheek.

“Yes, I’m not crying anymore. Thanks bambino.”

“Welcome!” Miles shouted now actively pushing away from Tony to get some room. Tony slightly lessened his hold on Tony so that he could grab a cracker from the box Miles had been eating out of.

“Your kid is adorable Tony.”

This time Tony didn’t bother correcting Rhodey.

“Look I didn’t call you with the intention of making you upset or making you cry. I just wanted to remind you that it’s okay to take time toward forgiveness. You don’t have to forgive them all in a day, a week, or hell even a year. You don’t have to feel rushed Tones,” Rhodey whispered softly.

Tony turned his eyes down to look at Miles who was chewing on a soggy cracker.

“Hey Tones man look at me.”

Tony turned watery eyes toward Rhodey. Rhodey’s heart clenched and he was trying his hardest not to end this phone call and schedule a flight back to see Tony. But Tony was right in saying he couldn’t miss his physical therapy appointment. So he checked in his disappointment and hoped his words would tide him over until he could make a personal visit.

“Any person would take time to forgive the transgressions of those idiots. Some wouldn’t find it in themselves to forgive at all.”

“Hey,” Tony choked on a laugh. “They’re not idiots…just a little misguided is all?”

“Okay, misguided idiots,” he corrected. “Maybe when all this has cooled down you should go take some time off for yourself. You’ve been dealing with everything for the past six months. I don’t know maybe you and Ryder should just go on a vacation. Or go on a vacation by yourself. Do whatever it takes to make sure you’re emotionally, physically, and mentally healthy,” he said. “Or I’ll send Mama Rhodes your way.”

“Please don’t,” Tony winced just imagining the time Mama Rhodes visited him junior year after Rhodey snitched on him for not having left his room in a month.

Rhodey smiled, remembering the same ordeal with his mom and Tony. He knew that threat would hit Tony. Rhodey stared at Tony and looked at the circles under his eyes and the tiredness residing on slouched shoulders. He tried dialing back his anger toward the Avengers for making his friend…his little brother feel this way. He opened his mouth to say something more, but that wasn’t what Tony needed right now.

He didn’t need Rhodey to feed him anger. He needed comfort and love. Since neither he nor Pepper could be there physically to offer that, he quickly texted Pepper to see if she still had Ryder’s number. Upon receiving a text with a phone number from Pepper, Rhodey began drafting a message to Ryder.

“Who you texting?”

Rhodey looked up quickly. “No one.”

“Yeah, sure. Well look Rhodey it’s been good talking to you, but I’m pretty sure you have a date coming up in an hour with Nurse Miranda,” Tony teased.
“It’s not a date Tony. I have told you this multiple times,” Rhodey groaned. “This is just physical therapy.”

“With a very hot nurse, who you have mentioned has a few certain desirable assets. Emphasis on ass,” Tony snickered, of course making sure he covered his hands over Miles’ ears. Miles didn’t like this and went to tug Tony’s hands away from his ears.

“You are literally a child. I see two children in this room right now. I am having trouble deciding which is older,” Rhodey dryly stated. “Plus who told you anything about Miranda and her assets?”

“Pepper,” Tony admitted. He really hoped Pepper wouldn’t get mad at him for revealing this tidbit of information.

“I told her that in confidence! Goodness, I can’t tell you two anything,” Rhodey sighed a smile gracing his features.

“It’s not our fault we have to keep a separate group message to discuss your relationships, since you tell us two nothing,” Tony reprimanded. “And we are extremely hurt by this. We want to know more about your love life. It’s like watching a live-action Hallmark movie. Wounded soldier nursed back to health by a beautiful lady, who wants to instill in the soldier the love of Christmas again. But the soldier has lost all hope. However, Nurse Miranda discovers that she is going to nurse him back to health and back to the joys of Christmas.”

“Tony you really need to stop watching those Hallmark movies,” Rhodey laugh. “They are changing how you view things.”

“Oh come on let me live out my dream of experiencing true love happen before my own very eyes.”

“Sure.”

“Now go, go. Fall into a wonderful Hallmark movie romance, not a lifetime one. I will be very disappointed if you try wooing my sister-in-law Miranda with a lifetime romance plot. Understood?”

Rhodey’s boisterous laughter echoed in the lab and he shook his head. “Tony.”

“Understood?”

“Yes, understood. Now guess I’ll go lug my humbug downtrodden self-down to Nurse Miranda who’s going to what...help heal me through the joys of caroling and children?”

“That’s the spirit. Have a good time,” Tony told him, secretly hoping there would be a wedding in the nearby future. He would take whole responsibility...okay Pepper would get some responsibility in this Hallmark romance as well.

“Alright love you man,” Rhodey said.

Tony’s heart stuttered. Pepper and Rhodey had made it a habit of telling Tony they loved him every time a conversation ended. Tony still hadn’t gotten used to this, but welcomed it all the same.

“Love you too,” Tony brightly said.

“Love you,” Miles said wanting to get in on the goodbyes. “Love you,” he then directed toward Rhodey...though this love you sounded a bit unsure because he figured had still made his baba sad.

“Love you too nephew,” Rhodey joked looking at Miles. “Stay out of trouble and keep me updated
on things. Hopefully, I’ll still be able to go to your Thanksgiving charity gala next month.”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “Alright now stop trying to draw out this conversation. Go get your woman.”

Rhodey mock-saluted him and ended the call.

“Your Uncle Rhodey is such a silly man,” Tony said drawing away. “Let’s say we go get you some real food, hmm? No more soggy crackers.”

Tony stood with Miles. “FRIDAY save and shut down everything.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Alright Miles how are we feeling about chicken nuggets,” Tony questioned walking outside of the lab.

“Dinosaurs?” Miles excitedly shouted.

“Well what other kind are there? To the dinosaur nuggets we go!” Tony shouted and skipped to the kitchen, enjoying how the child’s laughter followed him.

When Tony had put down a full Miles, he retreated back to his bedroom. He had originally wanted to go back down to the lab, but he still wanted to be close to Miles just in case he needed him. And while he had put a play pen in the lab, Tony figured the kid would have better time sleeping in an actual bed.

So Tony queued up some music and turned on his StarkPad. It was a few hours of silence and alone time that Tony certainly needed. Don’t get him wrong he loved talking to Rhodey and entertaining Miles, but he still needed a few hours to himself. He had practically been raised on being alone till he went off to college so sometimes that urge to be alone came up.

He was allowed three hours of alone time, before his door creaked open and a tired Ryder came in. Tony looked up from his StarkPad and smiled warmly at Ryder.

“Rhodey called me saying you were having a hard day,” Ryder said taking off his suit jacket and throwing it onto an empty chair in the lab. Tony looked up just as Ryder was beginning to unbutton his tie and sit down. “Why didn’t you call me? We could’ve taken the day off together.”

“Didn’t want to bother you,” Tony replied looking at the schematics displayed before him. “Plus I don’t really trust the Avengers right now with babysitting duty.”

Ryder hummed in the back of his throat and Tony hoped that this wasn’t the beginning of another argument. He just did not have any energy left in him to try defending himself or his actions. He was drained.

Ryder leaned over Tony’s body and gently grabbed the StarkPad from Tony’s fingers. He crawled toward the head of the bed and place his back against the headboard. When he was settled, he softly maneuvered Tony into laying his head in his lap.

Tony didn’t know what was happening. Ryder had never been so careful with him. Tony didn’t want to say anything to break this softness, this hesitance of touch and safety. Ryder ran his fingers through Tony’s hair that was beginning to curl at the nape of his neck.
Tony stretched into the touch and his heart thundered with how he wanted to keep this forever. He was right for not telling Rhodey. He would have missed out on this. And this was beautiful. For a few minutes all that Ryder did was massage his scalp and hum a song under his breath.

Tony’s eyes felt like they were going to flutter close.

“I know that I haven’t been the best boyfriend to you. I know that the bruises I leave on your skin don’t fade away in days. It’s just sometimes I can’t control my actions and I know that it may sound like I’m just making excuses. But just listen to me honey,” Ryder whispered and leaned toward Tony.

“I am trying to change my reactions to you.”

Tony hummed as Ryder leaned down to angle his face toward Tony’s and place a warm kiss on his cheek. Tony almost felt a sob threaten to break out with how light everything was. With everything that has been going on in the past year…this is what he wanted. He wanted someone to care for him.

Hot tears burned at the back of his eyelids and he tried blinking them away.

“I promise I’ll be better. I’ll do all the necessary steps to make sure that I don’t hurt you the way that everyone else has. I promise that I won’t leave you. I don’t want to be like them. Please don’t let me ever become like them…someone who just hurts you,” Ryder whispers leaning back and continuing to massage the back of Tony’s neck.

“Just be patient with me Tony,” he said mouthing softly at the corners of Tony’s mouth.

Tony let out an involuntarily shiver at the surprising amount of gentleness

“Just be patient with me honey, please.”

Tony turned his face up to Ryder’s. His hands found themselves running over the stubble of Ryder’s cheek. Ryder leaned into the touch and placed a cool hand on Tony’s cheek.

The blinding smile Ryder sent his way warmed Tony. Tony felt that out of everything bad with today was washed away with that smile. Ryder looked down at him from under his eyelashes and traced his nose.

“Just be patient with me please. Promise me you’ll be patient.”

“Okay,” Tony whispered afraid to break this glow of relief and safety. “I promise.”

Chapter End Notes

See why this physically drained me?

Anyways thanks for all the comments, kudos, bookmarks, etc. you make me want to continue writing even when I would rather take a nap lol :)
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Apologies for no chapter last week life happens, you know? Also there will probably not be a chapter update next week because I'm trying to study for finals *sobs*

But enjoy this chapter that I promised would be completely fluffy...but well

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony woke up to a warm arm slung around his waist. He turned slightly over and was met with Ryder breathing softly into his pillow. A slow smile started to grace Tony’s face as he continued looking at Ryder. A few minutes passed as Tony studied Ryder’s sleeping face and taking in how peaceful he looked, when he didn’t have the stress of his job on his shoulders. Tony wished that he could remain as peaceful as this forever. But alas Tony knew his wishes rarely ever came true.

Looking at the time on his watch, Tony ran a hand over his face and sighed. It had been two weeks since the Accord talk with the Avengers had went down the drain and two weeks since he had taken Miles back to Karen’s. A sharp pain entered Tony’s chest as he remembered Miles’ face as he handed him off to Karen. Miles had been healthy, probably healthier than he had ever been before. So it was time he went back. He had done what he said he would do.

Tony had ended his weekly visits, but still kept on sending gifts and checking in. But he couldn’t go there and see Miles and know that he couldn’t keep him. He definitely wasn’t fit enough to be a father and he shouldn’t get Miles’ or his hopes up that he ever would be able to adopt him. There would be some family who eventually came and saw Miles’ bright face and decide to want to bring him into their home. Tony clenched his jaw at the thought of someone taking his Miles…his bambino.

But it was okay because Ryder hadn’t wanted kids and if they were in this for the long haul Tony had to respect that. So he was fine with giving Miles back. He was completely fine with how he would go into the room that was quickly made into Miles’ and see the stuffed toys and books that were left behind. He was completely fine with getting back into the habit of not waking Miles’ up for breakfast or putting him down for his nap. He was-

But dang it, just one more visit. Then I’ll be done, Tony thought to himself. I can just like make sure he’s still fine. Surely, that wouldn’t hurt?

“Mmm, where ya goin’?” Ryder questioned feeling the body underneath his arm move. He opened his eyes slowly and peered to look at Tony who was already grabbing some things to get ready to shower.

“I have another meeting with my board execs. Pepper said apparently I need to stop rejecting my duties and since Miles is gone I can’t use him as an excuse anymore,” the lie flew easily off of Tony’s lips. He stood up and leaned over the bed to press a kiss against Ryder’s cheek.

“You’re not lying to me right?” Ryder said raising his body up to bring himself closer to Tony. His hand rested on Tony’s hip and he used it to draw him closer. “Because I was pretty sure your whole day was cleared off. Remember we both decided we would take the today off to just relax in bed?”
Tony’s eyes widened before he quickly schooled his expression. “Yeah, but I decided I’m not the type to just lounge around and do nothing. So it was either my lab or this meeting and since I’ve been putting this off forever, I can’t neglect it anymore. But I’ll be back soon. Just give me three hours then we can do all the relaxing we want.”

Ryder looked at him. “You know that I would be really disappointed, if you are lying to me Tony.”

Tony winced slightly at the applied pressure on his hip. “Yeah, I know.”

Ryder breathed deeply through his nose and nodded. “Okay. I trust you.”

“Love you,” Tony whispered pressing his lips against Ryder’s.

Ryder rolled his eyes and burrowed back into the covers. “Yeah. Go have fun at your meeting.”

Tony would have been concerned with how easily he was brushed off, but he was too excited for the fact that Ryder bought his lie. Then Tony realized that he shouldn’t have had to lie to Ryder anyway.

He grabbed his clothes and went toward his bathroom and softly closed the door. He stepped out of his clothes and slowly eased his aching body into the shower. As the warm water traveled over sore shoulders, Tony looked down to see his skin beginning to redden from where Ryder’s grasp had been too tight on his hip.

As his hands traveled to wash the rest of his body, he gently ran his towel over the bruises left behind from a few days ago. Looking at them, he quickly shook his head to keep his mind from wandering to dark thoughts.

He had promised Ryder he would be patient with him. So what if somedays Ryder just tended to be a little rough. He at least apologized and thanked Tony for being so patient and understanding with him.

A smile found its way on Tony’s lips as he remembered how Ryder had treated him so kindly upon realizing how truly patient Tony was with him. Ryder had never experienced that type of patience and understanding in his life before. Ryder had told Tony that. And who was Tony not to be understanding and patient with him? Everyone had flaws. Hell Tony had more than he could even count. So he could forgive him for these bruises if it meant Ryder would continue to say how much he needed and wanted him.

He could forgive him. Oh he wondered how dear old Howard would have if he could see his son now. But then he remembered exactly what he would have said.

“You can’t accept apologies. Do you know why son?” his dad had asked, squatting down to look him in the eyes.

Tony remembered the scrapes on his knees and the way his shirt kept hanging off of his shoulder. Sniffling, he nodded. Howard frowned and raised his hand to push his son’s shoulder again.

“People apologize so that they can be good with the person. And they want to be good with you so they can get something from you,” he told Tony fingers clutching his chin roughly. “That’s all they will ever need from you, son. You think they actually apologize because they want to be your friend? That’s fucking child play.”

“He didn’t intend to push me dad. He just became aggravated and I was in the way,” Tony said
struggling over the words, hoping he pronounced them correctly. Despite being four years old, his
dad had already expected to act like an adult.

Zane hadn’t meant anything by it. He just got angry sometimes. He protected Tony though.
Protected him all throughout those days in recess. When everyone was making snide remarks about
him being a weapon’s dealer, words learned from their parents nonetheless, he was there fist in
balls and ready to swing at anyone who crossed little Tony.

He was his only friend. Tony didn’t want his dad to taint the only friendship that he had. But there
was one thing he should have learnt early on in life. Howard Stark, when truly putting his mind to
something, always accomplished his goal.

“I don’t care whether he meant it or not. Look, he apologized, yes?” Howard asked, eyes searching
for something, but for what Tony never did know. He never found it either.

“Yes.”

“And how many times have you had to accept his apologies? How many times have you been
pushed, only for seconds later for him to say sorry? How many times after he has apologized, has he
asked for something from you? Huh? Tony that shirt is too big for you. Your mom would never buy
a shirt like that for you. You weigh less than you did when school started. Are you giving him your
lunch now too?”

Tony bit his lip, praying that the tears wouldn’t fall. Howard hadn’t liked it when he would cry. Said
it didn’t do anything, but make him angry. So he tried to stop feeling sorry for himself and try to
master the steely glare his dad had been giving him probably since the day he was born.

Howard stopped briefly to catch his thoughts, before he continued his rambling. “See that’s what
people do Tony. They apologize for their mistakes and faults, so that they can be forgiven. But you
shouldn’t give them anything Tony. It’s a sign of weakness if a man is to forgive every person’s
transgressions. If you continue forgiving him, who knows what he might ask for or do next.”

He paused, disgust stretching across his face. “Goodness how did I end up with such a fucking weak
son. Can’t do anything right.”

“I swear it’s a trait that you got from your mother. This forgiving nature. It’s going to break you. It’s
going to make you fragile to other people. It already has.”

Tony tried wiping away the tears that were running furiously down his cheeks as his father left his
playroom. He tried stifling his cries into his stuffed animal, but a sound escaped. Before he had the
chance to cover his mouth, Howard stalked back in and grabbed the stuffed animal and ripped its
head off.

Horrified Tony watched as Howard flung the stuffed animal into the trash can. “Big boys don’t play
with toys. Now wipe your fucking nose and stop all that crying.”

Again he left and Tony quickly went to hide his stuffed penguin so that his mom wouldn’t know what
Howard had did. He placed the toy under his pillow and grabbed his blanket to wipe at his tear
stained cheeks.

When Jarvis and his mom later came in to check on him, they smiled at the exuberant four year old
creating his own world with his toy blocks. He turned toward them and offered a bright smile in
return, despite how his heart thundered in his chest with fear of Howard coming back.
With those thoughts outside of his head, he stepped outside of the shower the cool air quickly chilling his skin. He choose to forego his suit today because it clung too tightly to his skin and was uncomfortable when the fabric rubbed against his scars and bruises. He grabbed a sweater and some jeans and quickly pulled them on.

He was going to say goodbye to Ryder, but Ryder had already fallen asleep. Tony softly exited his room and closed the door gently behind him. He sent out a quick message to Happy to tell him he would be downstairs soon and wondered briefly if Happy had some other place to be before Tony had texted him.

Maybe he could give Happy all of December and part of January off. After all Tony could drive himself, he just had to manage to remember that he couldn’t park anywhere he wanted even when knowing he could pay for the tickets.

As he went down to the first floor he bumped into a flustered Natasha.

“Oh, sorry,” she said looking at him.

A few minutes passed with neither of them saying anything, before Tony took this as a sign to continue leaving. “Okay, well this was nice. See you later.”

“Look Tony I-” Natasha began, but was silenced by Tony shaking his head.

“Look I’m going to Karen’s in a bit, so I don’t really have time for a heart to heart right now. Maybe later?”

Natasha chewed at her lip and looked toward Tony. Tony stared at her and battled with what he was going to say next. He knew what he wanted, but he didn’t know if he should. Besides did he want to be disappointed with her answer?

“I’m going to go visit Miles. The children at the orphanage are quite fans of Black Widow you know. The girls especially love you. Though I’m pretty terrified about that because I think those girls have been holding secret meetings about training to be little spies and assassins. Fairly certain their first mission is to kill me with cuteness over how they all are taking all the plastic knives from the pantry. You know what never mind that’s not cute. I should probably tell Karen about that. Right?”

“Tony,” Natasha interrupted. “I would love to go to the orphanage with you and meet my little admirers, though I’m not certain there’s much to admire about me anymore.” She added the last bit to herself.

Tony imagined that Natasha had thought he hadn’t heard her last statement and he decided not to respond to that. After all, he wouldn’t even know what to exactly say.

“Oh, thank goodness because you know I was wondering how long I could go without like directly asking you.”

“Are you sure you’re comfortable with me going? I mean this is your thing,” Natasha offered, hoping that Tony wouldn’t mind.

“Yeah, it’ll be fun.”

“Okay, I’ll just leave a note saying where we went just in case they start-”

“No!” Tony shouted.
He looked at Natasha’s startled expression.

“Ummm, just no because I don’t need Ryder finding out that I’m going to the orphanage,” Tony quickly explained.

Natasha frowned. “Why? He knows you’ve been going there so why would it be a problem.”

Tony shrugged not wanting to explain himself to Natasha. “Doesn’t matter. Just no leaving notes or just tell them you went shopping.”

Natasha quirked an eyebrow at him and titled her head. Tony raised his hand in defense. “Sorry or I don’t know spying on some local bystander. Just nothing with me going to the orphanage. Nothing with me at all okay.”

Natasha wanted to dig deeper, but knew it wasn’t her place anymore. She had to earn that trust back to where Tony could confide in her.

Tony nodded thankful and led Natasha out. “Well let’s go our chariot awaits.”

“Oh, my gosh you brought the Black Widow here. Like the Black Widow,” Jaime stuttered looking about a few seconds away from passing out. “I…this is the best thing you have ever done for my life Mr. Stark. I mean besides like the tuition scholarship you gave me this is the best.”

“Jaime breathe,” Karen said though she was looking just as awestruck.

“Why didn’t I get this much of a response when I came?” Tony questioned with his arms already full of two toddlers. “You think I’m way better than the Black Widow right?”

The two children laughed at Tony and shook their heads. Tony tilted his head backward. “That’s it I’m being betrayed by my whole tribe. I give you all my love and as soon as the next bright thing comes along I am pushed to the side.”

Natasha watched Tony’s expression. And she knew him long enough and had studied him long enough to know that he wasn’t partly joking. So Natasha playfully rolled her eyes.

“Tony I am pretty sure you are the brightest thing is the room. I personally think Iron Man is the coolest. I mean you both have seen his armor right? So bright and pretty.”

“Yes!” the two children agreed giving Tony two loud wet kisses on his cheek.

Tony pretended to be disgusted as the two kids kept peppering him with kisses, but he was secretly delighted. Who was he to stop coming to his weekly visits? Ryder couldn’t keep him from the orphanage in fear that his heart would grow too big and he would want to adopt.

Natasha ran her eyes over the room and noticed a group of girls huddled in the corner with an assortment of yarn, plastic silverware, and glue rested in the middle of their circle. Natasha looked at Tony in askance.

“Yep, those are the little spies in training. Go be with your little followers,” Tony said. “But please don’t teach them your ways this early. I’m still really terrified of you and I don’t think I’m ready for little Black Widows following my every move.”

Natasha laughed at him as she began to walk toward the girls who hadn’t noticed her presence. “Oh
Tony you wouldn’t know if they were following you.”

That was when Tony knew he had made a mistake.

Suddenly, arms were pushing at him to put them down. The two children immediately began to ask Jaime if he could make them a sandwich. Jaime looked at Natasha once more, before nodding at the kids and taking them into the kitchen.

“So where’s Miles? I mean I came here for all the children, but I wanted to check up on him and see how he’s doing.”

“Tony I have to warn you Miles hasn’t taken to you leaving him back here all that well and then with you not even visiting,” Karen said glaring at him. Tony shifted at the spot feeling guilty. “Even when Peter came last week Miles didn’t want to play with him and Peter is Miles’ favorite person besides you.”

“How is Peter doing by the way?” Tony questioned as he followed Karen to the room Miles’ shared with four other boys.

“He’s fine. He’s been wondering why you have been ignoring his messages and not making your weekly visits. I tried easing his worries and making sure he didn’t show up at the tower, but Tony you should make sure to talk to the boy.”

“I will,” Tony said feeling guilty.

“Good,” Karen said. “Now will you be staying to help us taken down our thanksgiving decoration and put up our Christmas decorations?”

“Will you lift me up to put the star on the tree?” Tony asked cheekily.

Karen rolled her eyes. “No.”

“Come on I know you’ve been wanting to feel me up since day one. Now I’m giving you the opportunity.”

“Tony you are a hot mess.”

“That’s not a no,” Tony laughed.

Karen shook her head and laughed. “Look I’ll be in my office doing some work, but come get me in an hour or so and we’ll start putting up the decorations.”

Tony nodded and pushed open the door to Miles’ room. Miles was sitting in his bed and coloring in his coloring book. Tony smiled and went to go sit down at the head of Miles’ bed before Miles flung the coloring book at Tony and pulled the covers over his head.

Tony looked on confused as he rubbed the spot where the coloring book had come into contact with his forehead. He would have laughed if it were anyone else but him Miles’ was throwing the coloring book at.

“Bambino what’s wrong?”

“No ba’ino,” Miles said his voice muffled by the bed sheets.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”
Miles didn’t answer and Tony tried pulling the covers away from Miles’ face. “Hey talk to me. Is it something that I did?”

Miles pushed back at the covers angrily and nodded. He crossed his arms over his tiny body and stared at Tony.

*That’s adorable,* Tony quickly thought.

“Okay, what did I do?”

“Left me.”

Tony’s heart stopped then and there. Okay, it was time to call the medic. Then Miles’ next words quickly sent him to the grave.

“You don’ love me no more.” Miles whispered. “Sally said we come back here when our daddies and mommies didn’t love us no more.”

“Bambino no, no, no that’s not why I left,” Tony wanted to quickly assure.

Miles shook his head. “Baba stay if you loved me.”

“I do love you bambino.”

“Do not! Do not!” Miles screamed. “Left me here! I want penguin and Dum-E and FRIDAY. Why leave? Was I bad?”

“No bambino. You are perfect. I didn’t want to leave you.”

“Why? Why leave me?”

Tony had no good reason to answer him why. He shouldn’t have left him here and not visited. He could only imagine how this must have affected Miles.

“I’m sorry. I do love you and it was very mean for me to leave you. I thought you would like it better with your friends here and everything. I don’t have a lot of things at the Tower.”

“But tower is where you are,” Miles said looking down. “Want you baba.”

Tony swallowed a lump in his throat. Miles still looked sad and Tony never wanted to fix anything as much as he wanted to fix the expression on Miles’ face.

“If that’s where you want to be, then that’s where you’ll be,” Tony told him. Maybe Miles could visit the tower every now and then? “I love you bambino. I will always love you. I shouldn’t have left.”

“No,” Miles agreed. “Color?”

Tony was surprised with how easily Miles’ forgiveness came, but Tony was not the one to take this for granted. So he grabbed the blue crayon Miles gave him and rested his back against the wall as Miles sat on his lap. Miles placed the coloring book on his lap and told Tony where he wanted him to color.

Tony followed Miles’ instructions and the two continued coloring, until Tony noticed nearly an hour had passed and he remembered Karen needed him to go to her office to tell her it was time to start putting decorations up.
Tony grabbed Miles and led him outside of the room. “Go play with the others, I’ll be right back okay,” Tony told Miles. “Then we can all do the decorations.”

Miles looked weary as though Tony would leave him again.

Tony leaned down to look Miles in the eye. “I promise I’m not leaving. If I’m taking too long come into Karen’s office and get me, okay?”

Miles seemed pleased with this and ran off to find his other friends, but not before looking back at Tony once more. Tony smiled and was thankful that he had come today. As he made his way to Karen’s office he heard two other voices talking.

“Yes, Miles is a very nice boy. He’s very attentive and very intelligent for his age. He’s also very sociable so you will not have many problems getting him acclimated. He’s a little shy at first, but again once he warms up he’s this little chatterbox,” Karen said.

A women’s voice echoed in Karen’s office. “Oh, Evan he sounds wonderful. We’ve been wanting to adopt for so long and now that this is finally happening.”

“I know sweetheart. It seems like all our prayers are finally being answered.”

“I know. This is just…we’ve been saving money and this…thank you Karen.”

“No, thank you. This boy needs a good home and you two will make lovely parents.”

Tony had had enough. He burst into Karen’s office wide eyed and breathing heavily fear gripping his chest at thought of Miles going away with this Evan and his wife.

He looked at the two and they looked exactly like a couple you would see in some magazine talking about healthy relationships. Evan was leaning back in his chair and his wife had her hand placed over his knee.

Tony’s throat tightened and his chest began to feel heavy. “Sorry, but you can’t adopt him. I’m sure you are probably wonderful people and would make wonderful parents, but I cannot let you take him. So I know this is probably unprofessional and Pepper would literally kill me if she saw my behavior right now, but I want to adopt him and I would go through hell and high water to make sure that Miles becomes my son. So not to be rude or anything, but you can stop what you’re doing now and save you the-”

“Tony!”

“What?” he shouted equally as loud as Karen.

He hadn’t noticed until now, but all three of them were laughing. Karen’s face was bright with joy and she waved at the two.

“Thank you Evan and Miracle. I’ll make sure to sign those community service papers,” Karen said. “You both can go into the kitchen and warm yourselves up a plate, while I talk to Mr. Stark.”

Evan and Miracle both smiled at Tony and whispered about how brilliant their acting was.

“What just happened?”

“What just happened is you finally got your head out of your ass and realized just why you’ve really been coming to this orphanage every week for the past six months.”
Tony slumped down in the chair opposite of Karen. “I’ve just been played.”

“For your own benefit love,” Karen said.

“So I could adopt him? Like he could be mine?” Tony whispered afraid to hear the answer.

“I’ve been having the papers ready for you to sign since the second month of you coming here,” Karen admitted warmly. “I think…I know you will be a wonderful father to Miles.”

Tony felt tears spring into his eyes and an abundance of joy fill his heart. At the back of his mind there was a fleeting thought of Ryder, but the joy pushed it aside. A sob broke through his chest and he hunched over himself. Karen quickly went to him and gave him a hug.

Her own tears fell over her eyes because she had always loved seeing people who came in who genuinely wanted to adopt a kid and provide them with love. Karen ran her hand soothingly over his back as Tony’s shoulders racked with the vibrations from his sobs.

“I’m happy I swear. I don’t know why…why I can’t stop crying,” he hiccupped. A broken laugh escaped his lips. “Never thought I’d want to be a father because I thought I’d always be one like my old man, but with Miles…I just…It may be selfish, but I want him to be my son and I want to do right by him as a father like mine never did.”

“I’m going to be a wonderful father,” Tony said turning to Karen.

Karen smiled wetly at him and ran a thumb under his eyes to catch a tear. “I know. I know Tony.”


Miles’ concerned voice traveled to both of their ears. Miles walked into Karen’s office and toward the two crying adults. Tony imagined Miles had decided he waited long enough.

“It’s because we’re happy bambino,” Tony said pulling Miles’ into his lap. “Just really happy.”

“Why?” Miles inquired placing both hands on Tony’s cheeks to wipe his tears then leaning over to do the same for Karen. Karen smiled at Miles’ actions.

“Because you are going to live with me.”

“No more Karen’s?” Miles asked.

“We’ll come back to visit every week, but your home will be with me. I’ll be your baba forever and always.”

Miles seemed to ponder on all of this and Tony wondered briefly if a child could understand this at his age. His fears were cast aside when Miles threw his arms around Tony’s neck.

“Love you baba. Stay with you forever.”

“Yes, stay with me forever.”

“Can I bring my coloring books?”

“Yes, we’ll make sure to pack everything,” Tony agreed resting his head on Miles’ back.

The door roughly swung open, breaking them out of their warm glow to reveal a shy looking young girl. She fiddled with her glasses and looked hesitantly at the two adults.
“Ummm…Mr. Stark?” her nervous soft voice greeted.

“Yes,” Tony sniffled turning his face away from Miles.

“Ummm, the little black widows are planning a revolt with their leader being Ms. Romanov. And some of the kids are actually pretty terrified,” she squeaked. “Myself included. We don’t know where they went, but they are somewhere in here.”

Her voice grew softer as her eyes darted around the room. “And like the older volunteers tried stopping it, but Ms. Romanov recruited Jaime as second command and most of the other volunteers look up to him so we’ve been outnumbered…”

Immediately, her words cut off as a ball of yarn filled glue was thrown to the back of her shirt. She shrieked and jumped.

A little kid peeked through the cracks of the door and smiled. She gave the “I’m watching you motion” with her fingers and closed the door behind her.

“See,” the young girl whined. “We just wanted to start the decorations, but the little black widows claimed we were doing them wrong and now they’re attacking us. Mary had to cut her hair two inches because they mixed glue with peanut butter and threw that into her hair.”

Karen laughed. “Alright, let’s go deal with this yeah and then appropriately get started on the decorations?”

After two hours of hunting down the little black widows, everyone had decided they needed a break. It was almost everyone’s nap time or for the older kids it was time to do homework. So they all went to their study rooms until it was time to start putting up decorations.

“Thank you for letting me come here with you today,” Natasha said putting down the box of Christmas ornaments.

“I come here every week so I’ll let you know what day I come and maybe you can come with me again. Though maybe this time you can get your little evil minions not to attack me. Like I’m pretty sure I won’t be able to remove what it was that your little ones made. Like what’s in it?”

Natasha shrugged and smiled. “It’s cute that you think I’ll tell you.”

“Natasha! Natasha!” Tony shouted after her as she went into the kitchen to talk to her little fan, Jaime. “I’m going to get payback and you’re going to help me bambino,” he said to Miles who was beginning to fall asleep in his arms.

A few minutes passed before he felt his phone vibrating in his jean pocket. For a brief moment he imagined it was Ryder asking why the three hour meeting was quickly veering toward five.

Tony tried maneuvering his way to grab ahold of his ringing phone, while carrying a sleeping Miles toward the couch. Finally, he was able to grab it and quickly answered it upon seeing Isa’ name on the screen.

“Hey?”

“Mr. Stark.”

“Yes?”
“Steve signed.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again for all the comments, kudos, and bookmarks. Makes my heart happy.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Finals are over! And as a treat I am making up for my absence. I hope you all enjoy and feel free to comment, kudo, bookmark, etc.

Also didn't really mean for this to be over 10k, but I didn't want to break it up into two different chapters. But next chapter is definitely going back to its normal programming.

P.S. This is a little heavy and tense so just prepare yourselves...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Previously on To Need is Not to Want

“Who are you?” Steve questioned looking at the women who had suddenly entered the room.

“I am here to provide legal counsel and to soothe out and question and concerns you all may have in regards to the Accords,” Isa said soothing out the wrinkles in her skirts.

“Why exactly do we need legal counsel especially from someone who is not involved with our situation? Tony is telling us since he’s the one who’s been advocating that we sign the Accords,” Steve began looking briefly at Tony, who was still trying to gather himself.

“You need legal counsel especially for that reason. All of you are rather close to the Accords. There is an emotional closeness that will prevent you from viewing things holistically. Tony felt that if he were to discuss things with you all, you would not listen. From your refusal to look me directly in the eye I am guessing I am correct,” Isa pointed out. “And from the fact that Tony looks like he’s being brought out of an attack I know I am correct.”

She looked at him in a concerned manner and he tried waving of the concern. “Tony,” she mumbled settling down her briefcase and taking out the Accords. “What happened?”

“I’m sorry Isa…Isa I have to go I can’t…just tell them what you…I can’t be here. Please Isa,” he quickly scrambled to grab his Accords packet and sign in a rushed manner. He was used to doing this so it was completely legible.

Isa turned fiery eyes toward the other individuals, but said nothing to them. Instead she choose to look at Tony and address him.

“I am so sorry you had to deal with them alone. I meant to be here on time. Please forgive me,” Isa exclaimed looking at Tony wearily.

Tony went to grab Miles and settled him on his hip, despite Miles trying to be put down. Eventually he gave up and just settled on Tony’s hip, and laid his head on his chest.

“It’s not your fault. I should have realized a long time ago that I stopped being anyone they cared about back in Siberia.”

Tony left the room to whispered question of what happened in Siberia. Good, Tony thinks darkly. Let
As soon as Tony left the room, Isa was going to give these people a reality check and give them all hell.

Isa turned her face back toward the silent Avengers and mentally tried calming herself down. She had only heard of this team’s stubbornness to hear reason from Pepper and Rhody, but to actually experience it was something else. She blamed the traffic and then herself for putting Tony in this position where he was defenseless. However, she was thankful that he was gone because now she did not have to hold back.

She would have held back for Tony seeing as though he was currently employing her, but well he wasn’t here to physically stop her from saying anything that was…well less classy.

Isa sat down in the chair previously occupied by Tony and opened up her briefcase revealing 14 individual packets. She placed nine aside. “You know you are all in the minority opinion right now. Nine individuals have already signed the Accords.”

“Make it ten,” Natasha said standing from her kneeling position from the ground and slightly towering over Isa. “I went into this thinking the Accords were fair. Now I know that they are. Packet.”

Isa easily handed it over to Natasha and succeeding in not glowing at the fact that she managed to get Natasha to sign. Of course she was more than positive it was mainly due to her closeness to Tony and her own understanding of the documents.

“Who all has signed it?” Steve questioned, glowering as Natasha began to scan the document.

Isa chewed on her bottom lip then answered, “So far T’Challa, Rhodey, Vision, Spiderman, Scott, Sam, and Wanda have all signed. However, this is only the beginning. We’re getting news of other gifted individuals or superheroes as you would call them who are coming forward. Of course we are letting them have anonymity.”

“As in the course of this spider dude?” Clint questioned leaning over to look at Natasha, who had now sat down. His eyes were also now scanning the document alongside her.

“Spiderman. And yes. We do not require that you reveal your secret identities to us. Of course that doesn’t really pertain to you all seeing as though your faces have been plastered on the television to show the faces of those who made civilians clean up your mess,” Isa drawled darkly.

“Wanda signed?”

Isa tried with all her might not to roll her eyes at Steve. He was asking a reasonable question, but her natural response over the months of hearing about him had become to roll her eyes.

“Yes. The Accords allow her to access help, develop her powers, and provide therapy for all the trauma she has experienced. We do not want to restrict her powers. We do not want to criminalize her. So in order to do that she has to work with us. We need to alter her image and make sure she is not perceived as a threat. We need to do this to make her safe,” Isa explained. “You understand, right?”

Steve clenched his jaw and turned his face away from hers.

*Childish*, Isa thought to herself.
“You mentioned therapy?” Clint questioned, now seeming interested in knowing what all was happening. He’d be foolish if he let himself go into anything without knowing the whole story behind it…which was exactly how he got himself into all of this. Which got me to losing Laura and the kids, Clint thought blankly. Maybe I can call them after this…if Laura answers.

“Yes, that actually is included in the Accords. However, it is entirely optional. The people signing this just figured there needed to be a way to properly deal with trauma and brushing it under the rug as you all have done so far has not worked in anyone’s favor. So while we would like all of you to seek private therapy once every other week, it is up to the individual. There will also be group therapy one a month, if the group decides they want that to be included,” Isa explained taking a highlighter out of her briefcase and highlighting the portion explaining that.

“Mr. Stark and the others who have signed have gone to therapy. Though they set their own times, so it may not be as frequent as once a week because well people do get busy. Fortunately, it has helped though.”

Isa noticed Clint’s and Bucky’s own unease about therapy and decided to ease the tension. “Look as a legal counsel for the Accords, I think that therapy would be the best for you all moving forward. It doesn’t have to be about you all exposing yourselves. It does not mean testing of any sort. No needles, no brainwashing of the sort, no trying to change your entire identity,” she answered looking directly at Bucky when she said all of this.

“All this is helping to do is effectively treat your trauma and your responses to it. It is to help mediate the pain you feel and all of the emotions that are brought up in your day to day job. It is to make sure that your thoughts are clear.”

Bucky’s eyes hesitantly searched Steve’s before clearing his throat. “May I see a packet…Miss?”

“Bordelon. And yes you may,” she said handing one to Bucky, but not before seeing Steve angrily clench his jaw and clutch his knees.

“And what about our families?” Clint questioned shifting back into the couch.

“Your families will be protected. And even if you do not sign your family in particular will be protected. Tony has made sure of that.”

“He has?” Clint implored rather confusedly. Clint had done nothing to deserve any kindness.

“Because Tony is a nice person. Do not know why it is so hard for you all to notice that,” Isa told him. “He’s been taking care of your family and keeping them out of the spotlight. I’m sure you would have known that if perhaps you gave your wife a call. But oh well guess exiles don’t really have access to a phone.”

Clint sighed under his breath and began to slowly realize what was happening. He was losing his family in a war that wasn’t even his to fight. He had no problems with the Accords. Hell he knew it was the safest thing that guaranteed his children would be protected if someone like him didn’t have morals. There was one time he didn’t…

“May I see a packet?”

Isa smiled inwardly and handed a packet. “And then there was one. Steve I am pretty sure you have noticed by know that this is the best—”

“No,” Steve’s voice broke in startling all of them. “No, it’s not the best thing. The Accords are not implemented to protect us. It is meant to restrict us. Tony is advocating this because he feels guilty
and okay we have all felt that. There is no need for all of this because we have run quite effectively without it. We know what is best for the people and we are able to be their protectors when they are not able to. We have these gifts so we should—"

“Are you quite finished?” Isa questioned eyes becoming alight with fire. Her posture straightened and she focused all of her attention toward Steve.

“Yes,” Steve bit out.

“Good so sit back and listen Mr. Rogers,” Isa hissed. “Do you want the police to run around the city with no rules?”

“No of course not that’s—”

“Do you want the president to have unchecked power and just dictate over our lives?”

“Ms. Borderlon I…of course I don’t—”

“Do you want the military to have the ability to march into a town for whatever reason they deem necessary. And it may be justified. Then they leave the town impoverished because of people losing jobs, due to their businesses being destroyed. Children getting sick because of all the debris or being collateral damage. Do you want that?”

“No.”

“So if you want to make sure that people like the police, the president, military powers, and other people in authoritative positions have a check on their power…why do you exclude yourself? Because all of those people are not perfect, they make bad judgment calls. You all are human despite a serum running through your blood or years of assassin training. Not one of you all can make the right choice all the time for the people.”

Isa breathed out slowly and attempted to calm herself.

“There will come a day that you make a bad judgment and it will get somebody…some people killed. It will destroy homes. It will undermine a town’s efforts of being developed. Your bad judgment call has already done so.”

Everyone minus Steve had the decency to look ashamed and bury their faces back into their packets. Meanwhile Steve stared stone faced at Isa. Despite the stoniness of Steve’s expression, Isa continued on.

“And you want to say you don’t need the Accords? The Accords are for those bad judgment calls. The Accords are a time to reflect on your actions and how it affects others. The Accords are implemented to make sure average day civilians are not freaking terrified of going outside their homes without Avengers going headfirst into some crisis and not looking back behind to see the damage.”

Steve swallowed a lump in his throat and tried ignoring the burning on the back of his lips wanting to defend himself. And he could…because he for once had nothing to say back.

“Look around you. Do you want these people to fear and hate you like some young black men fear the police? You know black parents, upon their son being able to understand life, have to teach them how to interact with some police officers in order not to be killed. Do you want them to curse your name like they do to political officials trying to take away their individual rights? Because in you not signing these Accords you are taking away the civilian’s rights to protection, safety, and freedom.”
Isa continued her passionate speech spurred on by the speechlessness in Steve’s expression and the others shrinking in on themselves. For a moment she hopes FRIDAY is recording this all so she can show Tony later.

“I mean Steve what would you have felt if your commanding officer led your team into a mission, where no one made it out alive. You had to tell fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters that the men and women they said goodbye to wouldn’t be coming back. What would you do if you later learned that mission was not even important? Those men and women died a careless death due to a misjudgment call?”

Isa paused as if allowing Steve to speak, but Steve knew she did not desire for him to say anything at all.

“The Accords are not taking away your right to serve and protect. The Accords are not forcing you to give up your identities. The Accords are not here to restrict you.”

“The Accords are just helping give us normal citizens a peace of mind knowing that while we have you all to protect us, there are provisions made to make sure that if you plan on making bad decisions you are held accountable. Tony even got rid of the Raft as a punishment. The Accords allows you and your council along with UN representatives to appropriately come up with a course of action. It could simply be just rebuilding the small business shops. It could be a month’s suspension.”

“And I know you are all smart. Steve I know you are fairly intelligent. Any person who is able to acclimate into the 21st century the way you did has to be smart. So I know when you read the documents you realized all of this.”

Isa smiled softly at Steve, but with a certain harshness said, “You are a good man inside who wants the best for the little men. The Accords is exactly there to help the little man…so for the love of all why are you so hell bent on not signing?”

Steve’s expression turned solemn and he bent his head forward so as to not meet Isa’s inquiring gaze. Natasha who had lifted her eyes from her own packet watched Steve and decided she would have to privately talk to him later.

“I think it’s time that you really think about why you don’t want to sign the accords. You all have two weeks. You may send it to me by mail if you want to get it to me early, but I will be back here in two weeks to pick up any remaining documents. I hope you all have a wonderful evening,” Isa said packing up her stuff and getting ready to go.

It was only when she was out of the building that she let out a sigh of relief and unclenched her shaking hands.

Isa had left nearly five hours ago and everyone had dispersed onto their own floors to go through the document. Steve knew that most of them would have it signed by the end of this week and Steve did not know how to exactly feel about that information. He wanted to talk to Bucky and see where his head was at and maybe persuade him back onto his side. But after everyone had dispersed, he couldn’t find Bucky. FRIDAY had mentioned he was still in the building so he wasn’t worried, but he didn’t want Isa’s explanations to be the last thing Bucky heard.

*But what would be so wrong with that?*

Steve silenced his thoughts and leaned against the headboard of his bed. His eyes remained shut, but
he couldn’t get his thoughts to be completely suppressed. He opened his eyes when a harsh knocking sounded through his room.

“Knock, knock. You decent?” Natasha’s voice rang.

“Come in.”

Natasha walked in closing the door behind her. She sat across from Steve and pulled her knees to her chest. Neither of the two said anything to each other and just allowed for a few minutes of quietness to settle.

“So,” Natasha began.

Steve raised an inquiring brow at her.

“So why don’t you really want to sign the Accords?”

“I don’t believe in it Natasha,” Steve tried saying.

“Cut the bull shit Steve. For once stop lying to yourself and to those around you. The Accords are not what you have a problem with. If you seriously have a problem with the Accords, I would be doubting your efficiency as our team leader.”

Steve bit his lip and tilted his face toward the ceiling.

“Steve talk to me. This is probably one of the rare times I am willing to have an open and honest conversation and share feelings. So seriously. Why don’t you want to sign?”

“You know Tony and I. We’re complete opposites. Ever since the day I met him we would clash. There was something refreshing about that because ever since I woke up everyone wanted to treat me like someone to worship. And I hated that. They wanted me to be what the stories were. And it got tiring of having people need you to be something above the normal person. And Tony saw that. He didn’t treat me like someone whose ground that I walked on should be kissed.”

Natasha hummed in the back of her throat and settled for a more comfortable position. She had no idea where this conversation was going or how it was related to him not signing the Accords, but she had told him she was going to listen and that’s what she was going to do.

“We argued about basically everything. How we should enter a fight, what we should have for dinner, how my suit wasn’t user friendly, how he was just a body in a suit, how I was just a serum in a body. It was this constant back and forth, but it became us. Soon the fights became less about serious things and more about playful things something you’d fight with a sibling about.”

Natasha narrowed her eyes at the sibling’s part, but remained silent.

“So I thought the Accords were just another thing we would fight about. I thought eventually one of us would concede to defeat and laugh about it. I mean I was half way in about the Accords. I didn’t agree fully with it, but—”

“I was for amending it. Then we found Bucky and my focus shifted. Soon it became more about protecting Bucky. And I had to protect him because I couldn’t last time. So I figured the trouble with the Accords would distract him from what was happening with Bucky. I thought us fighting over that would manage to hold his attention and—”

Steve’s voice broke off mid-sentence and he palmed the back of his eyes. His breathing deepened
and he dug the heel of his hands into his eyes as if shaking away dark thoughts.

“I love him like family you know,” Steve whispered, chest burning with his admission to Natasha. “And I thought so many bad things have happened in his life if I could just protect him from this one thing…this terrible thing I could finally protect him.”

“What terrible thing Steve,” Natasha whispered, wanting immediately to ask Steve what his love confession meant. But as much as she wanted to explore that she needed to know what Steve felt like he had to protect Tony from.

“God Natasha it’s awful,” Steve broke though. “I just wanted to protect him and I wanted Bucky to be my best friend. I wanted to be right because everything else was falling apart around me. I kept feeling empty during all of this, but I was finally whole when I thought that I was protecting Tony. I felt like for once I was saving someone I lo-”

Steve broke his sentence and drew in a haggard breathe. Red rimmed eyes met Natasha’s clear ones. Natasha’s eyes continued to stare at him as though telling him to finish his sentence. Steve remained silent and turned his head refusing to meet Natasha’s stare.

“Tony is fully capable of taking care of himself Steve,” Natasha added once she knew Steve wasn’t going to say anything else on his unfinished sentence.

“Not from this.”

“Steve,” Natasha breathed. “What did you want to protect him from?”

Steve turned watery eyes. “From the fact that Bucky killed his parents. And Natasha I wanted to tell him, but I figured it wouldn’t help. His parents were dead nothing would have changed that. I didn’t know he…I didn’t know he would have felt so strongly about it. I thought eventually once everything was cleared and Bucky had gained some semblance of normality then I could explain everything. But I didn’t get a chance to because Zemo showed a tape.”

“Of Bucky killing Tony’s parents?” Natasha questioned fearful for the answer.

Steve nodded.

“And I thought all of this fighting would eventually work its way out because in the end I wanted to protect him just a little longer from the heartache. I wanted to protect Bucky from being vilified. I wanted to protect me because I knew that there was a chance I could lose both of them. I could lose my best friend and Tony. And guess what I did!” Steve exclaimed with faux enthusiasm.

“Bucky still doesn’t really talk to me. I get that he’s recovering. So I know it’s a lot, but Tony…those ties have been cut. I sent a letter and a phone and not once did he use it. I was trying to protect him from the news of Bucky killing his parents, when I should have been protecting him from me.”

“You know he thought it was his fault for the longest,” Natasha explained.

Steve’s eyes widened by Natasha’s declaration.

Natasha leaned closer to him. “That night his parents left, Howard and Maria actually wanted to stay with Tony an extra day. Maria had insisted that Howard would let her stay to see Tony’s first piano recital in years. Tony was actually hoping to have the house to himself that night because he had already sent out invitations for a party. So Tony explained that they could catch the next flight and that he had already pulled the car out front for them. He literally pushed his parents out the door. He got the news of their death one hour into the party.”
Steve swallowed a thick lump in the back of his throat and cleared it loudly. His voice scratched as he questioned, “How did you know that?”

“Tony told me. Back when I was his assistant he got drunk and started spewing a few life stories. He’s an awful sentimental and truthful drunk. Sobered up pretty quickly after and made me promise that I would never tell a soul. But—”

“But.”

They remained silent letting the heaviness wash over them uncomfortably.

“This mission would have been successful either way,” Steve truthfully forced out. The honesty in the statement settled like cement on his tongue.

“But a young Tony didn’t know that. Our Tony didn’t know that until nearly over a year ago. He’s had that added guilt on his mind for years. How long did you know?”

“Three months into finding Bucky. I looked into the Winter Soldier and had a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent do some research before deleting any evidence of me snooping. And that’s when I found out.”

Natasha hummed in the back of her throat not really knowing what to say to this. What could she say to change…to even help with this situation?

“I thought eventually we would get over this and we would find our way back to one another. I mean we always did. After everything we always regrouped and came back stronger, but this…I think I’ve come to the point of no return and Natasha it feels like I can’t breathe…I can’t breathe because I know that Tony will never look at me the same. And I have these nightmares of Tony’s face just looking at me in disappointment as he says Bucky may have killed my parents, but you…you killed me,” Steve rasped.

“And it’s the same all the time. I just see me standing over Tony with my shield and I know it’s worse for Tony and Nat I can’t” Steve sputtered.

“Steve breathe,” Natasha calmly stated trying to ground Steve back into the room.

“I can’t. Don’t want to…” Steve rasped clutching at his throat. “Natasha I can’t breathe.”


Steve shook his head and continued rambling. “You don’t understand. I can’t breathe, when I know that Tony is hurting because of me. It’s always been me Nat. I was hoping things with Tony would eventually develop to—”

His breathing cut off and Natasha continued to try to get him to mirror her breathing.

“Come on in and out Steve. Match me.”

Tears flowed freely down Steve’s cheeks and his lips trembled. “Nat I’ve lost him. I’ve truly lost him.”

“Hey. Hey no you haven’t lost him until your body’s been put in a coffin,” Natasha added.

Steve looked hopefully at her. Natasha grabbed his chin lightly and repeated the mantra of in and out. Steve managed to match her breathing and slowly felt the tightness in his chest loosen up.

“Maybe Isa is right and we all need that therapy,” Natasha joked, but the sentiment was serious.
“I’ve been an ass to him.”

“You have,” Natasha agreed solemnly. “But you love him.”

Steve turned bright red. “Like as a brother in arms.”

“Steve when I said cut the bull shit, I meant in everything.”

Steve sighed.

“I do. I’ve loved him the moment he flew into space. I fell in love with the fearlessness, that selflessness, that kindness that he doesn’t allow to many people to see. He let me see that and I like abused that.”

Natasha nodded solemnly. “Well, it’s never too late to make amends. Who knows what the future might hold?”

“He’s with Ryder.”

“I said the future not the present. Get some sleep Steve. And look over the document. If you need to talk more or confess your undying love for Tony come to me,” Natasha said hoping to light the feeling in the room.

Natasha looked once more at the solemn expression on Steve’s face. “Perhaps instead of bottling up your feelings and everything maybe try talking to Tony.”

“He won’t listen.”

“Maybe it’s because you haven’t employed the same courtesy,” Natasha said. “So listen now and read the document. Good night Steve.”

Natasha braved a kiss to his forehead and left Steve to his thoughts. Steve stared at the thrown Accords document and picked it up on the floor. Raising a finger, he flipped to the first page and began reading.

It had been two weeks since Isa had talked to them and Steve had finally admitted to himself that he should sign. So that morning he had planned on going to Tony and telling him so, but he had learned from a leaving Ryder that Tony had gone in to S.I. for a meeting.

So Steve waited for Isa to come later that evening and gave her his signed document. Isa smiled brightly at him and immediately went to her phone no doubt beginning to call Tony. Steve had wanted to stay around and see if he could hear his reaction, but Clint had pulled him into a conversation of how he should save his marriage.

Steve wasn’t very helpful seeing as though any romantic relationship he ever tried having ended without having much been started. Clint later told him he was awful at the advice and went to call on Natasha for a woman’s advice.

Steve laughed softly as he remembered Natasha screaming, “Fucking useless idiot” to Clint when he announced that he had accidentally sent Laura some flowers that had wilted and died.

It had been three days since Steve had learned that Tony had adopted Miles and it had been three whole days of Steve trying to talk to Tony, but Tony running in the other direction. Steve tried not to
feel disheartened and rationalized with himself that he deserved this distance.

But he wanted his friend back.

So he was trying to come up with a plan, when he became hungry. Shuffling toward the kitchen, he began to walk slower as he heard Tony’s voice echo in the hallway leading to the kitchen. Making sure he went unseen, he pressed his ear forward to hear Tony’s conversation.

“Peter,” Tony laughed slightly. “Seriously, I am not going to come to your school and-”

More laughter and some moving of plates. “Yes, I am fairly sure your aunt would approve of that. No, but maybe I should come to school and see this Michelle person you have been talking awfully about. Yeah, you know what I think that’s what I’ll do.”

A pause in the conversation meant that Peter was replying and while Steve’s hearing was really good, he could only pick out a few words from Peter.

Steve wondered briefly why Tony would be having conversations with his intern. Had he had this close of a relationship with other interns? Steve racked his brain trying to find out, but knew that Tony rarely ever took on any interns for himself. He said they needed to gain work experience not the Tony experience.

“Fine Peter yes I will come pick you up to show everyone how awesome I am…though I don’t know why you need me, when you can easily just…yes of course. No, May made me promise I keep you from doing too many reckless things. Though as a favor I’ll need you to watch Miles after the Christmas Charity Gala in a few weeks…four weeks I think? December 23 I believe?”

Tony hummed. “Yes, you can bring your little girlfriend and your band of science geeks…hey no offense I myself hold that title with honor. Okay, now seriously do your homework kid. Alright yes…mhm…yeah you too. Good night,” Tony said before handing the phone up.

Steve was just about to enter the kitchen and maybe just start a casual conversation about this Peter kid, but was stopped by an added voice of Ryder.

“You going to adopt him too?” Ryder asked.

“Hardy har har,” Tony dryly said.

“Seriously, I mean it wouldn’t be the first time that you adopt a kid without me knowing,” Ryder growled. “I mean who knows what you might just do next!”

“Would you lower your voice please,” Tony whispered.

Steve thanked everything that he could still hear what they were saying even though their voices had grown softer.

“Did you want anything for lunch? I’m making something quick for when Miles wakes up from his nap, but…why are you looking at me like that?” Tony sighed softly. “Really again?”

“What do you want from me Tony? You want me to be happy that you just adopted a kid knowing full well that you’re not ready to be a father. I mean you and I both know how hard it is being a kid of someone who isn’t equipped to be a parent.”

“Ryder,” Tony brokenly whispered.
“I’m just saying.”

“Ryder that’s a little tight. Loosen up,” Tony gasped.

Steve assumed they were talking about opening a bottle because moments later the sound of glass shattering surrounding the kitchen.

“Really Tony?”

“Sorry,” Tony hurried out. “Sorry.”

“I’m sure you are. Look we’ll have a more private discussion about things later. I need to pack for my trip to Honduras. Clean this up and we’ll talk when I get back, before I leave to board my flight.”

“Okay,” Tony agreed.

Steve hurried into the bathroom in the hallway so Ryder wouldn’t see him. A few moments passed before Steve was sure Ryder had left. He stepped out of the bathroom and made sure to close it softly behind him.

Steve heard a glass break and a body falling to the ground. Immediately he ran into the kitchen and spotted Tony lying on the floor, hands a bloodied mess. His head hung low on his shoulders and on his lap the palms of his hands were upturned. Steve stood looking at Tony as Tony brought his hand up to wipe away a tear.

Seeing the shards of glass sticking to Tony’s palm, Steve quickly went to grab Tony’s hand so he wouldn’t wipe the soft skin of his face with his bloodied hand.

Tony’s body quickly recoiled as Steve reached out to grab one of Tony’s hands. A moment of stagnant silence filled the room as neither one dared to move. Steve’s eyes immediately darkened with shame and he tried hunching his shoulders as though trying to make himself smaller. Meanwhile Tony was trying to calm his breath and uncoil the tightness in his body.

“Sorry,” Steve rasped unsure of what he should do. He wanted to grab the medkit in the medicine cabinet and fix Tony’s hands. Those hands created many of the most brilliant things Steve had been introduced to in the 21st century.

Tony scrambled quickly to his knees and began picking up the pieces of glass with his hands. Steve winced as each piece would pierce Tony’s skin even more. Tony refused to look at Steve in the eyes as he tried cleaning up his mess.

At one particular sharp pinch of glass, Tony bowed his body first and let out a string of curses. Steve having grown tired of seeing Tony be in pain moved to get a broom and swept the bloodied glass off of the floor. Once done, he grabbed a washcloth and wiped the spilt water and blood from the floor.

Tony watched on with dazed eyes as Steve completed the task. Steve noticed the attention, but did not stop his actions. Tony pressed his back into the cabinet doors and drew his legs closer to himself. His lips were pressed into a thin line as he turned his hands toward himself as if examining the damage.

Steve put the dirtied washcloth in the trashcan and went toward the medicine cabinet to grab the medkit. Tony stared blankly at Steve and reached his hands out for the medkit, only to wince in pain when the contact from the kit met his burning skin.

Tony seemed to internally struggle with what to do. Logically he knew with the state of his hands he
couldn’t bandage his hands. However, his heart wanted nothing to do with Steve. He wished that Ryder were here because as a doctor he would have been equipped to handle this. He had lately been equipped with handling the bruises and scars on Tony’s body.

Steve remained silent, only choosing to sit opposite of Tony. He kept opening and closing his mouth like a fish out of water. Tony delighted in this small sense of uncomfortableness coming from Steve.

The pain was starting to trouble Tony and he felt numbness begin to settle. Steve let his head fall back to look at the ceiling. Breathing in, he tried centering himself and reminding himself that Tony could take care of himself. Then he had to remind himself that he couldn’t just get close to Tony because well… anyone could see what happens when he gets to close.

So while Steve wanted nothing more than to ease just a little bit of Tony’s pain, he remained still.

After nearly fifteen minutes of tense silence, Steve figured that he would leave. Tony clearly didn’t want him here and…

But shouldn’t he at least try? After all wasn’t the main reason he was in this position was because he didn’t try?

Before he could further question himself, his eyes latched onto a movement. Turning his head down, he saw that it was Tony who had switched positions.

Tony pushed his body forward so he could further stretch his arms out. Steve smiled tiredly before grabbing both of Tony’s hands lightly in his. He reached into the medkit and grabbed his essentials before moving closer to Tony.

He still remained a short distance away from him as to not crowd Tony.

Tony was calming himself internally to stop the thunderous racing of his heart. The first piece of glass being taken out with a tweezer barely registered in Tony’s mind because he was so focused on staring at Steve’s face as his serious gaze was directed toward Tony’s hands.

The soft touch was so different in comparison to the last time Tony and Steve were physically close back in Siberia. Both of their minds were focused on this, but neither chose to speak up afraid of disrupting this silence.

Tony, however, was never one for silence. And there were things he wanted to get off of his chest, things that his therapist told him he should say aloud. Tony debated with himself and felt his heart pressing tightly against his chest.

A wheezing breath strangled the silence and forced sound into the room.

Steve immediately looked to him checking to see if he was okay, before resuming his actions.

“You hurt me you know.”

“Just now? I can try to be gentler,” Steve apologized, the tips of his ears going red something Tony once took sweet pleasure in seeing.

“No, back in Siberia... hell this past year,” Tony tiredly announced.

Steve faltered briefly, his movement to take another shard of glass was put on pause. He brought his eyes up to meet Tony’s. However, Tony’s had his face turned toward the resting palm in his lap.

“And I don’t know why I’m even telling you this, but Rhodey says I should be more open and my
therapist says I should talk things out. And I am tired of hiding in my own house. I shouldn’t have to do that.”

Steve’s mouth went to open, but Tony immediately shook his head. “Just don’t say anything because if you do I’m going to lose my nerve and force you to pretend that I never said anything.”

Steve nodded his head and looked to Tony’s hand and continued his work there. He knew that as long as he paid attention to fixing the hands, he could listen to Tony and try not to interrupt. After all hadn’t Natasha mentioned he should actually listen to Tony?

“Okay, well I’ve been hurt physically. I’m sure everyone knows that. Everyone on this team gets hurt physically. I’ve been hurt verbally. I’ve been hurt emotionally. I’ve been hurt to the point where I just feel fucking empty and purposeless. I’ve been hurt to the point where I just want to isolate myself and quickly disappear. I’ve been hurt to the point where I can’t move my body.”

Steve drew his hand back from Tony so that he wouldn’t accidentally tighten his grasp on Tony’s wrist. Anger fueled in his heart and he wanted to go after anyone who had hurt Tony. He would do the same for any teammate. No one could heart a member of his team and just get away with it.

“And you did all of those.”

Steve stopped breathing.

Tony noticed this, but didn’t allow that to stop him.

“The last person I ever expected to hurt me in all of those ways was you,” Tony choked. “Because for once I thought I had found someone besides Pepper and Rhodey who I could trust. Who I could trust enough not to hurt me, but you did. You lied and you didn’t…you still don’t even seem to care.”

Steve opened his mouth to say something…to defend himself, but Natasha’s words of just listening added with Tony’s refusal to look him in the eyes stopped him.

“Everything with the Accords…I knew there were going to be some ruffled feathers. I expected you and me not to side on this. We’ve rarely done so in the past and it would have been nothing short of a miracle if we had agreed. So I had been prepared to fight for this and to work with you on it,” Tony managed to say, mouth tightening as Steve smoothed a thumb over raw flesh.

“I had everything ready for you and me to talk and then you up and fucking disappear with Bucky. And I think oh okay…things will get sidelined for a little. Because I understood what Bucky meant to you. And with me knowing how he was basically the Rhodey to my Tony, I was going to help you. I was going to tell you about ways to get him acclimated back into society, ways to do things legally, how to help heal his mind and his body. But you never gave me the chance to.”

“Tony,” came Steve’s startled gasp.

“Don’t,” Tony hissed. “Just don’t.”

Silence broke through once again.

“But the worst thing that you could have ever done to me was not the fact that you didn’t tell me you were on a mission looking for Bucky, hell if it was Rhodey I would have done the same. It was not that we argued over the Accords. But the thing that hurt me the most was when I asked did you know you looked me in the eyes and I could tell that you knew. You knew everything and…”
His voice cracked and Steve froze knowing that Tony was on the verge of crying. However, being as calm and collected as Tony had grown to be, he quickly gathered himself.

“And I just kept thinking how this all wouldn’t have happened if you had trusted me…if you had really cared about me even as a teammate. But I was never that for you and it was my fault for assuming. I just…I don’t know maybe it was the way that Howard would always tell me stories about how great you were and how honorable that I put you on a high pedestal. Surely this great and honorable person wouldn’t lie about the truth of one of his teammate’s parents’ death. But you did.”

“I did it to protect you,” Steve finally said.

“Protect me!” Tony screamed. “That’s what you tell yourself? That was not protection. I don’t need your protection. I have never needed anyone’s protection. What I needed was honesty. What I needed was for you to tell me everything and let me deal with the consequences. Sure, would I have blamed Bucky and resented him? Yes. But I would never have tried to kill him or punish him. I would have just needed time, but you took that away from me.”

“Protect me my ass,” Tony bit out as Steve switched hands. “It’s like you didn’t want me to be angry at the fact that my parents were murdered. Murdered Steve! I had to deal with the fact that my parents’ death was my fault when surprise it was because some brainwashed super soldier had a mission!”

“I didn’t mean—”

“Yeah, sure. You didn’t mean a lot of things. Just like you didn’t mean to hurt me, right? Just like you didn’t mean to leave me freezing and alone with a broken arc reactor in Siberia? Just like you didn’t mean to just leave a fucking phone and a letter and think things were solved? Just like you didn’t mean to make me deal with all of this alone.”

“I had to do this all by myself Steve. I needed you all here and you all were gone. You were just gone,” Tony rasped. “But hey you didn’t mean to. My bad I should have thought about that small little fact.”

Steve’s eyes brimmed red hot with tears and he cleared his throat. He had no reason to feel this affected. He was the one who did all of this stuff to Tony. He was the one who put him in this position.

He was the one who hurt Tony and who kept hurting him by his past actions.

“You’re right I didn’t do what I did to protect you. I did it to protect me. I was tired of feeling out of control in a space where I was supposed to be the leader. I was tired of not being enough and when I found Bucky I thought finally I can make things right again,” Steve explained finally looking to Tony once the last piece of glass had been taken out.

“And so I wanted to protect him from all scrutiny. I should have told you about him. I reprimanded you for Ultron and I was doing the same thing. Then I found out about what he did to your parents and Tony I should have told you as soon as I found out, but I couldn’t.”

Tony stared at Steve. “Why?”

Steve shrugged his shoulders. “There’s honestly no other good reason than I just wanted to protect myself from your hate. Here I was chasing after the guy who killed your parents. I know how your parents’ death affected you and I wanted to keep that door closed because I wasn’t ready to deal with that. I wasn’t ready to announce that it was actually me that killed your parents.”
Tony frowned at Steve and tilted his head to the side making sure he was hearing things right.

“Excuse me what? It just sounded like you said it was you who killed my parents. Steve what the hell?”

Steve breathed in slowly and began to explain himself.

“I was supposed to get rid of Hydra. I was supposed to keep Bucky from falling off of that train. I was supposed to stay in the 30s. I was supposed to die in that ice. If it hadn’t been for me and this stupid serum, your parents would still be alive. Your parents’ death and many others happened because of me. My serum success story is the reason there are people creating super soldiers. My greed made Bucky into the Winter Soldier and made Hydra conceive plans to kill your parents.”

Tony wordlessly stared at Steve his own eyes widening at Steve’s admittance. Tony didn’t know how to respond and thankfully Steve didn’t prompt him to say anything.

“So it’s my fault. All of this is. It’s like no matter how hard I try I keep failing at protecting the people I love and it all started with this serum. Erskine said to me,” Steve began to quote.

“The serum amplifies everything inside, so good becomes great; bad becomes worse. This is why you were chosen. Because the strong man who has known power all his life, may lose respect for that power, but a weak man knows the value of strength, and knows...compassion.”

“Seems like it amplified the bad in me much more than the good,” Steve softly uttered to himself. “And I felt like I had to disprove that. Out of all the bad things that the serum had caused, the person who had the serum running in their blood had the ability to make it good. And it did for a while. But it caused this snowball effect.”

Steve laughed unamused. “I thought that I could stand up for everyone and show compassion. I didn’t show compassion for you Tony. I just…I was tired of knowing that people’s pain was because of me…and maybe that is also why I was against the Accords. I knew I would see people’s pain in relation to my actions, but I know it isn’t fair for me to brush that aside.”

Tony remained silent and let his hands grow limp in Steve’s. Tony had barely noticed that Steve continued to rub circles into his palm with his thumb.

“You did some pretty good things serum boy,” Tony said with just a hint of a smile gracing his tired features. “Heard you punched Hitler in the face.”

Steve shook his head. “Hey, no this isn’t meant to make you feel sorry for me and forgive me easily. I’m sorry I didn’t mean that and-”

“Look Steve I’m tired of fighting. I’m tired of feeling empty and feeling like I am purposeless. I can’t keep going to sleep feeling like there’s a missing part of me that I lost in the past year. I know you feel the same.”

“I do,” Steve mumbled eyes widening and heart quickening.

“So maybe we can take this as a starting point to rebuild. We both made mistakes in our past. It will be hard to get over it, but we are a team.”

“Of course a team,” Steve slowly repeated.

Not what he wanted to say…why?
Oh, yeah Ryder.

“So maybe we just move forward slowly. I can’t trust you fully right now. I can’t really trust the team, but I know for the world we need each other. Maybe I’m losing my sanity or maybe I’m being selfish in wanting things to go back to normal.”

“We were never normal.”

“True.”

“Look Tony, if you need distance from us…we can go. Just let us know.”

“Is that what you want? To leave?” Tony said evening out his tone in order to hide any hints of sadness.

But despite Tony thinking he was able to hide his feelings, Steve had become somewhat well-versed in the media portrayal of Tony.

“No, we never want to leave and we will never want to leave. We should have never left in the first place” Steve answered. “And I’m all for talking things out from now on and figuring what to do from here.”

“I can’t say I will always be happy to see your face and sometimes I may literally make you want to cry,” Tony said.

“I’ll take my chances,” Steve said smiling.

Tony returned the smile.

“We have to be honest from now on. I don’t care for whatever reason. Just be honest and listen to me. I know more than I let on,” Tony announced.

“I will. I promise.”

Tony winced at the word promise and Steve quickly took note of that.

While the two knew things were not quickly resolved, there was a hope feeling them. A hope that things could change.

Few moments of silence passed, before Steve stood up. “Can I wash the blood off of your hands?”

Tony stared at him and looked at his hands. Nodding, he stood up and followed Steve to the kitchen sink. Steve made motions to pull up the sleeves of Tony’s shirt, but Tony quickly pulled his hands back and pushed the sleeves down to his wrists.

“I don’t mind if the shirt gets wet, but I’m still a little cold. So do you mind just rinsing my hands?”

Steve breathed out a sigh of relief knowing that he hadn’t done anything to mess up the sense of calm that had just settled.

When that was over the two went back to their spots on the floor and Steve began to bandage Tony’s hands.

Tony watched on as Steve, with careful care, bandaged his hands.

“Alright and we’re done,” Steve cheerfully announced.
He went to put everything back and made sure to clean the kitchen counter. He turned to look back at Tony whose eyes were starting to look heavy. “Well I guess I’ll be heading back to my room now.”

Steve said this, but he really had no intention of moving. This was the most time he had spent with Tony in the past year and he wanted more of it. So he was genuinely surprised when Tony opened his mouth.

“Just stay. Can you just stay for a moment,” Tony whispered as though ashamed he was asking this of Steve.

He wished he could take out some of the pleading, but he couldn’t. He didn’t want to be alone in the kitchen right then and there. He just needed the presence of somebody and if that somebody was Steve then so be it.

Steve sat down opposite of Tony.

Tony leaned forward being careful not to damage his bandaged hands. With narrowed eyes he moved his head closer to Steve.

“You’re growing a beard?”

Steve forced his body to stop the warm spread of heat travel this his body as Tony’s breath ghosted across his jawline.

“Yeah. Haven’t really felt motivated to shave,” he announced, whispering softly enough so that Tony wouldn’t have to feel like he had to move. “Is it too much?”

Tony leaned back and shrugged. “It’s decent I guess. Certainly not on my level of refined, but I can see some people digging that lumberjack masculine esque appeal.”

Do you? Steve wanted to ask, but was never too bold to actually say it aloud.

“Gee thanks,” Steve teased. “It was just what I was going for. I’ve been training my beard all my life for this moment.”

Tony laughed and leaned back.

“You’d make a great father by the way. Miles really loves you and it’s really cool that you adopted him,” Steve admitted, bringing to mind Ryder’s previous words.

“Really? Pretty sure I am already ruining the kid,” Tony teased, though it lacked any humor. His eyes dimmed slightly. “I mean I pretty much am my father’s son. Even you said so.”

“I’ve been known to be wrong on many occasions,” Steve quipped. “Anyone who says you can’t be a good father doesn’t know you. The way you love Miles so unconditionally is amazing to watch. I mean the moment I saw him with you, I could just see the genuine care. Miles really does seem to adore you.”

For once Tony’s eyes brightened and the smile on his face threatened to send Steve to an early grave…or really late early grave?

“Yeah?” Tony asked shyly. “I haven’t been too sure. I mean Ryder thinks that I shouldn’t have adopted. He constantly brings that into conversation and I mean it’s true. I really shouldn’t have adopted without his input. I mean we are together and it wasn’t fair to spring a kid on him.”
“He’s an idiot,” Steve announced. “Sorry, but I am trying to implement this new honest policy we have going and if Ryder can’t see how amazing you are with Miles then he’s stupid. Besides you didn’t spring a kid on him. It’s his own fault for not realizing how connected you two were. I only saw you two together for a few weeks and I knew. So stupid, he’s just stupid.”

“Eloquently put Rogers,” Tony said though he was slowly losing his smile.

“No, I’m sorry I mean I am sure Ryder will eventually come into fatherhood. You just have to be patient with him. Some are just slower on the journey.”

Tony sighed. “Yeah, patience. I’ve been working on that lately. Hopefully you’re right.”

“So how did you meet Ryder?” Steve said hoping it came out as smooth as he thought.

Tony looked at Steve as if seeing if he was serious before sighing. “Okay, fine.”

“Name’s Ryder,” he smirked easily leaning against the wall, cigarette pressed softly against his bottom lip. “How about you?”

He’s nearly six years older than Tony. Tony knew it was a college party, and he hadn’t even been able to apply for his learner’s permit yet. He took in how cool Ryder looked and how effortless it all seemed. He began to study him and see what made him so nonchalant.

“You a mute or something?” he asked honestly, smoke from his mouth settling on Tony’s face. His eyes looked glassy and new. He’s new. He didn’t know Tony. He didn’t know his face, his name. It was just Tony. He could give him a fake name. It sometimes worked. But he was never a fan of lying.

He waited a second before tilting his head and drowning down the drink he had in his hands. “It’s okay if you are, kid. You are a kid right? You look almost as young as my sister and she’s about thirteen.”

He kept silent not sure what to say and half wanting to just pretend he couldn’t speak. His eyes scanned over the room of bodies sticking close together and falling over one another. Brittany, the girl who quite literally dragged him over to this party was off making out with some guy from their Bio Chem class.

“You seem cool, but it would be nice to see if you have a name. Don’t wanna keep calling you a mute in my head,” he laughed, drawing the cigarette back up to his lips. “Start with an A? Able? Adam? Ace? Anthony?”

His heart started beating quickly because the last time someone said the name Anthony, well it wasn’t said calmly. He noticed the startled look on Tony’s face and grinned toothily.

“Is that it? Anthony?”

A few moment of silence passed and they both let the music thrum through their ears. “It’s ah... yeah, but I go by Tony.” Ryder didn’t need to know his last name.

“Anthony? Tony,” he said, Tony’s name falling easily over his lips. “I like the name Tony. I think we’ll get along just fine. I’ve been told making friends in a large place like this, makes things not so lonely.”
Tony was so eager to just have a friend there he didn’t care who it was. He seemed pretty cool and maybe he needed some of Ryder’s cool personality to pass on to him, maybe then his dad would be able to tolerate him better.

“And that’s how we meet. Can we not talk about Ryder anymore for right now?”

Steve wanted to know why, but figured that he shouldn’t be pushing his luck right now. So he refused and just continued talking with Tony. While there were still some awkward silences and moments of tension, the hours passed before their eyes.

Steve hadn’t even noticed how late it was getting, until he realized that Tony was slowly leaning forward. He had realized that toward the end it was mostly Steve talking about his time with the Howling Commandos and Tony hadn’t inserted his two cents in a while.

Steve smiled softly and poked at Tony’s shoulder. “Come on Tony. You look tired let’s get you to a bed.”

“Let’s get you to a bed,” Tony slurred, eyes blinking sluggishly. Steve’s cheeks warmed and he was glad that Tony was not fully capable to notice that yet.

Steve tried waking him up, but a sleeping Tony was a hard one to wake. So Steve hoped Tony wouldn’t mind him carrying him to his room. Carefully, Steve picked Tony up hooking an arm underneath his knees and behind his back. He gently cradled him close to his chest as he walked toward Tony’s room, which was thankfully on the main floor.

Tony had recently relocated to the main floor so Miles would have easier access to things around him and wouldn’t have to rely on the elevator so much.

When they reached the bedroom, Steve first took Tony’s shoes off and then placed him under the covers. He looked at his face void of any pain and felt a warmth settle nicely in his heart. He hadn’t had the chance to look at him like this since the time they went to Clint’s house and had to spend the night together.

But looking at him now like this made him want things to be better this time. With his face close to Tony’s, he could see him starting to sweat. He had no idea where the temperature was in his room, so he made motions to take off this heavy sweatshirt Tony had been wearing. He had been wearing a lot of them lately even when it was warm in the building.

Before his hands pulled at the hem of his sweatshirt a cough stopped him. He nearly fell back, but held himself together. Ryder narrowed his eyes at Steve.

“I sorry. It’s just I was putting him to bed…not like that! He fell asleep in the kitchen and then I brought him here, but noticed he was sweating so…”

“Steve, it’s fine,” Ryder laughed. “I’ve got it covered now, but thanks for taking care of him.”

“Of course,” Steve said quickly stumbling out of Tony’s room.

Steve sighed out of relief, when he made his way back to the kitchen. He took a few moments to himself and smiled. Today had gone a whole lot better than he ever imagined and he imagined things could only get better…hopefully.
The rest of the Avengers, minus Tony were in the kitchen trying to entertain Miles, who had woken up and become disappointed that Tony’s door was locked. Natasha was playing with him, while Steve made a quick snack.

“Baba needs a nap like me?” Miles repeated after Natasha.

“Yes, you want baba to be strong, right?”

“The strongest,” Miles quickly nodded. “Because he has to fight bad guys.”

Steve laid the food before Miles and sat down with his own plate of food. Miles looked at his plate and turned to Steve with an unimpressed glare.

He’s already developed Tony’s mannerisms, Steve thought to himself.

“I don’t want your food,” Miles said.

“But you have to eat so you can be big and strong,” Natasha noted. “See?” She picked up a carrot and bit into it. “Yum.”

Miles rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. “I want baba’s food. He makes animals.”

“I can make animals,” Clint said. “I used to make them for my own kids.”

Miles rolled his eyes again.

“Miles if you roll your eyes like that they’ll get stuck,” Steve said remembering what his mom would tell him.

Miles leaned forward near Steve’s face, looked him in the face, and rolled his eyes as slowly as he could.

Bucky stifled a laugh as a cough and Clint had to turn away pretending to be busy with making coffee. Natasha shrugged her shoulders.

“Your baba will be sad if you don’t eat your food. He wants you to be big and strong too. Don’t make your baba cry,” Bucky sang picking up a grape and tossing it into the air.

Miles shook his head solemnly. “I don’t want baba to cry.”

He took a cut up carrot and chewed on it. “Is baba awake now?”

Steve shook his head. “No.”

A few minutes later Miles had cleared his plate and Steve was wondering what they should do until Tony woke up or whatever they were doing in that room was finished.

“You want to color?” Steve questioned. “I saw some coloring books and that looks like fun.”

“No, because I do not like any of you. You all made baba cry. So I don’t want to color with you,” Miles announced to everyone. “No good colors for bad people.”

“I’m gonna wake up baba now,” Miles said running away, before they were even able to register that he had hoped out of Natasha’s lap.

“Did he just diss us?”
“I have never been told of by a kid and the rejection of coloring has never stung this much.”

“That kid is fast.”

“He sure is,” Clint noted.

Not even a few seconds later, Miles came running back in, but instead of going to Natasha he went straight toward Steve.

“Captain,” Miles said. He tugged on his pants leg and Steve pulled him onto his lap so that they could be nearly eye level.

Steve smiled at how adorable it was hearing a four year old call him captain. “Yes, Miles? I thought you were going to wake up your baba.”

Miles sighed frustrated as though Steve interrupted him. “Captain. Mr. Mean Bad One made baba cry. I don’t like you, but I don’t like when baba cries. Fix it.”

Steve looked alarmed and everyone else’s bodies grew tense.

There was no one else in Tony’s room except…Ryder.

Everyone came to the same conclusion and immediately began to head toward Tony’s room before they were stopped by Ryder meeting them in the middle of the hallway. Ryder looked haggard.

“Sorry, Steve. Tony was having a nightmare and Miles took that as well you know the bad mean one,” Ryder addressed. “Your baba has told you about that.”

He swung Miles into the air and then settled him on his hip. “I’m sorry about that. I had to calm Tony down and then Miles suddenly came in and then ran out looking for help. I’m sorry. Were you all busy?”

Everyone sighed, relieved that the threat was gone.

“No, it was no problem.”

“Okay, good. Well I have to go and Tony is asleep right now so would one of you mind watching over Miles at least until Tony wakes?”

Natasha nodded and stretched out her arms for Miles who easily went into them. Ryder smiled and adjusted his bag.

“Well, it was nice seeing you all again. I will see you all in three weeks at the gala. Please send Tony my love, when he wakes.”

Ryder was the first to leave, before the others were soon to follow.

Steve frowned as everyone left the hallway and Natasha went to go entertain Miles. His eyes scanned the hallway leading to Tony’s room. He had a feeling who the Mr. Mean Bad One was and he didn’t like it.

After the conversation he had with Tony, he was pretty certain that he was the reason for Tony’s bad dreams. Talking about everything in the past year probably brought everything up to the surface for Tony. He didn’t want to be reminders of a terrible past for Tony.

So starting now he was going to make sure he listened and was going to be honest. He wanted to be
a better person for his team, for the people, and for Tony. After all if there was one thing Tony seemed very serious about in tonight’s conversation, it was honesty.

Chapter End Notes

As always thanks for the wonderful comments, kudos, and bookmarks! They make me sincerely happy :)}
When Tony woke up, he tried ignoring the way his body seemed to scream at him. For a few moments he just lay in his bed, staring at the ceiling. Fingers traveled over his body lightly touching the bruises that were left behind from yesterday. Yesterday there had been a harshness to Ryder’s touch that hadn’t been there before. Tony knew he would be upset about him adopting Miles, but he figured since three whole days had passed without Ryder mentioning the adoption, he was safe. But those bruises marred all over his body and the slight burning in his throat all pointed toward otherwise. He blinked his eyes open trying to clear away the wetness that was starting to form. He shouldn’t be crying. After all was said and done, Ryder had apologized and offered that he would try for him to accept Miles.

He had said that sometimes it was just hard for him to keep his emotions bottled in and he had tried for three days. That was much longer than what he would have usually done. He looked at his phone and realized that Ryder had tried calling him, but Tony didn’t feel like answering.

Just for once he wanted to ignore him.

Tony quickly refused to focus on all of this. He had a four year old to wake up and get ready to go to Peter’s school for some school program being put on. Peter had been talking about this presentation for weeks and Tony sure wasn’t going to be late. Also May would have his head, if he showed up less than five minutes before the program begin.

He walked toward the bathroom and attempted ignoring the way his legs trembled as if wanting to collapse. He barely made it to the bathroom before he had to lean against the door and rest his head against the coolness of it.

Breathing in, he turned the light on and went toward his cabinet. Grabbing the essentials, he quickly showered. Once done, he grabbed a turtleneck and then a sweater to go over it. He hoped the extra padding would soften any pain that would come from anyone touching him today. After all going to a public school especially on a day like this, Tony expected for many people to want to hug him or touch him in some way or fashion.

He was entirely grateful that it was freezing outside and his choice of apparel wouldn’t be
questioned. Plus the turtleneck would hide the bruises that Ryder had left above the collar. Thankfully none of his marks above his neck had stayed. Ryder had at least been mindful of that.

But Tony couldn’t keep sneaking into Natasha’s room and taking her make-up to cover up his visible bruises. Soon she would notice her empty containers. Speaking of…

“FRIDAY make sure you put a note aside for me reminding me to buy more of Natasha’s make-up and replace it,” Tony stated grabbing his phone and heading out of his bedroom.

“Yes sir,” FRIDAY acknowledged.

Tony walked to Miles’ bedroom and turned on the light in there. He silently approached his bed and sat down at the edge of it. His hands slightly shook Miles’ sleeping body. He smiled fondly as Miles curled up closer to Snuggles and seemed to turn his face into the pillow to avoid the light in his room.

“Come on bambino it is time to get up and get dressed,” Tony instructed pulling at the covers.

Miles let out a few groans and a few raspy no’s. Tony tried waking him up by pulling the covers off of his body, but Miles didn’t seem to care.

“More sleep,” Miles told him opening one eye. “I’m still sleepy baba.”

“I know, but you have to get up and get dressed. You can take a nap, when we get back home. But you don’t want to be late. Remember we’re seeing Peter at his school today. Or I guess we will just stay home and tell Peter we will see him later. I guess sleep does sound better.”

Miles’ sleepy eyes seemed to brighten. “Peter!”

“Yes, Peter. Remember he told you about the cool things his school was going to be doing today. We don’t want to miss all of that, do we?”

Miles shook his head and leaned up. “No, baba! Come on hurry! We have to get ready!” He jumped out of his bed and bounced on his feet, while holding Snuggles in one hand.

He tried opening his dresser drawers, but fell a little too short of reaching it. Tony pulled out some clothes for Miles, while telling him to go wash his teeth.

“And I’ll know if you don’t brush all your teeth mister! Just brushing your front teeth isn’t doing the job,” Tony yelled as Miles ran to the bathroom.

Miles giggled loudly. “I don’t do that anymore baba. I’m almost five. Five year olds brush all their teeth.”

Tony laughed inwardly. Miles was nowhere near being five. He had only turned four three months ago, but ever since Sally started saying she was seven and two quarters, Miles began telling people he was almost five.

Tony laid out some warm clothes and waited for Miles to finish brushing his teeth. When Miles came out of the restroom, he flashed his teeth at Tony.

“All right it’s time to see if you pass the tooth test. You know when the tooth fairy comes she gives an extra special prize to the little children whose teeth are clean,” Tony commented as Miles opened his mouth for Tony to inspect. “Mhmm, oh yes that’s a nice tooth right there. Oh, good teeth yes all clean. The tooth fairy will be very satisfied.”
Miles smiled brightly. “Think so baba?”

“Oh, I know so. Okay arms up,” Tony said as he took of Miles’ night shirt and put on a long sleeve. “We’ll put on your coat jacket when we go outside. I don’t want you getting too hot. Alright legs now.”

Miles shimmied into his pants as Tony helped button them. Once done, Tony moved to put on Miles’ shoes and then brush his hair. Satisfied with how Miles looked, Tony took his hand and led him to the kitchen.

The only other person that was in the kitchen was Natasha. Natasha smiled warmly at the two, before handing a cup of coffee to Tony.

“See this is why you are my favorite,” Tony said

“Your baba cannot function without coffee. It gives him his super powers,” Natasha teased watching as Tony began to literally inhale his coffee.

“Oooh can I have some of baba’s…copey?”

“Coffee bambino. And no you’re too young to have coffee. Wait a couple of more years.”

“Didn’t you say you started drinking coffee at six,” Natasha stated pouring some cereal into a bowl for herself and then pouring a smaller portion for Miles.

“Thank you,” Miles said as Natasha sat the bowl down in front of him.

“You’re welcome.”

“Exactly, which is why I can’t let my son drink coffee that early,” Tony exclaimed. “What are you doing up so early?”

“Tony it’s not that early,” Natasha said. “And I’m helping Karen get things ready for tomorrow.”

“I’m glad you’re helping out. The kids really like you there. Though I am hoping that maybe you just stop having secret meetings with your little black widows. I’m pretty sure last week, one of your little spies hacked into my phone and downloaded videos of black widows.”

Natasha frowned. “I honestly have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I can’t tell if you’re lying or not, but that creeped me out. Could they have downloaded pictures of cute puppies or rainbows instead?”

Natasha smiled and shrugged. “Tony you’re thinking too hard on this. I merely go and play with them.”

“No, you are teaching those kids your ways in like a PG rated version and I am still terrified.”

“Oh, Tony you think that this is PG. This is more like the Barney version of things.”

“So you are involved?”

“Never said that. Look I have to go. Have fun at Peter’s school,” she said waving goodbye to Tony then leaning down to kiss Miles’ on the cheek.

“She’s so the leader of the little black widows. You think so too right?”
Miles nodded his head and with a mouth full of cereal said, “Yes baba.”

Tony sipped his coffee. “Yeah, I know she is.”

By the time Tony reached Midtown High School, Miles had already fallen back asleep. Happy had gotten out of the car and grinned at Miles who was slumped over in his car seat. Opening Tony’s door, Happy stood by the car as Tony carefully extracted Miles from his car seat. He made sure to grab Snuggles, stuffed penguin that was in Miles’ loose grasp.

“Thanks Happy,” Tony told Happy as he stood outside of the car. “I think you can pick us up around one, but I’ll notify you if anything changes of course.”

“Okay. You both have fun. I’ll be back to pick you all up shortly,” Happy regarded Tony and went back to the driver’s side of the car.

Tony shifted Miles so that he could hold him on his waist. Miles’ eyes opened briefly as if trying to see where he was. He looked at Tony and once satisfied that he knew where he was and who he was with, his body slumped forward with his chin resting on Tony’s shoulder and arms curled loosely around his neck.

Tony was grateful that when he entered the school, most students had already been called to the gymnasium for the program. The only thing he needed was to get a name tag from the receptionist and give them some form of ID.

“Mr. Stark it is such a pleasure to have you here,” the receptionist said handing him back his ID. “The kids are so thrilled that you are able to make it here. Someday we’re going to have to get you back here so you can do a presentation or speech of your own.”

Tony laughed warmly. “Perhaps.”

“And oh your son is adorable. Seems he’s all tuckered out though,” the receptionist noted. “I remember those days, when my kids were that small and young. Oh how they grow up so quickly before your eyes.”

Tony’s heart tugged at the thought of Miles growing up fast, but it warmed at the thought of being able to watch Miles grow up. Tony became so distracted that he hadn’t noticed the receptionist begin singing their own rendition of *Sunrise, Sunset*.

“Is this the little girl I carried? Is this the little boy at play? I don't remember growing older, when did they?” The receptionist’s somber voice sang.

“Alright I think Mr. Stark has heard enough of your brilliant singing,” May exclaimed, quickly pulling Tony toward her. “But the program is about to start and we really need to get to our seats.”

“Oh of course. I do apologize.” The receptionist smiled nervously.

“No, it’s no problem. Your singing is amazing. However, I don’t want to be late, so I think I’ll follow May. It was nice meeting you,” Tony said bidding a quick goodbye to Miles.

“I should have come sooner. Have you been standing out here long? I know that any person who passes the receptionist literally can stay there forever. One day you’re being entertained with a full musical piece then the next second you can be getting instructions on how to meal prep.”
Tony held a sleeping Miles in his arms as he was lead to their seats. May looked back at him to make sure he hadn’t gotten lost. She led them to the middle section of the gymnasium, where there were still some available seats. May sat down beside Tony with Miles situated in the middle.

Miles held onto Tony tighter as Tony tried placing Miles down in his seat. Eventually Tony was able to sit Miles down. Miles head rolled onto Tony’s lap and Tony let it rest there.

“He really is an adorable kid,” May noted, while checking to make sure her phone was silenced.

Tony immediately did the same. “And a sleepy one at that. I’ve never met someone who sleeps so much.”

May raised an eyebrow at him. “Tony I’m pretty sure he’s sleeping the appropriate hours necessary. It’s just who isn’t sleeping much. Besides I am sure that once he wakes up, he’ll be energized for hours.”

Tony sighed aloud. “I know, which is why after this I’m taking him to the park so he can run off some of his energy. I mean we’ll probably stop to get something to eat because it’ll probably be Miles’ lunch time and I know Peter will probably be hungry.”

May laughed. “When is Peter never hungry? I mean I don’t know if his powers attributed to him eating so much or if it’s just the average growing boy thing, you know? Also thanks so much for watching Peter this week. I really tried getting out of having to go away for the company, but apparently I am their best.”

May flipped her hair shamelessly and smiled brilliantly at Tony.

“Of course you are. And look it’s no problem. It’ll be nice to spend some more time with him. Plus Miles is really excited that Peter is going to be hanging out with us for a while,” Tony told her.

“I know. I just feel bad leaving him for a whole week and I am going to worry already with the added stress of knowing he’ll probably be out in the streets webbing it up.”

“Excuse me what?” Tony chortled looking at May’s tired face.

“Webbing it up,” May announced. “Hey, stop laughing. I’m serious. He’s on break now so he’ll have more time to web it up and I’ll be out trying to outsource to a Eerin’s Media and selecting optimal media platforms for my them to use. Like seriously you can literally google how to appropriately determine the best combination of media to achieve your marketing campaign objectives. But nooo I have to fly out to Utah, while my nephew is here webbing it up and missing his curfew.”

Tony tried reigning in his laughter, but the more May talked the more he laughed. Seriously, May kept him entertained.

“Yeah, Tony you laugh now. But just wait until Miles starts webbing it up or builds his own suit to fight bad guys in,” May huffed not pleased with how Tony was laughing at her.

“First of all Miles is never going into my line of business. I’m already training him to be a professional artist. All those coloring books are a part of my master plan,” Tony admitted.

May tried stifling a laugh, but couldn’t just keep herself quiet. “Sure. That’s what you think.”

“But no honestly May, Peter will be protected as if he were my own. I have eyes on him always and that’s not going to change. I’ll make sure he doesn’t get into any harm, while webbing it up.”
“Thank you,” May said gratefully. “And I can pay you for watching him. Like for food and stuff.”

“May we’ve already discussed this. Peter and you are an extension of my family. I take care of family, yeah? So we’re good.”

May smiled and adjusted the glasses on her face. “Okay, and you remember to call me if anything goes wrong. And I mean anything. I don’t care if it’s an allergic reaction, you call me.”

“Got it,” he stated.

May nodded reassured. “Good.”

The two talked for a few more minutes, before Principal Davis went toward the podium. Following him were Peter, Michelle, Ned, and two other students. They all were led to their seats as Principal Davis stood in front of them. Principal Davis began to introduce the guest speaker, going over his list of accomplishments and the sort. Shortly after the guest speaker came in thanking Principal Davis for his kind words then directed the audience’s attention toward a video that he had brought along.

The lights dimmed and a clip began to play on the projector. The scenes were entirely captivating and Tony found himself reminiscing about how he found joy in science as a young child through observing the world.

By then Miles had woke up, due to the noise coming from the video. He blinked open his eyes and few time and looked around. His gaze settled on everyone around him, before he saw Peter. Immediately his face brightened and he bounced excitedly in his seat.

“That’s Peter!” Miles exuberantly announced, loud enough for the whole audience to hear. “Look baba it’s Peter! Hi Peter!” He stood up on Tony’s lap and waved.

A few people awed aloud at the disruption.

Peter’s face flushed a bright red, once he realized all the attention was directed toward him. He waved quickly then turned his attention back toward the video that was still playing.

“I know I see him Miles, but let’s be quiet so we can hear the video, okay?” Tony said trying to calm down the excited child.

“Okay,” he whispered, but not really whispering.

“You’d think Mr. Stark would know how to control his kid in a public setting,” a parent said scoffing.

Tony was about to say something, when May quickly asserted her piece. “Oh Christopher shut it. Don’t think we don’t remember when your son sent the whole school an unsavory video involving you and his chemistry teacher or when your daughter decided she wanted to drink a whole bottle of ketchup as her talent for the spring pageant.”

Tony’s eyes widened as May leaned back into her chair. Looking at Tony she shrugged and resumed paying attention to the video.

The video ended and the interview section began with the students including Peter able to ask questions. Tony was exceptionally pleased with the questions that Peter brought into the conversation.

Miles by then had grown bored of listening to their questions and restlessly started turning around in
his seat. He once tried to get up and leave. Thankfully May saw all of this and offered Miles her phone so he could play some games. Pleased with something to do, Miles sat back in Tony’s lap and stayed glued to the phone.

Tony sent a silent thank you to May, to which she responded with a smile.

Nearly an hour later, the program had ended and the gymnasium was beginning to clear. Tony was surprised that no one really tried staying in order to see him, but May quickly explained that the students were more eager to leave this school and hop into their break than briefly speak to Tony.

Miles tugged on Tony’s hands. “Baba I have to go to the restroom.”

“Alright bambino. May?”

“Yeah, I have to go in a short bit so I can catch my flight. So I’ll say goodbye to Peter real quick and then I’ll let him know where you’re at,” May kissed Tony on the cheek and told him goodbye before walking to Peter and doing the same.

“Okay thanks,” Tony answered grabbing Miles and taking him to the restroom.

When Tony went back to the gymnasium, the only ones who were still there were the interviewees and Principal Davis. Principal Davis seemed to be commending them on handling themselves well and interacting with the guest speaker nicely.

Once Miles saw Peter, he began tugging at Tony’s hand as though that would make him walk faster. Tony obliged and went toward Peter who was speaking to Michelle and Ned. Tony let go of Miles’ hand so he could run to Peter.

Peter smiled brightly and picked Miles up. “Hey buddy. How are you doing?”

“Good,” Miles said hiding his face in Peter’s shirt, once he saw there was more company around. Miles looked over his shoulder nervously.

“This is Miles,” Peter introduced.

“Say hi Miles,” Tony said smiling.

Miles turned his face to Peter’s neck and muffled a shy hi.

“And this is my baba…wait no my dad…wait no it’s Mr. Stark. I…this is Mr. Stark. I totally don’t call you baba or dad in my head. Or aloud! Like because that would be weird and like yeah I don’t do that. I just heard Miles calling you baba and like unconsciously…you know? Umm, can we just like redo this? This is Mr. Stark, but you all obviously already know that.”

“Michelle. Nice to meet you Mr. Stark. I would apologize for Peter’s rambling and lack of an appropriate grammatical sentence structure, but I assume you are used to that,” Michelle dryly said slightly amused by Peter’s flailing.

Peter’s face turned bright red and he shifted on his feet. “I…thank you Mr. Stark for coming.”

“Seriously, that was pretty cool of you,” Michelle offered.

Ned meanwhile stood start struck at Tony. “You…you know…” Ned let out a few discernible sounds and pressed his hand against his heart.

Michelle rolled her eyes and sighed. “I swear if I hadn’t just done an interview with you both, I
would assume that you couldn’t speak.”

Peter sighed. “Ned, I told you I intern with Mr. Stark.”

“I know, but you didn’t tell me you interned, interned with Mr. Stark,” Ned rasped.

“What does that even mean?”

“Like I didn’t know you like knew him on a personal basis to the point where he just comes to your school events,” Ned said.

“Ned,” Peter said quirking an eyebrow. “I was really only able to get this intern because of Mr. Stark.”

Ned’s eyes widened before he smacked his forehead. “Of course. Dude that’s so cool.”

“Okay,” Michelle drawled out suspiciously, narrowing her eyes between the two.

“Will I be seeing you both tomorrow at the winter park for Karen’s?” Tony questioned trying to steer the conversation from any sort of revealing statements.

“Yes, I think a lot of Midtown high schoolers are actually coming out to volunteer with setting up booths and everything. It’s a real nice way to give back to the community,” Michelle said. “Plus it may be the only time we actually get to go inside that winter park. Not too many of us can afford it.”

“Yeah that’s why we planned on after eight and until two in the morning the park is open for all of the high schoolers to enjoy their time, while we take the kids back,” Tony said. “We’ll have the normal workers step back in to do their jobs, while giving them a nice Christmas bonus, since they’ll be working later hours.”

“You’re alright Mr. Stark,” Michelle nodded. “Don’t see how you got an intern job with him Peter.”

Peter rolled his eyes. “MJ don’t be jealous okay. It’s not my fault that you were clearly not born as fabulous as me. Maybe one day I can teach you.”

Michelle laughed loudly. “What? Okay, Parker. Fabulous, yeah right. Look I’ll see you later. My dad’s outside and I can already hear him beginning to call asking what’s taking so long.”

“Yeah, I better head out to,” Ned said. “It was nice meeting you.”

“It was nice meeting both of you,” Tony honestly said. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Michelle and Ned both said one more goodbye before leaving the gymnasium.

“Alright let’s pick up your things from your house and then we can go grab something to eat. Sounds good?”

Peter turned to Tony and smiled. “Sounds perfect. I’m literally starving.”

Once the three of them had all gotten something to eat, Tony, Miles, and Peter walked toward the park.

Tony let go of Miles’ hand and kneeled beside him. “Alright bambino remember stranger danger. If someone who isn’t me or Peter approaches you, you come directly to me or you touch the button on
the watch I gave you. Got it?"

“Yes baba,” Miles said practically bouncing with excitement and ready to let go of Tony’s hands. “Alright, I get it. Can I go now?”

Tony sighed inwardly. He knew that Pepper had managed to work her ways so that Miles would be out of the spotlight as much as possible, but he was still concerned. He didn’t want anyone coming near Miles that was not him. However, he had a four year old that needed to get his energy outside of running around the tower.

He had mentioned to Rhodey and Pepper that he thought about just building Miles a playground outside the tower, but they had quickly shut that down. Apparently being around other kids on the park creates social skills and also he needs outside time. So here he was at a public park, but thankfully this was a park where most people like Tony took their kids. So the paparazzi knew not to cross over into that playground area.

“Alright, fine go. But remember stay in my sight always. If you cannot see me or Peter, you have gone too far,” Tony continued.

Miles threw his head back. “Okay,” he drawled out. “Can I please go play now?”

Tony titled his head toward the playground. “Yes.”

He let go of Miles’ small hands and watched him as he ran straight toward the slides. Standing up he walked to the nearest bench and sat down. Peter quickly followed behind him and sat down.

“So how’s school going,” Tony questioned Peter. “That Mr. Heinzelman isn’t giving you any problems in class anymore, right?”

Peter groaned aloud and slouched his shoulders. “I swear he’s out to end me Mr. Stark. Seriously, every paper that I have submitted to him has at the most gotten a C+ and I don’t know why. I have done the prompt. I have gone to writing labs and I even took my paper to the head of the English department and she said I should have received an A+.”

Tony frowned and looked at Peter, before going back to watching Miles. “I thought that things were getting better?”

“Nope,” Peter said sounding distressed. “And it’s going to bring my GPA down and I can’t get lower than a B in this class if I’m trying to graduate at the top of my class.”

“I can talk to him if you want,” Tony offered. “I know a thing or two about arguing for a grade change that is truly deserving.”

“You can’t bribe him.”

“I didn’t say I was going to bribe…but now that you mention it,” Tony easily joked.

“No! Aunt May would kill both of us if she found out we bribed a teacher,” Peter replied.

Tony winced just thinking of the wrath of May falling down on him. “You’re completely right. But I was joking.”

“Sure,” Peter sang. “But honestly I think he’s just punishing me for being absent or tardy in his class. I mean sometimes I have to handle things before class starts or I sleep through my alarm.”
“Peter school comes first. We’ve already talked about this. May is allowing you to keep this side job in return that your school work doesn’t suffer. Look if you have anything you need to get handled let me know. Maybe you can take a break during weekdays and just focus on your education. Then like on a few weekends and a few days in the summer you can go back to your full slinging webs and sticking on buildings.”

“Mr. Stark no offense because I totally appreciate everything you’ve done for me and like you’re super cool, but I’m not stopping. I can’t take a break. I have a responsibility and,” Peter’s sentence trailed off. Peter paused and looked straight ahead. “Look I just can’t.”

Tony sighed. “I know, but Peter you are also a young teenage boy. This is a lot. You’re right it is a responsibility, but making sure that you’re getting good rest and making it to your classes on time is also a huge responsibility. How about later on we try to work something out that doesn’t involve you getting fined for truancy and having teachers give out bad grades due to your tardiness.”

Peter nodded his head. “Okay.”

“Good.”

Peter and Tony continued talking for a few more minutes. Then a moment of comfortable silence settled between the two. Both watched as Miles and a few other kids indulged in playing a game of tag. Peter leaned back into the bench and chewed on his bottom lip. He side-eyed Tony and wondered if he should say what he’s been wanting to say for a while.

He figured now was as good time as any.

“So is everything good at the tower, with everyone back and all?”

Tony tried playing off his surprise at Peter’s question. “Yeah. Actually everything’s great.”

“Hmm,” Peter hummed in the back of his throat and began to play with the a frayed piece of his sweater.

“What do you mean hmmm? I mean things aren’t back to what they were, but we need them to get back there and better or at least try. So yeah it’s fine. Nothing’s blown up yet. Why?”

“I know. I guess I’m just concerned,” Peter admitted softly, quickly adverting his eyes. “I mean I know that like you’re an adult and can take care of yourself…but I’m the type of person that I get close to people quick. And you’re family now. So I just…I don’t know. I just want to make sure you’re safe, you know? Cause when I visited you I remember Rhodey cursing out the Avengers and telling me that they were the reason you were laid up in your bed like that.”

“Peter,” Tony started, “I am perfectly safe and capable of handling things. Besides we’re actually talking things through now and trying work on our communication. We’ve seen our past mistakes and are using them to learn how to move forward.”

Peter bit his lip forcing back a retort…but he’s never been good at really holding back what he wants to say.

“But their past mistakes are what almost got you killed.”

“Peter-”

“Look I just don’t want to lose any more family okay,” Peter admitted. “I know you can keep yourself safe. You’ve been in this business longer than I have, but I also don’t have friends who have
the potential to nearly kill me. At least I don’t think so? Maybe if Liz takes up her father’s profession and comes back then maybe I guess. Ned definitely not—"

“Peter,” Tony quickly inserted before Peter could be given the chance to continue rambling. “Thank you for your concern. And trust me I’m being cautious. I have far more to lose than I ever had before.”

Tony smiled softly looking at Miles.

Peter nodded. “Okay, well that’s good.”

“Yeah.”

“But like you’ll tell me if you’re ever in any trouble or need help, right?”

“Peter you shouldn’t be—”

“You’ll tell me.”

Tony turned toward Peter shocked by the sharp demand. Looking at Peter, he watched as a solemn darkness passed over Peter’s features. Peter stared back at him.

“You’ll tell me,” he repeated in a serious manner.

Tony turned away from Peter. “So when are you asking Michelle out.”

Peter sighed at the abrupt conversation change, but answered nonetheless. “I’m not asking Michelle out.”

“Oh, but you like her?”

“No, she’s a great friend and really smart, but I’m not interested in her like that. Besides she’s not interested in me like that.” Peter shrugged helplessly hoping that Tony would change the topic like he did just a few seconds ago.

“Yeah, okay Peter keep telling me the little lies that you tell yourself.”

“I’m serious.”

“Look honesty is the best policy. So if you like Michelle just tell her how you feel and then you both can reach the conclusion of whether to try a relationship or remain friends.”

“Like you did with Steve?”

Tony turned toward him sharply and Peter quickly sputtered out a response, “I mean I know you’re with Ryder, but I knew you liked Steve because I overhead you talking to Pepper about him. And like I wasn’t eavesdropping.”

“No,” Tony answered. “Because there was never anything to tell him.”

Peter tilted his head. “Really?”

Tony looked at him. “Really?”

Tony’s phone began ringing as it had been doing so all throughout the day. He looked down at it and was not surprised to see Ryder calling him again. Ryder had tried calling him ever since this
morning, but he had since ignored him. Tony didn’t particularly feel like engaging in conversation with Ryder for right now. He knew that eventually he would have to talk to him again, but he was actually having a good day today and he didn’t want it to be ruined.

“Who’s that?”

“Ryder,” Tony answered placing his phone down again. He wanted to put it on silent, but he never knew just who might actually need to reach him.

“Oh, are things alright with you two?”

“Of course.”

“So why aren’t you answering any of his calls?” Peter inquired shifting in his seat so he could look at Tony. “He’s been trying to reach you almost every hour since we left the school.”

Tony waved off his concern. “Couples fight some time, Peter. Right now I am just letting him enjoy the beauty of the silent treatment.”

“So everything’s good between you two or decent? Like he’s not cheating or anything?” Peter asked again.

Tony sighed. “What is with the interrogation today little spider?”

“I’m not a little spider and I’m not interrogating you. I am just asking questions. I’ve never met him so I don’t know him personally. And if you’re ignoring his calls it must’ve meant he did something for you not to answer any of his what…fifty calls.”

Tony shrugged his shoulders. His phone rang again and this time Tony didn’t bother picking it up to check it. Instead Peter looked down at the phone and noticed a different name this time.

“It’s Steve,” Peter told him grabbing the phone. “Do you want to answer it?”

Tony looked at Peter for a few seconds. Peter held the phone between them and let the ringing feel the silence in the room. Groaning Tony reached for the phone and answered it.

“Hello?”

“Oh thank…” Steve muttered. “He’s fine.”

There were a few more voices that were muffled in the background. Steve’s voice traveled back in his ears.

“Just calling to make sure you were safe,” Steve said sounding as though he had just finished running. Who knows taking into consideration this was Steve he was talking to, he probably did just finish running.

“I’m safe. Why wouldn’t I be?” Tony questioned looking around trying to see if anything was misshapen.

“Oh, no reason. Ryder called me asking if I could get in touch with you. He said he’s been trying to reach you for a while, but you weren’t responding. I thought that something might have happened and so I called to check in.”

“Look I’m fine. I’m just at the park with Miles and Peter. I’ll probably be back in another hour or so.”
The two continued talking, while Peter went back to looking at Miles. The hairs on Peter’s arms stood and a cool shiver went through his spine. He straightened his back as he saw a woman approach Miles and begin talking to him. Peter didn’t even hesitate as he sprung out of his seat and walked toward Miles.

Tony’s eyes followed Peter’s abrupt motion and he too began to get out of his seat. “Thanks for checking in. I’m fine. You can tell Ryder or not. I don’t care.”

“Okay, well if-”

The phone call was cut short as Tony hung up and placed his phone in his back pocket. Peter had already reached Miles and was holding him by his hand. The woman had since left. Tony looked around trying to find the woman, but it was as though she had never been at the park.

Tony picked Miles up and checked him over. “Did she hurt you?”

Miles frowned. “No, she didn’t hurt me baba.”

“What was she saying to you?” Peter questioned walking around the play area where Miles had been.

“I don’t know. It sounded funny,” Miles giggled squishing Tony’s cheeks in between his two hands. “I was going to show her my Spiderman toy, but she left.”

Miles’ lips tugged downward and gestured toward his stuffed penguin and the Spiderman toy on the ground. Peter picked up the Spiderman toy, which Peter had given to him as a late birthday present. Miles had been fascinated with Spiderman lately and Peter was secretly pleased so he figured he could add to his toy collection.

“Thank you,” Miles whispered bringing both toys closer to his body.

“Bambino. What did I say about talking to strangers?” Tony said his heart beat already thundering loudly in his chest.

“She said my name. So she’s not a stranger silly baba.”

Both Peter and Tony shared looks of alarm. “She said your name?”

“Yes,” Miles sang as though tired of all of this questioning. “Can I go back to playing now?”

“We’ll play some more another time okay sweetheart. I think it’s time we head home,” Tony told him already calling Happy to pull around the car.

“But baba,” Miles groaned.

“But nothing,” Tony answered. “It’s time to go home.”

Miles sighed and dropped his forehead against Tony’s shoulders. Peter looked around once more and then at Tony.

“I came over here so fast Mr. Stark I swear, but I couldn’t get a good luck at her,” Peter whispered. “I’m sorry.”

“Peter, it’s not your fault. No need to apologize. You got there right on time and you realized something before I did. It’s time to go home anyways,” Tony said and if he held Miles a little tighter on the walk to his car no one would be the wiser.
Chapter End Notes

Thanks again for commenting, giving a kudo, and leaving bookmark! Until next time :)

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

An update on a weekday? What is happening? Well tis the season for giving and I wanted to give you all an extra chapter! Your comments made me smile and I just felt like you all deserve a little treat. So please enjoy. I'll see you again on Saturday. :) 

Also quick question I've been trying to figure out. Should Peter eventually transition to calling Tony: baba, dad, Uncle Tony, Tony (with Aunt May's permission of course) or just stay with Mr. Stark? 'Cause I don't know yet lol.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve looked around his room, searching for something. Once his eyes found what he was looking for, he let out a relieved sigh. Grabbing the necklace in his hand, he turned it over revealing the inscription that was left behind. He ran his index finger over the smooth groves of the necklace and packed it away into his pockets.

He grabbed his coat jacket and left his room. He quickly went to the kitchen hoping to briefly say hello to Tony, before he left. However, Clint who had just been leaving the gym, told him that Tony had left a few minutes ago. Steve held in his disappointment.

Clint raised an eyebrow at him. “Where are you off to this early in the morning? And don’t try telling me you’re off to go for your morning run because I’m pretty sure your clothes aren’t appropriate for running.”

Steve looked down to the jeans he was wearing and the coat jacket he had put on in a hurry. “No, I’m not. I’m just going out.”

“Okay, cool. I’ll come with you. Just let me freshen up real quick and we can go,” Clint said. “I’m tired of being in this house all day and I need a break.”

Steve wasn’t even able to say he wanted to go out alone.

“Who’s going somewhere?” Bucky questioned appearing behind Steve.

“Umm, I had some errands I needed to run alone. But it seems as though Clint wants to come too,” Steve murmured shifting on his feet.

Bucky nodded his head and looked around the room. “Do you mind if one more tags along?” Bucky questioned silently.

Steve’s eyes widened.

Bucky mistook his shock for a rejection.

“I mean its fine or whatever. I can just stay here. Probably don’t want anyone to see-”

“No, Bucky I’d love for you to come,” Steve reassured. “Also it’ll do some good to get you out and back acclimated into civilization.”
Before Bucky had the chance to respond, Clint darted out in front of them. “Okay, I am ready to go!”

Steve frowned. “You said you were taking a shower five minutes ago.”

Clint nodded. “And I did. Look if I have only learned one thing in my career, it is how to take a quick shower and get ready in five minutes. Now let’s go! Can we stop by David’s Burger Shack first though? I’m starving.”

Bucky and Steve watched on as Clint began to walk in front of him. “He’s really excited to get out of the house, isn’t he?”

Bucky looked back at Steve. “Sure is.”

The two followed Clint outside of the tower and began their day. They first went to David’s Burger Shack as Clint had hoped and sat down in a booth. Clint sighed and melted into his seat.

“If there’s one thing I missed greatly besides my wife and kids, while in Wakanda it was this,” Clint said openly salivating at the smell of food. “How did I survive this long without a burger from here?”

“Speaking of how are things with Laura?” Steve asked looking down at the menu. “Were you able to get in touch with her and the kids?”

Clint shifted in his seat and brought a hand to scratch his neck. “Yeah, we talked. The first time I called her, she cursed me out then hung up. The second time she told me how she never thought I would turn out to be a deadbeat dad like my old man, but here she was proven wrong.”

Clint let out a lifeless laugh, while Steve and Bucky winced.

“And then she told me how she didn’t want me near the kids and all this other mess. And I get it. I really do. I told her I had retired then I wind up in all of this giant mess,” Clint groaned. “I tried explaining it to her, but she keeps telling me reasons why I should have stayed. And her reasons make sense.”

“Clint I’m so sorry. I should have never asked you to become active again,” Steve said.

Ever since his talk with Natasha and Tony, aided with the words from Isa, Steve had realized how his actions had tremendously affected his relationships and the relationships of people around him. Steve had never wanted to be the one to break up a family and he had done exactly that. He had broken up the Avengers and now the Barton family.

The Avengers was on the mends or at least trying to be on the mends, but he didn’t know if he could fix the Barton family.

“Look Steve it’s not your fault. It’s not Tony’s fault. It’s mine. I knew I had a wife and kids at home that needed me. I just didn’t prioritize my family over my job or my supposed duty to my friends. I should have said no when you called,” Clint told Steve.

“Did you tell Laura that?” Steve asked leaning forward on his elbows.

“Yeah, I think the hardest part was admitting I was wrong. But after Natasha gave me some helpful hints,” Clint added unconsciously rubbing his shoulder, “I realized that I needed to confess my own wrongdoings and admit them to Laura.”

Clint paused for a brief second. “And so I called her and told her everything. I mean she’s still upset
no doubt. But she’s allowing me to see her and the kids when they come back from her parents. So I’ll probably be visiting them after New Year’s.”

Steve smiled at that. “Well that’s a good move forward.”

“Yeah, it is. I just want my family back. I’m sure you understand,” Clint said motioning toward Bucky, who had remained silent during their whole conversation.

“Yeah,” Steve agreed.

All of them became quiet as their waiter walked over to their table.

“I am so sorry for the wait gentlemen. My name is Harry and I’ll be your waiter for this evening. Can I start you off with any drinks?” the waiter began.

“I’ll have a sprite,” Clint said.

“Water,” Bucky told him.

“Water,” Steve also said.

Harry smiled at them. “Okay, now were you all ready to order or do you need some more time?”

The three looked at each other and reached a conclusion. They all gave Harry their orders and handed back their menus.

“Alright thank you and I will be back with your drinks shortly,” Harry said and turned to leave.

Clint turned back around to face Steve and Bucky. “So Bucky how are you?”

Bucky tried to hide the surprise at being addressed. “Umm, I’m good.”

Clint nodded his head slowly. “That’s good. Everything you know alright up there?” He tapped his temple.

Steve narrowed his eyes. “Clint,” Steve bit out.

Bucky laughed shortly. “I think so. I mean I’m still doing therapy and then I’ve been keeping up with my B.A.R.F. appointments that I began in Wakanda. So I don’t think it’ll ever be a full recovery, but it’s better than knowing that the Winter Soldier can become activated with a few words.”

Clint’s eyes widened and his mouth gaped open. “Wow.”


Clint began to smile widely. “Nothing. I was just beginning to wonder if you could talk for more than one sentence. But that’s good. Glad that things are getting better for you.”

Bucky shrugged his shoulders. “Me too.”

“And you. How are things with Tony? I mean you signed the Accords, which that was a surprise to me.”

Steve scratched the back of his necks. “Yeah, I guess like you I came to my senses. Plus Isa’s explanation left no room for disagreement. I would have been a fool to deny the pros of signing the
Accords.”

Clint and Bucky nodded in agreeance.

“And were you able to talk with Tony?” Bucky questioned.

“Yeah, I did,” Steve told them.

“And how did it go,” Clint drawled. “Don’t leave us hanging.”

“Well it was kind of personal so,” Steve said. “But just know that we talked.”

“Personal?” Bucky questioned his lips turning up in a smirk.

Clint waggled his eyebrows. “What do you mean by personal? Did you confess your undying love to Tony? I bet that was romantic. You probably cried.”

“What is with this confess your undying love? I’m like not in love with Tony or anything and if I was he has a boyfriend and I highly doubt Tony has any feelings like that toward me. I’ll be lucky if we can get back our friendship,” Steve admitted with cheeks growing warm at Clint’s waggling eyebrows and Bucky’s smirk.

“Steve I may have been brainwashed for years and some things I may have forgotten. But I did not forget your face when you were lying or the face you make when you’re talking about someone you like,” Bucky teased.

Clint giggled and rubbed his hands together. “Oh I like this talking Bucky. So was there crying involved or hugging?”

Steve hunched his shoulders. “There were some tears shed. No hugging,” he muttered quickly.

Bucky and Clint looked toward one another.

“So like things will be better moving forward,” Clint asked.

“Yeah, I hope so.”

“He hopes so because he loves him,” Clint said to Bucky. “We all realized that when Steve started bringing Tony lunch to his lab.”

Steve’s cheeks grew even warmer. “I don’t love him. And besides I bring him food because if I didn’t, we’d just have a starving genius on our hand.”

Clint rolled his eyes and leaned closer to Bucky. “No one goes to Tony’s lab if he’s been down there for more than 72 hours. It’s not worth risking your life. But Steve does. Why might you ask? Because he loooves him.”

“Okay, can you be quiet,” Steve hissed looking around to see if anyone heard him. “Seriously, look I may have a crush on him a while ago. But it’s all over now. He has a boyfriend that he seems to really like.”

Bucky tilted his head to the side. “We can get rid of Ryder, if that’s the only problem for you.”

“I don’t know if you’re joking or not, but I would love to be a part of this plan,” Clint said joyously, nearly jumping into his seat.
“You are a child,” Steve said pointing toward Clint. “And we are not getting rid of people anymore, certainly not people who have done nothing.”

Clint slumped back in his chair grumbling.

“So you’re never going to tell Tony how you feel about him,” Bucky summed up.

Steve nodded his head. “What good will it do? Look these feelings will go away and if not I can just try to be happy that Tony is safe and happy.”

Clint reached over to pat his shoulder. “It’s okay Steve. You know I think Tony liked you too once upon a time.”

“Really?” Steve brightened, then tried in a softer more unaffected, “Really.”

Clint nodded. “Yup. Started talking about you and how your hair looked so soft and how your kindness made you sort of infuriating. Then he started talking about everything he liked about you and your and I quote, stupid brilliant fucking face.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?” Steve asked.

“Because the next day he got back with Pepper. Didn’t really seem like something to tell you anymore. Plus he was drunk and I didn’t want to hold that against him. But looking back there have been some instances where anyone could tell he liked you, but of course you didn’t.”

Steve chewed the bottom of his lip.

“And now it doesn’t matter because he’s with Ryder,” Clint said sadly. “But you’re right Tony seems happy with him. So that’s all that matters.”

Clint looked at Steve’s crestfallen face and drew back. “Hey, I’m sorry I didn’t mean to drag all of this stuff up.”

“No, it’s fine Clint. Tony is in a good relationship. He’s become a father and he seems happy. That’s all I want for him. I just want him to experience happiness, love, and safety. If that’s all without me, I have to be fine with that,” Steve whispered.

“This got sad, real quick,” Clint added playing with his fork.

Harry went toward their table with their food and drinks. Looking at them, he noticed they had a somber attitude. He knew he certainly didn’t leave them like that.

“Are you gentleman alright?” Harry asked as he motioned for one of the other waiters to set down their meals at their appropriate spots.

“Yeah,” Clint said.

Harry nodded. “Okay, well is there anything else I can get you all?”

Harry left and the rest of them resumed eating without much conversation. Once they were done, Harry came to them with the receipt.

“Also you don’t have to leave a tip in exchange for a picture with you all. My girlfriend is going to go nuts when she finds out I served you all,” Harry beamed. “Of course if that’s alright with you.”

“Sure,” Steve said.
Clint made room for Harry in their booth. Harry smiled in thanks and brought his phone up to take a selfie of all of them. Looking back at the picture, he smiled.

The three of them left and still made sure to leave behind a generous tip for Harry. Steve walked in front of them as they left so he could lead them to where they were going next.

“So you clearly went out for a reason. Where are we going?” Clint questioned trying to match the fast pace that Bucky and Steve had taken on.

Steve looked behind him. “To a store. I need to have something made.”

Clint and Bucky looked at each other noting the mysteriousness in Steve’s statement. The two walked alongside Steve until they reached a small store that looked like it had been renovated from an old house building. Steve walked up the steps leading to a front porch and opened the door.

The bell chimed above the door and all three of them stepped inside. Steve walked in the store moving between different customers who were all looking around trying to buy different things. A few people stopped and stared as they realized who exactly was in the building. Thankfully, no one bothered to take pictures of them.

Steve made sure that Bucky and Clint were still following him as he led them to a backdoor. Steve opened it and it revealed a cozy little office space. Inside the office space was an older man, hovered over his desk and scanning different pieces of silver.

When he noticed his door was open, he looked up and smiled. Standing up he walked toward Steve and greeted him with a hug.

“I brought it.” Steve said as he took out the necklace and another piece of jewelry with him. “You still have the other stuff I brought it on Monday?”

The older man smiled. “Steve I do not lose anything. Alright give them to me. And the design is the same as we discussed on Monday, yes?” Steve nodded. “Good, well this should certainly be ready for you before Christmas that way you can give it as the Christmas gift.”

Bucky and Clint turned to Steve.

“Christmas gift for who?”

Steve’s slowly growing red cheeks was enough answer for them.

Steve shrugged. “I just wanted to give a nice Christmas gift. I mean I know it’s not enough to make up for the past year, but it’s something nice.”

“So you’re also making me a piece of jewelry. Aww, Steve man I’m so touched,” Clint said swooning into Steve’s side.

Bucky laughed softly into his hand.

Steve pushed Clint off of him. “I’m giving you coal.”

Clint pressed a hand against his heart and then pressed it against his forehead. “Why must you be so cruel to me?”

Steve shook his head. “I apologize for my friends Mr. Moore. I wanted to come alone, but well as you can see that didn’t happen.”
Mr. Moore smiled at him. “It’s quite alright Steve.”

Suddenly, Steve’s phone began to vibrate in his pocket. He took it out and looked down at the screen.

“I’m sorry I have to take this,” Steve said looking down at the unknown number. Not too many people had access to his number so the few people that called him have to have called for a reason. Taking a chance, he answered the call.

“Steve?”

“Yes?”

“Hi, this is Ryder I was just calling to see if you were near Tony by any chance,” Ryder rushed out. “I’ve been trying to call him and he hasn’t picked up any of my calls.”

Steve frowned a moment before thinking. “Oh, he’s probably still at Peter’s school right now. I’m sure he’s fine. His phone is probably just on silent right now. Try calling him again in an hour or so. The program will probably be over it by then.”

Ryder’s sigh crackled through the phone. “Okay, thanks.”

“No problem,” Steve said before disconnecting the phone.

“Who was that?” Bucky asked getting closer to him.

“Ryder.”

“Ryder? What was he calling for?” Clint asked.

“Couldn’t get in touch with Tony,” Steve said shrugging. “Told him he probably just doesn’t have it on sound. Besides Tony’s not that great at answering phone calls anyway. Probably shouldn’t worry too much.”

The two nodded their heads. Steve settled things over the design and thanked Mr. Moore again. “I can’t tell you how much this means to me. Thank you.”

Mr. Moore waved him off. “It’s no problem really. Just tell me how he reacts to it. I always love hearing those stories.”

“Okay, and should I pay you now?” Steve said already reaching for his wallet.

“No, no, no. Don’t pay until you see the item and make sure it’s perfect for you. Then you can pay,” Mr. Moore told him.

Steve said thank you once more, before wishing that Mr. Moore enjoyed the rest of his day and he left.

It had been four hours since they had went back to the tower. Natasha was still at Karen’s and Tony still hadn’t made it back to the tower. The only ones there were Bucky, Clint, and Steve. Steve had been arguing with Clint over what to watch for the last fifteen minutes or so. Bucky sat on the couch watching the two of them argue.

Bucky had never seen anything so amusing.
“Steve get your giraffe legs off of me. I swear. I don’t feel like watching another History channel documentary,” Clint groaned as he tried pushing Steve’s legs off of him.

“I’m trying to become educated,” Steve hissed.

“Read a book in a corner then! I’m tired of watching this stuff. It’s boring. My eyes are bleeding right now. Steve let’s take a break,” Clint sighed. “Come on even Bucky is tired of watching this stuff.”

Steve looked at Bucky. Bucky nodded his head. “It’s true. Steve we have watched two hours of this. We need a break.”

Steve looked at them two. “I will not concede to defeat.”

The two wrestled some more over the remote. Steve held Clint in a headlock just as his phone began vibrating again. He managed to still hold Clint, while answering the call.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s Ryder again. Look I know you said to wait, but it’s been hours and he’s not answering my calls. Could you just try calling him, please,” Ryder worriedly said. “I just need to make sure he’s okay.”

Steve frowned. “Uh, yeah sure. I can try calling him, but he probably won’t answer.”

Ryder sighed. “Thank you. Okay, let me know if you can reach him.”

“I will.”

He hung up the phone and began calling Tony.

“Is everything alright?” Clint questioned.

“Not sure,” Steve said biting on his thumb. “Ryder said Tony hasn’t been answering his calls so.”

Clint looked at him. “Oh.”

The phone rang for a few seconds, before Tony’s “Hello” sounded through.

“Oh thank…” Steve muttered. “He’s fine.”

Bucky and Clint said a few things, but Steve quickly silenced them.

“Just calling to make sure you were safe,” Steve said.

“I’m safe. Why wouldn’t I be?” Tony questioned.

“Oh, no reason. Ryder called me asking if I could get in touch with you. He said he’s been trying to reach you for a while, but you weren’t responding. I thought that something might have happened and so I called to check in.”

“Look I’m fine. I’m just at the park with Miles and Peter. I’ll probably be back in another hour or so.”

“Oh, that sounds fun. How was the school program?” Steve asked resting his back against the couch Bucky was sat on.
“It was really good actually. Peter did an amazing job, but that was never in question. But how are things there? Hopefully, you all haven’t burned the building down yet or anything.”

“No, we haven’t done any of the sort. The house is still intact,” Steve smiled. Clint made kissing sounds behind him and Steve pushed him away.

“Ow, Steve,” Clint hissed rubbing the arm he had fallen over.

Bucky laughed and took the remote from Clint’s hand. Clint narrowed his eyes at him as he nursed his arm close to him.

“That’s good. Oh by the way while I have you on the phone, I wanted to know if you all plan on going to the winter carnival Karen and I are throwing for the nearby orphanages. I mean it’ll probably be good to help build back all of your images in the public eye. Natasha is also coming so,” Tony trailed off.

Steve immediately brightened, imagining that this meant he could get the chance to spend more time with Tony. “Yes, we would love to go. Sounds fun.”

“You didn’t even ask us. You just assume we want to go,” Clint mumbled now trying to get the remote from Bucky.

“Do you not want to go?” Steve questioned raising an eyebrow.

“I didn’t say that,” Clint gritted out trying to take the remote form Bucky’s metal arm.

“You know you can’t take this away from me, right?” Bucky said with a completely straight expression.

“You don’t even know what good shows are on the television right now! So why do you even care about controlling the remote,” Clint stressed out.

Bucky tilted his head to the side and scrolled through some channels. “This looks good.”

Clint turned his face to the screen and groaned aloud. “You have got to be kidding me! We’re not watching this. Out of all of the things to choose, you choose this. This is clearly an example of your bad taste in shows. I’d rather watch *Twilight* again.”

“What are they arguing about?” Tony said hearing the other voices in the background.

Steve rolled his eyes at the two, before bringing his attention back to Tony. “What to watch on TV. Bucky just turned on some show with…I don’t know what it is to be exact. But right now there’s this girl whining about how unfair it is that her sister thinks she can just take her clothes? I think? Oh wait…no someone…I think her mom is telling her that her sister can borrow her clothes, when she’s taken clothes from her mom? I’m confused. Why is this so important?”

Tony laughed loudly through the phone and Steve’s heart raced. What he wouldn’t do to hear more of that sound.

“Steve I am now going to need you to watch that show with me whenever I watch it. I need your commentary.”

“You watch this?” Steve said, but secretly wanting to know if Tony’s offer had been genuine. He would gladly watch this show with all these girls crying and discussing their family vacation, if it meant more time with Tony.
“Hey, don’t judge. I binge watch the season during the holidays. It’s amusing to me,” Tony said. “Plus your historical documentaries and all that isn’t great. Steve there are more things to watch than the Discovery and History channel, you know this.”

“I like them. They’re very informative,” Steve replied.

“Of course they are. Of course they are.”

Steve opened his mouth to respond in defense of his shows, but he was quickly cut off by Tony.

“Thanks for checking in. I’m fine. You can tell Ryder or not. I don’t care.”

“Okay, well if.”

The phone call was cut short as Tony hung up. Steve looked at his phone confused by the sudden abrupt end to their phone call. Steve sat the phone on the coffee table and figured he would just see what that was about, when Tony came back.

Clint and Bucky had settled on some Cake Wars show. Steve also became intrigued in the show and they all watched it with conversation filtered in on how they wondered if those cakes actually tasted good.

Natasha walked in just as the judges were about to announce the winners. She stepped over Clint’s legs and threw herself onto the couch.

“Tired?”

“Exhausted,” Natasha answered. “But still energized? Entertaining kids and getting things ready for the carnival is a job. I don’t know how Karen is able to do that all day.”

Natasha then stood up to make herself something to eat, before sitting on the floor next to Clint. Everyone continued to watch the Food Network channel and all the shows that were coming on. Nearly an hour later, Tony came in with Tony and Peter.

Peter went into the kitchen with Miles and Tony came over to sit on the couch Steve was sitting on. Steve watched as Tony stretched out on the couch and turned toward Steve.

“Hey, sorry I kind of hung up on you like that,” Tony said yawning into his shirt. “Some lady was talking to Miles and I had to go get him.”

“Oh I understand. Everything good with that?”

Tony shrugged and rubbed his eyes. “I hope so.”

Just as he said that Peter walked in carrying Miles. Miles was stuffing a cookie into his mouth and Tony narrowed his eyes at Peter.

“Peter? What did I say about cookies before dinner?” Tony said raising an eyebrow.

Peter smiled nervously. “Not to eat them. But look Miles had already grabbed a cookie and stuffed it in his mouth. I didn’t even know how he got it.”

“Miles is not tall enough to reach the table. How can he reach the top cabinet,” Tony added.

Miles shook his head. “Baba don’t be mad at Peter. I hide the cookies for a long time, then eat them,” Miles said smiling brightly with a crushed cookie in his hand. “Want one?”
Tony sighed, but smiled nonetheless. “Alright bambino I’m letting you off with a warning this time, okay? Next time is time out. You can’t eat cookies before dinner because it’ll spoil your appetite.”

Miles nodded his head eagerly. “Okay baba. No more cookies for me. Here Peter,” he said taking the rest of his cookie and holding it up to Peter’s mouth.

“Oh, yum this looks delicious,” Peter winced taking the cookie and discreetly placing it on the coffee table.

Everyone looked on at Tony’s parental display with varying degrees of amusement. Peter sat down with Miles on the floor beside Natasha.

Miles looked at Peter. “Peter can I have my coloring book please?”

Peter stood up. “Of course. Is it in your room?”

Miles nodded. “Yes.”

“Okay,” Peter nodded and left in search for the coloring book.

Miles turned toward Natasha and opened his arms toward her. Natasha leaned over and grabbed the child, tucking him in close to her. She tickled his arms and smiled once Miles let out rushed giggles.

“Aunt Natasha stop,” Miles said laughing. Natasha smiled even more brightly and kissed his full cheeks.

Tony smiled at the two. Miles had gotten used to Natasha over the past few days and had innocently asked Tony what he could call her. Tony had been honest and explained that he could call Natasha whatever she wanted as long as she was comfortable with it. Miles had settled on Aunt Natasha.

Clint shook his head. “I feel like I’m in an alternate universe right now.”

Steve nodded. Peter came back in with the coloring book and some crayons.

“So you’re the intern?” Steve questioned.

Peter turned to face him and smile widely. “Yes, I am. It’s so cool to meet you Mr. Rogers or Captain America. Do you have a preferred title?”

Steve shook his head. “No, Steve is just fine.”

“Clint,” Clint introduced holding out his hand.

“Bucky,” Bucky greeted keeping his eyes on the screen.

“Well, it is nice to meet you,” Peter said looking at Tony and smirking.

Tony smirked back before getting more comfortable on the couch. Everyone went back to watching the cooking show. Natasha, Miles, and Peter continued coloring. Steve wanted to talk to Tony and he had been gathering all the strength to talk to him. In his mind he was going through conversations starters.

“How are you enjoying the weather?”

“Boy, this holiday traffic is something else.”
“So this winter carnival sounds like it’s going to be fun.”

“What should we order in for dinner?”

“You want to hang out sometime after the winter carnival?”

“So what are we supposed to be wearing to this Christmas Gala on next Saturday?”

By the time Steve had settled on one of these conversation starters, Tony had drifted off to sleep beside him. Steve sighed and tilted his head back. Okay, moment lost. But he would get another one soon. Steve settled into his spot and tried ignoring how Tony’s sock clothed feet kept pressing against his thigh every time he moved.

Steve observed how the lines in his face slowly softened and the tension around his mouth eased up. Steve tried to ignore how watching this made the tension in his own shoulders relax.

“Hey lover boy, your phone’s been vibrating for the past 30 seconds,” Clint said grabbing Steve’s phone from the coffee table.

Peter turned toward Steve and raised his eyebrows, when Clint said lover boy. “Lover boy,” he mouthed to Natasha.

“Hello,” Steve answered.

“Hey, it’s Ryder. I wanted to know if you were ever able to get in touch with Tony,” Ryder questioned.

Steve looked toward a sleeping Tony and debated how he should answer Ryder. If he said yes, that would at least ease Ryder’s worry that Tony was in trouble. If he said no, that would increase Ryder’s worry.

“Uh yeah. He answered, he’s safe. He was just at the park,” Steve told him.

“Oh, so he answered your call,” Ryder made a few noises under his breathe. “Did he say why he wasn’t answering my calls?”

Steve shook his head then answered aloud. “Uh, no. He didn’t.”

Ryder laughed. “Okay, well do you mind handing him your phone for a brief second? I’d just like to talk to him before I lose cell reception.”

“Oh, umm sure,” Steve said. He reached out to shake Tony’s leg awake, but was stopped by Peter. Peter shook his head and mouthed to not wake Tony up. Steve frowned at him, but stopped his actions nonetheless.

“Oh well he’s asleep right now. So maybe you can try again later?”

“Look Steve can you just wake Tony up. It’ll all be for a brief moment,” Ryder pleaded.

Steve had an internal debate with himself, before Peter snatched the phone out of his hands. “Good evening Dr. Ryder. How are you? Yes, I’m doing quite well. Look, Tony hasn’t been feeling all that well this morning. I’m afraid he’s caught something so that’s why he hasn’t been really able to answer your calls.”

There was a brief pause in conversation from Peter’s side.
“Of course I understand. I would be concerned as well. However, he is in good hands. No, no. Well, he has to answer the call of any member of the Avengers. That is a matter of life and death. I will be sure to let him know you called though. Yes, you too. Goodbye.”

Peter hung up the phone and handed it to Steve.

“Why’d you lie son?” Steve asked.

“Look Mr. Rogers my boss hasn’t been able to get a good sleep in forever. Between dealing with the effects of the war between you all, the Accords, dealing with the board of executives at SI, becoming a father, and having to get ready for all the holiday functions…he’s been running haggard,” Peter explained.

“So anytime he’s able to get some rest even if for a little bit, I’d like for it to be uninterrupted. Ryder can call him later.”

Steve nodded. “Okay. Did he tell you why he wasn’t answering Ryder’s calls?”

Peter shrugged. “Got into an argument. Tony’s giving him the silent treatment for a little while.”

Clint looked at the ceiling. “Ah, I remember when Laura would give me the silent treatment. She could last up to a month. But I have to say it made the making up part a whole lot more fun, if you know what I mean.”

“Clint!” Steve said. “There are children here. Watch what you say.”

“Miles is literally so absorbed in coloring he’s not listening to anything,” Clint said.

Steve rolled his eyes at him. As the night went on, the others continued watching TV and just relaxed. Peter fixed Miles some dinner, before they both retired for the night seeing as though it was Miles’ bedtime. And Peter had to get rest since he alongside other students had to get up early in the morning to set up for the carnival.

Natasha packed away a dinner for Tony and set it in the refrigerator. No one had wanted to wake Tony up because what Peter had said was true. He did need sleep. Clint followed Natasha up to her room and asked if they could have a sleepover. Natasha pushed him out of his chair. Bucky had left the living room a few minutes ago to mediate for the night. It was something that his therapist suggested and something that Bucky had been trying to do daily.

That only left Tony and Steve. Steve looked at Tony and realized that he had to be uncomfortable resting like that. He didn’t want to wake Tony up, but he remembered what Peter said. He didn’t want to risk waking Tony up and having him go back to the lab.

So he gathered Tony in his arms and walked him to his room just like he had done so a few days ago. Steve pulled the covers back and placed Tony on the bed. Tony curled up onto the bed and reached for the sheets. Steve pulled the sheets over his body and tucked him in. He was about to leave, before Tony reached out for him.

“Steve,” Tony whispered.

Steve looked at Tony whose eyes were now open. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“No, it’s fine. Ah, look can you just stay with me until I fall back to sleep. I know it’s probably childish, but I realized that I sleep better when you’re near. Weird I know seeing as though you’re the reason behind a few of my nightmares…though not so much anymore. And I probably shouldn’t
have said that. It’s just the time in the kitchen when I fell asleep quickly you were there and just now on the couch you were there,” Tony trailed.

Steve smiled in the darkness at Tony’s rambling.

“And I know correlation doesn’t imply causation, but like can you just…You know what never mind it’s probably stupid. I’m fine to sleep alone. Besides Miles will most likely come in here later because-”

“Scoot over,” Steve whispered. Inwardly he was grinning from head to toe. Ryder doesn’t help you get a good night’s rest like me, Steve thought happily. Though he crushed that thought as soon as it landed in his head. “Or do you prefer this side.”

“Uh, no. Either side is fine with me,” Tony said yawning.

“Okay,” Steve said.

Tony looked surprised. “Wow thank you. I…I know this is a weird request seeing as though we could barely look at each other a few weeks ago. So thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. You need your sleep and I’ll be happy to help,” Steve told him.

He didn’t lay down, instead choosing to prop his back against the headboard and silently wait for Tony to fall asleep. A few minutes passed and Tony’s breaths started to even out. Steve looked down at him and noticed just how small Tony was in comparison to him. His body instinctively tried curling toward Steve.

“Oh give me grace,” Steve whispered as Tony’s head fell to his lap. Steve’s hands hovered slightly over Tony’s head where it was resting on his lap. Deciding that Tony was well into sleep, he began running his fingers through the strands that were beginning to become longer and curled at the nape of his neck.

Tony’s breaths puffed out and filled the silence of the room. Steve hummed in the back of his throat as he continued the repetitive motion of running his fingers through Tony’s hair. A few more minutes passed with Tony completely still.

Steve’s eyes grew heavy and he became tempted to fall asleep right there. However, he didn’t know how Tony would respond to waking up with Steve still in his bed. He had wanted Steve to be there until he feel asleep, so that’s probably what he should do.

He struggled with himself. He could say he accidentally fell asleep. But he didn’t want to start of their new friendship with lies, no matter how small. So he gently pried Tony’s head off of his lap and placed it on a pillow.

He sat up from the bed and looked once more at Tony’s sleeping figure. His chest did a weird swooping feeling as he watched Tony. He needed to seriously leave in the next minutes or he would stay.

“Good night Tony sweet dreams,” Steve said.

He brushed a lock of hair off of his forehead and leaned down to kiss him on the cheek. Steve stayed for a few more seconds, but not long enough to hear Tony’s breath catch or eyes flutter open.

Chapter End Notes
Thanks again for everyone who commented, gave a kudo, and left a bookmark. You all continue to make my day :)

You know what let's continue the trend of just pure light goodness. So here's another chapter of just that...before we begin the "I apologize in advance for many tears shed" 3 part series beginning in Ch. 11 (give or take a chapter).

I hope you all experience a fun and safe New Year's with friends and family. :)

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Alright does everyone have their given wristbands on? Raise your hand if you have not been given a wristband that matches your group leaders’ shirt colors,” Tony instructed as he went through the heard of children and volunteers.

Everyone was gathered near the entrance of the carnival with varying levels of excitement. The three surrounding orphanages, Karen’s, Magnolia Orphanage, and Makalni Orphanage all brought their children ages four and up to attend the winter carnival. Tony had been busy running circles making sure each child was in their appropriate group. So far the only ones who wanted a change in groups were the little black widows.

One of the girls in the little black widows spy corporation tugged on Tony’s pants leg. Tony looked down at her. Other girls in the group, about nine of them, also gathered around Tony.

“Yes, Julie,” Tony greeted, while handing the bag of extra wristbands off to a volunteer.

“Can we stay with Ms. Natasha?” she asked. “Pretty please.”

“Natasha isn’t here right now. She’ll be coming in another hour or so. Maybe when she gets here, you can tell her to join your group,” Tony said.

“But she is here,” another girl said pointing behind Tony. Tony turned around to where she was pointing and smiled.

Natasha who had just walked in smiled in a pleased manner. Bucky, Clint, and Steve were soon to follow. Tony raised an eyebrow to her as if making sure that was okay. Julie looked up at Tony and asked again.

“Can you be our group leader Ms. Natasha?”

Natasha swung Julie onto her hip. “Of course I can. Besides our group will be the best. And I can teach you all how to sight if anyone has rigged the games, so you can appropriately decide the next course of action,” she whispered to them.

“Natasha, I heard you. This is a day for riding rides and eating large amounts of sugary filled treats. It is not a day to give a lesson in spy work,” Tony drawled out. “Isn’t that right Julie?”

Julie laughed into her hand. “Okay.” She made a not so discreet wink toward Natasha.

Tony rolled his eyes. “I give up. Natasha just make sure you tell whoever group leader they had, that
you’ll be taking them. I don’t want a teenager having a heart attack because they think they’ve lost a kid.”

“I understand. I’ll make sure to tell them.” Natasha grinned.

“Alright and here are some wristbands,” Tony told Natasha holding her a bag of wristbands. “Every group has a different color. And since I knew that this would likely happen I have saved the black wristbands for you all.”

Natasha pressed a kiss against Tony’s cheek. “You’re the best.”

“I know,” he grinned as he watched her hand out the wristbands to the kids. Some of the volunteers began to help the little girls put them on. Once everyone had a wristband, Natasha threw one to Bucky and Clint.

“Alright Bucky and Clint you’re with me. Come on little black widows. Let’s see if we can get in line for the Frosty rollercoaster.”

Clint narrowed his eyes. “Little black widows?”

Bucky shrugged his shoulders and followed Natasha. He figured it would be best to just not question it. Natasha looked back to Tony and smiled mischievously. Internally, Tony was already praying that Clint and Bucky made it out of this carnival uninjured.

Tony looked at Steve and smiled. “Well, guess that means you’re stuck with me. Of course, if that’s okay with you?”

Steve smiled at Tony. “Always.”

Tony was brought to silence, then shook his head. Tony needed to learn how to not immediately make something out of nothing. Tony handed Steve a wristband and put on his as well. They moved through the crowds of children and watched as the volunteers gathered their children or went to their own stations. Tony spotted Jaime and walked toward him.

“You have everything set up Jaime?”

Jaime smiled brightly. “Yeah. This is my first shift until three I think. Then I go with Ms. Natasha for the rest of the day. She told me she needed her second in command.”

“That sounds about right,” Tony agreed.

“Well, do you feel like being my first customer for the day?” Jaime questioned holding up three rings.

Steve stepped forward. “Sure, you just have to get it around the bottle?”

“Yes, sir. That is the goal of the game,” Jaime announced handing the rings to Steve.

Steve took them and rolled his shoulders back. He strode confidently to his spot and began. First one, missed. Second one, didn’t even go near the bottle. Third one, bounded off of Jaime’s forehead. Jaime remained silent as though waiting for his body’s response. Finally, he came back to life.

Jaime winced. “That actually hurt a lot.”

Steve winced in response. “Sorry.”
“Want to try again?” Jaime questioned rubbing his forehead. “I’m pretty sure I’m going to have a bruise. But who else gets to say that Captain America accidentally hit them with a toy ring.”

Steve grimaced and took the offered rings again. Mentally, he began prepping himself.

“Alright soldier, make sure your arm is steady this time. It was shaking a bit,” Tony teased, secretly amused to see someone like Steve really struggling with this game.

Steve tried nine more times, before sighing frustrated. Steve looked back at Tony. “Why are you laughing? I am trying to get in concentration mode.”

“Concentration mode?” Tony mouthed at Jaime.

Jaime raised his eyebrows. “Apparently this game requires a lot of it Mr. Stark.”

Steve straightened his lips in faux seriousness. “I need silence from Mr. Stark and Mr. Jaime please. This requires my full focus.”

Jaime motioned zipping his lips and throwing away the key.

Tony laughed as Steve tried throwing the ring onto the bottle. Steve rolled the bottom of his lip between his teeth and then breathed in and out. Narrowing his eyes, he swung his arm back and threw the ring toward the bottles, missing it by barely two inches.

“Oh come on. I’m pretty sure this game is rigged. If I can throw my shield and hit my target, I am pretty sure I can toss a ring onto a soda bottle less than ten feet away from me,” Steve bemoaned.

Jaime laughed and shrugged his shoulders. “I’m sorry Mr. Rogers, but the game doesn’t lie. Perhaps you’re just not as good as you thought.”

“Not as good as I thought? Not as good as I thought?”

Tony laughed at Steve’s affronted look. “Alright Jaime I think you’ve hurt his feelings enough. Let me have a try.”

Steve moved aside and let Tony take center. Crossing his arms over his chest, Steve whispered to Tony, “It’s okay if you miss. I’m pretty sure Jaime is secretly moving the bottles.”

Jaime laughed and Tony tried ignoring the warmth that spread in his body when Steve whispered close to his ear. It reminded him of the closeness and the warmth that spread to him, when Steve had pressed a kiss against his cheek last night. Tony wondered if he should bring it up to Steve. Thinking less of it, he decided he wouldn’t. Besides it was probably just a good night thing. Plus things were good right now and he didn’t want to make it weird.

Jaime gave Tony three rings and leaned back against the wall. “Alright Mr. Stark you know the rules. Ready?”

Tony rubbed his hands together. “Born ready.”

Tony stepped back and released the rings one by one each circling the bottles before landing on it. Tony straightened his shoulders and smiled at Jaime who looked amused as Steve looked on dumbfounded.

“Set aside the penguin, please. I’ll be back to pick it up later,” Tony said as he stepped aside letting the other group who was waiting to move forward.
Steve followed Tony wordlessly for a few minutes, before finally asking, “How?”

“When the carnival came to town Rhodey and Pepper made me go. I was never able to go as a kid because well reasons,” Tony explained. “So every year the carnival would come and I would play these games, but for the life of me I couldn’t win. Then I made it a mission of mine to learn what I was doing wrong and to adjust. I mean I graduated college, when I was still only a teenager. I was going to win this little game.”

“Wow, that’s some um dedication,” Steve announced. “Mind telling me how you adjusted to fit the game?”

“Hey my dedication allowed me to win this game.” Tony bumped his shoulder into Steve. “And reveal my secrets? Never. Steve you’ll just have to find your own strategy.”

“Fine. You won’t tell me. I’ll figure them out on my own then,” Steve replied.

Tony rolled his eyes. “That’s quite literally what I suggested.”

They walked around for a bit, Tony making sure to say hello to the donors that were there. Tony knew that they often liked to see their money being put into action, so he figured this was as good time of any. Plus it may lead them to donate more at the Christmas Charity Gala on next Saturday. Steve followed him and also made his own introductions.

By the time Tony was pretty sure he had made introductions with everyone and did a once over of all the groups to make sure everything was good, he went to the nearest food stand and got a funnel cake. He gave some change to the volunteer at the stand.

“Mr. Stark. You know you don’t have to pay right? Everything has been covered for the day,” the volunteer, Emily, said.

“I know, but they didn’t say we couldn’t give tips,” he winked.

Emily pocketed the change and smiled brightly at him. “Thanks Mr. Stark. Enjoy the rest of your day.”

“You too Emily.”

Tony went back to where Steve had been waiting. He walked behind him silently as he watched Steve try to shoot the moving ducks with the water gun. Steve’s mouth was tensed in concentration as he shot all of the ducks. Steve stood up proudly. The volunteer reached for a stuffed animal, but Steve stopped him.

“Keep it. I just wanted to see if I could win at least one of these games,” Steve laughed.

“I’m impressed. You won a game built for five year olds,” Tony teased.

Steve reached over and snatched a piece of Tony’s funnel cake before popping it into his mouth. Tony’s eyes widened and his mouth opened and closed as though trying to figure out a response to it. Steve made motions to take another piece, but Tony was prepared this time. He held his plate away from Steve.

“You did not just take a piece of my funnel cake and eat it!” Tony shouted. “It was mine.”

“I thought you said we could share,” Steve offered innocently and if it weren’t for the smirk setting in on his face, Tony would have thought his statement was genuine.
“Yeah, then you said you didn’t want any, when I asked. So in my mind I had already set that I was going to eat this all by myself. It’s not my fault your sweet tooth kicks in every hour of the day,” Tony sighed bringing his paper plate above his head.

Steve easily reached his hand above him and took another piece. “You know I’m still taller Tony.”

“So not only do you take my food, you want to talk about my height. I will not suffer under these conditions,” Tony said slitting his eyes at Steve. “Go get your own.”

“But you already have one,” Steve replied.

“Yes, emphasis on I already have one. Not you,” Tony said trying to wave of Steve’s attempts at getting his funnel cake.

By then the two were standing up, with Steve briskly following Tony around. To anyone else they looked like two children playing a game of tag. Karen watched as they passed her and shook her head amusedly before returning to her conversation with one of the donors.

“Come on Tony. Just one more piece,” Steve begged running after Tony.

“That’s what you said last time,” Tony said never stopping his run.

“I promise this time,” Steve said.

Tony stopped. “Fine you can have one.”

Before Tony was even able to break off a piece, Clint came swooping by and took the plate from Tony.

“There. Now neither of you have the funnel cake,” Clint said breaking off a piece and popped it into his mouth.

“Aren’t you two supposed to be with Natasha?” Tony said trying to catch back his breath. Running away from Steve was an exercise in itself.

Clint sighed and spoke with his mouth full. Tony winced, but chose not to say anything. “Yeah, but they said we could take a break for a few minutes then return.”

“You know they’re probably plotting against the both of you as you take your break,” Tony told them with an eyebrow raised. “Natasha probably began thinking of this as soon as she asked you both to join her group Wise up boys.”

“Shit,” Clint breathed out.

“And to think you call yourself a spy,” Tony murmured. “How do these things go unnoticed with you? I think you two may want to watch your surroundings when you go back to your group.”

Bucky swallowed deeply as if knowing the gravity of the situation he and Clint had placed themselves in. They had been with the little black widows for less than two hours and they already knew that Natasha had begun their training. Now they just needed people to practice on. And they just gave them an open opportunity.

“Or we could just you know hide,” Clint offered.

Bucky shook his head. “No way. Come on between the two of us and our skill set we should be able to face off Natasha and a group of little girls.”
“They’re not little girls,” Steve somberly addressed. “They’re little black widows and oh I think I see one trailing behind you.”

Tony pursed his lips together as he caught Steve’s smirk and wink.

“Crap, they’ve caught on to us. Come on Bucky let’s move out,” Clint said pulling along a passive Bucky. “Thanks for the funnel cake.”

“I didn’t give it to you,” Tony sighed. “But you’re welcome.”

Steve and Tony watched as they ran off. Tony looked down at his empty hands.

“Don’t worry, I’ll get you another funnel cake,” Steve said while he pressed a warm hand into Tony’s back.

Tony started to lean into it, but just as he felt that unconscious response he pulled away. “You were going to get me another funnel cake either way. Also this time I will take a lemonade.”

Steve drew his hand back and stepped away from Tony. He smiled slightly and walked toward the food stand. While they were in line, Tony’s phone began to ring. Tony looked down and saw that it was Ryder calling him. Steve tried being discreet with trying to see who was calling Tony. Tony tucked the phone back into his pocket and cleared his throat.

“I’m pretty sure half of these kids are going to have a sugar-high in the next hour or so. Is it bad that I’m kind of waiting to see how the volunteers handle a bunch of highly energized kids?”

Steve laughed. Tony’s phone rang.

“I should probably take this,” Tony said smiling at Steve. “And remember I want a lemonade.”

Steve nodded as Tony walked away from the line.

“Hello?”

“Well, it seems as though my boyfriend can answer his phone,” Ryder snidely answered back. “You’ve been ignoring my phone calls. Look I know you have every right to not talk to me for like a day, but two days? Come on Tony act your age. And that whole you’re sick bull shit was cute. Tell Peter I’ll be looking for his Golden Globe nomination.”

“Look we can talk about this when you get back into town,” Tony told him. “I’m in public right now so I can’t really get into this.”

“Oh, we can talk about this when I get into town? Oh, you mean before or after I have to meet with Pepper and Rhodey so I can tell them my intentions with you as your boyfriend. Like Tony you didn’t even ask if I agreed to this,” Ryder hissed.

“I know, but they haven’t seen you in a while. Plus they like to meet who I date. I don’t have parents and they kind of stepped in,” Tony replied. “I tried to get them not to, but they really want to meet you again.”

Steve looked behind himself and turned to where Tony was pacing back and forth. One hand held the phone pressed to his ear and the other was gesticulating wildly in the air. Tony turned toward him and Steve raised an eyebrow. Tony faked a smile and then returned to his call.

“Look, I know we have a lot to talk about. And I am honestly so sorry that I haven’t been answering
your calls. But I’m at the carnival right now. So I’ll have to call you back. I’ll make it up to you I promise,” Tony answered hoping that Ryder would accept his apology.

“No, it’s fine Tony. Look I’ve just been stressed. Some of the treatments aren’t working on the kids down here and I’m putting all my negative feelings on you. That’s isn’t fair,” Ryder confessed.

“Oh,” Tony said shocked at the turn in conversation. “Will the kids be alright?”

“I’m not sure,” Ryder’s breathe caught.

“Ryder, I’m so sorry. I…I have a few minutes we can talk,” Tony said biting his lip.

Of course his phone call had been important. Tony should have answered and now Ryder had to go through all of this alone just because Tony wanted to give into his desires and give him the silent treatment.

Ryder’s voice cracked through the phone. “No, no. You’re right. You’re at the carnival and you’ve been planning this thing for ages.

“Again I’m sorry Ryder. I’ll make sure to answer your phone calls all the time from now on,” Tony said feeling the guilt begin to settle in. “Are you sure you don’t need to talk right now? I can step away for a bit.”

“No,” Ryder rasped hoarsely. “But…we’ll talk when I get home.”

“Okay.”

“Thanks Tony.”

“Love you,” Tony said.

He waited a brief moment for the sentiment to be shared, but his only response was the click of a phone hanging up. Tony rubbed his hands over his face.

“Sorry about that. Ryder wanted to tell me about his progress,” Tony explained laughing. “Alright I am ready for my funnel cake.”

“Our funnel cake,” Steve explained walking away from Tony.

“Fine, our funnel cake,” Tony laughed. “And don’t think I won’t notice if you give me the smaller piece.”

Steve laughed and picked off a piece and gave the rest to Tony. Tony grinned and followed Steve throughout the rest of the carnival. Eventually they found themselves at a rollercoaster. Tony finished off the last bit of his lemonade and threw it into the trashcan alongside with the rest of his funnel cake.

Before the funnel cake even reached the trash can, Steve swooped in and grabbed it. “No need to waste good food.”

Tony rolled his eyes good-naturedly. “Alright, you up for a ride?”

Steve stretched his arms above his head and grinned widely at Tony. “Definitely.”

The two found themselves passing Miles’ group. Peter, Michelle, and Ned were filtered in between the kids. Peter being in the back turned toward Tony who had just walked toward them.
“Mr. Stark!” Peter shouted.

“Peter I have told you mean time you don’t have to refer to me as Mr. Stark. You can call me Tony, the ultimate superhero, or even the greatest genius of all time,” Tony suggested.

“Tony that’s a mouthful,” Steve inserted.

“Oh, hush you. Nobody asked for your opinion,” Tony said.

Steve raised his arms in defense before sharing a look at Peter.

“One day, I’ll get you to stop calling me Mr. Stark,” Tony promised. “But anyways how are the kids. Are you, Ned, and Michelle doing okay with watching them? Miles doing okay?”

“Yeah, we’re doing pretty good. I mean we had lunch a little while ago. We had to switch lunch shifts because these little kids hungry are not little kids that you want to hang around with,” Peter admitted. “But other than that it’s been fine. Miles is good too. He’s been hanging out with Michelle so he’s in good hands.”

Tony patted Peter on his back. “I’m glad to hear that. Well Steve and I are off to ride more rides and win more prizes from children.”

“Don’t you mean for children?” Peter questioned.

“No, I’m pretty sure he said what he meant,” Steve exclaimed shaking his head. “You all have fun now.”

“Will do Mr. Rogers,” Peter said. “Alright guys the lines is moving forward. Follow Ned.”

The two left Miles’ group and went toward a rollercoaster that was a little bit more geared to people who were older.

“I’m pretty sure we have to go through height check,” Steve announced looking at the height check toward the middle of the line.

“We do not need height check,” Tony laughed. Then he realized what Steve was trying to imply and playfully hit him in the shoulder. “Oh, fuck you very much. You know what I am not short and I am getting tired of you suggesting that I am. I am an average height thank you.”

“Okay, Tony,” Steve chuckled.

Tony followed Steve into their cart and waited for the ride to begin. Tony made no actions to stop his laughing as Steve tightly clenched the ride’s bar handles as they ride went up. However, he couldn’t stop his laugh, when Steve let out a startled gasp when they went down. Tony’s eyes burned bright with tears.

When the ride was over, Steve curled an arm around Tony’s shoulder. Tony patted Steve’s back. “It’s alright Captain. I won’t tell anyone about you screaming like a newborn baby, if you cease your short jokes.”

Steve sighed. “Sorry, it’s just I haven’t gone down that fast since…well.”

Tony immediately grew serious. “Steve why didn’t you tell me? I wouldn’t have led you to this ride if I had known…I…crap Steve.”

Steve pulled Tony closer to him and sighed. “It’s fine.”
“No, it’s really not.”

“No, seriously. It’s fine,” Steve said turning his face toward Tony. “I would have told you if I didn’t want to do something. Besides I wanted to do ever since I was a kid. Before the serum, I couldn’t really risk getting on rides and certainly never imagined anything on this scale. And then I became an Avenger so there was never anytime. So let’s go find some more rides.”

“Are you serious?” Tony screeched, completely okay with the idea of not going on any more rides.

“Yeah, come on,” Steve said steering Tony. “Plus I want to go get some cotton candy.”

“You and your sweet tooth. How about we go get something to eat with the closest nutritional value,” Tony offered up.

Steve laughed and Tony felt the vibrations of it through his chest. Steve’s warm fingers curled around Tony’s shoulders and settled like a weight there. If Steve continued to keep his arm around Tony for the rest of their day there, Tony wouldn’t even have it in him to complain.

The day went by faster than Tony knew it. Spending it with Steve certainly did help. He thought to himself that he should have had thoughts of wanting to spend today with Ryder. But he could honestly say he was thankful that Ryder had been called to do work abroad. Tony hadn’t even imagined that a day like this could exist. Nearly a year ago he couldn’t even imagine going to the store with Steve without an argument. Now here he was enjoying this winter carnival with him and wishing that it didn’t have to end so soon.

Eventually, groups had to be broken up and volunteers began to take their kids to their respective places. Steve had left Tony briefly to help assist in making sure the kids were in their appropriate meeting spot. Peter had handed Miles off to Tony as he went to go with the older kids who were preparing to have their own fun at the carnival free from the responsibilities of watching their kids.

“Did you have a good time at the carnival bambino?” Tony asked as Miles laid his head on his shoulder.

“Yes, baba. Did you?” Miles questioned around a yawn.

Tony looked back toward where Steve was helping guide children to their specific rides. He looked at Tony and flashed a warm smile at him. Tony gave one back.

“Yeah, I really did.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to everyone who commented, gave a kudo, and left a bookmark. You all continue to make my day :)
“Baba can I have this?” Miles questioned stretching his short arms toward the fruit snacks. His small body tried leaning out of the shopping cart that Tony was currently pushing through the grocery store.

Tony grabbed Miles’ body in order to stop him from getting out of the cart. Miles turned a disappointed glare toward Tony and began to pout. His eyes were beginning to shine brightly just ready to share tears he had probably been mentally practicing for, since they had entered the store. Tony had been prepared for this. He knew Miles was only four, but he also knew that Miles was beginning to develop the famous pout that could make people coo and bend to his will. Tony refused to be one of those people…even if he did allow Miles to eat a cupcake for breakfast.

Sue him. That cupcake was just baiting Miles and even Tony began to want one.

However, now they needed something healthy to eat and the tower was fresh out of things. Tony had thought of asking FRIDAY to send someone to go get the groceries. Then Steve had suggested to Tony that he would go get the groceries. Tony had instantly disagreed saying that they didn’t need to go.

Even though the two were moving forward in their relationship, there were still the occasional arguments between the two. At the foundation of the arguments was a growing fire ready to overwhelm the two. Thankfully, their arguments had never escalated that quickly. This time it was Tony who had given in.

So here he was with Miles and Steve at the grocery store with what almost seemed like a hundred people running up and down the aisles in hopes of gathering groceries to prepare for their Christmas meal.

Tony had dressed Miles in a heavy coat, a knit cap, and a pair of glasses that he insisted he keep on. While there were preventive measures to make sure Miles stayed out the public eye, Tony certainly didn’t want someone to take a picture of Miles. Tony himself couldn’t exactly hide his signature goatee, but he hoped that a pair of glasses, a bulky coat, and a ball cap could help camouflage him. Steve…well Steve put on a cap and hoped the new addition of his beard still camouflaged his identity.
“No sweetheart no fruit snakes today,” Tony said pushing the cart away from the temptation.

Miles looked at Steve and wordlessly pointed to the fruit snakes. Over the past few days the two had grown closer over their love of art. Miles had expressed a wariness to all of the Avengers. The only one he had latched onto had been Natasha. Anyone besides her and Tony he refused to engage with. However, that had changed four days ago.

Tony had stumbled over the two that day sleeping in the main room. Miles had curled up on Steve’s chest with a crayon placed firmly in his hand. There were coloring books and crayons strewn carelessly over the floor. On their cheeks looked something like drying paint. Tony had taken a picture of the moment and set it as his screensaver. Tony was happy mainly because he still had plains for Miles to become an artist. He had hopes that would steer him away from any possible superhero business. He also was also getting him some science kits for kids for Christmas. So he had two options at the ready.

Ever since then the two could be seen coloring together in Tony’s lab, while Tony was working on some schematics for SI.

So Miles suddenly turning to Steve in hopes of getting the fruit snacks was not surprising. Tony shook his head at Miles.

“No, Miles. We are not getting the fruit snacks. You already had a cupcake for breakfast. Don’t you want some delicious broccoli and carrots?”

Miles scrunched up his nose and crossed his hands over his arms. “No.”

Steve quieted a laugh, when Tony nudged him sharply in the ribs. Steve looked down at Tony then to Miles. “But carrots and broccoli help you get to be big and strong,” Steve added.

“No, they don’t,” Miles disagreed. “You say that. I’m not growing. Aunt Natasha says baba eats his veggies and he’s still tiny.”

Tony stopped the cart and pressed his hand to his heart, gasping dramatically. “Your aunt said what? I am not tiny. I am a fully grown man and I do not appreciate your aunt saying this nonsense. I’ll have you know I am at a reasonable height. Plus why does height even matter? How about we measure genius. I made my first circuit board at four. I graduated summa cum laude at MIT at 17. My IQ is-”

“Tony I am pretty sure that just went over the kid’s head,” Steve admitted as he watched Miles reach back in front of him to the fruit snacks. He was almost successful in his mission.

Tony immediately stopped his rambling and placed the fruit snack box back. Miles turned slowly to Steve and frowned. It seemed as though he looked at Steve in betrayal for telling on him. Tony got what he came for on that particular aisle and went to the next one.

Miles slumped in his seat in the cart and pouted. Tony refused to give attention to the silent tantrum he was giving. He knew that Miles needed way more vegetables than a snack that was probably drenched in sugar…even if he secretly desired the fruit snack as well.

And people said Tony wouldn’t be good at parenting.

As Tony went into the next aisle looking for bread, his phone rang. He answered the call, seeing that it was Peter.

“Hey, Peter,” Tony answered. “Everything alright at home?”
“Yes, everything’s good. I was just asking if it would be fine if I could go to the movies with MJ,” Peter rushed out.

“That’s fine. Tell Happy to drive you,” Tony told him. “And make sure that you tell me when you make it there safely and when you’re on your way back.”

Peter made a noise of agreement. “Okay, I will.”

“Also if you happen to start webbing it up—” Tony began.

“Webbing it up?” Peter whispered confused.

“Yes, webbing it up,” Tony replied. “Your Aunt May started using it and well it caught on. So if you get up to webbing it up, make sure you at least tell APRIL to let me make sure you are okay. And if you happen to stumble over something…”

“I doubt that will happen. I’m just going to the movies,” Peter stressed.

“Yeah, well you never know,” Tony told him. “But have fun on your date.”

Tony shook his head as Steve held up a package of bread. Steve raised an eyebrow at him and pointed to the price. Sure, it was cheaper seeing as though it was the grocery store’s brand. He appreciated Steve with his serious price checking, despite how many times Tony had enforced that he didn’t need to do it. He suspected that Steve took price checking as a small challenge. It was somewhat endearing.

He mouthed “Hard” to him and Steve placed it down.

“It’s not a date,” Peter said bringing Tony back to their conversation. “My decathlon group is going to the movies.”

“Then why did you say you were going to the movies with Michelle?”

“I didn’t say that,” Peter backtracked. “I said I was going to the movies with my decathlon group.”

“You really didn’t. Plus who goes to the movies with their decathlon members? I mean that’s great team bonding. I guess,” Tony added, while pushing the cart to the other aisle. “But that sounds really fun. What movie are you all seeing? Do you need some money? That way you could offer to buy Michelle’s ticket at least.”

“Mr. Stark,” Peter whined aloud. “Please stop.”

“Though I am also certain that Michelle wouldn’t like you offering to buy her ticket,” Tony thought aloud. “But you could offer. Make sure to cover up. I really don’t need to send you back home to May with you sick.”

“Mr. Stark I appreciate all of this, but the movie starts in two hours and with the traffic and the distance I really need to go.”

“Alright but—”

“Yes, I will make sure to wear a coat. Yes, I will make sure to check in with you. And no I don’t need any extra money, but thank you. I’ll tell you when I am on my way back,” Peter rambled.

“Okay, have fun.”
“Thanks,” Peter said.

“You're welcome.”

The two said their goodbyes and Tony went back to shopping for groceries. Steve looked toward him and tossed a bag of apples into the cart. Miles swung his feet and bobbed his head to the song the grocery store was playing.

“Okay, so I think we have everything we have on our list,” Tony noted. “Hopefully.”

Steve nodded. “I think we do at least everything that was written down before we left.”

Steve and Tony made sure to do one more double-check of their items, before they were fine with checking out. Miles made one last effort to get some fruit snacks, but Tony remained strong in his decision. Maybe they would come back next week and get the fruit snacks.

When they arrived back at the Tower, it was quiet. Clint was on his floor preparing gifts for his children because he had no intention of coming empty handed, when he reunited with his family. Natasha was having a meeting with Phil and Fury in regards to something secretive. Natasha promised him she would tell Tony, if it was anything that concerned him.

Tony had nodded in thanks.

Bucky was at his B.A.R.F. appointment. He had a few weeks without it, since he had been here, but he had needed to get back to his schedule. So Tony set up a few of his trusted doctors and set everything up the way it had been for him in Wakanda. While things would never be perfect, Tony hoped B.A.R.F. would help Bucky.

Tony and Steve were putting up groceries, when Tony pulled out a box of fruit snacks. He frowned, distinctly remembering that he had made sure that he hadn’t bought any. He turned to look at Steve who was looking down with flushed cheeks.

“Really Steve?” Tony questioned. He placed the fruit snack box on one of the top shelves.

“He really wanted them. I mean at least he doesn’t know we actually have them. That way they can be a little reward if he eats his vegetables,” Steve replied. “Hope that wasn’t wrong. I mean of course I can eat them. He won’t know that they were ever there.”

Suddenly, Tony realized the absence of one small body. He looked around himself and didn’t see Miles anywhere. He was certain he was latched onto his leg just a few moments ago, but there he wasn’t.

“Steve did you see Miles leave?” Tony questioned.

Steve looked around himself and began to look as confused as Tony felt. Tony opened up the cabinets and started looking in them. Lately Miles had developed this thing where he liked hiding in small places as though him and Tony were forever playing a game of hide and seek. So far the hiding spots had been relatively safe. So it nearly gave Tony a heart attack when he raised his eyes to see Miles standing on top of the refrigerator.

“Miles Morales!” Tony shouted more so from earth shattering terror rather than anger. His immediate response was to walk toward the refrigerator and reach his hands out to the boy. Unfortunately, his height did factor in and he just had to choose the refrigerator that was too tall.

“Why are you up there bambino?” Tony tried in a more calm voice looking around for a step stool.
“Wanna fly like you baba!” Miles laughed and without a second glance he jumped off of the refrigerator-

And straight into Steve’s arms.

Miles laughed and Tony immediately snatched Miles from Steve’s hands. “That is not funny Miles! You could have gotten hurt and broken something. You cannot fly bambino. You also should not climb on anything that is taller than you. You could get yourself killed and then…”

Tony’s voice was rising and Miles was starting to shrink in on himself. Steve stood off to the side as he watched Tony place Miles on the floor. He noticed that Tony placed down Miles so that he could gather himself. His shoulders were rising as he tried inhaling a ragged breath.

Steve went behind Tony and wondered what he should do. Tony looked on the verge of a panic attack and Steve didn’t want to make Tony uncomfortable. He remembered how Ryder brought Tony out of his attack, but Steve also knew another way.

Steve rested a hand on Tony’s back and rubbed smooth circles. Tony’s knuckles whitened as his grip on the counter tightened. Steve continued rubbing his back and then slowly with his other hand removed Tony’s hands from the kitchen counter.

Tony immediately latched onto Steve’s hand and turned into him. Tony felt himself vibrate with terror at the fact that he didn’t even see how Miles had gotten on the refrigerator…how close he was to jumping off and just falling to the ground.

“It’s okay Tony. Miles is safe. He’s not hurt. He’s right here with you Tony okay. Look at him, nothing is broken,” Steve whispered into his ear. “He’s okay Tony. He’s okay.”

He repeated this over and over and kept one hand rubbing Tony’s back, while the other held Tony’s clasped hands.

“Is baba mad Mr. Steve?” Miles timidly questioned not wanting to get

Tony leaned away from Steve and Steve allowed him to put some distance between them. Tony pinched the bridge of his nose and knelt beside Miles.

“Look bambino I am not mad, but that scared me okay. I can fly because I have a suit that helps me. I can’t fly on my own. Please don’t scare me like that Miles. You cannot climb on things and jump from them, okay?”

Miles nodded his head quickly. “Okay baba. I’m sorry.”

Tony brought Miles into a hug and held him tight to his chest. He closed his eyes and focused on listening to the soft breathing of Miles’ in his ear and the way his small hands curled around his neck.

He opened his eyes to mouth a thank you to Steve who had returned to putting away groceries. Steve mouthed you’re welcome. Moments later the two returned to putting away groceries and Tony made sure that this time Miles stayed either attached to his hip or seated at the kitchen table. Once the two were satisfied with the placement of the groceries, Tony made a quick lunch for them.

While they were making lunch, Clint and Natasha came into the kitchen and noted the scene before them.

“Now if this isn’t just a wonderful domestic photo op for some family magazine,” Clint dryly asserted. “Finally living out your childhood dreams of having a normal family, right Stark?”
Tony immediately grew pale and his eyes dimmed slightly. He swallowed a lump in his throat and turned toward Miles, refusing to meet any of their eyes. He opened his mouth to say an equally stinging retort, but figured he just couldn’t…not today.

Steve watched as Tony grabbed his and Miles lunch and retreated to his floor. Steve was quick to follow, but not before talking to Clint.

“I don’t know what your problem is with Tony, but I suggest you figure it out and then apologize. Tony had done nothing to deserve your hate or rude comments,” he said then left. “We’ll talk more about this later.”

Natasha grit her teeth together and remained silent as she went to fix herself something to eat. Anger simmered in her body and she just knew that if she said something right now it wouldn’t get across. She stuffed a piece of bread in her mouth and hoped that it would help her not to say something she’s been wanting to say to Clint. Yet maybe it was time for her to finally say something.

Natasha slammed the pantry door close as she went to the refrigerator to grab some tomatoes.

“What?” Clint sighed. “I can tell by the loud slamming cabinet doors you’re clearly angry.”

“Oh, really?” Natasha sarcastically commented. “How could I be angry, when you clearly just disrespected a teammate, a friend? I mean that was completely unacceptable Clint. Lately, you’ve just been blatantly rude to Tony and for what?”

“Look, I don’t know why you keep looking at me as though I’m the bad guy. I have already apologized, isn’t that enough,” Clint argued resting his back against the counter.

“No, you’ve apologized to Laura. You have not apologized to Tony and frankly if I am being honest Clint Tony is the reason you are able to still get in contact with your wife,” Natasha said heatedly. “And I am not saying this to guilt you into an apology. If that’s the case, I don’t want you apologizing. It has to be sincere. However, I will say this I have never been so disappointed in your behavior these past few weeks in regards to Tony.”

“Please do tell me what my behavior has been lately, since you know so much,” Clint sneered.

“That! That has been your behavior for goodness sake Clint. You’ve been acting as though everything is an annoyance to you. You have been sauntering around Tony like he’s beneath you. You are behaving like he is the reason for everything that has gone wrong in your life. Clint that is a lot to place onto one person,” Natasha rasped.

“Tony has done nothing to deserve this. He has not once said anything bad against you. He even looked after your family, when you couldn’t. However, you want to pick fights and goad him, into what reacting negatively?”

“That’s not what I’m trying to do Natasha,” Clint hissed.

“Then tell me what you’re trying to do by digging up Tony’s insecurities and making him feel like he’s not worth anything.”

“I didn’t-”

“Bull shit Clint. You just did that. You’ve been doing that ever since we got here. Everyone is trying and you’re not even making an effort,” Natasha honestly told him.

Clint stared at her and wanted to tell her he had been making an effort. He wanted to tell her that he
was trying to make things go back to where they were, but they couldn’t. He didn’t know if he deserved for things to go back the way they were.

He had been dealt a few good things in his life, which he certainly hadn’t deserved. One of those things were Laura and the kids. The other was his membership in the Avengers and friendship with them. Another had been being friends with Tony.

Tony was like a brother to him. Sometimes he was the only one who was able to put forth as much energy to something as Clint did. Sure, they argued a lot, but it was never…well mostly it was never real anger. It was something shared between siblings, brothers. Clint remembered the many times Tony would come sit next to him, not talking, but knowing that Clint just enjoyed having another presence behind him. Tony knew how Clint didn’t like to always feel alone, because good things never happened when you were alone.

And it wasn’t even the small things that Tony did for him that he should’ve thanked him for. He should’ve thanked him for always updating his weaponry, without even asking for anything in return. Hell he should’ve thanked him for being the main reason they were all pardoned and allowed back entrance to America. Clint brought his head down to stare at his lap, thinking of all the times a thank you fell on his lips, but was never brought to Tony’s ears.

He hadn’t meant to say those harsh things to Tony. He had originally been excited to come back to America first to see his family, then to see Tony again. Tony made things better with his jokes, innuendos, and playful jabs at Fury and Phil. Clint would have liked to say he didn’t mean anything, but Natasha was right. At some point this wall he built to protect himself from gaining a family and quickly losing them, fell second-nature to him. Funny how this wall built to protect him was the one that actually made him lose his brother.

He had thought that this was the world correcting itself. It was taking away a good thing that Clint hadn’t deserved in the first place and in some way Clint felt like there was some pressure off of his shoulder. It was like finally things were being righted in his life. So he wanted to push Tony away in any manner possible.

And it was working.

Everything that he done in this world…all the hurt that his hands caused shouldn’t allow him to have all he had in his life. He had Laura and the kids. He had the Avengers. He had his brother…Tony. But those were three things too many. He didn’t deserve not one so Clint had to even out things and he couldn’t lose Laura or the kids. He couldn’t lose his purpose of being on a team. But he could lose Tony even if he felt like he was losing a part of himself.

He had lost a brother before, surely he could do it again.

He told all of this to Natasha who softened the harshness of her expression.

“Maybe you should tell Tony this Clint and realize that while we may think we don’t deserve these people in our lives, doesn’t mean we don’t need them,” Natasha explained.

“When did you get so wise?” Clint whispered toying with his hands. He hadn’t felt like looking at Natasha just yet because he felt like he had been properly chastised.

“When I realized, I actually have a family to lose,” Natasha regarded. “I thought you would have realized that too.”

The two remained silent with their own thoughts bothering them.
Eventually, the time came for the weekly movie night. Steve had insisted on bringing back movie night from before they all broke apart, so this was the first day they were having it again.

Tony begrudgingly followed Steve into the main room. He had just put Miles down for sleep and really wanted to go back to his lab. He had intended to go back to his lab and hide in there. Unfortunately, a certain super soldier wouldn’t let him do that.

“Don’t let Clint get to you Tony,” Steve had said.

Tony frowned at him. “He doesn’t get to me. He hasn’t said anything that anyone hasn’t said before.”

Steve furrowed his eyebrows as Tony walked ahead of him. Tony had settled next to Natasha who had her legs propped up on Bucky’s lap. Bucky looked tiredly at Tony.

“Bad day?” Tony questioned sitting down beside Natasha.

Bucky tilted his head back and closed his head. “It was a B.A.R.F. day so not the best, but I’ll survive. It’s been helping so…”

“Let me know if it ever gets too much and I’ll take a look at it and make adjustments,” Tony told him.

Bucky nodded in thanks not really feeling up to talking much more.

“How about something light tonight?” Tony suggested.

“A Disney movie?” Steve offered.

“Sure, you haven’t seen Lion King yet have you?” Tony questioned.

Natasha perked up from her seat. “Yes, I vote Lion King.”

Natasha had watched it with Tony two years ago and it had easily become her favorite children’s film. Anytime she was presented with the chance to watch it she grabbed it. Plus she hadn’t really had the chance to sit down and watch a movie due to the past recent events and this was a good movie to get back to.

“I’m a little terrified to go against Natasha. So I second Natasha,” Steve admitted.

Peter walked in just as they were queuing up the movie. Tony sat up from his spot beside Natasha and waved.

“How was your date?”

“Not a date,” Peter yawned. “And it was good. I’ll tell you more about the day tomorrow. But I’m tired so I’m sorry to miss movie night, but maybe next time.”

Tony waved good night to Peter as he trudged to his room.

The movie began and they all watched on and listened to Tony and Natasha sing along. When they got to “Hakuna Matata,” Natasha and Tony had begun a fully choreographed performance. Bucky looked on with bleary eyes and Steve watched on with pleasant amusement. Clint stared at his hands with discomfort because this was something that he and Tony would have done.

Tony laughed as Natasha loudly sang, “And oh the shame!”
“He was ashamed,” Tony sang back with an equal amount enthusiasm.

“Thought of changing my name,” Natasha sang frowning at Tony and tilting her head to the side.

Tony placed his hand on her shoulder and stared at her seriously. “Oh what’s in a name?”

The two carried on their back and forth, until the song’s end came. With a flurry of motions the two loudly exclaimed, “It means no worries for the rest of your days! It’s our problem free philosophy! Hakuna Matata!”

The two were reduced to laughter as they fell into one another and back onto the couch waking up Bucky who had drifted asleep mid song. Natasha leaned her head on Tony’s shoulder and giggled. Clint looked at Natasha and observed the lightness in her expression and the happiness sketched over her face. Tony resembled the same look until he noticed Clint’s stare.

The two looked at each other for a few seconds, before Clint turned back around to face the movie. When the movie ended, Tony stood up taking orders of what people wanted from the kitchen, while teasing Steve for crying at Mufasa’s death.

Clint waited for Tony to go back into the kitchen before following him. Clint excused himself stepping over Natasha’s leg and went into the kitchen. The sounds of Natasha and Steve debating over what to watch next came to a soft whisper as he walked away. Tony was gathering some more popcorn and he didn’t register Clint coming behind him until he turned around.

He startled and nearly dropped the bucket of popcorn. Tony frowned, “Are you trying to send me to an early grave?"

Clint came in here with a mission. He was going to apologize for his behavior today and then move on. Unfortunately, Clint’s mind and his mouth did not reach the same agreement.

“I thought I couldn’t have good things without some good actions on my part,” Clint began.

*Oh no please stop talking,* he whispered to himself. His pleas went unheard.

“But I’ve been blessed with so many things Tony like you can’t imagine and I don’t deserve a fucking inch of it. And maybe I’m selfish for wanting to take in the world’s mistake of giving me some good stuff in life. Tony I’ve done so many bad things in my life.”

Clint let out a harsh laugh and rubbed his face.

Tony looked like a dear caught in headlights as Clint continued talking. Clint didn’t stop talking even though he wanted to, but this seemed to have opened a floodgates of everything.

“I’m not mad at you over the Accords…that’s fuck….” Clint struggled with himself for a few seconds. “I shouldn’t have even fought in a war that didn’t concern me, but I did and in that I lost all the good things I never deserved in the first place. I lost my wife and kids. I lost the Avengers because we were fucking broken. I lost my brother,” he rasped looking at Tony.

Tony swallowed a lump in his throat and turned his face down hoping he could force the tears back.

“So I thought I would finally try being good and maybe the world would forgive me and give it all back to me, but it fucking didn’t. It fucking didn’t,” Clint hoarsely cried out. “Laura wouldn’t answer my calls and in turn wouldn’t let me speak to my kids. I was basically a criminal hiding in Wakanda. I wasn’t an Avenger. We weren’t Avengers. And I was fighting against you and I didn’t know why.”
“I was losing everything and I didn’t know why. But I told myself that I would make things even. I would do good things and in turn get back what I didn’t deserve. So I’ve been trying to do good things so I can be shown a little favor. I’m here in America so that’s one thing. I’m meeting up with Laura and our kids in a little while. But I haven’t worked on anything good so that I can deserve to have you back. So I thought that I can push you away. I need to push you away because I’d rather not have you than not have my wife and kids.”

Clint shook his head. “This isn’t making sense. It made much more sense in my head. Look there’s no excuse for me being an ass these past few weeks, when you’ve done nothing, but been amazing and generous. I just…I thought I couldn’t lose them. I’d rather have them and being an Avenger than you.”

Clint immediately winced as he said that. “No, that… shit this isn’t coming right after. I fucking suck at this.”

Clint felt pressure on his chest at his inability to get across what he wanted to say.

Tony turned his head away. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

Clint shifted on his feet. “I don’t know what I want you to say either.”

The two stared in a rather uncomfortable silence not really knowing who should speak up. Clint didn’t know why he went into this without a plan. He had thought his talk with Natasha had prepared him for this, but it hadn’t.

He watched as Tony discreetly tried wiping away a tear. Clint felt an aching pain settle in his soul as he watched Tony struggle with what to say.

“Just let me work toward getting my wife and kids back Tony, please. Then I can get my brother back too,” Clint tried. “I’ll stop pushing you away and being an abrasive asshole. I promise.”

“You seemed to come up with some of those insults fairly easy,” Tony told him.

Clint grimaced. “I didn’t mean them. Tony I never meant them.”

Tony looked unsure of that. “The popcorn’s getting cold. I should probably get back.”

Clint looked disheartened and watched as Tony grabbed the bag of popcorn and water bottles. He walked ahead of Clint. He shakily exhaled as he felt the air brush against his skin as Tony passed him.

“Let me know how the journey toward getting your wife and kids goes,” Tony said. “I hope it goes well.”

Tony didn’t smile, but his eyes had lost a little bit of that deep-rooted sadness. Clint smiled and let his body melt against the wall. He felt drained and all the same energized to get back his whole family a family that included Tony. Maybe he should have stopped separating his family and realized that Tony shared the same importance in his life as Laura and the kids.

He mulled over this and remained in there for a few more minutes coming to the conclusion that while he hadn’t been able to articulate perfectly what he wanted, he finally knew what he needed to do. He needed to stop thinking of Tony as a brother that could be removed from the family like some twice removed cousin. He was family and he would remain that way. Clint just had to treat him like such.
Clint eventually went back to watch the movie the others had chosen, when Natasha had yelled his name. Natasha watched as Clint walked in and tried seeing if there was a difference in how Tony and Clint had exited and then entered.

She saw something, but she wasn’t quite sure if all was resolved, but she knew there was progress being made.

As it grew later, people began leaving. Bucky was first. He had already fallen asleep during *Lion King* and had woken up in the middle of the second movie and decided he was going to bed. Clint was next saying he had to get up early to do a little more gift shopping. Natasha followed Clint jokingly saying she needed her beauty rest.

The only ones remaining were Steve and Tony. Both were tired, but were unwilling to leave each other’s company just quite yet. Tony told FRIDAY to play another movie something along the lines of what they had been watching. Tony was the first to fall asleep his head tilted awkwardly against the couch.

Steve was soon to follow.

*There was laughter coming from beside him. The laughter sounded full of joy and was comforting to his ear. Steve turned around and smiled brightly, once he saw where the laughter was coming from.*

“All Bambino slow down! You just learned how to stop on your skates,” Tony laughed as he watched Miles skate around the park. Tony continued watching until he noticed Steve’s staring. “Do I have something on my face?”

“No, no,” Steve was quick to tell him. “Just sometimes I can’t help, but to stare and admire.”

A pink flush entered Tony’s cheek and in turn he grabbed Steve’s hand and interlaced their fingers. Both of them watched as Miles continued skating.

“Baba! Dad! Look at me. I’m really doing it. I told Uncle Bucky I would soon beat him in a race,” Miles yelled as he skated past them again.

“I know, but we must make him believe that you haven’t secretly been training,” Steve winked. “And remember stay close to where your baba and I can see you. You skated too far past us just a second ago.”

Miles sighed and tilted his head back. “But you can see me dad you just have to look.” Steve narrowed his stare and Miles put his hands up in defense. “Fine no skating to the point I can’t see you both. Promise.”

“Your son,” Tony laughed into his hand.

“No, that was all you countering my argument and all that,” Steve replied leaning back into his chair. Tony hummed and leaned back further into Steve.

Steve tilted his head in hopes of giving Tony a quick kiss to his cheek, so as to not fully get his attention away from Miles. However, Tony noticed Steve moving and turned his body fully to meet Steve’s. Tony placed Steve’s face in his warm hands and brought it closer to his.

Steve closed his eyes and leaned in. He stayed that way for a few minutes until he noticed the disappearance of hands on his face and the fact that he was not kissing Tony. He opened his eyes and immediately saw Tony’s wet eyes looking back at him.
A chill swept through the room and Steve looked around in horror as he realized that he was back in the bunker in Siberia. Was all of that with Miles a dream? His heart beat raced against his chest and he felt his palms grow sweaty.

Tony grinned ruefully at him this time. “Come on Cap. What are you waiting for?”

Steve startled at his question and tried leaning away from him, but that’s when he realized that he had his hands tightly pressed against the broken armor of Tony’s suit. His shield was carelessly thrown beside Tony’s body.

“What?”

“Didn’t you come back to finish what you started,” Tony rasped. “Thought you had to go save your friend though. Wasting time dear Captain.”

“You were going to kill him. Tony he’s my friend I can’t...”

“So was I.”

The statement stayed on a constant loop in his head. His mouth tightened and a burning entered his throat as though wanting to say something.

“You are my friend.”

Tony laughed, but it was short and dark. “Come on Cap. Stop lying. Do what you’ve been wanting to do since you first met me.”

Suddenly, Steve felt the weight of the shield back in his hands.

“This time finish the job,” Tony said angrily. His hands pressed against Steve’s firmly on the shield. “Go ahead and kill me.”

“No.”

“Kill me.”

“No,” Steve yelled trying to get away from the shield. “Let me help you. I came back this time. I came back. Tony.”

“Kill me.”

“No!” Steve yelled.

Steve was hoping for a response from Tony, but instead he got silence. For every time that he had said no the shield had pressed deeper into Tony’s chest. Steve scrambled away from Tony’s body when he realized the damage that had been done. Steve was looking down at his hands that had grown red from trying to stop the bleeding from around the arc reactor.

Tony coughed up some blood and smiled softly at Steve. “Congrats Cap. You’ve finally gotten what you wanted.”

“No, this isn’t what I wanted. I’m sorry. Please Tony. Please don’t do this to me. Please,” Steve blubbered pressing his hands against the arc reactor. “Tony tell me what to do. Just tell me what to do and I’ll fix it.”

“Some things can’t be fixed Steve,” Tony whispered his mouth slowly growing slack and the
remaining color in his cheeks left.

He watched as the light became absent from Tony’s eyes and his arc reactor and the chill that had only been passing around his body settled deep in his bones.

Steve woke up with a startled breath. His heartbeat thundered loudly in his ears and he felt as though he was dying. His throat closed up and his eyes watered. His dream felt so real because if he were being honest things could have gone that way. But they hadn’t. Had they?

He needed proof.

He looked at Tony and moved his body to his side. His fingers trembled as he hovered them above Tony’s body, afraid that if he touched him he would disappear. But he needed to touch him to make sure that he was there, that Steve hadn’t killed him.

Just as he was about to press hand against Tony’s cheek, Tony woke up with a startled, “No, don’t!” with his hands pressed against his arc reactor.

Unfocused eyes met his and he flinched away from Steve. Steve winced at the response and curled in on himself. The two stared at each other silently for a few minutes not quite sure knowing what to do. Steve watched as the focus slowly appeared back in Tony’s eyes. Tony watched as Steve grew closer to getting off the couch and leaving.

“Don’t leave,” Tony rasped his hand rubbing his throat to calm the roughness in it. “I didn’t notice FRIDAY put on one of your boring history documentaries. Must have been so boring it woke me up, but it’s also boring enough for me to go back to sleep too.”

“Tony,” Steve said in a strained voice.

“Don’t leave just...stay here for a little bit longer,” Tony said trying to incorporate some strength back into his voice and not heavy begging.

Steve lingered for a few moments unsure and just when Tony thought he was going to leave he sat back down on the couch and stayed.

The two didn’t talk about what made them wake up with fevered looks and stolen breath. But in that moment they could almost fool themselves into believing that it was alright as long as they stayed together on that couch watching boring history documentaries.

Chapter End Notes

I made a few changes and if you're like me sometimes you need those addressed. The Christmas party in the story is now taking place on Dec. 25th on a Saturday instead of Dec. 23. (I'll edit that change later). Also Peter's AI is called APRIL instead of KAREN, since I already have a Karen.

Thanks again to everyone who commented, gave a kudo, and left a bookmark. You all continue to make my day :)}
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Feel free to comment, even if you just want to write "why." So I am going to go into a nice little cave and hide only popping out to read and reply to comments and update the next chapter because well...

"I apologize in advance for any tears shed" Pt. I

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Welcome again to the annual Stark Charity Christmas Gala. I was going to have this whole introduction, which I thought was entirely endearing, but Pepper has insisted that it is not appropriate for the younger ears here tonight,” Tony joked. “Especially Mrs. Goldman.”

He winked at the older woman, who blushed. Her husband playfully waved his fist in the air toward Tony. Tony smiled brilliantly at the crowd once again.

“As you all know this Gala is meant to allow those within our line of work to come together, have a good time, enjoy some entertainment, and raise money for the Maria Stark Foundation. For those new here the money going toward programs that help orphanages, give resources to underprivileged areas, improve the education of all children, and more. So thank you all for joining me for another year.”

Everyone gave an applause, before Tony was allowed to continue his introduction.

“So enjoy this evening where you all can enjoy one night free from the paparazzi,” Tony laughed. Everyone exclaimed their agreement toward his last statement. “Now without further ado I introduce you to the lovely and talented Nathaniel who will begin our evening with some comedy.”

Nathaniel ran up to the stage ready to take the mic. “Be careful who you talk about Nathaniel. Some people here sign your checks.”

Tony winked at Nathaniel who laughed. Tony passed him and went down the stage. On his way down he greeted everyone who was invited and thanked them for coming and for their donations. He said hello to their children and other members of their family.

“Well this has turned out lovely as always,” Pepper greeted kissing him on the cheek. “And it is nice to see that your former teammates are here.”

“Not former Pep,” Tony said looking at the table where all the Avengers were sitting. He had extended the invitation to everyone, seeing as though it’d be another way to get the Avengers back in a positive light in the public eye.

The only ones who were there were Steve, Bucky, Sam, Natasha, Clint, Wanda, and Vision. Wanda and Vision had been able to take a brief break from her training to attend the Gala. Tony had warmly welcomed them. He truly didn’t trust himself to be too close to Wanda. Even though he was hoping that she was getting her necessary help, he just couldn’t trust being close to her again at least not yet.

Clint had been happy to see her though, so there was that. Natasha narrowed her eyes at Wanda,
searching for something. Then her expression smoothed out as she went back to talking to Steve.

Pepper shrugged not really caring to fix her mistake with the former teammates’ statement. She turned toward Rhodey who came beside her. Rhodey smiled brightly at Tony and engulfed him in a hug.

“Platypus. My goodness have I missed seeing your face,” Tony exclaimed pulling back from Rhodey. “How is my hallmark movie romance going?”

Rhodey made a face at this. “It isn’t going. I am not going to fall in love with my physical therapist for your entertainment.”

“See that’s what he thinks. We all know this is just part of the plot where the main character thinks woe is me I will never fall in love again. This just means the plot is thickening,” Tony said gleefully. “And Pepper have you met any royalty while in London? Then I can have two cliché Hallmark movies! But for real I need you to find one because I doubt I’m getting invited to Harry and Meghan’s wedding…though I am still holding out for an invitation.”

Wanda walked up to them, followed by Vision. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but I wanted to say something.”

“Okay,” Tony drawled out confused as to where this was going.

“I came here to tell you I have a surprise for you,” Wanda announced shyly. “While I was traveling across the world and across the universes using only my mind…which well I’ll explain how that is possible on a later date. However, it is fantastical. Dr. Strange is helping with that and I do apologize I digressed.”

Tony stared at her. Wanda looked at Vision for encouragement. “Well, I sent a signal to look for Bruce because I know you were missing a friend, certainly one who was untouched with all this mess. And this is the time to be surrounded by family so…”

Tony didn’t dare allow himself to be hopeful. However, Wanda’s hopeful smile at the back of him and Pepper’s excited squeal caused him to want to look behind himself.

“I do hope that I am not too late in reserving a spot at the Avengers table,” Bruce exclaimed.

Tony was shocked into silence and stayed still. He stayed like this for a full minute before he threw his arms around Bruce. He wrapped his arms firmly around Bruce, who was shocked by Tony’s response. He had an idea that he had been missed, but he truly hadn’t known how much. He brought his hands up hesitantly to rest on Tony’s back and pat it a few times.

“Brucie bear where have you been? How are you? There’s so many science things we have to do,” Tony listed. His eyes then traveled to the two people beside Bruce. He stepped away sharply and stared at the other two accompanying Bruce. “I see Thor. I see Loki. One of these two is not supposed to happen. Please tell me the correct answer Bruce.”

Bruce shifted on his feet and scratched the back of his neck nervously. “It’s ah a long story.”

Thor smiled brightly. “Tony! How I have missed your tiny human body.”

He stepped to Tony and picked him up in a hug. Tony smiled at the affection, but remembered that breathing was a thing and Thor was just always a little too enthusiastic with his hugs.

Tony scrunched up his face. “Uh, thanks? Tiny human body needs to breathe then.”
“Aye,” Thor exclaimed putting Tony back down on his feet.

“Thor not so loud,” Bruce said trying to show an example of how loudly one should be speaking.

“So we’re just fine with Loki being here and not chained up. I mean I’m just you know pretty certain the last time we were all together it didn’t end well and it did end up with Loki chained up. Unless I’ve somehow transported to some alternate universe.”

“We’re keeping an eye on him,” Bruce said. “He’s…been better.”

Tony looked unsurely at him. Bruce sighed. “Trust me I know. It’ll be better when Thor and I have explained it.”

“I promise to be on my best behavior tonight,” Loki said with a voice like silk.

Tony did not trust that voice.

But he trusted Thor and Bruce. “Just make sure he doesn’t…just doesn’t do what he usually does.”

“Where in the world have you two been? I’ve looked and could never find you and well I just assumed Thor was somewhere in Asgard doing some royal godly stuff or something,” Tony waved. “But why are you two here together?”

Thor and Bruce shared a long look and sighed. “It is a long story, one that must be explained as soon as we have available time.”

He led the others to the table and they all sat down. Miles who had been sitting on Natasha’s lap went to sit on Tony’s lap. Tony watched all of them with a smile on his face. This, this is what he had been waiting for and wanting. It had taken some time to get there and they still had a long way to go, but here they all were.

Thor smiled brightly to Steve. “Shield brother you have grown a bear! It sits nicely on your face.”

“Thanks,” Steve smiled. “And you cut your hair. That is certainly different.”

“And Tony got a baby human,” Thor implored. “It has been the season of much change, has it not?”

Natasha shrugged. “Yes, I suppose next I’ll dye my hair blonde.”

“Okay, Nat let’s not go crazy,” Clint warned jokingly.

There were no arguments, but they were all gathered here tonight listening to Nathaniel’s comedy, Christmas carols, eating food, and just talking with one another. Tony was finally relaxing when he felt Steve tap him on his shoulder.

“Hey, can I talk to you outside on the balcony for a second,” Steve whispered not loud enough to hear over the carol of children.

Tony turned to him and nodded. Steve stood out of his seat as Tony went to hand Miles to Pepper. Miles enthusiastically settled into Pepper’s lap to tell her how much fun he was having with the toy science kit Pepper had given to him for Christmas.

On his way outside to the balcony he bumped into a body. When he looked up, he was startled to see the person there. “Ryder? What are you doing here? I thought you were coming back next Saturday.”
“I was, but I wanted to come back early and surprise you. Surprise,” Ryder laughed.

“Yeah, look I…can we talk when I get back. I have to meet someone really quick,” Tony kissed him on the cheek. “Glad you could make it though. You can sit down in my seat. I’ll be right back.”

“Oh, yeah sure okay,” Ryder said confused as he watched Tony walk away.

Steve fiddled with the box in his hand, while he waited for Tony to go outside to the balcony. He looked out into the city impressed with the skyline and wished for a second that he had his sketchbook that Tony had given him this morning. It had been a while since he drew, but now he longed for it. When Tony stepped outside to meet him, he yearned even more for some paint and a canvas. Tony looked beautiful with the moonlight lighting up his features and the skyline being his backdrop.

“So you said you wanted to see me Rogers,” Tony replied, his expression soft and unguarded.

For a moment Steve thanked whoever and whatever allowed Tony to have this expression on his face. Steve had since placed the box back into his jacket pocket and hoped that Tony wouldn’t be able to see its imprint. He had originally wanted to give Tony this present during the morning, when everyone went to the main floor to exchange gifts. However, he had backed out of it at the last minute and instead chosen to give Tony a sweater.

Bucky’s and Clint’s insistence that he give Tony his original gift brought Steve to grab Tony and ask that he meet him. So there he was.

“Yes, I did,” Steve began leaning against the railing of the balcony. “How’s your night going?”

“It’s going amazing. The fact that everyone was able to make it has made my day. I mean Bruce is here. Bruce!” Tony exclaimed vibrantly. “Do you know how much we are going to be able to do now that he’s back? No, you don’t because it’s too much.”

“Yes, because you two are what they call science bros, right?” Steve inquired.

“Yeah,” Tony answered. “But the night is going well. I mean it always tends to be a good night. It’s a time that everyone lay aside their differences with one another, their egos, the competition, and everything. It’s…to put it simple it’s one of the best Christmases I’ve had in a long time.”

The corners of Steve’s mouth tugged upward in a brief smile. “That’s good.”

“And what about you? Enjoying your first Stark Charity Christmas Gala?” Tony asked. He placed his hands in his pockets and rocked back onto the heels of his feet. “I know it can get a lot for some first timers with you know introducing yourself. Pretty sure everyone wanted to meet you as soon as you walked in.”

It was true. As soon as Steve had walked into the ballroom, he was met with many people trying to say hello. Thankfully, they soon understood the need for privacy and space and returned to their own assigned tables.

“I have truly enjoyed myself. You have a wonderful thing going here Tony,” Steve exclaimed.

Tony grinned shyly, not used to such open compliments. “Well, it’s the one thing I was proud of that my parents did. So I figured it was something I needed to carry on.”
“You’re doing an amazing job,” Steve truthfully admitted staring straight at Tony.

“Did you just call me out here to give me compliments?” Tony asked, attempting to advert his gaze from Steve’s. “I thought I would never live to see the day.”

Steve’s heart went to his throat and his palms immediately grew sweaty. Okay, there was no putting this off anymore. It was just a gift and that’s all it had to mean. Steve just had to remind himself that. Just giving a gift to a friend.

“Actually, I called you out here because I wanted to give you this,” he responded taking out the box from his jacket. “I wanted to give it to you, once we exchanged gifts this morning.”

Tony took the box from him and looked at him curiously. “But you already gave me a Christmas present?”

Steve shrugged. “That was really a backup, but this was more personal. I kind of wanted to give it to you privately.”

“Oh,” Tony whispered, suddenly holding the box reverently. “What is it?”

“You’ll just have to open it,” Steve whispered as softly as Tony did, afraid to break the quietness and sort of innocence of this moment.

Tony looked up at Steve once more before opening the box. In the box laid a thin silver bracelet. The silver bracelet was a simple silver band with markings engraved in them. The markings are set in a smooth design outlined by the silver. With the marked engravings were pieces of sapphire interwoven with it. Tony marveled at the bracelet and watched as moonlight caught on some words engraved within the bracelet.

*The way your heart expresses love is a form of art. It encompasses the beauty of movement, while expressing the serenity of a peaceful stillness.*

Tony looked up to Steve, eyes bright with unshed tears. He looked back down toward the bracelet not wanting Steve to see him cry.

Steve looked at Tony, who was visibly affected and placed a hand on Tony’s shoulder. Tony looked up once again and this time with a smile. He breathed out a shuddering breath and shook his head.

“Steve, how did you...how?” Tony stuttered. “I mean what...”

Steve grew amazed at Tony’s speechlessness. He was hoping that the gift would be well received, but Tony not being able to form a coherent sentence was unexpected.

“I knew that you had three people who you truly loved in your lifetime. Jarvis, Peggy, and your mom. I also know that you didn’t really have anything of theirs in your possessions. You had JARVIS, but then you didn’t. I know you told Peggy’s family that you didn’t deserve any of her old things. I knew that Maria’s family demanded that they receive everything of hers and you were too young to be able to contest that.”

“How did you know all of this?” Tony questioned. “No one knows.”

Steve shrugged. “I have my sources.”

Tony narrowed his eyes. Steve had no doubt in his mind that Tony would eventually try looking for these said sources.
“So I wanted you to have something of all of them even if it’s something small,” Steve explained. “So the designs I found were the ones you made with your mom, when you were young.”

Tony ran a finger of the design markings and smiled sadly. “Yeah, people always assumed my dad and I were the only geniuses of the family. However, they often forget that my dad met my mom when he visited his friends at Harvard. My mom was brilliant it’s just when Howard started diminishing her ideas is when she lost that fire for her own research. I’m pretty sure these were part of the last designs my mom and I made together. I had stumbled upon her working one night on some prosthetic designs and regenerative limb research and being so fascinated with it all.”

Tony looked up into the sky and stayed silent for a few moments. “That night I spent more time with my mom then I had during my whole lifetime at that point.”

Steve smiled as Tony smiled at the fond memory. Steve had been worried that this would bring up bad memories, but so far it was going good.

“And the sapphire?”

Steve shifted on his foot. “Is actually for Edwin Jarvis. I actually remember this from a conversation that I had with you.”

“Was I drunk?” Tony questioned knowing full well he hadn’t divulged in past memories while being sober.

“No, actually,” Steve said. “It was said briefly in passing. You were talking to me about how Jarvis would sit you down and you two would read the *River of Sapphire Dreams* every night, when you were scared.”

Tony chocked on a cry and Steve tilted his head up. “I know how you loved how that sapphire seemed to glow brighter on those nights as Jarvis made it feel alive in real in your dreams. I know how it brought comfort to you. Since then sapphire always reminded you of Jarvis and the safety that he allowed you to escape to.”

“Steve,” Tony softly and almost reverently whispered.

Steve stepped closer to him and kept his hand on his chin. “And the quote was from Peggy. I never knew how much you knew Peggy, but then I found out to you she was your Aunt Peggy. You’d spend the weekends with her and she’d tell you everything. She gave you wisdom that you had never explored before.”

His voice had become a soft hush and the wind seemed to accompany his voice into this melodious tune that had Tony wanting to close his eyes and eagerly draw in the sound.

“I know that when you were with her, you would write down things that she would say because you loved her and you trusted her. You trusted her words because she lived through them. And then when she started forgetting you would remind her of the words she spoke to you so she could remember. You had a book full of those quotes. Then it was taken from you wasn’t it?”

Tony turned his face down and wiped at his eyes. He was not going to cry, he told Steve so. “Was it your mission to make me cry tonight?”

“It’s never my mission to make you cry,” Steve answered.

“Obie burned it,” he said softly as if he said it soft enough it wouldn’t be true. “I…he said it was making me soft to rely on that, when I was supposed to be making weapons and continuing my
father’s legacy.”

“He was wrong,” Steve fiercely put forth.

Tony nodded. “I know. He always was.”

Tony placed the bracelet on his wrist and held it up to his chest as he brought his hand close to the arc reactor. The metal clicked against the covered arc reactor. Steve shortened the already short distance between them. His eyes lowered as he looked at the bracelet on Tony’s wrist. Tony looked up to meet Steve’s gaze and for once felt centered.

“Hey Tony…” Sharon exclaimed, but stopped when she saw her cousin and Steve close together. “Should I come back at another time or?”

Tony quickly stepped aside and tried shaking his head from the fog that had settled over his eyes. He turned to Sharon and gave her his full attention.

“No, we were just done here actually. I didn’t know you were here. When did you get here?” he questioned.

Sharon raised her eyebrow then smoothed her expression. “A little while ago. Ah, Senator Evans wanted to introduce you to his daughter. He said he’d like for her to intern at SI and was hoping she could introduce herself and maybe talk with you briefly.”

“Okay,” Tony said.

Steve watched as Tony walked away. Tony then turned around and regarded Steve. “And thank you Steve for the gift. I’ll certainly be one I’ll never forget.”

He turned back to Sharon and walked in front of her. Sharon glanced back and watched as Steve looked forlornly at Tony leaving. Steve quickly turned away when he saw Sharon’s assessing glare. When he turned back, both were gone. He sighed loudly, before going back to the table.

When Tony came back to their table, Steve smiled at seeing the bracelet adorn Tony’s wrist. Tony saw Steve’s gaze and gave a discreet smile. Steve went back to talking to Thor, who was completely enraptured with the small portions of food they were serving. Steve and others had tried many times to explain the concept of appetizers, though Steve admitted to himself his own explanation was rather terrible.

If he was being honest, he understood Thor. He would much rather get to the main course. They had a breakfast at the tower, but Steve himself hadn’t made lunch. Clint picked at his food somberly as Natasha talked in a low breath to him. He looked up with a bit of a smile, before going back to poking at his food.

Tony arrived at the table and sat beside Ryder who had brought another seat to the table. Ryder had been talking to Pepper and Rhodey. He appeared slightly uncomfortable as Rhodey talked to him, until Rhodey broke out into a smile and patted Ryder’s shoulder. Pepper rolled her eyes toward Rhodey and said something else to Ryder, then turned back to talk to Sharon.

Just as Tony was about to sit down, Miles went to Tony and whispered something in his ear.

Tony excused himself from the table as he held Miles hand in his. Miles grabbed on to Tony’s hand and skipped toward the destination, despite not knowing where they had placed another candy workshop station opposite of the ballroom that they were in. Ryder, who had noticed Tony’s departure, went to go follow him. Tony went by one of the volunteers and introduced him to Miles.
The volunteer then took Miles and his appointed group through the little candy workshop. Ryder waited as Tony let Miles follow the other children who were running around freely grabbing their gift bags and putting candy in it.

When Tony noticed that Ryder had followed him, he turned around and walked toward him. Tony hadn’t really had a chance to talk to Ryder, since he had surprised him. However, seeing him there made him realize that he should catch up.

“This was a nice surprise,” Tony said raising himself on his toes to kiss Ryder on the cheek.

Ryder sneered as he leaned away from Tony. “I can see just how surprised you were. You were probably up to something you shouldn’t be up to.”

Tony smiled as he took his spot beside Ryder. He had to keep smiling so none of his guests would notice anything was amiss.

“I don’t know what you are implying,” Tony exclaimed. “I am actually very happy that you are available to be here. I was just surprised because you said that you wouldn’t be back until the fifth of January. However, I can show you later just how thankful I am that you’re here, when we get back home.”

Tony wiggled his eyebrows in playful seduction at Ryder. When Ryder refused to acknowledge Tony, Tony tilted his head to him quizzically. He took a step back to stand in front of Ryder. He observed Ryder’s serious expression and mouth taut with tension.

“What’s wrong? You’ve been here at the most an hour and a half and you’re already having a problem. Are you still feeling bad about the treatments not working?” Tony asked worriedly. “If so I can get a few doctors that I know and see if they can pull their heads together. Bruce is here and he’s brilliant.”

“I’m not upset over that,” Ryder mumbled over his breathe, his eyes trained to something over Tony’s head.

“Then what’s got your face looking like that,” Tony questioned.

“I’m upset because my boyfriend’s been basically whoring himself out to the next available person, while I’ve been away,” Ryder hissed snapping his eyes to Tony.

Tony reared back as though he had been slapped. “Whoring myself?” he whispered mindful of the company that was around him. “I have not been whoring myself out to anyone and how dare you say that. You know what I think it’s time I get Miles. He probably has enough candy to fill up three bags.”

Tony moved to walk away, but Ryder reached out and grabbed his arm. His fingers tightly curled around Tony’s bicep and he squeezed it pulling Tony toward him. From an outside perspective it would look like Ryder and Tony were just engaged in a comfortable embrace. Tony muffled a noise of surprise at the abrupt movement.

“Do you think this is a joke? You’ve been making a fool out of me this whole evening.”

“Please do explain oh mighty one how I have been making a fool out of you,” Tony spat out.

Ryder grit his teeth together and grounded out, “You’ve been marching around and playing house with Steve. You think I haven’t seen the photos of you and Steve at the winter carnival or you and Steve with Miles at the grocery store. Or how about the time you and Steve were seen running
together? And here you’re just glued to him at the hip as though you’re ready at any moment to drop
to your knees and obey your captain.”

Ryder’s face grew enflamed with anger. “And then you’re kissing Bruce on the cheek and hugging
him like he’s your long lost lover from war. When I, your boyfriend surprises you, you barely even
react.”

“That’s different. I haven’t seen Bruce in forever,” Tony tried explaining. “That’s extremely
different. Plus that’s just how I always greet him. It’s just how our relationship works.”

“Well that’s going to have to change. Think about how people will view our relationship, when you
are out here kissing everyone that isn’t me and…”

“Who cares what they think? The only opinions that matter are yours and mine. You have no reason
to be jealous,” Tony placates. “I am yours and only yours, when are you going to realize-”

“Don’t you fucking dare interrupt me, when I am talking to you. You know what’s a joke is you
wearing this gift of Steve’s. What’s this him branding you as his,” Ryder said tugging on the bracelet
on Tony’s wrist. “I noticed it wasn’t there, when I first saw you. But it was when you two came
back.”

“It was a gift,” Tony exclaimed trying to push away from Ryder. “That’s all it is.”

“You have to understand how this all looks to someone from the outside Tony. Remember when I
told you about those rumors I heard about you in regards to the Avengers. They are certainly looking
true right now. Did you spread your legs for them, while I was gone? That’s probably why you
didn’t return my calls. Was Steve fucking you, when I was out saving kids?”

“Stop it.”

“Were all your dreams finally coming true because he was using your body like it was intended for?
It’s probably why he gave you this bracelet like a common day prostitute. That’s probably why all
your little supposed Avengers are coming back. They came back to get the final uses of their
precious toy.”

“Stop it,” Tony hissed as a burning in his eyes slowly grew. “Stop it.”

“And you probably like a greedy whore just kept asking for more didn’t you. And I don’t know why
I’m still here. I should have left you a long time ago, but I had hoped that you would mature. I had
hoped that I being around would change you for the better,” Ryder remarked as he caressed Tony’s
cheek.

Ryder sighed dejectedly. “I knew how you were back in the day. Hell I probably had a hand in how
you started sleeping with so many different people. That was my mistake, wasn’t it? Didn’t know it
would get so bad.”

Tony grew still as he remembered the night that Ryder was referring to. Ryder pleaded that Tony
became still in his hold smiled heatedly at him as though himself remembering that night.

*It was Tony’s fifteenth birthday. Rhodey and Pepper had argued with Tony over coming down to see
him, but Tony didn’t want them to. There was no use of them coming to MIT only for a day to go
straight back home. Especially with Pepper all the way at Berkley and Rhody was still at base in
Arizona. They had of course agreed, the plan itself making sense. They would meet up again*
sometime during break and celebrate Tony’s birthday. After all it was only his fifteenth birthday, it wasn’t that big of a deal.

His mom had tried arguing with Tony, but settled on placing aside a piece of pie from Leauna. She had sounded disappointed that he hadn’t wanted anyone to celebrate his birthday with. Tony just had to constantly remind her that he only had a month left until he was back home for summer break. Then they could go out and celebrate him finally turning fifteen.

“Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, dear Tony. Happy birthday to you,” Ryder’s voice sang out of tune. He wrapped a large arm around Tony’s smaller shoulder, grinning brightly. “Finally, you turn fifteen. Not old enough to drink legally, but old enough to get a driver’s permit.”

“Ain’t that awesome,” he laughed back, surprised that he had even remembered it was his birthday. Though he shouldn’t have been so shocked. After all, he kept mentioning to everyone how the baby was finally on his way to becoming a man. Tony had brushed off those comments, and rolled his eyes in disagreement. He was already a man.

He was just a small man.

Ryder took his arm way from his shoulder and laid back in bed. “Hey, so what do you want to do today? I mean after all it is your sweet fifteen. Sexy fifteen? I don’t know about sexy though. It feels kind of naughty saying sexy in regards to you,” he said pulling a face.

“I am very sexy,” he shot back, pulling on his jacket. It always got cold in the dorms during the spring semester. He guess they figured since it was hot outside, it needed to be cold inside.

Ryder looked at him shortly before bursting into raucous laughter. “Gosh, Tony no. Please, stop. You are like a small child. I feel that it is weird to call yourself sexy. Cute? Adorable? Yes. Sexy. Meh.”

He leaned forward to grab ahold of Tony’s belt loops to pull him closer so he could pinch his cheeks. “See, totally adorable. Did you do baby GAP modeling? I feel like you could have been a baby model.” Tony didn’t reply, but only growled in response. “Ah, Tony it’s been like two years. Let’s not go back to mute nameless boy.”

“Ryder, you’re an ass,” he bit back, breaking away from him.

“But it’s a great one,” he said waggling his eyebrows.

“I still ask myself everyday how in the world you managed to get Sydney to date you,” he snorted, sliding into his desk chair. He took his glasses off, trying to rub the tension away that was forming in the back of his eyes.

“It’s obviously my great ass,” Ryder joked. “But seriously Tony. Plans? Today, your day of birth. What should we do? The day is young and so are you.”

“I don’t want to do anything Ryder. Can’t we just like lounge and watch a movie. Or we can just like go to the party they’re having on Aspen,” he suggested, watching as his computer came to life.

“And that sounds entirely, boring. You know what grab your keys I’m taking you out kid,” Ryder smiled brightly, as if he had just come up with an amazing idea. “Who knows tonight may be the night when some lucky lady turns you into a man.”

“I don’t have to sleep with someone, in order for me to gain man status,” he stated, cheeks flushing
warmly.

“Of course you haven’t because you’re always busy in some lab or back in the dorms studying. So boring. If it weren’t for me, I’m pretty sure you would be as pale as a vampire, you certainly look dead like one sometimes. Like goodness, that week during finals last year. I was afraid you were about to like go on a hunt for blood.” Ryder continued talking.

“So, we’re getting out. You need fresh air. But you can’t stay in this room surrounded by all of this,” he gestured to the tornado mess of Tony’s side of the room.

“Ryder, I think the best thing is for me to stay in,” Tony said softly. “I know that. I can’t go out.”

“Okay, how about this let’s go out for an hour and if you still want to come back then we can.”

“Ryder.”

“Tony,” he drew out in a singsong voice. “One hour.”

He turned his eyes toward me and he swallowed the lump in my throat.

“An hour.”

“An hour.”

By the time he had made it to Ryder’s car, he was already bobbing his head to some teen pop song. Once Tony closed his door behind him, he sped out of the student parking lot. Tony barely managed to put on his seatbelt before they were at the second stoplight. The car ride over was spent singing ridiculously out of tune to whatever song came on the radio.

Laughter flowed easily between the both of them and he took a moment to think of how appreciative he was. He had managed to finally find a friend on his own, that wasn’t after the Stark last name. Pepper and Rhodey hadn’t come for the Stark name, but he had met them through his mom.

But Ryder was the first friend he had made. Like he didn’t need introductions and he hadn’t scared him away. They’d been friends for two years and Tony was constantly amazed by that small fact. An easy smile spread crossed his face and Ryder looked at him briefly smiling back, before placing his eyes back on the road.

Thirty minutes later they were at some club in downtown. The atmosphere was dark and Tony felt uncomfortable. There was no attention on him, but yet again there could have been no attention on me if he was in his room.

Ryder seemed to be enjoying his time leaning back into his chair and staring at the lit stage. Tony let the music of the club drown out the thoughts in his head.

“Come on Tony,” Ryder told me and brought the bottle to Tony’s lips.

“No, no Ryder,” he said pushing back the bottle. Then he insisted that Tony take a sip of the alcoholic beverage. The liquid passed across his lips and trailed down his throat. The burn caused him to cough slightly. He hadn’t had alcohol since he was seven when his dad “accidentally” allowed him to drink some.

Then he found out how his dad was when he drank and he vowed to never be like him. So he never drank anything. At least until now.
Now he kept on swallowing the bitter liquid as Ryder pressed it against his lips. His eyes fluttered close and he could hear Ryder laughing. He smiled against the bottle and brought his fingers to rest over his that were on the bottle. Ryder took the hint and drew his hand away so that he could hold it myself.

“That’s right Tony. Let me take care of you okay. That’s what friends are for,” Ryder said grinning from ear to ear.

“Yeah,” he laughed ignoring the burn in his throat that felt almost as bad as the burning in his heart. He tried massaging his chest. Ryder leaned Tony back against his chest and waved over a young woman.

“Hey, Candy what you say about giving my boy a little fun. He’s had a hard time today. Old man didn’t call him to wish him happy birthday.”

“Oh poor baby,” Candy said pouting.

He languidly turned his head to look up at her. Candy couldn’t have been her real name. Though some parents were into that sort of thing. Candy sauntered toward the two of them, her hips swaying side to side. Her bright green eyes were a stark contrast to the dark hair that framed her angular face. She looked dangerous.

He wanted to leave. He told Ryder, but he shrugged it off and grinned cheekily at Candy.

“I’m always going to do what’s best for you, promise. So just let me,” Ryder said as Candy drew closer to him.

Is that what was best for him?

But then he found that booze and alcohol was the best for him. It allowed him not to focus on that gaping hole in his chest. Ryder was a fucking genius. Truly. Honestly. No wonder his dad wanted to let him intern at SI.

“Will you let me take care of you tonight? I promise let me take care of my friend. Let me help you get your mind off of things. I can help you with anything you ever need. I got you forever and always Tony,” he breathed heavily as he looked at Tony from heavy lidded eyes.

Tony blearily blinked his eyes up to Candy who was kissing Ryder’s neck. His eyes followed her lips on his neck. He had never had anyone to kiss him like that. No one wanted the genius freak. And he hadn’t wanted them either. At least that is what he would tell himself when he was slapped with rejection and mocking laughter.

He wanted it to be special. It had to be special. But he couldn’t help this growing need that he needed to touch, needed someone to touch him in order to rid himself of this loneliness.

Candy tilted her head to leer at him just as she darted a pink tongue to wet her bottom lip. Tony’s breath hitched as she then swiped it along Ryder’s throat. Ryder leaned into it and his fingers ghosted over her waist.

Candy gasped slightly when the touch became firmer and rolled into it. Ryder’s arm that was on Tony’s shoulder loosened and he wanted to fall back into that contact. Tony looked at him, but he pushed him away. Candy took the hint and settled down in front of Tony, but not before she waved over another young woman. That woman smiled mischievously and made her way over to all of them.
“Always going to look out for what’s best for you,” he said again whispering it into Tony’s ear. “No matter what ever happens between us, whether we are miles apart you can always call on me when things get bad. Let me show you how I can do that tonight.”

And he had believed him.

Tony shook himself out of the memory and pushed himself away from Ryder. He wasn’t going to let him do this to himself tonight. He was having a great time. Bruce and Thor were back. Rhodey and Pepper were here. Nothing was going wrong. Nothing.

So why would he sit here and let Ryder destroy all that happiness. Sure, Ryder had been a source of happiness recently…but at what point does it become too much? And now he has all of them back, so does he really even need him anymore.

It had felt pleasant being reminded how he felt wanted and needed and to not have someone leave. But the way Ryder needed and wanted him felt wrong. The reasons that Ryder stayed felt stifling.

“No, you’re not trying to help. You’re been rude and this is certainly not the place to have this conversation. Lately, I don’t know what is going on with you, but if this is how you’re going to act then we can call ourselves through. I am not going to be reprimanded for being myself and I refuse to restrict myself to a freaking cage. Maybe this break away from you was just what I needed.”

Ryder’s mouth turned downward. “Excuse me?”

Tony bit his lips nervously, but with just a shy bit of confidence repeated, “We need a break whether permanently or temporarily we’ll see. However, I think we need to reevaluate this relationship and the benefit of-”

“No,” Ryder growled lowly.

“No?” Tony laughed. “Yes. Ryder you and I aren’t happy okay. Maybe we need the break to see what makes us happy again. You don’t make me happy…at least not with the way you are acting right now.”

Ryder’s chest heaved up and down and he pushed Tony away from himself, though not in a way that brought attention to himself. His body practically vibrated with fury and he felt the need to physically express his anger. A body came barreling into his. Before he could even remember that he was in the presence of others, his hand swung downward at the body.

Miles made a soft gasp as he saw Ryder’s hand barely missing his face. Tony looked down to see that Miles had slowly made his way over to Tony. Miles’ eyes widened in confusion and he turned upward to Tony.

“Were you going to hit him?” Tony screamed face growing tight with anger. “How dare you? I told myself I’d never be Howard and I sure as hell would never be like Maria who let her kid suffer abuse” Tony bit out. “And you wonder why I need a break from your-”

Ryder quickly grabbed Tony by the waist and brought him closer. Under his breathe he threatened, “It would be best if you do not finish your statement. You are going to go inside and say that you forgot that we are supposed to be spending a few days at my parents. Find a babysitter for that kid and you and I are going to take a trip.”

And suddenly everything around Tony became blurred and every sound became white noise. His
fingers fell loosely from where they had settled around Ryder’s shoulders in hopes of getting space. He could feel Ryder breathing harshly against his ear as he continued talking. His chest tightened and he wanted to tell Ryder to just get his hands off of his arc reactor because he couldn’t fucking breathe. But his tongue was weighed down and his mind had slowed down his thoughts.

He felt immobile as Ryder ran his hands along where the arc reactor was. Even though it was covered by clothing his touch burned through the fabric. Tony had grown to calm himself down when someone unknowingly touched the arc reactor, but Ryder’s intent…his intent to put Tony in this space of abysmal darkness was tilting the world around him.

Ryder saw the silent panic in Tony’s eyes and steered him away from the candy workshop, leaving Miles behind. Ryder placed his hand on Tony’s back and moved the immobile Tony to somewhere else in the hotel.

“Tony, I apologize for my behavior tonight. I truly do. It was wrong. I just sometimes I get fearful that I will lose you and disappoint you. You are the greatest mind of all time and you are here with me and that makes me feel special. However, it also makes me realize how much it can all go away,” Ryder said as he continued walking in the hallways.

Tony still felt the phantom touch of Ryder’s hands on his reactor, then it shifted to being back in Afghanistan, then it transformed into Obie’s hands reaching for him, then it altered to someone who was unnamed reaching for the arc reactor with cold hands and stabbing the space below it, then it became Steve pressing the shield into his chest.

His body became cold and he couldn’t feel air enter his lungs. But Ryder kept talking and kept his hand pressed against his back as they moved through the hallways. His body felt limp and the space around him felt distorted. He could hear Ryder talking and it felt soft and muffled against the disjointed mess going on in his mind.

He reached out for the softness and soothing nature of that voice. He wanted it to bring him back. But had it brought him there in the first place?

He couldn’t remember.

He couldn’t breathe.

He couldn’t.

“I want to have forever with you and so it hurts me, when you don’t feel the same. It hurts me, when I see you with other people even if you are just naturally flirtatious. It shouldn’t anger me so and I should not react to you in a violent manner. You’re right I shouldn’t have raised my hand at Miles. I hope you can forgive me like I can forgive you for cheating on me.”

Cheating?

*Did I cheat, Tony thought to himself mulishly. Maybe it had looked like cheating? I probably shouldn’t have been too close with the others, especially Steve.*

Ryder led Tony toward a small room and sat him down on the bed. His hand went up to his arc reactor and he traced his hands along where he knew it was. Tony couldn’t breathe.

Couldn’t Ryder see he was struggling? He felt his head grow light and dots swim in his vision. He wanted the hand back on his back because it grounded him. He wanted it off of his chest. He didn’t trust that hand there.
“When I was your friend in college, I wanted nothing more than to be with you. Even then. Howard knew how I felt for you and perhaps that’s why I received that internship. I think he wanted to make sure you had a stable partner. He saw something in me and I am hoping you see the same,” Ryder softly sang.

His voice was so nice.

He smiled at him and it looked inviting.

Why…why did it feel like he wanted to leave, but he wanted him to stay?

Ryder sat back on the floor in front of Tony. “I want everything with you and feel like I deserve nothing with you. I know you have been patient and I hope you continue to be patient. I am trying here Tony. I just got jealous, but you cannot allow us to be separated from this. Because if I’m separated from you who else will be there for you? At the end of the day everyone leaves you, this past year is evidence of that,” Ryder cooed at Tony.

Tony’s breaths deepened and Ryder leaned forward on his knees. “Let me take care of you Tony. Let me be the one not to leave you like the others did. Like Steve did.”

Steve?

Steve?

The name felt familiar, but it felt dangerous on Ryder’s lips. Tony continued to feel muffled and constrained in his own mind. He thought of Steve. Steve. He felt a warm kiss on a cheek. He felt a coolness on his wrist.

He wanted Steve.

He didn’t want to say that aloud.

Ryder’s eyes grew closed off and his expression hardened at Tony’s statement. He nodded his head a few times to himself, reaching a conclusion. Ryder stood up and took his phone out of his jacket pocket. He looked down at it and the light illuminated his facial features.

Tony didn’t like the face he was wearing.

He wanted Steve.

He said it aloud again.

This time it was on purpose.

Ryder grabbed him up roughly by the arm, pocketing his phone away again.

Was he taking him to Steve?

He wanted to know.

His thoughts slowly raced around his head and his mind grew dizzy. Would Natasha be there too? He wanted Natasha. Natasha could stop this feeling of powerlessness and emptiness resting in his body. He wanted Bruce because he hadn’t seen him in so long and maybe he’d help him figure out why his eyes couldn’t focus and why he still felt like panic was gnawing at the back of his tongue. Because wasn’t Ryder safe?
Ryder was so nice.

He was taking him to them.

Ryder knew what he needed

He smiled at Ryder.

Steve had noticed that Miles, Tony, and Ryder had been gone a long time. He knew he had no reason to worry, seeing as though they were all together. Unfortunately, that didn’t stop him from looking around every few moments to see their bodies reappear in his line of vision. He remained at the table not willing to part ways from it until he could see Tony again. He didn’t want to wander away too far.

Conversations went on around him as he looked around and chewed on his bottom lip. He was certain that Wanda had been talking to him, but at a certain point realized that he had grown disinterested and returned to speaking to Vision. He had made a quick apology and Wanda waved it away smiling.

Sharon noticed Steve’s pensive expression and excused herself from where she was talking with Pepper and Rhody. She took the now empty spot beside Steve, seeing as though Bucky had left again for a little space break. Steve hadn’t even taken notice of her presence until she placed her hand down loudly on the table.

Steve jumped a little in his spot then turned sheepishly toward Sharon. “Sorry Sharon. Were you saying something?”

Sharon raised an eyebrow. “No, I wasn’t. You’d have better be lucky it wasn’t anything of importance or I would have been highly offended,” she teased lightly. “What has you looking like a lost puppy?”

Steve frowned at that. “I do not look like a lost puppy.”

“You kind of do man,” Sam echoed suddenly tuning into their conversation. “I wasn’t going to say anything and wait for a while, but hey. This is literally the saddest I’ve ever seen you. Like if you were selling Girl Scout cookies, I would buy all the boxes and just let them sit in my pantry.”

Sharon covered up her laughter behind her hand.

Sharon narrowed her eyes at him. “You were looking fine just a second ago, when you were…oh…oh,” Sharon’s exclaimed. Her eyes widened and a bright smile grew on her face. “Are you brooding because you lost your talking companion?”

“Bucky?” Sam questioned. “From what I’ve experience he doesn’t really talk and the times he does talk I wish he hadn’t.”

“What’d you say?” Bucky announced suddenly coming back to grab a seat beside Sharon.

Sam looked at him straight on and repeated, “I said you don’t really talk and the times, when you do I wish that you hadn’t.”

He smiled widely at Bucky and then turned back to Steve. “Then who are you talking about? Everyone is seated together at this table. So I’m sure you have a lot of potential talking companions. I
mean I’m pretty sure Tony organized it to fit all of us because the other tables only sit fifteen.”

Sharon smiled at Sam’s obliviousness and even Steve’s own oblivion in why he looked like a lost puppy. “So how did my cousin like his gift? I am assuming it went well, since he was wearing it, but I didn’t really ask him since he got swept up talking to people.”

Steve grinned, fondly remembering his time with Steve on the balcony. Sam tilted his head and pondered for a few seconds, while Sharon and Bucky continued looking at Steve. Steve didn’t even notice their stares as he was focused on drawing the image of the moonlight kissing Tony’s cheeks as he smiled up at him.

He remembered how he sent a shy smile toward Steve, after he had put the bracelet on and how they had grown together.

“You’re talking about Tony!” Sam loudly whispered.

Steve was brought out of his daydream and felt his cheeks begin to warm. He shook his head at this. “No, I am not. I just was wondering, when he was returning. They have been gone for a while.”

“So if I left right now, you’d worry about me and my well-being,” Sharon teased.

“Well then quiet down your whole lost puppy look,” Sharon offered. “Who would have thought that Captain America would have a crush on Tony? Man if I could go back in time and tell little Tony that would be amazing.”

“I don’t have a crush,” Steve grit out. “Can we just go back to like whatever you all were doing?”

“I’m fine with what I’m doing right now,” Sharon cheekily proclaimed. “It’s actually rather amusing. Though I do have to agree that my cousin should have been back by now. However, I don’t even know where he went off to so maybe he’s just kept up talking to someone.”

“Knowing Tony he probably is,” Steve said feeling slightly better. “Plus he can talk awhile, especially if it’s anything in regards to science.”

“Trust me I know,” Sharon said solemnly. “One time Tony came to visit me, while I was training to become a SHIELD agent. I remember he came unannounced one day because he had been inspired by something. I had my whole freaking assignment laid out on the floor and he didn’t even notice because he was so focused on explaining whatever schematics he had worked on. I had never been so nervous in my life, because of course at that time I didn’t want him to be involved.”

“Really, why? Seems like that would be pretty cool to have your cousin involved,” Sam pondered aloud.

“It would have, but I don’t know. I wanted Tony as far away from this life as possible. Aunt Peggy would often tell me that even if I’m younger, Tony had a far more innocent and trusting spirit than me. It made him easier to break. I didn’t want that for him…of course he wound up getting into this anyway. I’m pretty sure Aunt Peggy would have reprimanded him for a few hours and then trained him to be the complete badass agent ever, if she could have.”

“I didn’t know the two of you were so close,” Steve said.

“Yeah. We especially were during our teenage years. Tony looked after me. I looked after him, even
though he said that wasn’t my job. Then well his parents died and he had to become head of his
dad’s company. I was an agent. I didn’t really have time to make home visits. I mean we still stayed
in touch, but not so recently.”

Sharon looked down at her hands and sighed. She placed a lock of her hair behind her ear and
looked at Steve.

“I should have taken a break and stayed with him. We were family, but I didn’t.” She shrugged her
shoulders. “But wow this was so not supposed to be about me. I see what you did Rogers,
deflecting.”

Steve gave her a lopsided grin and raised then dropped his right shoulder. The four of them remained
silent for a few more minutes. Steve listened to the conversations around him and turned to look at all
his teammates.

He saw Wanda looking more relaxed and calm than ever, while talking to Vision. He looked as
Natasha and Bruce engaged in a conversation with shy smiles and bodies slightly worn with tension.
He saw Sam and Rhodey comparing short and often amusing stories about their time in the military.
He saw Thor attempting to steal dessert from the other tables, while Loki grinned mischievously his
hand outreached and…wait…

“Thor control your brother,” Natasha warned seeing Steve’s line of vision.

He turned his attention away as Natasha, with the help of Clint though not really, tried stopping any
mischief coming from the two brothers. He was certain Thor probably just wanted more cake, but
Loki? Loki could want anything.

He watched as Pepper turned from Rhodey and brought her chair closer to Sharon to talk. He
watched Bucky lean back in his chair and try to pay attention to the actual source of entertainment
that was being provided for them on the stage at that moment.

And he noticed that this was all happening because of Tony. Tony had made all of this happen and
he had the sudden urge to tell him and express just how thankful he was for Tony getting them all
here, because he was certain he was the only possible person with the power to do so.

He leaned over to tell Bucky he was going to look for Tony, before Wanda’s voice interrupted him.

“Somethings wrong,” Wanda quickly said causing their whole table to stop whatever they were
doing and turn toward her.

“What?” Steve questioned as he drew toward her in worry.

“I feel this sense of panic and fear coming from somewhere,” Wanda explained straightening from
her seat. “I can’t place it.”

All of them looked around and didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary. They gave one more
cursory glance.

“Steve, I feel it. I don’t…I’ve been working on it, but I know what I feel,” Wanda said increasingly
growing more frustrated. Vision put a calming hand on her back and she forced herself to exhale.
“Sorry I just…”

“Mr. Steve. Mr. Steve,” Miles voice rang in their ears.

All of them watched as Miles’ short body ran to their table in a hurry. He went straight to Steve,
despite seeing Natasha. However, Steve was closer and he wanted them to come on.

“Mr. Mean Bad One make baba look scared,” Miles said. His wide eyes were full of terror and unshed tears as he pulled on the pants leg of Steve. “Mr. Steve. Mr. Steve.” Then he turned to Natasha. “Aunt Natasha please.”

Steve frowned and picked up Miles. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t want baba sad. Help ‘em Mr. Steve,” Miles said pulling at the lapels of Steve’s jacket.

Steve scanned the room, but couldn’t find Tony anywhere. “Does anyone have eyes on Tony,” he said walking toward the others.

Bucky shook his head, but narrowed his eyes. All of the others stood up from their seat. Everyone in the room noticed the movement and watched as the Avengers got up. They distinctly wondered if they should care. However, Rhodey called them down by simply explaining they were looking for something. He told them that a few should stay at the table so as to not cause any panic.

Rhodey who was still recovering, along with Pepper, Sam, Clint, and Sharon offered to stay. Thor wanted to go, but he really needed to keep an eye on Loki. Steve turned toward them.

“All right put your coms on,” Steve told the ones sitting at the table. Steve was thankful that they all remembered from previous times that they always would bring their coms, when they were in large public spaces. “We’ll let you know what happens.”

The others followed Steve outside the ballroom.

“Okay, Miles can you tell me where your baba is,” Natasha questioned taking Miles from Steve’s arms. Miles easily went into her arms and pressed his face against her neck. She felt warm tears wet her skin and she tightened her grip on him. “Where’s the last place you saw him.”

“By the candy,” Miles sniffed. “I tried to run Aunt Natasha.”

“You did. You did good. Okay, he’s talking about the candy workshop they had. It’s a few doors down,” Natasha explained.

They followed her into the candy store, but Tony was not in there. Steve looked toward Wanda and addressed her, “Is there any way you can reach him?”

Wanda closed her eyes in concentration. “I can’t…I can’t feel him at all. Usually, I can, but it seems like he’s blocked me. Vision they didn’t tell me there were people who could block me from entering their mind.”

“After you messing with his head, before Ultron he probably took preventive measures to make sure it didn’t happen again,” Natasha explained. Then seeing Wanda’s tortured expression, she quickly added, “Don’t feel bad.”

Natasha’s curt statement did nothing to ease Wanda’s silent unease. Natasha listened to Miles cry. She whispered soft words to him in hopes of calming him down.

“Miles where did you see your baba last?”

Miles looked back with red eyes. “Don’t know. I turned to get more candy and then I went back and he was gone. I lost baba. Baba’s gone again.”
“No, no baba’s not gone. Come on,” Natasha said walking outside of the workshop.

“Ms. Romanoff perhaps I may escort the young gentleman back to an area where he can be occupied to get his mind off of things,” Vision exclaimed.

Natasha bit her lip. She was unsure how she felt about handing Miles off to a stranger. Sure, Vision was one of Tony’s creations, but he also hadn’t been around Miles that much. How would Miles respond to her handing him off to someone? However, she needed to make sure that they wouldn’t stumble upon anything that she didn’t want him to see.

So she handed Miles over to Vision, but not without some complaint from Miles. “I know Miles, but we just want to make sure Tony is okay. Vision is going to take you back to the ballroom to watch the puppets, okay? The next time you see me we’ll have your baba back.”

“Promise,” Miles sniffled hands clutching Natasha even tighter.

“Promise,” Natasha said as she reluctantly handed Miles off. “You better keep an eye on him.”

Vision agreed and waved Wanda over. “Wanda perhaps you may accompany me back.”

Wanda still had her tortured expression and allowed herself to be led away by Vision. Once they were gone, the remaining three walked through the hallway. They made sure to check every room and were about to turn around and check the other side of the hallways, before they heard a door open and shut.

They watched as Ryder and Tony stumbled outside of a room. Ryder looked startled at the three people in front of him and he leaned against the wall. Steve ran his eyes over Tony making sure he was physically fine.

He noted the messed up hair and swollen lips. He noticed the beginning of a hickey marking up Tony’s neck. Tony could barely stand on his own, his weight being supported by Ryder. Ryder was almost in a similar fashion, but his shirt was halfway undone and his cheeks were red.

Steve tried swallowing down the urge to throw up and tear Tony away from Ryder’s grip. He tried to cease the burning in his chest and the desire to pull Tony into his arms. He didn’t want Tony to be leaning on Ryder for support. He didn’t want to see this and he hated that he was led here. He hated that he was seeing Tony’s eyes look up at Ryder in wonder before settling on Steve.

“Sorry about that guys. I was hoping no one would see us in this state” Ryder said smiling warmly. “Tony had a panic attack. He just got too overwhelmed and cornered with everyone coming to him suddenly…he just froze and soon well…”

Ryder made a “well what can you do motion.”

“But I got him back to the physical present if you know what I mean,” he said pressing his lips against the mark on Tony’s neck.

Tony shivered as Ryder pressed himself closer into Ryder’s body.

Steve felt something animalistic in him want to claw itself out and rip his lips off of Tony’s neck. He had no right to feel such a thing. This was Tony’s boyfriend. He didn’t even know that he had growled in the back of his throat and had stepped forward until Bucky had to curl a hand around his wrist.

“Steve stand down,” Bucky whispered just light enough for only Steve to hear.
Steve didn’t want to, but he had no right to get upset because they were having sex.

“So you’re okay?” Natasha questioned.

“He’s fine.”

Natasha turned sharply to Ryder. “I was not addressing you. Tony are you fine?”

Tony turned his head slowly to her. Ryder’s hand traveled down to his waist and underneath his untucked shirt. Steve wanted to cut the hand off. Bucky had to grab his wrist again.

_Breathe Steve. Breathe. You had your chance. Don’t be a jealous man. Breathe._

He repeated the mantra to himself.

Tony smiled warmly at her. “Yes,” he said breathlessly.

Natasha smiled and leaned forward to kiss his cheek. Ryder followed the movement with his eyes, but choose not to say anything.

“Good,” Natasha said. “Had us worried.”

“Sorry,” Tony whispered. “Why were you worried?”

“Miles came to us crying saying you were scared,” Steve told him. “Wanted to make sure you were alright.”

“That’s sweet,” Tony said talking to all of them, but only looking at Steve. “Is Miles alright?”

“He’s fine, but he’s a little shaken up. It would probably do him some good to see you right now though,” Natasha said. “I did promise him that I would send him to you and your kid takes promises seriously.”

Tony smiled and made a motion to move, but was stopped by Ryder. “Tony remember we have to go catch the flight so we can make it to my parents’ house before nine tomorrow.”

Tony screwed his face up in confusion and Steve watched the adorable way his nose scrunched up. Tony tilted his head to face Ryder.

“We were?”

“Yes, we talked about this. You said you would meet my parents and spend five days with them. We already got our plane tickets. I know you tend to be forgetful about anything that isn’t SI, Avengers, or Miles, but I was hoping you remembered this,” Ryder explained. “You said that we could leave Miles with Steve.”

Steve was unsure that Tony would feel comfortable about leaving Miles in his care. While he felt there wasn’t as much hostility between the two as it had been, he knew that Tony still did not truly trust him especially with his son, especially not to watch him for that long.

“So Natasha could,” Ryder added watching the unease Tony expressed at the idea.

“I don’t know. I’m not ready to leave him for that long,” Tony said.

“Tony we’ve talked about this. I asked if you wanted to bring Miles, but you said you didn’t want to. I already told my parents we were coming.”
Tony frowned. “I don’t want to bring Miles especially with…” His sentence broke off.

Ryder smiled awkwardly at them and blushed. “I’m sorry we’re having this conversation partly undressed. If we can step inside for a few seconds to get dressed and a little more presentable.”

He gestured toward the nearly half-clothed nature of the two. Ryder’s tie was done loosely and backward. They really did need to go fix themselves, before actually going back to the ballroom. Ryder excused himself and Tony.

They waited for nearly three minutes until they came back. Ryder had an arm lying on Tony’s shoulder. Tony turned to Natasha.

“Natasha can you do me a huge favor and watch Miles for a few days. I know you have to get ready for your mission coming up soon and if you have to leave early or aren’t available I can get in touch with May. But Ryder is right I did promise him and I hate to leave a bad impression on Ryder’s parents,” Tony rambled. “It just slipped my mind.”

“Tony, you don’t even have to ask. I’d love to watch Miles, but you should still say goodbye to him before you leave. Unfortunately, I do not imagine that will be an easy goodbye.”

Tony winced. “You are right.”

Steve remained silent the entire time as they headed back to the ballroom. He didn’t want Tony going with Ryder anyway. Wasn’t it too soon for the whole meeting parents? Steve watched as Tony said goodbye to everyone at the table with promises that he would get in touch with Rhodey and Pepper and set up a breakfast date for when they were all back in town.

He looked on sadly as Miles burst into tears, when Tony told him he had to leave for a few days. Miles cried inconsolably into Tony’s neck and Tony had to leave the ballroom for nearly twenty minutes, before he returned a sleeping Miles to Natasha. It seemed as though he had quite literally cried himself to sleep.

Tony walked back to Ryder and placed his hand in his. “Alright kids play nice. Don’t break anything at the Tower. I am especially talking about you Thor and Loki. I swear.”

“Tony our presence shall only be in the Tower for a day, before I must visit my Lady Jane and discuss the matters of the displaced Asgardians, whom I have been entreated to-”

“What?” Tony broke through just beyond thoroughly confused.

“Again, something that we will have to seriously discuss when you come back,” Bruce said suddenly looking tired.

Tony shrugged. “Alright. Well, someone make my closing speech for me.”

Rhodey rolled his eyes. “Tony we all know you were going to make me say your closing speech.”

Tony smiled brightly. “You’re right sugarplum. That’s why I love you. Alright see you all soon! Be safe getting home.”

Tony followed Ryder out of the ballroom with one final goodbye. When the two reached the front foyer, Tony took his phone to call Happy. However, his phone was snatched out of his hand by Ryder.

“What? I’m trying to get Happy to pull the car up front so we can grab some things from the Tower
to pack and then we can head to the airport. Do I need to bring something to your parent’s? Like are they wine lovers or flower types?”

“Already have someone waiting for us,” Ryder exclaimed as he walked outside to a black car with equally black tinted windows. “Get inside.”

Tony looked around unsure. “Umm.”

“Get inside the car Tony. Please do not make me repeat myself.”

Tony listened to the harshness of Ryder’s voice and raised his hands in defense. “Fine,” he muttered sliding into the backseat.

Ryder gave a brief look around his surroundings to make sure no one was following, before he slid into the seat beside Tony and then the car sped off.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for any possible mistakes, if one makes your head particularly hurt please let me know.

Thanks again to everyone who commented, gave a kudo, and left a bookmark. You all continue to make my day :)
Ryder checked in to whatever place he had brought Tony too. Tony ignored the slight swelling in his eye, a Christmas gift that Ryder had been all too ready to give, while in the car. The driver had said nothing as the sound of Ryder’s fist meeting Tony’s face, echoed in the car. Tony wondered briefly if Ryder had paid the driver not to say anything.

He remained silent as Ryder took the keycard from the receptionist and slid her a 100 dollar bill asking for her discretion. Ryder didn’t want anyone to know Tony was here, including Tony. Tony had no clue where he was and his heart hammered in the back of his chest. He never did well in not knowing where he was. He looked at his surroundings and saw nothing that could give away where they were.

He had for a moment honestly believed that Ryder was taking him to meet his parents. Then that moment was quickly gone, when he realized that the ride to the airport was much shorter than the ride that they were on.

“Where are we?” Tony rasped, his voice sore from trying to argue his case in the car.

Ryder narrowed his eyes and dragged Tony to the elevator. He never responded to him. Tony felt nauseous as they entered the elevator and pressed fingers against his forehead trying to massage it away. Ryder hissed and pulled Tony’s body up as though aggravated by his disoriented state.

Tony wondered if he had a concussion.

Ryder let go of Tony’s arm to open the door to their room. Tony wasn’t expecting any roses or anything special. However, he hadn’t expected darkness that was only lit by a desk lamp. Ryder pushed Tony into the room and followed him inside. The door creaked behind him and Ryder closed it and made sure to lock the top lock.

Tony stood in the center of the room not fully sure what to do with himself. He didn’t know if he had passed the point where he could smooth talk himself out of this. He had enjoyed his time away from Ryder and had hoped he would have had a few more days without him. But Ryder coming back unannounced messed everything up.

Ryder turned on another lamp in the room and then turned his gaze toward Tony. Tony opened his mouth to say something, anything. But Ryder’s stern and unheated glare convinced him to do otherwise. It was a look he had received from his dad on many occasions. That look landed him in the hospital a few times.

The two of them stood there in silence for a few minutes. Ryder licked his lips and drew closer to Tony. Ryder pushed at Tony’s shoulder and Tony fell onto the bed easily. He looked up into
Ryder’s eyes that were beginning to darken. Ryder ran his fingers alongside Tony’s chin and tilted his face higher to meet his gaze.

“You know you’re such a beautiful person Tony,” Ryder admitted. “It’s a shame you had to go and ruin your face like this.”

His fingers left his chin to poke at the bruise on his eye. Tony winced and turned his head away from him. Ryder grasped his chin and roughly turned his face toward him again.

“Look at me, when I am talking to you,” Ryder demanded.

“You’re the one who decided to hit me in the most fucking visible place asshole,” Tony hissed fed up with how Ryder was making it seem as though this was all his fault.

Ryder slapped Tony’s face sharply. His cheeks grew red with anger and his body almost seemed to vibrate. He grabbed Tony by the shoulders and pushed him down on the bed.

“I wouldn’t have to if you didn’t upset me so much Tony. You know this.”

“You said that you would get better. You made me promise to be patient and I have been patient. But how can I continue to be patient, when every time…every fucking time I am around you I end up with bruises, a swollen this or that, scars from broken glass, a sore throat, and more. How can I fucking know what upsets you, when everything I do upsets you! You just want me to stop being me?” Tony questioned loudly trying to push Ryder’s hands away from him.

“Just stop it. Just stop. I can’t do this anymore Ryder. I can’t. Please Ryder. Please just let me go,” Tony rushed out and by then his voice was wobbling and his cheeks were wet. “Please. It hurts all the time. Please just let me go.”

Ryder took his hands off of Tony and stepped back. “Tony I…I never wanted you to feel this way. I thought you liked the roughness.”

“I don’t,” Tony said hoarsely. “I’ve asked you many times to go slower or not so hard. I’ve asked you not to hit me. I’ve told you that you’ve hurt me many times. And you keep hurting me Ryder.”

Ryder looked on with his mouth parted. Tears were now flowing freely down Tony’s cheek. Ryder immediately went toward him and tried wiping away his tears. Tony pushed his hand away and began to curl into himself, humiliated that he had been reduced to his crying fumbling mess. The panic attack that he had at the Gala had left him emotionally unhinged. Usually he was better at building back the walls, but to be so sharply pulled out of an attack from Ryder…it was disconcerting.

Ryder tried wiping his tears again and this time Tony didn’t bother refusing. Ryder leaned closer to Tony. “I’m sorry. Tell me what you want.”

Red swollen eyes met Ryder’s. Tony turned his head and bit his lip, internally just wanting to leave. But Ryder had taken his phone, his money, and he didn’t even know where he was. Plus he couldn’t go out with his current appearance.

“Do you want me to be soft and gentle? You want me to kiss you softly in your ear and tell you just how beautiful you are and how I am the luckiest man alive to have been graced to call you mine,” Ryder whispered pushing Tony firmly onto the bed.

He leaned over Tony and trailed his fingers along his lips. “You want me to lay you down gently and just worship your body head to toe. Tear you apart with care and get your body to release moans
of pleasure that have never escaped your lips before.”

Tony laid there numb as Ryder’s hands traveled over his clothed body. His mouth left trails of hot kisses on his collarbone and neck.

“You want me to enter you slowly and fill you up to the point where you feel like you can’t breathe, but it’s the best feeling in the world. You want me to move inside you like water, brushing up against you. You want the warmth that I have left inside you to last you for days because you’ve felt cold since then.”

His fingers reached for Tony’s zipper and Tony shook his head.

“No,” he said breathlessly.

“No?” Ryder asked amused. “See I believe that you do. And it’s not even just sex, is it? It’s in everything. You want me to take you out to dinner dates and curl my arm around you. You want me to go see movies with you and even invite Miles sometimes. You want me to kiss you gently on your cheek and brush back the hair that is curling against the nape of your neck.”

*Then why don’t you, Tony thought to himself. Why don’t you?*

“Ryder please,” Tony broke through as Ryder’s lips ghosted over his.

“And you want me so desperately to love you,” Ryder whispered against Tony’s mouth.

“You want me to do all of that because that’s what you imagine Steve doing,” Ryder exclaimed pressing a soft kiss at Tony’s throat. Tony grew startled, but Ryder pressed a finger against his lip.

“Shh, Tony. Let me talk.”

“Steve would probably wait for you and probably try making it special,” Ryder announced. “He would make you comfortable. He would lay you down slowly onto the bed and his body would quickly follow.”

“Ryder please,” Tony whispered this time a little more brokenly.

“Shh, let me finish,” Ryder said. “He would remove your clothes as if they were an outward expression of those walls you’ve built around yourself.”

Ryder undid the top three bottoms of Tony’s shirt and ran his fingers along the exposed skin there. He went closer to Tony and brought his face close to his chest.

“He would take time to marvel at the arc reactor and you would shy away, just as you did our first time together. But he would make you feel like that arc reactor was something to be proud of and how he loves it because it keeps you alive,” he explained pressing a kiss to the arc reactor.

Tony tried ignoring how all of this made him feel light. It was a weird feeling. He felt light, but he also felt weighed down by some invisible pressure. He felt the need to sob and yet he also felt the desire to pull Ryder in closer.

“Then he would take his clothes off, pretty fast. You’d watch on amused because he looks like some eager little puppy. Then he’d ask you if you were sure again. After that he’d probably spread you apart real nice,” Ryder further explained sliding his hands down Tony’s legs and spreading them.

Tony tried resisting this because he didn’t want Ryder to know how affected he was by all of this. He didn’t want to be affected by all of this.
“He’d spread you apart and just look at you and you would preen under that attention. Never had that before, so you’d love it. He’d run his hands all over you a pleasant weight. Then he would spread you apart with his fingers,” Ryder unzipped his pants and pushed Tony’s hips up to slide them off.

He pulled down Tony’s underwear and ran a finger around Tony. “He’d probably be so gentle making sure you’re fully stretched. And just when you feel like you can’t even take his fingers, he looks at you again for permission then enters you,” Ryder moaned.

While he was talking he grabbed a bottle of lube and opened it. He put some on his fingers and looked down at Tony. Tony’s heart slowed down, when he realized that for once, Ryder was actually going to properly prep him. He could do this.

He pressed one finger lightly inside Tony and Tony tried calming down his breathing. “And he would move inside of you and it would feel like a storm is settling inside your stomach…like something has entered that cannot be calmed. He’d continue kissing you and say sweet nothings into your ear. He’d wait for you to fall apart first and he would be brought over the edge just because he was satisfied that he did that to you. That’s how he’d do it right?”

Tony breathed out shakily, watery eyes meeting Ryder’s. Ryder’s fingers moved inside of him again and he tilted his head at Tony.

*Why are you doing this?* Tony cried inside his head.

“And you all know this because you’ve probably been dreaming about it,” Ryder announced.

“I haven’t. I swear Ryder,” Tony whispered, greatly fearing what Ryder could do with his imagination.

“Yes, you have. Don’t lie to me,” Ryder said looking back to the bracelet hanging on Tony’s wrist. “You responded so well to me this time.”

Tony’s mouth began to tremble and he felt confused. He wanted to leave and he didn’t want his mind games. He didn’t know what Ryder’s intent was, but he wasn’t here for it. Ryder had never acted like this before.

“Does getting off to another guy turn you on Tony?” Ryder hissed mouthing against Tony’s skin. His fingers traveled lightly over the smooth skin there. “The idea of someone besides me turns you on.”

He leaned back from Tony and swept his fingers in Tony’s precum. Tony turned his face away from him and ignored the burning in his throat to shakily answer back, “No.”

“Then why did you respond so well to me, when I gave you this fantasy of Steve,” Ryder inquired, reaching back to grab Tony’s cock and squeezing it tightly between his cold fingers.

“Ryder,” Tony breathed out trying to exhale through the added pressure.

“And you know that’s all it will ever be, right? A fantasy. People like Steve don’t go after people like you. There’s simply too much of you to handle. You think he likes you because you shared a funnel cake, did some exercise together, and he gave you this bracelet?”

Tony shook his head. “No, of course I don’t. I don’t know how many times I have to tell you. All of that meant nothing.”
Ryder rolled his eyes.

“If I had known you responded so well to other people, I would have done this sooner,” Ryder laughed all of a sudden turning behind him.

“What-” Tony barely managed to get out, before a figure came walking toward them.

“Since I can no longer just do it for you, I thought I would bring in a guest,” Ryder explained as he began taking off his shirt. “This is Winston. Not his real name, but we’ll go with that tonight.”

Winston looked at Tony and smiled. Ryder walked toward him and pulled him into a kiss. Tony watched on as his heart settled in the bottom of his stomach. Here he was being accused of wanting Steve, when Ryder was out here kissing a whole other man.

Ryder let go of Winston and wiped his mouth. Winston turned back to face Tony and grinned broadly.

“Take off the rest of your clothes Tony,” Ryder commanded hands already loosening his belt.

“I’d rather not. Look Ryder this is just between you and me. I’ll do whatever you want okay. Just not another person. No offense Winston,” Tony said. “Ryder come on.”

“It’s adorable you think you have a choice. Where are you going to go Tony? I have this whole city blocked off. No cell reception for at least 300 miles. There are no modes of transportation here. The nearest sign of civilization is 400 miles away from here. This town is practically invisible,” Ryder explained taking off his watch.

Tony gulped.

“So I’ll repeat myself again. Don’t make me do it three times. Take off your shirt for us Tony,” Ryder leered eyes growing dark. “Stand up and take off your clothes.”

Ryder sat down on the bed and motioned for Winston to follow him. Ryder sat behind Winston and began taking off his own clothes. Tony started to breathe harshly and his fingers shook as he tried undoing the rest of his shirt buttons.

His fingers trembled and slipped off the button a lot of times before the shirt fell completely off of his shoulders. Tony held his face down and mentally coached himself not to cry. He called upon his father for this one time to give him strength not to cry.

*Stark men don’t cry,* he had told him on many occasions.

Tony looked up as he heard the sound of pants meeting the floor. Winston was now straddling Ryder’s lap. Ryder smirked and attached his lips to Winston’s neck, while directly looking at Tony. Winston’s head lolled back in satisfaction and then he turned his face to meet Tony’s.

Tony tried thinking how much of a risk it would be to run and realized with fear that it’d be too much of a risk. He had no methods of protection. He was bare and vulnerable and Ryder knew all of this.

Ryder looked at him now completely unclothed and motioned him to come to the bed. On shaky legs Tony walked over to the bed and sat down on it. He tried covering himself, but Ryder shook his head.

“Hey, none of that. You weren’t modest back in the day. Don’t get modest on Winston’s account,”
Ryder said. He tapped Winston on the shoulder and Winston leapt off of his lap.

Ryder grabbed a condom and roughly turned Winston to face Tony. “He gets turned on from the thought of another man touching him. I want to know what happens when the thought is transformed into action,” he enforced as he harshly thrust into Winston.

Winston let out a ragged breath as his body bowed over. Ryder bit at his neck. “I want you to show him what he’ll get with another man that isn’t me. You got it?”

“Ryder please you don’t have to do this,” Tony exclaimed as Winston tried turning Tony’s body over. “No, get off of me! Ryder please. Please. I’m sorry. Look I’ll do anything else you want. Just Ryder please I’m your only yours, right?”

His pleas echoed against the walls in the room. Tony tried fighting Winston off of his body and managed to get in a good lick. Winston’s head rolled back and Ryder kept his body steady with his firm grip on his waist.

Winston then let out a load moan and reverently touched where Tony had hit him. His eyes darkened and his mouth grew slack.

“What the actual fuck,” Tony breathed aloud.

Ryder pushed back into Winston and continued aggressively pressing into his body as Winston let out a string of curses. Winston rested his hands on Tony’s hip firmly and tugged Tony closer to him.

“Please don’t do this. Listen, Winston. I don’t want this alright. You don’t have to do this. I’ll pay you three times what he’s paying you,” Tony pleaded trying to pry off the strong fingers that were digging into his flesh.

Winston gave him a look that seemed so innocent as though he didn’t understand why Tony didn’t want this.

“I’m not getting paid,” Winston answered back bringing Tony closer to him.

Winston gasped loudly as Ryder bit at his skin and Tony shook his head. Ryder guided Winston’s hand to the bottom of Tony’s stomach. Tony’s stomach tensed under the pressure there. Ryder smiled against Winston’s neck.

“Just think about how it will feel when you’re inside of him and you can feel yourself right here,” he said interlacing his fingers with Winston’s.

Winston grabbed his free arm and dragged the tip of his cock against Tony’s hole. Tony tried clenching his legs and stopping them from spreading. Ryder laughed.

“He’s a tough one, but he's oh so perfect when you’re finally inside. He falls apart so prettily,” Ryder breathed.

Winston’s darkened eyes traveled to the spot where Tony and him were about to be join. By now Tony was openly begging for both of them to stop. Ryder looked on amused and Tony could feel Winston’s cock beginning to rise in interest. He closed his eyes and just resigned himself to this. Just as he felt it begin to press inside of him, the weight from Winston’s hands were gone and there was a thump on the floor.

Tony opened his eyes and tried to cease the shaking in his body and the tears that were falling on his cheeks.
“See this is how you should respond when you think of Steve doing anything with you,” Ryder said kissing Tony’s tears away. “You know I would’ve never let Winston hurt you like that. You know that. I’ll protect you. I protect what is mine.”

Tony let out a hoarse scream half in part for how Winston’s body was laying on the floor barely moving and half in part from how Ryder roughly entered him. Tony tried scrambling away, barely being able to gather enough air into his lungs. Ryder pushed Tony back further onto himself driving himself deeper and harder into Tony.

One of Ryder’s hand kept still on Tony’s waist and the other pressed lightly against Tony’s neck. Tony pushed at both hands and Ryder looked at Tony directly in his eye and kept going. By then Tony couldn’t even say anything because he was trying to hold in that air to breathe. But eventually it was too much and Tony embraced the darkness like a welcomed comfort.

When he woke up, he noticed two things. Winston was gone and his hands had been tied up.

Ryder looked at him and smiled. “Hungry?” He motioned to a plate of breakfast and smiled. “We had a long night last night.”

Tony narrowed his eyes at Ryder. “No.”

Ryder rolled his eyes. “Come on Tony. Don’t be like this. This was all just a lesson. I didn’t even let Winston touch you. I just needed to make you realize that you and I are forever. There is no Steve. Because at the end of the day, Steve will leave you.”

Tony looked at his tied up hands and noticed the bareness of his right wrist. “Where’s my bracelet?”

Ryder frowned. “Bracelet?”

“Yes, my bracelet Ryder. Where is it?”

Ryder shrugged. “Don’t know. Don’t really care too much honestly. You may have lost it in the car with all that waving your hands angrily. Probably slipped off your wrist, didn’t seem like it was sized to good,” Ryder said and stuffed a piece of bacon into Tony’s mouth.

Tony chewed on it and swallowed. “Ryder.”

“Yes,” Ryder sweetly said.

“Can we go now? You’ve proved your point. I’m sore and I need to see my son,” Tony said.

Ryder frowned at the mention of Miles. Ryder pushed aside the breakfast and went toward Tony. “I really wished you would stop mentioning Miles.”

Tony was about to say something, but Ryder’s harsh fingers entering his already abused hole cut off his words. Ryder drew his fingers back and kissed Tony firmly on the mouth.

“You realize that no one will ever love you like I do, right?” he said completely ignoring Tony.

“You don’t love me Ryder,” Tony hissed, shrinking away from Ryder as he curled a hand possessively over his forearm.

“If I don’t love you, then who does? Pepper and Rhodey like you as friends, but even they’re not around you long enough to really love you. The Avengers certainly don’t love you. Get this in your mind they came back because they missed their old lives in America. They didn’t come back for you.
Steve doesn’t love you. He’s merely keeping up pretenses because he knows his image can’t suffer another blow like it did last year,” he explained.

Tony bit on his lip and turned his eyes downward.

“Miles merely loves you through association. When he gets older and sees the man that you truly are, he’s going to be so disappointed that he was adopted by you,” Ryder said finally digging the final nail in the coffin.

Tony sniffed and cleared his throat. “That’s not true.”

“It is or else you wouldn’t be so affected, “Ryder said. “But I do love you because I am here in spite of this. I won’t leave you because of your nightmares. I won’t leave you because you may keep yourself locked away for a few days. I won’t leave you because you’re hard to be around. I won’t leave you because you can’t give me anything. But they will. They already have.”

Ryder looked down sadly at Tony. “Poor Tony. You always have such high hopes, but it’ll be a domino effect. Steve will be the first to leave.”

Tony shook his head refusing to believe Ryder. This time he wouldn’t believe him. Pepper and Rhodey will always be there for him. He and the Avengers were back toward strengthening their relationship and it was going to be stronger than it last was. His ties with the orphanage and Karen was not going away. His friendship with May and mentorship over Peter was strong. His relationship with his son could not be easily broken.

Ryder was lying. Steve would not be the beginning of the domino effect. Tony told this to Ryder.

“Fuck you Ryder. That’s not going to happen. Steve is not going to leave and it’s not going to be some domino effect. Just because you’re jealous or whatever the fuck is going on in your messed up-”

Ryder pushed Tony off of the bed. Tony’s shoulder gave a loud pop and he let out a loud cry of agony. Ryder looked down at him.

“I wish you wouldn’t talk to me that way,” Ryder bemoaned. He roughly leaned over and began to put Tony’s pants on, before throwing him back on the bed. “But since you want to talk back and think that I’m just some mean person…I’ll show you just how spiteful I can get.”

Tony blinked away tears that was coming up due to the pain in his shoulder. Through bleary eyes he looked at the two women entering the room. Ryder looked back at Tony. He kept the door open.

“I wish you wouldn’t talk to me that way,” Ryder bemoaned. He roughly leaned over and began to put Tony’s pants on, before throwing him back on the bed. “But since you want to talk back and think that I’m just some mean person…I’ll show you just how spiteful I can get.”

Tony blinked away tears that was coming up due to the pain in his shoulder. Through bleary eyes he looked at the two women entering the room. Ryder looked back at Tony. He kept the door open.

“I’ll give you three days with him. I need to have him back and sober by then. He has a kid to take care of unfortunately,” Ryder instructed. “I’ll be back then. Do level three.”

The two girls nodded and closed the door behind Ryder. One girl locked the top lock and the other rolled in her suitcase. She looked back at the girl and grinned.

“Cali, do you want to go first? Or me,” one asked, with a thick accent that Tony couldn’t quite place, plopping down beside Tony.

“You can go first Miriam,” Cali said, responding with the same accent.

“Ladies, please you don’t have to do this.” Tony winced trying to move so he could take off pressure from his throbbing shoulder. He looked to both of them, but then settled his gaze on Cali.
“You, you were at the park that day. What did you say to my son?” Tony demanded trying to sit up, but was held back by Miriam.

Cali bit her lip and shied her glance away from him. “I said nothing.”

Tony laughed. “Alright ladies. This has been all, but fun. I’m ready to leave. I can pay you whatever Ryder is paying and more.”

“We don’t require payment. We do this to please Dr. Ryder,” Miriam announced.

“What is with you and this whole thing? First Winston now you too.”

“Oh, Winston was here. He’s moved up faster than I thought,” Miriam addressed to Cali who was trying to make herself seem small.

“What?” Tony questioned hoping that if he talked to them long enough he could get them into wanting him to go.

Miriam smiled darkly. Choosing not to say anything, she opened her suitcase and in it revealed bottles of different alcoholic beverages. Tony immediately felt anger. He had been working on his sobriety for years and he would be damned if it would all go to waste by these two women. Miriam grabbed one bottle and closely inspected it.

“This will be good to start with,” Miriam instructed. “Alright Cali come hold his neck.”

“Ladies, come on. We don’t have to do this. I’ll be honest with you. Okay, I had a hard time getting sober and I’m pretty proud of where I am at in my life right now. I don’t want to go back to that place.”

“Oh, we know. We are fully aware of your former battles with the bottle,” Miriam said opening the bottle up. “Which is why this is going to be so much fun. Now open up Mr. Stark,” she said pressing the bottle up against his lips.

Tony pressed his lips firmly together and refused to let any drop of alcohol reach his tongue. Miriam tried again, but this time Cali tried assisting her by trying to open up Tony’s mouth. Neither were successful.

“Oh, seems like he’s not going to be fully cooperative with us Cali. Syringe,” Miriam questioned holding out her hand. Cali reached into the suitcase and grabbed a needle.

Tony moved his body away from them. “Okay, I definitely don’t do needles. Stayed away from the hospital for a whole year one time because I hate needles. So like let’s not do this.”

Cali placed the needle in Miriam’s outstretched hand. Cali steadied Tony’s head and Miriam leaned forward injecting whatever was in the syringe into his neck. A few seconds passed and Tony felt his jaw slacken and his mouth open up.

“What’d you do?” Tony questioned, his words becoming slurred.

“No need to concern yourself with the logistics of it. Just know it gets the job done,” Miriam explained as she let the liquid travel down Tony’s throat.

Tony tried sputtering out the drink, but Cali closed his mouth forcing him to swallow it. Miriam’s eyes shone bright and she continued pouring the liquid down his throat with no care at how fast she was going. The burning in Tony’s throat brought red hot tears to his eyes.
The light coming from the lamps seemed to swirl in his vision. Miriam tossed that bottle aside and grabbed another one.

“I wonder how many bottles we can get before you’re fully incoherent. Winston was able to have his fun, but a pretty thing like you I’d think I’d like to have a piece as well. Ryder doesn’t have to know,” Miriam said taking a swig of the drink before pouring some down Tony’s throat.

Tony tried talking around the bottle and some of the drink dribbled outside of his mouth. Miriam grew delighted and began to force the bottle down his throat. Her eyes grew dark and she grew fascinated with how his throat spasmed and how drops of alcohol traveled down his jaw.

Cali leaned over from her spot behind Tony and pushed the bottle away. “Miriam stop it. You’re choking him. And you will not be sleeping with Mr. Stark. That was not in our instructions.”

Miriam rolled her eyes ignoring how Tony dry heaved. She drank the last bit of that bottle and tossed it to the side.

“You’re such a buzzkill Cali. But whatever,” Miriam said. “Alright now for bottle three.”

“Don’t you think we should stop? I’m pretty sure this could give him alcohol poisoning. I didn’t sign up for murder,” Cali stressed out looking worriedly at Tony.

“Didn’t sign up for aiding in kidnap either, but look what we’re doing. It’s part of the job,” Miriam told her. “Look I love you because you’re my sister. But if you’re going to whine about this all day and night I can do this on my own.”

Cali leaned back wordlessly and picked up Tony’s head. Tony shivered and shook. He smacked his lips together and turned sluggish eyes toward Miriam. Miriam petted his hair and then leaned over to grab another bottle.

“You know Mr. Stark I was thinking how does child services handle an alcoholic father. And you’re a new father right? I would certainly hate for someone to release the footage of the room’s cameras of you being drunk. Or perhaps I’ll send you home right now to get your son. I don’t imagine you’ll be a father much more, when they see your drunk self,” Miriam taunted.

“Miriam,” Cali hissed. “That is enough.”

“Please. Just please don’t bring my son into this,” Tony slurred, hiccupping around another taste of alcohol.

Miriam shrugged. “Or we can just release the camera shots. Playboy Tony back in action,” Miriam announced loudly forcing the alcohol down Tony’s throat again. Miriam hummed in the back of her throat and watched on with glee as Tony could barely keep his head up straight.

Tony blacked out for a few minutes and when he woke up there Miriam was grabbing another bottle.

*This is how I die, Tony thought to himself, which is a shame because just as things were getting better, minus Ryder, I was finally doing well.*

Tony eventually fell asleep in hopes that his headache would go away and that he could get a break from drinking. All he wanted to do was curl up in a ball and just check out for a week. After all these years of sobriety and now…

He tried holding in a sob, while his eyes were close. The pressure on his throat from holding in the sob did not ease up until his body succumbed to sleep.
The next time he woke, his head ache had cleared up and he felt a wet cloth being smoothed over his face. For a brief moment he thought he was about to be smothered to death. Then he noticed that Miriam was knocked out on the chair near the desk. He looked up into Cali’s eyes and saw that she was rubbing some ointment on his face.

“This will help with the bruising and swelling,” she said then reached over into her bag. “And I can cover it up with this. And this will help you sober up real quick. An old family secret.”

She handed him a bottle full of the brown liquid. Tony figured nothing could be worse than all the alcohol he just drank…unless this was poison. Cali seemed to see his train of though and grabbed the bottle. She took a sip of it then handed it to Tony.

“And trust me I have no desire to die today,” she told him.

She undid the ties at his hands and handed him a hoodie. “Put this on. I hope it’s your size.”

Tony turned curiously to her. “What?”

“You need to leave Mr. Stark,” Cali explained looking for Tony’s shoes. “And I don’t know if you’ll have another opportunity to actually get away before Ryder comes back and you both try acting as though nothing happened here.”

“What is here exactly?” Tony said with a hoarse voice.

Cali shrugged her shoulders. “I honestly couldn’t tell you even if I wanted to I’m afraid.”

Tony pulled on the hoodie. It was about a size larger than him, but Tony was definitely more fine with that then being naked. Cali looked at him and smiled sadly.

“Go,” Cali explained once she had got done resetting Tony’s arm. “My sister won’t be asleep for long and Ryder will come back in a day. Take this hoodie cover your face. There will be a driver downstairs who will not ask questions. He will drive you to a plane. Get on the plane and he will take you home.”

“How can I trust you,” Tony slurred.

Cali looked at him sadly. “You can’t, but I know you can’t trust them even more. I don’t like doing this line of work and I can’t let them hurt you like this. You don’t deserve it.”

“And Mr. Stark,” Cali said.

“Yes, Cali,” Tony said leaning against the door.

“I’ll make sure that those videos are erased. I won’t allow them to be the reason your son is taken from you. You’re a good father,” Cali whispered. “Now go.”

Tony tugged on his hoodie and left the room. Until he reached his tower, he would continue looking at his surroundings. He didn’t want to be caught off guard. He hoped Cali was as genuine as she seemed. He settled into his seat and rested his eyes for a little bit, hoping to sleep off the rest of the alcohol. He was able to sleep for about an hour, before the pilot announced he was home.

Tony wanted to thank the pilot, but the pilot remained silent besides telling him they had landed. Tony nodded and exited the plan. He watched as it flew off and went inside. He first went to his room and tried cleaning up. Cali had done wonders to his face, but he needed to shower and get rid of the smell of alcohol. While in the shower, he had time to think and think he did. By the time he
looked presentable, he knew what he was going to do.

He went to Steve’s floor and immediately went searching for Steve. He had to tell Steve everything. He couldn’t keep this inside of him anymore. He doesn’t care about the threats or the lies that Ryder was telling him. Steve had promised him honesty and it was time for Tony to express the same. And if some part of him, some inner childlike fantasy of himself wished that Steve would be the knight in shining armor come to get rid of the dragon, no one would know.

He walked briskly through the whole floor and realized that he wasn’t there. He knew that Steve was in the tower. It was pretty much silent, but Steve always left his light on in his floor, if he was home. And it was on.

He walked everywhere and he kept running sweating hands over his jeans. His eyes kept looking around him as though waiting for Ryder to pop out of nowhere and take him to that place again. Tony felt his chest grow light and a head ache start to form.

But he wouldn’t stop. He couldn’t stop yet.

Not until he found Steve.

He didn’t know why his first instinct was to go to Steve. On any other day he would’ve called Pepper and Rhodey. He told himself he would give them a call and explain everything when he gets the chance. But Steve was here and maybe he just wanted to go to Steve to have proof that everything Ryder said was a lie.

He needed confirmation that no one would leave him again. He wanted confirmation that someone wanted and needed him without the added expectations of Tony giving them something in return or with Tony receiving bruises.

He needed Steve to stay with him and denounce everything that Ryder said. He wanted Steve to be the domino effect, not the domino effect of people leaving, but the domino effect of people staying and actually caring about him.

His feet carried him so fast into the main floor and into the living area, that he didn’t even register the weight of a body bumping into his. Tony looked up into the eyes of Steve and let out a relieved breath.

Tony breathed in and on his exhale exclaimed, “Steve I need to tell you something.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to everyone who commented, gave a kudo, and left a bookmark. You all continue to make my day :)
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

*gets out of hiding, replies to comments, and quickly returns to hiding*

"I apologize in advance for any tears shed" Pt. III

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve sat down on his bed and stared at his hands. His mind seemed to be at unrest yet his body stayed unmoving. He leaned back in his chair and sighed with frustration. Turning his head, he looked at the time. There was a second where Steve wondered if he had ever been a man worthy to carry the shield. In this moment, he decided he was not.

A groan rippled through his body and he felt the sting of tears press against his eyes. He brought his hands from where they were resting on his lap and rubbed the palm of his hand into his eyes. He tried massaging away the sting settling in there, but it was only coupled with the burning in his throat. He had felt something want to claw itself out of his throat and just echo into the open air. He couldn’t do that though.

He wondered momentarily when Tony would be coming back. He wanted to…

He knew what he wanted, but he couldn’t dare say it aloud. If he said it aloud, that would change things. He needed to remain steadfast in his decision even if it caused him physical and emotional pain. Tony deserved this much. He didn’t deserve Steve becoming some…homewrecker. Steve had suffered many blights to his image as of late, but he would not become a homewrecker.

He was certain that he could be better though…

But Steve wasn’t the better that Tony needed. He had proof that he wasn’t every time Tony raised his hands to his arc reactor, when he saw Steve. He had proof, when sometimes Tony’s smiled dimmed as he raised a hand to rest on his shoulder or made a sudden movement toward him. Tony had always been openly affectionate and gravitating toward touch. It’s almost poetic how the first time Steve actually wanted to reach out and touch, Tony pulled away.

And he deserved that.

He deserved knowing Tony would never want him.

But by all that is good how Steve couldn’t stop wishing that Tony wanted him.

He pulled his hands away from his face and stared at his hands again. A frown marred his features as he realized what those hands nearly did to Tony. He’d explained to Tony and Tony seemed to have accepted the apology.

Was he trying to save my feelings? Was he wearing the mask that I used to be so good at taking apart?

He didn’t want to think about that, but his mind couldn’t help but stray to those thoughts. Would
Tony ever be able to look at him without immediately thinking of Siberia or having nightmares the same way that Steve has had?

Tony didn’t deserve that.

He reached over to his desk and grabbed that piece of paper. He read the script on it and he felt weighed down. His eyes couldn’t help processing the letters that formed words, which burned in the back of Steve’s mind. He kept reading it over and over, torturing himself.

For a moment he felt like he couldn’t breathe. He felt chocked in his room. He leaned over his body and placed his head between his knees. He tried coaching himself through breathing. He grabbed his knees to stop them from trembling. Something rang in his ears and it pounded against his head. After his breaths had calmed down and his mind’s thoughts came to a slow stop, he stood from the bed.

Bucky was waiting for him. He had come back for the piece of paper. He wanted to leave it in the room, but he couldn’t risk Tony finding it. After all he needed that note as a reminder.

He left the room and made no action to turn the lights off. He felt if he did…

He just couldn’t turn them off. He walked through the hallways and his steps wore lethargic as if he had been up all night. He practically had been up for more than 48 hours. He briefly wondered if Tony would be proud.

A smile made its way to his face as he remembered bringing Tony food down to his lab, during one of his working binges. Tony had told him one had never lived until they lived three days straight with no sleep. Steve hard argued that it hadn’t made sense. Tony had merely taken the offered sandwich and went back to his work, only stopping once in a while to bother Steve about what he had been drawing. Steve, almost always, obliged.

He walked into the main living area and saw Bucky gathering some books into his bag. He raised an eyebrow, which was received by a half shrug. Steve laughed shortly and turned away intending to go into the kitchen and grab a bottle of water and some snacks. However, his movements were stopped, when he felt a body barrel into his.

He looked down and saw Tony. An apology was already forming on his lips, before Tony quickly and rather out of breathe interrupted him.

Tony breathed in and on his exhale exclaimed, “Steve I need to tell you something.”

Steve shifted on his feet and looked past Tony. Steve’s refusal to look Tony in the eyes led Tony to look elsewhere. Tony noticed the bags resting near Steve’s feet and others that were piled up in the main living area. Steve’s jaw clenched and he kept his eyesight on the wall behind Tony.

Steve had hoped he wouldn’t run into Tony on his way out. He had hoped that Tony would be arriving later, but as things would have it Steve just could not catch a break. His chest clenched and he felt sparks of pain settle there. He didn’t want to physically have this conversation and he couldn’t lie about the real reason those bags were there.

Tony continued to look at the bags for a minute, before finally addressing Steve. “Are you going on the mission with Natasha? Also I thought she was leaving after New Year’s. Also seems like a lot of stuff to bring for four days coming from the man who told me that I didn’t need two suitcases for a week vacation.”

Tony laughed and smiled warmly at Steve. Steve tried everything to swallow down the cry that was crawling in the back of his throat. He felt his whole body become drained as he looked at the tired,
yet hopeful expression of Tony.

His eyes traced Tony’s facial features as he wanted to make a mental picture of how beautiful Tony looked. He wanted to remember the rosiness settling in Tony’s cheeks from probably running to see him. He wanted to remember how his brown eyes seemed to melt like chocolate as he stared into them. He wanted to remember how his forehead creased in the middle as he stared at someone in concentration, just like he was doing right now.

He wanted to remember all of this, because it would probably be the last time he would ever be this close to Tony.

Tony ran his tongue over his lips and Steve followed the motion, forcing himself not to give in this once and just bring himself closer to Tony. He had to hold himself from wanting to gather Tony in his arms and watch as Tony relaxed and his breathing fell like a warm breeze on his neck. He had to stop himself from doing all of this because he would want to stay.

And he needed to leave.

“I’m not going on Natasha’s mission,” Steve explained watching as Tony cocked his head to the side.

Tony shifted on his leg. “Oh, then what mission are you going on? Is it like some super-secret thing?”

Steve shook his head. “No, I’m not going on any mission. I’m leaving.”

“Like on vacation? Wakanda wasn’t enough of a vacation for you,” Tony joked, eyes slightly dimming as he played with the fringes of his sweater.

Steve noticed Tony did that a lot when he was nervous. Steve imagined he was nervous for his response.

“No, I’m actually leaving with Bucky to stay at Sam’s,” Steve said hoping that Tony got it without ever actually saying it.

Though why couldn’t Steve just say it, without hoping Tony could get what he was implying?

Tony then brightened. “Oh, you’re all having a sleepover. That’s nice. Sounds fun. Have a little boys’ night out and all that.”

“I’m Tony that’s not what…” Steve sighed out frustrated.

“Then what? Steve you’re just going to have to help me out here.”

“I’m leaving Tony,” Steve finally forced out not emotionally prepared to suffer through Tony guessing and missing the point.

“Oh, okay,” Tony stuttered, but was quick to find himself again. “When are you coming back? I could probably arrange for Happy to be ready to pick you both up, when you all are done having boys’ night.”

Tony wasn’t getting this. Okay, just rip it off like a Band-Aid. He hated the maker of that expression.

“No, I’m leaving the tower and I’m going to stay with Sam until Bucky and I can find our own place.”
Tony drew back as though Steve had slapped him. Steve felt an emptiness begin to settle into his body. It was an emptiness that he hadn’t felt since he talked to Tony on the kitchen floor with what seemed so long ago. Tony shook his head.

“No,” Tony announced curtly.

“Tony,” Steve started.

“No, you just…no you don’t get to that. I asked in the beginning if you wanted to live somewhere else, but you said no. So what’s this all of a sudden,” Tony said crossing his arms over his chest, a defensive action that Steve had learned Tony did a lot.

“Tony. I need to leave,” Steve said. “Let’s not make this hard.”

Tony shook his head and laughed. He began to walk back and forth. “I don’t get it,” he murmured to himself then louder to Steve. “I don’t get it.”

“You don’t have to,” Steve replied swallowing down his need to tell Tony how much he wanted to stay, how much he needed to stay. “Tony…you don’t have to get it.”

“Yes, I do. Look is it something I did. I’ll change. I can’t change something, if I don’t know. So what do I have to do to get you to stay, huh?” Tony questioned still walking back and forth. “Do I need to change my attitude, my work hours? What needs to happen?”

“Tony no. I never want you to change. That’s…Tony never think for a second that I’d like you to change anything about you,” Steve explained.

He hated how Tony immediately thought that Steve needed him to change to get him to stay. He wanted to tell him that everything that Tony was remained perfect. He wanted to tell him that his passion for his work was invigorating. He wanted to tell him that the time he spent working was inspiring because it encouraged him to work just as hard.

He wanted to tell him that his smile made him want to curl in the warmth that it offered around him. He wanted to tell him that look he has, when he’s just woken up and seems confused makes Steve want to gather him in his arms and kiss him until he’s fully awake. He wanted to tell him that he loves seeing how at ease he is with Miles. He wanted to tell them that his compassion and servant heart for others makes Steve desire him in a way that is foreign to him.

He wanted to tell him that there is never a need for him to change and anyone who thinks so is an idiot…anyone who thinks that Tony is less deserving and needs to change would be gladly met with Steve’s shield shoved down their throat.

He needed to tell him all of this.

But he needed even more to tell himself Tony didn’t need to hear this…at least not from him.

“There’s nothing you need to change,” Steve replied hoping that this would get through to Tony.

He was hoping that Tony would just let him leave and not make him answer these questions. He was hoping that Tony would appreciate the distance, so that he could actually recover.

“Then what Steve? Tell me. Because people keep on leaving and I must be doing something wrong. So help me Steve. What have I done so wrong in the past few weeks to get you to leave?” Tony finally whispered growing closer to Steve. “Why are you leaving me?”
And if that didn’t make Steve die a little inside.

“Because I need to protect you,” Steve admitted, wincing at how weak he sounded.

“Protect me from what?”

A beat of silence. Steve swallowed a lump in his throat.

“Protect me from what?” Tony repeated stepping closer to Steve.

Steve took a step back.

“Me,” Steve softly said looking down at Tony. “I need to protect you from me.”

“I told you I didn’t need your protection! Or did that night conversation just go inside one ear and out the other,” Tony screamed. “Is this like last time? You told me you were actually just wanting to protect yourself? That’s bullshit. Tell me the truth Steve. Tell me.”

“I know you don’t need my protection,” Steve said.

“So there’s no sense of you leaving, if I don’t need your protection,” Tony angrily shouted, fire coursing through his vein. “I don’t need anyone’s protection. I am fine on my own! I’m just like everyone else in this tower Steve yet you’re not running away from Natasha. You’re not telling her you have to leave because of some protector mess.”

Steve turned away and wished he could just disappear. He made moves to step away, but Tony’s grip on his elbow forced him to stay rooted in his spot. He knew he could easily break out of his hold, but that touch on his elbow sent a shiver coursing through his body. He looked at Tony’s hand on his elbow and sighed.

“You’re right. You don’t need my protection,” Steve rasped. “That doesn’t mean I’ll ever stop trying to protect you. You don’t need it, but I do. I need to protect you from me.”

“Then stay. You’re protecting my hea…fuck just stay,” Tony said trying not to make it sound like he was pleading. “Stay Steve. I’ll give you two whole floors if you need space. If you really want to protect me, stay.”


He raised his fists to meet Steve’s chest.

“How can you tell me you want to rebuild you fucking asshole?”

Another hit against Steve’s chest.

“How can you stand here and tell me you’re leaving, when you told me you never should have left in the first place?”

This hit landed somewhere near Steve’s collarbone. Steve briefly registered a light tap.

“How can you promise to be honest, but not tell me why you’re really leaving?”

Tony punched at his chest and Steve let him. Steve stayed still as he let those hits meet his chest. He
had never wished so much that those blows could actually hurt and leave some real damage. Though
Steve knew that while they wouldn’t leave a bruise on his skin, they would certainly leave a bruise
on his heart.

“Tony…this isn’t easy for me,” he broke out as he watched Tony’s trembling fists go toward his
chest much slower.

“Then why are you leaving me,” Tony said eyes bright with tears as he looked up at Steve. “Why
are you leaving me? I told you I needed you all. I told you I needed you here. I need you here. Is that
what you need? Do you need to hear that no matter how things are still rocky I still need you here…
as my friend.”

Tony let out a shaky breath “Would it change if I…”

Steve. “Don’t. Please don’t.”

He couldn’t have Tony ask him to stay. He couldn’t.

Steve didn’t bother holding back a tear from falling this time. Tony watched the tear fall down his
cheeks. Tony had since stopped beating on Steve’s chest, when Steve grasped his hands in between
his. Steve ran a thumb over the soft skin there and raised it to his lips. He pressed a soft kiss against
his wrist and let his tear fall between their joined hands. His mouth trembled as it kissed Tony’s
balled fists.

He pressed Tony’s hands tightly to his chest. “I have to leave because I can’t stay knowing that I’m
the reason behind your nightmares. I can’t stay when I know my presence is still affecting you in a
negative manner Tony. It breaks my heart.”

“But it’s not Steve. Those nightmares aren’t because of you,” Tony said.

Steve immediately thought to separate occasions that said differently. When Miles first came to them
talking about that Mr. Mean Bad One, only to realize Tony was experiencing that nightmare because
of him. Then when Tony woke up from his nap grasping his chest and looking as though he could
hardly breathe. He remembered how Tony had flinched away from his touch. Then at the Gala when
Ryder had come to him, while Tony had been calming down a crying Miles, and explained that
Tony had a panic attack that took him back to Siberia.

Then there was that piece of paper…that note, which had been left in a box on his desk drawer.

Everything just pointed toward Steve being the main person that wasn’t helping Tony. In order for
Tony to move on, Steve needed to not be such a heavy presence in his life.

“They are because of me Tony. Look you don’t have to say it isn’t just too save me from being
hurt,” Steve told him. “It’s okay. Look, we’ll still be teammates.”

Tony rasped out a laugh and swiped his thumb against his lip. “Teammates?”

Steve nodded. “Yes, it’ll be fine. We’ll both be fine. We were teammates first, if nothing else,” Steve
said and immediately wishes that he hadn’t. Tony grimaces and turns his head, so it’s no longer
facing Steve.

“No, it’s not because you are leaving without still giving me a good explanation. So what I have
nightmares. I have nightmares about Miles’ stuffed penguin eating me. Does that mean I think
Snuggle should just march up and leave?”
Steve breathed out and opened his mouth to speak, but Tony spoke first.

“And I’m going to therapy. That helps. Steve look it’s not all going to go away in a few weeks and I’m sorry if you thought that. But look I promise you that nightmare on the couch was not because of you. You just have to believe me and if you will just actually listen for a-”

“Tony I can’t handle it okay! I can’t handle your nightmares and knowing that you’re broken because of me,” Steve exclaimed loudly, interrupting Tony midsentence.

Tony abruptly tried ripping himself away from Steve, but Steve’s tight grasp on his hands kept him pressed against Steve.

“You think I’m broken,” Tony said and it comes out accusatory. His statement is harsh in the moments that were silence. His breath stuttered. Steve watched as the color left his face and the energy that Tony had, arguing for Steve to say, left his eyes.

Steve immediately shook his head trying to backtrack. He didn’t know how to react. He couldn’t know how to make things okay or ignore the way that Tony’s breath caught on a cry or how his body seemed to grow rigid with tension. He wanted to feel like he could change things. Wanted to have control over what was going on…but he had never felt so out of control…so powerless like this.

He tried to explain.

“No, Steve. Just say it for what it is. You’re leaving me because I’m fucking broken and I can’t be fixed,” Tony joked lacking any amusement. “You’re leaving me because I’m just not good enough for you to stay.”

There’s a second, where Tony gave Steve a chance to say something. There was no verbal statement on Tony’s part, but it was implied. Steve pursed his lips into a thin line and staves off the innate yearning to get on his knees and plead that Tony forgive him for this.

Tony laughed and it’s something dark and desperate. It made Steve feel worse. Tony drew back from Steve with a hand over his mouth, trying not to let any sound escape. He tilted his head back and continued to dryly laugh to himself.

Steve watched as Tony’s chest seems to hiccup. It’s as though Tony is in a physical battle to make himself not cry. Steve observed, with a sinking horror, as Tony began to struggle for breath. His eyes glazed over and Steve let his grasp on him loosen. Tony without the weight of Steve holding him, nearly collapsed.

Steve saw from the corner of his eye Natasha coming toward him. He wondered how much she had heard. She leaned down to whisper something to Miles and watched as FRIDAY directed Miles to go to his room and wait for Natasha to return. Natasha stalked over to where Tony was. Before she was able to reach him, Tony looked at Steve once more.

Steve didn’t say anything. There was nothing left to say at that point. Tony seemed to see that with the look Steve was giving him. He nodded once to Steve and then to himself, before stepping away from Steve. His body swayed and Steve reached out to steady him. Tony quickly recoiled from his assistance and stood on shaky legs. His body hunched over and he gathered his sweater in his hands and played with the fringes at the hem. He kept nodding to himself as he staggered away from Steve.

Steve didn’t dare allow himself to look back, not even when he heard Tony’s body fall to the ground and heard sobs rack through his body.

Natasha angrily marched toward Steve. Fire settled deep in her cheeks as she raised her hand. Steve
prepared himself for Natasha’s hit and prayed that for once it really truly hurt. He was disappointed, when she made no movement. He watched as she shook her head at him portraying her disappointment and grief over his actions.

“I’ll talk to you later. Seems Tony did need protecting from you after all,” Natasha hissed. Natasha followed where Tony had fallen in the hallway.

Steve walked toward the wall and collapsed against it. He tilted his head back and closed his eyes. Steve allowed himself a few moments to compose himself, before he turned to look where Bucky was standing.

Bucky looked back at Steve, his grasp on his own bags growing slack as though hoping Steve would change his mind. Steve tried toning out the whimpers of Tony and the voice of Natasha trying to console him. Bucky looked at Steve trying to ignore those cries. Bucky had heard Steve’s explanation, he had told it to him the night of the gala after Tony and Ryder had left.

He had told Steve that leaving didn’t make sense. But Steve had stayed with Bucky and now Bucky felt the need to go with him even if he didn’t agree and he told Steve that. Bucky looked to Steve again and hoped for once that him seeing how affected Tony was with his departure he would want to stay.

“Steve are you sure you want to leave, no regrets?”

Steve turned to him sadly eyes glistening with tears. Bucky waited for a response.

A tear fell down as he looked at his bags. He reached inside of one and took out a square box. Reaching inside he pulled out the bracelet that he had given Tony. He ran his hands over the smoothness of it.

He remembered how it had been returned to him the night of the gala with that piece of paper behind. The words from the note had left him short of breath and had given him the added incentive for what he had to do.

He turned the bracelet in his hand and then smiled briefly. The smile was tired, but there was something of a yearning in his expression.

Bucky knew that Steve's mind had been changed. He knew that look. It was the look of a guy, who knew it was stronger to stay than to leave. He let his own bags fall back to the ground.

Steve walked over to the kitchen counter and placed the bracelet there. He walked back to where Bucky and their bags were.

Bucky watched as Steve grabbed his bags and left.

Chapter End Notes

I'm really sorry, but keep in mind this has a happy ending I promise!

Thanks again to everyone who commented, gave a kudo, and left a bookmark. You all continue to make my day :)
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Can I just say that all of your comments have given me so much inspiration. Like I seriously love each and every one of you so much 'cause I was legit worried about last chapter. I hope I can continue to give you all solid content, since you all are more than deserving of it. Also my school semester has started again (cries), but I am definitely staying on my Saturday update schedule. If anything changes, I will let you all know :) And guys can I just say you may need to buckle your seats for the next few chapters because...well I'm not going to spoil anything

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Where is he?” Natasha’s commanding, yet controlled, voice asked.

Sam didn’t even look up from where he was making biscuits. “Natasha what a wonderful surprise. Mind telling me why you are breaking into my home this early in the morning.”

Natasha closed the door behind her and stepped inside. “Sam, it’s courteous that I even came through the front door.”

Sam shrugged and mumbled something about spies. He looked up from where he was stirring his batter. Before Sam had the chance to enter, Bucky walked into the kitchen rubbing bleary eyes. Sam rolled his eyes at the mere presence of Bucky and sighed loudly. Bucky merely gave a dry smirk in response.

“You’re making biscuits again?” Bucky implored raising his hand to stick it in the batter.

Sam slapped his hand away and turned to face him with a scowl on his face.

“Did you even wash your hands you heathen. And yes I am making biscuits again because cooking for two super soldiers is hard and biscuits are easy to make in large portions. Besides I don’t see you coming to help make them. So you don’t get to complain.”

Bucky shrugged. “Just saying. Did you get any plums?”

“I am not your caretaker. You can go out and get plums yourself. I have told you this many times. You can’t keep giving me a list of things to get at the store,” Sam growled lowly.

“Yeah, can’t really go into public spaces by myself quite yet unless you’re volunteering,” Bucky replied taking a bite out of an apple that he retrieved from the refrigerator.

“Yeah, no. After the little incident we had, when I took you and Steve to Target. I am not doing that again.”

Bucky tried sputtering out a response.

Natasha allowed their bantering to go on for another minute. Then loudly she repeated her question. “Where is he?”
Sam looked up at her as though remembering that she had come to his house for something. Sam frowned then smoothed out his features. Natasha noted the tension laden in his features. Bucky was nearly a mirror image. Natasha breathed in to calm herself.

“Steve,” she yelled just loud enough to know that Steve could pick up her voice. “If you are not out here in the next twenty seconds, your head will not be attached to your neck.”

Sam winced, already knowing that Natasha didn’t come here to play. Both him and Bucky seemed to get the idea and moved quietly in the kitchen as Natasha went to go sit in the den. Steve came out of the room. A moment of startled surprise at Steve’s appearance, shook Natasha. Steve dragged himself into the den. His beard looked poorly kept and his eyes were rimmed red with no sleep. His shirt was rumpled as though he hadn’t changed clothes in a few days.

She stood up and walked toward him. A resounding smack was heard as her hand met Steve’s cheek. Steve’s face went backward from the sheer force that Natasha exerted. Natasha coolly sat back down in her seat as Steve tried to register what just happened. He could feel the stinging pain begin to settle in his bones. He hadn’t known Natasha could hit that hard…he never had reason to care how it felt. But now he did.

“You look awful,” Natasha spoke aloud finally addressing him, once he sat down on the seat opposite of her.

Steve sighed loudly. He turned tired eyes to her and rubbed at his cheek. “Thanks.”

Bucky and Sam tried to make it look like they weren’t making sure Natasha pulled out any knives. Natasha took some time to gather her thoughts. Once she had run through her thoughts in her mind, she began to talk to Steve.

“You know I told myself I’d give you one month to come to your senses. Then I sat back and realized that month was actually for myself. See if I had seen you again within that timespan I would have killed you,” Natasha exclaimed coldly.

Steve winced.

“You know I told myself I’d give you one month to come to your senses. Then I sat back and realized that month was actually for myself. See if I had seen you again within that timespan I would have killed you,” Natasha exclaimed coldly.

Steve winced.

“I can’t believe we’re right back in this position Steve. I thought you would have learned from your mistakes. It takes a special kind of idiot to do this again. You made me watch as Tony nearly become inconsolable. You tore him apart Steve and I had hoped that…you claimed you loved him, but for the life of me I couldn’t imagine anyone who loves Tony to have done that to him,” Natasha exclaimed in one breath.

“No, you don’t speak. You don’t make excuses. Nothing can excuse you from leaving Tony again after you fucking promised that you wouldn’t. You made yourself into a liar and you made it just that much harder for Tony to trust that anyone he loves will ever stay.”

Steve turned away not willing to let Natasha know how visibly affected by her words.

“No, you look at me. You were bold enough to watch Tony ask you to stay and you to tell him no. You will be bold enough to look me in the eye, when I talk to you,” Natasha grit out.

Wet eyes met Natasha’s. “Natasha…you have to believe me I didn’t want to leave…but it was better. I…have a letter.”
“A letter?” Natasha stated with a deadpan expression.

Steve immediately reached to his pocket. Upon Natasha’s curious glance, he explained “I always keep it near me as a reminder.”

Natasha’s glare softened slightly, but not enough to erase the hardness in her expression. She held out her hand for the note and started to read it aloud.

Dear Steve,

I know that as a noble man of considerable honor that you will listen to my words with caution. As of late, I have noticed that Tony has been having more panic attacks and sleepless nights. Upon further examination, I realized that his change of behavior has originated from the return of the Rogue Avengers, mainly you Steve. It seems that your presence is always reminding him of the past year, especially the moment he spent cold and alone in Siberia, nearly moments from death. He had been making strides toward getting better, but as of late he is getting worse. This is a great concern of mine, seeing as though I love Tony and can hardly bear to see him suffer due to his forgiving nature and lack of self-health.

I merely hope that you may maintain a distance from Tony as he makes strides to recovery. I just cannot bear to see him hurt any longer. I do apologize if this hurts your relationship with Tony. However, as the man in his life I must look out for Tony’s best. Tony would never tell you this, in fear of jeopardizing his spot in the Avengers. In saying so, I hope that you let this remain between the two of us. I’m sure as a former friend of Tony’s you can still understand his best interests. I genuinely wish you the best, but the best is not near Tony.

Sincerely,

Dr. Ryder

“Is this it?” she questioned her voice growing rough from unrestrained anger. “You let the words of Ryder, whom we have known less than three months, to get into your head. You let Tony’s boyfriend dictate your actions without actually talking and listening to Tony?”

Natasha read the letter again except this time in her head. “The best for Tony? Okay, Ryder has just come back into Tony’s life. He doesn’t know Tony like you do…like we do. This is just a guy who’s become jealous and has possibly grown weary of the closeness that you and Tony have had lately. You really let a piece of paper…” Natasha broke of frustrated.

“Yeah, this letter just seems like a guy who feels like there’s competition,” Sam noted. “Doesn’t really seem like his letter has that much merit.”

“Do you even love him?” Natasha questioned ripping apart the note.

“I do love him,” Steve angrily replied. “That should never be in question.”

Bucky, who had kept an ear on their conversation, chose to speak up from his spot in the kitchen.

“No, let’s be honest Steve. Right here with just you, Sam, Natasha, and me. Your love for me made you go against the world, but your love for Tony isn’t strong enough to go against Ryder? If you truly love him, you wouldn’t let a note get in the way of things. I never knew the great Captain America would give up on a fight just because of some words on a piece of paper.”

Steve looked down at his clasped hands. “Ryder is his boyfriend. I have to respect their relationship.”
“Bull shit,” Bucky broke off.

“Buck,” Steve’s hoarse voice interrupted.

“No, you don’t get to just pull a pity party. You don’t love Tony, if you let this note get in the way. When I was watching you and Tony, never did I hear Tony say he wanted you to leave. He told you to stay. I think you should’ve been listening to him more than the words on a piece of paper. You can’t sit here and say you love Tony, when you let him walk off crying from you,” Bucky stated.

Natasha nodded. “He’s right. You know usually when you love someone, you fight for them. You gave up without even trying. I’m sure you had a deeper friendship with Tony than he does a relationship with Ryder. So no you don’t love him.”

“Don’t tell me I don’t love him!” Steve yelled standing up angrily getting up. “Don’t you both dare tell me I don’t love him. You have no right to tell me how I feel!”

Bucky by then had entered the den. Now Steve and Bucky were standing opposite of one another. Natasha had also stood up behind Steve. Now Steve was in the middle of the two. His breathing grew haggard and his head was spinning.

“What so now you’re getting mad at us because we’re telling you the truth like a petulant child?” Bucky shouted pushing back at Steve. “Don’t get mad at us because we’re voicing what’s really going on. You’re not in some bubble anymore Steve! This is your reality and if you choose to spend it pretending that the actions you did equates to love, then possibly the years have changed you more than I thought.”

“Don’t say that to me! You don’t know that,” Steve growled pushing at Bucky. “I haven’t changed.”

“Says the guy who once said he’d never leave a fight. Says the guy who told me that once he found the person he loved, he would hold tight to them and never let them go. Where’s that person Steve? Huh? Where is he?”

“He’s here,” Steve shouted voice growing hoarse.

“Really? Because I don’t see him,” Bucky hissed. “All I see is some coward who refuses to admit-”

Next thing they knew Steve had pounced on Bucky and threw a punch toward his chin. Pure unrestrained anger flew outside of Steve. It seemed like that month holed up in Sam’s house really did affect Steve.

“You know if you had as much passion for fighting me right now as you did for loving Tony then maybe you’d be with him,” Bucky drawled, while kicking at Steve’s side.

“What can’t you two get in your head? I’m not good for him. I’m doing this because I love him,” Steve rushed out. “You think I wanted to tell Tony I had to leave. You think I wanted to make Tony feel like me leaving was his fault?”

Natasha rolled her eyes. “All I hear are excuses. You’re believing the words of someone you don’t know, someone you don’t trust over the words of Tony. The only thing that explains this is that you think it’s easier for yourself to just walk away. Were you looking for an out ever since you stepped in the tower?”

“No!” Steve shouted. “No, no, no.”

“Then I don’t understand this,” Natasha said collapsing onto the chair as she continued watching the
two fight. Sam briefly wondered if he should intervene, because he really didn’t want blood on his new rug. However, Natasha’s glare in his direction made him reconsider and he stayed silent.

Bucky rammed his elbow into Steve’s ribs and Steve let out a gasp. Steve rolled over and stared at Bucky.

“Look how easy it is for you to fight, but not for you to stay,” Bucky mockingly said. “Didn’t know that leaving him in Siberia would set the trend.”

Shame coursed through Steve and he immediately drew his body away from Bucky’s. Natasha pursed her lips together, wondering if Bucky had gone too far. Bucky’s eyes widened and his chest went up and down, trying to regain his breath. When he realized that Steve was no longer going to be wrestling with him, he took his seat next to Natasha again.

Steve stayed on the floor and allowed everything that Bucky was saying just sink into his mind. Immediately, Tony eyes bright with tears came to the forefront of his mind. He watched as his eyes dimmed and he could feel that desperation…that need to go back as soon as he had grabbed his bags and left the tower.

His hands trembled where they were resting on his knee. He loves Tony. He knows that he loves Tony. But his actions weren’t proving that. He had made Tony feel like he wasn’t good enough. Steve’s eyes glazed over and he felt the panic began to settle in.

His hands began to tremble and he felt acid burn in his throat. Everything around him grew hazy. His mind started to go back to Siberia and…

_Not here. Please not here_, he chanted to himself trying to calm himself down.

Natasha began to notice the state of panic Steve was succumbing to. She knelt beside him and took her hand in hers. He thought he heard her telling him to mirror her breathing. He always found it funny, mirroring someone’s breathing. His eyes remained unfocused and he tried centering himself.

Bucky ran a hand through his hair as he watched Natasha slowly calm him down. When Steve gained awareness of his surroundings, Natasha stood up and went back to her seat.

Steve followed Natasha and went to go sit back in his chair. Sam had entered again and brought biscuits and breakfast and sat silently in the recliner. Sam didn’t say anything to break the silence.

“Sorry,” Bucky winced. “I went too far.”

Steve shook his head. “No, you…you’re right. You are both right. I should’ve never left.”


Steve closed his eyes. “Both.”

Natasha picked up a biscuit and motioned for Steve to explain.

Steve shrugged. “I admit it was easier for me to leave and to never know what would happen if I actually fought for him…if I made him know that I thought I was better for him. Because what if I stayed and fought for Tony? What if I stayed and I became the person who destroyed Tony? But what if I fought for him and I lost him.”

“What if you fought for him and realized that you should’ve done it sooner,” Natasha spoke up. “What if all this time spent apart could have been spent together? What then?”
Sam sighed and turned to face Steve. “Leaving doesn’t make things better Steve. It doesn’t make that ache go away. Leaving isn’t a good decision, when there is a chance to resolve things and to become better with one another. But the moment that the talking is over so are the chances of things being resolved…chances for you and Tony to have an honest and open conversation. You never gave Tony the opportunity and you did both of yourselves a disservice.”

Bucky nodded in agreeance. “For once I agree with Sam. Look Steve.”

Steve looked up from his lap and focused his attention on Bucky.

“Movement is the last manifestation of your reality. It is not what you say, but what you do that confirms who you are. So your promise not to leave never mattered, once your actions belied your words.”

Natasha stood up straighter, thankful that she had the support of Sam and Bucky. Going into this, she thought she would have been arguing with Steve alone. She would have made him see reason and his mistakes, but it was nice going in with backup.

“Understand this Steve. You never should have left and you will have to deal with the consequences of that action. Be lucky that Pepper and Rhody took Miles and Tony on a trip to San Diego for this past month or they would have come with me. I’m pretty sure we wouldn’t have made it this far, if they were here.” Natasha said hoping that Steve understood the importance of what she was implying. “Actually I’m still pretty sure Rhody’s been practicing how to use his leg brace as a weapon and Pepper…well I’m pretty sure she’s out to make sure you can’t be mobile for a year.”

Sam swooped his head so fast to Natasha. Natasha lifted a shoulder. “Pepper is not a woman to mess with. And when you mess with her family. Oh, it’s game over. You’re lucky that I suggested that trip in the first place.”

Steve paled, but nodded. “I deserve it. I should’ve treated Tony like how I treated the mission toward finding you, Bucky. You were right on that.”

“I know that punk,” Bucky said snatching a biscuit from Sam.

Sam sneered at Bucky and poured syrup all over Bucky’s plate. Bucky grinned and grabbed the soaking biscuit and put it in his mouth.

“Do you want to stay with Tony?” Sam asked turning away from the disgusting image of Bucky eating that syrup soaked biscuit.

“Of course I do,” Steve said.

“Then this time fight for him. Stay for him,” Natasha told him.

“Shouldn’t you be telling me that since I hurt him I shouldn’t get the opportunity to even try?”

“Oh trust me, Pepper, Rhody, and I have discussed this in great detail. I mean great detail,” Natasha stressed. “We all reached the same conclusion. You are an idiot and we all get to slap you at least once.”

Steve slouched in his chair. “Great. That’s what I thought.”

“But,” Natasha added, “We also know that Tony is happier, when he’s with you. There’s this sense of easiness and genuine love shared between the two of you. Pepper has told me that, while she wants to slap you and cut of your balls next time she sees you, she knows how confused and hurt
Tony is. She believes that you can ease the confusion.”

“Genuine love between us?”

“Tony isn’t one to just open himself up to someone. You know that. You’re going to have to actually try and realize that if you want the chance to be with Tony you need to fight for him though.”

Steve immediately got out of his seat. “I can write a letter!”

Natasha frowned and nodded to herself. Then she looked at Bucky and Sam. Seeing something in their eyes, she reached a conclusion. She stood up and grabbed Sam’s remote. She weighed it in her hands and set it down. She then looked around and her eyes brightened upon seeing a metal book holder in the shape of a falcon. She raised it in her hands and aimed straight for Steve’s forehead.

“Ow Nat!” Steve yelled raising his head to the growing swell on his forehead. “What was that for?”

She stood up and got in his face. Grabbing his chin, she said, “You will most definitely not write a letter and hope things just solve things on their own. You did that last time and it didn’t solve anything. Try again.”

Steve rubbed his forehead. “It’s just easier for me to write things. I can just place all of my feelings on there.”

“I don’t think that a letter is the best option.” Natasha sighed. Steve looked at her imploringly. “Fine. Write the letter and I’ll send it to Tony, since I know where he is right now. But that will not be the end. That is only the beginning.”

Steve ran a hand through his hair. He had a fleeting thought that he should get a haircut soon. “I think I’d like to show Tony that I am staying, truly apologize for leaving, and show him that I’m going to fight for him. I’m going to show him that I love him and I’m not going to let Ryder manipulate me into thinking that I shouldn’t be near Tony.”

Natasha leaned back in his chair. “If only you had realized this sooner, we wouldn’t be in this position. As cliché as it is, I assume it is better late than never.”

Sam nodded. “True.”

“But do you think it’s acceptable to try and break up Ryder and Tony?” Steve whispered not sure if he wanted to hear the answer. He wanted to fight for Tony and had a renewed strength running through his body. He realized that his time wallowing could’ve been spent getting closer to Tony. He was never one to run away from a fight. He shouldn’t have let this been the time he lowered his defense and walked away.

Natasha shrugged. “I think that sometimes there is someone better for you than the person you’re in a relationship with. For example the person dating the one you love could be after their family’s small business in hopes of tearing it down and building a hotel. But you’re watching from the outside seeing how this person doesn’t really care for the one you’re in love with. So you start making plans to be that one, the one. Because even if they don’t know it yet, you’ve always been there and will always be there for them.”

“You’ve been watching those hallmark movies with Tony haven’t you,” Steve smiled.

Natasha’s cheeks turned bright red, but as soon as they flushed they quickly went back to its normal coloring.
“There was a marathon. I merely suggested to Tony we could watch that, instead of him being holed up in his lab,” Natasha said. “But that’s not the point. I’m just saying I don’t think Ryder is the one for Tony.”

Steve smiled feeling hope grow warm in his chest. He was already mentally going through a plan. Natasha leaned closer to Steve.

“Look he’s going to try to push you away. He’s going to have that fear that if you get close, you’ll leave again. He’ll have all of his walls back up again. He’ll say things to you that might make you want to pack your things, but you can’t. Do you understand?” Natasha questioned.

Steve nodded. “I do. I know that I’ll have to work back toward gaining Tony’s trust. This time I want my actions to speak for me and how I feel.”

Natasha nodded seemingly pleased with how the conversation had been going. “So is part of your plan moving back in?”

“Is there still a place for me to move in to?” Steve asked her.

Bucky and Sam waited for Natasha to answer. Steve waited with baited breath for Natasha to reply to his question.

“He never cut off the light on your floor,” Natasha admitted.

Steve felt his heart do a weird leap. “Then I would love to come back.”

Natasha nodded. “Good. Now tell me have you been out of Sam’s house in the past month?”

Steve’s ears turned bright red as if being caught. “Of course I have.”

“Lies. He went outside once and that was to check the weather,” Sam told Natasha, laughing slightly.


“I’m making a trip to the orphanage. It’ll do you some good to get out, so you’re going to come with me. I would let you go straight to the tower, but I want to actually make sure you don’t somehow be stupid and talk yourself out of it. So you’re going to be fucking attached to my hip. Also do something with that beard. You’re starting to look like a stalker out of some lifetime horror movie.”

“That’s a lot of demands,” Steve said, but started getting ready to follow them nonetheless.

“Yes, and you’re not in a position to question them. So hurry up and get ready. Bucky could you possibly have all of your and Steve’s things packed by the time we arrive? We’ll return here after our visit and then we’ll leave to the tower.”

Bucky nodded his head. “Yeah.”

“Good.”

Steve had been at the orphanage for nearly an hour and he had spent most of it trying to hide from Natasha’s little black widows. He was pretty sure they were avenging Tony. He knew that Natasha probably didn’t go into full about what happened, but he was pretty sure that one of the little black widows had thrown a Gatorade bottle at his head with just a little force. Now he had a matching
bruise on his chin to match the one on his forehead.

Julie had kicked him in the neither regions and exclaimed that, “You’re the reason Mr. Tony hasn’t been here in like forever!”

Steve bit back a whimper and narrowed his eyes at Natasha who was snickering behind the hallway door and high-fived Julie. From then on, he tried hiding from all of the little black widows. He thought that he would find safety with Jaime, but Jaime turned a cool glare to him and ousted his position.

Now he knew why Natasha really wanted him to come to Karen’s. For a moment he tried hiding in Karen’s, but Karen merely raised her eyebrows and directed him elsewhere.

He shouldn’t be scared of some little children, but little children who felt the need to carry out justice carried a lot of anger. The smallest, Maia, had managed to pierce a ballpoint pin into his calf muscle. He winced as he watched her tiny legs run off.

He looked up and saw Natasha high-five Maia, while Jaime picked her up and whispered “Good job.”

Steve knew he deserved this, but after an hour of these attacks…he couldn’t. Finally, he thought that he had found a spot. It was a small room, probably one of the smallest ones at the orphanage. He walked in timidly eyes searching for any little black widows. Once he did a check and saw that there were none, he closed the door behind him.

He walked in so fast, he barely missed tripping on a lump on the floor. He would have mistaken it for just a few blankets tossed on the ground, if it weren’t for the quiet ouch coming from underneath it.

“You make it a habit to step on kids,” the small boy questioned tossing the covers over his head. He turned red eyes to Steve. His mouth was turned downward and his brown hair stuck up at odd ends.

Steve knelt beside the boy. “Are you okay son?”

The boy rolled his eyes. “Of course I’m okay. What tells you that I’m not?”

“The fact that it looks like you’ve been crying and you’re hiding underneath three blankets,” Steve announced resting his back against the back of the bed.

“Or I could’ve been doing drugs. And you just messed up my vibe,” the boy bit out.

Steve raised an inquiring eyebrow. “Drugs aren’t good for you kid.”

The boy scoffed and shook his head. “You actually promote this stuff in real life? Thought the videos in school that you did were just for show. Nice to know the great Captain lives what he preaches.”

Steve winced at the rough tone of the boy. “Are you on drugs?”

“Does it fucking look like I’m on drugs? And if I am what are you going to do, report me to your little nice American sense of moral justice?” he growled. “Fuck off. Why the hell are you even in my room?”

Steve was taken aback by the foul nature of the young boy’s mouth and told him so. The boy frowned. “Are you serious? You can’t just come in my room and start trying to be some type of…”
some…get the hell out!”

Steve shook his head. “See I can’t do that without knowing you’re alright. Do I need to get Ms. Karen?”

The boy gave an incredulous look to Steve. “Are you fucking stupid? Why the hell would I want Ms. Karen to come in here? It’s not like I don’t want to get kicked out of my fifth home or whatever,” he laughed darkly.

Steve blinked owlishly not really sure how to approach this situation. He was pretty sure he wasn’t fit to deal with any of this. Yet he didn’t want to risk leaving the room and he truly wanted to understand and try to help the kid.

“Allright, alright. I won’t bring in Ms. Karen, but you’re going to have to talk to me then. You can’t keep this inside,” Steve told him.

“The only one I can talk to is not here,” he growled.

Tony.

He sighed and looked at the kid. The boy hadn’t stopped frowning and now he was running his hands though his hair trying to calm the strands to stand down. He shook his head and gave out a brittle laugh.

“I’m a pretty good listener as well,” Steve tried softly saying to the boy. “I won’t speak up unless prompted. It seems like it would do you some good to get some stuff out. So…”

The boy looked quizzically at him and was trying to figure out Steve’s true intention. He scooted back and let some distance between himself and Steve. He looked back and up a few moments, before beginning to talk.

“My dad left us, when I was younger. People said he was a good man, but how does a good man leave his family? So it was always just me and my mom.”

He cleared his throat and played with the fabric of the blanket in his hands. “It was good. Things were fine. I mean we weren’t living in a nice house or anything…but the apartment we stayed at was nice. It was ours. Then mom met Jack. Jack’s pretty cool. They had my sister, she’s cool. I just don’t think I was in the cool factor.”

Steve wanted to speak up, but let the boy continue speaking.

“I realized that, when mom started getting really sick Jack would start taking my sister with him on his trips back home, while mom was in the hospital. But CPS was called and so here I’ve been shifting through group homes back and back.”

“Jack doesn’t let you stay with him?” Steve questioned, hoping that the boy wouldn’t mind this one interruption.

“You said you wouldn’t say anything,” the boy said all of a sudden tired.

Steve nodded. “I did. I’m sorry.”

“You look like the guy who’s always sorry for something,” the boy honestly replied. “I don’t like those guys. Jack is one of those guys.”
Steve bit back a response and most importantly bit back another apology.

“Jack doesn’t let me stay with him and my sister because I was never a part of his plans, which is stupid because I existed, while he was dating my mom. Either way, Jack doesn’t want to take me on. Mom doesn’t have any family and all the family on my dad’s side...well I know nothing about them.”

The boy crossed his arms over himself. “So here I am trying to be good here because Mr. Stark is nice and...” he stopped mid-sentence. “He promised that once a week he’d be here to take me to see my mom. But he’s not here and I haven’t fucking seen her in a month. I couldn’t even...” his voice caught up on a wet laugh. “I couldn’t even welcome the new year with her.”

The boy shrugged and stared at the ceiling. “But what should I have expected. The world doesn’t treat people, with the name Harley fucking Keener, fair.”

Steve watched as Harley rubbed the palms of his hand into his eyes. “So there’s that. Are we done here? I’d like to go back to what I was doing.”

“I can go take you to see your mom,” Steve blurted out without even knowing what he had said. “I mean I’m the reason Tony hasn’t been at Karen’s for the past month, so I can take you to visit her until he comes back.”

Harley tilted his head. “What’s your deal?”

“My deal?”

“Yes, like what are you even? Why are you the reason Mr. Stark isn’t here?”

“Long story.”

“Make it short,” Harley demanded.

“I left,” Steve told him.

Harley seemed to understand him. “Yeah, a lot of people seem to love doing that.” He looked at Steve once more. “You can really go take me to see my mom?”

Steve nodded. “Yes, I have to tell Karen. However, I believe we can go see your mom today. How about you get showered and try to look like you haven’t been doing drugs and I’ll go tell her.”

Harley smiled shyly and immediately got up. He grabbed a change of clothes and nearly ran to the group bathroom. Steve turned up getting ready to leave and ran into Natasha. Natasha didn’t even try to hide the fact that she had been eavesdropping. She simply followed into step with Steve on his way to Karen’s office.

“Steve you can’t just tell him you’re going to take him to see his mom,” Natasha told him. “You need to have your information with Karen and you need to be safety trained, which you aren’t.”

“You are,” Steve said turning to Natasha. “Look can you come with us. I’m sure we can go if Karen knows you’re coming.”

Natasha looked back at him and sighed. “Fine, just this once. Come on.”

Steve and Natasha asked Karen. Karen simply brightened at the request and gave them her permission. However, she made sure to take a copy of Steve’s ID and any other information, just for
Harley met them near the front of the orphanage, nearly bouncing with nervous energy.

Julie walked to them pulling on her coat. “I’m coming with you. Come on Harley,” she commanded grabbing Harley’s hand in hers.

The tips of Harley’s ears turned a bright red as he looked down at their joined hands. He tried stuttering out a response. Julie smiled mischievously.

“Cute. Ms. Natasha can we stop for flowers to get for Mrs. Keener?”

Natasha smiled as she closed the door behind her. “I believe that we can make a short stop at a flower shop on our way to the hospital.”

Steve followed them to the car. He got in the passenger side and settled in as Natasha took off. They stopped at the flower shop, as suggested by Julie. Julie directed Harley around the small shop. His hand was still clasped firmly in hers. Harley’s ears had not lessened in redness. It almost seemed like they grew redder.

“My mom likes magnolias,” he softly told her.

It was such a difference than when he had been speaking to Steve. Steve watched as Julie’s face changed to one of determination. She immediately went in search of magnolias. Natasha watched on from a safe distance. When they found the magnolias, Natasha went to the counter to pay for them. Julie smiled widely at Harley and led him out of the store. Harley didn’t say anything, but just took the flowers from Julie’s other hand.

When they made it to the hospital, the first thing they did was go to the front desk. Steve placed a hand on Harley’s shoulder. He noticed the trembling of Harley’s body.

“You okay?”

“You think my mom will be mad at me for not visiting her lately?” Harley questioned instead.

“No, she won’t be mad. She’ll understand,” Steve said.

“Visitor for Mrs. Keener,” the nurse announced. “If you’ll follow me.”

Harley smiled and followed behind the nurse. When Harley left, Julie turned to Natasha. “Ms. Natasha can I go look at the trains?”

Natasha turned her head around to look at the trains that were situated in the main lobby. She then looked back at Julie.

“Yes, but stay where I can see you. If something happens, you know what to do,” Natasha told her. Julie smiled and bounced on her feet, before going to look at the trains.

“You’re good with them you know,” Steve said as they took a sit in the waiting room. Natasha smiled softly. “No, really. Those girls truly love you and admire you. I mean I can tell by the throbbing in my back, where one of your little black widows threw a toy at me.”

Natasha crossed her legs and relaxed in her chair. “I’ve trained them well.”

“You ever think you might want to have some kids on your own or adopt?” Steve asked.

Natasha stayed silent for a few moments. “A few months ago it would’ve been a definite no. Now… it may be a maybe. I’m not sure. For so long I pushed that side of me that ever wanted to be a parent.
away. It's what's necessary for us in our job positions. Then seeing Tony with Miles…well a part of me wants that. Then seeing those girls,” Natasha broke off.

“But sometimes it’s hard for me to think that I’ll ever just have this maternal nature. Kids are too fragile and they just need so much attention. I feel like I would crush them,” Natasha laughed, though it lacked any amusement. “I think I fit better as a part-time mentor than a mother.”

“That’s not true,” Steve told her.

“Doesn’t matter whether it’s true or not. It’s what I believe. I think if I did though I would adopt someone that’s older. Spending time at Karen’s showed me that the older kids rarely get chosen for adoption. Some don’t even really want to foster older children,” Natasha admitted.

Steve’s mind went to Harley. He didn’t know when Tony would be coming back and maybe he could help Harley to see his mom more than once a week. “What would it take to foster a kid?”

Natasha turned surprised eyes to him. “You thinking of fostering a kid?”

Steve shrugged. “I don’t know. I mean it’d be hard you know with us basically staying on alert for if anything happens. But I know Tony has a plan implemented for Miles, if something were to happen when we need Iron Man. So…I don’t know he just seems lost and I think maybe it would be good to get him in a smaller environment to let him deal with his-”

Suddenly, Harley came into view eyes bright with anger and glistening with tears. “Fuck you! Fuck all of you and this whole damn hospital institution!” He directed it toward the doctor who was following him. “I’m ready to go.”

“You haven’t been here long,” Steve said trying to calm down the boy. “We can stay a little longer.”

“She’s not waking up. If the doctors are right she’ll never wake up again. He just told me to tell her goodbye,” he whimpered. His lips trembled and in his hand he held one magnolia flower. “I just want to go. Please.”

Julie had come back into the waiting room, hearing the commotion. Her eyes zeroed in on Harley and the doctor. She tried seeing who she should direct her attention toward and settled on Harley. She pulled him into a hug and Harley awkwardly let her do so. Natasha walked toward the two of them and whispered to Julie. Julie nodded and led him away to the trains.

Natasha walked toward the doctor, who looked pained. “Ms. Romanoff and Mr. Rogers I am sure you can understand what I had to do.”

“No, what do you think telling a thirteen year old to say goodbye to his mom,” Natasha said.

“How is that helping him?” Steve asked honestly confused as to how that helped.

“Would you rather have the chance of saying goodbye or rather regret never being able to have the chance to say goodbye,” the doctor questioned. “I would much rather Harley be the chance to say goodbye to his mother before she passes.”

The doctor walked away from them. Natasha looked toward Steve whose own eyes were beginning to glisten with tears. Natasha remembered the information in his file and allowed Steve a moment to compose himself.

“I was never able to say goodbye to my mom,” Steve choked out, still affected by a pain that the years could not cure.
“Would it have been different if you could have said goodbye?”

Steve looked at her unsure how to answer the question. Instead he walked away and went to tell Julie and Harley to start heading to the car. The car ride back to Karen’s was spent in silence. Harley stared blankly out the window and Julie had tried consoling him, but had decided it was best to give him his space. When they arrived back, Ms. Karen looked at them curious as to why they were back so early. Natasha and Julie stayed behind to talk as Steve followed Harley to his room.

Harley climbed into his bed. Steve sat on the edge of it and began to talk to Harley. “I know how it feels, when you start losing someone you love. It hurts and it’s an indescribable pain that settles in your stomach. You feel like the world is closing in on you and nothing can stop that movement from pressing tightly against you.”

Harley sniffled and a cry escaped his lips. Steve rubbed his back gently.

“I’ve lost people I love. I can’t tell you that it won’t feel like the world is ending because for me it felt exactly like that. It felt like a piece of me was dying alongside with them. If they left, they would have been taking all my love along with them,” Steve rasped. “And I would be left empty.”

Somewhere along, Steve realized he was no longer talking about his mom or Bucky, but instead about Tony.

Harley sniffled. “Is this supposed to make me feel better? Because if so you’re doing a horrible job. Mr. Stark is better at this than you.”

Steve smiled at that. Of course Tony was better.

“I’m sure he would be much better at this than I am. Look I’m saying this all to say, it’s going to be hard losing someone you love, but you’ll have memories that you can look back on. You’ll be able to live for your mom. Don’t stop seeing her because of what some doctor said. She isn’t gone yet. Spend as much time as you can with her.”

Harley remained silent at that.

“I don’t do drugs. It’s what made my mom like this,” Harley admitted turning his face away. “I wanted to. I thought it’d bring me closer to her, but she told me she didn’t want me to end up like her. Said she didn’t want me dying of drug use like she is.”

Harley’s bottom lip trembled and tears openly poured down his cheeks. He pulled the covers up further underneath his chin. Steve stayed rubbing a hand over his back until he had exhausted himself so much he feel asleep.

After a few more hours at Karen’s, Natasha and Steve left with promises to come back. As promised Steve, along with Bucky and Natasha, went back to the tower. Bucky sighed loudly as he grabbed his bags and went to his room saying he was tired from proving to Sam that he could lap him five times easily. Natasha followed Bucky’s lead.

Only Steve was left in the living area. His mind immediately went back to a month ago and he realized all that he lost in that timespan and everything that he was willing to do to gain it back. He looked at the counter and saw the bracelet gone. He hoped Tony had taken it back. After all, it still meant something to him.

“Welcome home,” FRIDAY announced.

“Thanks FRIDAY,” Steve said. “I’m glad to be back.”
Steve began to walk to his room and was slightly alarmed to see Ryder walking toward him. He scowled at Steve’s presence and then sent an unimpressed glare to Steve. An expression flashed across Ryder’s face, but it was too quick for Steve to place what it was. Steve straightened his shoulders and Ryder shook his head and regarded Steve as though he was a child.

“And here I was thinking you were smart enough to get the hint to stay away.”

Chapter End Notes

P.S. So Steve will be fostering Harley for a short time as of now. Question is would you all rather Harley's mom pass away and he eventually be adopted into this growing family (like far down the line because well we've got things to work out first) or for his mom to make some miraculous recovery and he have a relationship with the others equivalent to Peter's relationship with Tony?

Thanks again to everyone who commented, gave a kudo, and left a bookmark. You all continue to make my day :)
Chapter 15

Ryder wandered somewhat aimlessly in the tower. He didn’t too much mind the silence of the building and found a slight appreciation in its beauty. He distinctly missed Tony, but only for some sort of entertainment. He refused to admit to himself there was anything more toward missing Tony’s presence. However, as he thought about the lack of Tony he remembered his discussion with him nearly a month ago. A smile formed on his face that day, realizing that Steve had fallen right into his plan.

Ryder entered the tower and immediately sought out Tony. He had been livid, when he came back to the hotel room and found Tony missing. His blood had run hot throughout his body. He distinctly remembered taking it out on Miriam. He doesn’t remember much after that, but he does remember her fingers wrapping loosely around the fingers on her neck. He remembered the tears that ran down her cheek as she begged for forgiveness and the saltiness of the tears clinging to his tongue as he licked them away.

He had let her go and kissed her softly on the mouth. Miriam smiled shakily back at him, eyes darting around to see if she would be further punished. He remembered how she looked pleasantly surprised, when he looked at Cali and chose not to say anything. He left the two sisters in the hotel room. He figured he could deal with them more thoroughly when his problem with Tony’s disappearance was solved.

Had he been too harsh? He just wanted to instill in him a lesson of obedience.

He had wondered that all the way back to the tower. When he came to the tower, he was admittedly shocked, but nonetheless happy as he watched Steve and Bucky grab their bags and enter a car. He had hoped that his letter would mess up Steve. He had hoped that Steve’s feelings for Tony weren’t strong enough to the point where he pushed back. Thankfully, his assumption that they indeed were not proved beneficial to Ryder.

So when he entered the tower and found Natasha consoling Tony on the hallway floor, he immediately drew his eyebrows together in worry. Natasha looked up from beside her spot near Tony. Ryder and Natasha had shared a glance and then turned their attention back toward Tony, who was sniffing into Natasha’s neck. His fingers were coiled tightly in her t-shirt as if afraid that if he let go she would leave too.

Ryder knelt by Tony and brushed a strand of hair of his face that had grown damp, due to the tears. He ran a soft finger on his cheek and purred softly, when Tony froze slightly then relaxed.

“Let’s get you to bed, hmm?”

Tony didn’t say anything. Ryder hadn’t minded. After all, he much preferred when Tony was silent anyways. Ryder pulled him gently away from Natasha.

“I’ll take him to bed,” he told her. “Thanks for being there for him.”

Natasha refused to move away from Tony and seemed to search his eyes for something. Her eyes looked into Tony’s and she sighed softly. She nodded at Tony and brushed her hand across his
cheek. She leaned forward and pressed a firm kiss on his forehead.

“Let me know if you need anything,” she said to Ryder, but directed it toward Tony. “I’ll be back to check on you. I’m going to see what Miles is doing.”

Tony held his head down. “Okay,” he hoarsely whispered.

Ryder watched as Natasha reluctantly stood up and walked away. With her gone Ryder gathered Tony in his arms and led him to the bedroom. Tony numbly allowed himself to be led away. When they had reached Tony’s room, Ryder had gently laid Tony onto the bed.

With a great sense of care he began to take off of Tony’s shoes. His hands reached to massage the soft flesh of Tony’s hip bone, but Tony recoiled and further turned in on himself. His back was now facing Ryder. Ryder sat on the edge of the bed and watched as Tony’s fingers trembled where they were resting on the pillow.

“Why are you here?” Tony whispered.

Ryder stayed rooted where he was, but still let his hand rest somewhere near Tony’s ankle. He sighed softly, before addressing Tony.

“Because you ran away from me. I had to check and make sure you were okay. I was worried,” Ryder softly admitted. “I was worried that something had gone wrong and you were hurt.”

A few moments of silence passed until it was disrupted by Tony’s raspy laugh. Ryder frowned at this abrupt change and sought to implore the reason for Tony’s laughter. Tony pushed himself up with his hands. Tony turned his face to meet Ryder’s. Ryder stared at the red rimmed eyes and forced himself not to focus on just how beautiful Tony was, when he cried.

He felt some string of desire take root in his body as he watched Tony’s laughter shift into a dark sob. He tried to settle the sense of wanting desperation to see those tears fall down because of him. Then he wanted to kiss them away and swallow the sobs that racked his body.

“You were worried that I was hurt,” Tony bit, the last bit of sobs clinging to his voice. “Worried I was hurt, yet you…yet you…did that to me. You rap…” Tony broke off not even having the strength to finish the sentence.

He turned his head down and sniffled. Fingers began to tug at the frayed ends of his sweater. Ryder’s eyes widened. Rape? Surely, Tony hadn’t meant to imply Ryder would do something like that to him. He prided himself on always having the consent of his partners. So Tony couldn’t have meant to blame him with that.

“You think I raped you?” he questioned aloud, putting more distance between the two.

“You think you didn’t?” Tony rasped. “I…I didn’t want that.”

“Oh, Tony. You asked that Winston not be with you and I complied. You never once asked the same of me. I do not recall you asking me to stop,” Ryder exclaimed. This time he crawled forward on his knees and leaned over Tony. Tony shrank back and tried pressing himself further into the bed, as if hoping it would swallow him.

Ryder settled in between Tony’s legs and hummed contently. “Don’t you agree? I remember you crying for it. You needed that physical closeness and I provided it for you.”

Tony pushed at Ryder’s chest. “No, I was not crying for it. I was crying and pushing at you to get
away. And like always you didn’t listen.”

Ryder rolled his eyes. “So what now you’re suggesting that all the times we have been together sexually has been counted as rape? Tony, listen to yourself. Look I know you’re distraught right now, but you have no reason to blame me for-”

“I know what fucking counts as rape Ryder!” Tony screamed, eyes wild with anger.

Ryder winced back at the tone that Tony had.

“I know what rape is,” Tony said, albeit a little softer this time. He stared at Ryder then broke away from his gaze.

Ryder swallowed a thick lump in his throat. He couldn’t argue with Tony about this, seeing as how emotionally driven Tony was right now. Ryder knew what he felt and that couldn’t be changed. Tony closed his eyes and let his head rest on the headboard.

“Alright Tony,” Ryder said. “Alright maybe I have been slightly rough.”

Tony scoffed.

“Okay, perhaps I have been seeking out my own pleasures first. I hadn’t realized that and if you had spoken up sooner, we could have resolved this in a better fashion. I’m not excusing my behavior for this past year, but I am saying this takes effort on both of our parts,” Ryder claimed.

Ryder grabbed Tony’s hand in between his. “I love you. I really do. It pains me that I have caused you this much pain,” he said as he fingers reached to press against Tony’s hip, where he knew a bruise was. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I try not to hurt things and I do.”

Ryder blinked away some tears that were beginning to swell in his eyes. “I’ve been trying so hard to be a good person. In the past I’ve directed my goodness to my work…to my patients. I never directed it to myself or another person. So now trying to direct goodness to me and to you, it’s been hard. But I’m trying Tony.”

His bottom lip trembled. He tried not to outwardly smile as Tony’s gaze started to soften at the sight of seeing how wrecked Ryder was becoming because he was finally understanding how much pain he caused to Tony.

“Maybe I haven’t been trying enough. That’s my fault. I think…I think I’ve been rough on you because I was hoping you would push me away so you wouldn’t see just how broken inside I am,” Ryder rasped, inflicting a sound of pain in his voice. He hoped Tony caught on to that.

“I’m broken inside and I feel like I can’t be fixed. After…after my internship with Howard abruptly ended and my friendship with you ended as well I spiraled. I don’t think I ever got back on track and if it weren’t for becoming a doctor I would have-” he broke off with a cry and allowed a few tears to fall onto his shirt.

Tony looked at him curiously. Ryder looked back at him. How do people actually communicate these feelings, he questioned to himself. Tony still looked at him wearily and he needed something to make sure Tony would let him stay. He could use force, but he didn’t want to. He needed to manipulate his mind and emotions this time, not his body.

So Ryder rubbed a hand on his face. “But even being a doctor I still feel broken. I mean you know how my family household was. Maybe I repressed what I saw and it was waiting to come out. And I inflicted all of that on you.”
“I don’t act like Howard. I had enough years of looking at that and I still didn’t become him,” Tony
admitted.

“You’re a better man than me,” Ryder offered. “And that’s why...I grew jealous. Both of our lives
were nearly parallel. But you’ve seem to grow and maybe when I came back and found you again I
wanted to taint that. I wanted to know why someone who was essentially like me was able to move
on from their past. I mean look at you. You’re perfect.”

He hoped that Tony would like that little bit of praise. He had noticed that Tony always seemed to
preen when his character was being uplifted in some way.

“It took a lot of work,” Tony gently offered. “It definitely didn’t happen in a day.”

“Then that’s what I’m doing Tony. I’m making an effort, but it won’t all change in a day. I’m
hoping that you can stand beside me as I make that effort. Let me be good to you and to me for a
change. Help me please.”

Tony remained unmoved for a few seconds and Ryder wondered briefly if he should have added a
bit more. His rhetoric classes back in college had greatly taught him the art of persuasion, but he
had failed that course. Tony glanced back at his hands.

“I know that I can be better. I can be gentler. I’ve just never had the opportunity to do so, until now.
Forgive me and I’ll show you that I need you. I’ll show you a love that never leaves,” Ryder
expressed. “I asked you to be patient. Maybe I’m asking a lot, but…and maybe I’m not saying this
perfectly.”

Ryder trained his eyes upward to face the ceiling and allowed a few seconds to pass as though he
was thinking of what to say.

“I am the only one willing to. I told you that everyone would leave and Steve would be the first of the
domino effect. I warned you because I care. And I am staying because I care for you Tony. I always
have,” Ryder stated.

Tony flinched at the reminder of Steve’s departure. Ryder gave a little cheer of victory over Steve’s
fickle nature. Ryder chanced Tony’s lack of response as Tony slightly giving in.

Time to drive it home.

“When everyone else is gone, I hope to still be here. Because not once have I ever even thought of
leaving you.”

“Okay,” Tony whispered. “But let’s take things slow.”

Ryder excitedly agreed. “That’s all I need. We can take things as slow as you want…think of it as the
beginning of how things should have been. I’ll court you, take you out to that pizza place you love,
we can take Miles to the zoo. We can have movie nights!”

He hated all of those suggestions.

Tony rubbed his fingers together. “I also mean with like...like sex. We should take a break from it,
until...until we fix this. Maybe we could do some couple’s therapy?”

Ryder tried not to flinch at that. He had five years of therapy and they did nothing for him. However,
he couldn’t refuse Tony now. Besides he could recommend a therapist that he knew could be easily
swayed. It wasn’t too hard for him to put on a façade.
“Anything you want,” Ryder whispered leaning in to press a kiss against the shell of Tony’s ear. “I have no problem staying abstinent for you. Maybe this break will show me that when the time comes it’ll be out of love…not out of punishment or for my own physical release.”

Sighing, Tony nodded. “Alright.”

He didn’t say anything else. Ryder watched as he went back into his curled position and closed his eyes. Within a few minutes, Tony was completely asleep. Ryder watched his unconscious state and brought his fingers to Tony’s eye. His finger caught on a tear and he brought it to his mouth. He hummed around his finger as he tasted the saltiness. He felt a smile widen on his face.

He reached out to push Tony’s sweater aside and glowed at the hand shaped bruises placed over Tony’s lower torso. He had never been so grateful that Tony was a heavy sleeper. He manipulated Tony’s body to lying on his back. Straddling his waist Ryder bent himself forward to place open mouthed kisses on Tony’s bruises. He knew that some people liked marking up their partners as a sign of possession or passion, but he loved those marks because he remembered how much pain Tony had been in when they were placed there.

He knew that he could be soft if he wanted. He had been soft and gentle to a few of his partners in the past. But those partners were not Tony. He wanted Tony to burn from his bruises and he would delight in the destruction of it.

His mind filtered away from that image and he pressed a hand against his slowly hardening cock. He wished Tony was here. He had been gone a month with Miles, Pepper, and Rhodey. He hadn’t had a month to explore a “soft” side with Tony. But this month allowed him to practice. He took a few of his employees of the CMPNY and tried seeing how to be soft. Miriam had been a delightful study.

He was disappointed that he had to start all over with Tony though. If it hadn’t been for Steve, his plan wouldn’t have hit a major road bump. Tony wouldn’t have had this little string of hope that his savior would come and not leave. Then Ryder could have followed his plan to a perfect T. Of course he allowed for some room for obstacles. Besides he had been working on this plan for years, he wouldn’t allow a little disturbance to deter him.

He felt a scowl settle on his face as he remembered just exactly why he was enacting this plan.

“Stark just stop sounding so childish,” Ryder had snarled, deep voice sinking into Tony’s ears. “Grow up.”

“Oh, so I’m Stark now?” he hissed as equally pissed off as Ryder had been, pointing an accusing finger against his chest. “And news flash I am practically still a child, as you have told me many times.”

“Your father is right. It’s time you become a man.”

By now their living area had become the picture of the aftermath of a tornado. Both of them had thrown objects at each other. Curses had flown into the room and rested on their shoulders.

“Yeah, you know what you must like eating ass because you sure do suck up to Howard’s a lot,” Tony jeered, eyes especially wide with anger.

“Gosh, Tony must you be so fucking crude.” Ryder exclaimed with a face of pure disgust. He shook
his head back and forth as if unsettled by something. “Whatever, I’m tired of arguing over the same topic with you.”

“We wouldn’t have to argue if you would just stop being around Howard every single waking moment!” By then Tony’s voice had grown horse from yelling and he felt as though his body would collapse from the sheer lack of energy he had.

“That’s just being selfish. You got him your whole life. I’m just getting to have him around for a few months. For an internship! Why does it bother you so much?”

“Look I get you’re having daddy issues and think that Howard can fix that, but I don’t think he really cares seeing as though he already has a son he has practically abandoned.”

“Daddy issues? Pot meet the fucking kettle,” Ryder snipes back. His phone rang and he looked down at it. “Whatever. I’ve got to go meet Howard. I’m pretty sure we’ll continue this conversation later tonight when I get back.”

Tony had scoffed and waved his hand off. “Yes, go run to your master.”

Ryder had turned back to spit out something as equally spitefully, but the door slammed in his face didn’t allow him to. He took a few calming breaths and continued to walk away from their place. Lately, his relationship with Tony had been…to put it lightly, strained. The main reason was Tony hadn’t liked Ryder working so closely with Howard. Ryder knew that this was an awesome opportunity to intern under Howard Stark. He was pretty sure he could get any job he wanted or even work at SI. He couldn’t dare allow himself to hope.

His time interning with Howard was going amazing. It was something that he was internally grateful for. Ryder got into the car waiting for him and relaxed as it pulled off. Howard had always sent one for him. It was only thirty minutes, before he was ushered into the building that Howard usually sent him to.

It wasn’t SI and despite interning with him for only two months so far Ryder had been somewhat of Howard’s assistant. Ryder had never felt so lucky to be working directly with Howard himself. It was going to look so good on his resume and then he was going to show Tony that it didn’t matter after all. He would apologize to Tony later, but right now he needed to focus on his career. He didn’t have the last name Stark like Tony fortunately had.

What he wasn’t expecting was Howard to be already sitting at his desk and waiting patiently for him. Usually, Howard would come in later with some job report that he wanted Ryder to look over.

Ryder flinched softly as the door closed loudly behind him.

“Your internship here has been terminated,” Howard spoke easily not even allowing Ryder to get settled into his sit.

“Excuse me?” Ryder stumbled out. “I’m…Mr. Stark I’m not sure I follow. Why am I being terminated?”

Howard groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Let us make this hard Deaver. I am certain that you will find a new intern position somewhere else.”

Ryder laughed not willing to accept this. “I have done all that you have asked of me Mr. Stark. I have been a great intern. Perhaps you may explain to me what I have done to receive this response and I can approve on it.”

Howard shook his head. “Often when I make my decision it is final.”

Howard looked at the space behind Ryder. “I will be honest with you Deaver. When I met you, you showed great promise. These past two months you have demonstrated a great work ethic. Unfortunately, I am concerned about Tony.”

“What does Tony have to do with this? Has he told you something because I assure you it’s probably because Tony greatly dislikes you and feels like he has to protect me? No offense,” Ryder rushed out.

Howard waved off Ryder’s statement. “No, I am rather aware of my son’s feelings in regard to me. I am rather always aware of people’s behavior. That is why I cannot allow you to work here anymore. There is something with you Deaver that you may not have explored yet, but it’s going to come out one day. I do not think that it would be beneficial for you to help me with CMPNY or to be around Tony anymore.”

Howard reached into his desk and produced a letter. “This is an acceptance letter to Harvard medical school. They have accepted you into the fall admissions. I have already accepted it on your behalf and MIT has been notified of your departure.”

Ryder stood up angrily, face screwing up at the audacity of Howard dictating his life. “You can’t do this! I worked hard to get into MIT. I worked myself to the bones to get out of my situation and into this program. You can’t send me to Harvard! Mr. Stark this is incredibly unfair and quite unprofessional. You do not have my consent.”

Howard straightened in his chair. “Deaver I suggest that you sit back down.”

Ryder obediently sat down in his chair.

“Harvard is a wonderful university. I mean it certainly is a better school than your brother was admitted to. What was it? Oh, it was community college was it not. I could send you there, if that’s what you prefer.”

“It’s not MIT.”

“True, it is not. Unfortunately, I need to create some distance between you and the Stark family. While my son believes I do not love him, I in fact do. I love him enough to realize that you are not good enough for him.”

Ryder sputtered out a response. “Good enough?”

Howard went about his office as though the conversation took no effort, while Ryder looked on the verge of passion out. Howard settled near his book shelf and grabbed a book, before going back to his chair.

“Yes, I have seen how you act around Tony. How you talk about him. I know you are keen on him. And I know that you will destroy him. You’ve already destroyed your own family,” Howard insisted. “I’ve looked into you. It’s such a shame what happened to your younger brother, perhaps the only reason why he’s not the one attending MIT and you are.” Howard exclaimed.

“That wasn’t my fault,” Ryder grit out. “I have told my story a thousand times over.”

“I will not let my son be a part of your demented destruction,” Howard growled. “I had thought keeping an eye on you in the CMPNY would be ideal, but Tony still wants to be friends with you. I
had thought working for his alcoholic father would deter him, but it hasn’t.”

Ryder scoffed. He should have heard Tony this morning.

“Well what if I stop being around Tony? Could I still attend MIT and still intern with you,” Ryder questioned desperately. “Please I need this. Please Mr. Stark.”

“Accept the Harvard offer son or I’ll make sure you don’t have a pot to piss in, when I’m done with you,” Howard exclaimed roughly.

Without saying another word, Ryder knew that Howard had just dismissed him. Howard stood up and left the room with a stack of envelopes. Ryder stared blankly at the spot that Howard had just occupied. Without a moment’s of hesitation he opened his backpack and went behind Howard’s desk. He grabbed something in his bag and hooked it up to Howard’s computer. He copied all of the files and images of the CMPNY onto it. Quickly he placed his things back into his bag and grabbed the Harvard acceptance letter.

His heart thundered loudly in his chest. His face grew taut with anger.

Fine.

Howard said he was good at destroying things. Well, he was going to get a front row of this destruction. He was going to bring destruction to everything that Howard had touched. He had ruined his life plans and now Ryder was going to ruin his life. He’d show Howard that no one messed with Ryder Deaver. After all that’s part of the reason Ryder’s brother could hardly afford to put himself into community college and why all the colleges where he got accepted into took back their offers.

Ryder gave a few calming breaths. Every time he thought of that day…the beginning of it all he grew upset. That had started something inside of him that tainted his soul. When he went to Harvard, he was ostracized. Apparently news had gotten around that he had been fired by Mr. Stark because of something scandalous. Rumors flew around and then reports of his past started circulating. Ryder had to study abroad in South Africa just to get away from it all.

And Tony, not once called to see how he was doing…to see how he was taking all of this. The only response he had gotten was when he came back to their room and Tony took one look at him and sneeringly said, “I told you so.”

He was just upset when somebody got to Howard and Maria, before he was able to. But he still had possession of the CMPNY. After Howard’s death, the CMPNY started to slowly disband, but Ryder began to rebuild it and fix it to his own needs. He hadn’t set out to ruin it like he initially wanted. But the idea of owning something that Howard once had was…it was invigorating. It was like even in his death, he owned Howard.

So now all he had to do was destroy Tony and oh was it a wonderful process. He hoped wherever Howard was he was looking on in pain. His thoughts took control of him so strongly, that he didn’t even register the noise in the tower.

He knew that no one should be here. Tony wasn’t set to arrive until the end of this week. Following the noise, he went into the kitchen. His eyes immediately hardened when he saw the occupant of the kitchen.

“And here I was thinking you were smart enough to get the hint to stay away.”
Steve made no move, but instead straightened his shoulders. “I shouldn’t have left. I don’t know what your plan is, but I was a fool to have even somehow fall right into it. You may think that I’m bad for Tony, but I’m not. I was stupid and naïve for listening to you.”

“I’m not devising some master plan Mr. Rogers. I am rather offended you think so lowly of me. I simply acted out in the best interests of Tony.”

“I don’t think you did,” Steve exclaimed. He stepped closer to Ryder. “I’ve known Tony longer than you. I get that you were friends in college, but you don’t know him. So you can’t speak for him or claim to know his best interests.”

“And what? You think you know his best interests,” Ryder laughed. “Does his best interests include you?”

“They might,” Steve stated, his voice never wavering. Instead he seemed to grow even bolder. “I want to tell you now so you aren’t surprised, when it happens. But I am going to fight for Tony. I don’t think you’re good for him.”

“Has he said something to you?” Ryder exclaimed, slightly concerned that maybe he had gotten to Tony too late and he indeed had said something to Steve.

“He doesn’t have to. He’s not happy. At first I thought it was because of me, then I started thinking that maybe it’s because of you,” Steve suggested. “I love Tony and I don’t think you do. I know Tony doesn’t deserve to focus his attention on someone who can’t decide if he loves him or not, after nearly a year of being together.”

“Oh, so now you love him. Tell me did you love him, when you were walking away? Did you love him, when you almost killed him? Did you love him when you blamed him for Ultron? Please tell me if I’m wrong, but that doesn’t seem to define love,” Ryder suggested.

Steve balled his fists in his hands. “I have apologized and I will continue seeking forgiveness. I will continue to show Tony that I care and love him…something that you clearly don’t.”

“Such a bold statement coming from someone who doesn’t know me,” Ryder laughed. “And you’re fine with taking him away from me? The noble Captain America pursuer of goodness is content with being a home-wrecker. He loves me, why are you so intent with embarrassing yourself like this?”

“If you truly believed me to be noble, then you would know that I’m not going to give up on someone I love. Especially if there’s a chance those feelings may be returned,” Steve addressed. “And quite honestly if you knew that Tony loved you back, you wouldn’t be so concerned with me fighting for him.”

Steve smiled confidently at Ryder as he grew pale. Ryder grit his teeth together. Grinning Steve tilted his head to the side, “Have a goodnight. I’ll let you know when Tony comes back home…or not.”

Ryder watched as Steve walked away with his bags in his hand. Ryder stayed silent. He didn’t expect Steve to come back and try fighting for Tony. He was sure that he had addressed all of Steve’s insecurities in that letter. He couldn’t have Steve fighting for Tony and letting Tony know that there was someone out there who actually loved him.

Biting the insides of his cheeks, Ryder looked behind him to where Steve had walked away. Okay, so Steve was added back in. There needed to be simple adjustments made. He didn’t know where Steve had gathered this confidence, but he knew it could be easily broken. Because somewhere in that conversation Steve had revealed himself. Ryder grew excited over what he picked apart in the
inflictions and expressions of Steve.

Ryder was going to destroy Tony one way or another. It was time to call upon more members of the CMPNY and perhaps to speed his relationship with Tony from “slow” to…well Steve couldn’t possibly pursue a married man, could he?

Chapter End Notes

So I am deciding to let Harley's mom live because I have an interesting story-line with that. Also good news Ryder's vindictive ways will be exposed at the latest by Ch. 20! So we don't have far to go before the reveal :)

Thanks again to everyone who commented, gave a kudo, and left a bookmark. You all continue to make my day :)
Chapter Notes

Goodness gracious how did this story get to a 100k+ words...I mean I'm confused. Thanks for sticking with me for this long I highly appreciate and love you all :)

Pepper leaned back in her beach chair as she observed Tony instructing Miles on how to build a proper sandcastle. Miles had been adamant that they include seashells, while they were building the sandcastle. Tony wanted to add the seashells after they foundation had been laid out. Amusement settled warmly in Pepper as she noticed a familiar trademark Stark look of exasperation take Miles’ face.

“Tony’s gonna have a handful with that one,” Rhodey asserted beside her.

Pepper turned to face him. In agreement, she nodded her head. “Yeah, trust me I know. Miles and I got into a heavy debate in regards to whether he should be allowed to eat ice cream for breakfast. I think that he’s been listening to Tony talk too much. Tony can nearly talk someone into anything.”

“So that’s why the tub of ice cream was halfway empty when I checked this morning?” Rhodey questioned laughing. “You let a kid persuade you into ice cream for breakfast.”

Pepper shrugged unashamedly. “Hey, I’m not the parent. I’m just the fun aunt and I can indulge my nephew with a few things every now and then. Plus I also made sure he ate an extra serving of broccoli that night if you do recall.”

Rhodey lifted his eyebrows in question. He hadn’t remembered that, but he sure wasn’t about to argue the case with Pepper. Sometimes he just had to realize it was a lost cause. Instead he choose to lay back on his blanket and place his hands behind his neck.

“Also I wasn’t the one who bought Miles an entire Lego set at LEGOLAND,” Pepper teased back.

“Please as if Tony wasn’t going to buy that whole display, if I hadn’t interfered,” Rhodey mumbled.

Cool wind caressed Pepper’s cheek and she closed her eyes to bask in it. “This trip has been a welcome relief. Seriously, I think I was going to go lose my mind, if I had to keep entertaining those business investors in London. Half of them still question Tony’s capability to run the company. I almost accidentally tripped one.”

“I’m sure if you had no one would blame you,” Rhodey inserted. “But yeah this has been really nice especially since I’m finally off of the leg brace.”

“Yes, I see Miranda worked her magic,” Pepper teased poking at Rhodey’s leg.

Rhodey rolled his eyes. “You and Tony need to stop this whole Miranda thing.”

“We’ll stop it after the wedding,” Pepper said laughingly. “But until then just go ahead and accept it. It will be much easier for you, if you do.”
Rhodey sighed. “Menaces the both of you.”

Pepper shrugged. “Possible. Has Natasha got in touch with you?”

Rhodey leaned up on his elbows and took his sunglasses off to look at Pepper. “No, not since a few days ago. I’m assuming she hasn’t found anything. That’s good though right? Right?” he questioned again noticing Pepper’s silence.

Pepper shook herself out of her thoughts. “I don’t know. I mean something in the back of my mind was telling me something’s up with Ryder. So when Natasha asked us to you know separate the two for a while, I was kind of hoping that I’d find out what doesn’t sit right with me. I mean you understand, right? I’m not just going crazy or overprotective?”

Tucking one leg under his bottom, Rhodey leaned forward and spoke softly just so that his words wouldn’t travel to Tony. “No, you’re not. I mean the man goes off to Harvard without a word and Tony after that was just…well distraught for a while. They didn’t exactly leave off being buddies. Now suddenly he’s back. I mean sure reunions or whatnot. And I mean I know he had a crush on Tony. That was obvious every time we would come down to visit.”

Pepper sighed softly. “Yeah, I think that’s what bothers me and…well…” her sentence tapered off.

“What?”

Pepper twisted her body so it was directly in front of Rhodey. “It’s just every person that Tony has been with he can’t stop talking about them. He talked about Linda every single time we saw him. Talked about how loud she ate, her nice perfume, and things. He talked about Davis’ love of any type of bread, how he had a birthmark the shape of an elephant on his upper thigh, and other things we didn’t necessarily want to know. Hell he even talked about Steve as though he thinks we didn’t know he had a crush on him way back when.”

“But with Ryder he’s silent,” Rhodey suggested knowing where Pepper was going.

“Exactly! It’s like Tony’s not even in a relationship. I’ve tried asking him you know about dates, but silence. You know how much Tony likes to talk.”

“Yeah, I do. But maybe this is different. Maybe they’re trying to be low-key about their relationship,” Rhodey offered, not liking how that thought settled wrongly in his mind.

“He’d tell us right?” Pepper asked worriedly. “Like if something was wrong.”

“I would hope that he’d trust us enough to come to us…that’d he know we love him and would do anything to take care of him. I mean we’re family. So I’d like to think he would,” Rhodey said as a frown made its way to his face. “I don’t think I could handle the idea of Tony keeping something bottled in.”

“But he does that,” Pepper stressed. “He does that all the time. I mean we’ve gotten better at knowing, when he gets to the point where he can’t bottle things up anymore. But I want to make sure he doesn’t get to that point where it comes out like a storm, you know? I want to protect him from that.”

Fingers dug into the sand and rested in there. She smoothed her fingers out and watched as the sand grains traveled through her fingers.

“I don’t know maybe I’m thinking too hard about this. It’s just when Natasha called saying she needed us to take Tony away for a month while she does some recon on Ryder, I got worried. I
mean what did he do to gain Natasha’s suspicion?”

“She told me that Tony had frozen a little bit, when Ryder had come back to the hallways as she was consoling Tony. I mean it may have just been from the stress, but you never can be too sure. There’s just too much of his history that’s uncounted for. So who knows what changed about Ryder…I just…” Rhodey bit off the last bit of his sentence as anger began to nip at his skin.

Pepper reached out and grabbed his hand. “I know, but for all we know Natasha may not find anything.”

“But you and I both will continue worrying about it until we find out,” Rhodey laughed.

“We always do, we always do,” she announced.

The two remained silent. Pepper picked up the book she had been reading in hopes of taking her mind off of the real reason they had taken a whole month vacation. Sure, she was always up for spending more time with her family and it had been nice. It was much needed as well. Also she knew that Tony needed some time away from the tower, after Steve’s departure.

Steve.

A page ripped underneath her tight grasp.

Rhodey raised an eyebrow toward her in question. Pepper merely shrugged and continued to try reading her novel. If she focused on one passage too long…well it’s not like she was reading this for an assignment.

While Pepper and Rhodey were indulging in silent time, Tony and Miles were heavily engaged with building the best sandcastle at the beach. Miles leaned over Tony and placed a seashell on top of a mound of sand. Discreetly, Tony tried making the mound into a door.

Miles shook his head. “No, baba. It’s supposed to look like that,” he said growing frustrated. “Baba. Baba no.”

Tony raised his hands away from the mound. “But Miles it will look so much cooler, if we make it into like a cool door for the entrance of the castle.”

Miles sent an unimpressed glare to Tony. Tony waved his hands in defeat. “Okay, bambino. Have at it.”

Miles pressed his strawberry sticky lips against Tony’s cheek. He let go with a resounding smack on his cheek. Lifting the boy into his arms, Tony gave Miles an even louder kiss. Meanwhile Miles was trying to get away, fits of laughter escaping his small body.

“Oh my goodness now aren’t you two just the cutest,” a woman’s voice interrupted.

Tony looked up to address her. “Oh, thank you.”

“You’re his dad?”

“He’s my baba,” Miles corrected. “Who are you?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m Ingrid. I’m here with my family. I don’t want to sound like a creeper, but I was looking and wondering if maybe you would be interested in having dinner with sister. She couldn’t believe that Tony Stark was here at the same beach, so I figured I would be the brave one to ask on
her behalf. She’s had a crush on you for ages.”

Tony opened his mouth to tell her that he was off the market. Unfortunately, Miles had other plans.

“He’s got someone. Sorry lady,” Miles asserted narrowing his eyes. “Mr. Steve loves him very much.”

Tony’s eyes widened and he choked on air. He tried clearing his throat as he watched the woman look on in concern. He waved off the worry and the woman’s expression cleared just lightly.

“No, ummm I’m actually dating Ryder. I don’t know why my son said that,” he corrected. He felt his heart rate increase at the mere idea of Ryder getting word that Miles had said Steve loves him. He knew it wasn’t true, but that wouldn’t stop Ryder from thinking so. So he had to correctly address that before the woman went off talking about that.

Miles looked at Tony and rolled his eyes. “Mr. Steve loves you. Mr. Mean Bad One makes you cry baba. I hate him.”

“Miles Morales Stark you take that back,” Tony said under his breath. He shot his eyes to the woman hoping that she would eventually take that as her cue to leave. Unfortunately, for Tony she didn’t. Instead she remained exactly where she was and even decided to sit cross-legged beside Tony.

Miles picked up his shovel and said sternly. “I don’t like him baba. He makes you cry. People that love you don’t make you cry baba.”

“Sweetheart he does love me. He just sometimes has a different way of showing it. Just because I cry doesn’t mean I’m hurting.” Tony lied.

“So if someone makes me cry that means they love me?” Miles questioned confusedly.

Tony quickly backtracked. “No, bambino. No that doesn’t mean they love you. No one should hurt you, ever make you cry.”

Tony’s blood boiled at the mere thought of someone making his son cry.

“You said lying is bad baba,” Miles said. “Why are you lying?”

Tony grew lightheaded from where this conversation was going. He knew that kids picked up on things, but had he really been letting his son see what was happening to him. He didn’t want those problems to be public for Miles.

“Diana!” the woman yelled loudly and suddenly a little girl around the age of six came running over. “Hey, pumpkin. You want to play with Miles, while I talk to his baba for a second?”

Diana looked at Miles and contemplated whether she really wanted to play with someone so young. Since there weren’t too many kids on the playground she agreed.

“Okay, momma. Want to play with my beach ball?” Diana asked looking at Miles.

Miles’ attention was immediately taken away from Tony and steered toward Diana. Diana’s mom smiled warmly at the two.

“Okay, Di stay where I can see you or where granny and granddaddy can see you okay. And don’t go toward the water. You both don’t have anyone with you, okay?”

Diana nodded her head and took Miles to a place only a few feet away from them. Tony was still
frozen from the turn of events. Diana’s mom twisted a curl of hair behind her ear.

“You know they say they’ll change, but people like them never do,” she said softly.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Tony whispered, afraid that this stranger could read into him. Granted Miles gave her a whole lot of information. He had to do better at hiding these things especially from his kid.

She laughed dryly. “You don’t have to lie to me.”

“I’m not lying,” Tony bit out. “Look you don’t know me and to be perfectly honest I was having a wonderful time with my son until you interrupted. So please feel free to excuse yourself.”

She nodded her head a few times. “When I was nineteen my brother got his first serious girlfriend. He had been known as a player, so we were all shocked when this gorgeous lady tamed that player. It was like beauty and the beast. A freaking fairytale.”

She smiled warmly, but underneath that were undertones of sadness.

“My whole family took her into our homes, into our hearts. He became serious and reserved. We all figured this was him becoming mature. He was finally growing into a respectable young man. They stayed together for seven years,” she said.

By then her eyes had grown a wet sheen to them. “We didn’t notice anything wrong. I mean I was his twin sister, surely he’d tell me. But he didn’t. He told me about how wonderful things were. And I believed him. I didn’t know that he being serious was him actually being depressed. I didn’t realize that him becoming reserved was evidence of her isolating him from all those that loved him.”

She broke off and sighed trying to gather the strength to continue. “It was three years into their relationship, when I first saw the hand shaped bruise on his neck. I didn’t ask. I figured they were up to some kinky shit. Then the bruises increased. I asked him and he said he was fine. He said I had nothing to worry about. I asked him again a year later, when he was in the hospital for a broken collarbone,” she trailed off.

“A broken collarbone for falling weirdly at the skating rink. My brother hated skating. She said that she wanted to take him there to get him out his comfort zone. So I believed her. Then he fractured his wrist slamming into a wall accidentally not even four weeks later. He didn’t say anything.”

Tony felt his chest tighten and his breath escape from him completely. He was enraptured with everything that she was saying and felt that any movement, any speech from Tony could disrupt things.

She tilted her head to the side, “Then one day…” her lip wobbles and tears pour out of her eyes. She raised a shaky hand to wipe them away. “Then one day I get a phone call from my brother. He’s crying and sobbing asking me to tell mom and dad that he’s scared…that he doesn’t know where she’s taking him. And I’m trying to be calm. I’m trying to get to him, telling him to drop a pin where he’s at.”

“I still hear her voice coming through the speaker telling him to hang up or she was going to put a bullet through his head,” her voice quivered and she pressed her hand against her chest. “She told him to hang up and she’d do better. She’d take them back home and she’d try. But he kept crying and crying asking me to find him. She just kept getting louder and more upset. I was screaming. I was trying so hard.”

“She drove them both off of a cliff and they died on impact,” she hoarsely whispered. “And now I
don’t have my brother. Di doesn’t have her uncle. He didn’t get to see me get married. I wanted him to be my daughter’s cool uncle. Now the only way she’ll ever know him is through photos and trips to the graveyard. And the said thing is I found a note not even a few days later saying that if he had told someone no one would believe him because certainly he could take on a girl. I would have believed him.”

She sniffled and looked to where Diana and Miles were playing. “Don’t stay silent. Don’t let whoever is making you cry continue because they don’t change. They only manipulate you to think that they are until one day they snap completely and your son becomes an orphan.”

She stood up and rubbed at her red eyes. “I don’t mean to scare you, but this…this can kill you. I couldn’t save my brother, but maybe…look I see I’ve taken up a lot of your time. So I’ll send Miles back over here.”

Tony remained still for a few moment, before reaching out to grab her hand. “If there’s anything that I can do…or anything you need. Just let me know, get in touch with Pepper Potts.”

“The only thing I need can’t be given,” she said, her hand slipping from Tony’s. “Have a wonderful day Mr. Stark.”

Tony remained rooted in his spot not having the strength to move. He appreciated the woman’s story, but Ryder wasn’t like that. Sure, he gave him a few bruises and some things that were supposed to be pleasurable were painful. However, she didn’t know Ryder. Her brother’s girlfriend was on a whole other level. Ryder could never kill him. Tony could deal with what Ryder was doing. Also Ryder was trying to be better this past month proved it. Granted he wasn’t near Tony for a month.

But Ryder wouldn’t go that far. Sure, his time with Winston, Cali, and Miriam was awful and he definitely didn’t need an encore of that night’s performance. Ryder wouldn’t do anything to him like that again. Tony always believed that people could change. So who was he to pass judgment on Ryder and think that he couldn’t?

“Can I have some more strawberries baba,” Miles said quickly running to Tony and throwing himself onto his lap. “I’m hungry.”

Tony swung Miles up as he stood. “Of course you are my little hungry monster. Of course you are.”

He walked over toward Pepper and Rhodey. “Sleep already platypus?” Tony teased as he sat down. He opened up another bag of strawberries and handed them to Miles. “Eat slowly or I’ll cut them up again, okay?”

Miles nodded.

Pepper sat her book down. “Who was the lady you were talking to?”

“Oh, just some fan of SI wanted to know when I was going to open up the internship application. I was just telling her we’re always accepting application no matter the time of the year,” Tony explained sneaking a strawberry for Miles bag.

“Excuse me Mr. Stark, I have a delivery for you,” a man greeted coming up on the four. He was dressed in a black suit, shades adorning his face, and a bouquet of roses and a letter. Walking closer he held out the items to Tony.

Pepper narrowed her eyes and held her hand out. “And why did you not deliver this at the hotel we are staying out. Better yet how do you have our location after all?”
“Apologies. I was instructed by Ms. Romanov to make sure this delivery reached you safely, before I am allowed to report back. Ms. Romanov assured me that she had called Colonel Rhodes and told him that she would send me.”

“Of course she did,” Pepper said sending a glare toward a sheepish Rhodey.

“I meant to tell you, but then I forgot. Don’t look at me like that Pep. We’ve been out in the sun for like three hours and it has drained me,” Rhodey defended. “But yes we’ll take the delivery. Tell Natasha we said thank you.”

The man placed the items near Tony and turned to leave. Tony picked up the bouquet of roses and frowned at it. Then he held the letter in his hand and saw it was addressed to him. Surely, Natasha wasn’t sending him gifts. He set the roses aside and Miles took one out and started to observe it.

When he opened the letter, the familiar handwriting jarred him. He didn’t know if he wanted to continue or not. Perhaps it was more reasons as to why Steve had to leave. If so, he really didn’t want to read it. His palms grew sweaty and his fingers began to shake.

“Tones, you alright? What’s the letter say?” Rhodey inquired, reaching out to place a hand on Tony’s shoulder.

“It’s from Steve,” Tony whispered not liking how Miles seemed to perk up. Maybe he needed to lessen the time spent between those two. Oh, wait he didn’t need to because Steve left.

“Oh,” Pepper scowled. “So Rogers decided to write a letter again.”

“Pep,” Rhodey chided. “Do you want to see what Rogers wrote?”

“I don’t know. It’s not like it’ll change anything. I mean he wrote a letter after everything went down with the Accords. This letter is probably just more excuses and reasons as to why he chose to leave me…the tower,” he quickly corrected, but Pepper and Rhodey had already caught on.

“Do you want me to read it aloud?” Rhodey questioned. “Because I know you, if you don’t read it you’ll bug and worry yourself all day.”

Wordlessly, Tony handed the letter to Rhodey for him to read.

Dearest Tony,

Yes, I’m writing another letter to you and you’re probably wondering why. I guess I always found it easier to put my thoughts onto paper. I think if I hadn’t joined the army, I would have tried being a writer or an artist. Something about putting things down through a pen or a paintbrush has always helped me reason out things…things that are going on inside of me.

So I hope that you allow me to show you my thoughts through this paper, until I am ready to say them aloud. (I think, when you come back I will confess everything that I have said in this letter to you. No, I promise I will. This letter is just the start).

So here it goes.

I love you.

“Damn,” Rhodey whistled.

“Rhodey you can’t just stop reading the letter to insert your own comments,” Pepper said.
Tony’s eyes widened and his mouth grew dry. Steve can’t love him. That’s…that’s a huge problem. Is this a joke?

“Okay, fine. No more comments got it,” Rhodey exclaimed. “And continuing.”

I love you so much that my heart, well I don’t really know. I’ve never felt like this before and it’s terrifying, but exhilarating at the same time. You’re probably asking if I love you why I left you. Well, to put it simple Ryder had sent me a note the night of the Gala, with a returned bracelet. He explained to me that I was an obstacle toward your recovery that your nightmares, which your panic attacks were all because of me. And I believed him, even when you were telling me not to go. I was a coward. That note was merely an excuse.

I was a coward because I let words get in the way of staying near the person I love. I know I may still be the object of some of your nightmares, but I shouldn’t have let that pull me away. I should have pulled you closer and comforted you. I should have told you how sorry I was that I was the reason you woke up frightened. I should have stayed and let us grow. I know that now.

Nat is telling me to keep the letter short. She thinks that you can’t keep your attention on one thing for that long of a time, certainly not a written document. I think she’s just trying to rush me because she’s an impatient person. (Please don’t tell her I said that).

So I’m coming back to the tower and I’m not leaving. I want to say so much more, but now Nat is giving me a death glare and I’m pretty certain she’s serious. I’ll see you back home and we’ll talk then. Please see me as soon as you return.

Sincerely,

Steve

A few moments of tense silence followed. Rhodey handed the paper back to Tony who let it rest on his lap. Pepper had turned her attention to Miles who was slowly dozing off. Neither of them knew what to say. Pepper had a few feelings that Steve liked Tony, but every time she mentioned it to Tony he brushed it away. Now, Steve said he loved Tony and Pepper wasn’t sure about that. Before the Accords she would have been planning the wedding, but she still had reservations especially with him leaving.

Rhodey’s eyes trained hard on the sandcastle that Miles and Tony had been building. He wanted Tony to be happy. Tony was his little brother and he wanted to protect him. Rhodey knew that Tony had a crush on Steve back in the day. He used to have a Captain America poster in his dorm room that he swears up and down to this day he didn’t. Sure, Steve had apologized and set about having his transgressions forgiven. He had signed the Accords. Tony and Steve had gotten along until recently.

So he was conflicted. Looking at Tony’s face, he knew he was conflicted as well. Whether it was because he was already taken or some other reason, Rhodey was unsure.

“Ah, give me my favorite Stark,” Pepper announced reaching her hands out to Miles, who was now slumped over the lunch basket. Rhodey passed Miles over. “He doesn’t let me hold him as much as I used to. Apparently he thinks he’s a big boy now.”

Tony smiled, but had his eyes were still focused on the letter. “Yeah, he keeps on going around saying he’s almost five. I keep telling people he isn’t and then he debates with me about it for a good four minutes.”
“Like father like son,” Rhodey said his mouth tilted in a sarcastic grin. “So what do you take of the letter?”

Tony shrugged his shoulder. “I don’t know. This is just all of a sudden, but is it bad I feel…” Tony trailed off, his cheeks rising in color.

“You feel what?” Pepper asked her voice slightly muffled by the sandwich bite she had taken.

Tony looked down shyly and smoothed his thumb over the words. “Hopeful? I mean I know it feels silly,” he said trying to wave it off. He laughed a little. “Forget it.”

“No, Tony that’s not silly. It’s okay to feel hopeful. I mean I’m not going to lie and say I’m Rogers’ biggest fan right now. However, I will admit that he’s…” Rhodey winced as though not wanting the following words to come out of his mouth. “A decent guy.”

Tony narrowed his eyes at Rhodey. “What?”

“A decent guy…albeit a little misguided at times. I just… I love you Tony. I want what’s best for you. If this letter makes you feel hopeful inside, maybe this is what you’ve been subconsciously waiting for. Maybe things have happened to lead to this moment,” Rhodey announced. “Look that ball’s in your court. You can choose to ignore Rogers or to hear him out and I don’t know try things.”

“You look like someone’s pulling your teeth,” Pepper chuckled as she situated Miles on her lap. “Listen Tony, you know what your heart desires. If at the end of the day you feel weightless and your heart is singing in your chest, because of Steve then feel hopeful and pursue that hope.”

“I have Ryder,” Tony muttered. “I have Ryder and I can’t do that to him. I can’t.”

Pepper frowned as she saw Tony’s eyes become misty. “Oh sweetie. I wasn’t going to say anything, but well do you even like Ryder?”

Tony’s eyes widened at the question. “Of course I like Ryder Pep. I wouldn’t be dating him, if I didn’t.”

He tried lowering his voice and extracting the defensive tone from his voice. “Sorry, it’s just I really like Ryder and for Steve to pull this so late. It’s frustrating. Maybe a year ago…and crap I don’t know. It’s confusing. Steve can’t just do this and make me feel hopeful for something that can’t happen.”

“Who said it can’t happen?” Rhodey questioned.

“I have Ryder.”

“People break up all the time Tony. Maybe Ryder’s not right for you. Maybe Steve is or isn’t. However, I want you to think of the two of them. Decide which one you couldn’t see yourself living without.”

“Pepper I can’t,” Tony brokenly whispered. “I can’t do that to Ryder. He’s been there for me, when no one else was. I was alone and he was here. I can’t just drop him. I can’t.”

Rhodey crawled toward Tony and wrapped his arms around him. Tony fell easily into the embrace and rested his head on Tony’s chest. Tony found comfort in listening to the soothing thrum of Rhodey’s heartbeat.
“This isn’t fair. Why would he do this to me?” Tony asked the two of them. “I didn’t ask for Steve to love me. He can’t love me.”

“He can’t love you. Why not?” Pepper asked curiously.

“Because I’m…you know why Pepper. He’s all American goodness and sweet apple pie and I’m Tony stark,” Tony mumbled against Rhodey’s chest. “I’ve lived my whole life knowing that I would never be good enough for someone like him. I wasn’t good enough for you.”

“Tony you were more than good enough for me. At the end of the day, I just wasn’t strong enough to constantly worry about whether you were coming home to me or not. Besides you and I agreed we work well as friends that doesn’t mean my love goes away, it just alters its form,” Pepper exclaimed. “So don’t you ever say you aren’t good enough.”

Rhodey tightened his hold on Tony. “Any person is blessed to have you in their life, to love you Tones. How could Steve not love you?”

Tony sniffled and he wiped furiously at his eyes. “You all say this because you’re my friends. You have to like build my ego.”

“No, I actually have to knock it down a few times,” Pepper joked. “But in all seriousness don’t let a possible good thing go away because you don’t think you deserve it. Everyone has flaws Tony that doesn’t mean that we’re incapable of loving or being loved. It just means that we have a greater understanding of a love without conditions.”

A love without conditions.

He certainly didn’t have that with Ryder.

“I just…I’m so tired,” Tony admitted. “I’m tired of having hope. I’m tired of thinking for once that I’ll have something good in my life and having it taken away. I have you both and Miles. I think I have the Avengers. I just…I keep waiting for the day it’s all taking away.”

“Tony you can’t think like that,” Pepper said. “It’s doing a disservice to you.”

“I know.”

“Do you really?”

Tony shrugged.

“Tony all you can do is listen to your heart. You know what’s good for you. If that’s seeing what Steve really means and maybe pursing things with him you do that. But know you’ll always have Pepper and me by your side. That’s never going to change.”

Tony smiled. No one said anything else as the sun began to set before them. Though their minds and hearts were heavy from the conversation, they didn’t allow it to weigh them down.

As they began to pack their bags to head back to the hotel, Tony peered at the letter again. He passed a garbage can and wondered if he should throw it away and pretend he never saw it. His hand hovered near the trashcan. However, his fingers would not let the letter go. Tony folded the letter and placed it in his basket.
When Tony and Miles came back to the tower, Miles was already excitedly asking if he could go find his Aunt Nat and show her the cool seashells he brought back. Pepper and Rhodey had dropped them off with promises to try doing a little vacation one weekend every month.

Miles held tightly on to Tony’s hand and urged him to go faster. “Alright Miles I get the hint. I’m coming. I’m coming.”

Miles smiled brightly at him and raised his hands for Tony to pick him up. “Oh so my big boy wants to be carried? I thought you were too big for that, hmm?” Miles hid his face in Tony’s shoulder and giggled.

The two continued down the main floor hallways until Tony noticed a figure approach them. The figure came into focus as he got closer. Upon closer inspection, Tony realized it was Harley. Miles immediately wiggled on Tony’s hip in hopes that Tony would let him go. Tony did as Miles wanted and watched as Miles ran to Harley, who easily picked him up.

“Well hey there Miles. Man are you getting taller?” Harley laughed. “Hey Mr. Stark.”

“Harley,” Tony greeted. “What are you doing here?”

Harley shifted on his feet. “Oh Mr. Rogers didn’t tell you? Well, since you were gone for a month Mr. Rogers agreed to take me to see my mom every week and then figured it’d be easier to watch me. I think he’s trying to be like a mentor or something. I’m not really sure. Pretty sure I’m the mentor in this relationship. I mean he’s kind of behind on things. Like he didn’t know what Uno was? Uno! Like how do you not know that game,” Harley sputtered.

“But now he’s acting like some Uno expert so I had to leave,” Harley claimed. “Is it okay if I stay here for a while?”

Tony smiled warmly and patted Harley on the shoulder. “Of course Harley. Look I’m sorry I left unannounced. I should have set things up so you could still see your mom, while I was away.”

Harley shrugged. “It’s okay. I get you have things to do. So it’s cool. I mean Mr. Rogers helped.”

Speaking of Rogers.

“Harley! You can’t just leave every single time you start losing a game. That’s unsportsmanlike conduct. Sometimes you have to lose, to know how to win,” came Steve’s voice.

Harley rolled his eyes. “Is he like this all the time?”

“Yes,” Tony answered.

“Well I would win, if you didn’t always have three draw fours in your hand,” Harley shouted back. “I mean I’m pretty sure you’re cheating.”

“I don’t cheat,” Steve said, his voice coming closer. When he realized where Harley ran off to, he came up short. “Oh, Tony you’re back.”

Tony bit his lip and nodded. “Yep.”

“So how was your trip?”

“Good.”

“That’s good.”
“Thank you for watching after Harley.”

“No, problem he’s a good kid.”

Harley watched on in dry amusement. “Okay, this is awkward.”

“Can we show Aunt Nat my seashells,” Miles questioned. “Baba’s taking too slow.”

“Of course. Anything to leave this awkward love situation. It’s like watching a bad romcom.”

“Harley,” both Tony and Steve shouted. Then looking at each other colored slightly.

“Miles is too young to see this horrible bad romcom. So we’re going to go,” Harley announced. “Alright kid let’s go find your Aunt Nat. How many seashells did you get?”

The two voices carried off softly until Tony could no longer hear them. Tony watched as Harley led Miles toward the playroom. Once they were out of his line of vision, he narrowed his eyes toward Steve. Both of them remained silent. Tony, deciding that Steve wasn’t going to say anything, began to march to his lab. For a second he was sure that he wasn’t being followed at least until he heard Steve’s footsteps follow closely behind him. Without looking back he continued to head to his lab.

When both were in there, Tony sat down and would get up to pace for a few moments muttering under his breath. He continued this repetitive action and Steve watched on in amusement. The corners of Steve’s mouth tugged upward as he sat down in a spare chair. Tony continued mumbling, hands gesticulating wildly in the air. Every now and then he would look at Steve, pause, and go back to pacing.

Steve couldn’t help, but to let a small breath of laughter escape his lips. At that noise, Tony turned sharply to him.

“What are you laughing at? What is so amusing to you Rogers?”

Steve shrugged and raised his eyes to rake over Tony’s body. Sharp eyes trailed a slow descent toward the tips of Tony’s fingers that were raised to Steve to his feet now placed firmly and unmoving on the ground. Tony felt his cheeks become warm from the direct attention placed on him.

Tony shifted on his feet and placed his hands on his hips. “Why are you staring at me?”

“Goodness, you’re gorgeous,” Steve announced, no hint of hesitation coloring his tone. “How could I not stare?”

Tony shook his head. “Okay, did you happen to undergo some type of brain surgery while I was gone, during this past month? I mean I know that I’m fine as hell so no reason to tell me, but are you alright in the head?”

Steve nodded. “Yeah, you’re fine as hell. However, I said you’re gorgeous. Don’t forget that darlin’.”

Tony sputtered and strongly tried ignoring how his heart jumped in his chest. He had hopes that what he had read from Steve’s letter was true. Of course he also told himself not to read too much into it. Though now…perhaps with Steve actually here maybe he was being honest in his letter.

Steve smiled brightly as he watched the pink flush flood Tony’s cheek. He could watch that color travel into the softness of his cheeks for the rest of his days on this earth, if he could. He smiled even
more, when Tony seemed to be speechless for once. Steve had appreciated all of this and was thankful for Natasha, Sam, and Bucky for helping him pull his head outside of his…well ass.

Internally grateful, Steve leaned back comfortably in his chair as Tony tried coming up with words. Tony’s mouth would open and close a few times. He gave out a particular frustrated sigh as he couldn’t figure out how to respond.

“It’s okay sweetheart. Take your time,” Steve drawled leaning forward to place his elbows on his knees.

Tony clenched his jaw. “Yeah, that. Don’t do that Rogers. I don’t know what your game is, but it’s not amusing in any sort of way. Look I get that you had a moment of stupidity in leaving so you felt that you have to make up for it. Don’t worry you’re forgiven. I forgave you for all of that jazz, when I read your letter. Nice letter by the way, much better than the one you gave me after the Accords. Did Natasha help you write it?”

“No, that was all me.”

“Oh,” Tony said somewhat breathless. “Oh, well that…”

Tony frowned and swiped his thump over his bottom lip in contemplation. Steve followed the movement and his eyes grew slightly fevered. Tony noticed the change and quickly brought his hand into his pants pocket. Glaring at Steve, he went to his desk and then turned back around.

“No, actually that’s not fair. What the hell were you thinking writing that letter to me professing your love or something? You don’t love me Rogers. I don’t know what’s happened between here and then because we’re barely friends! Plus did you just expect to write a letter and poof everything becomes like one of those Disney movies? Huh?”

Without even becoming aware of it, Tony had slowly gravitated toward Steve, who was now standing from his position beside the chair.

Tony pointed at Steve’s chest. “Seriously? I don’t understand. I mean one moment you’re telling me you have to leave and then the next I’m getting a letter saying you love me and how you didn’t want to leave…then why did you leave? I mean I’m not believing you for a second that you could actually love me…”

“Why not?” Steve interrupted. “Why couldn’t I possibly love you?”

“Rogers,” Tony started.

“And why do you keep calling me Rogers all of a sudden?” Steve said moving closer to Tony.

Tony tried introducing some space between the two of them. Their close proximity caused Tony to lose focus and instead turn his attention upward to a pair of blue eyes looking down at him.

*You have a boyfriend,* Tony reminded himself.

*Yeah, one that beats you,* his subconscious helpfully interfered.

*But is trying to be better,* Tony thought.

*Yeah, so says the abuser,* his subconscious once again interrupted.

Tony shook himself from those thoughts as soon as he realized he could feel Steve’s breath ghosting
on his nose.

“What’s going on in that brilliant mind of yours?” Steve questioned.

“What’s going on in my…? Steve are you high or on some medication? Where are all these compliments coming from?”

Steve stepped back for a moment. Tony held in a whine of protest.

“I…ah perhaps I should have started with what I followed you here for. So everything you read in the letter is true. That was me saying everything I wanted to say the moment I came back here…everything I wanted to say only a few months after getting to know you,” Steve explained. “But I felt I couldn’t. You were everything I thought I could never have. You were brilliant, sarcastic, kind, selfless, insightful, and confident.”

“And I fell in love with you and I couldn’t stop. I couldn’t stop imagining how it would be if I told you my feelings…whether you would accept them. If you did, I felt like everything…those 70 years in ice would be worth it just if I could have you,” Steve honestly proclaimed.

“Steve…”

Steve smiled down at him. “But I repressed it all. A man of the future couldn’t want a man stuck in the past. Then when I gathered a little bit of courage you were back with Pepper. Then you broke up. Then I thought here’s my chance. Then Ultron. Then you got back with Pepper. Then the Accords and well you and I both know that was a reason of its own…or rather an excuse,” Steve told him.

Tony swallowed a lump in his throat. Steve took his silence as permission to continue.

“And I know you have Ryder, but I can’t help thinking that you deserve better. Perhaps I’m selfish in wanting that better to be me even if I’m just a kid from Brooklyn.”

“You were never just a kid from Brooklyn,” Tony shyly rushed out, before his brain could catch up. “I mean you don’t have to talk down on yourself to make me feel better.”

Steve shook his head. “That’s not what I’m doing at all. I’m just saying you deserve so much more Tony. You deserve everything good in this world. I just want to be with you on that journey. I want to be the one to take you out on dates and listen to you switch from topics within seconds. I want to be the one who always brings you food, when you’ve worked yourself too hard and forget to take care of yourself. I want to be the one that makes you want to take a break from the lab because the place you find in my arms is better. Or maybe I want to be the one who loves you so hard and so passionately, that you won’t have problems falling to sleep.”

Tony’s heart twisted in his chest and he felt something flutter in his stomach at the suggestion of the last statement. By then Steve and Tony were nearly a hair length’s apart. Steve grew closer with each sentence that he whispered between them. There was no time for him to be shy or for him to talk himself out of this. He said he was going to fight for Tony and this was only the beginning.

“Because this,” he grabs Tony’s hand and places it on his heart, “will forever be yours and I hope one day yours can be mine. And when I have that completely, I’m never letting you go.”

I’m dead, Tony thought to himself. Yep, it’s time to plan my funeral because I am officially deceased.

Tony shook himself out of this and blinked his eyes a few times. “You…you love me?”
Steve stepped closer, relishing in the fact that there was now no space between them. “I nearly can’t remember a time I spent not loving you. I only regret that I didn’t do this sooner.”

Tony turned his head to the side and mulled over what Steve was saying to him. Oh, how much he wanted all of this to be true. If Steve had come to him saying all of this a year ago, Tony would have unashamedly climbed Steve like a tree. It was only the thought of Ryder that kept him from doing so.

Ryder.

“I’m with Ryder.”

“Do you love him?” Steve questioned, hoping his face didn’t belay the fear he had while asking this.

Tony shrugged his shoulders. “I’m with Ryder. He’s my boyfriend.”

Steve began to feel the confidence settle in his shoulders. He had a long way to go, but he was certain that at the end of the day Tony felt the same or at least a little bit of what Steve was feeling. After all if his feelings weren’t even slightly returned, Tony would have somewhat kindly told Steve to leave his lab.

So Steve didn’t miss the way Tony’s eyes grew dark or his cheeks grow warm. He didn’t miss how Tony’s body instinctively started to gravitate toward his. He certainly didn’t miss how for a brief moment Tony allowed himself to smile shyly at Steve saying he loved him.

And that’s all Steve needed.

“I didn’t ask you if you were with him. Do you love him?”

At this Tony grew slightly upset. “Why are you doing this? Are you trying to confuse me or something?”

Steve shook his head and followed the warring emotions in Tony’s eyes. One emotion didn’t rest easy with him.

Fear.

He narrowed his eyes and Tony noticed. Tony quickly cast his eyes downward.

“I don’t know,” Tony grit out. “Can we stop with the 21 questions? We’re not blushing teenagers in high school anymore.”

“After a year, you should know. Do you love him?”

Tony pushed back at Steve’s chest. Steve allowed some space between the two. Tony looked back at Steve.

“I said I don’t know Steve.”

“Yes, you do. Come on Tony. Do you love him?”

“No!” Tony shouted loudly, surprising himself with the strength behind that. “No,” he said trying to hide how his voice quivered. “But I could because he’s my boyfriend. Some things happen more slowly.”

Steve didn’t look to sure. So instead he said, “Fine.”
“Fine?” Tony questioned, suddenly confused at the acceptance. He was kind of hoping…No, he should be thankful. He doesn’t need little pipe dreams. It’s easier to nip this thing in the bud, before anything got too crazy.

“Yeah, fine,” Steve said calmly as though the statement hadn’t bothered him. In fact it truly hadn’t. “It’s fine because as long as your answer is no, that’s as long as I’m going to continue to fight for you. I’m a patient man.”

“Are you?”

Steve’s blue eyes settled heavily on Tony’s brown ones. Steve steppe closer. “Yeah, I’m extremely patient figuring that I haven’t kissed you yet when everything inside of me wants to pull you close,” Steve said raising a hand to Tony’s waist. He waited to see if his touch would be allowed and once Tony grew closer, he allowed his arm to encircle his waist. “And kiss you until I lose all the breath from my chest.”

Steve leaned closer to him, his cool breath setting flames on Tony’s neck. He leaned down closer and let his mouth hover a few inches at the base of Tony’s neck. Tony held in a breath and unconsciously let his eyes flutter closed. He was momentarily disappointed as Steve moved away from his neck. But he was thoroughly grateful when his cool breath traveled at his ear. Tony shivered in his arms and pressed himself closer to Steve.

“But I won’t do that yet because I’m patient and the wait will be oh so worth it,” Steve whispered softly in his ear. “Granted I hope it won’t be that long of a wait.”

Screw being patient, Tony wanted to tell him.

Steve stepped back from him. Inside he felt a pleased grin and hoped that outside reflected it. Though he knows he was probably looking like an overeager dog right now. However, he wasn’t afraid of letting Tony know how affected he was by him. He kept everything bottled up inside for so long and it didn’t do him any good.

“So what you’re going to court me now or something?” Tony said feeling off balance and wanting to gain some solid ground. So he hoped that he could quip some Tony Stark sarcasm into the conversation.

“If you came from this conversation thinking otherwise, perhaps I need to go over this again,” Steve teased. “Yes, I’m going to do it all Tony. Staring with dinner.”

“Dinner?”

“Yeah, I’m going to make you some dinner,” he said. “I’ll make something for you and me. Then I’ll make something more age appropriate for Miles and Harley. I’m certain the two won’t mind having spaghetti.”

“I don’t have problems with spaghetti,” Tony rushed out. “I mean…that way you don’t have to make two different meals. Pepper says I eat like a child anyways.”

Steve smiled. Pepper. He needed to send her a fruit basket and hope that would be enough for her to tell him certain things Tony liked. He could observe, but it was also nice to have some more information.

“Well spaghetti it is. Has Ryder ever made you dinner,” a petty part of Steve replied.

Tony tilted his head as he thought. He snapped his fingers and answered with a smile. “Yeah, he did
actually. One day he gave me a granola and yogurt.”

Steve scowled. “A granola and yogurt?”

Tony frowned. “Yes, that was very nice.”

“He knows that if you can’t cook there are still places you can order food right?” Steve said. “A granola and yogurt aren’t for dinner. That’s like a snack.”

“He was trying,” Tony offered.

“Not hard enough, but this will make things better for me,” Steve said low enough under his breath that Tony hadn’t heard him.

“Okay, be prepared for some amazing spaghetti. Also buckle your seat belt for this wonderful wooing ride of the famous Steve Rogers. Granted not many people have been on this ride, so feel special.”

“Oh, I most certainly do,” Tony said finally giving in to Steve. It wouldn’t hurt…and if secretly Tony had been hoping this for almost his who life no one would ever know.

“You even fit the height requirement!” Steve joked as he began walking away.

“Ooooh, one point deducted from your wooing skills Steve. Not sure how this is going to go in your favor with this start,” Tony teased back, for the first time letting doubt flee from his mind and letting hope enter. He didn’t know how this would pan out. However, there was nothing inside of him that wanted to tell Steve to stop.

“It’ll be earned back by my mastery of spaghetti skills!” Steve said doing a mock bow.

He laughed as Steve walked backwards from the lab. “It’s going to be great! I’m going to sweep you off your feet I swear. And I promise I’ll be nice to Ryder, when you break it to him that he’s just not good enough for you. I also will hold the box of Kleenex out to him as I usher him outside the tower.”

“Steve!” Tony choked out a burst of laughter.

Steve shrugged his shoulders. “Just saying. Okay, dinner at seven. Don’t be late. I’ll drag you out the lab if I have to and FRIDAY will help me won’t you?”

“If it is for the benefit of Tony, I suppose I will assist,” FRIDAY exclaimed.

Steve gave two thumbs off and quickly left. Tony let small bursts of laughter shake his body. Water fell from his eyes as the laughter transformed. He didn’t know why he was crying. Any other time he would have been beyond thrilled. But he had Ryder and…

“FRIDAY what just happened?” Tony said hiccupping around a disbelieving cry.

“Steve has informed you of his plans of courting you sir,” FRIDAY explained.

“But I have Ryder? I can’t let him do this, when I’m still dating Ryder, right FRI?”

FRIDAY remained silent as though she had not heard his question.

“Right FRIDAY?” Tony asked again.
“I am sorry sir. I had assumed I didn’t need to reply, seeing as though you had already answered your question,” FRIDAY cheekily replied.

Tony blinked owlishly and sat in the seat that Steve had occupied. He let his fingers trace the ear that only moments ago Steve had been whispering in. He pulled his bottom lip between his teeth as he felt a smile overcome his expression. He looked around his lab and back at the clock. He had three hours, before he had to meet Steve in the kitchen. He tried pushing down the wave of giddiness that circled around him.

He tried ignoring how easy it was going to be to accept Steve’s “fighting” for him because Tony would be lying if he said he wasn’t already in love.

He loved Steve.

He didn’t think he could ever love Ryder.

He was screwed.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to everyone who commented, gave a kudo, and left a bookmark. You all continue to make my day :)
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Apologies for having no update last week. It's just been one of those weeks and I would much rather give a late update than a chapter where my heart and mind wasn't in it. This also means I'm late to responding to comments, but know that I've read them, I've loved them, I've highly appreciated them, and I'll be getting to them soon. :)  

Also Black Panther has me physically shook and I want to send marriage proposals to practically everyone in that movie.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Do you even know how to make spaghetti?” Bucky questioned, coming up on Steve.

Steve nodded, biting his lip in concentration. He held up two different sized pots to Bucky. “Okay, which one of these do you think I should make the pasta in? I was thinking about using the larger one, that way we could have leftovers.”

Bucky hummed in agreeance. “Yeah, that would probably be the best. So are you making dinner for Tony and the kids?”

Steve smiled as he put the smaller pot away. “Yeah. And what do you mean if I know how to make spaghetti?”

Bucky raised an eyebrow in question. “I know my memories may still be a little scattered, but I do distinctly remember the knowledge that you don’t know how to cook.”

Frowning, Steve turned to Bucky. “What? I am a great cook.”

Bucky watched as Steve grabbed pasta and put it dryly in the pan. His eyes widened and he hurriedly ran over to stop Steve from turning the stove on. He sent an internal thank you to FRIDAY for letting him know that Steve was attempting to cook.

“Yeah, clearly someone who plans on putting pasta in a dry pan knows how to cook. You do know you need to add water, right?” Bucky muttered taking the pan and adding water to it. “Then you have to let it boil. And I remember you burning the broth, when we were kids. It was broth Steve.”

Steve shrugged sheepishly. He grabbed a skillet and placed it on the stove. Reaching into the refrigerator he grabbed a stick of butter and cut a square. He turned the burner on and placed the butter on the stove. Then he turned to where Bucky was adding some salt into the water.

“Why are you adding salt?” Steve questioned as he made a move toward grabbing the turkey beef.

Bucky placed the salt down. “Helps it boil faster. Now we just wait for the water to start boiling and then we can add the noodles. Hey, what’s that burning smell?”

Bucky sniffed and narrowed his eyes at the burning butter. He quickly grabbed a towel and placed the skillet on the part of the stove that was not hot yet.
“Steve!” Bucky shouted as he watched the butter crackle and sizzle in the skillet. “You can’t just
leave stuff unattended. What were you trying to make with butter?”

Steve frowned. “I was trying to make toasted bread Buck. You know I really don’t appreciate all of
this yelling.”

Bucky tilted his head to the side in confusion. “How is it that I was brainwashed for years and I still
know the rules of the kitchen. Steve!”

Steve almost dropped the packet of meat in his hand.

“What?” Steve shouted, his heart already thundering.

“Steve that meat is frozen,” Bucky announced.

“And you had to yell to say that?” Steve made a look at Bucky. “I fail to see the problem here. We’re
putting it in the skillet to make it unfrozen Bucky.”

Bucky sighed. “Why didn’t you just tell Tony you were ordering in? You don’t know how to make
spaghetti at all. It’s a good thing I came in here or else you would have burned the house down.”

“That’s not true. Plus I wanted to make a home-cooked meal. I need to show him that I’m making all
the effort and am serious about this,” Steve admitted.

“Yeah, showing him you’re making an effort would be him not ending up with food poisoning.
Goodness, Stevie just move. Let me handle the big things okay. I’ll direct you. Do not do anything
that I have not told you to do, yes?”

Steve remained silent.

Bucky raised his eyebrow in question.

“Yes?”

Steve turned around mulishly. “Fine, you can help me.”

Bucky rolled his eyes. “Alright punk, first of all grab some meat that isn’t frozen or put that meat in
some hot water and we’ll see if we can defrost it.”

Steve did both things and continued following Bucky’s instructions seeing as though Bucky clearly
knew more than he did. He also told himself he really didn’t want to give Tony or anyone else food
poisoning. That would not be a good start to his plan of courting Tony. Nothing said I love you more
than food poisoning.

“So how’s everything going with you and B.A.R.F.?” Steve prompted as he began cutting up some
tomatoes for the salad.

Bucky lifted his shoulder. “I mean it’s going. Good days, bad days. I can’t really complain though as
long as it gets rid of these trigger words then I’m good.”

“Doctors still treating you well and all of that?”

“Yes.”

“And the diet they put you on, is it helping you?”
“Yes, mother,” Bucky drawled. He craned his neck to the side. “Would you also like to know if the mouth wash I’m using actually gets rid of bacteria?”

Steve ran his fingers through his hair and let out a small huff of laughter. Reaching out, he squeezed Bucky’s shoulder in comfort. “You’ll let me know, if you need anything. Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Bucky told him returning to his pan. “Now how about we stop talking about my health. I do enough of that at therapy. Hand me the pepper. You do know what that looks like, right?”

Steve tossed the pepper to Bucky. “Jerk.”

“Punk,” Bucky said his lips tilting up in a smirk. “You know I’ve never seen you like this before.”

Steve lifted an eyebrow. “Like what?”

Bucky turned sideways. “Nervous. I mean even when you were you know not this…” he motioned toward Steve’s body “…you always had confidence and power just radiating off of you. I mean it got you into a lot of trouble.”

“I’m not nervous. I’m just a little…well okay possibly a little nervous. It’s just I’m hoping to impress Tony. I just want to do everything I can to express through both my words and actions how much I love him. I’m nervous that at the end of the day this won’t be enough,” Steve admitted taking a piece of the loaf of bread he had pulled out and popping it into his mouth.

“Hey, now don’t go doubting yourself. When you start doubting yourself, you lose focus of what you truly want. You remember when we went on missions with Howling Commandos we couldn’t let doubt cloud our thoughts because if we did one or all of us could die. Doubt here means you could lose Tony. So just…you know don’t do that,” Bucky trailed off awkwardly.

Steve nodded. “Yeah, you’re right. I just…”

“You just nothing Steve. You know I never had to talk you into doing things. You always had the strength to go after what you want. Somethings may have changed over the years, but don’t let your persistence…your courage ever waver no matter the circumstance,” Bucky told him.

Steve blinked slowly. “Yeah, I know.”

Bucky sighed. “Look Steve I’m gonna be frank with you. These past few days it seems like I’m encouraging you to go after Tony more than you’re encouraging yourself. I’ll always be your encourager, you know that. But either you are in this or you are not. I can only steer you right for so long.”

Steve frowned. “Now wait just a minute Bucky…I’m a 100% in this. I’m sorry if I gave you the impression that I wasn’t. I don’t have doubts about anything. I talked to Tony and explained my intentions and I’m not going to go back on them. I know what I want and what I want is him. I don’t need anyone else telling me what I want, or feeling the need to encourage me because I’ve known this feeling ever since I started to know Tony.”

Bucky smiled and turned back to the stove. “I know you are.”

Steve scrunched his face up, his face losing some of its redness. “Then why…” he narrowed his eyes at Bucky. “Oh, okay got you.”

Bucky nudged Steve in the rib. “Now go grab the sauce.”
The two of them continued cooking. Steve tried sampling a bit of the food, but after a relatively hard nudge from Bucky’s metal hand Steve resisted the temptation. Besides he would be able to eat the food in a little bit.

Steve felt a warmth settle in his body as he reminisced how he and Bucky would often prepare food with the little rations they had back in the day…though he was fairly certain Bucky had done more of the cooking. Even the Commandos had known that Steve couldn’t be trusted to make anything after his first incident of cooking for them. To this day he still argued that his soldiers just couldn’t stomach the spices he had found from that market place.

Steve’s stomach had been perfectly fine.

At that moment Harley chose to run into the kitchen carrying a sniffling Miles. Steve’s ears immediately heard the sniffling and he searched Miles’ face for the root of the problem. Harley immediately went to the medicine cabinet and grabbed a Band-Aid. Steve left his spot from making the salad and went toward Harley.

“Hey what’s wrong?” Steve questioned.

Miles looked at Steve with wet wide eyes. He raised his thumb toward Steve. Steve leant down and inspected the thumb, which had a pretty considerable scratch on it. Harley set Miles down on the counter and grabbed a wet paper towel and wiped his thumb.

“He accidentally scratched his thumb on one of his toys. Now I know why those toys have those little hazard warnings,” Harley muttered as he wrapped the Band-Aid on Miles’ finger. “Alright there you go kid.”

Harley set Miles back down on the floor. Miles squinted his head at the bright neon green Band-Aid and then turned his face toward Steve. Steve smiled and went back to cutting up some slices of cucumbers for the salad, when he felt something tugging his pants.

“Baba always kisses them to make it better,” Miles said as though that was common sense.

Steve picked up Miles and settled him on his hip. He grabbed the Band-Aid clad finger and kissed it. “Alright, now it’s all better.”

Miles smiled toothily at him and then stretched his arms out to Harley. Harley easily took him from Steve. Looking at the two super soldiers cooking, Harley inspected the meal and turned his eyes upward to Steve.

“You know he’s allergic to red sauce, right?” Harley stated worriedly.

Steve immediately stopped what he was doing and Bucky slowly turned around. “You’ve got to be kidding, right? It’s almost time. Tony should be coming here soon,” Steve muttered.

Harley remained silent for a few tantalizing seconds before breaking out in laughter. “No, but goodness the face you made is hilarious. FRIDAY did you capture their faces?”

“I have captured the startled expressions of Captain Rogers and Sgt. Barnes. Shall I send them to your phone Harley,” FRIDAY inquired.

“It’s Steve.”

“It’s Bucky.”
Both Bucky and Steve stated at the same time.

“Please do FRIDAY,” Harley announced.

Steve rolled his eyes. “I don’t want to see that circulating the web.”

Harley chuckled. “Yes, as if you would even know if something was on the internet.”

Bucky turned the stove on low and wiped his hands on his pants. “Alright, all the food is ready. You just have to set up the table and maybe clean yourself up a bit. I’ll take the little kids here and take our portions to go.”

“I’m not a kid,” Harley muttered as Bucky handed him a bowl of spaghetti.

Miles copied the same exact statement and even crossed his arms.

Bucky ruffled Harley’s then Miles’ hair. “Sure kiddos. Now let’s get out of Steve’s way.”

“Does this mean I can finally get you to play Mario Kart,” Harley said as he followed Bucky out of the kitchen. “Because I am in high need of a rematch, since I’m pretty sure you and Mr. Rogers are both cheaters…”

Their voices became soft whispers as they traveled further away from the kitchen. While they were gone, Steve quickly set the kitchen table and ran to his room to freshen up. Once done, he nearly ran to the kitchen and saw he had a few minutes to spare.

He made sure everything was in its place, when he heard footsteps behind him. Immediately he straightened his shoulders and turned to Tony who was sluggishly walking into the kitchen. Tony’s eyes widened upon seeing the meal laid out before him. He shook his head as though trying to wake himself up.

“I thought you were joking,” Tony said as he took in everything on the table. “You made all of this?”

Steve pulled out a seat for Tony and then sat down in his own. “I hope everything is good. I’ll be honest I’m not the best cook so I did have to rely heavily on Bucky to tell me what to do. Apparently, I’m a disaster in the kitchen without supervision.”

“It’s no problem. Maybe one day I could cook for you or you know help out,” Tony admitted softly running his fingers over his silverware.

“You can cook?” Steve implored. “I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah, well when you basically grew up with absent parents you had to learn how to make your own food. Plus Jarvis’ wife, Ana, was our cook and I often gravitated toward her so she taught me everything I know about food,” Tony said smiling fondly.

Steve grinned. “So you were close to Jarvis and Ana.”

“Yeah, I mean I used to pretend that they were my real parents. I mean they were there more than my parents. I remember there was one summer my parents’ went on a trip to Spain and left me to be with Ana and Jarvis. That summer was the best and I told everyone that Ana and Jarvis were my mom and dad,” Tony laughed. “I was so fucking disappointed when I had to go back to being a Stark.”

Steve frowned and reached out to Tony’s hand that was playing mindlessly with his napkin. His
fingers slowly interlaced with Tony’s and Tony brought his attention back to Steve.

“Sorry, that’s all in the past. I’m pretty sure you didn’t do all this to hear about my childhood,” Tony laughed.

“That’s not true. I want to know everything about you,” Steve honestly stated. “And I’m sorry your parents weren’t the ones you deserved.”

Tony shrugged. “Yeah. But hey this all looks really good maybe we should dive in and-”

“This looks awfully a lot like a date,” Ryder exclaimed angrily as he came upon Steve and Tony. “Is there something I should be made aware of?”

Tony froze in his spot and opened his mouth. He had completely forgotten that Ryder was coming home that not. After everything with Steve talking to him in his lab, Ryder coming home had been the last though in his mind.

“No, it’s not like that.”

It’s everything like that, Steve had wanted to say.

“Did you happen to forget that we had dinner reservations? I told you that I didn’t have the night shift tonight so I wanted to take you out. Thought since we had been apart for a month you would have looked forward to our date or at least remembered it.”

Tony pushed his plate back. “I’m so sorry. I forgot. Look I was hungry and Steve mentioned that he made spaghetti so I was just wanting to grab something. I’ve been in my lab all day and so I was hungry.”

“Look, you’re free to join us. I made a lot,” Steve told Ryder, though he wanted nothing more than to tell Ryder he was free to leave. In fact, he was encourage to leave.

“No, thank you Rogers,” Ryder bit out. “I would still like to take my boyfriend out to dinner. Tony?”

Tony sent an apologetic expression to Steve, before standing up. “Okay, yeah. Let me just get cleaned up and we can go.”

Once Tony was gone, the two stared at each other in silence neither wanting to give the other their attention. However, the tension created enough conversation for them. Ryder turned his eyes downward to Steve who was still sitting down.

“Don’t think that you’ll be able to take Tony away from me. I know what this spaghetti dinner was all for. Don’t take me for stupid,” Ryder growled.

“I think you should concern yourself with finding a new place over wondering whether or not this spaghetti dinner was a date. Because I can ease those concerns right now,” Steve said standing up. “It was.”

Tony at that moment came back slightly freshened up. “I’m ready.”

“You look great,” Steve said as he walked toward Tony. Steve turned to Ryder and looked warningly at him. “Text me when you get there safely,” he whispered to Tony.

Tony smiled and looked behind him as Steve walked away. Ryder immediately settled his hand on Tony’s lower back and steered him away. He wanted to say so many things and he wanted his hand
to press so hard on Tony’s back that it left a bruise. He wanted to scrape his nails at the soft flesh of Tony’s hipbone and remind him that his body belonged to him and him alone…Steve had no right to go around making dinner for what was his.

But with Steve basically being the antithesis to his own character, he had to reign in those instincts for a little while. He had to become a better version and let Steve slowly be warped into being the antagonist.

“Look, I know you and Steve are friends. So if you really want to stay and eat spaghetti with him that’s fine. I could just take an extra shift at the hospital,” Ryder explained softly.

Tony shook his head. “No, no. You’ve already had a long day at work. It’s fine honestly. I’m sorry I forgot. Hopefully we can still make the reservation. If not, I’m sure I can just throw my last name out there.”

Ryder laughed. Of course being a Stark meant that he could do anything he wanted. Being a Stark meant that he could ruin his life, just like his dad had. And he wasn’t going to let that happen again.

Thankfully, they were able to make their reservation. Tony settled into his seat in the dimly lit booth that the hostess led them to. Ryder leaned across the table as he pressed a kiss to Tony’s cheek. He leaned back as he brought his thumb to rub across the place his lips had been. Tony’s eyes sparkled from the lit candlelight.

“I love you,” Ryder said. “And I missed you so much this past month. Everywhere I looked I kept turning to my side to say something to you, but you weren’t there. You’ve left an imprint.”

Tony smiled easily. “I guess I do tend to do that. Hopefully, it’s a good imprint.”

Ryder laughed. “The best kind of imprint. But your trip was good?”

Tony nodded as he sat down his glass of water. “It really was relaxing.”

“Maybe next time we can take a trip together,” Ryder suggested.

Tony cut his eyes to the side and Ryder watched the slight twitch of his shoulder. “Mhm.”

Ryder didn’t particularly like that response. From there on, he became increasingly suspicious of Tony’s responses to him. It seemed like that month away had changed some things and he hadn’t even known what Steve had told Tony.

He was losing Tony and he couldn’t afford to do that certainly not now.

Just as their food was coming, Tony’s phone began to ring. “I thought we were putting our phones on silent,” Ryder commented as he began to cut into his salmon.

Tony fished out his phone from his coat pocket. “Yeah, but with Miles at home I like to always keep my phone on vibrate. Sorry, let me just see what this is about.”

Ryder smiled softly. “Of course. There’s no rush, the food will still be here.”

Tony swiftly kissed Ryder on the forehead before sliding out of the booth. When he was gone, Ryder’s smile quickly fell off of his face. Not even a few minutes passed, before Tony stalked
quickly over to their booth and grabbed his coat jacket.

“I’m so sorry, but I need to go back home right now. Harley just called saying Miles is coming down with a fever and you know with him having sickle cell and asthma I just have to be cautious. But look enjoy your meal, okay? Can you get my stuff to go?” Tony rushed out hurriedly. “I’m so sorry, but I need to go check and make sure Miles is okay.”

Ryder waved his concern off. “Yeah, no you go. I’ll have this all packed and ready to go. I’ll follow you back shortly.”

“Thanks,” Tony responded kissing Ryder soundly on the lips. “I’ll make it up to you. I promise.”

“I know you will,” he said into the air as Tony turned away.

Ryder watched with a clenched jaw as Tony ran off to go back home. He waved off the waiter who came to his table. He took his phone out and went through his CMPNY contacts before settling on a name. He looked around the restaurant and locked eyes with some of the patrons of the restaurant. They all nodded once before clearing out of the restaurant.

He settled back easily into his chair and pressed call. Bringing the phone up to his ear, he listened to the thrum of the ringing vibrate in his ear. He was foolish to think that Rogers wouldn’t actually be a problem. He doubted that Miles was even sick. And honestly it was just like Tony to pick the one sick kid. He hadn’t wanted to say anything to Tony because he still needed to act as though he was truly trying.

But seriously he could have at least adopted a healthy kid. And if this was honestly a ploy to get Tony back home, which Ryder was fully aware it probably was, Ryder was going to have to do better at separating Tony from the recent additions to the house.

“Hello,” the voice cracked through.

“You were right,” Ryder bit out angrily.

“Oh dear I’m often right about a lot of things more oft than not,” a sultry voice replied. “I must ask you to be more specific.”

Ryder groaned. “It seems like you were right about Rogers actually being a problem and the whole Avenger family and Tony’s joy of adopting strays.”

The voice hummed lowly. “So I suppose you need to make sure you are a more permeant fixture in Stark’s life in order to continue your plan.”

“Yes.”

“Well, you are lucky. I have just the venue that opened up that will fit this life-changing decision. My men and women will be fit to work alongside those of your CMPNY to give you more muscle. Though I do want a front row seat to the destruction of Stark,” the voice quipped. “It will be joyfully wondrous to see his damnation.”

Ryder smiled. “Don’t worry, once I push him away from everyone and isolate him from everything, he’ll only be able to depend on me. And what better way to live than for your destruction to be at the hands of the one you love. For the rest of our married life, I will own him.”

“Dear, you’ve just made my night. And what happens if he decides to say no,” the voice offered. “I know you must have thought about that.”
“Oh, then we’ll just take a nice trip to Winston’s estate in California,” he joked.

“Ryder, I’ve heard that is such a delightful place to go in the spring,” the voice moaned. “There is a part of me that hopes he denies your proposal if only to go the estate. Has he been there before?”

“Yes, he has.”

“And the experience?”

“It was marvelous. And I’m hoping for an encore performance, perhaps with more actors this time.”

The voice laughed then quieted. “Well dear let the time of the Starks’ control over our lives end fairly soon.”

“Agreed.”

“I am greatly proud of you and your dedication to the CMPNY. I had my doubts when you decided to take control after Howard’s death and I have never been so grateful than to have lived long enough to see the change you have implemented into the CMPNY.”

“Thank you.”

“Of course.”

“Benedici il CMPNY.”

“Benedici il CMPNY,” the voice proudly repeated before hanging up the phone.

Ryder set his phone down and smiled. He had seen his past actions and knew what he needed to do. He had already prided himself on being a fast learner. And he certainly had no patience in the desire to see Tony’s destruction.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to everyone who commented, gave a kudo, and left a bookmark. You all continue to make my day :)

*Translation/Italian: Benedici il CMPNY: Bless the CMPNY
Steve went back to the kitchen, after Tony and Ryder had left. Sure, he was disappointed that the evening’s plans had turned out differently than expected. However, he had nothing but confidence that at the end of the day Tony would much rather be eating spaghetti with him than at some restaurant with Ryder. He had a text to prove it. Smiling at the thought, he grabbed his phone and looked at the message he received a few minutes ago.

Tony: Hey, made it safely. It’s really dark in this restaurant and to be honest I’d much rather eat spaghetti than whatever I’ll be having tonight.

Tony: Also please make sure Miles goes to bed, before nine. He’s gonna try and stay up with Harley, but I do not want a tired Miles on my hands tomorrow. Thnx!

Steve looked at the message and saw his own below it…unsent. He slapped a hand to his forehead in annoyance at himself for forgetting to send a message back. He truly thought he had, but maybe in all the excitement of Tony telling Steve he’d rather be with him eating spaghetti Steve had forgotten.

Steve: Thanks for letting me know :) I’ll make sure to save you some spaghetti and also make sure Miles is fast asleep by his bedtime.

Not even seconds later, Steve’s phone buzzed with an incoming text. He frowned slightly, when his brain provided the fact that Tony never liked paying attention to his phone, while with company. It was actually the only time that someone could see Tony unattached to his phone, unless it was an emergency. Tony had told him it was the one good thing he took from his father. He may not have always been attentive to Tony as a child, but he was never rude enough to have his attention anywhere else beside the food in front of him.

Tony: I’m really craving spaghetti rn

Steve: rn?

Tony: Yes…as in right now? Steve come on I literally gave you a dictionary with all of these SMS language. In fact I have been extremely nice in not going full slang on you rn

Steve: Tony, I think I had other things to concern myself than understanding the difference between lol and lmao

Steve could almost imagine the eye roll that Tony was sure to give.

Tony: Language cap! smh Steve. Ur skills r terrible like you’ve been having a phone for how long and still don’t know the difference?

Steve: No, I just don’t understand why one would go through the trouble of taking time to subtract just one letter from the word. Isn’t it easier to just write things out the way they are intended?

Tony: Y r u such a loser

Steve: Tony.
Tony: Steve. Tbh I think it’s b/c ur grandpa setting is on idk

Steve: I don’t know what you are saying. Plus aren’t you supposed to be on a date…I mean not that I’m complaining that you’re texting me.

Tony: Ryder went to go speak to a colleague he saw a few minutes ago…oh ttyl Ryder is coming back

Steve: K cu l8r

Tony: You troll! You knew exactly what I was saying. I bet you read that dictionary three times and probably practiced.

Steve: Gtg

Tony: I greatly dislike you

Steve: ;)

Tony: Just wait till I get back you massive troll.

Steve: K

Steve placed the phone back in his pocket and smiled to himself. Rather happily he went to placing the leftovers in Tupperware and placing them in the refrigerator. Unbeknownst to him, Bucky had re-entered the kitchen having already eaten his dinner and going just to wash his and the boys dishes. He watched on silently as Steve hummed around the kitchen placing things in saran wrap and such.

Bucky cleared his throat so that Steve would know he was there. Turning around quickly, Steve’s cheeks flushed a bright red.

“Bucky,” he squeaked and then in a clearer voice repeated, “Bucky.”

Bucky raised his eyebrow and headed toward the kitchen sink. “So you’re in a good mood. I have to say though I thought you and Tony would still be having dinner in here or moved things up to the bedroom.”

Steve’s cheeks flushed even more darkly at the suggestion. “That’s…that’s not…we wouldn’t do that. Goodness, Buck he’s not even broken up with Ryder yet.”

“He isn’t?” Bucky said turning away from the soapy water. “Huh, okay. Then where is the tiny genius.”

“You know Tony doesn’t like that particular nickname,” Steve noted as he leaned back against the counter with crossed arms.

“I know,” Bucky said cheekily. “But seriously where is the resident genius, seeing as though he isn’t here with you right now?”

“I mean Tony definitely would rather be here than with Ryder, but I understand not wanting to let Ryder down in public. Though I wished that Ryder was out of the picture sooner than later. I mean this night was going to be really good, the start of something I could tell.”

“Yeah, cause you worked oh so hard on that spaghetti. Truly, I see Master Chef in your future,”
Bucky teased. “But did Tony tell you that he’d rather be here than with Ryder?”

Steve nodded and handed his phone over to Bucky. Bucky read the text message and smiled warmly, before handing it back to Steve. Nodding to himself, he returned to cleaning his dishes.

“That’s really good that first he felt comfortable enough saying that to you and then being able to say that to himself. Means that he’s probably been out of that relationship a while without ever realizing it.”

“Yeah and that makes me really excited just knowing that he feels the same way even if he hasn’t articulated that to me just yet. I can be a very patient man,” Steve proclaimed. “I mean I did stay in the ice for 70 years, so if that isn’t patience I don’t know what is.”

Bucky chuckled lightly and agreed. “Well, I’ll let you keep cleaning up. I have a record to beat.”

“Alright Bucky, but please no more than two games. The boys need to get some rest. I’m taking Harley to go see his mom tomorrow morning and Miles had a bedtime.”

“Yes, father,” Bucky waved off. “I’ll make sure we all go to sleep at our bedtime.”

Steve pushed at Bucky’s shoulder as he passed him. When Bucky had left again, Steve turned back to his duty. Making sure that everything was packed away in the refrigerator, he took a step back and bumped into a body.

“Bucky,” he said thinking that Bucky had left something in the kitchen. So turning around he was fully expecting to see his face. But what he wasn’t expecting was seeing Tony’s face looking back at him. “Tony? What…I thought you were with Ryder.”

“I pretended that there was an emergency with Miles,” Tony said sheepishly pushing his body onto the counter. “I don’t know you were just talking about how amazing the spaghetti was and well…I realized that I didn’t want to be there with Ryder.”

“Yeah,” Steve replied growing closer to Tony. “And what is it that you want?”

Tony mistook Steve’s flirtation for an honest question. “Honestly, some spaghetti. Where did it go? Please tell me that it’s not all gone.”

Tony turned wide eyes to Steve and Steve placed a comforting hand on Tony’s shoulder. Tony leaned into the touch and Steve had to force himself to separate in order to take out the packaged food.

“So you used your son as an excuse to come back home,” Steve laughed as he began heating up the food and bringing out two plates.

“Yes, and I have no shame in that matter. Though actually just a little because I don’t want to like jinx Miles’ health because he’s been really good so far,” Tony said biting his lip. “I probably should’ve used a different excuse. Crap I probably just could’ve said I was coming down with something and needed to go home.”

Steve watched as Tony gradually became distressed. Tony leaned against the counter and ran his hands through his hair messing up the perfectly styled do. Tendrils of hair fell softly against Tony’s forehead casting shadows on it. Steve reached out and let his fingers lightly push back a strand of hair.

“Relax, Tony. Miles is going to be fine. If you want we can grab our food and go check on him.”
“Yeah, you’re right. I guess I’m just stressing. Steve I’m starving,” Tony bemoaned. “I’d honestly eat the spaghetti cold at this point.”

“Yeah, I am not letting you get sick from cold spaghetti. Plus it won’t take that long to warm up seeing as though I just put it in the refrigerator not even a few seconds ago. While you wait, you can grab the two bottles of juice.”

“Juice? I’m not five Steve,” Tony mumbled.

“Yeah, but you’ve also been sober for about what five years now? Plus, I know you’ve really been cautious about not drinking since you adopted Miles. Besides alcohol does nothing for me,” Steve shrugged. “And right now fruit punch actually sounds amazing.”

Steve kept talking until he realized that Tony hadn’t replied. By then Tony would usually have interjected with some debate over which juice was better. Steve stopped from putting the spaghetti into the bowl and turned to Tony.

Tony was looking down at his hands with a frown. He chewed at his lip and Steve watched as it nearly drew blood. Walking toward him, Steve took Tony’s hand in his and brought one to tilt his chin upward to look directly into Steve’s eyes.

“Hey, what’s wrong? Is it something I said?” Steve inquired gently.

Tony shook his head, clearing his thoughts. Steve did not like the media smile that broke off on his face.

“Yeah, I’m fine. I don’t know guess I’m just a little tired, but nothing that some food won’t cure. Also fruit punch is definitely a child’s juice. We could have at least gone for grape juice. Oh, or white grape juice that’s the best.”

Tony trailed off on this rambling of better juices, until his phone went off. He looked at it quickly and typed a response, before placing it back into his back pocket. He took the bowl from Steve’s offered hand. Steve didn’t want to pry, but he also wanted to know who had texted him that made his face scrunch up for a few seconds before smoothing out its expression.

“Who was that,” Steve tried offering nonchalantly.

“Oh, that was just Ryder saying that he had been called in for an emergency surgery and won’t be back until early morning.”

“Oh,” Steve simply said. Inside he was screaming and doing the most intricate happy dance his serum-enhanced body could do. “Well, that’s fortunate for us. That means that we can enjoy our spaghetti as was intended.”

The smile that overtook Tony’s face this time made Steve want to enclose Tony in his arms and never let go. Instead he nudged Tony and grabbed the rest of their dinner.

“Let’s go check on Miles, yeah?”

“Lead the way Cap,” Tony entreated.

When they made it to the main floor where Bucky, Miles, and Harley were, the first thing Tony noticed was Miles adorably trying to keep himself awake. His body was slowly losing its upright position only to be jerked back when either Bucky or Harley gave a loud shout to the game. Miles’ eyes would the unfocusedly shoot between the two, before his eyelids fluttered close for a few
“Alright bambino. It’s time for you to go to sleep,” Tony told Miles as he handed Steve his bowl and leaned over to pick Miles up. Tony was eternally grateful for Steve’s coordination and his ability to carry many things at once because he was unsure if he could carry Miles and his dinner plate.

“No,” Miles tiredly complained leaning away from Tony. “Wanna stay.”

“Of course you do, but you’re falling asleep Miles,” Tony whispered. “And you, Harley, bed by ten. Bucky if he goes to sleep later I will know and I will find you.”

Bucky mock saluted before returning his attention back to beating Harley’s car in the game.

“You can watch them play later okay. I promise,” Tony mumbled. Then looking down he realized that Miles had already fallen asleep on his shoulder. Tony tightened his grasp and looked to Steve. “Sorry, I need to put Miles to bed. Follow me?”

Steve nodded as he went to follow Tony, but not before Bucky and Harley were making kissing faces at him. Steve internally hoped Tony wouldn’t turn away and see those faces or just how red Steve’s face had gotten.

When they entered Miles’ room, Tony first went to change Miles into his pajamas, which Miles easily allowed. However, when Tony tried separating himself from Miles’ hold, he found he couldn’t. The small child had wrapped himself completely around his father unwilling to go.

“No, baba,” Miles sleepily muttered. “You hafta stay.”

“Sorry. Sometimes he’s seriously like a panda bear just latching onto me like I’m bamboo, when he’s really tired,” Tony muttered as he sat down on the bed.

“It’s alright we can eat in here, if you don’t mind. At least until Miles’ grasp lessens,” Steve said.

“Yeah, I don’t know how, but this kid just has like a super grip on everything. Thanks again for this Steve I really appreciate it,” Tony replied honestly taking the bowl of spaghetti from Steve.

Steve smiled in response. “Hey, I told you that you’re aboard the Steve wooing ride. I intend to keep my word about it being fun.”

Tony laughed softly into his spaghetti. He shared a soft glance with Steve, before the two returned their focus to their food. Tony had truly meant it, when he said he was starving. Steve at one point had to leave to fix Tony another serving, but he hadn’t minded not one bit. The two ate in comfortable silence. Steve spent some of his time watching as Tony’s eyes blinked rapidly as if trying to will himself awake. He slowly lost his grasp on his bowel and Steve gently eased it out of his hands.

“Steve,” Tony whispered confusedly.

“Shh, go to sleep,” Steve whispered while setting the halfway eaten bowl of spaghetti aside. “I don’t think Miles is letting you go anytime soon, so you might as well just go ahead and sleep here.”

“Don’t want to fall asleep. Missed you and want to talk more,” Tony said around a yawn.

“We can talk in the morning and every day after that, if that’s what you want,” Steve said his heart thrumming in his ear. “Just close your eyes and go to sleep.”
“Don’t want to,” Tony exclaimed letting his mouth form a pout, which Steve desperately wanted to kiss away.

“Come on your eyes are red and you can barely keep them open,” Steve said reaching over Miles sleeping body to close Tony’s eyelids. “Go to sleep.”

“No,” Tony mumbled into his pillowcase. “Not…going…to…sleep,” he said each word punctuated by a yawn.

“Why?” Steve inquired.

“Because if I go to sleep, you’ll disappear,” Tony truthfully answered, sleepiness not allowing him to mask his honesty.

Steve stopped shortly at the confession and felt something in his heart unravel. His fingers ghosted over Tony’s cheek and rested there a few seconds before moving in slow easy circles. Tony’s breath came out in low puffs and his eyes looked up blearily to Steve.

“I won’t disappear. Promise. I’ll stay right here,” Steve said drawing his hand back.

Tony yawned once more and scooted his body so that Miles was tightly sandwiched between himself and Steve. Without warning or announcing his intent, Tony moved the hand that was underneath Miles to grab Steve’s retreating hand. His fingers curled around Steve’s and he squeezed it once before allowing their intertwined hands to rest in the space between them.

“Just to make sure I know when you’re gone,” Tony said as though he had to explain.

He didn’t need to. Steve would have accepted the handhold no explanation needed. Steve squeezed the fingers once more. He allowed himself a few seconds to stare at Tony’s face, before the day’s events caught up to him and he realized that he had become just as tired as Tony looked.

He woke up to two small hands pressing his cheeks together. He slowly opened his eyes to stare into Miles delighted ones. Seeing that Steve was awake, Miles went and turned to do the same to Tony. Fortunately, Steve’s reflexes were on point and he grabbed the child’s body to stop him from waking up Tony.

“Hey, let’s not wake up your baba okay? Let him sleep for a little bit longer, yeah,” he said. He was trying to hold onto Miles’ squirming body, but it was a hard feat to accomplish when one hand was being occupied by Tony’s…not that he was complaining.

“Baba still needs to sleep?” Miles pouted upset at that announcement. “But I’m not sleepy.”

“I know you’re not, but your baba is a busy man and he needs all the rest he can get. Do you think you can be a good boy and let him sleep for just a little longer?”

Miles seemed to think about this for a second.

“We can color, until he wakes up,” Steve said, knowing that he had about another hour until Tony roused from sleep.

“Okay, Mr. Steve,” Miles said as he climbed over Steve’s body to grab coloring books and his crayons. “But you have to color in the lines. Baba doesn’t because he says we shouldn’t re…rect…”

Miles’ eyebrows furrowed trying to remember the exact word his baba had used, when they were coloring. Steve set the boy on his lap as he opened the coloring book, seeing exactly what Tony had
colored and what Mile had colored. Miles had expressed on many occasions how he didn’t like his baba coloring in his book. Steve still didn’t know why Tony refused to color in the lines because he had seen Tony sketch out some designs and those were immaculate.

“Restrict?” Steve questioned.

Miles looked puzzled. “I don’t know. But you color really good Mr. Steve. Can we color the robot?”

“Sure, what color do we want him to be?”

“Ummm, purple?”

“Purple. That’s a really nice color. We’ll have to show Clint when we’re done,” Steve told him. “And what other color. Think we can make him three colors?”

Miles nodded eagerly. “Yes! Purple, blue, and…what do you think Mr. Steve?”

Steve seemed to ponder on this heavily. “This is a mighty serious decision you have placed into my hands Miles. I do not know, if I can decide.”

Miles giggled and reached into his coloring box. “It’s easy just choose one.”

“But how can I? You’ve chosen two perfect colors,” Steve groaned. “This is so hard.”

Miles laughed again. “Okay, okay. I’ll help you.”

Steve made a huge show of breathing out in relief. “Ah, thank you Miles. You’re the best.”

“I know,” he said proudly looking around in his crayon box.

Steve chuckled at the easy acceptance of his compliment and Miles took out different colors and compared them with the two they decided upon. They finally reached the decision that they would do silver. The two began coloring and Miles discussed how much fun he had on his trip. He told him all about LEGOLAND and how Tony fell into a duck pond. He told Steve not to tell Tony he knew, but his Uncle Rhodey had pictures.

Steve set a reminder to ask Rhodey for that physical evidence.

“I like you more than baba’s boyfriend,” Miles whispered. “Julie said he’s gonna be my dad. I don’t want him to be my dad. Can’t you be my dad instead Mr. Steve? I’ll be the bestest son ever, you can ask baba!”

Steve stopped shortly, not really knowing how to respond or if to respond. He loved Miles, he truly did and he was really grateful that Miles had been placed in Tony’s life. He knew that if he truly wanted to pursue Tony and having Miles say he wanted him to be his dad instead, well that got to him.

Not seeing the tears that were quickly filling Steve’s eyes, Miles continued coloring. “Oh, I forgot to tell you Aunt Pepper said that when we go back I can swim with the dolphins again.”

“That sounds fun,” Steve replied. He cleared his voice trying to clear up the emotion that settled thickly in his throat.

“Yeah, maybe next time everyone could come,” Miles said. “I would like that.”

“I would too,” Steve answered.
A few minutes later, while the two were discussing penguins Tony’s eyes blinked open. He stared at
the two and allowed a soft smile to fall onto his face. His fingers that were still intertwined with
Steve’s squeezed slightly once then twice. Steve turned to him, once he felt the movement and
squeezed back. The two shared shy smiles and Tony let Steve’s smile carry him back into slumber.

Two more hours passed and it was nearing the time for Steve to take Harley to his mom. So he set
Miles down and told him he could probably go play with Natasha, until Tony woke up again. Miles
quickly went off to find Natasha. Steve made sure to let FRIDAY alert him, when Miles made it to
Natasha. A few minutes later he got the confirmation.

Leaving Tony like this was hard. He didn’t want to leave, especially with the warmth he was
receiving. He felt like it was his anchor, grounding him. If there was no visit today, he would have
been perfectly content to stay there with Tony all day. Alas that was not the case.

So rather slowly he eased his hand out of Tony’s that had grown lax with sleep. Tony mumbled into
his pillow and turned to see Steve who was standing up. His eyes immediately began to close off and
Steve leant down.

“I’m just going to take Harley to visit his mom. Don’t worry, I’ll be back before you know it,” Steve
whispered smoothing out the worry lines in Tony’s forehead.”

“I wasn’t worried,” Tony muttered. “Go. I know he’s probably waiting at the front door for you.”

“See you when I get back,” Steve said.

Tony mumbled again and drew further into the covers. Steve left the room warm and happy knowing
he had something to look forward to, once he returned.

Harley and Steve arrived at the hospital just as visiting hours were starting. Immediately, the lady at
the front desk greeted them. Smiling at the two she held out the forms for them to sign and pointed
them to the waiting room. Steve followed her direction, but allowed Harley to be led to his mom’s
room. While waiting for Harley to finish up visiting his mom, he grabbed a magazine and begin to
flip through it. Finding nothing worth his interest, he placed the magazine down and settled on
observing the people in the waiting room.

All of them had varying levels of expressions on their faces, depending on the reason they were there
in the waiting room. Steve prayed that he never had the expression of this one particular man sitting
opposite of him. His eyes were red and looked dull in expression. Tense lines creased in his forehead
and his lips were pursed slightly together.

There was something haunting about his expression and something that screamed loss. Steve
wondered briefly if he should be the one to reach out and offer some amount of comfort, seeing as
though no one else was around him. He figured it ought to be lonely waiting to hear good news or
bad news by oneself.

Just as he was getting up to approach the man, a doctor came to the man and led him away. Steve
silently hoped that the doctor would be offering good news. Struggling to lose sight of the man’s
face, Steve tried picking up the magazine. Maybe the details of whether Jennifer was back on the
market or not.

He didn’t have to keep his thoughts of mindless celebrity gossip much longer. Harley went toward
him and motioned for him to stand up. Steve walked to him.
“Mom says she needs to talk to you,” Harley shrugged. “Don’t know what for, but guess I’ll sit here and wait.”

“Okay, just stay here then and don’t talk to strangers,” Steve told him, before walking toward Bekah’s room. When he arrived, Bekah was sitting up in her bed a tired, yet restful smile lighting up her pale features.

“Hey, Mrs. Keener.”

“Steve, how many times must I tell you to call me Bekah? Surely, you don’t want to upset a patient,” Bekah addressed. “Now sit down you’re making my neck hurt having to look up at you. Goodness, just built like a tree. Trust me, if I weren’t married…”

Steve smiled at her and chose to sit in the chair closest to his bed. Harley must have pulled it so it was directly beside his mom, but Steve chose to create a little distance for some breathing room.

“Bekah,” Steve said knowing full well he would revert back to calling her Mrs. Keener, even unconsciously. “How are you doing?”

A soft smile lit her features as she toyed with the blanket resting on her lap. “I’m doing much better. Everything that Tony has done for me has been so beneficial that I may leave here healthier than I’ve ever been.”

Steve reached out to place his hand atop of hers, giving it a squeeze before placing it back onto his lap. “That’s truly great Bekah. I know Harley will be truly excited to have you back home.”

Then as if a dark shadow had come into her room, Bekah turned her face away. “Actually, that is what I wanted you to come in here for. As you know, when I got out of high school I went straight to the army. It was the proudest moment of my life. I felt like I had a purpose, that I was doing something far greater than what could be conceived. You understand that right?”

Steve nodded.

Bekah continued. “I spent three years in the army. Then I got pregnant and when Harley was born that too became the greatest moment of my life. Raising Harley became the main goal in my life, the only thing that mattered to me besides well you know,” she trailed off, knowing that Steve at least knew a little bit of her struggle with drugs.

“I got addicted because it felt like the only way to get over what I saw was to be high. Everything that I saw down there it was a lot,” she laughed dryly. “But I don’t regret it and I could have stayed longer, if I hadn’t have had Harley when I did…I think I just might have. And I know I can’t really go back to the army right now, but I still want to make an impact, while I can. I’m still only 34.”

“And you can. There’s a lot of things you can do Bekah. When you get discharged, I’m sure that you-”

“I already know what I want to do,” Bekah said. “I always wanted to see an impact on a global scale. The army did that for me. So when I am discharged I am applying to be in the Peace Corps.”

Steve frowned. “I don’t understand…you would be leaving Harley? Bekah you can’t honestly think that this is a great idea. The kid’s finally getting excited about you coming back home to him.”

Bekah sniffed and wiped at her nose that was beginning to run. “I know and that’s what makes this so hard. I…Steve I love my kid unconditionally. There is nothing that I wouldn’t do for my children. But at the end of the day, when I leave this hospital and go home…I’m going to feel empty.”
“I wasn’t made to be someone who just folded laundry and took after the household. I mean there’s nothing wrong with that. My mother is a stay-at-home mom. But I wasn’t built that way. And when I think of what I want to do there’s nothing else in my vision besides this.”

Steve shook his head, still trying to understand what Bekah was saying. “Yes, I understand wanting to make a difference globally, but you can do that here close to your children.”

“Steve, I didn’t tell you so that you could persuade me to change my mind,” Bekah explained. “My decision is set. I’m applying and if accepted I have about three weeks before I leave.”

“This is something that your heart truly desires,” Steve inquired. “Something that without it you would feel lost?”

Bekah nodded. “Yes, I want to directly help. We get visits and I’ll make sure to keep in contact with my son. But I have to do this.”

Steve nodded his head. “I truly hope you know what you’re doing.”

“I do,” Bekah answered. “But that means I have a huge favor to ask you.”

“Okay.”

Bekah fumbled with her blanket. Her eyes would shoot toward Steve’s then look back at her hands. Taking a few moments to herself, she finally addressed Steve.

“I need you to take care of Harley, if I am accepted into the Peace Corps. I would leave him with my husband, but…I just think that he would personally prefer being in your care. Every time he comes to visit me, he always tells me about how cool you are despite being a Uno cheater,” Bekah teased.

Steve lost the sentiment of the tease, instead choosing to open his mouth in shock. He blinked his eyes a few times confused as to why on earth Bekah was going to entrust Harley into his care. Sure, he loved having the kid around, but he wasn’t sure if he had the necessary skills to be a full on guardian.

“Bekah I’m not sure-”

“Plus I am just so tired of having him bounced around back and forth. He also says he enjoys Midtown High School. I think he’d be terribly upset if he had to leave the friends he’s made there. So Steve just please consider it. Like I said I still have to wait to be discharged and see if they even accept my application.”

Steve chewed on the inside of his cheek and consider this.

“And maybe it’s unconventional me asking you like this, but I can’t live with myself knowing that the only thing my son will remember me by our trips to the hospital. I want to go out and do something that he can be proud about. And I’ll rest easier knowing that he has someone like you watching over him, while I am away.”

“Okay,” Steve finally told her.

“Okay?” Bekah questioned.

“Okay, I’ll take on guardianship while you are away. I truly hope you know what you are doing,” Steve implored, waiting for any sign of hesitation. Not seeing one ounce of hesitance, he nodded. “I’m sure you will be the one to inform him.”
“Yes, not today. But soon,” Bekah smiled. “Thanks for making my heart feel a little more at ease Steve.”

Steve smiled warmly at her. “You’re welcome.”

“Now send my son back up to me please. I bet he’s wondering what we’re up here talking about and my son is awfully curious.” Bekah laughed.

“Indeed he is,” Steve said agreeing with her as he stood up. “Have a good day Mrs. Keener.”

Bekah rolled her eyes and playfully swatted at Steve’s stomach. “Oh and we were doing so well.”

Steve laughed as he exited the room. On his way back, he bumped into Harley who was waiting by the candy machine. Harley jumped at his presence and smiled sheepishly at him.

“Were you eavesdropping?” Steve questioned, hoping that for once Harley’s curious nature didn’t lead him to investigate.

“No,” Harley answered back. “I just got bored and decided to wander around. Then I got hungry so here I am. But speaking of eavesdropping what were you and mom talking about? You were in there for an awful long time.”

“Oh, nothing,” Steve said not willing to lie to Harley. “But she wants you back in her room. I think we have another hour or so of visiting, so go.”

Harley’s mouth widened into a smile and he sprint toward his mom’s room. Steve watched as he entered Bekah’s room. When the door closed behind him, Steve turned away and let himself walk through the hallways. For a few moments he was alone with his thoughts and let the reality of what Bekah was asking to completely settle on him.

Unfortunately, he could not settle on the implications of this extended guardianship position as his eyes focused on a familiar face standing near the front desk. He widened his strides and walked to the figure.

“Ryder, I didn’t know that you worked at this hospital,” Steve said easily, trying to force down an instinctual frown he had for every time he saw Ryder. “I thought Tony said you worked at St. Edward’s hospital.”

Ryder turned slowly to him, excusing himself from talking to the lady at the front desk. “I do. However, every now and then I’ll have to come in and give my expertise. The hospital board wanted me to give a demonstration this morning to a couple of residents. What are you doing here?”

Ryder grabbed a pen from the flower adorned bowl and began to sign some papers. Steve tried looking to see what was on the papers he was signing, but after a deliberate covering of the papers by Ryder’s hand Steve went to look at Ryder instead.

“I’m here letting Harley visit his mom,” Steve said. He didn’t want to indulge Ryder with too much more information.

“Oh, right of course. I forgot that Tony used to take him. Well that is awfully kind of you Rogers. Look I am heading out in about thirty minutes. How about we save some gas and just ride back together, since we’re all heading back to the same place,” Ryder offered smiling easily.

Steve held back a grimace. There was something in that smile that was distrusting. Steve supposed it had to do more with him just genuinely not liking the guy Tony was presently dating…and soon to
be breaking up with.

“Sure,” Steve said.

“Good. Hold on just a minute,” Ryder stated, holding up his index finger. He motioned to a woman in blue scrubs. She came closer to him and gave him a friendly kiss on the cheek. “Did they get Carl up to CT yet?”

The woman nodded her hand, placing her chart on the desk. “Yes, they did. Though I still don’t think that he needs a CT. I’m pretty sure it’s just a routine headache.”

“Never can be too sure,” Ryder addressed worriedly. “I would rather check to make sure everything is okay, then him blood hemorrhaging and dying.”

The woman’s face paled greatly. “Of course,” she said. Then as if realizing Steve was there, she turned toward him and held her hand out to shake. “Hi, I’m the head nurse, Miriam,” she greeted warmly shaking Steve’s hand.

“Steve. Nice to meet you,” he greeted in response.

“How did you meet this old rascal,” Miriam teased.

“He’s Tony’s boyfriend,” he said managing not to wince at admitting that. He really should be nominated for an acting award for not following the statement with “But not for long.”

“Oh, yes Tony. You two are still going strong. I am glad to hear of that,” Miriam said delightedly. “Let me tell you Tony has a good one of his hand. I owe my whole life to this man right here. He saved me and my sister. I’m not sure I would have been in this field, if it weren’t for him.”

“Oh, Miriam please stop. I’m sure Steve doesn’t want to hear all that,” Ryder whispered abashedly, averting his eyes back to the document he was signing.

“I don’t,” Steve bit out, before he was even able to

Miriam stopped shortly, eyes blinking owlishly. “Oh, okay. Well, I need to get back. But it was good seeing you again Ryder. We’ll be catching up soon, right?”

Ryder grinned. “Always. Have a good day.”

“You too. Bye Steve.”

“Just let me check that everything is good to go. Then you can get Harley and we can leave,” Ryder said. “Meet you two both at the front desk say at a quarter till ten.”

“Sure.”

Steve went to go sit back in the waiting room and scanned through a few more magazines. Finally, Harley came back into the waiting room and motioned that he was ready to go.

“Oh, we can’t leave yet. We’re waiting for Ryder,” Steve said putting down the magazine.

“Ryder? What’s he doing here? Plus, I don’t think I want to ride with anyone who Miles calls a Mr-”

“I thought we were meeting up at the front desk, but that’s okay. I ended a bit earlier so let’s leave now. Perhaps we can even still catch breakfast,” Ryder cutting Harley off and throwing an arm around Harley. “I have a car waiting for us outside, so we can go now.”
Harley tossed his arm off of him and rolled his eyes. Steve allowed himself a momentary pleased
grin. Ryder shrugged and began leading them outside, trying to feel the conversation with idle
chatter. Neither Harley nor Steve felt like truly speaking with Ryder, but Steve figured he couldn’t be
rude. It wasn’t right for him to be mean to someone just because he was currently with Tony. So
Steve tried pushing aside the feelings of wanting to silence Ryder out. But he couldn’t say he wasn’t
excited, when they were finally back in the tower. Harley quickly went to the kitchen to grab a bowl
of cereal and Steve wasn’t too far behind him.

Almost everyone was gathered in the kitchen eating breakfast, except for Tony.

“I’m thirsty,” Miles said as Steve came upon him.

Before Steve was even able to hand Miles a cup of apple juice, Ryder had handed Miles a cup of his
own. Miles looked warily at the cup, but deciding that he was thirsty he accepted it.

Bucky who had been talking to Natasha at the time, tilted his head to the side. His nose flared twice
before nearly gliding over to Miles to snatch the boy up from his seat, thus leaving the cup of juice in
Ryder’s hand.

“Mr. Bucky no,” Miles whined, arms stretched wide to the cup Ryder was holding out. Miles tried
climbing out of Bucky’s grasp, but Bucky’s hold only tightened. He passed the small child over to
Natasha.

“You tried giving him orange juice,” Bucky said.

Natasha slowly and dangerously turned her body to Ryder’s. “You tried giving Miles orange juice?”

Ryder laughed and sat down in his seat. He tilted the cup back and drank its contents, before
replying. “I hardly see the problem here. The boy said he was thirsty and I was giving him something
to drink.”

“He’s allergic to oranges,” Bruce’s soft voice said.

Bruce’s presence was so silent that Steve had even forgotten that he was still in the kitchen. Steve
went to the refrigerator like intended and grabbed some apple juice and poured it into a cup, which
he gave to Miles.

“Oh,” was all Ryder said.

“Oh?” Natasha grit. “You don’t just say oh. How could you not know Miles is allergic to oranges?
He has been here for nearly half a year and I’m pretty sure Tony has everything that Miles can and
cannot eat posted onto every surface of the kitchen.”

Ryder’s eyes looked around the kitchen and settled on a list of Miles’ allergies. “My apologies. I
hadn’t known. Next time I will know better.” He stood up and went to ruffle Miles’ hair. “Sorry little
man.”

“Where’s Tony?” Ryder questioned.

“He’s in his lab,” Natasha stated, eyes still narrowed at him.

“Well, I am going to leave you all here and go visit my man,” Ryder announced. “Oh, but before I
leave I want to give you these invitations for a party this Saturday. Now it’s a surprise party, so
please do your best not to spoil the event for Tony. It is truly going to be special.”
Ryder reached into his briefcase and pulled out a party invite. “I figured, since you all live together you wouldn’t need multiple invites. I will give you further details as the day approaches. If you have any more questions, just let me know.”

Ryder handed the party invite to Steve, picked up his briefcase, and left the kitchen.

“What does he have planned?” Steve asked unsurely as he looked at the party invite in his hand. “It’s not Tony’s birthday, so it can’t be that.”

Natasha stared at hers and looked at Steve unknowingly. “I don’t know.”

“Guess, we’ll find out yeah,” Bruce said, whose arms were now full of an energetic child taking pieces of fruit out of his bowl.

“Yeah, guess we will,” Steve muttered to himself.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know that Bekah’s decision may not be realistic, so I'm sorry, but that's how I wanted that situation to pan out. But hey she's on a healthy road to recovery and making an impact!

Remember that the expose will happen in either Ch. 19 or Ch. 20 so please prepare yourselves. You have been warned lol.

Thanks again to everyone who commented, gave a kudo, and left a bookmark. You all continue to make my day :)
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

I may not be able to update next Saturday *tears* because I'll be traveling back home for break and then my week is just busy. So next update might come 3/17 or 3/18 depending on when my film project finishes wrapping up on set for that day.

I would just like to say thank you all who are commenting your words mean everything to me. There is simply nothing I can truly explain to how much I appreciate your words and am grateful. Even when you may offer critics they are done in such a kind and respectable manner and I just feel so blessed to have y'all as readers. To everyone who gave a kudo thank you so much. My heart feels that love and it brightens my day to know you all are enjoying it. To those who have bookmarked thank you for wanting this story to be a presence in your reading enjoyment.

So in honor of all of you, I am giving you all what you deserve and have been (would patiently even be the right word lol) waiting for "The Reveal."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony didn’t know how he found himself here. He truly didn’t know how in the world he was at his current position. No, in fact he knows exactly how he got into this position. It’s because the world genuinely had it out for him. Seriously, out of all the places in the world he never imagined he would be here.

“Mr. Stark,” a gravelly voice interrupted Tony’s train of thought.

Immediately, Tony turned his attention back to Principal Davis. At the time Principal Davis was trying to serve as a mediator between Harley, Peter, and Flash. Tony had been surprised, when he had received a call from May asking if he can go into this meeting seeing as though she couldn’t pull herself away from work at the time. So Tony had agreed. He set a reminder to ask why on earth May didn’t give him a brief explanation that this meeting was not a simple catch up on Peter’s grades.

He first caught on to that when he saw the split lip that Peter was sporting and the bruise beginning to blossom on Harley’s chin. Flash meanwhile had his shirt torn and a small cut above his eye. Harley straightened his shoulders defiantly and Peter seemed to shrink in on himself as his eyes caught on Tony’s.

Miles didn’t help the situation as he quickly slid his hand out of Tony’s and ran to Peter. Tony was sure that for Miles this was just an early trip to see two of his favorite people. Peter smiled briefly at Miles, shifting to place him on his lap.

Tony dug out his phone and handed it to Peter who then gave it to Miles. Tony sat in the chair beside Harley and nodded his head as Mrs. Thompson who was cooing over her son. Flash seemed to preen at the attention and Tony didn’t mistake the glint of mischief in that kids’ eyes.

“Mr. Stark thank you for joining us,” Principal Davis.

“Sure. Mind telling me exactly what I am joining you all here for?” he said toward Principal Davis,
but focusing his attention on his two teenagers.

Harley shifted under the serious gaze directed at him and turned to explain. “Honestly, Mr. Stark I’m not even sure why we are here. Flash and I just got into a little scuffle and Pete here tried helping out. Nothing really worth noting.”

“Is that right Peter?” Tony implored shifting his gaze to

“Yes, I mean I saw Flash cornering Harley and so you know I stepped in. It didn’t really escalate above a few shoving. No one got hurt,” Peter explained.

“What? I object to this accusation,” Flash interrupted. “Do you see a person such as myself trying to pick on a freshman?”

Peter levelled him with a cool glare.

Mrs. Thompson soothed the wrinkles in her dress, before addressing Principal Davis. “Principal Davis I am sure my son is not to blame for this little skirmish. I have raised him to be a respectable young man. Now Principal Davis I am certain that you and I can reach the conclusion that Peter and Harley are not quite respectable. Although they can’t be to blame, their home lives are not quite as structured as ours.”

Mrs. Thompson sent a sympathetic glare to the two. “I mean if my family was like theirs I am certain that I would have to act out in some way as well.”

Harley’s eyes were brimming with anger as he tightened his fingers on the armrest. Peter’s eyes had glazed over briefly at the statement of having a broken home, no doubt going back to the unfortunate events of his parents’ and his Uncle Ben’s deaths.

Tony felt a deep sense of discontent settle thickly in his throat. He tried reigning in that liquid hot anger, so that his words would come out literate and not verging spite.

“Now wait just a moment,” Tony began to argue. “You will not regard Peter and Harley as though they are two teenagers with discipline problems. I will not allow them to participate in that narrative. Also how do you feel as a grown adult talking badly about some kids? You do not see myself nor Principal Davis engaging with that rhetoric do you?”

Mrs. Thompson shrugged. “Of course you would think that I am talking negatively. I am sorry if I touched a sensitive topic for you seeing as though you are the brand image of the effects of a broken family. Perhaps that is why these two children are acting out, they no doubt know of how you grew up within your family. Maybe they’re taking after their mentor.”

Peter cut his eyes to the woman and bit his lip so as to not say anything disrespectful. He found it dryly amusing she was saying that he and Harley were not quite respectable, while she was the least respectable in this room. Peter waited for Tony to defend himself, but he didn’t. If possible Tony seemed to take the accusation as truth. Now that Peter was not going to allow himself to be silent on.

“You are not being fairly generous Mrs. Thompson,” Peter began. “Mr. Stark has done everything to ensure that we have great values. Sure, we may have pieces of our family missing, but the great thing is that we are able to build ours. Mr. Stark has helped give us our home and has taken care of everything that I could ever need. It is unfortunate that you are not able to understand that. But please do refrain from speaking badly about a person you do not know.”

Tony was completely glued to his seat. His heart was caught in his throat and he felt a burning in his eyes. Blinking quickly, he turned to Principal Davis. Principal Davis who had remained silent for
most of this meeting finally chose to speak up.

“This does seem to be a simple disagreement and no one was seriously harmed. However, you do understand that I have to hold these meetings. Now we will be having some issues resolve meeting to work through this problem between the boys. During the study hall period all three of you will go to the school counselor to talk and she will give me progress. Once you have satisfied those requirements, you will be free.”

All three boys voiced their disagreement over this arrangement, but was promptly silence by Principal Davis clearing his throat.

“This is not up for discussion. Midtown High does not condone this behavior and to be frank I am letting you off easy with no suspension,” Principal Davis admitted.

Mrs. Thompson huffed annoyed and began to grab her things. “Come on Flash. You and I can go meet your dad for lunch. Principal Davis. Mr. Stark.” She nodded briefly to them and began to leave his office.

“Parker,” Flash hissed as he bumped into Peter.

“Oh! Come on did you not just see that,” Peter shouted at Principal Davis.

Principal Davis leaned forward and rested his elbows on his desk. “Yes, and that is what counseling will be provided for.”

Seeing Harley about to argue this, he motioned for them to get ready to leave. “Alright guys let’s leave Principal Davis to his day.”

Harley and Peter mumbled words under their breath, but followed Tony outside into the hallway. Tony turned toward them and looked at the clock in the hallway. It was only ten in the morning. He seriously wondered how they could get into trouble merely two hours into school.

“So have fun at class. Steve should be done with his meeting later, so he’ll probably pick you up,” he said getting ready to turn around, but was stopped by Harley calling out to him.

“Can we just go home early?” Harley bemoaned. “Like you’re already here.”

Peter looked back earnestly to him. “I don’t have any more tests and I’m pretty much free.”

“Pretty much free?” Tony questioned raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah, gym doesn’t count. Plus we got a new gym teacher and everyone says he’s the worst,” Peter stated. “So can we please leave early?”

“Call your aunt and see if she doesn’t mind me taking you home early.” Tony relented and Peter quickly dug out his phone to call his aunt. “And you had better turned in all of your assignments.”

Harley bounced excitedly on his feet and nodded. He never got what was the excitement over leaving school early because he always wanted to stay there longer. However, he also had a reason for not really wanting to go home. When Peter turned back giving a thumbs up, Tony grinned.

“Alright let’s go get your things then,” Tony said.

Miles was still placed on Peter’s hip and they decided to go to Peter’s class first. Peter entered the classroom and quickly made his way to his desk. Ned looked on with jealousy.
“Aww you get to leave early and with Mr. Stark. So cool,” he whispered as he handed Peter his backpack.

“The only cool thing about you,” Michelle dryly said leaning forward on her elbows. “Since you’re going home can I have your lunch?”

“You say that as though you haven’t already taken it,” Peter said motioning to his lunch sticking out of Michelle’s bag.

Michelle smiled cheekily. “You know me so well.”

“That I do,” Peter whispered to himself. “See you guys later.”

He exited the classroom amidst whispers of them talking about Tony. Even their professor had tried discreetly getting a view of Tony. Tony poked his head in and waved, before closing the door behind them.

“You know that’s all they’re going to be talking about for the rest of the class,” Peter told him throwing his backpack over his shoulder.

“I mean I am a celebrity figure Peter. It all comes with the territory,” said Tony ruffling Peter’s hair.

The three of them then left to go to Harley’s classroom. Harley silently entered the classroom and said goodbye to neither his classmates nor his teacher. However, that didn’t stop them from excitedly telling Harley they would see him on Monday.

Tony checked both of them out of school and met Happy outside the front entrance. Happy smiled jokingly at Tony as he held the door open for them.

“Weren’t you the one telling me you wouldn’t be tricked into signing them out of school early?” Happy questioned seeming thoroughly amused at the two new additions.

Tony waved him off. “Yeah, yeah.”

Happy laughed all his way to the driver’s seat and continuously kept joking about this on the way to the tower. When they arrived, Happy dropped them off. The four of them then travelled onto the main floor stopping by the kitchen since it was lunch time. Tony pulled out stuff to make sandwiches and went to work on individually preparing them. After he was done making their lunches he pushed it in front of them.

“Lunch is served. Now you two are going to babysit Miles while I go to the lab,” Tony instructed. “Also make sure your homework is finished.”

“How long are you going to be in the lab?” Peter questioned his mouth already full with a bite of his sandwich. “Because I know you have no concept of time.”

“Hilarious Peter. I do have a concept of time. If you think, I’m in there too long just grab me,” Tony explained. “Or have FRIDAY alert me.”

Pleased with Tony’s suggestion, Peter nodded. Tony looked at the three of them, before heading down to his lab.

With Tony gone, Peter and Harley went to get their homework done early. Peter had laid out some alphabet worksheets for Miles. Miles was currently concentrating on making sure he was able to correctly copy the letter Q.
Harley looked up at waved his pencil in front of Peter. Peter looked up and took his headphones out. “Yeah?”

“How do you know if numerical summary of data is resistant?” Harley furrowed his eyebrows and looked to the math sheet before him.

“It’s resistant if extreme values, basically very small or large values, relative to the data do not affects its value substantially,” Peter easily explained.

Harley scrunched up his face and groaned. Peter winced and tried giving him an example, though it did not help Harley at all. Peter scanned Harley’s face and resolved that he wasn’t really having trouble with that particular math problem at all.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

Harley shrugged. “Nothing…I mean look you’ve known Mr. Stark long right?”

“Yeah.”

“So how do you handle just not going off on everybody who speaks badly about him? And like Peter they try to find everything no matter how trivial. Even in the meeting Flash’s mom didn’t hesitate to talk badly about him. Also Midtown does know that a great amount of their donations come from Mr. Stark, right?”

Peter nodded in understanding. “Is that what your fight with Flash was about? I mean I just jumped in, but you never really told me what happened.”

Harley clenched his jaw as though remembering did him a great pain. “Flash was just being an ass. Basically he was saying how Mr. Stark wasn’t a genius and it was only through his dad’s legacy that he was able to build something. Then he said if it weren’t for Ryder, Tony would still be seen as a…” he broke off not wanting to say the word that Flash had said.

“You know that’s not true,” Peter said worried that some of the kids there were going to turn Harley against Tony.

“Of course not,” Harley said as if Peter had offended him. “And I told him so, but then he kept talking and well I pushed him.”

“Well, that was an interesting way to enter the Mr. Stark Defense Squad,” Peter laughed.

“The what?”

“Mr. Stark Defense Squad we have t-shirts and everything. Steve was the president, but well with everything that happened I think he was demoted seeing as though he went against our first rule which is to never hurt Tony,” Peter replied.

Harley looked at him solemnly. “I want to be a part of this.”

Peter raised his hand for Harley to shake. “Welcome.”

The two then continued talking about finding ways to prove that Tony was one of the greatest humans that ever existed. They were going to do their own little outside work. The two were so involved in discussing their plans that they hadn’t realized the time passing. Harley went to go use the restroom and Peter placed his earbuds back in his ear.
With Peter listening to his music and focusing on his homework he didn’t realize Ryder coming into the kitchen. Ryder settled his briefcase softly by the table and looked at the two of them. Peter was bouncing his head up and down to the music.

Miles looked up from where he was now connecting the dots on his coloring worksheet. Ryder reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of bubble gum balls. He waved them in the air and held it out to Miles.

“Want some gum?” Ryder questioned opening up the packet.

Miles looked at Peter who was still focused on his sheet and timidly leapt out and went toward the offered snacks. Ryder conveniently poured the orange bubble gum balls into his small hands.

The hair on Peter’s arms stood still and he felt he couldn’t shake this weird feeling. So looking around he noticed that Miles had left his seat and took out his earphones to ask where he was going. When he looked up to see Miles about to chew a piece of orange gum, he quickly ran over and grabbed Miles.

“Dude Miles can’t eat anything that’s orange flavored. Also those bubble gum drops are choking hazards,” Peter said.

Ryder’s eyes widened fractionally. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Oh, it’s fine,” Peter said though wanting to argue that it really wasn’t. “Just know he can’t eat oranges or anything hard and spherical. It’s easy for them to accidentally choke on things like that. I can write down all the things he can’t eat, if that would make things easier for you? I know Tony used to have those things written on the refrigerator, but it looks like someone removed it. Probably because everyone’s had it memorized by now.”

Peter steeled Ryder with a heavy gaze, not bringing notice to Harley walking behind him. “Is there a problem?” Harley implored looking at the tension resting heavy on Peter’s shoulders.

“Yeah, everything’s good. Look please tell Tony I won’t see him until tomorrow. I have a double shift tonight,” Ryder said grabbing his bags. “You both enjoy the rest of your day.”

“I really don’t like him,” Peter said throwing away the orange candies and handing Miles some sliced apples instead.

“Preaching to the choir,” Harley answered back.

After hours of homework both resolved to go to the main floor and just relax. They were soon joined by Natasha, Clint, and Bruce. All of them wanted to know why they were home so early and Harley quickly filled them in. Natasha narrowed her eyes, but said nothing. Instead choosing to leave the room for about an hour. When she returned she was pulling an agitated Tony and in his arms was a red and gold journal.

Peter’s eyes shone as he looked at the red and gold journal in Tony’s hands. It seemed like today was as good a day of any to give it to him. Tony fell into the couch grumbling about how they never want him to actually get any work done, but want him to come and like be social.

Clint rolled his eyes and threw his feet onto Tony’s lap. Tony stared Clint down, but didn’t make any attempt to remove Clint’s cold feet. Peter smiled at the interaction, though small it was a move toward the teasing sibling relationship the two had before everything with the Accords went down.

Peter hadn’t seen the two interact until everything went down, so he really had nothing to compare
to. However, Natasha would sometimes find herself reflecting on the closeness everyone else shared before things went down. Then she would quickly bring herself back and pretend as though she hadn’t said anything aloud to Peter.

Then when Steve and Bucky came back from wherever they were he observed Steve’s eyes brighten as he sat in front of where Tony was sitting. Bucky sat beside Steve and looked up as Tony poked Bucky’s arms talking about all the new designs he was working on, while his hand ran through Steve’s hair.

Peter stared as Steve fell into the touch and any remaining tension was lost. Bucky himself had lost the coldness around his eyes as he listened to Tony’s ramblings, with little input from Bruce about how he couldn’t put donut makers in Bucky’s arm.

Bucky sent a pleading look to Bruce as if knowing Bruce’s doubt would only encourage Tony to prove him wrong and Bucky would be the one to suffer. Natasha meanwhile was paying attention to the conversations filtering in the room, even while she was helping Miles and Harley make a Lego replica of the Stark Tower.

This…this is what Peter imagined when he became Spiderman. He wanted the chance to expand his family. And looking at Tony absentmindedly run his fingers through Steve’s hair, watching Bucky debate with Tony about how he didn’t need lasers in his new arm, laughing at Bruce turn bright red as Harley tried setting up a dating profile for him…was simply all he ever dreamed of.

He didn’t just want to belong to a superhero group. He wanted to belong to this family and seeing them able to be together after this long and troubling year was nice.

Peter leaned back and allowed his eyes to close with the thought that nothing would ever break them apart again and heaven have mercy on whoever tried.

Tony wasn’t sure what to expect, after Ryder told him he had made some dinner reservations on Saturday. He had told him he was merely making up for the interruption of Tony having to leave their date early. At first Tony had wanted to decline the offer in means of separating from Ryder. He had intended on breaking up with him, but it seemed every single time Tony started with, “We need to…” Ryder interrupted saying he needed to go into a shift or some emergency surgery.

He had tried to do the same things for tonight, but he figured he could get a free dinner out of this and then break up with Ryder. He wanted to break up with Ryder ever since he came back. He hadn’t forgotten what had happened only a little over a month ago. He still had a fading hand shaped bruise left on his hipbone.

That month also gave him time to think about his relationship with Ryder. It was through those self-reflections that he realized that his time with Ryder was spent in pain more often than not. Toward the beginning of the relationship, Tony had been happy to have someone to not make him feel so alone. Then he realized that even with Ryder he felt alone.

He desired for someone to want and need him. He had that with Ryder. Ryder demonstrated to him that he wanted him and truly needed him because no one else could be with him. Tony knew this for what it was then. He hadn’t told anyone what happened in that unnamed place, but he had told himself what happened wasn’t a dream no matter how many times it had a recurring presence in his nightmares.

He was breaking up with Ryder because he couldn’t take it anymore. He didn’t want to be like that
woman’s brother and end up in some less than desirable situation. He had desired the physical presence of someone that wouldn’t leave, but Tony knew he was better off being alone. Plus he had his son to think about.

He had to be an example for Miles. He didn’t want to become like his mother, who let Howard run over her and allowed Tony to watch on. He didn’t want Ryder to one day direct his anger toward Miles either. That was his greatest fear.

A chill went through his body as he imagined Ryder deflecting his anger onto Miles. The night at the Gala had come the closet and he would be lying if he said he wasn’t reconsidering his relationship at that very moment. No one would dare lay a hand on his son. He would kill them first.

So yes Tony was going to break up with Ryder and he was going to feel so damn good about it.

Ryder turned toward him and grinned broadly. Tony returned the smile rather a bit shaky. Ryder didn’t seem to notice. When they arrived at this hotel venue, Ryder opened his door then quickly walked over to the side that Tony was on. Tony began to open his own door, but was stopped by Ryder opening it.

Tony was momentarily startled, seeing as though Ryder had stopped opening his door for him nearly two months after they started dating. Tony stepped out and reluctantly took the hand that Ryder offered. There were always cameras around and Tony hadn’t wanted to cause some scandal by simply refusing to hold hands with his boyfriend.

Ryder led him into the hotel venue and directed him to a ballroom. As if knowing of their arrival, the doors opened and in it revealed one of Tony’s greatest nightmares.

Tony loved attending parties. Correction: Tony loved going to parties that he knew about. Ever since Tiberius Stone planned a party on behalf of Tony, which ended up in him having some terrible accounts and a day locked up, Tony hated not knowing about parties. Also he couldn’t control the guest list and restrict it to people he was familiar with and or people who he knew wouldn’t be out to get him.

So all of these new faces and security? Why on earth were there two people stationed at nearly every single wall or exit in the ballroom. Some of the faces he did know like those of the Avengers, Pepper, Rhodes, Leauna and her husband, even Isa had made an appearance, and some people he’s known and liked throughout his life, but the others…he realized them for journalists and others of the like. He turned sharp eyes to Ryder and felt betrayed.

He knew how Tony felt about anyone in this field. He didn’t feel comfortable around him and the amount of people with cameras in there made him extremely nauseated. His eyes settled on Pepper and she seemed just as angry. Her fingers were flying angrily away at her phone no doubt finding a way to get these journalists away from Tony or at least find a way to confiscate their phones, cameras, or any other recording devices for the time being. When he she looked back up, she sent him a sympathetic glance and in turn Tony nodded in thanks.

“Why did you bring them?” Tony said pointing to the journalists. “Also what is this all for? Ryder I would much rather not to be surrounded by…goodness how many people are in here? What are we at, maximum occupancy?”

Ryder placed a warm hand on his lower back and steered Tony further into the room. “So many questions, Tony. I just truly wanted to do something nice for you and seeing as though you like parties I figured I would throw you one.”
“Ryder I don’t like surprises like this,” Tony mumbled under his breath so as the noisy journalists wouldn’t hear him and spin it into something.

“Tony don’t be like that. I try doing something nice and now you want to complain? Look, I don’t want to fight right now. So can we just not do this right now?” Ryder questioned looking down at Tony. “Just have a couple of drinks and you’ll calm down.”

“I don’t drink anymore.”

“I would say otherwise seeing as how I saw you just gulping down the alcohol Miriam gave you,” Ryder said cheekily. “Hey smile!”

Tony’s felt frozen. This was the first time Ryder had referenced back to his time at the unnamed place. The two of them had as if by silent agreement vowed to not talk about it again and so Ryder’s flippant disregard to what happened had Tony feeling shaken up. But he turned toward the camera and flipped his media smile on.

“Thanks Mr. Stark,” the person who couldn’t have been more than 24 said.

Tony nodded and offered a peace sign. “Sure kid. When I see that, you had better got my good side.”

“Oh, every side is your best side,” Ryder said pinching Tony on his bottom and making a huge play of it in front of the person who took their picture. He leaned forward and pressed a kiss on Tony’s temple.

As the photographer walked away, Tony wiped at his temple trying to get rid of the wetness Ryder had left. Tony continued playing up his Stark persona going around with Ryder. He merely only did this to ensure nothing got printed. He had to know that Miles would be seeing everything now and when he got older he at least wanted to start moderating how he was portrayed…though most of it wasn’t his fault how the media smeared his name during his teenager years and the years following his parents’ death.

Yet he knew that if he couldn’t pour his sparkling cider over the next person who asked if he was going to send Miles to a boarding school like he was or whether he and Ryder would be making it down the aisle soon. Tony wanted to throw up as Ryder simply tightened his hold on his waist and said breathlessly and said, “I sure hope so.”

He almost puked when a reporter questioned whether Ryder was getting ready to be a step-dad to Miles. Yeah, that would happen over his dead body.

Finally, he was able to separate himself from Ryder. After hours of walking around the room and introducing himself and answering questions Tony told Ryder he needed to go to the restroom. Instead Tony discreetly went off to a supply closet and went inside of it. He didn’t stop even as the Avengers followed him with their eyes. They had huddled into their own corner and were talking to the people closely associated with Tony such as Pepper, Rhodey, Leauna and her husband, Karen, Isa, and some people that Tony had worked with over the years.

He was allowed a few moments of rest, before he heard the supply closet door open. He almost started to angrily cry at the thought that it would be Ryder telling him he had to go back. He let out a noise of relief, when the brief light from the hallway revealed Steve.

“Close the door,” Tony quickly rushed out. “I don’t want anyone to see me.”

Steve complied to the demand and tried fitting himself into the small supply closet. There wasn’t a
whole lot of room so the two let their legs entangle and Steve had to hunch his shoulders a little to allow for some space in the crowded closet. Steve’s breath ghosted over Tony’s neck and Tony had to resist not to bare his neck, allowing the warm breath to caress his skin. He was thankful for the darkness in the room that disallowed Steve from seeing his cheeks grow warm.

Tony leaned his head back so as to resist the temptation, but this inadvertently caused him to arch his back slightly, his chest briefly meeting with Steve’s. Tony quickly bent back and remained still. If Tony hadn’t seen Steve, he would have assumed he wasn’t there. Despite the sound of breathing, Steve hadn’t moved.

Tony was fine with this. He came in there for the silence anyway. Just as he was getting comfortable in the silence and trying to calm his nerves from the surprise party, Steve reached out and blindly searched for Tony’s hands. He found them placed firmly on the floor and brought them to rest on their entangled legs.

His heart leapt in his chest and he tried reminding himself he wasn’t some young teenager experiencing his first crush. But here he was getting all messed up simply because of a handhold. Steve grew closer to him, his thump repeatedly drawing circles in the skin between Tony’s thumb and index finger.

“You’re shaking,” Steve whispered as if afraid he was breaking the silence that he and Tony had created for themselves.

Tony shrugged, but when he realized Steve couldn’t see the movement he articulated his movement. “Yeah, sometimes I get a little jittery, when I’m in settings like this especially when I didn’t prepare beforehand. I may be good with crowds and media, but that’s because I always get ready to set up this defensive shield. I was setting up a shield for a small dinner not this.”

The stressed sound didn’t ease Steve’s worries. Instead he kept massaging Tony’s hands and Tony was completely content to just stay like this.

“I figured. All of us saw your face, when you came in. Ryder told us about this, but we didn’t want to spoil it for you. We should’ve at least warned you, after we arrived here. I’m sorry,” Steve said his voice deep with apology.

“It’s fine. I get it Ryder tried planning a surprise party you didn’t know it would exactly be like this,” Tony laughed. “But it’s fine. I mean I was hoping to break up with Ryder today, but I guess it’ll just have to wait. Can’t exactly break up with him in front of all of these journalists.”

“Oh, you were,” Steve replied with a large amount of enthusiasm. “I mean I’m sorry that the relationship didn’t end up how you wanted…”

Tony started laughing and scooted his body closer to Steve’s. “Please Steve you don’t need to pretend you aren’t happy I’m breaking up with Ryder.”

“You’re right I’m ecstatic. I’m over the moon. It’ll be truly swell when I can truly court you without the added presence of Ryder,” Steve added.

“Steve your old man is showing,” Tony teased, though inwardly preening at Steve’s enthusiasm. He wasn’t breaking up with Ryder because of Steve, but he did delight in knowing that Steve was just as happy by his decision as Tony was.

“It’s just that I think it’s aces to be able to court my fella,” Steve said and Tony wished for nothing, but to see the mischievous glint that Steve got in his eyes whenever Steve gave back what Tony
“Your fella?” Tony questioned, quirking his eyebrow and feeling slighted that Steve wasn’t able to see his expressions.


“Please stop,” Tony laughed softly.

“Pumpkin? Doll? Daffodil? The apple to my pie? The straw to my berry? The chocolate to my banana?”

“Why Steve! You dirty dog,” Tony said intentionally misinterpreting Steve’s last one.

Steve sputtered and quickly tried to come up with a response. “That’s…Tony that’s not what I meant. I mean like chocolate covered bananas not…”

Tony could just imagine the color rising into Steve’s cheek at the moment. Tony reached out and found contact with Steve’s shoulder and gave it a light shove.

“At ease soldier,” Tony joked. “I’m just joking. But chocolate bananas are also disgusting just so you know. Bananas are the most horrible fruit in the world.”

“No, you’re just not healthy,” Steve said and quickly added, “Coffee is not healthy.”

“Lies,” Tony said. “I don’t know how I feel about you talking badly against my first love.”

“I’ll bring you coffee for as long as you let me even if I think that they’re terrible for you,” Steve said leaning closer to Tony’s space. “But you’ll have to add some fruit and vegetables.”

Tony scrunched his face. “In my coffee? Steve you are crazy if you think I’m going to have vegetable flavored coffee.”

Steve chuckled and Tony let the sound echo in the small space. “Not in your coffee, but a separate meal. Don’t think I don’t see you sliding Miles your extra vegetables.”

Tony made an affronted noise. “I would never do such a thing.”

“Sure you wouldn’t,” Steve said.

The two let the conversation rest for a little, perfectly fine with just being in each other’s company. Tony felt himself slowly falling into sleep with Steve’s hold on his hand. Steve leaned closer and this time Tony could feel Steve’s nose brush his cheek.

“I know you haven’t broken up with Ryder yet, but I really want to kiss you,” Steve muttered under his breath as though ashamed of his admission.

“Seeing as though I’ll be single by end of this night I don’t see a reason why we can’t just get a head start,” Tony replied, suddenly awake. Who knew that Steve offering to kiss him would do him better than a cup of coffee?

Steve waited a moment and Tony really wondered if he would deny himself this until Tony had officially broken up with Ryder. He was ready to argue that kissing him right now wouldn’t be bad in anyway.

However, as Steve’s lips barely touched his he knew he didn’t have to defend his case at all. Tony’s
eyes fluttered shut as Steve pressed closer and his hands went from Tony’s hands to encircling around his waist. Tony easily fell into the hold and guided himself closer to Steve until his body was practically only a hair widths apart.

Steve’s hand rested heavily on Tony’s back and provided a grounding strength. Steve leaned over Tony his tongue sweeping over Tony’s bottom lip. Tony gasped in surprise his mouth falling open at the movement. Steve took this response as a welcome to his advances. The kiss was soft, slow, and adventurous as if mapping out each other.

Tony had never imagined he would be in this position and he would have later to wonder about just how he got here, but right now…right here he just wanted to simply feel and not even think about how Ryder was only a few rooms down from where he was. He wouldn’t allow himself to feel bad about that.

Steve’s teeth nipped teasingly at Tony’s lip and Tony breathed out a laugh. Steve responded in the same way their laughter mingling with one another. They laughed as hands landed on chins or kisses were misplaced on each other’s eyelids. A short giggle reverberated in Tony’s chest and came out softly as Steve found a ticklish spot just at the curve of his hip. Steve trailed his fingers over the spot, teasingly leaving a hot trail on the little bit of exposed skin. Tony shifted lightly so that the ticklish touch would become firmer.

Their laughter soon transformed into breathy gasps as the kiss grew more heated as though the two had been separated for so long and this was finally like coming home.

Tony’s hand rested on the back of Steve’s neck, pulling him closer. Steve broke away from Tony’s lips to begin its descent on Tony’s neck. Tony’s fingers tightened around Steve’s neck and released with each breath against his neck.

Steve’s lips never stayed too long to leave a mark and Tony let out a sigh of disappointment. He wanted Steve to leave a mark, so that when he woke up the next morning he had evidence that this wasn’t a dream. But he knew that going back into the ballroom with hickies surrounded by journalists would be like putting honey in front of bears.

At one surprising brush of his lips against the hollow of Tony’s collarbone, Tony let out a breathy moan and rolled his body closer to Steve’s. At one point Tony had found himself straddling Steve’s waist and leaning over him his own mouth mapping out the points of Steve’s neck. The two continued this play of touch on each other…a call and response. At one rather impressive roll of his hips, Steve fingers tightened on the dip of Tony’s waist and he had to stop himself from bucking into the movement.

The two needed to stop, but neither was willing to voice out that thought. Too many things had separated Tony from being able to do this and he wasn’t going to allow this time to be cut short.

“We…ah we need to stop before this gets out of hand,” Steve said though didn’t loosen his grip on Tony or stop from mouthing openly at Tony’s neck.

“We should?” Tony said as a question, but intending for it to come out as a statement.

Thankfully, neither of them had to make the decision seeing as though in a few seconds later it was made for them.

The door opened and the two quickly broke apart. Steve instinctively pushed his body in front of Tony. Tony looked up and then pushed away, once he saw who it was.
“Natasha! Could you have like given us a warning,” Tony shouted pressing his hand, that wasn’t occupied with holding Steve’s, to his chest. “Like you know my heart condition isn’t that great.”

Natasha looked between the two and slowly smiled. Tony would have been slightly scared, if Natasha hadn’t seemed amused and slightly happy. Natasha cracked the door open a little further and motioned for Tony to stand up. Tony did so and Natasha adjusted his clothing then did the same for Steve.

“ Took you guys long enough. I was starting to wonder, if I needed to start a matchmaking scheme. You two aren’t subtle at all,” Natasha sighed reaching in her purse for her foundation. “Seriously, Steve you couldn’t have waited until we got home for you to jump Tony.”

Tony looked back at her baffled. Steve’s touch didn’t last long enough to leave a…okay know what never mind Steve did go back to a few certain spots on his neck and collarbone. Steve looked at where Natasha was placing the foundation on his neck and Tony watched as his breath quickened and eyes darkened.

Natasha noted this and turned Tony away from here. “ No.”

Steve broke out of his haze and turned embarrassed eyes to Natasha. “Sorry.”

“I’m actually surprised I have some concealer left, seeing as though a certain someone has been stealing mine,” Natasha said raising an eyebrow. “If you wanted to play in my make-up you could have just asked.”

Tony raised his hand in defense. “ I was not playing in your make-up. I just had some events to go to and I didn’t want to bother Pepper anymore about going to get some. So I used yours. I just assumed you knew and you never said anything.”

Natasha put the concealer back into her purse and looked back at the two of them. “Look so I found out what this whole surprise party is for,” Natasha exclaimed crossing her arms tightly across her chest.

“How?” Tony asked.

“I’m a spy,” Natasha stated in a deadpan manner.

“So seeing as though it isn’t my birthday please tell me what this is for,” Tony said brushing his hair back.

Tony discreetly wiped at his lip and tried not staring at Steve’s. By Natasha’s unimpressed glare he knew he was not successful. Tony returned his gaze to Natasha and smiled widely.

“Apparently he thought tonight would be a perfect night to propose. Welcome to your engagement party,” Natasha said.

Tony froze.

“Tony…Tony,” Natasha repeated a little concerned at the reaction.

Tony felt the walls cave in on him. He wanted to propose in public? He didn’t know why he was surprised seeing as how Ryder truly didn’t know anything about him. Natasha placed a hand on his cheek.

“You can say no,” Natasha explained.
Steve looked worried for a second, wondering briefly if Tony was thinking of saying yes.

“Of course I’m saying no Nat,” he quickly said breaking out of his brief panic. “I just…I can’t let him propose in public. Fuck. Do me a favor start spreading the word that everyone needs to leave. Let Pepper handle the journalists. I need to go speak with Ryder in private and tell him that it’s over.”

Natasha looked delighted as can be and Steve looked as if he was moments away from kissing Tony again. Tony would let him.

“Do you want us to stay? I could be nearby,” Steve suggested not really wanting to leave Tony alone. He didn’t exactly know how Ryder would react. It couldn’t be bad, but it wouldn’t hurt to get Tony away if Ryder started yelling at Tony.

“Yeah, we can stay outside and make sure everyone is gone,” Natasha said.

Tony waved off their concern. “No, this may take a while. Just make sure everyone gets home safely and say we’re sorry for having the party leave early. Maybe have Pepper give some excuse she’s good at handling stuff like this. I can’t let him propose.”

Tony raised himself on his toes and pressed a kiss to Steve. “I’ll see you when I get back home?”

Tony questioned hesitantly. Even though they had just shared a kiss, Tony knew all too well how things could change quickly.

Steve nodded a briefly kissed Tony back. “Of course. I’ll wait up for you.”

Tony smiled and nodded both of them, before leaving to go find Ryder.

“Alright come on lover boy let’s empty out this party,” Natasha said linking her arm through Steve’s.

A few hours after they had managed to efficiently end the party with minimum complaint, they were all gathered in the main living area, waiting for Tony to come back. After they had learned the true reason for the party ending, none of them felt comfortable going to sleep until seeing Tony arrive back and seeing how he was holding up after the break-up.

They had taken to watching *27 Dresses* thanks to Clint. Steve couldn’t even follow the plot because every thought he had centered on Tony and what he was going to do once he came back. The corners of his lips tugged upward and he had to tilt his head down from Natasha’s inquisitive gaze. His thoughts were so riddled with Tony and how he wanted to kiss him later that he didn’t notice Peter barreling into the room out of breath, with Harley quickly walking behind him.

Peter’s harsh breathing and sudden appearance caused everyone to turn their direction toward him. Rhodey told FRIDAY to pause the movie. Peter set Miles on the couch beside Steve and opened his mouth.

A string of rushed words came out and there was a silent quiver to them. Harley remained silent, but Steve could see the way his fingers seemed to tremble.

“Hey Pete slow down man,” Rhodey said. “Breathe and tell us what’s wrong.”

Peter tried slowing down his breath. “Mr. Stark he…”

“He’s on his way back in a little bit. He had to talk to Ryder for a bit.”

Harley went as pale as a ghost and seemed to be seconds from passing out. Peter himself had taken
the news and seemed to appear only seconds away from hyperventilating. Steve immediately got out of his seat and rest his hands on their shoulders in hopes of calming them down.

“Peter what’s wrong?”

Peter’s bottom lip trembled and his throat shook with the struggle to breathe easily. “You said he’s with Ryder. Why? Are they just on a date? When is he coming back?”

“He’s breaking up with Ryder. Peter look you need to tell us what is happening right now,” Pepper demanded completely facing Peter.

“Peter,” Harley’s voice trembled with fear.

Steve wasn’t calmed in the least and his eyes darted between the two teenagers. “Peter come on son, what’s wrong.”

Peter seemed to be debating about what to say, until he turned to Miles. His eyes lightened briefly and he walked toward him.

“Miles who is that? Tell them what you told me” Peter said turning on the television to a channel that was discussing the engagement party of Tony Stark and Ryder Deaver. The two entertainment talk show hosts were betting on whether Tony would say yes to the proposal or not, all the while talking about Ryder’s accomplishments, but not once talking about Tony in a good light.

Steve wondered if he could get Pepper to help him with changing the rhetoric around Tony’s image because Tony didn’t deserve this. He got so caught up in his thoughts that he didn’t realize Peter repeating his question to Miles who was looking on angrily at the television.

“Peter what…”

Peter held up a finger.

“Miles who did you say that is?”

Miles looked up to him confused. “That’s Mr. Mean Bad One. I already said that Peter,” Miles exasperatedly said as though he had repeated this on many occasions.

And Steve suddenly realized that he had.

“Captain. Mr. Mean Bad One made baba cry. I don’t like you, but I don’t like when baba cries. Fix it.”

“Mr. Mean Bad One make baba look scared. Mr. Steve. Mr. Steve. Aunt Natasha please. Don’t want baba sad. Help ‘em Mr. Steve.”

Miles had been telling them this whole time.

Without a second’s pause everyone simultaneously stopped breathing. Steve wasn’t Mr. Mean Bad One. His breath stuttered and he immediately reached for his phone to call Tony. It seemed like everyone had the same idea.

“I’m going to call the hotel and see if they know if Tony left yet,” Pepper announced as she walked a few feet away.

Steve began calling Tony and the phone rang for a few seconds, before reaching the voicemail. “Hi, you’ve reached Tony…DUM-E put that down…crap…U…no you can’t eat that…ugh is this still
recording? Pepper I don’t need-”

The voicemail cut off. It seemed Tony hadn’t gotten to correcting his voicemail as Pepper had suggested. He called the phone a few more times and each time the phone reached the voicemail. One time it didn’t even ring, but went straight to voicemail.

“Come on Tony, sweetheart answer the phone. Just answer the phone,” Steve stressed.

Bucky looked at Steve concernedly as Steve tightly grasped his phone. Pepper shook her head as Steve asked if she got news on Tony.

“No, they said they left two hours ago,” Pepper said distressed.

Steve’s heart sank. He didn’t know how bad it was with Ryder, but Miles had once said Mr. Mean Bad One had made Tony cry and Steve’s thoughts were immediately going to the worst things possible. He hoped that his fears weren’t valid.

“Pepper can you take the kids and watch them,” Steve said. “And can you see if any journalists were able to get any information. There has to be someone that stayed behind and might have taken pictures that may be helpful.”

“Of course,” Pepper said taking Miles and placing him on her hip. “Come on boys.”

Harley followed without question, but Peter was slow to follow. “No, I’m not leaving I can help!”

Clint turned to him. “No offense kid, but you’re just an intern. Let us handle this okay. We’ll let you know if there’s anything to know. You can help with Pepper.”

“Mr. Barton I am not just an intern, I’m…” Peter began, but was interrupted by Pepper.

“Just wanting to help, but you can help with me. They’re trained for this,” Pepper said sharing a look with Peter. There was something to her look that Steve couldn’t decipher, but it seemed to make Peter pause.

“You let me know any information that you find,” Peter said reluctantly dragging his feet behind Pepper.

All of them left and Steve turned to the remaining faces. Rhodey stood up from his place on the couch and took out his phone.

“I’ll get in touch with Coulson and Fury let them know what’s happening. See if they can find something on Ryder,” Rhodey exclaimed.

Natasha shook her head. “They won’t. When I was looking into him, he didn’t have anything that was out of the ordinary. Everything seemed on paper to be fine. I got in touch with a couple of people he worked with went through his digital history and nothing.”

“You had suspicions,” Steve growled stepping closer to Natasha. Then he backed down seeing as though first she was Natasha and second they were all in the same boat.

A brief flash of regret passed her eyes, but Natasha refused to waver especially right now. “I did, but not to the point of Ryder being Mr. Mean Bad One. I thought he was cheating or something, but then I found nothing so I dropped it. But still get in touch with them and let them know.”

Rhodey nodded. He went to the kitchen and began to call them. Meanwhile Natasha was pulling up
something on her phone. Clint had grabbed an arrow from somewhere and was now twirling it between his fingers. Bucky was looking for mission commands. Bruce was trying to calm himself down from becoming the Hulk.

Steve…Steve wasn’t quite sure what he was doing. All he knows is that one minute he was watching all of them and the next his eyes blinked out for a second. There was a bright flash of anger that surged in him and fear all at the same time. The two emotions were so powerful that they threatened to overcome him.

Pepper then came into the room with her phone clutched in her hand. “The hotel staff wasn’t employed tonight. Ryder told them he had his own employees that would be able to handle the event. I asked if I could get the information for these employees and they said that they hadn’t received any information. Everything was done through Ryder.”

Pepper let the information sit. “So I’ll see if anyone else knew anything and make some calls. Maybe some guests there knew of them.”

With that Pepper left and Natasha turned to Steve. Motioning him forward, Steve stood beside her.

“FRIDAY can you go through the video footage of tonight’s party on the television?” Natasha questioned. Nothing Steve’s curious glance, she explained. “I always make sure there are means of recording. Granted I only placed some cameras in the ballroom, but each face had to have passed a camera at least one. FRIDAY scan for facial recognition.”

“No facial recognition in the database,” FRIDAY noted with what sounded like a bit of disappointment.

“FRIDAY scan it again,” Clint announced.

FRIDAY scanned the images and Steve’s eyes focused harder on the images as if hoping by some grace he would see a familiar one. And that he did.

“FRIDAY go three images back and pause,” Steve told FRIDAY moving closer to the screen. FRIDAY did as suggested and Steve felt a frown overtake his face at the image.

“Do you know her?” Bucky questioned, suddenly at the back of Steve.

“Ryder introduced me to her as the head nurse at the hospital Harley’s mom is at,” Steve told them. “Miriam.”

“Alright well let’s go find ourselves a head…”

The sound of ringing stopped Clint’s statement. Soon all of them silenced themselves as Steve ran back to his phone. Natasha discreetly sent commands for FRIDAY to track the call and motioned that they all remain silent. Even Steve who had begun to say hello was silenced by Natasha. Now he knew why. It didn’t seem like Tony even knew he had called Steve.

A voice crackled through the phone. It did not belong to Tony, but to Ryder.

“I can’t believe you actually were thinking of saying no to me. After all I have done for you, you
ungrateful…” a sound of breaking glass was heard.

Steve had to do everything to control himself for not yelling and blowing his cover. The small grunt of pain that Tony made shortly after didn’t help ease that strain for control.

“Oh come on Ryder. I’ve suffered worse than a little hit to my face,” Tony argued back. “And if you can’t see why I said no to your proposal you’re dumber than I was led to believe.”

“Is this because of Steve?” Ryder questioned spitefully. “How many times do I have to get it into your supposed genius brain that he will never love you? You think him coming back after leaving you is a sign of love? I am going to make you love me and only me, once you realize that I’m all you have.”

“Where are we going?” Tony implored and Steve knew at that moment the call had been deliberate.

All of them waited for Ryder to answer, to give them a hint or anything.

“You and I both know we’re going back to…” Ryder’s voice grew closer. “Oh no Tony. You made a call to your precious Steve. How would Steve feel knowing that I…”

Steve clutched the phone closer to his chest and strained to hear what Ryder was saying.

“Leave him out of it,” Tony said out of breath.

“Perhaps I should reenact our time right here right now let Steve know how pretty the sounds you make are, when you cry,” Ryder laughed. “Let him hear you cry and not be able to do anything about it.”

A sound came like Tony was trying to stop himself from crying out.

“Oh, don’t be shy now. Cry,” Ryder laughed. “You hear that Steve?”

“Hang up the phone Steve. Damnit hang up,” Tony breathed through a short whimper as though the air was being knocked out of his lungs.

“Tony sweetheart listen to me. I’m going to find you, I just need you to hold on for me okay,” Steve urgently commanded, not caring anymore since Ryder knew he was on the line. “You hear me? Tony? Tony? Ryder I swear to you if you have-”

“Oh, he hears you, but I’m afraid his mouth is currently occupied,” Ryder said around a moan.

“Don’t you fucking touch him,” Steve grit out not. “Ryder I promise you I am going to…”

Ryder tsked as Tony made a choking sound. “Oh calm down. Tony’s not giving me a blowjob… though I can say that he awfully looks good on his knees. I was surprised to find out you hadn’t rendered his services yet. But don’t worry he’s only being served the greatest liquor this limo has to offer. Oh Cali he’s choking. Tilt his head back and make sure he catches every single drop.”

“But Ryder maybe we shouldn’t…”

“Cali dear don’t make me upset. Just do as you are told,” Ryder exclaimed.

“Ryder,” Steve growled overcome with bright fury and wanting nothing more, but to grab Ryder’s neck and squeeze. “If you lay one hand on Tony, I will cut both off.”

“Oh, please don’t threaten me with a good time,” Ryder purred.
“Well this has been fun, but I think Tony and I will have much more fun in a private setting. And Agent Romanov you can stop trying to track us, where we go no map follows,” Ryder said ending the call just as a sharp slap was heard echoing out of Steve’s phone.

“Damn it,” Steve cursed. “Tell me you got a location.”

Natasha looked apologetically at him. “No, it was circling around an area and then it just disappeared.”


Steve became frustrated and began pacing back and forth. His hands ran through his hair trying to decide the next move. All of them were looking toward Steve waiting for a command. Steve stopped short at their undivided attention and realized that he needed to step up.

He didn’t have time to ponder and think about how he had been so blind. He needed to find Tony first and foremost and then he would let the guilt claw around him. But for right now he needed determination to consume him.

“Bruce do you think you’d be able to come with us or would you need to stay here,” Steve questioned not blaming Bruce if he decided to stay.

Bruce shook his head. “The big guy and I need to get Tony back. We’re not staying home doing nothing.”

Steve nodded. “Okay, we don’t have a location, but we do have a name and a face. We need to get in touch with Miriam, before Ryder gets to her. Need to see if she’ll be able to name any of the other faces.”

“If she doesn’t comply,” Clint questioned.

“We’ll make her,” Steve rasped. “Ready?”

All three of them nodded, a grim determination taking all of their features. They began walking outside to get in the quinjet and head toward the hospital. Each were undergoing a greater inner turmoil that they couldn’t voice…not yet.

Steve hadn’t felt this type of unfurling anger, since he found out what Hydra did to Bucky. He had destroyed Hydra and he had no problems with burning Ryder and everything else he held close to him down. Steve hoped he was the first one to get to Ryder just so he could have the satisfaction of hitting Ryder harder than the sound of the slap that came over the phone. He was going to do more than hit him though. He didn’t know if he would be fine with just leaving him bruised.

His chest heaved up and down. His finger nails pieced into his palms. Feeling himself go into a dark place he leaned over the couch. Closing his eyes, he started trying to calm himself down. Suddenly, he felt his body close in on itself.

His body began to convulse and he began to dry heave. Heat rolled off his body into the air, making it nearly insufferable to breathe. He felt the corners of his eyes start to warm. Every image surrounding him became distorted and it seemed as though everything was blurred. No solid image could be surfaced into his mind. He felt that weight press up against his forehead.

Bucky went closer to him, already knowing what was happening. Natasha followed Bucky’s movement. Bucky reached out with his flesh hand and pressed it against Steve’s neck.
“What’s wrong?”

“You know how Steve doesn’t like bullies. Let’s just say when he got like this, 9 times out of 10 he ended up knocking somebody’s light out.”

“Pre-serum?” Clint questioned.

“Pre-serum Steve had less control of his response to bullies,” Bucky grit out knowing exactly the headspace that Steve was returning to. “And let’s just say underestimating him is when you lost the fight. I mean sure there were a lot of times that I had to get involved, but that’s because those bullies never took him there...to this place.”

Bucky began to speak some words to him, letting his Brooklyn accent get through. He tried repeating the nursery rhyme Ms. Rogers would say to Steve, whenever he was high with fever. Bucky was sure that he was missing a few words, but as Steve’s eyes slowly became more aware he figured that didn’t matter too much.

Steve settled his eyes on Bucky and shook himself of where he had gone. He had no time to go back into his head like that and he had already wasted enough time. He clenched his jaw and with his eyes seemed to tell the Avengers to get ready. No one wasted in time in grabbing their uniforms or weapons. Steve wanted to ask Bucky if he was sure he was up to coming with them and Bucky only seemed to raise a brow as if wondering why Steve had even asked.

Within seconds everyone began walking toward the quinjet on the roof. No one said anything. However, when they began to get closer to the quinjet Steve turned to them.

“I’m going to kill him,” Steve growled low under his breath. “I don’t know how you feel about this, but my decision will not change. If you have problems with that I suggest you go back with Pepper and RHodey.”

Natasha quirked an eyebrow at him. She slid a knife under her jacket sleeve and fell into step beside Clint, Bucky, and Bruce. She looked at them unwaveringly and said what they all were thinking in response to Steve’s confession.

“We were never under the assumption that Ryder would make it out of this alive.”

Chapter End Notes

I am not going to drag on Tony being "missing" for long! Hold onto that for comfort. Now I go to run off in a corner and hide until next update.

Thanks again to everyone who commented, gave a kudo, and left a bookmark. You all continue to make my day :(
I deeply apologize for updating a whole two weeks too late. My film project kept being pushed back because of actors' schedule problems, so we had to keep re-filming scenes. Anyways I am back and we will stay on the regular schedule of Saturday updates. Thank you guys for your patience and hope you all enjoy :)

Unfortunately, I cannot give you a fluffy chapter as an apology...soooooo *hides under rock*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He remembered a conversation. He thought he remembered barely even saying no to a proposal, before he was pushed aside into a hallway leading to a back alley of the hotel. He remembered hands reaching out toward him, forcefully guiding him away from the safety of watchful eyes.

He didn’t remember much of anything after that. And that terrified him. If there’s one thing Tony prided himself on it was being fully aware of how he got into a current situation. He remembered the events leading up to him being captured in Afghanistan. He remembered that led to him becoming Iron Man. He remembered Iron Man led him to the Avengers. He remembered the Avengers led him to Steve.

But he didn’t remember how he wound up here.

Or maybe he did and he just chose not to focus on how he allowed himself to be put in this situation. 

**Allowed.**

That word settled like acid on his tongue because he didn’t remember him allowing anyone to treat him this way…never granted Ryder permission to do this. But what other word could he choose to describe his lack of actions toward Ryder. If he hadn’t allowed himself to be placed in this situation with his body lying limp in the backseat of this car with the smell of liquor staining his breath, then what was it?

**Fear.**

It couldn’t be fear. He was a Stark and Stark men were not made of fear. He only knows because his father would yell that to him every single time Tony would come back from being kidnapped and asking his father why he hadn’t paid the ransom.

Even with the absence of a last name he was Iron Man. He had no reason to fear this man who he could easily crush with his suit. He had destroyed others ten times the size of Ryder. Then why didn’t he?

Why did he allow Ryder to place those cold calloused hands on his throat and force him down, when his suit was only a simple command away? Perhaps at the beginning he thought it was okay…that those bruises were okay because at least Ryder had chosen to stay. Ryder had expressed a desire toward Tony, one that wouldn’t waver. And so Tony hadn’t pushed in favor of Ryder staying, but
now he had his family back. That void inside of him had been filled.

But didn’t that say something about him? If Tony was alone would he continue to be susceptible to Ryder’s abuses? Would he leave Ryder even if the others weren’t here…if Steve hadn’t revealed his true feelings?

Would he leave if he was his only reason?

He’d like to think he would. Maybe even with the absence of the others he would eventually have been led to his decision to leave Ryder. He believed that there were always people in your life that could help guide you. Besides the woman that he met at the beach had already began to make him reflect on his relationship. So…he was leaving for himself. He was leaving because he knew he didn’t need Ryder’s touch that left bruises and scars. He didn’t need him. He supposed that he never had.

Because he needed to live and every moment spent with Ryder felt like he was dying.

He was tired of feeling like he was dying. He spent too long feeling that way.

His mind continue circling around those thoughts and it only served to increase the growing pain in his head. He distinctly remembered his head bouncing off of the window in the car at one particular sharp turn. He remembered Ryder touching the spot of impact and cooing at him.

He turned his eyes toward Cali, who ran her fingers over the empty bottle of liquor. Tony smacked his lips together wincing at the taste of alcohol lingering on them. Ryder leaned forward and grasped his chin pulling him closer to his face.

He couldn’t feel his body respond to the touch and there was a growing fear that he couldn’t move. He opened his mouth to form a complaint, but could only offer inarticulate slurred words. He tried pushing himself from Ryder, but only managed to lift his hand and have it fall it onto Ryder’s thigh.

Ryder’s smile grew delighted as he drew closer. His grasp on Tony’s chin tightened and he used it as a lever to draw Tony’s lips toward his. Tony widened blurry eyes and tried gathering the bit of strength he had left. Ryder’s sin hot lips ghosted over Tony’s and then firmly pressed against Tony’s chapped cooler ones.

Tony’s heart thundered in his chest as he realized that he had no control over his body. He thought that he could move his lips and bite Ryder in response. He imagined himself doing so, but when Ryder kept pushing his tongue forward Tony realized he couldn’t. Ryder used his fingers to part Tony’s lips and whispered against them.

“I should have done this a long time ago. I forgot how beautiful it is to render someone such as yourself completely still and silent,” Ryder announced into his mouth. “Such a power in getting someone like you to be quiet.”

Tony tensed. He was used to talking and constant movement. Even when he was with his sexual partners he was vocal. It’s just how he was. But with Ryder he had learned to stifle his pained groans and the rare moans of pleasure. He didn’t even know how quiet he had grown around Ryder until Ryder spoke on his silence.

He spoke through gesticulated hands and body movement. He used his words as his defense. But he couldn’t here. He couldn’t call upon his armor.

Thankfully, Ryder pulled back and leaned forward to speak in hushed tones to the driver. Cali turned worried eyes at Tony. Their eyes met and Tony hoped he could convey a desire to leave into his
eyes. He hated to plead. He hated to ask for help, but he needed it. He just needed her to reach for his wrist and push...

His eyes went toward his wrist and noticed it was bare. It shouldn’t...there’s no way. Every event that he went to he always carried some form of his armor on him. And that was through his watch, but it was gone. Panic seized him. Cali noticed his worry and shook her head.

She leaned close to him and whispered, “Ryder took it off of you when you were unconscious. He used your fingerprint to take it off.”

He sobered up. He didn’t remember being unconscious. Then he listened to the other part of Cali’s statement. Ryder had his armor. Granted he wouldn’t really be able to access the suit without his voice command, but the fact still stood that he had it.

At that moment, Ryder finished talking to the driver and leaned back in his seat. Cali then chose to focus her attention to the passing buildings. Ryder ran his fingers alongside Tony’s jaw and smiled.

“Won’t be long until we get to our destination,” Ryder announced.

Tony clenched his jaw and hoped that whatever was laced in his drink would wear off soon so he could choke Ryder. He had a flashing image of him choking Ryder, while in his suit. That image gave him a little bit of relief.

When they got onto the plane to take them to wherever, Ryder picked Tony up and brought him close to his chest. Tony wanted to bite the fingers off that had traveled too closer to his reactor. Cali followed behind Ryder and placed something cool on Tony’s bare arm. He tried moving his neck to see what it was, but as soon as the patch was on his skin he felt his eyes become heavy.

“Sleep well Tony because when we get to the estate we are going to have so much fun and I would hate for you not to be awake,” Ryder sang.

Tony tried his best to stay awake, but could not resist the pull of whatever had been placed on him. It reminded him of what Ryder had done, when he said no to the proposal. Ryder had simply nodded and placed something on Tony’s neck. The rest was spent in a blur.

He tried blinking himself awake, but couldn’t feel himself do so. His head lolled to the side and rested on Ryder’s chest. He fell asleep thinking how much he wished the beat thrumming against his ear would stop.

When he woke up, he found himself lying down on a bed. He noticed, however; with somewhat satisfaction that he was able to move freely. He pushed his legs over the bed and did a mental inspection of his body. He was bare except for his underwear and a thin white shirt. There were no bruises on his body. He breathed out a sigh of relief and ran his fingers through his hair then over his arm. His fingers ran over a small bump and he looked down to see a purple patch that was slowly growing gray.

He snatched the patch off and placed it in his jacket pocket that was on the floor. He figured when he got back, he would have Bruce inspect it and see what it was. He set his jacket aside and looked for any telephone in this room. As he got up he swayed a little on his feet. As the wave of nausea passed his eyes moved around the room and with a sinking feeling he realized he was in the same room he had been when Ryder first punished him.

Winston’s estate in California.

Tony froze as his fingers hovered over the frame of the bed for balance. Winston. Cali. He needed to
get out of here before Ryder chose to relive their time. His legs shook and his head still felt full of
cotton, but he pushed himself to the door just hoping that no one was there. His mouth trembled as
he struggled over hurried breaths.

Shaking fingers reached forward to turn the knob of the door handle and just as he was able to turn
it, he felt resistance. He shook the door knob and felt the same resistance. He stepped back for a
moment with the full intent of throwing his body into it.

Then it opened.

Ryder entered the room pushing Tony further into it. Behind him were Winston, Cali, Miriam, and
four other bodies. Tony’s body grew aflame with anger and he pushed back at Ryder. Ryder raised
an eyebrow.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing Ryder? Are you insane? No, you are and I’m just noticing
it,” Tony hissed. “I don’t know what type of sick game you’re trying to play, but I am not a player in
it. I highly suggest you give me my things and watch me leave.”

Ryder scrunched up his face at Tony’s suggestion. “Oh, Tony. I hate that you think you’ve been
placed in a situation where you can make suggestions.”

Tony knew he was outnumbered, but that didn’t stop him from punching Ryder. He felt great delight
in how Ryder’s head recoiled at the punch, but didn’t feel great satisfaction at the stinging in his own
check thereafter.

Tony let anger be his energy.

Nails scratched against the laughter coming out of Ryder’s throat. Foots were pressed against
breaking ribs. Elbows were thrown into stomachs. Hands blindly grasped for purchase on shoulders
for leverage to kick at the spot between Ryder’s legs. Teeth were bitten into the soft flesh of Tony’s
shoulder.

Spit was thrown onto the eye of Ryder as Tony cut his fingers into the underside of Ryder’s knee.
Backs bounced off the walls. Wounds opened and released their cries onto the floor beneath them.

Tony struggled for breath against a broken rib. He coughed and felt a piercing pain in his chest. He
looked down to see Ryder’s hand pressed firmly against the reactor. Tony surged forward,
attempting to throw Ryder off of him. Ryder only tightened his thighs that encompassed Tony’s
waist.

“Ryder, fuck…Ryder stop,” Tony breathed harshly. “I’m gonna kill you I swear.”

Ryder leaned forward and rocked his body down against Tony’s. He pressed forward and Tony felt
the reactor press into parts of his body that it wasn’t intended to be near.

“Fuck,” Tony coughed. “G’off and stop…stop being an asshole. I’m gonna kill you I swear, fuck.”

Ryder eyes became glazed over as though he was excited with Tony straining for breath underneath
him. Ryder’s mouth fell open, tongue darting out to lick his lips. Tony scrunched his face up in
disgust.

“You killed me the day you refused to listen to me,” Ryder announced using one hand to play with
the waistband of Tony’s boxers. “You killed me when you didn’t give me the chance to say goodbye
or even tell you the reason I had to leave.”
“Ry-Ryder I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Tony stuttered trying to blink away the spots that were swimming into his vision. “I promise you Ryder I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Stop lying,” Ryder growled pressing the hand at Tony’s waist. His fingers pieced the skin.

Tony let out a low hiss. “Ryder I…I don’t know.”

Ryder scowled. “Then today will be the day I let you know.”

Tony licked his lips and raised his arms to push away at the hands on him. “Ryder…stop.”

Ryder looked down sadly at Tony. “You know I hate to do this to you Tony. I never wanted to hurt you,” he choked on a cry. “But you drove me to this. You and your father.”

Tony smacked his lips together, trying to force out a salty tear that had fallen from Ryder’s cheek. He didn’t want Ryder’s tears.

“I didn’t do anything. Besides you know I’m not a fan of my dad so whatever he did to you I had no part in it” Tony attempted explaining while trying to wiggle his way from underneath Ryder. He turned his wet eyes to Cali who was hiding behind Miriam. Cali caught his gaze briefly then turned to stare at the ear of another observer that Ryder had brought in.

“You two did everything and nothing,” Ryder explained. “Say you love me.”

Tony blinked at the switch in conversation. “Are you out of your mind?”

“Say you love me,” Ryder said his voice like burnt sugar.

“No,” Tony laughed darkly. “How can I love someone like you?”

“Is it because of Steve? Is that why you said no to my proposal and had me end the party. Because you were fucking him?” Ryder softly said looking down into Tony’s eyes.

“No,” Tony said. He didn’t want Steve brought into this conversation. He wanted Steve so far removed from this. He wouldn’t let Ryder ruin that for him. “I said no to your proposal because I wanted to. I don’t love you Ryder and you never gave me a reason to feel bad that I don’t.”

“You will love me and then finally you’ll know how it feels to love someone that destroys you,” Ryder growled as he finally stood up from his spot on Tony’s body. “Hold him. And this Tony is where the fun begins.”

Winston came forward alongside two others observers. They went to Tony’s body, picked him up, and threw him onto the bed. Tony let out a wet cry at how his broken ribs felt at his body being carelessly thrown. His vision blacked out for just a moment and then opened just as quickly as he felt hands holding down his wrists and then spreading apart his legs.

Fear and anxiety grappled with Tony’s heart.

“You will love me even if I have to fuck it into you,” Ryder said as he ran his hands over Tony’s spread trembling legs.

Tony’s eyes fell shut.

Tony’s eyes opened.

Between his legs was someone different. Tony looked through half-lid eyes how the person licked
his lips hungrily and unbuckled their belt. Tony thrashed, but was held down by several hands. He tried kicking the hands off of him, but couldn’t. He looked down and this time saw a light purple patch on the inside of his thigh.

The guy came closer and trailed his fingers over Tony’s ankle. Tony’s mouth opened to release a string of curse words. The guy didn’t pay attention to Tony’s threats or curses. He came closer his body slotting in between the space of Tony’s leg. He reached down and tapped the purple patch briefly.

He turned back to Ryder who was standing in the near distance as though overseeing things. He said to him, “Benedici il CMPNY.”

Ryder straightened his shoulders and repeated, “Benedici il CMPNY.”

Tony’s eyes fell shut.

Tony’s eyes opened.

Miriam was now straddling him, her skirt pooling over Tony’s stomach. She hummed a song in the back of her throat as she poured herself a drink. She tossed it back and Tony wanted to tear into the skin that took the liquid.

Miriam turned a heated glare at Tony. “Such a beautiful man. Even the scars loitered across your body are like wonderful engravings on a canvas. I would much desire for my own mark to be upon your body.”

“Don’t you think there’s something wonderful about a man with scars,” she addressed toward her sister.

Cali clenched her jaw. “When the scars are born out of survival, yes. When the scars are born out of hate and chaos, there is nothing wonderful about that.”

Miriam rolled her eyes then redirected her attention to Tony. “I do apologize for my sister. She is awfully sentimental about these things sometimes.”

Tony tossed his head to the side and saw another patch had taken its spot on his leg. The previous purple one had begun to turn gray and now it seemed they needed another one. Tony tried pulling his arms, but again the hands on his wrist stayed firm.

Miriam tilted her head to the side and reached over. She grabbed a bottle. “Now let’s say we have some fun, yeah?”

She pressed the patch as though ceremoniously, brought the bottle to her lips and said, “Benedici il CMPNY.”

Ryder looked back, “Benedici il CMPNY.”

She tossed the drink back.

Tony’s eyes fell shut.

Tony’s eyes opened.

This time it was Winston. By then Tony had lost all feeling in his body. He was completely paralyzed, he couldn’t even move his mouth. Winston knelt between his legs and rested his head on
Tony’s thigh.

Tony wanted to recoil at the gentle touch. He wanted his body to gain back fucking movement. He wanted to not be weak.

Winston kissed Tony’s knee and whispered almost reverently, “Benedici il CMPNY.”

Tony saw more than heard Ryder’s. “Benedici il CMPNY.”

Tony’s eyes fell shut.

Tony’s eyes opened.

Tony’s eyes fell shut.

Tony’s eyes opened.

Tony’s eyes fell shut.

Tony’s eyes opened.

Tony’s eyes fell shut.

When he opened them again, his body felt like it didn’t belong to him. The arms on him were gone. His body seemed to have curled into itself, while he slept. The darkness covered him and provided a protection and safety net that he couldn’t create for himself. His hand reached for the reactor and felt a crack in it.

His breath caught and he didn’t want his hands to further explore his body…to see what had happened. He leaned over the bed wincing at his tight muscles. A hand went down toward his legs. He clenched them together. His hands shook as he tried parting his legs to feel…

And suddenly he couldn’t breathe.

Even with the room being dark it seemed to only grow darker. He felt like he wasn’t there in his body. He felt disjointed and fragmented from himself. He had no control. He couldn’t even allow himself to let the tears fall from his eyes.

His hands hovered above his body not wanting to touch it…not wanting any evidence of what had happened when his eyes felt shut. A broken cry caught itself in Tony’s throat and almost choked him.

A door opened. Hands rubbed the space between his shoulders. A light voice tried breaking through the screaming in Tony’s head.

“Shhh,” Cali hurriedly whispered. “They didn’t touch you. No one touched you. Ryder didn’t touch you and he didn’t allow anyone to violate you either. Tony. Tony look at me. If you center yourself and breath you’ll realize you don’t feel any pain down there okay. Listen, I’ve been here the whole time I swear. They only…they just…” Cali broke off unsure with how to follow. She leaned over to turn on the lamp in the room. “He wanted to make you believe that you were being violated to show you how much power you don’t have.”

“Ryder only did this as a scare tactic. He told everyone that no one was to touch you. Okay, no one. He just wanted you to think that you were being…” Cali explained and allowed Tony to fill in the missing gap.
“What type of sick,” Tony brokenly rasped. “Sick fuck does this.”

Cali clenched her jaw.

“No one touched me,” Tony whispered to himself, his hands still not wanting to check and see if Cali was telling him the truth. He didn’t feel any particular pain…but he also couldn’t really feel his body right now.

Cali shook her head. “No one touched you. You can ummm check, if you want. Or I can check for you.”

“I’d rather you didn’t,” Tony said angrily. “I’d rather that you tell me how to get out of here.”

Cali bit her lip and played with her fingers. “I can’t. Last time I get in so much trouble for letting you escape. And the driver that I sent you to, Ryder found out and he got punished more severely. I only got a light tap in comparison to his punishment.”

“What happened to him?” Tony questioned. He hadn’t known the driver, but he had felt thankful for him getting away.

“Let’s just say he won’t be driving anyone or himself ever again or speak,” Cali muttered then winced. “But I’m here to check your wounds. If you can just lie down, I can…”

Tony growled and pushed her away. “I don’t need you to check my wounds. I need you to get me the hell out of here or hell just show me okay. I don’t need you placating me or treating me nicely because you may not be on the same level as your fucked up sister, but you sure aren’t helping me. I need to get out of here. Come on Cali you have to see this isn’t right.”

“It doesn’t matter what I see Mr. Stark,” Cali offered. “I owe debts to the CMPNY, specifically Ryder. I have to do what he instructs.”

Tony reached out and grabbed ahold of her wrist. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. You help me out of here and I can get you out of this CMPNY, whatever it is. I’m Tony Stark,” he added smirking painfully. “Or go look for my watch and I can handle the rest, yeah?”

Cali opened her mouth, but quickly shut it and jumped off of the bed as Ryder came in. Only Winston and Miriam were there to follow him. The two of them sat in two chairs opposite of where Tony was. Ryder sat close to Tony and kissed his cheek. He leaned back and smiled at Tony. Tony wanted to snatch the smile off of his face.

“Where’s my watch,” Tony questioned.

“Now why on earth would I tell you that?” Ryder questioned. “Don’t want you running away from me, after all of the fun that I have in store for you.”

Tony tried reasoning with the last bit of sense Ryder might have had. “Ryder I need you to let me go. I said no to your proposal and you need to accept that. I have a son…”

“Speaking of your son I wonder how CPS will respond to leaked footage of a scandalous sex tape making its way into mainstream with you as the leading face,” Ryder pondered. “Oh and Winston I meant to ask earlier how’s your new job as a gym coach going?”

Tony stopped breathing.

“Yeah, gym doesn’t count. Plus we got a new gym teacher and everyone says he’s the worst,” Peter
Tony eyes widened as what Ryder was saying caught up to him. Ryder continued speaking. “Oh and Miriam how’s your patient going? Mrs. Keener, right?”

Tony clenched his jaw so hard he was afraid his teeth would crush at the pressure. Ryder turned to him easily.

“So you see you’re in no position to make threats, when I have a presence in every single factor of your everyday life,” Ryder laughed.

“Why are you doing this?” Tony questioned. “I mean…why do you insist on torturing me?”

“Torturing?” Ryder asked as though confused by what Tony was suggesting. “I’m not torturing you.”

“Yes, you are. What exactly do you call hitting me, raping me, manipulating me, and just this whole thing in the middle of I don’t even know,” Tony shouted with growing fever. “I don’t know what story you have concocted into your head, but this is torture. This is abuse.”

Tony’s last statement settled thickly between the space of Tony and Ryder. Tony went to reach forward his watch, then retracted remembering that Ryder had it somewhere.

“First that was one time and I apologized. Every other time was consensual. Plus I thought you were of the forgiving nature. How long must you hold that over me? Didn’t Bucky kill your parents and you forgave him?”

Tony felt his throat burn.

“Ah, and didn’t Steve leave you to die in a cave in Siberia and you forgave him to the point where you locked lips. Have you ever felt at any point that I would kill you? I don’t think you have. Yet you’ve forgiven murderers over forgiving me? The one you love.”

“Bucky was brainwashed. You’re doing this on your own sick fucking accord,” Tony felt the need to defend. “And I certainly don’t love you. I never did and I will never forgive myself for thinking that you were even worthy of my forgiveness.”

“Again may I remind you that Steve pushed his shield right into your chest and destroyed your arc reactor? And you think you love him,” Ryder said pushing against Tony’s shoulder.

Tony was so weak from the lack of food, the patches, and the drink with the dissolved pill being forced on him that his body didn’t even resist to the push. Ryder watched as Tony’s body fell back against the bed.

“You think you love Steve. You think that you love your team, the little family you have built. But this team won’t come for you. After all, it was you who called them and not them who called you on our way here. Makes me wonder if they truly cared whether you had left,” Ryder exclaimed pressing his fingertips in the space at Tony’s collarbone.

“They will find me. We always find each other,” Tony said.

He didn’t want to address the small doubt that they wouldn’t.

Ryder shrugged his shoulders. “We all have our defense mechanisms and if yours is to believe in the false surety of safety offered by your family then who am I to deny you. Miriam be a dear and clean
up Tony. He smells dreadful."

He went to the door, but not before looking at Tony once more. Tony watched as three other people came in, one face familiar from before. Tony wondered how many people Ryder had to call upon and whether they belonged to this CMPNY.

He also wondered why CMPNY sounded so familiar to him.

Ryder slipped into the space between the half open door. “I love you. You love me. I’ll be back soon.”

The smirk on Miriam’s face didn’t seem to ease Tony’s worries. However, he couldn’t help the small slimmer of hope that he could wash away the stain that their hands left. Ryder left the room, locking it behind him.

Winston grabbed his body. Tony pushed it away from him. “I can bathe myself.”

He went into the restroom alone and closed the door behind him. He looked to the full bath tub and shivered. He had never done well with large bodies of water after Afghanistan and his hands shook. He decided to leave that be for a little, instead choosing to look around the bathroom. He was dissatisfied that there were no means of escaping at least through the window. However, there was a vent.

“Oh, Clint time for your lessons in vent hopping to be put to use,” Tony muttered to himself never thinking that he would ever use that knowledge. He stood on the edge of the bathtub and tried to see if there was any way he could fit his body into the vent. It would be a tight fit, but it was certainly larger than an average vent nearly five and a half feet in length and three feet in width. Perhaps the lack of clothes would prove to be an advantage.

Just as he was about to try and propel himself forward he heard the door jiggle. He had locked it, but of course he should have assumed that they would have the key to everything. His heart thrummed against his chest. He didn’t have enough time to escape right now and truly looking at the vent he wouldn’t even know where they led to.

He quickly leapt onto the floor and looked as though he was taking off his shirt. Miriam raised an eyebrow at the bathtub then to Tony. Miriam shook her head silently and motioned the two unfamiliar faces forward. The familiar face stood back.

“Oh, Tony. You should know not to try and get away. You must be disciplined for that. Eva, Luka hold him,” Miriam instructed.

The two rushed forward pulling Tony down onto his knees. “Close the door. My sister seems to have formed an attachment and I would much rather her sentimentalism not be fed into my ears right now. Do you know what you did wrong?”

Tony scowled. “I did nothing wrong. I’m just trying to get away from you crazy people. Look I don’t know what type of hold Ryder…”

“Do you know what you did wrong?” Miriam repeated taking off her jacket and throwing it against the toilet seat.

“I did nothing…”

“Wrong answer.”
Before Tony knew it, his body was lifted and turned to the edge of the bathtub. His arms were held tightly behind his back by Eva. Luka grabbed a towel and placed it under Tony’s knees then placed a hand on Tony’s back.

Miriam tied her hair in a bun. “Again think long and hard. What did you do wrong?”

“Nothing,” Tony bit. “Nothing you ignorant masochistic…”

“Down,” Miriam said through clenched teeth.

Without any warning Tony’s head was forced down into the warm water resting in the bathtub. His eyes opened on instinct and his body inhaled a gulp of water. He struggled against Eva’s hold and tried latching onto skin and found a piece to claw at. Then his body was springing forward outside of the water.

Tony coughed and struggled for breath. His body shook with tremors. Afghanistan. Dark. Alone. He couldn’t stop those tremors or stop the whine coming from the back of his throat.

“What did you do wrong?”

“Nothing,” Tony hissed. “Out of all the people in this room, who’s exactly holding me hostage and forcing themselves-”

“Wrong answer. Down.”

This time Tony was able to hold his breath and close his eyes. He felt the pressure rise in his chest. He could feel the water pounding against his ear. His body was forced further into the bathtub his nose barely skimming the bottom, before he was yanked back up.

His body greedily took in the air that was offered. Miriam wiped off the water from her cheek that had flown on there, when they pulled Tony back up.


“How about you just be a doll and tell me what I did wrong. Make this little shindig go by a little faster, yeah?” Tony smirked letting cockiness feed into his tone, a defense that he relied heavily on.

Miriam shook her head. “I don’t think so. You know Ryder told me to get you clean. I am pretty sure he meant your whole body. Eva, Luka down.”

His whole body was off the floor and thrown into the bathtub. He pushed himself forward, arms thrown wildly hoping to catch an eye or a mouth. He slid back and forth in the tub trying to get out. He bit his tongue, his throat burned, but his mind was focused on getting out.

“Hold him still Luka,” Miriam gritted out. “And put him down.”

Luka obeyed and grabbed Tony’s shoulders to push him down into the tub. Tony gasped his lungs filling with water. His vision became blank. His body came up.

“What did you do wrong?”

“Just tell me.”

Down.
“What did you do wrong?”

“I don’t know.”

Down.

“Come on Tony. For a genius you should be able to answer me. What did you do wrong?”

“Please just tell me.”

Down.

He was pulled up again. His head rolled to the side and he couldn’t stop coughing up water. Miriam looked gleefully at him. Eva seemed distraught and Luka by then had left at Miriam’s insistence. He remembered Luka hesitating at pushing him back in and had hoped that would be the end. But then Miriam had taken over and she seemed harsher in her movements.

This time when he was pulled up he heard the door creak open. His eyes couldn’t focus, but he felt good when a blanket covered him. It didn’t stop the shivering, but it did help keep him warm. He heard doors slam and people yelling at one another. He heard a voice screaming at Miriam.

He heard someone whisper to him, “Shh, it’s alright. I’ve got you. No one’s going to hurt you ever again. I swear. No one is going to hurt you.”

Tony turned to the voice, letting his eyes blink rapidly trying to clear the vision. “Ste…Steve,” he croaked, his voice fully not cooperating. “Kn’d ya come.”

Hands briefly paused, but continued. “I’ve got you. I’ve got you. I love you.”

Tony smiled at the softness spoken in the words. He rested his head on the chest and turned further into him. He tried blinking his eyes open again to look at Steve once more before he fell into complete unconsciousness. He wanted to see that face and thank him. Thank him for coming for him.

The screams continued. They only seemed to get louder.

His eyes focused.

“I’ve got you. I promise I won’t let them hurt you again because I love you. You love me.”

The words no longer sounded soft. The face of Steve altered into Ryder’s.

Tony realized the screams were his.

His eyes fell shut.

Tony couldn’t tell how long he had been there in that room. It could have been one day, a week, a month and he wouldn’t have known. Between the patches and the drinks with pills Ryder and present CMPNY had kept him unaware of what was going on.

There had been more baths and Tony hated how powerless he felt. It seemed just as he was finally gaining back power in his life it was ripped up from underneath him. He had been sober for years and now he was being forced to drink. He had even entertained the idea of taking a bath with the scented bath bombs Natasha had kept mentioning. Now he threw up at any mention of going near
that large tub of water.

He did throw up.

Ryder was quick to enter the bathroom that time and coo to him as though he were a child. He cleaned up Tony’s mess and helped him brush his teeth. Tony had bit at the fingers that came close to his lips. Ryder frowned and walked away.

Familiar and unfamiliar faces went in and out of the room. He’s never left alone and if he was, he’s tied up. Tony didn’t know which one was worse. He hated when Miriam was there. She just didn’t seem to care. It seemed she was paying off whatever debt she and her sister had with joy. While Cali seemed to painfully do as she was instructed, Miriam loved to go above and beyond.

She was punished one time for leaving a scar coming from a broken bottle piece on Tony’s leg. Ryder had not been too happy about that. Ryder had put some aloe on it and kissed the healing scar, while banishing Miriam. Tony’s mouth opened to thank him, before it quickly closed. Miriam hadn’t been there since. Cali told him it was because she went to the hospital. And the way Tony was with time right now, she could have possibly only been gone a few days.

Ryder stayed beside him most nights. He would curl into the spot behind Tony and tell him about his day. He would tell him how he went to the boy’s school to observe Winston. He told him how he went by the tower and on one even noticed.

No one noticed.

How was Ryder able to fly so under the radar that no one could pick up on Ryder? He knew how the Avengers handled these cases so they would be monitoring every single video feed 24/7. So how come they didn’t catch Ryder on camera?

“They won’t come for you and it’ll just be you and me. But that’s okay because you love me, hmm? Yeah.”

Ryder pressed his nose against Tony’s neck and tightened his hold on his waist. Tony tried moving himself away, but couldn’t. There were patches all over his body know. Some were still purple and some had grayed to the point where they nearly became this misty white.

Luka accidentally shoved Tony too far against the wall one time, when Tony had struggled against receiving another patch and another pill. They made him feel like this. He was always tired and he was questioning everything now. He didn’t want them.

That shove resulted in a dislocated shoulder. Luka was sent off for a day. Ryder followed in his wake and kissed the shoulder. He popped it back in place and massaged the ache settling in. Tony almost said thank you.

“I love you, so you know I won’t let serious harm come to you, yeah?”

Tony’s brows furrowed. He rested his head against Ryder’s shoulder as he rubbed Tony’s shoulder. Tony shook his head.

“But you are hurting me. You let this happen. If you love me, you wouldn’t do this,” Tony said laboriously that sentence taking every little bit of energy he had. His eyes fluttered close and his breath became low and even.

He wished that he could talk to his son. He wanted to hear Miles’ voice and wondered, if there was someone in this CMPNY who he could get to agree. He tried with everyone, tried baiting them to
see who had just a little bit of kindness. Luka was in the running, but after his punishment from Ryder he remained distant.

Cali was his only option. He remembered her coming to him to check his wounds and telling him, “He’ll make you think that he deserves your forgiveness. You noticed how he stopped asking whether you loved him. I know you did. I know you realized why he started making it a statement that you loved him. He wants to manipulate you into believing those words to be true. Power relies on the ability to define reality and have others believe it as if it were their own. Do not give him that power.”

Tony needed that, but he needed to know what lied outside of these walls again. He was losing focus of that. With only Ryder in his ear, his reality was shifting to one where Tony could see himself saying thank you when Ryder came in while his head was being pushed in the bathtub or when someone was throwing bruises onto his body like splotches of paint. He didn’t want his reality to be him curling into Ryder when he shivered from the cold water or sighing in relief when Ryder pressed soft touches against the bruises.

“Can…can I talk to my son. Please Cali…I…need to talk to my son,” Tony pleaded. “Don’t care…do…do whatever just let me talk.”

Cali looked worriedly between the door and then at Tony. She sighed. “Ryder won’t be here until tomorrow morning. Make this call quick though. I don’t need him coming early.”

Cali reached out of her jean pocket and handed her phone to Tony. Tony reached out, but couldn’t push his body forward. He painfully looked to Cali for help and ran off the numbers for her and put it on speaker. The phone rang. Tony held his breath.

Cali’s hands shook as she kept looking at the door.

“Hi, you’ve reached the voicemail messaging system of Steve Roger to leave a message please wait for the tone,” the automated voice message

Tony had told Steve to create a personal message system, but Steve told him the one he had was phone.

Tony left his name and then said, “Steve…I just want to talk to Miles. Can I please talk to my baby?”

As soon as the call ended, the phone began ringing again. Cali silenced it and answered. “Tony! It’s Tony! Natasha! Oh, sweetheart we’ve been looking for you okay? Do you know where you are? Any type of signs or landmarks that you can tell us?”

“No, how you’re doing? I thought you said it was rude to start off a conversation with a question,” Tony coughed.

“Tony,” Steve laughed wetly. “Can you tell me where you are?”

“Can I speak to Miles? Is he near you? I just…I really need to hear his voice Steve,” Tony broke.

“Hey…no why are you saying that as though…Tony what’s going on? I need you to tell me where you are. Tony.”

“Steve please. Let me speak to…my son,” Tony rasped.

There was some rustling going on the other side of the phone. Tony waited with bated breath before a bright voice came through the phone.
“Baba! I missed you! Mr. Steve says you went on a trip, but you would be back soon. But baba it’s been forever,” Miles drawled. “I don’t like when you’re gone baba. When you coming back?”

Tony raised a hand to muffle his sob. Cali winced as she watched the tears stream down Tony’s face. Tony continued listening as Miles kept talking, imploring whether Tony would be home soon.

“I put you on speaker baba!” Miles said. “Peter! Harley! Baba on phone! See I tolded you,” Miles announced. “Say hi!”

“Told bambino,” Tony corrected.

“Tolded,” Miles tried repeated. “Why we not video calling baba?”

“Because baba is somewhere I can’t do that right now, okay? But know I miss you so much okay and I love you,” Tony rasped.

“But why?”

“I can’t,” Tony said trying to hold in a sob.

“I want to be where you are baba. Why didn’t you take me?”

“Because I can’t,” Tony said.

He would never allow Miles to be anywhere like this.

“You lying again baba,” Miles accused. “You lie. Where are you baba?”

Tony choked on another sob and pushed at Cali’s hand to remove it so far from his mouth so Miles wouldn’t catch on. The little boy had good ears and would catch on within seconds.

“Unc…Mr. Stark,” Peter rushed. “Umm, Miles went to his room. He doesn’t want to speak with you right now, but I think he’s just sad. Look Harley and I are watching him. We’ll make sure he’s okay. We’ll let you get back to talk to Steve. But…just…wherever you are just keep fighting, okay. We’re coming soon.”

Cali’s grip tightened on the phone as she brought it closer to Tony. Tony’s eyes kept fluttering even though he tried keeping himself awake.

“Tony is there anything you can give us to help us locate you. I mean we’re trying, we’ve followed your location and tried scanning your suit, but there’s a point that your location just gets lost,” Steve said disappointedly.

Tony sniffed. “You won’t find me Steve. I’m off the map. We all are here. There’s no location.”

“Tony.”

“I’m tired Steve,” Tony admitted. “I just wanted to talk to Miles.”

“Tony don’t…Tony don’t fall asleep okay. Keep talking to me, yeah?”

“Can’t…it hurts talking,” Tony confessed. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry sweetheart.”

Tony smiled at the endearment. “I like that.”
“Like what.”

“Sweetheart. From you it sounds nice. Can you keep talking? I promise I’ll try to stay awake,” Tony said, fully knowing he wouldn’t be able to. Ryder had placed six different patches up and down his body, before he had left. It seemed he wanted to be extra cautious that Tony wouldn’t be able to gather energy from the air and escape.

But he wanted Steve to keep talking to him. How he missed that voice.

“Of course sweetheart,” Steve answered.

Tony fell asleep as soon as Steve said sweetheart, but Steve had no idea. Cali instead kept listening as Steve talked about how they were continuing to look for him. Then a sentence brought her out of her passive listening.

“Wait say that again,” Cali answered taking the phone of speaker and bringing it to her ear.

“Who are you…”

“Someone that allowed this call to happen. Now what did you just say?”

Steve paused unsure if he should divulge what he had said. “Why is Tony not answering?”

“Tony fell asleep almost a minute after you said sweetheart. Look it’s important that you answer my question,” Cali stressed.

“I said we have Miriam in our possession and believe she helped Ryder. She’s with us now along with some other members of this organization. No one’s said anything so far including giving up the name, but we have means of making them say something.”

Cali’s breath caught in her throat. She had asked Ryder why Miriam hadn’t showed back here after her shift, but Ryder had waved her concerns off saying she probably took on another shift.

“Is my sister okay?” Cali questioned.

Steve made a noise. “She’s decent, but I have two trained assassins questioning her right now and to be frank if she doesn’t give us any information soon, we’ll be forced to take measures we would much rather not. Though I am sure, we can reach some type of agreement that will secure your sister’s safety that is if she means to you what Tony means to me.”

Cali knew she was being baited. She wondered if Miriam would have fallen into the same trap. She doesn’t allow herself to wonder in fear of being disappointed of the answer.

“I don’t know where this place is. Ryder doesn’t allow any of us to know where we are. He only has one trusted driver…or he did. But I think I can help you in finding someone who does. Of course in exchange for my sister,” Cali said.

“That seems agreeable,” Steve responded back without a moment of hesitation. “Where can we meet?”

“Don’t worry about that. You stay wherever you are right now. I’ll meet you in an hour,” Cali commented, not allowing Steve to respond before she hung up. Cali went to where Tony had fallen asleep and pulled the covers up to his neck.

She exited the room, being quick to place the phone in her back pocket. She chose Luka, figuring he
was the closest to a decent human being there and wouldn’t do anything to harm Tony least when he was asleep. She left him with simple commands and the parting instruction to tell Ryder she went to visit her grandmother.

She walked out of the room and went in search for the driver. While she was on her way to meet Steve, she refused to let herself fall into the thoughts that perhaps she didn’t agree to this meeting to save her sister, but more so to save Tony who didn’t deserve any of what they were doing to her.

People like Cali and Miriam didn’t deserve mercy.

Certainly not Cali. But she desired mercy…or at least a chance to right her wrongs. She may not have dealt him a physical blow like the others, but she had done far worse.

After all she was the one who told Ryder to come back to America because the Accords had left Tony by himself and that was exactly the opportunity that he had been waiting for.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to everyone who commented, gave a kudo, and left a bookmark. You all continue to make my day :)

P.S. Sorry for any mistakes (hope there's not too many). I wrote this with a headache, but I really wanted to get it out since I'm so far behind lol. But I'll edit any possible ones when I pop some Advil and take a nap :)
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

I'm behind on responding to comments, but know I see you, appreciate you, love you, and will respond soon! As always enjoy :) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Day 3

Steve gathered all the Avengers. Thor came back, alongside Loki. He claimed he didn’t quite trust Loki to be by himself yet. Wanda and Vision flew in as soon as the news reached them. Sam had put a hold on his counseling sessions and offered his help in any manner. T’Challa offered his services and told them that if they needed further need of him, he would fly to America with great urgency.

They were all back together and their main purpose was to get Tony back home.

Day 11

They finally found Miriam eight days after Tony was taken. It had been hard getting a location on her, seeing as though she hadn’t worked at the hospital in a few days. Steve had implored that the hospital staff tell him whenever Miriam was set to have a shift and he also placed a few S.H.I.E.L.D. agents on standby just in case she chose to arrive earlier.

When they finally found her, she came without much resistance. It seemed to most of them that Miriam had created for herself the idea that she was not in such a terrible situation. She smiled leeringly at Bucky as Thor was pulled her off the quinjet into her jail cell.

She remained silent for the first two days. No matter what they did, she would not speak. It seemed that she had taken a vow of silence. They had found other people connected to Tony’s kidnapping, but much like Miriam they didn’t talk. Natasha had cross-referenced people who had just come into town the day Ryder came back to America with the video images of people at the supposed engagement party. They had rounded up about twenty-three individuals all of which still remained silent.

If by any chance they felt themselves teetering on exposing anything, their mouths would form the words, “Benedici il CMPNY.”

As soon as those words were uttered, their eyes would roll back and become glazed. They didn’t know why those words signaled that response, but it seemed to have some type of kill switch. They had to start gagging the nineteen remaining individuals.

Just as Steve was getting ready to go back to their holding cells, Natasha caught him by the arm, “We have one girl who’s willing to talk.”

Steve didn’t hesitate. He walked quickly to where Natasha was leading him and came to the cell of a girl who couldn’t be no more than seventeen. Her eyes were rimmed with red and tear drops stained her cheeks. She breathe in a haggard breath as her eyes met Steve’s. Natasha stood off to the side and motioned for the girl to speak.
“Who are you all?” Steve questioned, not even turning his gaze as he heard the door behind him shut and close. “And why did Ryder take Tony?”

Coulson made his way in the small cell and positioned himself in the dark corner of it. Natasha nodded once at him in acknowledgment of his presence, before turning her attention back to the girl.

“Do you know anything about the CMPNY?” she said licking her lips. At Natasha’s and Steve’s blank expressions, she continued. “It was a group built in opposition to Hydra. CMPNY was founded by Howard Stark and Evon Clerak. Later Howard Stark was the main operator of the group. CMPNY existed mainly to study the restructuring of epigenetics in accordance to the serum. Howard wanted to see if there was a chance that people with the serum could have heritable changes in gene function without it changing their genetic code. So then you wouldn’t have to have people getting the serum, you would just have them passing down this trait.”

“What does this have to do with why Tony was taken?” Steve said not really knowing why she was giving him this background information, but thankful all the less.

The girl slouched in her chair at Steve’s sharp tone. On any other day and speaking to any other person, Steve might have apologized.

“Howard took Ryder on as an apprentice or some internship thing. I’m not too sure. All I know is that Ryder was interned by Howard, until he found out that Howard was only doing this because he wanted Ryder away from Tony. Ryder never told us why, but something happened between the two. Howard made him transfer to Harvard and Ryder didn’t have that great of a time there so…”

“So this is what some misplaced revenge on Tony?” Steve rasped. “He’s doing all of this because instead of graduating from MIT, he graduated from Harvard.”

“You don’t understand. Tony was everything to Ryder then he was just cut of his life without a second glance. So Ryder went to Africa to study abroad and then found his place there. Later he found out the Starks had died in a car crash and decided to take over the CMPNY. No one had much complaint, since they never truly knew why this intern had left. And since he was rather close to Howard, they all figured he would be a fine option. After all Ryder was pretty influential,” she said softly.

“So he took over and started working on how genetic coding could be transferred into another person and mirrored so essentially the two would have the same DNA sequence. Tony somehow found out about this string of research after he came back from Afghanistan. Something was in his dad’s notes about this and Tony accidentally threw them away as a purging of anything related to his father’s weapons. Don’t know how he got his hands on it, but he did. Ryder was furious because once again Tony was dictating his life. Of course Tony never knew it was Ryder behind the research.”


“It’s nothing short of some obsession. Ryder was obsessed with the destruction that Tony seemingly caused him and at some point he truly loved him. He felt betrayed that someone he loved would ruin his life, take away his opportunity of great scientific discovery. But for a few years he forgot. That obsession had dwindled down to just a fading interest, but then someone called him saying that Tony was alone after the Accords.”

Steve swallowed a lump in his throat. “Where is he? Where are your headquarters?”

She shook her head forlornly. “No one knows. Ryder had one driver whom he trusted with the
location and he would take us back and forth. We were all usually blindfolded or giving a sleeping agent for the amount of time it would take to reach our destination. The only one, who may have an idea where the headquarters for the CMPNY, would be in his close circle.”

“Is there anyone here in that circle?”

The young girl frowned and seemed to think about it. “You have Miriam here right?”

Steve didn’t even say a departing word to the girl before he was bounding over to Miriam’s holding cell where they had her gagged. Steve ripped the cloth from her mouth and she turned sharp eyes to him.

“Well you certainly do keep a girl waiting Captain. Now please do remember my safeword is marrow;” she whispered.

Steve wished that there was a way to communicate to her without hearing her voice. “Where are your CMPNY’s headquarters?”

“No just why on earth would I tell you that?” Miriam laughed. “I don’t see you offering me anything in exchange.’

“I could kill you right here,” Steve grit out.

“So could I. I only have to say three words and frankly it’s a part of my job description. The only ones who fear death are the ones who never knew how to live. And trust me Captain I have lived my best life,” Miriam said.

Steve pulled her off of her jail bed by her jacket and stared her in the eyes. “I suggest you tell me where the headquarters are and where Ryder has taken Tony or else I will make sure that you won’t ever leave this cell dead or alive.”

“Oh, that’s awfully kind of you Captain. But alas I do not know the location. Ryder never told me.”

“But you’re a part of his circle,” Steve grit out still holding Miriam by the lapels of her jacket. “I do not have time to be playing this game with you.”

“Aww, such a disappointment. And here I was thinking you would finally let your hair down a little and let me play. Tony does after all, such a nice little plaything for us just getting him ready for Ryder…”

Her sentence was cut off as Steve tightened the grasp on Miriam’s neck. This only served to amuse Miriam as she huffed out sharp breaths. Steve’s eyes, alight with anger, rested at the spot between Miriam’s eyebrows.

“Tony is not a plaything. I don’t care where you think your loyalty lies may I remind you that you are here under my control and I am the Captain that is placing you on the tightrope between life and death.”

“I am certain you are. Is that what you like to be called in bed, Captain,” Miriam leered.

Steve let go off her suddenly.

“You know Tony cried for you, when I got him to the state of drunken bliss. Kept moaning for his precious Steve to come. Steve save me. Steve please. I want Steve. Steve. Steve. The disappointment on his eyes when Ryder kissed away those broken whispers of Steve was awe inspiring,” Miriam
moaned.

Steve didn’t know what happened, but all of a sudden arms were pulling at his shoulders. His vision cleared and he saw Miriam nursing a broken nose. Blood streamed through her fingers as she looked at Steve with almost disbelief that he had hit her, before a smile took her place. Steve was taunted by the laughter that bubbled in his chest at his horrified glance of what he had done.

Bucky pulled Steve out of the cell and rested a heavy hand on his back, trying to center Steve. Clint had rounded the corner and gave a short nod to Bucky.

“Let us handle things, okay punk. We’ll get her to speak whether she wants to or not,” Bucky claimed.

Steve watched as Bucky followed Clint into the jail cell where Natasha was waiting for them. Steve fell to his knees as soon as the door was closed and rubbed the palms of his hands into his eyes cursing away the tensing pain filling in them.

He would never admit it out loud, but he had hoped to see Miriam’s face as her sounds of laughter transferred to screaming.

Day 14

Steve doesn’t sleep anymore. He’s stopped trying. The days were running through his hands like grands of sand and he couldn’t stop. He tried smiling at Harley in hopes that the teenager would brighten up. Harley saw through his fake happiness and in turn became even more despondent.

He tried holding things together. He was the leader. He couldn’t let cracks in the seams of things and let anyone have fear that Tony wouldn’t come back to them. He didn’t read into the concerns the agents had at the Avengers not being able to find one of their own by themselves. He couldn’t throw his shield at the one agent that said if Tony had been smarter than he wouldn’t have wound up in that situation.

He tried ignoring the pain settling just under his ribs making breathing uncomfortable. He attempted to chase away the feeling of coldness every time he went to the kitchen and didn’t see Tony making coffee. He doesn’t go on his runs in the morning anymore. Sam had tried getting him to run, when he came back to help find Tony. Steve had softly declined the offer and Sam went off to find Rhodey.

He drew with Miles and redirected questions of when his baba was coming. He watched Pepper try to hide her shaking shoulders, when he stumbled upon her one morning. She had hurriedly wiped at the running mascara, offered a shaky smile, and turned away.

His team was falling apart without Tony. There was this hole and nothing could fill it. Now they had to rely on some stranger to give them the only chance to find Tony. He hated how he had to rely on someone else…he hated the unsurety of it. He hated how it made him feel uneasy.

He hated how he couldn’t fall apart not when they needed him to be strong. But how could he be strong, when the main reason for his strength was out somewhere being tortured?

At night time, when he was alone he broke.

Day 18

After his call ended with Cali, Steve immediately gathered the Avengers around him. He sent Peter and Miles to Pepper and told her to watch after them. The two had followed albeit a bit slower, not truly wanting to leave after hearing Tony’s voice. Steve was certain Harley would be disappointed
that he hadn’t gotten the chance to hear Tony.

At exactly an hour, FRIDAY’s voice alerted them of a guest waiting outside. Thor’s loud boisterous voice echoed the sentiment, “Aye she is here. Shall I permit her to enter?”

Steve nodded. All of them waited tensely as Thor went to go retrieve the visitor. When he came back, he was met with a young woman who bore a striking resemblance to Miriam. The two could nearly go as twins. Her face was sunken in as though she had experienced great trouble and she was wringing her hands together in obvious discomfort. Her eyes kept flitting around the room settling on the various individuals.

“I would like to see proof that my sister is alive,” Cali spoke.

“I’ll take you,” Fury offered.

Cali nodded briefly. It was mere minutes that she left and returned again. Her face was marked with grief. “She chose not to speak to me,” Cali told them all, knowing why they were looking at her quick return with confusion.

Coulson took control of the situation and offered that they all meet in the main living area. Cali followed all of them and chose to sit opposite of them all. Her posture was wound tight and her lips were pursed.

“I musn’t be long, before Ryder discovers my absence.”

“You said you can help us find Tony?” Steve said getting straight to the point. He hoped that this meant they were only a few seconds from knowing where Tony was.

“I can’t seeing as though Ryder never told me the specifics of the location. However, I know a driver who can. Unfortunately, he hasn’t been found since he lost favor with Ryder,” Cali said without further explanation.

“And what of the driver now, assuming you had one bring you here?”

“He is not to be trusted. I have half the mind that if you were to ask him anything in regards to the location he would activate his kill switch over jeopardizing his loyalty with Ryder,” Cali said.

“And of your loyalty?” Bruce inserted calmly.

“I have no loyalty that is not bound out of debt,” Cali responded, licking her chapped lips. “Tony does not deserve what is happening to him and I only wish to soothe my guilt in being part of his pain. I can find the driver, I only need that the one who reads mind is accessible.”

Wanda straightened her shoulders, weary of the request. “Why?”

Cali breathed out harshly through her nose. “When the driver was expelled out of the CMPNY, Ryder went through extensive measures that he would not be able to drive anyone anymore nor speak. So his tongue was cut and so were some of his fingers. I was thinking that, if you were to communicate through his mind, you may be able to draw forth the location where the CMPNY headquarters are.”

“Would you be able to do that?” Clint questioned, looking at Wanda imploring.

Wanda steeled them with a determined glance. “I will and if I need of help I am certain I can call on the assistance of Loki or Dr. Strange.”
Loki nodded in agreement to the statement.

She looked at her watch and sighed. “I need to go now, before someone is alerted that my visit with my grandmother lasted longer than I intended. I am certain that the one I left in charge may sell me out, if they can gain favor in Ryder’s eye.”

**Day 21**

They were all gathered around the table, save the exception of Pepper, Miles, and Harley who had all eaten an earlier dinner. The atmosphere was a little better, knowing that finally some information into regards of where Tony was located was coming. He had been unsure of what information Cali might bring, but they were hopeful. They were constantly on alert waiting for a notice from FRIDAY about her arrival, but the AI hadn’t said anything yet. So here they were trying to ease the nerves, before this stranger came.

They were all talking about something, Steve didn’t truly know. His mind had wandered off to silent reflection of how Tony had sounded on the phone call. So when he heard, Vision speak suddenly with a voice clear and demanding, he was able to break out of his thoughts and listen to Natasha’s response.

He didn’t know what Vision had said, for Natasha to illicit the response of, “If we find Tony, I’m pretty certain we’ll have to have medical staff on hand one that Tony would approve of.”

Peter’s fork fell harshly to his plate and he blinked owlishly at Natasha. It was only then that Natasha realized her mistake as she watched the closed of expression transform Peter’s face, one that too hauntingly mirrored Tony’s own. He pushed his plate back and gathered himself away from the table.

Without looking at any of them, he said softly, “Excuse me. I’m not hungry anymore.”

Natasha’s eyes followed his retreating figure and made way to follow him. Steve stopped her shaking his head slightly. He pushed his own meal away. Lately he hadn’t been too hungry anyways. Bucky took both Steve and Peter’s plates and made way to cover them with saran wrap and placed in the refrigerator.

Natasha turned a heavy expression of guilt to Steve. Steve waved off the guilt and told her softly. “It’s fine Nat. I know you didn’t mean it, but I think it might be better if I go talk to him.”

Tersely nodding, she replied to Steve, “Tell him I’m sorry.”

Steve comfortingly patted Natasha on the shoulder twice, before heading to Tony’s lab. That had been Peter’s place of comfort, since the news of Tony’s kidnapping. Steve had attempted in easing the concerns of the two teenagers by distancing themselves from the situation. Unfortunately, there was no way one could be distanced from having a noticeable gap in their lives. Pepper had been great in watching over Miles and Harley. She had decided that she could help by watching over the young boys, while maintaining SI business. News had gotten out that Tony had to cancel a lot of his upcoming meetings so she had to deal with that, on the added fear of knowing why he was really absent.

Miles had quickly grown distraught over Tony’s absence and had not been mollified of stories of Tony being on a vacation. Having to tell Tony’s son that lie did not rest well on his conscious. Miles’ suspicious glare constantly filled his thoughts as the lie flew off his lips. However, staying with his aunt Pepper and his trips to Karen’s entertained him. Unfortunately, that happiness did not last soon. Most nights Steve caught Pepper soothing a crying Miles to sleep.
Harley had become silent and whenever he talked his words were laced with anger. It seemed he displaced his anger at Ryder to anyone who dared say something to him. So Steve had taken to training Harley so he could exert some energy. After Harley’s body loosened some of his tension, he would leave to visit his mom. Then he would come back to the tower and sullenly lock himself up in his room.

Peter would come to the tower every weekend, hoping for any change. When he met the eyes of the rest of Avengers, he would immediately go to Tony’s lab. On several occasions Steve would find Peter in the lab playing with Dum-E and YOU. He never truly interrupted, until now.

He came quietly into the lab and was about to find where Peter was, but was stopped by a different voice in the room and some shuffling. He hid himself behind one of Tony’s machines and tried going unnoticed.

“Is there a reason why you are in your suit right now, when you are under specific instructions not to spider boy?” a voice said alight with teasing.

Peter huffed. “It’s man. Spiderman.”

“Sure, spider baby,” the voice laughed.

Peter rolled his eyes and stretched his limbs. “Don’t be jealous that I have superpowers and you don’t.”

“Yes, because I would love to be bit by a spider and climb things,” the voice said in a deadpan voice. “It would have been far more interesting if you had developed eight legs.”

“Shuri,” Peter whined. “Why on earth would I want to do that?”

“Because that would be a far more interesting.”

“I’m not interesting enough?”

Shuri laughed. “Not particularly Peter, grow eight legs then get back to me on that. But stop trying to distract me. I know you have spider-senses and guess what I have Peter-is-about-to-get-into-some-deep-shit-senses.”

Peter groaned. “That’s not a thing.”

“It’s a thing trust me. I am fairly knowledgeable in discerning when someone is about to get into trouble. Peter I do not need you to be another white boy I have to fix. I have reached my maximum,” Shuri joked lightly, but underneath her voice was concern.

“I can’t just sit here Shuri and do nothing! It’s been almost a month since Tony has been gone and we haven’t found anything. Sure, we have some lady locked up and a few others, but they’re very dedicated to not saying anything. We are literally at the same point where were in, when he was taken. And it’s all my fault,” Peter ranted while pulling the rest of his suit out of his backpack.

“Whoa, slow down. Who on earth told you it’s your fault?” Shuri questioned.

“No one needs to tell me that. I do that all myself. I should have known something was off. There should have been something I didn’t see. I mean how do I have spider-senses and they can’t even tell me when someone close to me is hurting,” Peter rasped.

Shuri sighed softly. “That’s not how it works Peter.”
Peter threw his back aside. “Well that’s how it should work. How can I be a hero if I can’t save my own family? I couldn’t save Uncle Ben and now I can’t…”

A tense silence filled the lab and Steve wanted to step out and comfort the young teenager. Shuri instead spoke up.

“You know when my father died, I blamed myself,” Shuri started off shakily. “Every time the news came on I saw the destruction. And I thought to myself if I had created this suit for underneath my father’s business suit he would still be alive. If I had been there, I could have saved him. I could have done something.”

Peter stayed silent afraid of interrupting.

Shuri continued. “It lasted like that for a while. I fell ill and T’Challa had been no better. He did not have the time to grieve and then I blamed myself for grieving too much. Here my brother was to take my father’s place and I couldn’t even get out of my bed. I honestly can’t tell you when or how, but I had to start telling myself it wasn’t my fault. Sometimes bad things happen and evil people intercept our best laid plans. It is not through our actions that those events happen. My father is dead, but Tony is not. Do not let rash decisions for revenge keep you from being smart. Tony will hate it if you do something reckless and I am quite certain he will put baby protocol on your suit.”

Peter sighed and rubbed a hand on his face. “Maybe. I just…he was living right here Shuri and we never noticed. Miles was telling us the whole time and we didn’t listen. It’s hard not to feel like this is my fault, our fault.”

Shuri nodded, sad that Peter felt this burden. “I know.”

Peter sat down and looked at the screen that Shuri was on. “I just want to go out there and help. They won’t let me because they think I’m just some intern and then the one time I showed up as Spiderman Steve benched me saying I was too young.”

“They just want you to be safe.”

Peter scrunched up his face. “I’m safest, when I know Tony’s looking out for me.”

“Look don’t lose hope. I am certain you will all find Tony and we will all be arguing in our group chat, which by the way I’m still highly upset I’ve been reduced to using primitive methods of communicating.”

Peter smiled softly at the thought of their group chat. After Steve had mentioned the brilliance of Shuri and Wakandan technology, Tony had immediately reached out to T’Challa in hopes of getting in touch with Shuri. Shuri had accepted albeit a little reluctantly, when she had traveled back from Oakland. She had been checking on the center and the kids. Tony had flown out and the two automatically started excitedly discussing schematics and the like.

Shuri had accepted Tony’s phone with a grimace on her face as she put her number in. Nearly three days later Shuri and Peter had gathered to troll the two resident genius, Shuri mainly. Tony and Bruce would try debating over whether biomedical engineering or mechanical engineering are better and both of them would tease them. Peter was usually just Shuri’s hype man as she teased Tony.

“Yeah. The chat has been silent.”

“Yeah, it has.”

Shuri noticed Peter’s growing solemn nature and spoke. “So what is this I hear about you asking
Michelle out to the spring formal? We have a bet going on in the chat and I would very much like to win.”

“I don’t think your brother would approve of this princess,” Peter said blushing brightly. “And I don’t know if I am going to ask her anyways. Not sure she’s even going to go.”

“Sure, just say you’re an afraid little spider baby,” Shuri teased.

“I’m not afraid. I’m totally not afraid. I could ask her if I wanted to,” Peter childishly asserted.

“Oh, yeah? By the end of this week I would like a report. Do not disappoint me Parker,” Shuri laughed.

“End of the week!”

“Yes. My conditions are set. If my conditions are not met you will have to be my backup in getting T’Challa to agree to let me go to Coachella.”

“Shuri! I can’t talk to a king about Coachella,” Peter whined. “My first real conversation with him can’t be to help you go to Coachella.”

“Well, you better ask Michelle out. Hmm, now I’m thinking of making you go with me to Coachella. Yes, we can take lots of pictures and I will pick out all of your clothes. Because frankly what are thooose!”

“Shuri we have told you many times to stop saying that. We even had an intervention,” Peter said looking at his shoes placed beside his backpack, then back to the screen where Shuri’s face was alight with joy.

“Oh, please that was merely a suggestion. Also I do not appreciate how you all added T’Challa to the group chat that day to stage an intervention. If all of your shoe games were on point then I would have no desire to state that,” Shuri defended.

“My shoe game is on point!”

“I’ve seen a toddler have more shoe game than you.”

Steve left the lab quietly as the two continued to go back and forth and made note to thank Shuri later for taking Peter’s mind off of things. When Peter came back into the kitchen later at night to retrieve his dinner plate, Steve passed him on his way placing a hand on his shoulder comfortingly before disappearing into his room. He didn’t bring to attention the backwards shirt that barely concealed the bit of his Spiderman suit.

Day 35

His phone rang. Everyone in the conference room sat still, wondering if it was Cali saying she’s found the driver. Steve located the phone in his pocket, ignoring Fury’s motion to put in on speaker. Heart thundering in his chest, he wondered if she’s not calling to tell them good news.

He answered with a dry, “Hello.”

Cali’s voice sounded rushed and unfocused. “Look…Steve I need you to talk to Tony okay. You need to talk to him about anything, but here. No questions asked right now.”

“Is he alright?” Steve immediately asked taking the phone off speaker and turning away from the
penetrative expressions of his teammates.

Cali breathed out. “He needs to check back into his reality and I need you to be that string. I think I found the driver and I’ll tell you more later. Just talk to him until he falls asleep he should be sleep soon with what they’ve…” her voice breaks off. “Never mind.”

Steve wanted to inquire just what she was talking and about. However, he stopped short once he heard a voice breathe, “Ste…Steve?”

Steve stifled a noise of discontent over how drained Tony sounded. “Hey sweetheart it’s me. Did Cali tell you we’re close to finding you, hmm?”

Tony sighed a little and a cough echoed in Steve’s ear. “Steve? I don’t…you’re Steve?”

Steve’s frown deepened at the confusion laced in Tony’s voice. “Yes, your Steve. Cap. Capsicle.”

A huff of laughter.

“That’s…that’s good ‘fraid you were…”

“Shh, slow down Tony speak slowly you’re overexerting yourself,” Cali said.

“Always…always tired here Steve. I want to go home and see my son,” Tony slurred. “Are you coming to get me? Ryder…Ryder told me you pr’bly forgot. I…I figured that…true, but don’t forget me please…I just want to see my bambino. I promise I’ll be good and I’ve been patient. Ryder…he…he likes my patience I think, said I was bad at it before. Tryna…tryna be good. Is that why you haven’t find me yet? Gotta wait til I’m good?”

“No!” he yelled then added softly, “No, of course not Tony. Look Ryder’s lying to you okay, he’s trying to hurt you. He doesn’t care about you.”

Tony made a sound. “Doesn’t? Then no one cares. No one cares. Said you all don’t care…and if he doesn’t care. No one cares. No one cares for Tony,” he sang. “Steve?”

Steve bent over and held a hand to his chest. “Tony that’s not true. You have a lot of people who care. I love you. Miles loves and misses you like crazy. I caught Peter looking at his vlog videos of the two of you all night. Natasha was sitting in your lab, while she went through files. We care about you Tony.”

“Hmm. Yes, that sounds nice. I want you all to care. Want…want you to want me…need me,” Tony slurred. “I’m sleepy. Can I talk to my son?”

Steve groaned. “He’s at Karen’s right now, but I can give a call later.”

“No, don’t call. He might…Ryder might punish me again. He hasn’t punished me lately, he’s always saving me from those punishments…but Steve I don’t get it he gets people to drown me and then comes with a towel. Steve I don’t like it here.”

Steve hissed at the image of Tony being water boarded again. The others in the conference by then had tried listening into the conversation, but it was hard with it not being on speaker.

“Ryder is not good okay. He’s not saving you. He’s hurting you sweetheart, so stay strong okay. I need you to remember that we’re coming from you. We’ll find you soon and you’ll be back home.”

“And I’ll get a cheeseburger? I really want a cheeseburger Steve. They don’t…they only give me
these weird patches and say they’ll make me full, but they only make me tired. Cali snuck me a milkshake though and other food sometimes. She’s nice,” Tony slurred. “I’m sleepy. I can’t talk anymore.”

“That’s alright. You go to sleep and we’ll find you. I swear to you, we will find you soon. I love you,” Steve said.

Steve didn’t get the chance to hear Tony’s muffled response as Cali took the phone from him. “Thank you Steve. I’m trying my best to keep him focused, but with everything they’re giving him I can’t really keep him coherent.”

“What are they giving him? Is there a way you can make sure he isn’t feeling so tired,” Steve said.

“I started trying to give him the placebo patches, but when I’m not here Ryder has another CMPNY member administer the patches and pills. Also I don’t know what they do when I don’t have a shift. I’m trying to get more, but Ryder doesn’t like one person being the sole person,” Cali informed him.

“Have you gotten any more chances on finding the driver?”

“No, but I’m getting close. I knew his daughter and she said he’s somewhere in Venezuela. I just need to narrow down on who’s sighted him, but hopefully it should be soon,” she said. “I have to go Ryder will be back soon. But thank you for talking to Tony.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” Steve answered, but he wasn’t sure Cali had even heard him since the phone hung up shortly after she spoke.

Steve nearly broke the phone that was in his hand. He ignored the inquisitive looks that the others had as he passed to the gym. Steve didn’t even realize that he had spent an entire day down in the gym, until he looked at his bloodied knuckles and the clock hanging on the wall. He sat down and angrily pushed away the fact that he had wasted a day looking for Tony was holed up in the gym, when he should’ve been questioning CMPNY members. His frustration kept him awake well into the night and he figured he’d get rid of his pent up energy in some manner, before he pushed it on some underserving person.

**Day 36**

Bucky came into the gym, watching as Steve clumsily re-wrapped bloodied knuckles. He stood a safe distance as Steve stood back up and threw the rest of the medical wrap onto the floor. With his back turned, he hadn’t noticed the presence of Bucky in the gym. Bucky realized Steve must really be out of it for him not to take notice. For a few more minutes, Steve angrily punched at the bags growing more and more incensed. At one particular punch, the bag broke apart and crumbled to the floor.

Bucky cleared his throat alerting Steve of his presence. Steve turned around and Bucky winced at the appearance of Steve. He knew he hadn’t gotten much sleep, hell most of them hadn’t with trying to find this driver and still looking for other methods of finding Tony. But Steve seemed to not be sleeping at all and it showed.

Without saying anything, Bucky went toward Steve and motioned that he sit down. Steve complied and at the instruction seemed to slouch into himself. Bucky went to the stash of medical supplies they always had on hand in the gym and knelt by Steve. He took Steve’s hand in his and went about unwrapping the wrap and applying antiseptic wipes to Steve’s cuts. Bucky remained silent as Steve tried to control his breathing.
“I’m gonna kill him Buck. As soon as I see him, I don’t care what I have in my hand. Whether it be
by my shield or my hands, he is going to die,” Steve rasped on the verge of a broken cry. “He…I
can’t keep hearing Tony’s voice and how he sounded. Bucky he sound like he couldn’t even
breathe.”

Bucky suddenly gathered Steve into his arms and felt the tremors shake Steve’s shoulders. Steve
turned his face into Bucky’s neck. He tried reigning in his sobs, but Bucky wouldn’t have it. With a
soothing voice, Bucky told Steve to not hold it in anymore.

Steve’s sobs wracked his body and Bucky began to feel equally affected. He hadn’t remembered a
time Steve had cried this hard, since the day his mom died. Steve was often good at shielding his
emotions, so to see him like this tore Bucky’s heart.

Bucky felt his neck become damp as Steve continued crying to the point where his cries sounded like
wheezing. If Bucky wasn’t certain that the serum had cured his asthma, Bucky would have been
rushing Steve over to medical.

In between Steve’s sobs, he kept uttering how he was going to kill him and that grew to Bucky’s
discomfort. Realizing that Bucky had tensed up, Steve pulled away and looked at Bucky.

“Sorry,” he apologized, thinking the reason for Bucky’s tension was because of him sobbing onto
Bucky. “I…I didn’t mean to just unload on you like that. I don’t know what happened.”

“Don’t apologize for crying Stevie. Been so strong this past month, it was bound to happen. Can’t
keep all of that in,” Bucky calmly asserted.

A few seconds of silence passed, before Bucky spoke up. “You know I know you want to kill him.
I’m not saying that he isn’t deserving of death, but Steve I don’t want you to go to a point of no
return. People like me, Clint, and Natasha we can reach that point and return, because we have been
trained.”

“Can you reach that point where you can turn back?” Steve questioned angrily. “Sure, it wouldn’t
trigger the Winter Soldier?”

Bucky straightened his shoulder. It was only then that Steve noticed what he said and made hasty
efforts to apologize. Bucky waved off the concern.

“You’re right and I don’t know yet. I haven’t been placed in a situation where I am met with
returning. But at the end of the day, I was still built for that. I know how it feels to kill Steve and I
don’t want you to have any remorse. Killing through revenge can be detrimental to your mind Steve.
I just don’t want this to cost you.

“Bucky I am sure you think what you are saying is justified, but this is already costing me. Tony is
gone because of Ryder and it doesn’t seem like he will feel any remorse at doing anything to Tony.
At the end of the day I protect my own. If the only way I can ensure his protection, is to place my
shield through him I will do that,” Steve said, “and I will have no remorse.”

Bucky nodded his head twice. He still wasn’t certain of Steve killing Ryder, but that may be more so
to do with the fact that the deaths he caused were outside of his hand. Maybe if he hadn’t been
brainwashed to cause those deaths then quite possibly, Bucky would be readily agreeing with
Steve’s decision.

It seemed hypocritical to him that as a trained assassin he was against this revenge killing…but he
saw what killing had done. However, seeing this it had to be justified. Right?
“You know I’ll follow you.”

“To the end of the line,” Steve said.

“To the end of the line,” Bucky repeated. “Now how about you stop punching inanimate objects and start hitting something that can move.”

Bucky threw off his jacket and sent a lethal smile to Steve. Steve rushed forward.

Day 44

Cali entered the Tower nearly running, pulling alongside a man who looked to be in his late sixties. His wide frantic eyes skimmed everyone before him. Steve noticed the missing fingers first and his heart pounded viciously in his chest. Wanda was immediately called forth and sent out to ease the man’s fears.

Rhodey was quick to turn up at the news that the driver was here and everyone was quick to follow. Wanda set the man down and spoke softly to him.

“I’m just going to talk to you through your mind and hopefully you can help us find where Tony is, yeah?”

The man looked dazedly at Cali, before nodding his head. Cali remained for a few minutes, before having to head back. Wanda looked at Steve and nodded her head. Steve grabbed a nearby sketchbook and listened to Wanda as she relayed what she saw in the man’s mind.

Day 48

Frustration rested like a thick blanket in the tower. Agents and Avengers were armed alike, ready to go search the location. They were so close and were conscious not to make any mistakes. The driver had been entirely helpful, but there was still no room for error. Everyone was on their toes.

They surveyed the parameters of the location where the driver always dropped off whoever he was called to drive. From there they had about 600 mile radius to narrow done. Their weapons were drawn and their plan was set. It was time to find Tony and damn anyone who tried getting in their way.

Day 52

They found him.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to everyone who commented, gave a kudo, and left a bookmark. You all continue to make my day :)}
Chapter Notes

Word of advice to anyone working on a student film, make sure your producer reserves the location where you are supposed to be filming. Otherwise, you have to scout for a space and that causes you to have to schedule more filming times because things got pushed back, yay! On the other hand I love the cast and crew, they are special human beings and I love them. So thanks for letting me work on that!

And as promised here is the chapter! See you all again on Saturday ;)

P.S. I will also be reading and responding to comments soon (blame my producer for that lol)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His eyes focused lazily on the ceiling above him. He had grown to find interest in the most minimalistic things within these four walls that housed him for however long he was under Ryder’s care…control. He would try counting every now and then, going through different schematics and even refreshed his mind on his senior dissertation he did at MIT just so his mental space wouldn’t be blocked by those four fucking walls.

Sometimes he felt like he couldn’t breathe in those four walls. He got so tired of just staring at the near pristine walls as people came in and out marring his body with bruises. He wanted to be like the walls, unmarked. He wanted people to just stop touching him in this cold room.

It wasn’t fair how everything in this room was just so damn perfect. Every time Tony closed his eyes and woke up everything was placed back in their respective place. It annoyed him and it terrified him because he had no idea how long he was here, if nothing ever changed.

The only way he could tell that the days were steadily passing was when Ryder would come in wearing different outfits. However, sometimes he didn’t’ come and Tony was lost. He didn’t remember how long he had been gone.

Bleary eyes turned to stare at the door, which Tony knew was locked. He had tried many times to find a way out of this space, but there was no place of exit. He nearly begged Cali to just let him go and damn the consequences, at least he could try. There had to be some way to leave. She had helped last time, so why wasn’t she helping him now when he really needed it?

Supposed she had figured out for herself he wasn’t worth saving. After all her visits to his room had been few. It seemed recently she was always gone. He didn’t know why he expected her to stay.

Tony hated when she was gone because she took the last bit of kindness that he had left.

She was gone today.

He almost pleaded to just have her stay, if she wasn’t going to help him leave. It wasn’t fair that he had to stay here and she was able to leave. Tony struggled to face the fact that he had no autonomy. He had no control over what happened next. His body was nearly immobile and the first time Tony
realized he truly couldn’t move he had been sent into a panic attack.

Ryder had soothed the space between his brows, forced a pill between his lips and told him to swallow. Tony woke up disoriented and his limbs wouldn’t move at his own command.

He tried staying awake. He used to be so good at it. He could stay up for nearly 72 hours without a nap, but now he struggled to stay awake for five minutes. He had taken to removing the patches himself and hiding them under the mattress. Cali helped him with that at least, but it didn’t help. From whatever pills they were giving him, the alcohol, and he knew that they probably placed something in his food, the little food that he received.

He had never been so hungry in his life.

He stared back at the space between his legs. He looked at the fading purple patches and the hand shaped bruises circling his ankles where Ryder, after Tony having kicked him in the jaw, told Luka to hold him down as Ryder forced another pill down Tony’s throat.

He raised a hand to press against the cool skin of his thighs. He placed his hands underneath his thighs to warm them up. It was cold in the room, always freezing. It used to be warm. Tony didn’t know what he did to make Ryder change it to be so cold. If he had known he would have apologized, crap…he didn’t want to but he was going to catch hypothermia or frostbite, something. He remembered asking Ryder if he could just change the temperature. Tony nearly cried when Ryder changed the room temperature even lower.

Tony didn’t ask much for anything after that.

He rolled to his side and curled into himself, struggling to find warmth that his body just didn’t produce anymore. Ryder only let him wear his underwear and he had taken his blankets and pillows, when Tony had tried to smother Ryder at night. Ryder had been sleeping, a heavy presence behind Tony. Tony had slipped from the bed and climbed on top of Ryder and tried to smother him.

It would have worked if he wasn’t so drained and his hands wouldn’t have shaken so much from whatever drugs they were feeding him.

He heard the door open and then close. He tightly closed his eyes and tried evening his wheezing breaths. He curled his arms tightly around his arc reactor, the place he was most vulnerable. Usually, Ryder left him alone if he was sleeping.

“Oh, Tony. Are you cold?” Ryder questioned, situating himself near Tony. He ran his fingers alongside the flesh of Tony’s hipbone.

Tony stilled at the touch and tightened his eyes to the point where it hurt. His lips trembled with the need to chatter his teeth from the cold just radiating in the room. Ryder’s touch was hot against his skin, but sent a shiver throughout his body.

Ryder had not been with him sexually, but that is not to say that he hadn’t tried. Ryder had tried on many occasions, but Tony had remained steadfast with his decision to not let Ryder ever have him that way again. Ryder sometimes hit him as though physically proclaiming his disapproval. After the first few times, he apologized. He stopped shortly after when Tony would turn his face away.

Tony liked it better, when he didn’t apologize.

Cali tried helping him with stuff like this. She told him Ryder wasn’t forcing himself on him, mainly because Ryder wanted Tony to willingly come to him…not because he actually cared for Tony’s consent, but rather he wanted Tony to finally relinquish control of his body and hand it over to
Ryder. Ryder assumed getting Tony to finally say yes would be him receiving the last remaining power that Tony had left.

“Are you cold?” Ryder questioned again, leaning over to press a kiss against Tony’s eyelids. Ryder shrugged off his jacket and placed it over Tony’s shaking shoulders. “I know you’re awake. You know it hurts me, when you pretend that you’re sleeping. Is my presence truly that displeasing for you? Have I not given you enough food? Have I not made sure that you are bathed?”

Tony didn’t open his eyes, but replied to him, “Fuck you.”

Ryder’s hold on Tony’s hipbone tightened briefly, before relaxing. “I am sure you do not mean that. Surely, you wouldn’t say that to someone you love.”

And there it was again.

That stupid fucking proclamation. Ryder made sure to tell it to him almost daily as though repeating it enough might make Tony believe it. Tony almost had. He remembered a few days ago...or was it yesterday?

His face was wet and he couldn’t make the distinction between his tears and the water from the bathtub. Hands held his body steady as he was yanked from the bathtub. Water fell from his lips and he felt his body ready to collapse on himself. They had been going for what felt like hours. He hadn’t even known what he did so wrong. He didn’t even know if he had done anything wrong, it seemed like Ryder had been doing things just to prove he could. But then he would come into the bathroom, look at Tony and command it all to stop as though he hadn’t instructed for them to being that process in the first place.

He would later blame his haggard mental state for the slew of grateful proclamations rushing out of his mouth as Ryder pulled him away.

“Thank you. Thank you,” he repeatedly whispered clutching onto the towel that Ryder had placed around his shoulders.

“I’ve got you. I’ve got you,” he said wrapping the towel around Tony’s shaking form. “I’ve got you Tony. You know I would never hurt you. Never hurt someone I love. You know I love you. You have to know that someone you love would never hurt you.”

Tony’s head had fallen toward Ryder’s chest, his ear pressed against his collarbone. His mouth opened to say, “Yeah, I know.”

His eyes widened and he wrenched his body from Ryder’s. On shaky knees he quickly dried himself off and went toward the bed. He tried ignoring how his instinct wasn’t to fight anymore, but to be relieved would Ryder would come in the bathroom.

He hated himself all the more for falling into the belief that he was thankful even if it was an internal thought.

Ryder kissed the spot behind Tony’s ears and leaned back. “I’m going to be gone for the rest of the day. I do hope that you will behave. I have a wonderful present for you, when I do return.”

“Take the present and shove it up your-”

Ryder interrupted Tony’s statement with a harsh bite to his bottom lip. “Ah, now there’s the feistiness that I hate to love. You are certainly a picture of beauty, it is a shame that Steve didn’t realize what he had in front of him. Otherwise he probably would have found you sooner. Guess,
you didn’t give him reason enough to look for you. Do you want to know how long it has been? How long they haven’t been looking for you?”

Tony ignored the throbbing in his bottom lip and turned his back to Ryder. He didn’t want to know how long it had been. What good would that do?

“52 days.” Ryder exclaimed giddily. “It’s been 52 days, since we’ve been together and they haven’t found you. Probably realized their resources were better spent elsewhere. So sad, is it not? You give your all to them and they don’t even give you an inch. I’m sure that if your precious Steve had gone missing they would have find him at the most within three days.”

Tony kept in a sob.

They probably would have.

“But that’s okay. I love you and that’s enough for you. Well I am off. I’ll be back before you know it,” he leaned down and pressed a kiss against Tony’s cold back.

Tony closed his eyes and waited for Ryder to leave. When he was gone, he surveyed his body quickly and stared at the purple patches. He spat out the pill that Ryder had fed him, which he had been hiding under his tongue. After he was done, he was drained. Ryder would at least be gone until the end of the day. If he got just a little rest without the pill and without the patches, he could maybe wake up and figure out a way out of this hellhole.

Tony closed his eyes once more and fell asleep.

He woke to two hands moving in circles under his knees. He raised a hand to push at the hands, but was stopped in his movement. He blinked his eyes several times before he saw two figures sitting on the bed beside him. One man and one woman. With his heart in his chest, he tried pulling away.

“Well, well, well. It looks like sleeping beauty finally decided to join the land of the living,” the man said, smiling greedily at Tony. “I always wondered why Ryder wouldn’t let us come up here. He’s so very selective with who he brings to his inner circle. Though looking at you I can see why, you are a gorgeous little thing.”

“Get off of me,” Tony rasped making his body rise from its lying position. “You should go now, before you get in trouble.”

“Trouble? Oh, it’s sweet that you are so concerned.” The woman smirked. “Honestly Jack, I have seen better. How much do you think we’ll get for him?”

“Oh, he’s Tony Stark. We could easily rake in a lot of money. I’m almost offended that Ryder chose to hole up this amount of cash in these walls. Just think if we took him right now.”

“Mmm,” the woman sighed. “He’s all marked up and bruised. You think they would pay well for a Stark that looks like this?”

“Hey,” Tony snapped angrily. “I don’t know what type of ransom scheme you have planned, but it’s not going to work.”

“What if we told you we ransomed you to your precious Avengers? I mean, you’re looking to get out of here aren’t you? Surely, if we were to sell you to the highest bidder the Avengers would come running,” the woman teased. “I know you are ready to leave, I mean this has to hurt doesn’t it?”

She leaned over and pressed a nail into a bruise. Tony let out a string of curses as she pierced her
skin into the skin, small drops of red tainting her finger. She leaned back.

“But you know what, I think we should have some fun before we send you off to the highest bidder.

“Yeah, I don’t think so. Tony Stark is sold to no bidder,” Tony said kicking his legs out and running to the door, where he knew they had forgotten to lock it. He almost made it, before Jack reached out and grabbed his ankle causing Tony’s body to fall to the ground.

His shoulder made a sickening crunch and he had no doubt that if his ribs hadn’t been broken, they were sure to have been broken now.

He kicked out and was satisfied to see Jack’s jaw lock at the hit. The woman ran to the door and locked it, placing the key in her back pocket. She angrily looked at him.

“You’re filthy. I think he needs a bath before we go out and send him away to the trader, right?”

“Hey, we don’t have time for this. I thought we needed to make him disappear before Ryder returned. He didn’t say he was leaving for a long time,” the man stressed holding Tony’s legs tightly together.

“No, we’re going to have some fun first. Seeing him immobile like this, it isn’t fair that we shouldn’t get to partake in this fun.” she explained. “I’ve heard around that Tony Stark loves water.”

Jack sighed and did as was instructed. “Rene, this…I thought we were just…”

He stopped at the look Rene gave him. Jack pulled Tony up to his feet. Tony played up this idea of being weak. Sure, he wasn’t fully energized, but he was better than he had been with the exclusion of those patches. If he could just get them into a false sense of security, was his last thought before his body was submerged into the cooling water leftover from that morning’s session.

“Don’t touch me, stop touching me,” he said every single time their hands wrapped around his shoulders and pushed him in the water. “Stop fucking touching me.”

He allowed that for three more times, holding his breath and counting the seconds. On the fourth time, he locked onto the hands holding him and pushed the body down into the water. Jack fumbled a bit in shock from his place behind Tony.

Tony stood up, staggering on his feet. He grabbed onto Rene first pushing her face down into the water and then pulling her up and throwing her body into Jack’s. Jack fell back with the impact and narrowed his eyes at Tony.

Tony reached down into the bathtub and grabbed a hold of the metal drainer, thankful that it wasn’t attached to the tub. He took their moment of shock and went toward them, pushing down the drainer into Rene’s collarbone.

“Crap, Jack! What the hell? Get him!” the woman screeched wiping her face and flicking the water angrily at the ground. “Where’s the patches? Fuck.”

Jack reached out and held him down, taking patches out of his pocket and blindly putting them on Tony. Rene held him down, forcing pill after pill down his throat. Tony scratched at her neck, but Rene seemed immovable. She opened his mouth and didn’t care if he tried choking up the water that she was forcing down his throat to make the pill go down. She looked at him angrily, as though he was deserving of this punishment.

Tony knew he didn’t have long before those patches and pills began to affect his body. He closed his
eyes and tried channeling the last bit of energy he had. He didn’t know if it was truly the fear of not knowing what would happen if he was sold or whether Tony had gotten so tired of people touching him without his fucking permission…but whatever and wherever the energy came from he was thankful.

He didn’t know what happened next. He just remembered water, bodies being thrown against walls, and bones crunching.

He looked at the bodies lying down on the ground. His breathing came out in harsh rasps and he felt his heart nearly ache to be out of his chest.

But they…they were going to sell him. Ryder promised him…he promised him he at least would never do anything to seriously harm him. But when Ryder was gone? He looked at the two unconscious bodies and felt proud. He hadn’t let them touch him. He did good. He didn’t let them touch him. If Ryder was here, he would have saved him earlier. Only Ryder could…

Tony reared back and fell to the floor. He brought his hands to his head and pulled at the hair there. No. No. No.

Ryder couldn’t touch him either. He couldn’t touch him, but when he got back and saw how bad he had been he would punish him. He couldn’t touch him. No one could touch him.

Ryder would touch him in a bad way this time. He rarely handed out punishments himself anymore, but if he came back to see this. Ryder would touch him.

Or would he wrap him up in and towel and speak softly to him as he usually did when he had those waterboarding sessions?

Would that be so wrong?

If Steve and the others were never going to find him, would it be so wrong to want that softness?

He didn’t know. He stood up for himself, but he felt sick. He felt like vomiting and expelling whatever concoction they put in his mouth. He felt like screaming at his mind telling him he wanted Steve, but Steve wasn’t coming. It had been 52 days.

It had been 52 days and no one had come for him.

He closed his eyes because at least in his dreams they came for him. There he could pretend that he wasn’t being left in the cold once more.

When they finally sound the location, they hadn’t wasted anytime in going. The Avengers and SHIELD agents were there. They had entered the building, an underground space in the heart of a woody area some thousands of miles from the tower.

They had separated, choosing to search different places to cover more ground and make the search faster. They hadn’t need of making a plan. The plan was simple. Find Tony.

Natasha found him first curled into a ball shaking. Her eyes then noticed the two bodies lying unconscious around him. She wasn’t too concerned with them. She could still see their chests rising softly. Her heart nearly broke when she was Tony push himself further into the wall. Sure, they had found Tony. But they didn’t know what had gone on for those 52 days that he was missing.
She pressed her earpiece and said, “Found Tony. Sixth floor, room number 608.” She cut it off because she needed to focus on getting to Tony and not on the responses that her statement would have.

Natasha walked toward him slowly holding her hands out to him. “Hey, Tony.”

Natasha was startled by the hazy blank expression of Tony. His body shook so violently Natasha was briefly scared that he may shake his body into a near convulsion. He shook his head back and forth as Natasha stepped closer to him.

“You can’t touch me. Nope can’t touch me. No touching. You’re not going to touch me,” he repeated over and over, his eyes widening fearfully. “Can’t…Ryder promised. He promised. No more touching. No more touching.”

“Tony, kotononok,” she said hoping the Russian term would soften her voice and smooth over how her voice trembled. “I need to put this towel on you okay? Can I…”

She grabbed a towel and went to put it on his shoulders, when Tony let out a bloodcurdling scream pushing his body back.

“I said no touching! Why doesn’t any…anyone listen? No touching. No more touching. Stop. Please stop touching,” he said wild eyes settling anywhere, but where Natasha was standing. “Go away. Ryder’s coming back. He’s…he’s coming. Have to…hafta be good so he doesn’t hurt my baby. Go away now. G’way.”

His voice became more slurred. He shook his head and kept repeating the same mantra to himself. The shaking of his body became more violent. Natasha stepped forward and Tony screamed again, his hands tore at the patches on his skin. Her eyes traveled to the scratch marks around the patches and wondered how long he had been trying to get them off.

Natasha went to him and tried to help him with taking them off, while also trying to see just how unfocused his eyes were. Tony’s wet body nearly slid across the floor.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” Natasha said as she began pulling off the patches. She didn’t know what they were, but she knew that Tony at some subconscious level was trying to get them off. Natasha didn’t want to hurt Tony. She never wanted to hurt Tony, but she knew that he was on something.

“I’m so sorry,” she said reaching forward again to peel away the purple and fading patches.

“No touching! No more touching,” Tony screamed hands pushing away Natasha’s. His words caught on sobs, each cry a fragment of its own kind. His eyes went back and forth.

Natasha held him steady. He was too weak to appropriately fight her off. She hated how he kept letting out pained moans. His body shook and Natasha was worried that he was quickly growing sick with fever.

Natasha hoped they found Ryder just so she could put her knife in between his eyes. Images filtered in her hand, but she had to stop herself. Her main focus was Tony. Tony was starting to shake.

“Fuck,” Natasha whispered to herself. “What did they give you Tony? Can you tell me what they gave you? What these patches are?”

“No touching. Get off of me,” Tony said bucking up his hips to push her off of him.

Natasha ground herself closer more so to keep Tony upright. “Come on Tony. Just tell me what they
gave you? You remember the color?"

His shaking wouldn’t stop. His eyes started to loll back and his shoulders slump forward. Natasha narrowed her eyes and pressed her hand against Tony’s back. “I’m so sorry. You have to stay awake. Come on.”

“Get off me! No one listens! I said stop touching me. Why are you touching me?” Tony cried eyes hurriedly looking at everything in the bathroom, searching for any method of attack. “Stay back.”

“Tony. It’s Natasha. I’m not going to hurt you okay,” she claimed trying to break through the haze that had settled around Tony’s mind.

Natasha worried her bottom lip between her teeth. Ignoring Tony’s cries and weak pushes, she gathered him in her arms and pulled a misplaced towel. She leaned him back against her chest and looked toward the door waiting for someone to come in and help her because she’s lost.

He struggled against her, arms throwing about wildly nearing knocking her in the chin. She grabbed a hold of his arms and kept him steady. His body began to slowly lose its fight, no doubt being tired from whatever he had taken. Natasha slowly lowered his body until his head was resting on her lap.

She looked toward the door, hoping that someone in medic would have come up by now.

She’s so lost and she’s never been this terrified before.

Tony looked up at her from his spot on her lap and for a brief second his vision cleared. The chattering of his teeth broke up a few words, but Natasha was able to piece together, “Natasha? That…you’re here? You all finally came? Steve? Steve here?”

Natasha wrapped the towel tighter around his shoulders. She sighed in relief, shoulder slumping from released tension. “Yes, we’re all here. I’m sorry it took us so long.”

“It’s okay. You did it faster this time,” he mumbled against her stomach.

“This time?” she wearily questioned.

“Yeah, last time you came a year later. Has it been a year in this dream?”

Natasha had to stop her fingers from tightening on the space holding the towel. She sighed in relief, shoulder slumping from released tension. “Yes, we’re all here. I’m sorry it took us so long.”

“Tony shook his head. “No, this is a dream. It’s always a dream. When I wake up, you’ll be gone and he’ll be there. He’s always there. It’s okay…Nat why are you sad? You’re never sad in my dreams.”

He scrunched up his face at Natasha’s worried glance. Natasha hooked her fingers around the back of his neck, meeting a patch. She smoothly took it off and watched Tony’s eyes blink to stay awake. Natasha did everything she could to make sure Tony wouldn’t fall asleep. Looking at the blood slowly trailing from his temple, he might have had a concussion.

“This isn’t a dream, Tony,” she tried explaining. “I promise you.”

“Nope, you can’t make promises in my dreams,” Tony slurred, his voice tilted with a type of lightness that Natasha found haunting. “Promises are never kept so we don’t make them in my dreams. No promises, no promises.”

Natasha grit her teeth and ignored the urge to bring to consciousness the two individuals lying just
outside the bathroom and bringing them within an inch of death.

“This is a nice dream. Hate…hate when I have to wake up,” he muttered into Natasha’s stomach.

“Hey, no Tony. Can’t fall asleep,” Natasha soothed raising his head and gently pressing her hand into his back.

“Already am asleep?” he questioned, eyes blinking slowly.

Natasha was just about to respond, when she heard footsteps. She straightened her shoulders and moved that her body was covering Tony’s completely. She only relaxed slightly, when she saw who those footsteps belonged to.

Steve came in, followed by Bucky. Tony turned his head to the two and the hazy expression was back in them.

“This is a dream. When I wake up, you’ll be gone. You’re always gone. You’ll be gone, like always. It’s just a dream, just a dream,” Tony sings.

“What took you so long,” Natasha muttered frustratingly, trying to cool her anger. She wasn’t angry at Bucky and Steve showing up minutes later, while she had to listen to Tony’s hoarse screams. She was angry at herself for not knowing how to help, for not seeing that he needed help before all of this happened.

Steve stared at the two unconscious bodies first, before his eyes rested on Tony who was resting in Natasha’s lap. The towel did little to cover the rest of Tony’s bare skin. Anger grew deep within him as he noticed with a sinking unease that barely any of Tony’s skin was unmarked with bruises or scratches. But his eyes, his expressionless eyes were the most chilling thing about this picture.

When Steve had finally taken the time to get to know Tony, he slowly realized that beyond the wall Tony had placed in front of himself he was rather expressive in his eyes. If one looked beyond the display he wanted to portray and actually took the time to look into his eyes, one would see stories there.

Steve had never remembered Tony looking so empty…not since he left him in…

“Hey, no. You can’t go there right now. Steve,” Bucky said sharply pressing his metal hand into the lower back of Steve. “Not now.”

Steve let the red haze disperse before him, coolly settling into something that he would be addressing later. Bucky was right though, right now wasn’t the time.

“This is a dream. You’ll be gone.”

“No, sweetheart we won’t be gone. Tony we’re here and we’re going to help you now. Okay? Will you let me pick you up?”

“We need medic now. He’s on something and I don’t know what,” Natasha said from her place on the floor, cradling Tony’s head on her lap. “He’s been muttering about this is a dream.”

Tony looked at Steve. “I like my dreams. In them you always care about me. Always love me in my dreams. But when I wake up you leave me. Always leave me. Left me in the cold once and in the cold again. I don’t want to wake up this time. It’s too cold. Always too cold.”

Steve’s heart sank and he held back from collecting Tony into his arms, but at the same time he
wanted nothing more than to find Ryder and put his shield through his neck. Tony kept babbling a mixture of this being a dream then altered into screams of him not wanting anyone to touch him.

His heart thundered in his chest. His fingers trembled with the need to reach onto anything. But Bucky was right, now wasn’t the time. Not when Tony needed him.

Steve turned back to Bucky confliction apparent in his expression. Bucky shook his head. “You take Tony to the hospital and we’ll canvas the area. He couldn’t have been able to get too far. Plus we have SHIELD helping. Go Stevie. You and Natasha take off. I’ll tell the others.”

Steve nodded, all the while trying to ignore Tony hoarsely screaming at them not to touch him. Steve wished he had brought a jacket so Tony could have something more than a thin towel covering his body. How cold did a room even need to be?

Tony pushed at Steve’s chest and tried to further the distance between them. “Let go of me! Let go of me! I said no touching! No more touching. Stop,” he cried tears now running freely down his cheek.

“Kotyonok you have to calm down. You’re going to work yourself into an attack,” she said soothing the curling strands of Tony’s hair. “Shh, it’s alright.”

Natasha pushed her body forward and motioned for Steve to help hold Tony. Tony’s limbs thrashed and Steve had to wrap his arms tightly around his body to keep himself restrained. Steve could feel the tremors in Tony’s body as he slowly began losing his energy.

“Steve?”

Steve looked down to him. “Yes.”

“I don’t like it when I wake up. Do I have to wake up this time? In my dream, dream Steve finds me always. When I wake up, he doesn’t.” Tony said. “I wake up just as we leave this room. I don’t know what’s outside of it anymore.”

“It’s okay. You’re safe sweetheart. You’re safe,” Steve whispered as he led them out of the room, trying not to think of how much he failed Tony that he had to rely on some dream version to find him, with no hopes of the real Steve ever doing so.

Where did things go so wrong?

Tony shook his head and pushed weakly at the warmth he wanted to lean in toward. “Ryder’s gonna come when I wake up.”

“Ryder won’t be alive when you wake up,” Natasha said, her voice coming like an echo in his ear.

“Sure. That would be nice, if this wasn’t a dream,” Tony rasped. “But it is. Why…why are we talking so much? Other times you just come and I get a cheeseburger. I like those dreams. This one you both are sad. Need to…needa wake up and go to sleep and try again. Something’s wrong with this dream.”

The hold tightened. Tony’s fell asleep, despite Steve’s worried urges of not doing so. He was so tired. Besides he knew, when he woke up he would be back just where he started. Steve wasn’t coming for him. No one was coming for him. He just wasn’t worth it. He only hoped that they would take care of Miles.
A doorbell rang.

“Kjærlighet, hvem er ved døren?” a man’s voice rang out.

“Jeg vet ikke. Jeg skal svare. Var vi ventet noen?” a woman voiced, heading to the front door. She stepped over misplaced toys and tried brushing her hair back in a manner that seemed appropriate.

She looked through the keyhole and saw a man of presentable nature. Her husband didn’t really like opening the door to strangers, but she figured that he was probably just some business man trying to sell some security home system.

She opened the door and warmly greeted him, “Hello, er det noe jeg kan hjelpe deg med?”

The man stared blankly at him and furrowed his brow. The woman repeated her question. The confused glare increased.

“I’m sorry. I don’t happen to speak Norwegian,” the man apologized, his cheeks flushing a deep red color. The woman noted it was almost rather adorable how he seemed to be truly apologetic of not knowing Norwegian, though she supposed it had to do with the fact that he was in Norway.

The woman waved her hand and apologized. “Sorry, I just naturally assume everyone speaks Norwegian. We haven’t had an American visitor in sometime. Are you here trying to sell something? If so, my husband and I would love to help, but we just do not have the money to do so right now.”

“Oh, no that is not what I came here for. I just…I am you could say an old friend of your husband’s. I was recently in town for a business trip and decided to come visit him,” he explained, dismissing her concern.

The woman’s eyes brightened. “Oh! A friend? You know he’s never really mentioned having any friends from back home. But I will tell him. Hold on.”

She cracked the door and yelled inside, “Honey, someone’s at the door for you. You know you look just like my husband, if he were to grow his hair out a little bit,” she said leaning against the front door. She turned her head aside and hoped he couldn’t see the whole mess that was her house. “I am awfully sorry for all the mess. The kids still haven’t grasped the concept of cleaning up after themselves.”

She laughed at herself, while kicking back a doll that had found its way outside the front door. “Now I’m sorry. I don’t think I caught your name.”

The woman turned her attention to him. He cleared his throat. “It’s Ryder ma’am.”

“Ryder,” she said slowly. Just as she was connecting the dots, a man entered the living area carrying a small toddler on his hip.

The man stopped short, his eyes landing on the visitor.

The visitor smirked and opened his arms. “You know you haven’t made it really easy to find you little brother.”

Chapter End Notes
I'm so sorry, y'all feel free to throw coal at me...I promise it will get better soon. Comfort is going to come like a gentle breeze.

Thanks again to everyone who commented, gave a kudo, and left a bookmark. You all continue to make my day :)

[1] Kjærighet, hvem er ved døren: Love who is at the door.
[3] Hello, er det noe jeg kan hjelpe deg med: Is there something I can help you with?
Steve didn’t know what to do. He didn’t know what to do with his hands. He didn’t know how to make sure his team didn’t fall apart around him, while they all stayed stagnant in the waiting room. They had since all come back here, after tearing apart every single inch of the CMPNY headquarters. Every single member in that group had all been sent to the Raft. Steve had been unwilling to send a sympathetic glare to any of them, even those who had pleaded for their innocence. They had stayed there, knowing full well what Ryder was doing to Tony. That didn’t even include the business he was holding, experimenting on some of his members.

He hadn’t even hesitated, when Bucky called in asking what to do with them. What to do with Cali was a whole other issue. Could he send her to the Raft, knowing full well she was one of the main reasons they were able to find Tony? But she had been there and the only reason she actually helped was on the promise of her sister being unharmed.

He left that decision alone for a while.

Steve looked down at his hands, running his hands over the healing marks where Tony had tried scratching his way out of his hold, screaming for Tony not to touch him. He could see Tony’s unfocused eyes looking everywhere, but to the man holding him as if he was terrified. Tony had nearly pleaded that they just let him go or that he didn’t want to wake up.

His eyes burned bright with tears. He turned his head to the side so Natasha wouldn’t see him. Natasha remained stoic beside him, shoulders taut with tension. He wished for a moment he had her strength, or the strength to at least appear that he was handling this better than he actually was. However, there was a moment she slipped. Sometimes she too would stare at her hands and let out a raspy breath, before controlling herself and allowing an impassive expression take place.

Rhodey was leaning against a wall, unwilling to sit down even if his leg was giving him pain. He wanted to be ready at any time, if a doctor happened to call upon him saying Tony was awake. He was in conversation with Pepper. Both of them spoke in hushed tones. Pepper wiped wearily at her eyes and shook her head at something Rhodey said. Rhodey in turn nodded and stared in front of him, motioning with his hand to a vending machine. The two quickly parted from the group and headed toward the machine, but not before asking if anyone wanted anything.

Steve didn’t.

He felt nauseated just thinking about eating food, while Tony was somewhere in the hospital being looked over by nurses and doctors.

He looked back down at the scratches and could distinctly outline which ones from where Tony had pushed him away and which ones were from Tony urging him to stay. He shakily ran a finger over the scratch, remembering Tony’s lost eyes as doctors tried to get him on the gurney and be led to his
He remembers him thrashing nearly knocking the doctor’s head. He remembered him yelling that he wasn’t going back again. Steve had only managed to pull himself away, when Natasha eased Tony’s tight grasp off of Steve’s hands.

A doctor came in, holding a clipboard in her hand. Steve looked at Rhodey and Pepper, who had just come at the right time. Rhodey led Pepper to a chair, beside Bruce who had his head tilted back. Pepper sat down and the doctor took that as her time to finally begin speaking.

“How’s he doing Helen?” Bruce said, being the first to speak as he tilted his head to look at her.

Helen bit her lip and sighed. “Right now we have him sedated. Tony was rather irritable and highly agitated. Whatever drugs he was on, those patches and pills…by the way Bruce I may need your help on further analyzing its contents.”

Bruce nodded, before Helen continued. “As I was saying those drugs were causing overexcitement of his neurotransmitter systems, making him potentially dangerous to himself. I know he has been sleeping a lot as you explained, Steve. However, we best figured that if he were to be sedated we could assess the things that could potentially kill him.”

“Kill him,” Clint choked leaning forward. “What…is that something that we need to be concerned about?”

Clint looked at her unwaveringly. Steve turned to him and for the first time saw just how much this experience had aged all of them in the 52 days that Tony had been missing. Clint blinked owlishly and fearfully, as though her answer would destroy him, if it wasn’t what he desired.

Steve was certain he would be destroyed, if Helen would say yes. He detached his gaze from Clint to look back at Helen.

“It is a concern yes,” Helen said truthfully, “one we have addressed. The next few hours will be critical. I must be honest with you all. Tony does have a high drug content. The state he was in mirrors that of an overdose patient and then you add the concussion, fractured ribs, esophageal damage due to his body ridding itself of its stomach’s acid contents on a frequent basis, probably due to the large amounts of alcohol we see.”

“And?” Pepper questioned, her voice breaking. “And…did you? Find any evidence of that?”

Helen stopped talking and looked at all of them. Everyone paused, breath being forced out of their lungs knowing fully well what Pepper was asking.

Helen shifted on her feet uncomfortably. “I am sorry, but there are some things that I cannot address to all of you. Also even then that is up to the discretion of my patient. We will only perform an examination, upon Tony’s permission as such rules dictate.”

Helen looked at them and noticed their desperation. She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose, hating how Tony had been taken apart like this. She looked back to her clipboard then back to him.

Something must have given away in her expression because the next thing she knew there was a sharp exhale from Rhodey and the sound of Thor breaking the chair’s arm handle, he was sitting in.

Steve immediately got up and walked slowly out of the waiting room, ignoring the concerned glances of everyone else. Once out of sight, he quickly ran to the restroom. He swung open the door and ran to the toilet expelling all of the nonexistent contents he had in his stomach.
He leaned over and began dry heaving at the point, trying to control his sobs as he heard the door open. He muffled his noises with the back of his hands, ignoring how the tears felt hot on his skin. The door to his stall opened.

He looked up, expecting Bucky or Natasha to have found him. But when bleary eyes, met the eyes of Clint he tried shakily wiping away his tears.

Clint closed the restroom stall door behind him and sat down in that cramped space. Steve tried saying something, but then his mind would go back to the list of Tony’s injuries and the list of unspoken trauma that he been inflicted on him.

And he threw up again, the acid scratching against the back of his throat. Clint left for a minute and then came back and placed a wet towel in Steve’s hand. Steve wiped his mouth with it and also took from Clint the piece of gum he was offering.

The two sat in silence for a few minutes not able to say anything. What could they say? That everything would be okay? That felt like a lie, even before it was felt on his tongue. That Tony was strong and he would recover in no time? That sounded awful and dismissive of what Tony went through, expecting him to hurry his process of recovery just because those around him wanted him to be okay.

And damn if Tony wouldn’t try to pretend to do exactly that. Exactly what he has been doing, with no one being the wiser.

He tried to force back the acid.

It came up anyways.

The gum fell out of his mouth with it.

Clint offered him another and went to grab another wet towel. They continued sitting there in that cramped stall listening to people come in and out, not knowing that two of the world’s mightiest heroes were off hiding because they didn’t know what to do.

Steve wiped his mouth again. He stood on shaky legs, helped up by Clint’s outstretched hand. Steve took it gratefully and nearly had to lean on Clint for support. Clint did the same. The two left the restroom, ignoring the curious glances they got from the guy washing his hands.

Steve’s glad that Clint came into that restroom stall. He loved Bucky and Natasha. He truly did, but he knew they would try talking to him, offering words of comfort, but what he needed right then was silence. There were too many things going on in his head at that moment.

They both walked back to the waiting room, where Helen had since then left. Steve sat down and Bucky turned to him. Steve leaned his head down between his knees and tried ignoring how weak he felt, knowing there was nothing he could do.

Natasha was the first to speak, “They said they are letting visitors in. He won’t be awake, but they said it’s helpful to talk to him. Rhodey and Pepper are with him now. You can go next, if you want?”

Steve shook his head. “I’ll…I’ll go last, if that’s okay.”

“You’re sure?” Natasha asked softly.

Rhodey and Pepper arrived shortly after, looking a little worse for wear. Pepper had wanted to stay
until Tony woke up, but she needed to go back and check on the kids. When they told Pepper that they found Tony, Pepper had hurriedly sent the kids to May who was willing to watch over them, while she met them at the hospital.

The boys had all wanted to come, but without knowing what state Tony was in it was best they wouldn’t come until he was at least awake. Peter and Harley had been highly annoyed at that, as expected. Miles had also been angry, hearing from Peter and Harley that his baba was back, but wasn’t able to see him.

Rhodey exclaimed he would go with Pepper to May’s.

The Avengers filtered in and out of the waiting room and into Tony’s, until finally Steve was the last one to go visit.

Steve slowly walked to the room. He stopped short of entering, hating the monotonous beating of the heart monitor and the near pristine walls of the hospital. He then finally allowed himself to rest his eyes on Tony’s unmoving figure.

The blankets nearly swallowed his whole frame and did nothing to bring to life the color in his cheeks. It only served to further darken this whole atmosphere. Tony would hate that when he woke up. Without thinking, he ran to the gift shop and bought an assortment of colorful things. He dressed the room up, ignoring everyone’s looks as he went back and forth until he was satisfied with how the room looked.

He looked back at Tony and it did nothing to lighten him up. If anything, it only served to show how pale he had gotten against the brightness of the once dull room. He walked and then stopped as though he was afraid that his closeness would break Tony.

He sat down in the chair and grabbed ahold of Tony’s hand, the one that didn’t have an IV drip stuck in it. He ran his fingers over the cooling skin of Tony. He remembered how cold Tony had been. He then took of his jacket that Pepper had brought back from the tower.

He placed it over Tony’s shoulder, looking at how the thick material seemed to swallow him up. Steve went back to holding his hand. He watched the steady rise and fall of Tony’s chest.

“I know you’re probably not going to hear me, but I am so sorry Tony,” Steve brokenly rasped. “I am sorry for failing you again. I try telling myself that I’m trying to be better, trying to be a better person, but I’m not. How can I save people I don’t even know, when I can’t save the one person that I love?”

Steve breathed and felt a lump catch in his throat. He swallowed, forcing it away.

“I don’t know what to do and that’s selfish. I’m concerned over what I will do, when this directly affected you. I have all these feelings of anger and blind rage that I want to kill Ryder. He hurt you Tony…he hurt you.”

He brought their hands to his lips and kissed Tony’s palm. “He hurt you and I didn’t know. We’ve been living together again for almost half a year. Pepper tells me you were with him for a year and I don’t know why. I don’t know why you stayed with him. I don’t know how long this has been going on, but it doesn’t matter how long or how short the time frame was…he laid his hands on you and fuck…”

Steve broke off and dropped Tony’s hands.

“And the only thing I can think of is that, you honestly think you deserved that treatment,” Steve
slowly said as though finally realizing what he suggested. “Is that what you think? That you deserved this?”

Steve wouldn’t know what to do, if Tony were to answer his question with a yes.

“I need you to wake up for me, please sweetheart and tell me that you know you didn’t deserve this. I need to make sure you know what that sick abuser did was wrong. I need to see those brown eyes that I love and see that I haven’t lost you,” Steve hoarsely exclaimed. “I need to know how to do better for you. I can’t lose you, Tony. You hear me. I won’t lose you. I just got you back again.”

Steve wondered to himself why he was saying all of this to an unconscious Tony, but his words just continued to pour out of himself. He couldn’t control what he was saying any more than he could control what was going on in his head.

“I love you. I love you so I need you to wake up, so you can see that fucker be put down,” he cursed, thinking to how Tony would have jokingly made a remark on his language. “I don’t know what you’ll need, but I’ll be there for you no matter how long it takes. Ma always said that you can wait forever for the ones you love.”

He bit his lip. He stared back at Tony’s sleeping face and longed for the bright eyed expression of Tony. He let his thoughts stay between himself as he looked around the room. He was so caught up in his thoughts and looking at Tony, that he hadn’t heard the door open behind him.

“Steve, visiting hours are over,” Helen announced. “You are certainly free to wait in the waiting room with the rest of your team, until visiting hours begin again.”

“I can’t leave,” he choked. “Please, don’t make me leave.”

Helen looked at his downtrodden face and sadly remarked to him, “Fine, but don’t do anything that could potentially cause harm to my patient. I’m doing this because I honestly don’t think any patient should ever wake up alone and if by chance he wakes up soon, I think it would be nice to see a familiar face instead of the nurse who tried sticking him with needles.”

Steve nodded hurriedly.

A nurse brought in an extra blanket and pillow. Steve felt for Tony’s hand and noted, displeasingly, the still cold nature of it. He placed the blanket on top of his jacket and leaned his head down to rest on the spot near Tony’s lap.

Listening to the beat of the heart monitor and Tony’s hand between his, Steve allowed his eyes to fall shut.

When he woke up, the first thing he noticed was the hand in his clenching and unclenching. He rose from his lying position and noticed Tony was awake and looking at him.

Tony looked up at him through hazed eyes and smiled. “You know I think someone promised me a cheeseburger? I think that was you Cap. So how about we blow this Popsicle stand and leave. I promise I won’t tell anyone you’re my accomplice. Also how does my face look? Your grasp on my hand was pretty tight, so I couldn’t leave to go to the restroom, which by the way is kind of far. But you know I’m perfectly fine, so I don’t even know what the hassle is, every single nurse checking on me. Also hello boundaries? Though Helen provided nice eye candy in this otherwise dismal place, I need to leave.”

“No. Don’t do that Tony. Please don’t do that,” Steve said. His eyes were red and it looked as though he hadn’t slept.
“Don’t do what?” Tony said, his expression clearing off. “I said a lot of things. Also don’t do things is pretty much like asking me to do something.”

Steve shook his head. “That, don’t do that. Don’t push me away by you ranting about cheeseburgers and wanting to leave.”

A tense silence filled the space between them. Tony turned away. Steve wanted to prod further, wanted to get him to open up to him.

“How’s Miles? I thought he would have been here,” Tony noted.

“We thought the first time Miles sees you again, it shouldn’t be like this. We wanted to wait a bit at least until you felt a little better,” Steve explained.

“Oh,” Tony said easing his hand out of Steve’s. “Guess…mhm guess that makes sense.”

He then used his free hand to play with the fraying end of Steve’s jacket. Steve tracked the movement and noticed sadly how Tony’s finger seemed to be shaking.

“Thanks, umm thanks for coming to get me,” Tony said as though he was thanking someone for simply picking him up from the mall...like someone had went out of their way to find him.

“You don’t have to thank us Tony. That’s...that’s not what...” Steve shook his head. “I’m sorry it took us so long. There’s no excuses.”

Tony lifted a shoulder then dropped it. He smiled self-deprecatingly at Steve and oh how Steve wished he had never seen that expression on Tony’s face. Steve leaned forward to grasp the hand that Tony was playing with his jacket.

Tony flinched. Steve froze.

“Sorry,” Tony said curling into himself. “Sorry. I’m sorry. Don’t know why I...don’t know why I did that.”

“You don’t have anything to apologize for Tony,” Steve told him. “It’s okay. I should have asked.”

Tony then turned angry eyes to him. “You don’t have to ask. I’m not some fucking fragile person to be careful of touching. Fuck, Ryder’s done a hell lot worse, I’m sure you could tell. I little hand holding isn’t going to kill me.”

It was Steve’s turn to flinch. Tony’s response to it made him wish he had better control over his reaction.

“Crap, sorry. Fuck, I’m messing things up again,” Tony bemoaned. “Fuck, can’t ever get things right. Sorry, sorry, sorry. Sure, makes this wish that you hadn’t found me? Don’t need a sarcastic asshole back, am I right?”

This time Steve truly was angry, but not at Tony...at the fact that Tony felt he had to apologize for reacting. “No, you don’t get to do that.”

“What? You can’t tell me how to feel Rogers. I am not something that you can control!” Tony hissed. “I am not a soldier that you command.”

“I’m not saying that you are Tony. I would never try to control you because human beings are not meant to be controlled. I just don’t want you pushing my away like you have done, since you have
Tony laughed. “Please, I’m doing you a favor Rogers.”

Steve turned to him. “A favor? How is pushing me away a favor?”

Tony smiled, the expression lost in his eyes. “So you won’t be saddled up with someone that is broken like me, some fragmented piece of whatever the heck I am. It was your job to find a member of your team, mission succeeded. You don’t have to be nice to me.”

“Did that night at the gala mean nothing to you? Did my confession to you that day you came back from your trip mean nothing to you?” Steve whispered. “I love you Tony. Nothing you say or do is ever going to alter my love for you.

Tony’s lip trembled and Steve immediately pressed forward wiping at the tears that were now falling from his eyes. Tony shook his head, wanting Steve to leave him alone. It was too much. Yet Tony didn’t want him to leave. The little bit of warmth he had left would leave him completely if Steve got up and walked away.

But it would be better if Steve walked away, just so he would see how…see how Tony doesn’t exactly know.

“I don’t know how to feel. I feel numb inside Steve,” Tony whispered, finally. “…I think of Ryder and I feel nothing. I know I’m supposed to hate him, but Steve I don’t feel that in my heart. I feel empty like…like there’s nothing there.”

Tony broke off.

“And then I feel like I hate him. I hate what he did to me, but he was my friend. I…I could have saved him. I don’t know what made him this way.”

“It wasn’t your duty to save him. He’s not someone you can save,” Steve told him.

Tony turned his head to the side. “I know…I think I know that. But sometimes when I looked at him, I just remembered the guy that was my first friend at MIT, the one who taught me how to play beer pong, or the one who brought me snacks to the labs on campus even when it was fifteen minutes walking distance from our dorms.”

Tony then looked straight at the wall. “And then I remember the bruises, the words he said to me…how he made me feel like you all…” his sentence broke off.

“How we all what?” Steve softly whispered, not wanting to scare Tony into not talking.

Tony shook his head. “Nothing. I just don’t know what to do anymore. I feel like something was taken away from me and I should know what, but I don’t. It scares me,” he admitted. “It scares me that I let…”

Again he broke off, the sentence left to be finished later. Steve reigned in his need to know more, but he couldn’t…wouldn’t push Tony into doing things faster than he wanted.

“Then let me help. Whatever you need. Just don’t push me away, thinking that you’re saving me from your pain,” Steve said pressing their foreheads together, their breaths intermixing with one another’s. “Please sweetheart don’t push me away.”

Tony looked away, then back to Steve testing the honesty in his expression. Steve probably didn’t
mean what he was saying. The nurses probably told them all to be nice to the patient and not to rile him up so much. It was all conditional.

So why shouldn’t Tony enjoy this affection, at least for the little bit of time he would receive it.

Tony shakily nodded, placing his hands over the ones that Steve had on his face. Steve leant down to kiss him on the cheek. Tony pushed his body a few inches away and motioned to the empty spot beside him. Steve looked concerned, having noticed the bruises and the way Tony flinched in pain as he moved his torso. However, Tony looked at him unwaveringly.

Steve ran his hands through Tony’s hair as Tony rested his head on his chest.

“Please don’t push me away. I don’t think I’d know what to do if you did,” Steve whispered, leaning down to press a kiss against the crown of Tony’s forehead.

“Yeah, okay,” Tony said looking up at Steve, wanting to tell him he didn’t have to pretend like he needed him.

He wanted to thank Steve for pretending to care. It was nice, even if it would never be real.

Tony ran his fingers at the collarbone peeking from Steve’s shirt. He wondered how long it would take before the act stopped, the final curtains closed. He hated hospitals, but he wouldn’t mind staying a few more weeks if it meant having this.

Steve brushed back a piece of hair that had somehow grown longer than the other strands. The curl wrapped around his finger as he pushed it behind Tony’s ear. He leaned closer and whispered into his ear repeatedly, “I love you. I love you.”

Tony let the lie sink into his ears.

Steve kept repeating the honest words to him, hoping that Tony felt them. He had never felt those words so strongly, until now when he was saying them to the man he truly cherished and loved.

With each whispered utterance, Tony’s breath began to even out showing that he was far more exhausted than he had let on. Steve was soon to quickly follow, finally for the first time sleeping well than he had since the 52 days Tony had been gone. He had the man he loved back in his arms and he wasn’t going to leave.

And that was how the doctors and nurses found them, bodies fused together as though one, Tony’s head resting against Steve’s heart and Steve’s hand splayed over Tony’s heart as though each protecting each other from any pain, even in their dreams.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter we have a surprise. I think you all want a trip to Norway, yes?

Thanks again to everyone who commented, gave a kudo, and left a bookmark. You all continue to make my day :)}
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

So update on the fic’s progress. We are more than halfway done because I promised myself this fic would not go over 40 chapters. Guys, I'm so sad that it's almost over, but I'm also excited to share the upcoming chapters because its' going to get good (also with the promised comfort and happy ending).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ryder stepped into the home, being mindful not to step on any toys. He smiled warmly at the child perched on his younger brother’s hips. He didn’t too much focus on the weary expression of his brother. He didn’t mind how his brother’s wife was handed the child and directed to go to their bedroom, while the two siblings visited.

The woman looked disappointingly at her husband. “Isak, surely we can visit for a while? I know the kids would love to see your…”

Isak stopped her with a kiss to the forehead. Looking into her eyes, he addressed her saying, “Eva, how about you take the kids to their room, while I see why my brother has chosen to visit.”

Ryder waved his hand in the air dismissively. “Isak? That’s a nice name change, probably why it was so hard to find you at first.”

Isak heaved a breath. “Guess I didn’t make the search hard enough.”

“Oh, dear brother you wound me. That shouldn’t be the way you treat family,” Ryder scoffed. “I am so sorry that you must be meeting me like this. Usually, my brother and I get along rather well. I fear that absence has not made the heart grow fonder.”

Ryder laughs charmingly at her and Eva joins in the laughter, eyes sparkling with delight. “Oh, I guess I am afraid not.”

“Would it be possible to steal my brother away for a quick moment? I have a new car and I know how much he would love to drive a Pagani Huayra.”

Eva turned wide eyes to Isak. She hadn’t noticed the car that Ryder had driven in. However, she knew with how many times her husband spoke about cars that this was a highly expensive one. She touched him on the elbow.

“You should spend time with your brother. I can get dinner started, while you two are gone. Maybe you could take him around town and give him a tour. We would love to have you for dinner,” Eva said leaning her face back as the toddler on her hip attempted to wipe some of her blueberry jam on her cheek.

“We would not,” Isak said, brows lowering. “My wife is merely being a gracious host. I fear we do not have enough food to host you. Also I have a presentation I must prepare for, so while it was nice to meet you I must bid you goodbye. Perhaps we can have a video conference on a later date.”

“Video conference? Ever so formal baby brother,” Ryder joked. “If you didn’t want me to stay you
could have just said. I just wanted to visit you for a while, see how things are. I mean Eva you do not know how much I have missed my brother. It nearly tore my heart, when I found that he had left New York.”

Isak tilted his head and laughed. “Are you kidding me? Look, I’m sorry Ryder. I sure that you hoped for some happy reunion, but today was honestly not the day to do this. If you had called earlier, I could have schedule a day where you could visit.”

“And have you ignore my call?”

“It would have been well within reason to do so,” Isak claimed.

“A reason that surely would not have any right justifications. You’re my only family left.”

“And whose fault is that, might I ask? I know you have the answer,” Isak explained crossing his arms over his chest. “Eva you will not have to prepare an additional plate for our guest. He is leaving.”

“Isak, please do not turn me away,” Ryder said, motioning to his brother’s child. “How old is your child?”

Eva bounced the kid on her hip. “She’ll be three in two months,” she said smiling brightly.

Ryder grinned and brushed back a curly gold lock from the child’s forehead. “Such a beautiful young child. Strong too, it seems like. It’s amazing how small children are, yet how fragile at the same time. Sometimes I wonder what would happen if children were to have amazing strength.”

He slid his eyes over to Isak, who without speaking knew the implications of what his brother was saying. He leant closer to his wife and his daughter, pressing a hand against her back.

“Fine, show me this car of yours.”

Eva rolled her eyes and tilted the corners of her lip in an amusing smile. “I know he would eventually cave. Now go have fun Isak. Dinner will be ready, when you two are back.”

Isak looked back to his brother and sighed. “If I’m not back in thirty minutes, he probably killed me.”

Eva looked disturbed for a brief second, before breaking out laughing under the impression that her husband was merely exaggerating as he often did when he complained about having to work with the snobs in his job. “Oh, Isak do not be so serious. Was he this serious as a child?”

“Dreadfully so,” Ryder agreed clasping his brother on the shoulder. “Should we go baby brother?”

Turning toward his wife and child, he bid them goodbye and followed his brother outside of the house. Isak slid into the passenger seat and placed on his seatbelt. His fingers shook and he pressed them underneath his thighs to control their tremors. The last time he had been in a car with his brother, it had resulted in the death of his parents and their two younger siblings.

He hadn’t talked to Ryder, since then. He didn’t even talk to him, when he found out that Ryder was the reason that he had been denied admission into all of the universities he applied to, resulting in him having to go to community college.

And to be rather frank, he hadn’t ever wanted to see this man again in his life. However, he would much rather isolate them than have him stay where his family was.
“So how have you been? I see I wasn’t even invited to the wedding. She’s a gorgeous woman by the way. Well done. That did hurt me, but I think the biggest surprise was finding out you moved to Norway. Thought you were always a New Yorker through and through,” Ryder said pulling away from the house and driving out of the neighborhood.

“New York didn’t have good memories for me,” Isak said stiffly, keeping his eyes on the road before him and his hand on his phone, ready to call someone if this ride took a disastrous turn.

“Oh, you still cannot let that go,” Ryder lightly commented. “I had really hoped you would have let go of these childish grudges.”

Isak looked at his brother incredulously. “Childish grudges? Are you serious? I have every right to be mad at you, seeing as though you are the direct cause of everything that has gone wrong in my life and nearly every other person you have touched. I’m honestly surprised that Tony took you back into his life, seeing as how you are good at destroying everything closet to you.”

“You don’t think I changed?” Ryder implored, pressing his foot on the gas a little more. “The years have treated me with favor and perhaps I have grown.”

“I have no doubt that you have not changed at all. I see the same man today that I saw years ago. You may have everyone else fooled, but remember brother that I know you. I know that this is all a façade. You’ve seem to get into the good graces being some doctor and dating Tony. It was actually rather smart trying to clean up your image.”

Ryder’s shoulders tensed.

“Oh, you think I didn’t keep tabs on you?” Isak scoffed. “I have to in order to make sure as far away from me as possible. Unfortunately, it didn’t work this year.”

“It is not your duty to watch me,” Ryder stated sternly. “I’ve changed.”

Isak laughed. “If you had changed, you would have admitted your crimes and gone to prison to serve time. If you had changed, you would have stayed wherever the hell you were and left me and my family alone.”

“Prison?”

Isak tapped his fingers against his thigh. “Don’t tell me you can truly say you don’t deserve time after what you’ve done. First ruining our family and experimenting on those people with whatever at the CMPNY. Those patients you have, while being a doctor are your lab rats.”

“You what?” Ryder growled, admittedly shocked by this new information. His foot pressed harder against the gas. “What do you mean you told someone about the CMPNY?”

Isak looked out the window. “I didn’t say anything about telling anyone about the CMPNY, but I do have certain measures enforced to directly link you to its organization should you do something that can endanger me and my family. I mean you’re just mad enough to do something crazy, so I have to protect myself. I didn’t last time…we didn’t.”

“That’s a foolish thing to admit baby brother,” Ryder announced, laughingly increasing his speed.

“Ryder!” Isak said eyes widening with the increasing speed that his brother was doing. Wild hands went to grasp at the hands on the steering wheel, hoping to intervene. “Slow down.”

“No! You think I’m mad? You think that I never cared about you,” Ryder sneered. “So why would I
care if we were to swerve of the side of the road. We grew up without parents, I’m sure your children will be fine.”

“What the hell is wrong with you? Are you insane? You killed our fucking parents,” Isak said. Although he tried calming his voice, he couldn’t help how it elevated with every sharp turn. “Ryder! Stop okay man, this shit wasn’t funny when you did it years ago and it isn’t funny now.”

“That was an accident,” Ryder stressed. “It was an accident. In the report they even said it was not my fault. The accident was not my fault. Why do you keep insisting that it was? It wasn’t. It wasn’t.”

Isak nodded. “Okay, it was an accident. I’m sorry. Ryder come on, I believe you. Now just slow down okay, or stop. Let me drive us back to my house, okay? Look, we can get you some help.”

“Help?” Ryder said eyes turning off the road. “You think I need help? I don’t need anyone’s fucking help. What I need is for you to shut the fuck up.”

“Ryder! Look at the fucking road. Are you trying to kill us,” he screamed loudly. “I will roll out of this care I swear to…”

Another sharp turn and then darkness enveloped the two.

Eva ran to the hospital, having left her children with their grandmother. Her eyes burned bright with tears and she felt she could collapse at any moment. She had felt faint ever since she received the phone call. She tried pushing away how her first thought was how she hoped her husband had survived. For all intents and purposes Ryder was a complete stranger to her. She had not attachments to him. While it would be sad for her husband, she was entirely grateful that the person in the hospital had been identified as her husband.

She was so grateful.

She came upon her husband, lying in a hospital bed blank expressionless eyes looking at the tv in front of him. She ran to him and wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

“He’s dead,” he cried into her shoulder. “He’s dead…I tried to stop him Eva. I did, but he wouldn’t stop going so fast. We didn’t even see the car. I tried. I tried so hard, Eva.”

She was startled slightly by the use of English. However, she pushed that aside seeing as how he probably had not mentally switched back to Norwegian since he was last speaking to his brother. He shook and his red eyes bore into hers. Eva took note of the many tubes and came closer to him, offering him her hand.

“Jeg burde ikke ha igjen med ham. Hvorfor skulle han gjøre dette til meg?” he cried, sniffing.


He continued to sob into her neck, clawing his hands around her woolen sweater. The two melted into one another, grasping each other for comfort. Eva ran shaky fingers over his hair and then to his trembling hands, not minding her husband’s hand’s usual softness was a little callous and how he was missing the ring on his left hand.
Thanks again to everyone who commented, gave a kudo, and left a bookmark. You all continue to make my day :) 

[1] Jeg burde ikke ha igjen med ham. Hvorfor skulle han gjøre dette til meg? : I shouldn’t have left with him. Why would he do this to me? 

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Yes, this is late. I apologize. I planned on updating last week but the site kept being down every single time I uploaded and I got frustrated and said f it. Then I re-read my chapter took it as a sign that wasn't my best work and re-wrote it. Personally, I am very glad I did and think you all will enjoy this chapter. (Also I will be getting to responding to comments soon!)

***Also to anyone who has ever been involved in car crashes, I do not want to take them lightly. Those are very serious, seeing as how many people have been affected by its disastrous results. Please stay off your phones, be aware of your surroundings, and just look up. I make a statement at the end about car crashes in relation to Ryder and hope this doesn’t offend anyone***

p.s. What even was IW? Like who told them to do that to us?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A hand closed around his neck, fingers tightening as they moved to press against his slowing pulse. His own hands fought against the fingers there, mouth trying to move and say something, anything. All air was steadily decreasing from his airway and he found the corners of his eyes blurring. A burning sting rose in his eyes as he hauntingly thought to himself, “He might actually kill me.”

He blinked away the burning, his vision clearing just for a moment to lock eyes with the man above him.

Hard thighs enclosed his waist and trapped him from moving. He didn’t even know why he bothered to do that, since he knew he couldn’t move with all those patches and pills draining his energy. He figured he only did it for some closeness. He moved his waist slightly to try to gain some space. It did nothing but only make his thighs tighten and for him to press closer to him.

Eyes rolled back at the sensation as fear prickled his skin. His jaw felt tight, then numb. Again. Again. Again.

The smile on the face above him widened and he leaned forward. Closer. Too close. Needed space. Behind his shoulder he could see the edges of a locked door. Always enclosing him in this space. The stinging in his eyes was back again. He shut his eyes tried to imagine himself somewhere else.

Fingers moved from his chest toward his chin. Nails bit into the skin there and Tony could feel the skin give way for blood. He hissed, a barely restrained groan. Fingers soothed the burning and tilted his chin forward making him look at the eyes above him.

“Oh, Tony,” he breathed as though fascinated by the body beneath him. “You are so beautiful no matter state of being you are in. Makes me wish I had done this far sooner.”

Tony licked his lips, trying to moisten the cracks of his dried lips. “Ryder,” his hoarse voice had exclaimed. “Let me go.”
He never wanted to be reduced to begging, but at this point he was so tired. He just couldn’t…not anymore.

Ryder tsked and shook his head firmly. “I can’t do that.”

“Please Ryder. Please just let me go. Please,” Tony pleaded, words catching on emotion he hadn’t wanted to share…not with him, never with him.

“Your tears almost make me wish that I could give you everything you desired in the world,” he said leaning back. He moved forward then to press a scalding kiss on the corner of Tony’s lips, then firmly pressed his mouth against Tony’s.

“Please Ryder. Please just let me go. Please,” Tony cried into his lips. “What do I need to do? What? Ryder just let me go. We never have to see each other again. Or just let me out of this room and stop giving me these fucking patches.”

Ryder bit at Tony’s bottom lip and drew back, looked down at him, and snarled as though disgusted. He wiped away the blood forming on Tony’s lip and shook his head.

All through his rambling, Ryder looked on detached until finally he said, “Stop begging, it’s untoward of you. Also why would I let go of the one thing that I’ve always wanted in my life.”

With that he stood up from the bed and gave Tony’s shoulder a pat. He kissed him once more not paying attention to the way Tony’s lips trembled beneath his. His ears closed off to whatever Tony was saying as his feet led him to the door.

“Ryder…just let me out of this room. Please. Just…or leave the door open don’t leave me locked up like some caged animal! Ryder, Ryder, Ryder!”

The door fell shut and muffled the screams of Tony.

Tony woke up with a start, his breathing harsh and ragged. Dots swam in his vision. He blinked once, twice…before everything started to clear up. He couldn’t stop the chattering of his teeth or the shaking off his fingers. He looked around at the walls and then to the closed door. His breath picked up.

He felt himself rising in panic and tried to bring it in, close to his chest. He couldn’t, wouldn’t do this here. Then suddenly as if finally the world was on his side, the door opened.

Pepper came in, quickly followed by Rhodey. Pepper smiled brightly at him, holding an Iron Man teddy bear. He placed his shaking hands underneath his thighs so they wouldn’t draw their attention toward them. He smiled widely at them, though all he felt like doing was curling up into a ball because it was still so cold in here. Or maybe it wasn’t cold and the coldness from his time there simply was just going to stay there for the rest of his life.

He shivered involuntarily, hoping that neither Pepper nor Rhodey would notice. He straightened his shoulders to disappear the way his body just experienced a full tremor of coldness. He beckoned them forth.

Rhodey shook his head and without even saying anything left outside. His eyes widened, scared that he had done something to get Rhodey to leave. He swallowed the lump in his throat at Rhodey’s disappearance. He wanted to ask what he did to get him to leave.

He wanted to make sure he would never do it again. Ryder often told him…
No. He’s not here anymore. Ryder couldn’t tell him things anymore and Tony needed to let that go.

“What’s going on in that head of yours,” Pepper greeted back, moving to sit herself in the chair besides his bed. “Also this is for you. I know we’re above the age where stuffed animals are appropriate, but I couldn’t resist. If anything, you can always give it to Miles.”

She placed it on the bed, so that Tony could grab it.

Tony took the offered stuffed animal, “Thanks.”

He had never been given a stuffed animal before. His dad had said if he couldn’t sleep without a teddy bear than perhaps he shouldn’t be sleeping at all and that was after he had ridiculed him from asking his mom could he have a teddy bear like his friend, Mara, had at show-in-tell.

Tony was only four.

His fingers wrapped around the warm fur of the animal and he was thankful it would hide his still trembling fingers.

“Nothing, really,” he answered. “Just you know waiting to get out of this hell house.”

“Told you Pep, he would want to get out. I’ve been trying to get her to let us break you out. But as you can see I’ve been unsuccessful,” Rhodey said, as he came back holding two thick blankets. “So the nurses said this was all they had. I don’t know why blankets are so thin at hospitals and not that comfortable either. But when I go back home I can grab some thicker ones to help with the cold.”

Tony’s eyes widened as Rhodey laid out the blankets and tucked them underneath Tony’s body, like he used to do whenever Tony had exhausted himself to the point where he couldn’t even pull the covers over his body. Tony hummed in content at the extra addition of blankets, before his eyes met Rhodey’s.

“Hey, what’s that face?” Rhodey questioned finding a chair and moving it to the other side of Tony’s bed.

“I thought you had left,” Tony admitted then berated himself for not having a filter.

Rhodey looked confused for all, but a second before his expression smoothed out to one of sadness. Pepper reached out to hold Tony’s free hand, but he pulled it back sharply. Pepper sucked in a breath, but let her hand stay on the edge of Tony’s bed.

He flattened his fingers underneath his thighs and hoped Pepper didn’t read too much into it.

Rhodey breathed lowly through his nose. “Nah, you know I would never leave you Tony. You’re the best friend I have, besides Pepper. I just saw you shivering and I couldn’t let you be even more uncomfortable than you already are over being in this hospital.”

The ease that he said he would never leave Tony, made a little bit of tension fall from Tony’s posture. He slowly offered him a sigh of relief.

“I know,” he said for the first time confident that at least there were two people in this world who would never actually truly leave him. Goodness knows there have been many times when they should have.

“So what’s with this plan of breaking me out,” Tony questioned. “And let me say sour patch I am all for it. Hospital food sucks.”
Pepper rolled her eyes. “As I have told Rhody, I am going to tell you. You are not leaving until you are discharged. You still have injuries that need to heal a bit more, before you are released. Also we need to make sure whatever stuff they pumped into your system is completely gone, before sending you home.”

Tony pouted. “That’s not fair.”

“It really isn’t, but I would much rather send you home later, than to send you home too early and find out that something is wrong,” Pepper admitted.

“I don’t like this,” Tony exclaimed, running his hands through his stuffed animal’s fur. He needed to name this thing. “This thing got a name?”

Pepper raised an eyebrow. “I figured you should do the honors.”

Tony reflectively pondered for a bit, waiting for a name to come to him. “Iron Bear.”

“Very original,” Rhodey commented, lips tilted in a smirk.

“Thank you. You know I am all for originality. I mean after all I am Tony Stark,” he said trying to inflict every bit of confident arrogance he could into that statement.

“So I’ve heard,” Rhodey teased. “But in all seriousness how are you holding up?”

Silence passed. Tony’s brow furrowed at the question. Why did they have to ask? Couldn’t they just look at him and see that he was fine. He was fine. No, he was better than fine. They all found him. Ryder was out of his life. Case closed.

“I’m great,” he lied.

“You know I would have believed you, if it weren’t for the fact that I’ve known you for more than half of my life and I can notice the subtle changes in your face dictating that you are not in fact fine,” Rhodey asserted.

“Then why ask how I’m holding up, if you obviously already know,” he questioned back, all of a sudden feeling angry.

Rhodey leaned forward, elbows pressing into the mattress of the bed. “Because I want to hear from you how you’re doing with everything going on, so that I can know how to help.”

“I don’t need help.”

“You may say that, but I’m always going to worry about you…have since you decided you wanted to eat fifty lollipops to see if it honestly takes the same amount of licks to get to the center of different tootsie pops.”

“That experiment was awesome and also if I remember correctly, you joined in,” Tony stated.

“Yeah, once I realized that you were planning on doing 100. I couldn’t let you eat a 100 lollipops Tony. That was going to end horribly wrong,” Rhodey said.

“But it all ended amazing,” Tony inserted, remembering the face on Rhodey’s face when he had tossed his twentieth lollipop to the side victoriously and said him and Tony were about to make a huge scientific breakthrough.

Tony should probably admit both of them were high at the time. Meh, finals were coming up and
Tony needed a little relaxation from his stress. It totally wasn’t his fault he found Ryder’s stash after he left-

Tony sobered up pretty quickly after that, eyes sharply moving back to the cracked open door at the end of his bed.

“Why am I just hearing about this now,” Pepper said, her eyes narrowed.

Tony turned to her, shrugging. “Why would we tell you this and have you pinch our ears like you used to, when we did stupid shit like this?”

“Yeah and then you would have joined like you always did,” Rhodey said, looking at Tony smiling as Tony laughed brightly.

“I… I would never entertain myself with stuff like that,” Pepper sputtered out indignantly.

“Yes, you would. I’m pretty sure we still have video documentation of spring vacation in-”

“You said you would get rid of it,” Pepper directed at Tony, her face suddenly dangerously close to Tony.

Tony backed up. “I need that video for insurance. Rhodey back me up.”

“Yep, what he said.”

The two laughed gleefully at one another.

Pepper nodded to herself and leaned back. “That’s fine. What’s one video in the midst of many I have of you two.”

Rhodey and Tony both stopped laughing at this. Tony drew himself up, “I promise I’ll delete the video now.”

Pepper shook her head. “Oh, no don’t do that Tony. After all you do need that insurance,” she joked. “But anyways back to the question because we steered away. Is there anything we can do to help you? I mean…like do you want to talk about it?”

What Tony wanted was to forget.

“Nope.”

Pepper sighed, deciding not to push. “Okay, that’s fine. If you don’t want to talk to us about it right now, then you don’t have to. It can be whenever you feel ready.”

“And what if I never want to talk about it,” Tony whispered, eyes going back to Iron Bear, since he didn’t really want to see their expressions of pity or worse disappointment.

Silence encompassed the room as the two thought about what Tony said. Rhodey was the first to speak.

“I can’t say that it wouldn’t bother me that you wouldn’t want to talk to us, but at the end of the day this concerns you. And if you don’t think that telling us will make you feel better…or help you recover then you don’t have to tell us in order to appease our wanting to know what happened to you.”

“Yeah, we don’t need to know what happened in order to still be here for you and give you
whatever you need,” Pepper added then stopped.

Pepper bit her lip and looked hesitantly up at Tony. Tony tilted his head to the side. “What’s wrong Pep?”

Pepper ran her thumb over her lips, a nervous habit of hers. He also noticed the chipping of her nail polish, something that Pepper never allowed to happen. The only times that her nails were chipped was when she was greatly stressed. He hated the fact that he was the reason for that stress.

“You don’t have to talk about it, but…I just…I’ve thought about it and I can’t figure out why you didn’t come to us before and tell us about Ryder. I mean I know that abusers can manipulate you into making it seem like you shouldn’t tell anyone. But why didn’t you come to Rhodey and I when he did something to you the first time? Did we do something to make it seem like you couldn’t come to us with something like this,” Pepper inquired.

Tony stared, his mind almost going blank as Pepper said abuser. Abuser. He hadn’t really thought of Ryder like that. Sure, Ryder was physically, emotionally, and verbally violent at times…at many times of their relationship. But he had never said to himself…abuser, his abuser.

His eyes watered and he heard more than felt a whimper escape his lips.

Abuser.

Abuser.

Abuser.

That meant Tony was abused and boy guess it just seemed he attracted all the right people, first his father…

What had he done to make them…He tilted his head downward. Maybe that’s why he had given up on trying to tell Pepper and Rhodey because he figured after Ryder another would just easily take his place.

He then wondered what would happen if he told Rhodey that he had tried telling him about Ryder before. He could just imagine Rhodey’s eyes feeling with shame and guilt. Tony couldn’t do that to Rhodey. He was already going through so much. Tony couldn’t possibly add to that. So he had to make sure he never let it out that he tried to tell them. They didn’t need that added stress. Tony would just have to keep it to himself. He was pretty good at that.

“Oh, sweetie,” Pepper said moving from her spot on the chair to hug Tony. Rhodey stood up as well wrapping himself around the two.

“I…can we just talk about this later,” he said trying to find his voice.

Pepper smoothed her hands over his hair and he leant into the touch, the only good touches that he had received in the past few days. He blinked back the tears, feeling his eyelashes heavy with teardrops. Pepper moved back and sat in her seat, Rhodey soon followed her lead.

“Of course, Tones,” Rhodey said.

“Well the boys will be here after school. I figured once Dr. Cho told me that you were able to stay awake for more than an hour at a time, the boys should be able to visit. Peter and Harley will probably swing by May’s to pick Miles’ up and head over here,” Pepper told him. “They’re really excited to see you.”
Tony grew excited too at the thought of seeing his son, Peter, and Harley. “I’ll be glad to see them too.”

Rhodey stretched out his legs. “Yeah, so they’ll probably be here soon and when they come I have to go to my PT.”

“Ooh, is that code for a date with your physical therapist,” Tony said waggling his eyebrows. “Still waiting on my hallmark movie.”

Pepper smirked. “Same. Not the movie, but I am waiting to see when you go on a first date with Miranda. Ah, don’t try to hide that smile now. Why are you smiling all secretive like that?”

Rhodey bit the inside of his cheeks.

“Nope, you don’t get to do that. As a wounded patient I require you tell me what’s got you smiling like that,” Tony demanded.

Rhodey raised one shoulder. “Just that Miranda and I will definitely be going on a date. It’s just that it’ll be our third date.”

Tony’s mouth gaped open and Pepper looked pleasantly surprised.

“Rhodey I am hurt. I feel betrayed. How could you do this to me? You know that I was the director in this romance movie and to have you not admit that you were making moves all along on the love interest. I…see if I ever make you updates on your suit again.”

“That’s an empty threat, if I’ve ever heard one,” Pepper said dryly. “If you don’t tell us, when you plan on proposing I can promise that Miranda will get a document full of all of your shenanigans with Tony in Colorado.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Rhodey said his face taking on a pale hue.

“Oh, trust me I would,” Pepper announced. “Now see Tony that is a threat.”

“Man now I remember why I used to love getting you all riled up,” Tony joked, then hissed when Pepper leaned over to flick his ear. “Okay, got it.”

“Good,” Pepper said.

“So is there a love interest for you Pep,” Rhodey said, trying with all his might to direct the attention away from him.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Pepper said, eyes bright with amusement.

“Yes, that is what my statement implied.”

“Dates here and there. Nothing is sticking quite yet. However, I am in a good place where I am fine being single and don’t really need anyone. If I happen to find someone that can add onto my life, then that’s great. If not I have the best job and the best friends in the world. Not too many people can say they have that.”

Rhodey wiped an imaginary tear from his eyes. “Pepper that was beautiful. Seriously, I wish I had recorded that.”

Pepper rolled her eyes. “But Tony is the real one with the love interest. Don’t’ think I didn’t notice lover boy has been staying by your side, since we found you.”
“Then where is he now?” Tony said. “I mean not that like I care where he is. I just woke up and he was gone…so…like not that it matters. He’s completely free not be here.”

“Tony,” Rhodey said. “Your lover boy was getting a little dead looking so we all suggested he go home, take a shower, and get an actual good meal. He’s been watching over you, he hasn’t really taken time to look after himself. And if he gets to the point where all his energy is depleted he won’t be able to. So we told him we were on our way to visit you anyways and so he left with the others. They’ll all probably be back soon, maybe not Clint though. He had to visit his wife and kids.”

“Oh,” Tony said trying to hide his pleased smile.

“Mhm, yeah I see that smile Tones,” Rhodey said.

“Smile? What smile?” Tony said with a deadpan expression.

“Mhm that Steve smile. The one you always get whenever you hear his name. It’s pretty adorable,” Rhodey said, waving off Tony’s exclamations of not being adorable.

Pepper rolled her eyes. “He’s steadily growing back on me, but I’ll still be talking to him.”

Tony’s eyes widened at that. “Please don’t. I don’t need you two giving Steve the shovel talk. Besides I’m not even sure that there is need for a shovel talk.”

Pepper scrunched up his face. “Oh, there is definite need for a shovel talk.”

Tony shook his head, deciding that he wasn’t about to disagree with Pepper right now. The three of them continued talking, until Rhodey did have to leave to make it in time to his PT. Pepper soon left after, once she was certain the boys were only a few minutes away. She didn’t want Tony to be by himself because she knew how much he hated hospitals, especially when he was the patient.

Pepper stood from her chair and ran her fingers affectionately through Tony’s curling hair. She leaned down and kissed his forehead, leaning back as Tony closed his eyes.

“Love you and call me if you need anything. I’ll only be at SI so I’m not far. Also I’ll be back tomorrow in the morning probably,” she said.

“Okay,” he said. “Hey can you make sure to leave the door cracked?”

Pepper nodded as she grabbed her purse and left the room, making sure the door was cracked. As soon as she was gone, Tony felt the walls enclose on him again. His fingers started trembling and he felt his vision darken He needed to open the blinds in here.

Before he was able to even think about making his way to the window, he could hear the excited chatter of Miles. The door opened and he let out a relieved sigh. Peter came in holding a flailing Miles, followed by Harley.

Miles eyes widened, upon seeing his baba. He bounced up and down in Peter’s arms, hands reaching out for Tony. Peter tightened his grip on Miles just so he wouldn’t fall to the ground.

“Miles, now remember what we told you. ‘Kay?”

Looking at Harley and Peter, Miles nodded seriously. “I remember,” he softly said.

Peter sat down in the chair Pepper had once occupied and Harley sat in the chair that Rhodey was once in. Miles looked hesitantly at the tubes that Tony was still connected to and then toward the arm
“Baba’s hurt,” he said frowning, brown eyes quickly filling with water. “You…you said he was better.”

He looked toward Peter and then to Harley as though they had betrayed him. Tony couldn’t handle that look so with all the strength he had he reached out his hands and motioned for Peter to hand him Miles. Miles went willingly and settled on the spot beside Tony.

“I’m okay bambino,” Tony muttered. “The doctors and nurses are making sure I’m all good and ready to go.”

Miles pouted. “Don’t look okay.”

Tony nodded at that. “I know, but I am okay. Know why I am okay?” Miles shook his head. “Because I am surrounded by three of my most favorite people in the world.”

Miles’ lips began to quiver at this and Tony wondered what he had said, before Miles began letting out large bawling sobs. Tony quickly brought him closer to his chest and rubbed his back soothingly.

“What’s wrong sweetheart?”

“They…they said you died baba! I though you left forever and you promised you wouldn’t… wouldn’t leave me,” Miles said around hiccups, his little body shaking under Tony’s hold. “But you did and it was longer.”

“Shhh, shhh, Miles,” Tony said rocking them. “I’m not dead. I’m right here. Who told you that I had died?”

Peter’s jaw clenched. “We don’t know how, but Miles apparently snuck out of his room during nap time, when we had the agents over to debrief them over the mission. One of the agents made a rather rude comment in which the end statement was saying you were more than likely dead. It took us awhile to console Miles.”

“He’s since been fired,” Harley exclaimed.

“That’s good,” Tony said, pulling Miles closer to him and kissing the hair that was beginning to curl. “You’re stuck with me kiddo.”

Miles sniffed and looked up to Tony’s eyes. “I don’t want you to leave again baba. I was scared and alone. And…Mr. Penguin missed you.”

“Did now?”

“Yes, he told me,” he whispered as though it was a secret he was not supposed to be sharing with Tony.

“Well, I’ll just have to tell Mr. Penguin that I missed him as well,” Tony said. “Have you been good, while I was gone?”

“The best baba,” Miles said. “I was very good. Aunt Pepper gave me lots of stickers, but I didn’t really want stickers. I wanted you, but Aunt Pepper said I can show you the stickers when you got home. I’ve gots lots of ‘em now! I’m gonna show you all of them. You can put them on your superhero suit baba.”
Tony probably would…no he knew he was definitely going to be putting his son’s stickers on the suit.

“Oh, and Aunt Pepper and Uncle Rhodey took me to the aquarium. There were lots of fishes—”

“Fish,” Tony interjected.

“Fishes,” Miles said back to him. “Lots of fishes there. Uncle Rhodey said the one swimming too fast was like you.”

Harley chuckled softly at Miles not correcting himself. He just knew Tony was going to have a lot with this one.

Tony fell into listening to Miles excited ramblings, going in on his time with Aunt Pepper and the others. Tony made sure to send Pepper all of her favorite things for making sure that Miles’ was far removed from this as he possibly could be. He hugged Miles tighter to him and at some point didn’t even realize he had fallen asleep, until he could no longer hear Miles’ talking.

“He’s pretty tired. I mean he stayed up all night excited that we were coming to see you. Aunt May tried to put him down for a nap, but he wouldn’t go. Also he hasn’t been sleeping all that great knowing you were gone so…” Peter trailed off.

“Thanks for bringing him here,” Tony graciously said. “But how have you two been?”

They nodded their heads as though that was all the answer Tony needed. It wasn’t. He raised an eyebrow and shifted his body, mindful not to wake up Miles.

“Okay, what’s with the whole silence?” Tony questioned, trying to insert a little laugh to lighten up whatever the hell just made things tense.

Harley looked down at his hands and didn’t answer. Peter looked everywhere but at Tony. Tony felt unease steadily grow in his chest. Crap, had he done something or said something.

“Why?” Peter finally said.

Tony shook his head, startled by the one word question. “Why? Why what?”

Peter moved his head to the side, offering Tony his profile before directing his attention straightforward. “Why did you tell us that if we had a bully to come to you, or talk to you. After that meeting with Principal Davis you sat both me and Harley down to explain how we shouldn’t allow ourselves to be silenced by bullies, speak to someone if we’re in trouble, and all of this bullshit… when you didn’t even come to anyond about what was happening to you.”

Silence.

“I just find that hypocritical. You expect us to come to you, but you didn’t come to any of us. So I want to know why.”

“Peter,” Harley hissed, eyes widening. “We promised we wouldn’t do this.”

Tony shared his exact sentiments. Honestly, Tony would have thought this was something that Harley would have said. Peter’s eyes widened and his face paled as though suddenly realizing what he had said. Instead of apologizing, his lips thinned and he crossed his arms stiffly over his chest.

Tony licked his lips not knowing what to say. What could he say to that question anyway? He knew
that Peter was right. If the situations were flipped, he could only hope that Peter would come to him. He quickly through this thought away, knowing that he would do everything in his power to make sure that the three other boys in this room would never find themselves in his situation.

Peter seemed to grow tired of the silence and Tony not answering. “I mean I thought we were family and family is supposed to trust each other. I…I don’t know why…crap my thoughts are scattered and I’m just fucking upset that we almost lost you and I didn’t even get the chance to ask if you wouldn’t mind me calling you Uncle Tony because I see you as this key figure in my life. I thought it’s all gone. Here’s another person in my life gone. And again I don’t know why.”

Peter ran his hand through his hair. “Then I hated how I went back through my mind and I could see moments where looking back I knew things weren’t okay with Ryder. Maybe if I had asked and been direct-”

“No, you are not going to blame yourself,” Tony sharply demanded. “None of this is your fault, either of yours.”

“How can I not blame myself? How can we not blame ourselves for us not being worthy enough to earn the respect of you coming to us and seeking help,” Peter said, lips wobbling. “There were four times you almost died here. Four times.”

Harley raised his legs and propped his chin on his knees. He face his head to the door and tried to discreetly wipe away tears that were falling. Peter meanwhile let his fall freely, tears catching onto his chin before falling onto his lap.

“I do trust all of you,” Tony said.

“Then why didn’t you trust us with this,” Peter said, eyes blinking rapidly.

“I don’t know,” Tony whispered.

Peter wrapped his arms around himself. “I don’t like that answer.”

“You don’t have to,” Tony softly said. “I understand why you feel this way and I’m sorry.”

Peter shook his head. “You have nothing to feel sorry for. Crap, I…that’s not what this is to make you feel. The only one who should be feeling any amount of sorry and blame is Ryder,” he hissed angrily.

“Yeah,” Harley said. “None of this is your fault, so you don’t have to like ya know apologize. That’s not what we want. Honestly, we just came because we missed you. Steve’s not as fun to play UNO with, when you’re not there.”

Peter let out a breath of air shakily. “I don’t want what I’m saying to make you feel bad. That’s not my intention. I’m just angry and not at you.”

Tony nodded. “And that’s okay.”

The three of them remained silent for a few moments, before Tony suggested that they watch some TV. They settled into watch some cooking show on Food Network. Peter leaned on the bed placing his head by Tony’s lap where Miles hand was hanging off of. He rested his head on his arms. Harley did the same, choosing to grab ahold of Iron Bear and use it as a head rest.

Tony looked at the two and let warmth spread throughout him, once again taking the cold that had begun to settle in his bones.
“That looks really good,” Peter said as one chef began mixing his ingredients together. “Though I would do without the licorice.”

Tony smirked down at Peter and gently brought his hand to rest on Peter’s shoulder. “Oh, trust me I know how much you hate licorice. I still have that essay you gave to me about how licorice is Satan’s snack.”

“It’s true,” Peter mumbled.

“My mom’s leaving,” Harley exclaimed all of a sudden. “That’s why I can’t have you leave again too. So…like if anything is a threat toward you staying…I just know that we, I need you here.”

“You mom’s leaving?” Peter interjected. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“Yeah, she told me a few weeks ago. Apparently, she wants to join the Peace Corps.”

“How are you feeling about that kid,” Tony questioned brushing back a strand of hair that had fallen on Harley’s face.

Harley shrugged and hid his face into the stuffed animal. “I don’t know. I’m happy that she’s getting to do what she loves, but at the same time it seems like she took the fastest chance to get rid of me. She won’t even be out of the hospital for a week, before she plans on leaving. I wished that I had at least a few months before she could be my mom and then leave.”

“Have you tried telling her this?”

Harley shook his head.

“I’m sure she would want to know Harley. You wanting to spend time with your mom for a few more months is valid,” Tony said.

“Yeah,” Harley said.

“If you want more time with her, you don’t need to pretend that you’re okay with her leaving as soon as she is. It’ll hurt you in the long run.”

Peter nodded his head. “Yeah, like if Aunt May just told me something like that I would be devastated. I’m sure your mom would understand.”

“We’ll see.”

“She will,” Tony said kindly. “I can be there with you, when you tell her.”

Harley removed his face from the bear. “Would you?”

“Of course,” Tony claimed.

Harley smiled at him, before going back to watch what was on TV. “Okay.”

The rest of their time was spent talking and watching cooking shows. Miles would wake up every now only for him to fall back asleep. Tony was disappointed when Peter told him that it was time to go to his Aunt May’s. He and Harley had homework to catch up on. Peter grabbed a sleeping Miles. Tony had wanted to say goodbye to his son, but figured that he didn’t want the chance of Miles possibly growing upset that he had to be leaving so soon.

With promises of coming back tomorrow the two began to leave. He stopped Peter just before he
left, “And Uncle Tony sounds good, kid.”

Peter smiled widely and leaned down to hug Tony, careful of Miles’ sleeping body in his arms. “Love you Uncle Tony.”

“Love you too kid,” he said. “Take care of this one and tell May I said thanks again for watching him and Harley.”

“I will,” he said.

“Oh, and leave the door cracked please,” he shouted after them. Peter nodded and left the door slightly open.

He pulled the covers up tighter to his chest and wished away the coldness. He also wished there was more light offered in this room beside the lamp and the light fixture above his head. A nurse came in carrying a food tray. She made her pleasantries and sat it near Tony’s bed. Tony said thank you and as she was leaving as for her to crack the door. She must not have heard him because she closed the door firmly shut behind her.

Suddenly, he felt chills break through his body. Even though the lights were on he could feel darkness start to claw its way up the four walls. His chest heaved up and down. Trembling fingers pressed against his chest as though it could still its fast movement.

“I said to crack the door,” he whispered to himself.

He was annoyed with himself for being so greatly affected by something as simple as a closed door. It was easier when there was someone in here with him that he knew. However, he was alone and it was getting dark. And hospitals were so cold. They always remained cold as though they wanted their patients to have a constant reminder that they were close to death.

His eyes focused on the shut door and he felt like at any moment Ryder or some member of the CMPNY was going to come into the room. Ryder had always liked knowing that he knew Tony could never leave. Were hospital room doors even able to lock from the outside?

His shoulder shook up and down. He couldn’t get into trouble for seeing if the door was unlocked, not like he had been when he was there. They couldn’t touch him here. He just needed the door cracked. Maybe he also needed a change of scenery besides the same four walls.

They saved him from that room and placed him in one just like it. Making up his mind, he tiredly pushed himself away from the pain and ignored the way his legs trembled. He was unsteady and he felt as though all at once tiny needles were being stabbed into every part of his body. His vision swam and he felt his head loll back.

He looked at the distance from his bed to the door and it seemed to grow more and more further away as he looked at it. He stretched his arms out in front of him. His body swayed and he felt pressure settle in between his collarbones.

He moved, one foot in front of the other and his body came falling in front of him. He wasn’t even able to catch himself, before his legs folded beneath him. He whimpered at the impact of the fall, but tried crawling toward the door. His body didn’t seem to cooperate.

The door seemed to taunt him. What if? What if Ryder had infiltrated one of the nurses and had them close the door. No one was here so it was possible. He could feel the panic begin to push him back like a great tidal wave. Acid began to claw up his throat and he leaned over his body into a sort of kneeling position.
The acid flew from his mouth and the pain of it caused tears to fall from Tony’s eyes.

“Oh, no you made a mess of yourself again. Tony, Tony, Tony. Seriously, I thought you would have much better control of yourself. Suppose you do need me to take care of you,” Ryder said looking at the spot of vomit staining the white sheets.

Tony stayed still as Ryder pressed a wet cloth against Tony’s forehead and then wiped the remaining bits of vomit from Tony’s lip and offered him a cup of mouthwash. Tony numbly swished it in his mouth, before spitting it into the container Ryder had.

Ryder grabbed all things he had come in with and left, closing the door behind him.

“Please, please, please let me out,” he cried, the palms of his hands meeting the cool tile floor. “Please let me out. I can’t breathe in here.”

“I can’t let you out Tony. Maybe if you behaved and I could be certain that you knew what happened if you tried running away then maybe.”

Tony followed Ryder’s hand on his cheek, before he realized what he was doing.

Tony cried onto the floor, body wracking with shivers. He couldn’t stop dry heaving. His arms curled around himself.

“You poor thing. I love you though despite all your flaws. And I take care of you.”

“Then let me go, please just let me go,” Tony cried. “I can’t do this. I can’t. I’ll be good. Someone please just open the door, I’ll be good.”

Tony was certain he was yelling all of this. His hands felt like they were inches away from the doorknob, when he knew that he had only made it inches from his bed.

“No one can hear you here Tony. Isn’t that wonderful,” Ryder exclaimed. “It’s just us.”

“No,” Tony bit.

Ryder shook his head at him. “You’ll learn to know it is just the two of us, very soon. I can’t really blame you for believing that you have others. But you won’t in a little bit, not when I’m through breaking you. And even if they do happen to find you, they won’t want someone who’s broken.”

“Why? Why are you doing this?” Tony hiccupped around a mouth full of alcohol dribbling down his lips.

Ryder went to lap up the excess. “Why not?”

His knees pressed up to his chest and his cries grew hoarse. He feared no one would hear him scream, if Ryder came to get him. No one was here. It could happen just like last time. And maybe that time they would figure it wouldn’t be worth it to save him. So he needed to make sure that they knew how thankful Tony was that they came for him. They couldn’t see him like this and see what Ryder had done.

Because Ryder was right. They wouldn’t want someone broken and right now that was all Tony felt.

He bit his lip to stop himself from crying in aggravation and from pain. His body rocked and nausea continued to swell within him. He heard people outside move back and forth and he wondered why no one was coming in his room at least to open it.
He couldn’t do this. He didn’t want to be here alone. Acid built up again and Tony’s body heaved expelling it from his body. He rolled his body away trying to get away from the pungent smell of it, but it stayed stagnant in this enclosed room.

He felt minutes pass and no one came. He cried openly for what felt like the first time in forever. No one was here so he could just do so. The cries came forth with such intense force that it was too much for Tony’s body to handle. It didn’t have enough strength for the painful sobs that Tony was exerting. Tony whimpered, not able to sob any more loudly.

He just wanted the door open and to leave this place. He wanted someone to come back, someone that he knew. He wanted Pepper to leave her meeting, she said she would if he called. But the phone was too far and he couldn’t move.

Then he wanted Steve. He wanted him with such a passion that he didn’t know what to do. He wanted him to come back and hold him the same way he held him, when he had first woken up. He wanted those whispers of him saying I love you because maybe finally Tony would start believing them, if he found Tony broken like this and could still say that to his face. Steve would be too kind to lie to a man in Tony’s position.

So he cried because he was getting neither of the things he wanted or needed. His crying tapered off, but the shivers persisted and he kept dry heaving even though he knew there was nothing left within him.

He called out, but this time they were whispers of, “Steve, Steve, Steve.”

He pressed his face to the cold tile floor and tried falling asleep, hopeful that in sleep his pain would stop and his awareness for how enclosed and alone he felt would cease as well.

Steve walked through the tower, having taken a shower already feeling greatly refreshed. He guessed the others were right in him needing to leave for a bit. Though a quick bit. Seconds away from Tony already felt like too much. He knew he still had hours, before the boys came and left. So Tony was in good hands for now, but that didn’t make the desire to go back to him lessen in any way, shape, or form.

He was just on his way out of the door, when Bruce pulled him aside. “Conference room.”

Steve frowned, but followed wordlessly as Bruce led him to the conference room where the rest of the Avengers, excluding Clint where. Fury and Coulson were also in the room, sitting beside one another. Natasha’s face was set in a grim and Thor seemed just as upset, arms crossed firmly over his chest.

“Close the door,” Fury instructed.

Steve did as was suggested then turned toward Fury. “I suppose this is something important.”

He sat down in a chair opposite of Sam and raised an eyebrow in question.

Natasha held a remote in her hand and cut on the television in the room. It was a foreign news network. The camera panned to a car wreck, before moving to the news reporter. Steve looked to all of them for any sense of clarification.
“Apparently, there was a car crash in Norway with one of the passengers was Isak Tiege, a prominent voice in the automobile industry.”

Steve nodded. “Okay, and what does this exactly have to do with us. I mean I am sorry for this loss, but unless any of you knew him-”

“Ryder is dead,” Fury said not giving a moment’s second to give any lead up.

“What?”

“Isak was his brother. Apparently, Ryder was driving the car overturned and Ryder passed on impact,” Bucky explained.

“Isak’s wife is with her husband right now,” Fury said. “I just thought you all should know, since you all, as I did, wanted to make sure he got what he deserved. Looks like fate worked in our favor.”

Steve raised an eyebrow toward him. “You see the body?”

Fury shook his head. “No, Ryder’s body was nearly unidentifiable. We only know that it was Ryder because Isak, the brother, woke up and identified him.”

Steve narrowed his eyes. “And you believe him?”

Fury raised a brow. “Is there a reason I shouldn’t? I though you would have been happy.”

“I would be happy, if I was a hundred percent certain it was Ryder’s body that died. And even if he had truly died in that car crash I must be honest, I’m a little disappointed I wasn’t the one that put an end to him.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying it’s highly coincidental that he goes to Norway just as we’re closing in on him and he supposedly wounds up dead, but his brother doesn’t? Also this is the same man, who Cali said was creating a formula for DNA to perfectly mirror someone else’s. Who’s to say he didn’t do that with his brother?”

“Steve, look I know this is a lot to take in, but Ryder is dead. Be happy about it. Tell Tony,” Fury said. “There’s nothing more to look into.”

Natasha raised her eyebrows at Steve, knowing he was about to say something.

“I’m not telling Tony anything, until I’m positive that the Ryder that was identified is actually the one who died. Find a way to get Isak here. I want to question him,” Steve asserted, jaw clenching tightly and hands folded tightly on the table.

“We don’t need to do that Steve. As I have told you he has been identified and we don’t need to cause anymore drama. Trust me I am as upset with all of this as you are, but don’t let your paranoia get to you,” Fury said calmly. “We cannot bring into question someone and make them seem guilty.”

“With all due respect Fury, I am the leader of this team. Anything having to do with the safety and well-being of any of my teammates falls directly under my jurisdiction. I suggest you find a way to get Isak here, or so help me I will find a way to Norway. And I don’t think we need another international affair on our hands,” Steve grit out.

Fury straightened his shoulders at the threat. Realizing that Steve fully intended to go through with
the threat if tested, Fury looked at the rest of the people in the room and saw the agreeance on their faces.

Steve nodded and stood up. “And I’ll be the first you tell, when he arrives. I don’t want him anywhere near Tony. Don’t even mention his name.”

Fury agreed to all of this. “Of course.”

Natasha and Bucky followed Steve out of the room. Once far enough away, Steve turned to the two of them. Natasha searched his eyes and placed a hand on his shoulder. Bucky did the same to the other free shoulder. The three of them looked at one another and seemed to come to a silent agreement.

They all hoped Isak was really Ryder because if so Steve was going to get the chance to show that he truly didn’t deserve anything as quick as a car crash, when he got through with him.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to everyone who commented, gave a kudo, and left a bookmark. You all continue to make my day :)
Chapter Notes

Enjoy this chapter, while I run off to take my final on a Saturday...I repeat a final on a Saturday. It's safe to say professors just don't care. But hey I have something to look forward to after I either pass/fail. I can reply to your comments from last chapter so yay!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve left Bucky and Natasha back at the tower, so that they could help in locating Isak and bringing him back here. Energy thrummed beneath his veins at just the mere hope that Isak was Ryder. Within him he had no ounce of a doubt that Ryder had managed to do this unthinkable offense, but it was just all too convenient for Steve to let fly over his head. He had dealt with too many ghosts that had turned out to be alive. Death to him didn’t quite mean anything more, until he actually saw a body and some provable information.

These thoughts continued to swirl through his head as he made his way back to the hospital. Peter had called him, saying that he and the boys were on their way back to May’s. That meant that Steve had a few minutes to get to the hospital. He had passed them on their way home and stopped briefly to check in about how their day was going, before heading up to Tony’s room. There he was stopped by a doctor, who wanted to ask for an autograph for her son. He obliged her wishes and went toward the front desk so he could have something to write on. When he was done, the same doctor asked if he wouldn’t mind coming down to the children’s floor, before having to go back to Tony.

Steve was completely torn. He didn’t want to bail on the kids, but at the same time Tony had already been left in his room alone for about five minutes and he didn’t really want to extend that time.

“Would it be alright if I check on Tony, first? Then I can come down to visit the kids,” Steve inquired.

The doctor brightened and waved him off. “Of course, of course. I’m sorry. Sometimes I forget that this time you’re not here to visit the kids, but because Mr. Stark’s in here. Please do check on him and whenever it is convenient for you come find me and you can visit the kids. And maybe when Mr. Stark’s up to it he can come as well.”

Steve agreed. His feet seemed to carry him to Tony’s room and he let the comforting warmth ease the energy vibrating through his veins. A sense of peace, coupled with the warmth, took over him. He smiled softly, opening the door, ready to tease whether Tony had fun with Pepper, Rhodey, and the boys.

His smile froze on his face as his eyes settled on the empty bed. Immediately his heart began thundering and the thought, “Not again” was constantly being repeated in his head. He first went to check in the bathroom, when a whimper caught his attention.

“Steve, Steve, Steve.”

Steve looked down and his heart seized in his chest. There Tony was in a similar position to when they first found him in that cold bedroom. His eyes were shut closed, tears streaming down his pale
face. His shivering body was curled tightly fingers pressing close to his chest. Steve didn’t take much more time to observe his appearance, before he fell down to Tony’s place on the floor.

“Tony, hey Tony I’m right here,” Steve murmured. “Can you open your eyes for me? Let me see those nice brown eyes.”

Tony shook his head, bringing his knees even closer to his chest. Steve looked around and saw the fallen blanket on the floor, right next to a puddle of vomit. He immediately took it in his hands and placed it over Tony’s shaking body. The shaking continued, but the chattering of his teeth remained constant.

Steve ran a hand over his back soothingly. Knowing Tony’s eyes were still close, he went to the restroom and grabbed a wet cloth. He came back to Tony.

“Hey, Tony. I’m just going to wipe your face a bit, okay? Is that alright?” Steve asked, fingers clenching around the warm cloth. While Tony hadn’t said yes, he hadn’t mumbled no. Steve swallowed back a noise of sadness instead to focus on his priority right now. He grabbed the washcloth and wiped Tony’s face.

He ran it delicately over the skin there, wiping away the remnants of vomit and tears on his face. He used that same one to wipe at the mess on the floor. He grabbed a few wipes and cleaned the rest of it, before throwing both towel and wipes into the trashcan. Steve went into the restroom and grabbed another towel and wet it with warm water. Steve ran the cloth over Tony’s forehead and cheeks, hoping to get some warmth back into his face. Tony’s shaking slowly subsided, with the added pressure of Steve wiping his face and his other hand rubbing soothing patterns onto the blanket covering him.

“Steve,” he murmured, groggily blinking his eyes open. “Steve.”

“I’m here. I’m here,” Steve whispered. Tony’s breathing was still a little haggard and it made Steve worry about the exertion he may be placing on his lungs. “Hey, sweetheart. Can you match my breathing?”

Steve evened out his own breaths, his breathing having picked up from slight panic over Tony’s current state. Tony’s brown eyes met worried blue ones. Tony averted his gaze and shook his head, breathing still having a harshness and wheeze to it, sounding like Steve in his asthma days.

“Come on Tony. I know you can do it. Breathing that hard has to be tiring, right? Yeah, I know so try to match mine okay. In and hold it. Out,” Steve breathed. “Come on Tony.”

Tony looked up again and tried mimicking Steve’s breathing style. Eventually, his breathing evened out and the rasping sound lost its harshness. Now there was just a soft wheeze. Steve continued this for about another minute or so, before he was assured that Tony could breathe slowly.

“Thanks,” Tony said, eyes dropping as though what he had gone had just wasted all his strength. Steve knew all too well how powerful an attack like that could expend all of your energy. Steve wanted to know what triggered it, so he could make sure that Tony didn’t have to go through that again.

“What happened Tony? Did someone do something to you?” Steve questioned, already ready to rip someone a new one, if they dared trying anything against Tony. Besides it would be good practice against the main event, when they brought Isak…Ryder down here.

“No, it’s just me being me. You know? I’m not Tony Stark if I don’t have my daily dose of a panic
“attack,” he tried joking, but it fell flat.

“Tony,” Steve softly said. “You don’t have to joke about this not with anyone, especially never with me.”

Tony froze.

Steve shook his head and brought Tony close to him. Tony fell into the embrace rather quickly, readily seeking to absorb the warmth that Steve offered. Tony turned his face toward Steve’s chest, refusing to meet his gaze.

“It’s always cold in here. The room is like this one…like the one,” Tony trailed off, hopeful that Steve would understand what he was trying to say. “And I asked her to crack the door, but she didn’t crack the door.”

Steve wrapped his arms tighter around Tony, shocked that he hadn’t said anything to him about the similarities between this hospital room and the room he was kept in. His complaints about being in the hospital had all been taken as his general dislike for being in the hospital. So the others hadn’t really brought into question why he really wanted to leave after the second day, despite knowing he needed medical attention. Steve allowed himself a second of guilt, before he pushed that feeling away to be experienced at another time. Right now he had someone to take care of and he couldn’t do that with guilt rearing at the forefront of his thoughts.

He grabbed Tony, blanket and all. He cradled him to his chest, in a bridal position. Tony sputtered hands flying to catch onto Steve’s neck. He glared back at Steve’s smiling face. His eyes narrowed even further as Steve began to walk outside of the room.

“Hey, I can walk by myself,” Tony argued, having a little bit more life into his voice. “Put me down.”

He knew that Tony just didn’t want to be seen being carried. He knew that at any moment, someone with a phone could take a picture and send it to some gossip magazine or something. So he knew where Tony’s concerns resided. He lifted an eyebrow and shrugged, the movement causing Tony to shift closer to Steve.

“I can either put you down in a wheelchair or carry you. However, I know fully well you cannot walk right now and that’s not a bad thing. It’s just you’ve been in this bed for a week and you haven’t really stretched your legs out yet.”

“Yeah, and you were lying down for seventy years, but from what I heard you could basically run the first time you woke up. So Rogers put me down,” Tony asserted, though fingers tightened on Steve’s neck.


Steve relented, carefully placing Tony on the floor. He figured he would do as Tony pleased. Tony grinned at him. Keeping two hands on his waist, Steve waited until Tony looked like he had a good grasp on standing. Extracting his hands away from his waist, Steve stood back a bit. However, he stayed close enough so that if Tony looked like he was about to falter in his steps Steve would be there to catch him.

Tony looked back and smiled smugly. Steve raised an eyebrow and raised a hand as though motioning that Tony should carry on. Tony made it three steps, three shaking steps might he had,
before his legs buckled underneath him. Steve was there within a second, arms wrapping around his waist. He tried reigning in laughter over the fact that Tony looked like a newborn gazelle learning to walk for the first time. He knew his laughter would not be appreciated.

“So,” Steve dragged. “Wheelchair or being carried.”

“Shut up.” Tony hissed, face already reddening from embarrassment. “Just cover my face with a blanket. I don’t want anyone seeing me. They already know I’m in this stupid hospital and I would prefer them not to get pictures of me in this stupid hospital looking like how I’m looking.”

Steve carried Tony outside of his hospital room. A nurse was immediately at his shoulder. “Ah, Mr. Rogers you’re not allowed to take patients outside of their rooms, especially nearing night time. Our policy doesn’t allow it.”

Steve looked down at the nurse. “I know, but you see I wasn’t really asking for permission to leave. So as much as I appreciate you following your procedure, I think I know Tony better than the rest of all of you. That means I know he needs a break from this hospital room he’s been kept in. But look I promise to have him back here within three hours and I’ll even tell you where we’re going.”

“Mr. Rogers, really I can’t allow…”

“Like I said I’m not asking for permission. If your boss has a problem about that, tell them to come find me and we’ll discuss it. So we’ll be outside at the cherry fountain not too far from here. It’s still on hospital grounds. We’ll be back around eight at night. If not, you may feel free to come remind me. Now, this has been a very titillating conversation, but if I really want to stay true to my three hour time limit we must be going now.”

Steve walked away with not even a second glance back to the nurse. Tony pulled his blanket off of his face slowly to look at Steve in barely hid amusement.

“You’re awful. That poor nurse is going to say he was bullied by a national icon.” Tony sputtered, body shaking, but this time from poorly restrained laughter. “And what happened with the whole you don’t like bullies? I’m going to need this to be added to the plaque above below your picture in the museum.”

Steve rolled his eyes at Tony and pulled the blanket over his eyes. It didn’t stop Tony’s laughter though. Steve smiled widely at the sound of Tony laughing again. He caught a few nurses, doctors, and patients looking at him oddly. He wondered the source of their looks, before he realized he was smiling albeit probably a little crazy, while carrying a body hidden in a blanket. He had the thought to stop smiling, but then figured that would be way worse.

When they made it to the outside garden, Steve was lucky to find that it was empty. The sun was setting, but there was still a nice warm breeze going about. He was thankful that it was warmer outside than what it was in the hospital. He led both of them to a spot near the cherry fountain, the sound of water being soothing to his ears, almost as soothing as holding Tony in his arms. Steve sat them down on a long outstretched bench.

Tony sighed at the movement, but allowed his body to be maneuvered gently by Steve. That was until Steve tried placing Tony in an upright position. Tony removed Steve’s hand and twisted his body so that his legs were elevated on the bench’s arms and his head was placed on Steve’s lap. Steve swallowed down the need to whisper, “I love you.”

His throat tightened from holding in the confession again. He wanted to tell it to Tony every day, but ever since he said it to Tony that first time he woke up in the hospital, Tony would flinch at the
statement. Steve would like to say it wasn’t him that was causing the flinch, he felt like he knew that he wasn’t…but at the same time…

He stopped thinking about that, remembering how Tony’s eyes had brightened the first time that he had said that he loved him. He remembered the redness quickly gathering in Tony’s cheek, before just as quickly dispersing. It wasn’t fair that Tony had such a control over his facial reactions whereas Steve was often this open book.

But he didn’t want Tony to hide things from him. He wanted that redness to stay in his cheeks, whenever he said something to Tony that surprised him or made him happy. He wanted that lightness in his eyes directed toward him. He wanted that smile, however brief and innocent…but his. He wanted those hands that had created nearly all of the things Steve had ever needed in life, to bring him closer.

He desired that Tony would look up into his eyes and bare himself to Steve…bare himself so freely that Steve could cover him with his body and protect him. He wanted nights just like this, with Tony trailing a finger over his knee, humming some song to himself.

He wanted it all with Tony. And he wanted it forever.

He had the thought that maybe he should be terrified by this admittance, but he couldn’t say he was. The only person he had ever felt this way about was Peggy and even then in many ways his love for Tony outmatched his love for Peggy. It was different loves for different times and he appreciated both the same. However, with Tony there was just this fiery need to be beside him and allow himself to freely experience this feeling.

He looked down at Tony and began to run his fingers through Tony’s hair. The humming trailed off into quiet breathing and for a second Steve thought that Tony had fallen asleep, before Tony turned his face upward to look at Steve.

Steve didn’t stop his movements. He continued running his fingers through his hair, occasionally placing a straying curl behind his ear. While doing this, Steve wondered if he should try bringing up what made Tony go into that panic attack again. He didn’t want to disturb this peace blanketing him, but he also wanted to be the one that helped Tony.

Steve looked into Tony’s eyes, which had closed sometime during Steve’s ministrations. Steve trailed his fingers over Tony’s cheek. Tony’s breath fanned over his fingers as they ghosted over his chin. Steve wanted to memorize every single feature of his face and later sketch it.

“What happened back in your room?”

The questioned startled him, just as much as it startled Tony whose eyes quickly blinked open. Steve shook his head at how Tony tensed and his expression grew tight. He wanted to soothe those lines in his face and get rid of the tension settling between his eyebrows.

“I just want to help you Tony. I mean you don’t have to tell me, if you don’t want to. Just know that I’m always here to listen,” Steve told Tony.

“Yeah, that’s what you all keep telling me,” Tony said as though that fact alone scared him. “And what if I told all of you and you would see just how…just how weak I am. I mean Steve I can’t handle being in an enclosed room. My body is always cold. Every single time a nurse comes in I think it’s someone from the CMPNY because they’re essentially doing the same thing, just poking and prodding. And I should get over this, right? I’m a Stark. I’m Iron Man. This…this shouldn’t phase me.”
The last statement was muttered so softly, that if it weren’t for Steve’s enhanced hearing he wouldn’t have heard what Tony had said. His heart lurched at the idea that Tony had been dealing with this, since he was found.

“First you’re not weak,” Steve said.

Tony scoffed. “Don’t feel like you need to sugarcoat things. I can’t get over this simple kidnapping. Hell my whole life was preparing me for this.”

Steve frowned at that. “This wasn’t a simple kidnapping, Tony.”

“Yes, it was. I was taken and yeah…kidnapping. But I’ve gotten over every single kidnapping before. I was kidnapped once when I was four. Dad of course didn’t pay ransom, figured it was just some teenagers asking for money. It wasn’t.”

“Tony.”

“Oh, and then when I was fifteen I was taken by some business investors that were upset over a deal my dad had cut them out of. Then a few months later I was taken by this guy who claimed I was actually his son. My dear old dad, Howard, claimed he would have been so lucky for it to have been true. My mom was the only reason that I came back from that one. Sometimes I think my life might have been better staying with that crazy man.”

“Tony,” Steve said expression, growing pinched.

Tony stopped. “Ah, shit sorry. I know you don’t want to hear my fucked up childhood and early adulthood. Look that’s all in the past. It doesn’t really matter anymore. I mean I’ve been told it does, by my therapist on many occasions, but what does he know. Actually, scratch that he knows a lot. He’s actually nice. Probably need to schedule an appointment with him soon. I’ve missed a lot lately.”

Crap, he probably should have told Tony’s therapist what had happened. No doubt his therapist would have been worried by the missed meetings. All of them had missed their meetings the past two months, with looking for Tony. But they had always a little time to stop for a brief few minutes to talk about their day on the phone. Maybe he would send a reminder to Pepper or someone to get in contact with his therapist and let them know that Tony being absent from his meetings wasn’t due to him.

“That’s…that’s not okay. None of that was at okay and those events are not preparation for some bigger scale kidnapping event,” Steve asserted. “Those were all awful events that Howard should have prevented. He should have protected you. I can’t believe…I mean four years old and Howard didn’t even care?”

Steve’s anger grew with each growing second, just thinking about what all Tony had to grow through. The anger continued to hit him like harsh tidal waves, until Tony sat up so his eyes were directly in Steve’s line of vision.

“Hey, no. Look that’s all in the past,” Tony said, hands going to wipe at a tear that Steve hadn’t even known that he had cried. “I shouldn’t have even brought it up.”

“No, no. Don’t feel like you have to keep things from me. Thank you for sharing that, but…” Steve blinked away the wetness in his eyes. “Tony how can you call yourself weak after any of that? No one who is weak would have been able to become the man you are today. You didn’t let those situations define you or stop you from going after your goals.”
Tony laughed dryly. “Someone who was weak wouldn’t have gotten themselves taken in the first place. I’m supposed to be a superhero and I get taken more than the average citizen probably. And crap what if they start taking Miles and I can’t protect him or…”

“Hey no, don’t go there Tony. No one is going to take Miles away from you. He has a wonderful father and his father has amazing friends who will do everything in their power to make sure he is never harmed.”

Tony still looked unsure of himself. His eyes fell and he went back to Steve’s lap, figuring that was a way to stop himself from looking at Steve’s attentive gaze.

Steve decided that for all he thought about Tony sharing himself, maybe it was time to do the same. His fingers went back to Tony’s hair, the repetitive movement helping his own fingers to not shake.

“I hate the cold. Like I truly hate it. After 70 years submersed in cold water, it would seem like I would get used to it, that it would become like some sort of second skin. It never did. When I first woke up, besides feeling disoriented from being in a different time, I felt cold,” Steve told him.

Even thinking about it now had him remembering just how cold he felt. “And I could never get warm. I tried everything. I tried those electric blankets. I tried increasing the heat in my room. Nothing worked. I then figured it was penance for leaving Bucky, for having not caught him on that train.”

“That wasn’t your fault Steve,” Tony said, his voice muffled slightly from his lips pressed against Steve’s knees.

Steve couldn’t agree that it wasn’t his fault…if only he had been quicker.

“Maybe,” he said instead. “But I figured since his body was forever buried in that ice, in the cold maybe that’s what I deserved. So I didn’t try feeling warm for a while. I believed that it was just something I had to get used to.”

Steve shook his head, remembering those first few months. “Then I had these moments where I was back with the Commandos and when I woke up I was back here in this seemingly new world. It was like I was kept reminding myself that it was my fault I had lost everything. I mean I had went in that plane intending to die and suddenly I was alive and I didn’t know how to deal with it. I didn’t want to deal with it.”

“Steve,” Tony said turning his body to face Steve. His voice sounded like his heart was breaking. Tony placed a palm on Steve’s stomach and he felt the gesture ground him.

“I mean everyone I knew was gone. My mission was over. I felt I had nothing to live for. Sure, SHIELD gave me a mission eventually, but I still felt like a man out of time, who didn’t deserve to be here.”

Steve stopped for a moment to clear his throat. “And so I kept being cold and I kept waking up feeling like this wasn’t the time I was supposed to be in. People kept wanting me to adapt quickly and be Captain America as though no time had passed.”

“It’s hard living up to expectations,” Tony softly agreed.

Steve hummed. “It is. And I couldn’t disappoint them, but inside I was so tired. I was drained. Then we had the Avengers Initiative and you all weren’t my soldiers, weren’t my Howling Commandos. You constantly told me you all weren’t my soldiers who had to obey all my orders.”
Tony’s lips tilted in a smirk, remembering with all the arguments that stemmed from that fact alone.

“And it was true. You all weren’t my soldiers, just like the Commandos just weren’t my soldiers. In way you all easily became my family and maybe I allowed that to happen so fast because I needed some ties to this world. I needed to feel like I was gaining something, instead of feeling like I was losing everything to the point where I was losing myself”

“And sure I felt close to Natasha, Clint, and the others. But you were the one that made me feel like this could actually be a home for me. I know it seems crazy, seeing as how we first were introduced,” Steve laughed then quieted, knowing that he could never apologize enough for the first words he said to Tony.

“I know,” Tony whispered, as if knowing where Steve’s thoughts were.

At that moment all Steve wanted to do was lean his head down and press a kiss against Tony’s cheek. But he practiced his self-restraint.

“At first I didn’t even know it was you. I just noticed things like how it was always warm wherever I went in the tower. I noticed how the updated to my suit, made it feel like I was constantly warm. Then JARVIS had an alert to calm me down, whenever I was experiencing an attack. I thought to myself how in the world was all of this happening. Here I was at the end of my rope and you were always right there in the shadows making it better. And it was not just for me that you’ve done these things for.”

Tony shook his head. “I didn’t know you knew that.”

“I mean, it was pretty simple to figure out, once I started to pay attention. So I’m just saying all of us feel weak at times. There are always things that are outside of our control, no matter how strong we are whether physically, emotionally, or mentally. You’ve been there for us. Let us be there for you,” Steve said.

“It’s hard,” Tony said, hands clenching around. “It’s always been me taking care of myself. I can probably take care of this too.”

Steve’s chest grew tight and he knew that he had a long way to go, but he was never one for giving up.

“I know and I’m sorry that we’ve made you continue thinking this way, even when we’ve been knowing you for years. And you don’t have to talk to me about it today, tomorrow, or even months later. But I don’t want you going around ever thinking that whatever happened was your fault or that the abuse you’re suffered was because of you not being strong. Because that’s not the case. And I’ll tell you that every day if you need me to.”

And so Tony looked at Steve through half lidded eyes, wetness gathering like an ocean. Steve stared at him, not wanting to tear his gaze from Tony’s. Tony brought his hands up to Steve’s cheeks, eyes following his own hands’ movement. He ran his fingers alongside his jaw, then his ear as though memorizing everything, should he never be given the chance to do it again. It worried Steve slightly, the delicate care in which he did this as though Steve would ever leave.

Tony leant back and nodded to himself, once twice, and then leaned forward to press a kiss against the corner of Steve’s lips. Steve could feel wetness falling down on his collarbone from where Tony’s eyelashes were fluttering against his skin. Steve breathed softly into his ear.

“I’m here. I’ll always be here, no matter what. I love you,” he said, finally allowing himself to say
what he’s been wanting to say. This time Tony didn’t flinch, but only tried pressing himself further against Steve’s chest.

“I want to talk to you,” Tony said, his forehead pressed against Steve’s neck. “I do…I just don’t know how.”

“Just talk to me sweetheart,” Steve replied back, wrapping his arms tightly against. “We can figure out the rest as we go, together.”

Tony looked at him, eyelashes stuck together. Steve kissed the space between his eyebrows and Tony’s eyes fell shut. Steve softly kissed the eyelids of both eyes. Tony breathed softly and opened them once more.

Steve looked back and Tony searched his eyes. Once finding what he was looking for, he leant against Steve’s chest and talked.

Chapter End Notes

Sighs, next chapter is going to be a lot because.... you know what let's keep this a mystery cause sometimes I don't even know the path my writing will take me on *however, I am gonna crack open a tub of ice cream and prepare to get ready for this next chapter (of course after I get done with this final)*

Thanks again to everyone who commented, gave a kudo, and left a bookmark. You all continue to make my day :)
Tony's talk will happen in 3 parts. This is "The Talk" Pt. 1. I would like to say it won't be as heart-wrenching as the "I apologize in advance for any tears shed" series, but ummm...

Also it's the Royal Wedding today. So that's exciting. What's not exciting is I'll have to get up around 5 a.m. 'cause of the different time zone to watch it. I'm wondering to myself is it worth it. Sighs, who all else is planning on watching the Royal Wedding? Update, might as well stay up because I had to wait for A03 to be up and running. Whelp, thank you A03 for being down so I have motivation to stay up lol

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony rested against Steve’s chest. He breathed in the scent that was so unique to Steve, allowing it to lull him into a certain sense of safety. He didn’t even know where to begin or if he even wanted to start this conversation at all. He should have just told him that he didn’t really want to talk about it anymore.

He was pretty certain Steve would understand his silence on the matter. He chewed his bottom lip to the point it drew blood. He gave out a silent hiss and thought of all the things that could go wrong with him telling Steve about Ryder.

Steve could view him as a completely different person. But he couldn’t stop himself from wanting to tell someone and here was Steve wanting to listen. Sure, the others had offered but he didn’t want to tell them. So what made Steve different?

What made him want to consider telling Steve, when he had no plans of telling Pepper or Rhodey everything that happened…at least not yet? Maybe he’d see how Steve took it first. Guess, this could be the trial run.

After this, he’d be surprised if Steve wanted to stay. His mind battled with his heart and he wondered if he wanted to risk the chance of him revealing everything and having Steve leave. He didn’t know what he would do. He had gotten good at people leaving, but after Steve had left him in that tower that day he couldn’t stop to wonder what would happen if he left again.

He didn’t want more people leaving him anymore. He had gotten used to having everyone back.

"You won’t leave, after everything’s said?" Tony asked once more, knowing it wasn’t fair to make Steve promise this. He shouldn’t have to feel required to stay.

"It was never on my mind to leave," Steve said.

"Okay so where do I start?" Tony questioned, laughing dryly.

Steve answered him, "The beginning may be a good place to start."

"Right, well I met Ryder at a college party, the first I ever went to. We talked and hung out a bit, but after that we didn’t really cross paths. I was disappointed," he said amused at his past self. "I think I
latched onto this idea that I could meet a friend so easily. I mean on the movies, it seemed so simple.”

Tony ran his fingers on Steve’s knee.

“So I never thought I would see him again. But then toward the end of my first semester I did.”

Tony talked freely as the memory, from that day he reencountered Ryder, flew through his mind.

Tony walked into the dorm hallways, his own body brushing against others. He only wanted to come and pick up Jason’s part of their Differential Equations class project and head back home. Originally, the two had made plans that Jason would meet up with Tony sometime during the week and hand him what he was working on. Unfortunately, Jason seemed to have caught a cold that was going around and was stuck in his dorm for a little bit resulting in Tony having to come to Simmons Hall.

He himself had wanted to live at a student dorm. In fact it was required that all first-year students complete one year of living at one of their resident halls. Of course with the last name Stark that wasn’t really going to happen. His dad had cut corners to make sure that Tony stayed home. Tony believed it was the fact that his dad wanted him under his eye and his mother may not have been ready to send him away at 15.

That meant that he was also ostracized from his peers, only interacting with them while in class. He had hoped that he would see some familiar faces from that first party he went to, when he snuck out during orientation. Sadly, he didn’t see any familiar faces, specifically Ryder. His cheeks burned at the thought of Ryder.

Ever since that first party, he had developed somewhat of a crush on the guy. He told himself not to. It was just Tony had this awful thing of attaching himself to people fairly quickly. And in his defense Ryder had stayed with him all night, even to the point of making sure that he had made it back home safely.

He shook his head, ridding himself of the heat swelling in his cheeks. He straightened his back and continued his mission of finding Jason’s room in the midst of this little hall party.

The loud music coming from an unknown source, pounded in Tony’s head. He had no idea that MIT students had parties at their residency halls. He was pretty sure that wasn’t allowed. The first party that he had went to wasn’t at a residency hall, but instead it was at some senior’s apartment complex.

When he came to the main floor, there were a bunch of students dancing lively. The room was lit only with a few lights. Some bodies were lounging on the different chairs. Others were off to the corners playing whatever games were in the room.

He felt oddly displaced.

He looked back at his phone and saw that Jason still hadn’t texted him. He hoped that he hadn’t fallen asleep. Just as he was about to head out of the main floor and back to where the rooms were, he bumped into a body. The action caused the other person’s drink to fall back on themselves. Tony’s eyes widened and he took a step back as if hoping the distance would make up for the accident.

“I am so sorry,” Tony apologized. “I wasn’t looking where I was going and I can completely pay for another shirt, if that’s what you want…”
His voice trailed off as he looked up to the person he bumped into. Immediately, his eyes focused on Ryder’s. The warmth in his cheeks returned and he felt those cursed butterflies float around in the depths of his stomach.

He took a deep breath and breathed, “Ryder.”

Ryder leaned back on the foosball game behind him and looked appraisingly at Tony. His mouth tilted and without a second thought he placed down his drink, reached at the corners of his shirt, and pulled it off of his body. Tony momentarily forgot everything at that exact moment. He didn’t even know why he was there at Simmons Hall.

Ryder threw the offended shirt carelessly on the floor and crossed his arms over his chest. He opened his mouth to say something to Tony, until a girl with dark hair came bounding up to them. She looked at Ryder’s shirtless figure and rolled her eyes.

“Goodness Ryder. You just fucking got here. Can you not remain clothed for literally a minute?” she bemoaned, poking his shoulder.

Ryder shrugged. “Not my fault Kali. It got wet.”

“It got wet,” Kali said raising an unimpressed brow. “Yes, because when things get wet it’s impossible for them to get dry.”

Then as if noticing Tony’s presence she turned to him. “Who are you?” she inquired.

Ryder turned to him. “That’s Adam.”

“Anthony,” Tony corrected, pushing back the hurt that Ryder hadn’t remembered his name. It wasn’t like someone as cool as him would remember the teenager that he met once at a party. “But uh I go by Tony.”

“Tony,” she said, as if tasting to see if his name sounded right on her tongue. “I haven’t seen you around at any of the parties on campus or anything. You new here?”

Tony shifted on his feet. “Yeah, it’s my first semester here. And I don’t go to parties. I actually just came to pick up part of my assignment from Jason.”

“Oh, Jason that fucking loser. Let me tell you honey, he probably more than likely does not have your project ready for you right now,” Kali teased.

Tony frowned at that. “Why?”

Kali pointed to a figure behind Tony. “Because that’s Jason and he’s been with that girl for about a good five minutes. Also you just can’t depend on him for anything. He’s like the well-known procrastinator. I’m surprised you actually thought he would do his part.”

Tony looked back and there it was his project member with his face planted in some girl’s chest. Jason probably never had a cold. Probably why he also hadn’t responded to any of his calls.

His eyes became downcast as he realized he would probably have to shoulder their entire project. Great, now he had this and all the assignments that his dad had for him. He could just feel the waves of stress push back against his body. It was only his first semester and he already felt like he was drowning. How could he prove to his dad that he didn’t make a mistake in letting Tony got to college already instead of just taking a few years to work at SI, if he didn’t do well his first year?
“Ah, I know that face. Looks like you need a strong drink,” Kali said.

Ryder stopped her. “He’s too young to drink Kali. Fuck, just look at him. He’s practically a kid.”

Tony had a retort ready to say that he wasn’t a kid. Kids don’t go to college at 15 or are instrumental in some of the designs at SI.

“Yeah, and you’re not exactly legal to drink either,” Kali said, raising a brow.

“Oh,” Tony murmured looking back at Ryder. He had assumed that Ryder was in his senior year just with the confidence and maturity he exuded. “I thought you were 21.”

Ryder smirked. “Nope, just turned 18. But he’s like nowhere near being legal Kali.”

Kali rolled her eyes. “Ugh, fine. I wouldn’t want to taint his little innocence anyway. Just look at him Ryder. Remember when we used to be that small and naïve?”

Tony folded his arms again his chest. “I am not small and naïve.”

Kali cooed at him. “Oh, that’s so cute. I actually can’t deal with how adorable you are. I mean goodness you must be a genius though. MIT at 15. But look you’re here now so you might as well party a little. Even if you’re barely out of your mom’s womb, you should still experience the life of being a college student. I know you haven’t drank before, but you ever fucked someone?”

“Kali, seriously what the fuck dude?” Ryder hissed.

Kali shrugged. “What just asking. There’s no problem in asking, right kid?”

Tony looked down at his shoes, wishing that he could disappear. He could feel his cheeks burning now and he was pretty sure his hands were growing sweaty.


Ryder groaned. “Tony I am so sorry for my friend. I would say that she’s not like this, but she really is. And she’s not even drunk yet.”

“Oh, but I will be,” Kali joked. “Look it’s pretty cool if you’re a virgin. Adds to the whole innocent thing. But gotta say if you were just a little older I would totally let you into my bed.”

“Stop Kali. Seriously, he’s a kid. That’s just wrong you’re trying to sexualize him,” Ryder argued back, reaching for his drink and swallowing the last bit that was in there.

“Ugh, such a party pooper. You’ve been hanging out with George and Emma too much. I mean you are thinking the same as I am. If he wasn’t a little older, you wouldn’t fuck him?”

Ryder looked at Tony, who had then looked up at him. Tony wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answer. None of the kids were as sexually free at his school, but that may be because he never really reacted with the kids at his school. Well, he had kissed Sarah when he was 13. She had been a freshman that he had met. They kissed at one of his parents’ galas.

He hadn’t really tried to go any further with anyone because he honestly just had so much to do. But now he was wondering if he had missed out.

Ryder shook his head. “I wouldn’t because he’s about as old as my sister. And I know if someone tried anything with her, I would kill them.”
“I don’t doubt that you will,” Kali told him. “Anyways as engaging as this conversation has been, I’m off to go get a drink and find someone to fuck me.”

Tony pulled a face.

“Yeah, yeah. Wear protection. I wouldn’t want the guy getting whatever you have,” he yelled at her retreating figure.

Kali raised her middle finger at him in response.

“She seems nice,” Tony muttered.

Ryder laughed brightly and Tony wished that he could make him laugh again. “Naw, she’s an asshole. She even knows that. But for real why haven’t I seen you around? It’s like after that party I never saw you again.”

He missed me, Tony’s brain unhelpfully provided.

“Ah, I pretty much go to class and then go home. My dad didn’t really want me staying on campus with people older than me, especially since I don’t really know any of you.”

“That’s understandable. But hey if you want to live on campus next year, you could room with me. I’m not a total stranger,” he added jokingly. “My roommates are graduating next semester, so I’ll have an empty room and you should apply.”

“That would be cool,” Tony said, already planning to pitch the idea to his dad.

“Alright, well I’m sure you have a curfew, so how about we go talk to Jason and see what’s up with this project, so you can head home, yeah?”

Tony wanted to tell him that he didn’t have a curfew, but he knew that his mom and dad wanted him home at a certain time. So he followed Ryder to where Jason was. By then Jason had the girl in his lap, face hidden in her neck.

Ryder plopped down in the seat beside him, patting the seat right next to him for Tony to sit down in. He then turned to Jason and clasped him on the shoulder. Jason turned around, eyes following the mark he left on the girl’s neck.

“Aye, man wassup?” he said. “Oh, Tony! Man never thought I’d see you here. How have you been?”

Tony pursed his lips together then responded, “I’d be better if you were working on our project instead of doing whatever you are doing right now. Jason this project is due on Monday.”

“Yeah, exactly Monday. Plus I figured you’d want to do the whole project anyway. People told me you were a little high maintenance, so why do the project if you’d redo it.”

“High maintenance? Who told you that? Look, it honestly doesn’t matter. Can you just give me your part of the project by Sunday, so I can put it all together? I didn’t even ask for much on your part,” Tony argued, growing upset with the lack of Jason’s attention.

Jason sighed. “Look 15, I’m sure you care about the grades we get in college, but you seriously need to stop stressing. Have a drink and calm down.”

“I can’t calm down Jason. I actually need to do well,” Tony stressed.
Jason turned to look at him directly. “For what? You don’t need the scholarship money and you already have a job…hell a company to go to and that’s not dependent on whether you have good grades nor is it dependent on you actually graduating. You’re a Stark, you can do whatever the hell you please.”

By then Jason’s exclamations had taken on a sneer. Is that what people thought of Tony? Did they see him as only getting here because of his last name and not based on pure merit alone? Tony hated the idea that his hard worked was being pushed aside for the favor of his name.

“That’s not true. I have to work just as hard as you do,” Tony told him. “It isn’t fair that you think I don’t. It’s also evident that I work harder than you, seeing as how I’ve actually done my work and you haven’t.”

“You know I was starting to wonder, when you were going to start whining like a little bitch. Shit, I can’t believe I even picked you for a partner.”

“Picked me!” Tony shouted indignantly. “No one wanted your sorry ass for a project member. I was left with you and I have tried my best to be nice and patient.”

Jason was about to open his mouth, but was stopped by Ryder. Ryder turned to Jason, face set straight. He leant over the girl and stared at him.

“Look you piece of shit, if the next words out of your mouth are not sorry, I’m going to make you wish they had been. What you’re going to do is go to your room right now and finish this project. Your part is going to be the best work you have done in your two years of being here. If they are not, you and I are going to have a problem.”

“You fucking him or something? Figured he’d actually be a little bitch. ’Cause I don’t see why’d you care if I did some project or not. Also isn’t that shit illegal,” Jason sneered. “Look I’m not about to leave my girl here and go like some servant bidding to your little bitch’s beck and call.”

Ryder nodded once to himself, before pulling his hand back and punching Jason in the jaw. The girl jumped off his lap and screamed, hands automatically reaching for Jason. Jason looked back at them in shock. Ryder calmly raised his arm that he used to punch Jason and dropped it around Tony’s shoulder.

Tony tensed at the contact, not exactly knowing how he should react. Ryder just pulled him closer.

“First Tony is no one’s bitch, bitch,” Ryder bit out.

Tony bit his lip, head looking to see the crowd glancing in their direction before losing interest, once it didn’t develop into a fight they were hoping to see.

“Finish the project. Tony will let me know if you did it or not. Also since you wanted to be smart, I think that you should have it to him by noon tomorrow and it better be fucking A grade worthy material. If not I’ll make sure I take a visit to you and the punch will be the least of your problems.”

Jason got up, alarmed and grabbed his girlfriend’s hand. He didn’t look back once. Ryder turned to him.

“Now, to make sure that the promise if fulfilled let me see your phone,” Ryder said, hand outstretched. Tony fumbled for his phone and handed it to Ryder. Ryder took it and hit some buttons. “Alright, now you have my number. Let me know if he doesn’t get it to you by tomorrow.”

“Okay, cool. And uh thanks,” Tony murmured, pocketing the phone. He wondered if it was bad to
wish that the conversation could continue. Now that he had his number, he could maybe try seeing if they wanted to hangout.

“Right, well I know you’re not exactly able to do a lot of things here, but we can have fun without being drunk or sober. How about we party for a little?” Ryder said, grinning broadly and standing up.

Tony nodded and followed Ryder around, despite knowing his driver was probably angry for him taking so long.

Later toward the end of the night, when Tony was certain he couldn’t put off his driver any longer he went to go look for Ryder who had went off to go to the restroom. He had wanted to thank him for watching over him that night and maybe make some plans with him outside of a party. He smiled secretly to himself at the way Ryder had placed his arm around him as he was talking to Jason. He let the smile carry himself to where he was certain Ryder had wandered off to.

When he found Ryder, the smile slipped off of his face.

There Kali was on her knees with Ryder’s hand tight in her hair. Ryder’s face was tilted back in pleasure, mouth slack open. His eyes followed the revealed part of Ryder’s body, watching as his hips thrust in and out. He swallowed a lump in his throat, wanting to ignore whatever it was he was feeling. Kali’s name fell out of Ryder’s lips like a whispered wish. Kali at that moment opened her eyes and turned her head to face where Tony was standing.

Her mouth smiled around Ryder’s cock and she winked at Tony. Tony froze at being caught and nearly tripped, trying to quickly leave Simmons Hall. He ran past the bodies, excusing himself as he bumped into them. His eyes burned and he didn’t let any of the tears fall from his face. It wasn’t worth it. So what Ryder had his number now and got Jason to agree to do his side of the project, it didn’t mean that Ryder liked him. Besides he was only 15 and inexperienced with anything.

He got into the car waiting for him and tuned out his driver’s questions of why it took so long.

Tony stopped talking and gave himself some time to breathe. “I don’t know, it’s stupid thinking about it now. I was just so ready to have a friend and I was excited that I had made my friend all on my own without my mom setting it up.”

“I thought you had Pepper and Rhody though,” Steve questioned, looking down at him.

“Yeah, but we actually met through our moms, planning some group hangout. I mean I’m forever thankful for that, but I never actually had friends that I just you know met,” Tony explained. “So I was happy to hang out with him. We did a lot of that in the beginning, just hanging out.”

“Okay, no there’s no way you think that’s okay,” Tony laughed, leaning against the park bench. “Seriously, that’s just awful.”

“No, you’re just uncultured,” Ryder laughed, poking Tony in the shoulder.

“Yeah, because putting pineapple on my pizza is a thing that is clearly cultured,” Tony joked.

“Clearly,” Ryder said with a solemn seriousness.
The two broke out in laughter. Tony was thankful that ever since the party, Ryder hadn’t decided to stop talking to him. Jason had lived up to his duty, but that didn’t stop Tony from calling Ryder to say that Jason had turned in the project. After that their conversation continued and led to them hanging out. Tony was beyond thrilled because this was the first friend he made at college. He would have to tell Pepper and Rhodey all about it, whenever they came down to visit.

Tony was so happy because he felt like he wasn’t so alone anymore. Sure, he still had to go back home at the end of the day, but at least he had someone else that was relatively close.

“Look if it bothers you that much, I’ll make sure to grab a pepperoni pizza for you,” Ryder said. “After all, I don’t want you starving on my watch. You’re already thin enough as is.”

“I’m not thin. I just have a high metabolism,” Tony said. “It’s not my fault that I’m not built to the picture of perfection like you are.”

Kill me, Tony thought to himself as soon as those words were out of his mouth.

“You think I’m built to perfection?” Ryder teased. “Why Tony I hadn’t known you thought of my way. I must say I am extremely flattered, but you must know that I am a taken man.”

Tony pushed his shoulder. “That’s not what I meant. It’s just you’re built like some college quarterback. Also taken? I thought you and Kali decided to call it quits again, after she found you kissing Meghan.”

Ryder shrugged, taking out a cigarette. He held out the box for Tony, but Tony shook his head.

Ryder shrugged and lit his cigarette.

“Look Kali’s absolutely bonkers. I like that bit of craziness in bed, but in a relationship it’s bad you know?”

Tony watched the cigarette rest on his lower lip, before returning his focus to Ryder’s eyes. “Okay, so who are you dating now?”

“Olivia. Sweet girl, really. I don’t know why she’s agreed to go on a second date with me, but I am not about to question it and jinx things,” Ryder laughed. “But it’s awesome. She’s so refreshing to be around, you know? She’s like not into the bullshit and she’s goal oriented. That’s what I need. Someone who knows what they’re doing in their life and is going after that.”

“I’m goal oriented,” Tony had wanted to say, but knew that statement would reveal too much about him. Instead he said, “That’s nice, Ryder. Hope it ends up well for you two.”

“What about you?” Ryder asked.

“Me? Me what?”

“Have you ever been in a relationship? I feel like we’re always talking about me and my shit, but never about you. I know you’re 15 and all, but surely you’ve gone on some dates before. I know the girls would be swarming at your door.”

Tony looked down shyly and paid attention to his hands. “No, not really. All the girls I went to school with were always older than me and they didn’t want to date guys that were younger. So…”

“Well that’s their loss then,” Ryder chided. He blew out a puff of smoke, the smell entering Tony’s nostrils. He wiggled his nose. “That’s adorable. Crap, I probably shouldn’t be smoking around you, should I? All that second hand smoking and what not. My ma’s not exactly happy about my smoking
anyway.”

“It’s fine,” Tony told him. “The smell doesn’t really bother me.”

Ryder smirked. “Okay. So you ever kissed any girl before?” then later adding, “Or guy?”

Tony’s eyes widened at Ryder adding on the guy part. He had hoped to control the way his eyes seemed to linger on both sexes. He could feel the panic rise within him. He had come out to his parents, but he was under no certain circumstances to reveal it publically. The media would have a field day with Tony, more than they already were having. All he needed was the headline with bisexuality being attached to the Stark last name.

His panic must have shown because Ryder reached out and placed a comforting hand on Tony’s shoulder. His own worried eyes looked back to Tony. Without another second passing he put out his cigarette and leaned forward to hug Tony.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Ryder murmured in his ear. “I mean I know some people aren’t as accepting of this, but you don’t have to hide that part from me or seize up in panic like you did now. And I also know you don’t really want the tabloids finding out anything, so you don’t have to worry about me selling a story. I’d never do anything like that.”

“Thanks,” Tony said, his voice muffled by Ryder’s jacket.

“For sure. And uhhh, I mean I have a few friends who are all over the sexuality spectrum and maybe I could give you their contact information. They’re really good at keeping things to themselves so you wouldn’t have to worry. But it’s nice to have some space where you don’t have to hide yourself, you know?” Ryder said honestly, pulling back so he could look Tony in the eyes.

Tony shrugged, not knowing if he would actually reach out. There was just too much risk involved.

Ryder clicked his tongue against the back of his teeth. “Also I’m pretty good to talk to. I equally notice a good set of boobs and a nice ass.”

“Oh,” Tony whispered.

“Yeah, oh. Probably can admit now that Olivia is actually an Oliver,” he joked. “Just you know never can be too careful with who you tell.”

“That’s…does Kali know?”

“Of course she knows. Kali and I go way back. She’s the one that introduced me to my first boyfriend,” he explained. “Now that was an experience. Lots of firsts with that one.”

Tony really wished he could curl up into a ball and hide himself. He knew that his facial expression probably revealed how much he wanted to know more about this. He hadn’t really been able to speak to anyone in regards to who he liked. His mom and dad had reacted well enough, more so his mom than his dad. However, he had never known anyone else who felt like him.

Ryder was the first….a trend that would continue much in his life.

Especially, beginning with this.

“You ever kissed a girl?” Ryder questioned.

“Yeah,” he said. “It was nice.”
Ryder moved closer to him. He looked down to Tony’s lips then back to his face. “Ever kiss a guy before?” Tony’s own raised eyebrow answered him. Ryder laughed. “You want to?”

Tony held back a greedy yes, especially if Ryder was offering. Ryder leaned closer to him. Tony’s heart beat thrummed in his chest. He had been dreaming of this for a long time. His own eyes fell on Ryder’s lips, wondering to himself if he still tasted like his cigarette. Ryder licked his lips once, twice, and smiled easily at him.

The sound of a car honking reminded them that they were in public. Tony looked to the sound of the car and realized that his driver had pulled up. He totally forgot that he had to be home soon to prepare for the charity gala his mom was hosting.

“Hey, save that first kiss for me, yeah?” Ryder whispered.

Tony almost tripped over his own two feet, heading to his car. Ryder’s laughter followed him all the way home and Tony tried and failed to keep his grin down.

“And he was, my first kiss. At least the first guy I ever kissed. It happened during a party. He was drunk and he probably forgot that he had told me. It was less than ideal because his mouth tasted strong like alcohol and a mixture of everyone else he had been hooking up with,” Tony inserted. “But it didn’t matter to me because it felt perfect. I felt myself falling in love.”

Steve pulled him closer. Tony ignored the burning in his throat. He wished he could go back and tell himself not to fall in love with Ryder. He wanted to save himself from the heartbreak and maybe knock some sense into his naïve brain for falling for anything that Ryder said…much like he had done even when he got older.

“I didn’t know how to stop myself. I just wanted someone to love and have them love me in return.”

“There’s nothing wrong with wanting to be love,” Steve said.

“Maybe. But I knew he didn’t love me or even like me like that. So I just decided to start dating other people. I mean it was my second year in college and some of the students were eighteen and I had just turned sixteen, so it wasn’t that much of an age difference. I thought I was just doing what Ryder was doing.”

“And what was that?”

“Having fun.”

It was his second year of enrollment at MIT. Thankfully, his parents had allowed him to room with Ryder. They hadn’t met Ryder, but Tony had assured him that he was a good person and he certainly wasn’t a stranger. His mom had been a little concerned, but his dad had surprisingly said it was good to go out and be independent. So here he was enjoying his first month in his new dorm.

The dorm had three bedrooms. Ryder took the one closet to the living area and Tony took the room situated in the middle of all three bedrooms. They had a third roommate, Jesse, but they rarely saw him. There was one time Ryder and Tony had come home late at night from studying to see Jesse sitting in the living room watching television.

Ryder had exclaimed, “Dude, I thought we were fucking living with a ghost.”
Jesse had smiled at the two, but didn’t reply. Ryder looked at Tony and the two shared a secret glance, before retreating to their own individual bedrooms both too tired to stay up any longer.

So here he was a month into his second year, enjoying the company of one of his classmates Cydney, who was currently straddling his lap. Cydney brushed back a curl sticking to Tony’s sweaty face. Tony settled his hands on her lap, appreciating the added weight on his body.

“I have to say Tony, you actually know what you’re doing,” Cydney remarked. “Have to give you maybe three and a half stars.”

Tony quirked an eyebrow at her. “Only three and a half stars? Aw, come on Cyd. I thought I’d at least make it to four.”

Cydney hopped off of his lap. “Calm down Casonova. This was still your first time. After all I have to leave you some room to improve. And trust me if you can improve from that, you’ll have the girls just begging to have you.”

She leaned down to kiss him on his cheeks, hands splayed across his belly. She leant over to grab her underwear. Tony turned on his side, leaning up on his elbows in order to appreciate her body. She looked over her shoulder to peer at him. She smiled softly.

“Now, if you would love some more practice I am fully willing to offer my services.” She winked at him amusedly.

“Oh, well I maybe calling on those services pretty soon,” he told her. “Now are you sure you don’t want to stay for breakfast?”

“You are too sweet for me to handle. Thanks, but I have to go get ready for my mom’s court hearing,” she explained. “But maybe we can have that breakfast some other time.”

“Of course,” he said, leaning up. “Plus it would be unfair for me not to allow you to experience the wonder that is a Tony Stark breakfast.”

“It would be unjust,” she agreed, placing on her heels. “Alright, I’m off. See you in class?”

“Why do you say that as a question?”

Cydney raised her head to look at him. “Because you and your delinquent roommate are never in class.”

“Not true,” he said. “It’s only on days when we know he’s not taking attendance.”

“Dr. Kyle never takes attendance,” she laughed. “Alright, seriously I’m gone. Come to class and I may do something special next time we hang.”

“Well, if I had that motivation I would go to every class.”

“Bye Stark,” she laughed throwing his boxers at him.

“Be safe Hendrix.”

When she left, Tony laid back placing an arm over his face. A grin spread across his expression and he couldn’t help, but to let a giddy feeling wash over him. Finally, at the age of 16 he could proudly say he wasn’t a virgin anymore. Also having his first time with Cydney was awesome. He had developed somewhat of a crush on her the first week of this semester and to have that attraction
Tony started brainstorming ideas to get her to maybe think of him as a potential boyfriend. He could maybe make the best breakfast. He started thinking about all the things he could do and grew excited at the prospect of having his first relationship.

Through all his thinking, he hadn’t even heard the door open to his room. Ryder came in and sat down on the bed. Noticing the added weight, he lifted his hand off of his face to look at Ryder.

“Well, this child is a child no more. I feel like we need to commemorate this experience. It feels only like yesterday, when you were a young virgin boy,” Ryder teased, pressing his hand against a mark that Cydney had left on his collarbone.

Tony pushed Ryder, smiling as he heard his body thump against the floor.

“Rude,” Ryder commented. “But seriously how was it?”

Tony looked bashfully at the wall.

“Oh, come on. Dude, you just had your cock in some girl’s pussy. You can’t go acting all shy now,” Ryder explained, getting back on the bed and lying down beside Tony.

“Do you have to be so crude?”

“It’s my nature,” Ryder said. “But fine. How did it feel when your purity was deflowered? Was there the scent of daffodils and did a choir of half-naked babies sing a rejoicing song in praise of you becoming closer to an adult.”

“I don’t think that’s much better,” Tony winced.

Ryder shrugged. “Sorry.”

“But it was good,” Tony said. “I’m thinking I might ask her to be my girlfriend.”

“Wait, pause what?”

Tony looked up at Ryder, who was now leaning over him. “Yeah, she’s nice. I like her and I don’t know she may like me.”

“No, you don’t want to do that. Look sometimes you mix the euphoria you feel from post-coital bliss and mistake it for like love or some shit, but it’s not that. Trust me. You don’t want Cydney to be your girlfriend,” Ryder told him.

“I’m pretty sure I do. She’s nice and I can at least try.”

“She’s not good enough for you,” Ryder said after a second’s pause. “I just think you may want to wait for a special person to be the one that you actually see yourself having a future with.”

“Oh, like you do,” Tony said growing slightly pissed over how Ryder was acting.

“I know I’m acting like a hypocrite, but I want better for you than me. I just don’t want your heart to be broken over someone who isn’t worth sharing it.”

“Let me be the judge of that,” Tony said.

Ryder swung his legs off of the bed. “Fine. Look, I’m going to the lab, did you want to come?”
“Sure, just let me get showered and dressed.”

Ryder nodded and left the room. For a brief moment Tony wondered if Ryder was right. Then he shook his head. He had a lot of people in his life telling him what to do. If Tony ever wanted to be independent, he had to start doing what he wanted to do. And what he wanted to do was ask Cydney out.

Two weeks later, Tony came back to his resident hall with ingredients for the best breakfast he would ever make in his life. He had plans of bringing Cydney over for breakfast and not even just for breakfast after sex type of deal. He had asked his friends for what she liked to eat and had even asked them her favorite color. He had gotten her a nice teal jacket, since she always complained to Tony about how cold it was in their lecture hall.

Humming to himself, he made his way to his room. He set his bags on the kitchen counter and placed his backpack in his room. He set his phone down and left heading to Ryder’s door to see if he was here. Just as he was about to knock on the door, the door swung open and he was met with Cydney.

His eyes latched onto the darkening bruise on her throat and her clumsily thrown on outfit. Her lips were swollen red and she looked as surprised to see Tony there as he was to see her. He knew who was in the room, but that didn’t stop his eyes from sliding past Cydney to rest upon Ryder who was splayed out on the bed, smoking a cigarette. His hood-lidded eyes met Tony’s and he breathed out a puff of smoke.

“Fuck you,” he said to no one in particular, but hoping that both of them knew it was meant for them.

He turned around, intending to go to his room and shut himself in there for the rest of the week. Cydney’s hand stopped him.

“Wait, Tony. Please let me explain,” Cydney said, her voice having a certain hoarseness to it.

“For what? You don’t have anything to explain to me,” he said. “You’re free to do as you please. It’s not like we’re dating.”

“Tony you don’t understand. Look I-”

“Guess, I won’t be having to attend tomorrow’s lecture anymore,” he joked, but the joke fell flat event to his own ears.

Cydney’s eyes began to water. “Tony, if you just let me talk for a minute-”

“No, need. It’s okay. Ryder’s probably more your speed than I am anyways,” he said. He went into the kitchen a grabbed the bag. “Here. I know you get cold.”


“What for?” Tony questioned.

Silence.

“I should leave,” she whispered. She looked at Tony. Tony wondered if she wanted him to disagree with her. He almost wanted to tell her to stay.
“Yeah, you probably should. Ryder doesn’t usually like his sex conquests to stay long after they’ve finished,” he added with a bit of meanness to his voice. Later, he’d berate himself for enjoying how her face falls.

“Yeah,” she said. She began to leave, but turned around. “For what it’s worth you’re going to meet a girl one day, who is completely deserving of having breakfast cooked for them by you.”

“For what it’s worth I thought you would have been that girl,” Tony said.

Cydney visibly swallowed and left the room. Tony leaned back against the kitchen counter and placed his face in his hands. Tears streamed down his face and he wondered how he could be so foolish as to believe that a girl like Cydney would actually want him. He laughed at the position he placed himself in.

He wiped his face, once he heard the heavy footsteps of Ryder. Tony took one glance at him and felt anger raise inside of him like an erupting volcano.

“Fuck you,” Tony said as Ryder grew closer. “Seriously, fuck you.”

Ryder placed his arms on either side of Tony’s body, bracketing him into an immovable position. His naked chest pressed against Tony’s. Tony could almost feel the heat radiating from Ryder’s body and he tried not to think so much about the thin cloth of the towel and Tony’s jeans being the only thing separating the two.

Ryder shifted and Tony felt his lower half graze against his own. Tony held in a breath. He shifted his head to the side, but Ryder’s fingers wrapped around his chin so that his gaze would meet Ryder’s. He choked back a sob at how Ryder had pretty much betrayed him. He knew that he liked Cydney and he still slept with her.

“Why? Why her? You could have had anyone, but you chose her” he questioned, not doing anything to hold in the break in his voice.

“I had to show you that she’s not relationship material. Look kid, she obviously enjoys having sex, but it doesn’t really matter who she’s having sex with. You know what I mean?”

“No.”

“Look obviously if she cared about you, she wouldn’t have slept with me. But I guess you didn’t mean much to her, if she slept with your roommate who is your friend. I’m just looking out for you, since you didn’t want to listen to me the first time I warned you.”

“Yeah, of course,” Tony said, trying to figure out if that made sense. When he thought about it, he guessed that Ryder had meant well. Besides it was better to find out about that now than when he had already set his heart on dating her…not like he hadn’t already done so.

“Thank you,” he told Ryder, his voice barely loud enough for Ryder to hear.

“Good, so how about we go get some burgers. I’m fucking starving. I can see why you like her though, girl’s highly energetic in bed. I almost struggled to match her level,” he smirked. “I’m gonna take a shower and then we can head out.”

“I should’ve known then, you know. I should’ve realized that a friend doesn’t pull stunts like that, but I didn’t. And then it was back to how it all was before. That was a thing of the past. He was just
helping me,” Tony said. “So I let it go.”

Steve pulled the blanket tighter over Tony’s body. He had remained silent for most part of the story even when he wanted to protest everything that Ryder was about. Tony could even feel when Steve was getting riled up. It was in the way he pulled Tony closer to him or pressed a kiss on top of his head so that he would say anything to interrupt Tony.

Tony was grateful. He soaked in the comfort and it made telling this story, not easier, but smoother. At one point the nurse from before had warned them that they were an hour in and Steve had thanked him for the reminder.

Tony sighed and began again.

It was only two weeks after the incident with Cydney. He had confided in Pepper and Rhodey and the two were admittedly upset over Ryder’s handling of the situation. The two had only met Ryder briefly on Tony’s sixteenth birthday, when he had stopped in to give a present before heading to his flight back home.

Rhodey threatened to come down there and practice his new skills against Ryder. It took both Pepper and Tony an hour to dissuade Rhodey. They had come down that weekend to spend time with Tony, before Rhodey had to head off for training. Tony was glad that they had come, especially when Ryder was away visiting his family.

When the two had left, Tony had plans of severing his relationship with Ryder. After that incident, he told Pepper and Rhodey a few of the questionable things he did. However, he also made sure to add all the wonderful things he did. He figured those outweighed all his wrongs and after all people aren’t perfect. Pepper and Rhodey had disagreed, but told Tony it was his decision to make.

It was late that Sunday night when Ryder came home. Tony had been practicing his speech all day. He wanted it to be nice, but also definite, leaving no room for question or possible persuasion. He didn’t want Ryder to be mad at him, but he knew he needed some space. Quite possibly he could go live with his parents again. He didn’t want to, but he didn’t really want to be near Ryder at all either. At least it would give him some more time to think, if this friendship was worth having at all.

That all stopped the moment Ryder stepped into the lit living area. His eyes immediately fell on Ryder’s red ones. He looked at Tony once and all of a sudden he collapsed on the floor, lips wobbling as a cry escaped him. Tony quickly got off of the couch and knelt beside Ryder, immediately checking for any wounds. Ryder’s voice stopped him.

“They’re all gone,” he moaned.

“Who’s all gone?”

“My family. Fuck, Tony they’re dead. They’re all dead…or…crap only my brother and me. It’s,” he broke off, sobbing and clawing at his chest. He hacked and his body was bent over. “I can’t. None of them were saved.”

“I’m so sorry,” Tony said, hugging him. “I’m so sorry that this happened. What can I do for you? What do you need?”

“Just you. Tony. Please just you. I can’t…I don’t know what else to do. I have no one now,” he rasped and repeated this over his cries.
Tony swallowed and looked down at Ryder. He couldn’t give his speech now. He wanted to, but the man who had come in here today was different than the man that he had been refusing to speak to for two weeks.

“I don’t even know what I’d do without you. I have no one left Tony. You’re all I have. The only one. I...please don’t leave me. I need you,” Ryder cried, hands clasping more firmly around Tony’s waist. “I’ll do anything. I know I haven’t been the best friend, but please don’t punish me for that. I’ll do better. I don’t know why I did that. I was a dick and maybe this has to be my punishment—”

“Hey no, no, no. This…this isn’t some type of punishment. You’re not a bad guy,” Tony whispered, refusing to let Ryder go down this train of thought.

“I’m not a bad guy?” he questioned, his red eyes straining to stay open and look at Tony.

“No.”

“Even if I hurt you?”

Tony breathed in shakily. “Even if you hurt me.”

Ryder seemed to collapse in relief and smiled softly. Tony didn’t want to admit how happy he was that he was the one that Ryder came to and the one whom he needed.

“You’re my best friend Tony. Thank you for forgiving me ‘cause I need you now more than ever. I can’t have you leave to,” Ryder sniffed.

He sounded so sincere. He sounded like he actually needed Tony.


And Ryder made still on his promise. He did do better. He did more than better and he did amazing. Their friendship was even better than the first time they had met. There was something deeper about their friendship and Tony clung onto it like a lifeline.

“Then it all changed,” Tony finished.

Steve continued running his hand over

“Our friendship, everything began to change and I didn’t know what to do. I thought...I’ve known him for two years and this was the first time he was acting this way. I thought we were at a good place after his family’s tragedy. I thought it put some things into perspective for him. He was nicer and more open. He was kind and gentle,” Tony said smiling at the thought of those days were Ryder had been one of the softest human beings he had known.

“But it didn’t last very long. It almost seemed to change without me nothing it for the longest. I don’t know if that’s because he was so good at hiding things or just because I wasn’t looking.”

“Why did it all change?” Steve questioned.

His breath hitched and the fingers tracing circles on Steve’s knee stopped its movement. He fought hard to stop the string of memories now rushing to his head. He wanted to stop the associated pain gnawing in his heart. He didn’t want to go there. He turned his face into Steve’s chest, a certain sense of nervousness settling in his chest.
Steve allowed Tony a moment, before saying, “It’s okay sweetheart. I’m here, you don’t have to hide anything from me Tony. I know whatever it is still hurts you. If you want to take some time, before talking we can stop here.”

“I can’t stop now. I think if I were to stop I wouldn’t have enough courage to continue,” Tony breathed. “I’m fine. Just let me…give me a second.”

Steve patiently waited.

Tony wiped his face. He didn’t want his face to be so close to Steve’s chest, when he began talking about the next part where things started changing. He situated himself so that his face was lying down on Steve’s lap. Steve went back to running his hands through his hair. Tony allowed himself a few more seconds of this, before he closed his eyes.

“It all changed when he met my father.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks my love for all your wonderful comments, bookmarks, and kudos. I love all of you for your support and thanks for sticking with this WIP.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Edit: For those who have already read this chap, I made a quick change, but it is not necessary that you re-read it. I just had to do a name change lol

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After his sixteenth birthday party shenanigans with Ryder and his brief relationship with Cydney, Tony realized that he was finally living the college experience. It was only a few months into his sophomore year, but things were going pretty well. Sure, Ryder had taken him to that bar a few more times than he had liked, but he had to admit it was growing on him. He was fairly certain that if he was a few years older Candy would definitely be interested in him. He kept telling himself that he only had to wait until he was actually an adult.

So he lost his virginity and experienced his first hangover all within the timespan of merely two months. So here he was sitting behind the driver’s seat, currently trying to drive.

“Allright! Crap, Tony don’t brake so hard,” Ryder breathed out clutching the door handle.

“Sorry.” Tony winced, effectively braking even harder by accident. “Sorry, crap. I swear I’m not trying to.”

Ryder pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. They had been at this for nearly an hour and even Tony was growing agitated.

“We can stop,” Tony exclaimed, slowing down. He hadn’t even known why he had said yes to Ryder’s offer of teaching him how to drive. He had experienced a lot of firsts lately, but this he always thought Jarvis would be the one teaching him how to drive. Jarvis had often told him that upon his sixteenth birthday he’d take him out to the open road by their house and just drive for a bit. He had told Ryder this, but Ryder had insisted that he could always pretend to learn with Jarvis. Also driving would probably score him some points with the older girls.

So Tony had said yes and mentally sent a prayer for forgiveness for betraying Jarvis like this. Tony stopped at one of the cones that Ryder had somehow managed to find. He placed the car in park and rested his head on the steering wheel.

“I mean we probably need to stop while we’re ahead,” Tony bemoaned. “At least before I’ve wrecked your car.”

“Nope, look your old man isn’t gonna teach you how to drive and you won’t even see Jarvis until winter break, so I’ll step in. Don’t think you’re getting out of this. You’re going to be the best damn driver your driver teachers have ever had,” Ryder exclaimed. “We just need to practice.”

Tony breathed out slowly. “Yeah, okay.”

“Allright, now let’s try turning. Drive to the stop light and then make a right,” Ryder instructed.

Tony sighed and placed the car in drive. He drove to the stop sign, put his blinker on and began to turn. Ryder stopped him and turned his body so that it was leaning against Tony’s. Ryder placed his
hands over Tony’s and helped him turn.

“Relax, Tony. Your fingers are going to cramp up with you holding onto the steering wheel so tight,” Ryder informed him as he helped guide Tony’s hand. “And let the wheel come back to you, you don’t have to turn it so harshly. Alright now let’s head to that other stop sign and do it on your own.”

Tony tried relaxing his fingers and taking his mind off of how nice Ryder’s hands felt on his own. He cleared his throat and instead tried to focus on Ryder’s instructions. When he had completed the turn far better than he had been doing at least in his opinion, he shyly turned to Ryder.

“Was that good? Or umm better than before?”

“Ah! Yes, now that’s what I want to see! See Tony you’re a natural. We’ll have you competing in NASCAR pretty soon,” Ryder said bumping his shoulder into Tony’s. “Now what do you say we do one more lap around the parking lot before we have to go to lab.”

Tony nodded eagerly, excited to spend some more one on one time with Ryder. Ever since he got news of Ryder’s family dying he had tried spending as much time as he could with his friend. Of course it was pretty hard with their conflicting schedules and different sleep patterns. However, Tony had made it a mission to at least try to always be there for Ryder much like he was for Tony. So maybe that’s why he really said yes to these driving lessons. Maybe it was selfish, but he wanted the same smile that Ryder had when he first met him to stay on his face. And if Tony was the reason behind it, even better.

So Tony winked at Ryder and delighted in the bright flush that entered Ryder’s cheeks, before dispersing. The two looked at each other for how long Tony wasn’t quite sure. All he knew was that he didn’t want whatever was happening in this car at that moment to stop. He had been pining over Ryder, since the beginning. He had hoped that the lessons toward getting a date that Ryder had been teaching would be actually helpful to getting Ryder. Unfortunately, Ryder had not picked up on any hints.

Tony nearly wanted to staple a sign onto his forehead saying, “Oblivious fool.” Whether it would belong on Ryder’s forehead or his wouldn’t even matter.

Ryder’s eyes shifted to Tony’s lip and Tony tracked the movement easily. For a second Tony was positive that Ryder was going to take that step. Tony surely would not hesitate to respond. The corners of Ryder’s lips tilted in a soft expression.

Tony was pretty certain he had an expression that mirrored Ryder’s. He widened his smile just a bit, allowing his facial expression to look a little more open. Before he was able to say something and maybe... hopefully change things between them Ryder spoke up.

“Alright, now come on NASCAR. Show me what you got,” Ryder said turning his attention back to the front, the moment gone.

Tony sat back and faced forward in disappointment. Swallowing the dryness that suddenly came in his mouth, Tony nodded. “Okay.”

Tony paused in his story, mouth tilted in a sad smile. “It’s funny, you know. I know right now he’s a bad person, but when I think of how he was the one who first taught me how to drive...well I don’t know I can’t...couldn’t help, but to reflect on it fondly. It’s messed up isn’t it?”
Tony looked ahead of him, toward the fountain. He watched as the colors transformed and was transfixed for a moment.

Steve shook his head, unsure of how to answer this. “It’s not bad to remember the good things. Those memories still belong to you. I know it’s hard and it may seem conflicted…I don’t know if I can tell you how to feel. Because honestly I don’t want you having any good memories of that man because he doesn’t deserve them. However, I didn’t know him and I’m…I’m sorry I can’t see any positivity. I’m sorry. May have to ask someone else that question sweetheart ’cause I’m afraid I don’t have the answer right now.”

“It’s fine,” Tony said truthfully wanting to get rid of the guilt seeping into Steve’s voice. It wasn’t his fault that he couldn’t help sort through these conflicting images of Ryder. It was like there was this dichotomy of good and bad where Ryder was concerned. Though now Tony wondered if there had ever truly been goodness inside of Ryder, or if only he had been fooled to believe so based on his youth and naivety.

“I just…I feel like a lot of my youth was experienced with him around. I mean he was the first guy I ever slept with,” Tony whispered, not wanting to announce this to himself or even to Steve, but at this point of time things were just coming out and Tony couldn’t stop the stream of memories from suddenly pulling at his mind.

Tony sat with the computer in his lap, eyes eagerly looking at the images before him. His cheeks grew warm with his actions. He couldn’t find it within himself to close the browser and so he looked on ashamedly, but interested nonetheless. His breathing picked up and he felt the desire to move his hand lower against his body.

“This is stupid,” he breathed out to himself. “Kids my age get off to this all the time. Also Tony you’ve had sex with girls plenty of times…okay maybe only twice, but that’s good. That’s good. We can so do this then.”

With the little pep talk he allowed himself to move his hand underneath his blankets and past his trousers. Little effort was needed to unbutton his trousers. Sighing with relief, he allowed cold fingers to tentatively rest over his hip bone. His hand hesitated outside his underwear, for only a second, before he reached to-

“Tony! Hey, do you mind if we change the driving…Oh,” Ryder said bursting into Tony’s room, his backpack slung loose on his shoulders.

Tony hurriedly brought the blankets over his body and shut his computer down. “This isn’t what it looks like.”

“I’m pretty certain this is what it looks like, but you won’t hear me shaming you. I understand you’ve hit a bit of dry spell lately…though I don’t know if one can hit a dry spell after only just having sex for the first time,” Ryder explained. “Was it any good?”

“What?” Tony squeaked, eyes widening.

Bury me in a whole, right now, Tony thought to himself.

“You know? The video. Was it any good? I can recommend a few, if you’d like,” Ryder said throwing his backpack to the side of Tony’s room. He went to sit at his desk seat and spun around to face Tony.
“No,” Tony quickly said. “I…I don’t need you to do that. Ummm, also what happened to
knocking?”

“We said socks were for knocking,” Ryder reminded him, raising an eyebrow. “And seriously Tony
stop being so red in the face. It’s adorable, but you really shouldn’t be so embarrassed. I mean come
on we’re human we need releases every now and then.”

Tony pressed his lips together not wanting to say anything

“Why are you so embarrassed? I mean it’s just porn,” Ryder easily said. “Unless…unless by
goodness Tony is it your first time watching gay porn?”

Tony’s eyes widened.

“Oh, wow. That’s precious.”

“Not precious and can we please stop talking about this now. Let’s just agree to forget this ever
happened,” Tony demanded. “I don’t even want to think about how this in my life. I’m locking my
door next time.”

“Did you like it?” Ryder questioned, not even giving mind to what Tony was saying.

“Did I…what?”

“Did you like what you saw? Like did it turn you on?”

Tony shifted in his spot on the bed, flickers of the two bodies going over his head. He licked his lips.
He wondered if he should tell Ryder. Ryder was the only one who knew about his bisexuality well
outside of the group that Ryder had introduced him to…maybe he could confide in him and tell him
that yeah it turned him on.

Tony shrugged his shoulders. Ryder smiled lecherously at him. “What made you want to look at it
all of a sudden?”

“How do you know it’s my first time watching gay porn? I could’ve been watching it for my
millionth time,” Tony remarked, upset over how Ryder kept asking him questions when all he would
prefer to do is hide in his bed for the rest of his life.

Ryder raised a brow as if saying that answered Tony’s question. “So my little blooming flower top
or bottom?”

“Ryder, you can’t…you can’t just ask that...that’s personal,” Tony shouted out, a frown marring his
features. “Besides how would I know?”

Ryder seemed to ponder this. “True. Just need some experience see what you like and what not.”

“And how do you propose I go about getting experience. I can’t exactly just go up asking some guy
to be my first. I mean Kevin from the group you sent me to he offered, but I mean I don’t know him. I
don’t know I was just hoping that my first time we would be with someone I at least liked and I mean
Kevin’s nice. But I don’t know my first time with Cydney was good because I was relaxed, but I
mean I can’t just go broadcasting my you know business out there because it’s not safe and…”

“I can be your first.”

“Someone will beat me up and like I already get enough of that from my dad…Wait what,” Tony
hissed, Ryder’s words finally catching up to him. “I’m sorry…I don’t…what?”

Okay, Tony admitted to himself that he always imagined Ryder being his first, but he didn’t want him to do it out of pity. Tony thought that this would go way differently, like sometime in the future when Ryder stopped referring to him as kid jokingly. Maybe when both of them were doing well in their careers, having been done with their growing up. Ryder would come to him and maybe ask him on a date

But as Tony was learning, those things that happened in his dreams never really came to fruition. Might as well take in the small good things that reality could offer him. If this was the only way he would get Ryder, then maybe he shouldn’t let this one good thing go away.

“I can be your first. I mean you’re right it is better to do it with someone that you trust. It can be hard for both partners, if your first time isn’t with someone you can trust and relax yourself with. So I’m saying that I want to be your first, if that’s something you would be interested in,” Ryder said, his words toward the end became a soft whisper.

Tony looked at Ryder’s expression, searching for any hints of malcontent. His heart thundered in his chest and he questioned whether this was something he should even consider. He could call Rhodey and Pepper to get their input. He would of course leave Ryder’s name out of it, seeing as though he hadn’t exactly come out to them yet. He should probably do that soon though. Out of everyone they were the two he trusted the most and whose opinion truly mattered to him.

But here he was now and he was afraid that Ryder would take back his offer, so he quickly answered him, “Yes.”

Ryder’s smile brightened and Tony wanted a camera so that he could capture it forever. Ryder reached into his backpack pulling out a bottle and some condoms. “Always stay prepared young one,” Ryder said placing the lube and condoms by Tony’s lamp stand. “Okay, sit back.”

“Umm, now?” Tony squeaked. “I…thought…”

Ryder stopped short. “Oh, I’m sorry I thought…yeah probably got too excited. I’ve been wanting to do this for a while. Crap, wait no that sounded weird. Just you’re cute, funny, and really smart. All of that combined is fucking hot and we can totally wait.”

“No, that’s not. Don’t want to wait,” Tony said licking his lips. He patted the spot next to him. “Just you’re going to have to explain like a lot because I haven’t really read up or watched a whole lot. Kevin tried explaining things, but then he got horny so he left with Jason so…”

Ryder laughed and leaned back on the bed. “Of course he did. But you know the basics, right?” Tony nodded his head. “Alright, so, since you have experience in neither fucking a guy or being fucked…you can fuck me tonight, cool?”

Tony was going to wound up with a headache from the serious whiplash he was getting from this conversation and turn of events. Ryder tilted his face, taking in Tony. Slowly he reached down to pull of Tony’s shirt and then pulled at the hem of his own.

“You’ll tell me if you ever start feeling uncomfortable right? I don’t want to do anything that you don’t feel safe doing,” Ryder told him.

Tony looked at him.

“Words Tony. I need verbal communication,” Ryder joked fulling taking off his shirt.
“Yes, of course. I’ll tell you. And uh that goes both ways.”

“Good,” he said throwing his shirt beside Tony’s on the floor.

Tony’s mouth opened, eyes following the beautiful thing that was Ryder’s body. Ryder’s cheeks flushed and he curled into himself a little. He looked down at his hands and played with his fingers nervously.

“I haven’t worked out in a while so I maybe a little pudgy,” Ryder joked, but it fell flat even to Tony’s ears. “But that like won’t affect anything…hopefully. I can turn off the lights if you want and you can imagine it’s some celebrity you’re with.”

“No, no. You’re beautiful. Trust me. Like you’re insanely hot. I could work out 24/7 for the next ten years and never look this good. Hey, you okay? I’ve never seen you this nervous.”

And it was true. Tony had never seen Ryder this nervous before, but he couldn’t help the feeling of happiness that being with Tony brought this shy response out of someone who was usually so confident.

“Yeah, I’m good.”

“Yeah,” Tony agreed. “Alright, so how do we do this?”

“First, we should probably both be you know unclothed.”

They hurriedly ripped off their clothes, throwing them onto the floor. Tony laughed when Ryder tripped trying to get back onto the bed, forgetting he hadn’t taken off his pants fully.

“So you always have to make sure your partner is properly stretched. We don’t have a natural lubricant so it takes a lot of lube, understand?” Ryder instructed pressing the lube bottle into Tony’s hand. “Now make sure your fingers are coated in it and don’t be afraid to add more.”

Tony licked his lips and opened the bottle with shaking fingers. Taking a decent sized amount he spread it over his fingers and looked to Ryder for more instructions. Ryder looked down from him on his spot on Tony’s lap and smirked shyly. He leaned forward to kiss Tony on the lips.

“Adorable,” Ryder whispered leaning back to press a short kiss against the corners of Tony’s lips. Tony chased after the touch, allowing his lips to press more firmly against Ryder’s. Ryder hummed in the back of his throat and then pushed at Tony’s chest.

“Alright now start with one finger and start slowly moving it in,” Ryder said moving Tony’s hand.

Tony watched his hand being led by Ryder. He leaned up a bit, shifting Ryder’s position only slightly.

“Remember easy. Just one,” Ryder said then left Tony on his own.

Tony took his index finger and pressed hesitantly against Ryder’s hole. His breathing caught and he felt himself suddenly unsure of what to do. Ryder looked down and sent an encouraging nod, so Tony pressed in. All at once, he felt the warmth and the tightness…and crap how could anything other than one finger even fit inside of him.

“Okay, now you can ah…add one more slowly. Wait add a little more lube, haven’t ahh fuck…just add a little more,” Ryder breathed.
Then Tony thought about him being the one to having to be stretched and his cheeks flamed. He wondered if Ryder would lean over him as he did so, wondered if his face would be tight in concentration like it was now.

His finger stilled within Ryder. He added another finger and moved both of them slowly inside of Ryder. Tony curled his fingers inside and waited for a sign that he was going in the right direction. He didn’t know exactly what he was waiting before, but the guy in the video had to have felt something great for him to be reacting like that. So maybe he just had to do something. Within all of his thinking, he hadn’t even noticed that he had stopped his movements.

“You have to move. Just scissor your fingers. Keeping it in there isn’t going to…owww fuck Tony. Ah don’t fuck don’t do that,” Ryder hissed, discomfort on his face. “I said don’t stay still not pull it all the fuck out…fuck.”

“Fuck, sorry. Sorry, sorry,” Tony apologized frozen in his spot. “I’m so sorry. It’s just you look like you’re in pain. Am I doing something wrong? I’m doing something wrong. This was a mistake. We probably shouldn’t have…”

“It’s okay. Hold on just let me,” Ryder reached behind himself and grabbed the lube. “I probably should’ve just been more patient. I haven’t really bottomed for anyone in a long time. It doesn’t really do anything for me to be honest.”

Disappointment settled like a weight within Tony. “Oh, then we don’t have to…”

“No, stop. I didn’t say that to make you feel bad. I prefer to be on top, sure. However, I don’t mind bottoming. Plus for your first time with a guy I figured it’d be good to see if you have any preferences. Maybe you like to switch I don’t know. And like I said I prefer topping, but you know I don’t hate bottoming. Besides for you I’d bottom the rest of my life.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “Excessive use of hyperbole much?”

“Okay, maybe not the rest of my life, but you get the idea. Plus it’d be a disservice for you to have never experienced me fuck you,” Ryder said leaning forward, his teeth catching on Tony’s neck. “And trust me when I do, you’ll wish that I had never been your first because you’ll always compare me to other guys.”

Tony pressed his lips together. Ryder patted his cheeks. “Alright now let’s try again.”

Tony admitted that he did way better this second time around. Later he would give himself a pat on the back for listening to instructions.

“Good, that’s good. Ready now. Safe sex is the best sex. Kali wouldn’t know” Ryder said grabbing the condom packet and tearing it off. “You know how to put one on, yeah?”

“Of course I know how to put one on,” Tony said snatching the condom from Ryder and rolling it onto himself.

Ryder laughed and replaced Tony’s fingers with his own, watching through half lidded eyes as Tony put the condom on. Once he had done so, Ryder lifted himself up slightly and grabbed ahold of Tony’s cock, sinking down on it slowly before finally bottoming out.

“Fuck, that’s good.” Ryder breathed rolling his hips to meet Tony’s thrust. “Ah…you’re not bad for the first time. Actually pretty good. Guess you do know what to do with your dick.”

“As I have said before and I will keep reminding you I’m not a virgin,” Tony hissed.
“Of that I am certainly now certain,” Ryder groaned. “Ugh, harder. Just a little more. Come on, not a piece of fragile glassware you Starks have in your cabinet that you only open up for Christmas.”

Tony could only hum, moans not allowing him to utter any words. But at that particular statement, he gave a particular hard thrust Ryder’s response only being to breathe out harshly. His hands curled tightly around Ryder’s waist holding him there. His eyes grew heated at the thought that his mark would stay there for a while, even if Ryder decided to go out with someone else. Whoever saw those marks would see Tony’s marks on him. This fact alone overwhelmed Tony.

It was him. And by goodness he always wanted it to be him. He clumsily wrapped his hands around Ryder, wanting him to come before he did. Tony couldn’t let himself go first, Ryder would probably laugh at him, but fuck it was hard and damnit…

“Fuck, I’m so sorry,” Tony apologized as his thighs shook and pleasure rolled throughout his body.

Ryder ignored him in order to take control of reaching his own orgasm. Ryder tilted his head back, exposing the long expanse of his neck. Tony leaned up, wincing at the wetness clinging to him. His lips latched onto his neck, his tongue soothing the spots where his teeth where. Ryder’s breaths fell against Tony’s forehead. His heavy pants grew as Tony covered Ryder’s hands with his own.

“Fuck.”

Ryder spilled over both his and Tony’s hands. Tony took his hand back and licked an experimenting taste at his palm. Tony’s face scrunched up and Ryder looked down at him. He pressed forward wrapping his hand around the back of Tony’s head. He brought him closer and pressed his lips to Tony, nipping teasingly at his bottom lip.

“Go team. We rocked that shit. Good first time?” Ryder questioned, leaning back from Tony.

“Yeah, it was really good,” Tony said leaning against the headboard, Ryder following behind him easily.

“Cool. When I…when I wake up. I’m going to rock your world,” Ryder said, pulling Tony closer to him.

“Oh, I should only hope so.”

“But now…now I’m going to take a nap.”

When Ryder had fallen asleep, Tony got out of his bed. Hunger had finally caught up to him. He went outside of his room and headed toward the kitchen. He nearly had a heart attack, when he saw Jesse eating a bowl of cereal at the kitchen table. Jesse turned dark eyes to him and Tony was pretty certain that in some other life Jesse was a vampire.

“Hey, Jesse,” Tony said, passing him to get to the refrigerator. “How’s uh your day?”

Jesse stared at Tony. “You’ve got a hickey on your neck.”

“Yep,” Tony said.

Jesse narrowed his eyes and then turned to face Tony’s door. “If I went in there, would Ryder be there?”

Ryder and he really needed to be more specific on their roommate matched for next year.
“Ummm, does it matter?”

Jessed hummed in the back of his throat. “Thought you were with Cydney.”

“How’d you know that?”

“Walls are thin. Plus I saw her leaving, when she first came over. Then of course I saw her again with Ryder. I mean if you’re cool with that you do you man…but…”

“But what? Also can I note that this is the most I’ve ever heard you talk? I have to say I am slightly amazed and I kind of want to document this moment with a picture. Should I take a picture? Okay, you’re glaring at me kind of hard and I’m kind scared you may put a hoax on me so I’m going to shut up now…” Tony trailed off.

“Be careful with that one,” Jesse answered as though Tony hadn’t just rambled for a full minute straight.

“Umm, pretty sure it’s none of your concern…but why should I be careful?”

“Because I’ve seen a lot of people come out of his room with more than just a hickey,” Jesse said and without saying any more, he poured his remaining cereal into the sink and walked back to his room.

“We’re definitely getting a new roommate,” he told himself as he began fixing a sandwich.

But Ryder had never gotten the chance to fuck Tony, when they were in college. Maybe that’s why when he first came back into his life, he was ready to share that part of himself with Ryder. It was him being allowed to have part of that bit of his youth back. He hoped that his promises of taking care of him in that respect would have been true, but it hadn’t been. Tony had only seen that, when Ryder took him apart with no care of how uncomfortable Tony had been. Tony had always wondered if his parents hadn’t come over that next morning, if his first time letting Ryder in would have been as amazing as Ryder insisted and not as painful as the real version that he had experienced.

Tony woke up to his phone ringing. He rolled over the side of his bed and pressed answer not even knowing who it was on the other side of the phone. He brought the phone to his ear and gathered the little energy that he had in order to answer.

“Hello?”

“Tony,” his mother greeted. “Sweetheart we’re ten minutes away from your dorm. Your father and I just wanted to pop in and say hello. A friend of yours called us concerned and you haven’t been answering your phone this whole week. Are you okay?”

“Mom…you and dad are coming here now today,” Tony said feeling a hundred percent nauseated.

His fingers quickly dialed Cydney’s number as he hurried off into the shower. The phone rang, but went straight to voicemail. Tony strung together a string of curses, hurriedly trying to finish his shower and gather something presentable to wear. He had to make it seem like he actually went to class this morning and hadn’t skipped.
He threw his things into his dirty clothes basket. He pulled out a sweater and just as he was about to put it on, Ryder entered into his room.

“Uh, so your parents are here…” Ryder said, throwing his backpack into Tony’s room. “I just let them in because it would have seemed rude not to, but why are your parents here?”

“Cydney called them for whatever reason to check up on me,” Tony said. “Fuck, this hickey is still here. Think I can get away with a turtleneck? Never mind I’m just going to have to get away with one and if they question it I’ll just make something up on the fly.”

“Cydney? I thought you weren’t talking to Cydney,” Ryder said smoothly.

“When’d I ever say that? Oh…you mean from like…no we talked and made up. I mean she is one of my first friends here on campus, she made a mistake and I couldn’t just let her suffer from it forever. Also she seemed really apologetic which is why I have no idea why she would betray me like this. Alright do I look good?”

“Like a million bucks,” Ryder said.

“Good,” Tony breathed. “Okay, so you can just like stay in your room, please. I don’t know what mood my dad is in…”

“He seems to be in a good mood at least according to me. And come on Tony let me meet your dad. I mean he is after all one of the leading figures in the world of science. Don’t be the reason that I don’t meet my hero.”

“I question your heroes. Fine come on. Might as well experience the greatest disappointment of your life. There’s a reason why they say never meet your heroes,” Tony muttered. He left the room, followed by an eager Ryder.

“Mom, dad,” he greeted hugging the both of them. “What a pleasant surprise.”

Tony could just feel the adoration radiating off of Ryder and it was at that moment Tony knew he was going to lose him. After all those who liked his dad, hardly ever seemed to share the same sentiments with his son.

“Wow, Mr. and Mrs. Stark it is such an honor to meet you. Mr. Stark I have followed your work for a long time and I hope I can one day do even half of the things that you have done,” Ryder announced.

At that time Jesse came out of his room, saw all four of them standing in the living area and retraced his steps back into his room. Howard raised an eyebrow in question, but honestly didn’t care to ask. He smiled warmly at Ryder and if Tony hadn’t been raised by the man, he would have actually thought it was genuine.

“Your father and I just wanted to check in and see how you were faring. I’ve been wanting to visit you for ages, but you know your father he gets busy so often. We thought it would be a pleasant surprise though to see you this week,” Maria greeted smoothly, the lies of being a perfect couple serving them well today. “Isn’t that right, Howard?”

“Yes, dear. I thought it would be a nice surprise. Though I figure it is a better surprise for Tony’s friend than my own son. Tell me Tony, are you not happy to see your dad?”

“S’great to see you,” he mumbled quickly. “You know glad you could fit me into your busy schedule. Truly dad I feel so humbled that a man of your stature would come to see his own son.
Father of the year award is definitely going to you.”

“Tony,” Maria gasped.

“I’m sure Tony’s just joking,” Ryder laughed trying to ease the sudden tension stifling the room. “Ah, please let’s have a seat in the living room.”

“At least your roommate seems to have manners. Please introduce me to your friend, the only one who actually seems to have a proper upbringing with way to respect family, nonetheless company.”

“You’re really commenting on my upbringing?” Tony scoffed. “I’m amused. Maria sent daggers to both Howard and Tony, all the while still maintaining a smile to fool Ryder. “Darling, Tony hadn’t wanted us here anyways. He is after all a young college student. You remember how we were in our college days, free from our parents.”

Howard huffed out a breath of air and shook his head. “Sure. All I know is I am missing out on important board meetings to be here. So what’s wrong with you son? Ryder would you do me a kind service and grab me and my wife a cup of water?”

And there went his charming smile and the tone he inflicted to make the other person feel as though they were doing a great service to him. Ryder quickly got up to fix two cups of water.

“You didn’t have to come. It’s not like you haven’t done so before,” Tony told them. “And I’m fine. Grades are good, health is good. Nothing is wrong. So we can cut this visit short and dad can go back to his meeting. I’m sure the board is missing your presence.”

Howard rolled his eyes at Tony, then looked to Ryder who was handing him a cup of water. “So tell me Mr….” he trailed off eyes squinting as if trying to remember from the back of his mind Ryder’s name. “Ah, yes Ryder. I have heard great things about you.”

Tony’s face scrunched up. How on earth had his dad heard about Ryder? He had never even asked for his roommate’s name before.

Ryder’s entire position perked up and if possible his eyes widened even further. “Re-Really? Oh, I hope they are great things.”

“They certainly are. In fact they are so great that I’m actually having a business expenditure for four months and I would love if I had your brilliant mind on the field with me. It’ll happen during your spring semester. Think of it as an internship or something. Don’t you require an internship for your own college credits?”

“Howard darling, perhaps we should let business and school matters rest for a day. After all we came to visit our son. No offense to you Ryder, but we did make this visit for him. Now Howard don’t you think you can give him just one day,” Maria asked over clenched teeth.

Howard straightened his back and sighed. “Maria, work doesn’t go on vacation, but I do suppose. Look, here’s my business card, though I am pretty sure you can contact me via Tony.” His hand slipped into his pocket to retrieve a sleek business card. Ryder took it, holding it like it was something to be respected.

It was merely a piece of paper with his name and contact information on it. Tony felt angry with how happy Ryder seemed to receive this business card. He had thought Ryder had no interest in Tony’s relation to Howard, but maybe he had and he was just waiting. No, Tony shook his head. It was only by pure misfortune that his dad had come here and Ryder had expressed an interest, but he
never asked Tony to reach out to his dad.

“Well, this has been fun. Come on Maria, our soon looks good. We could have honestly done this through a call. Now I must go back to the offices and make sure everything is running smoothly. Ryder I hope to hear more from you soon. You show great promise,” Howard had told him, then as if he just wanted to add a dagger to Tony’s chest, he added, “And you remind me a lot like myself.”


Howard stood up to leave and left and Tony felt the somber mood slightly lessen. Maria sighed and stopped up.

“Thank you for the water Ryder. Sweetheart I am glad that you are well. Next time I’ll call and set up a time when we can get some lunch. Will next Saturday be good, just you and me. We can invite Ana and Jarvis too, if you would like.”

Tony smiled and nodded at his mom. Maria leaned forward and kissed his cheek. “Watch after my boy.”

“I will Mrs. Stark,” Ryder agreed, following her outside of the door. When they were both gone, Ryder closed and locked the door. He turned to Tony and picked up the business card. “This might possibly be the best day of my life. I may have to call Cydney and actually thank her for calling your parents.”

Tony didn’t want to crash Ryder’s joy over meeting his idol…though he did have questions regarding his mental state. Seriously, anyone who looked up to Howard had to have been going through something. Perhaps he could perform some tests on him to make sure he was straight in the head.

Those thoughts kept swirling in his head, that he was shocked when he stood up and ran into Ryder’s back. Ryder grinned at Tony, tucking Howard’s business card back into his jean pocket. After he was sure it was safe, he went to his room, but not before motioning that Tony follow him.

“Here, I meant to give this to you as a present for me being your first time…not like you know in a sketch way of you being a prostitute or something. I’d never like do something in exchange for sex, but ahh anyways here,” he chuckled. “And I didn’t really want to give you the gift, because I’m pretty sure that you can afford a something ten times greater than this,” he drawled leaning over the bed to grab something in his coat pocket. “So happy first time Tony.”

Tony took the small box that was messily wrapped by him and opened it excitedly. It was a thin black watch and at that moment he thought it was probably ten times better than any watch that he could get with the Stark logo on it. He pressed a button intending for it to set the time, but instead was startled by Ryder’s voice coming out of the tiny watch.

“Yo, it’s me. What time is it? Time to party!” Ty’s recorded voice sings.

Tony delightedly looked up at Ryder and laughed, head thrown back in amusement. “Gosh, Ryder this is freaking awesome. Does it say more?” he questioned, pressing another button, equally as delighted when another phrase from Ryder came through.

“Yeah, even though you may get on my nerves sometimes kid, you’re pretty cool. So as long as you don’t get rid of this ah…old lug, I won’t leave you Tony. Promise. I know others have, but I won’t.” Laughter broke through the regarding. “Crap that sounds like vows. Can I edit this….I know who
can... oh ha that's you Tony. You can't edit your own gift..."

Tony could hear his long sigh. He pressed the button again and more phrases came out, each one causing him to laugh and smile all the same.

“Thanks Ryder,” he sincerely said clutching the watch in his hand, much in the same manner that Ryder had held on to that business card. “This is amazing.”

Ryder scratched behind his neck and smiled. “Ah, thanks. I know it’s not much, but I figured you’re too serious sometimes, so I don’t know if you need a smile, my voice always brightens up anyone’s day.”

“You’re once cocky guy, aren’t you?” Tony chuckled, sliding the watch onto my wrist. Ryder shrugged, a faint smile placed on his lips. Silence passed between the both of them, until Tony finally voiced my single concern he had since he had met Ryder.

“Promise you don’t start acting differently because you met my dad and seem to have idol worship for him or something.”

Ryder’s eyebrows raised in surprise, but he nodded in agreement. “If you promise you won’t care if I could never be as great as someone with a Stark name.”

I rolled my eyes. “That won’t be a problem. Let me in on a secret even those with the Stark last name aren’t that great.”

“You are,” Ryder said softly. “Now as any sacred promise goes. Promise we won’t ever do anything to go against one another, even if one’s father is one’s idol.”

Tony smirked.

“Promise?” He said, holding out his pinky finger.

Tony interlocked his pinky with Ryder’s and whispered back, “Promise.”

Only one of them kept his promise though.

“I didn’t know it then, or maybe I did, but that was the day everything started going downhill in our friendship. If I had known how much of a suck up he would have been to Howard, I would have cut off that friendship immediately, but I hadn’t. I wanted to hold onto my friend as long as I could. I waited too long to figure out Ryder wasn’t my friend. I mean Steve I literally had people telling me…and it’s only now when looking back I realized…” Tony broke off his sentence and closed his eyes.

Steve looked down at him and continued running his hands through Tony’s hair, giving him to gather himself. Tony curled his hands against the blanket and sighed.

“I should’ve listened to Cydney.”

“You called my dad,” Tony stated slowly, sitting down at the seat beside Cydney. “Why on earth did you call my dad? Seriously, that was not how the day was supposed to go. It was going fine and I didn’t need or want my dad messing things up.”
“Oh, I’m sorry was your day supposed to go spent in Ryder’s bed,” Cydney hissed.


“Oh, are we talking about the hickey the size of Texas on Tony’s neck. Nice job sweetie, it almost looks like you got your correct shade,” Kali said, all of a sudden coming near Tony’s shoulder. She pulled out her makeup bag and held up a few different items. She placed her hands on Tony’s chin and tilted his head back.

“Ryder has a habit of liking to mark in visible places. I should know. Of course I find it very hypocritical that he was the one who reprimanded me from flirting with you and here he is fucking you. Please tell him I said that exact statement, seeing as though we are not on speaking terms right now.”

“I’m sorry. Look you two are completely misunderstood. I didn’t sleep with Ryder. I tried seeing if I could flatiron my hair ‘cause my friend Rhodey dared me and…”

“Tony stop trying to dig yourself into a deeper whole. Jesse told me everything,” Cydney told him, eyes pointed at Tony’s neck.

“Jesse. You don’t even know Jesse,” Tony said, leaning his head back so Kali could have more room to work.

Cydney shrugged her shoulders. “Doesn’t matter. He called me and told me what happened, which you know after I got over the fact that your creepy roommate got my number I had to call your dad. I mean Tony that…look you don’t know what you’re getting yourself into with Ryder.”

“I think I know exactly what I’m getting into with Ryder. I mean you should at least know, seeing as though you slept with him,” Tony argued back.

Cydney sighed with frustration. “And I will tell you over and over again it wasn’t like that.”

“Then what was it like? Please tell me so I can understand,” Tony replied, tilting his head down as Kali got done covering his mark.

“Tony.” Cydney started, trying to calm Tony down. “Look, I’m sorry if my actions hurt you, but you have to know that wasn’t my intent. I never wanted to do anything to hurt you.”

Tony scoffed. “Right.”

Cydney shook her head and placed a hand on Tony’s knee. “I’m serious. I have never regretted a day like I have that day. I just…I can’t tell you why I did it. I don’t even think I truly knew why I did it. I had this idea that…well never mind. I’m sure it wouldn’t matter to you.”

Tony remained silent.

Kali looked between the both of them and looked to her chipped nails. “Look at this point how about you two just move on. No sense in ruining a friendship over this. You both fucked Ryder, congratulations. Make sure to get tested, dude’s dick has been almost everywhere on campus.”

Cydney looked horrified and Tony looked nervous. Kali broke after their expressions.

“Relax kid he and I go to get tested almost every week. Ryder is a clean bill of health. Always
practice safe sex kids. Now that I have done my nice little charity for the day, I am off to go do something a little bit more fun,” Kali noted grabbing her bags.

“Kali, class hasn’t even started yet,” Tony said as she stood up.

“If class hasn’t started in fifteen minutes, students are allowed to leave.”

“It hasn’t been fifteen minutes,” Cydney told her.

“It will be as a step outside this door,” Kali laughed, leaving the room.

Cydney and Tony looked at one another and smiled. Cydney tilted her head. “Hey, I’m sorry about calling your dad. I was just worried that Ryder may be taking advantage of you. It’s just you’re in two different stages in your life and I admit I was concerned. But I know your relationship with your dad, so maybe I shouldn’t have gone through such extremes.”

Tony shrugged.

Cydney looked at himsearchingly. “But you’re good right. Ryder didn’t do anything that you didn’t want him to do? Because I swear on my vintage MIT sweater, if he did something bad to you I will ask my gramma to teach me how to break a man’s dick.”

Tony barked out a laugh, but quickly quieted when he realized their professor had finally walked in.

“No, I don’t need you to do that Cydney. Ryder…it was good. Okay. Fine. Nothing happened that I didn’t want to,” Tony told her honestly, cheeks flushing from memories of that night.

Cydney still didn’t look pleased, but seemed to accept the answer. “Alright. Well you’ll let me know if anything ever changes, right?”

Tony nodded. “You know I will.”

Smiling Cydney turned to the front of the class. “Wanna bet on how many times Dr. R says quantum physics. My bet is 56.”

“Oh, you’re on. 60.”

“But things were still fine…at least I thought they were,” Tony joked.

“What happened?”

“It was subtle changes at first. I didn’t really focus too much on them. I was still hanging out with Ryder and he seemed to still have time for me. But then there were weeks where he would just be gone. I begged my dad to let him have some off days, but then Ryder would find out and get mad, said I was ruining his opportunity.”

Steve frowned at this and looked at Tony. “Do you think Howard may have been trying to actually put a wedge in your relationship?”

Tony hummed thoughtfully. He remained still for a second, pondering about this. “I don’t know…I maybe.”

Steve tilted Tony’s head so that he could face him. “Was Howard the main reason you two were you know distancing yourself, at least from Ryder’s part?”
Tony lifted one shoulder. “I don’t know. It’s funny because my dad never knew the days, when big things were happening in my life. But suddenly Ryder starts working for him and surprise he’s scheduled Ryder for every single day something important is going on in my life.”

“What’s wrong?” Cydney said, rushing over to Tony as soon as he opened the door. “I came as soon as you called me. Hey, breathe. You’re freaking me out.”

Tony winced as her sharp nails bit into his arms. She pulled back quickly, muttering apologies.

“No, no apologies. ‘Cause fuck…I just remember you asked me to tell you if anything changed with Ryder and me? I told you things wouldn’t…I mean back then maybe you were wrong, but now…fuck it’s like he’s become different ever since Howard stuck his claws in him. And I’m trying…I fuck I’m trying but my dad’s got him good and I don’t…”

Cydney pulled them to Tony’s room, closing it behind her. “Okay, sit down and tell me what’s wrong. Do you need a cup of water?”

Tony shook his head. “No.”

Cydney wrapped Tony in her arms.

“He can’t. He can’t ruin this too. My dad can’t ruin this. I don’t…he can’t do this to me.”

“Tony…”

“Cydney, no. Howard doesn’t get to ruin anything anymore. Not this time,” Tony snarled out bitterly. He immediately got up and started pacing the entire length of his room. “He can’t just decide to give Ryder an internship and think that shit is okay!”

“Tony-”

“No, I’m…Ryder’s not Howard’s freaking lap dog meant to go when he says fetch and stay when he says stay.”

“No, he isn’t. But Tony Ryder is able to make his own decisions, granted a lot of bad ones. However, you can’t let all of this fall on your shoulders.”

“You’re right! This is on you. If you hadn’t called them, they would have never come to my room and he would’ve never met my dad. Now thanks to you my dad has been hanging out with his number one fan and his internship hasn’t even started! What the fuck is going to happen, when he’s gone four months from me?”

Cydney soothed the blankets down beneath her. “And I have apologized tremendously for that. Don’t keep holding this against me like I am one of our classmates who ruined our lab assignment from a miscalculation.”

Tony deflated at that. “I’m sorry. I know, I know. It’s just…he’s changed. I only have so many things untainted in my life and here Ryder is being marked black. And I can’t stand it because it’s like I’m losing him right in front of my eyes.”

And it was true. Ever since his dad had come that day Ryder had been distant. He had tried flirting more with Ryder in hopes that he would get the hint. He thought that, since they had slept together Ryder might have eventually cared for Tony as a boyfriend would. He didn’t have extremely high
hopes, but they were hopes nonetheless.

He shouldn’t be so hung up on this or disappointed, but he was. He couldn’t stop thinking of the way that Ryder was distancing himself from him. They didn’t even have any more driving lessons lately. If it weren’t for Ryder’s stuff laying carelessly in the living room, he wouldn’t even be so certain that he lived there anymore.

“It’s…I just want my friend back,” Tony muttered, sitting beside Cydney.

“Have you tried telling him that?”

Tony laughed shortly. “When would I have the time to do that?”


Tony sighed and nodded. “Yeah, I’ll try.”

Cydney took her leave and went into the living room. “Fingers crossed Jesse isn’t there hiding in the dark.”

Smiling Tony waited until she had closed the door behind him, until he went to call Ryder. The phone rang six times and Tony was so certain that he would go to Ryder’s voicemail. On the eighth ring, Tony was about to hang up until Ryder’s voice came through.

“Yeah.”

“Hey, Ryder. This is uh Tony,” Tony greeted.

“Hey, Tony. Look I’m a little busy right now, so can we talk when we get back to the dorm?”

“Uh, no actually. It’s pretty….remember the award thing I was telling you about?”

Ryder’s silence answered it all.

“Okay, well it’s tomorrow, remember? And you promised you would come and drive me there.”

Tony expected Ryder to immediately say he forgot and to apologize, saying he’d be right on his way. Tony needed to start learning that he was in for disappointment.

“Don’t you have like someone you can call to drive you? I’m sure your dad could set it up,” Ryder said.

“But…well I know. I just thought you’d like to come, since I’m getting awarded with the Anthony Edward Stark award today. I mean they named an award after me because I am too brilliant for their mere high honors award or even the dean’s list.”

“And that’s great Tony, truly it is. I’m very proud of you, but I really can’t leave,” Ryder said, at least now having the tone of regret.

“Then why can’t you screw what dad says and come. We had already made plans Ryder.”

“Can’t you just ask someone else? Maybe Pepper or Rhodey. They would make perfect guests to this event.”

“No, because Rhodey is still at training and Pepper is visiting her aunt. They wanted to come, but remember you told them they didn’t need to because you would make sure I wasn’t alone.”
Tony cleared his throat to make sure he wasn’t coming across as whiny.

“I thought…it’s just we had plans of going to red carpets and stuff together. Now this is like a test run. Come on dad can give you one day off.”

“Tony, he really can’t. Look I’m sorry, but I can’t really start asking for off days so soon. Your dad is being really great and I don’t want to mess things up.”

“Just for once could you not be the lap dog waiting to bend at my dad’s will in fear of getting fucking punishment. It’s an award not a bank robbery I’m asking you to accompany me for goodness sake,” Tony ranted before he was able to contemplate what he had said.

“Tony is that how you see me?” Ryder whispered brokenly. He could hear sadness etched into his tone.

“No,” he told him hesitantly.

“No, no he says,” he chuckled darkly to himself. “Why can’t you just let me do this one…?”

His reply was cut short, when Cydney came into the room and snatched the phone from him.

“Listen here you ass, you promised me…yeah no. We made a deal…I don’t want to hear it. Said you wouldn’t hurt him….then what the fuck are you doing…You’re a fucking ass for telling him you’d come and…no…suck a dick Ryder and I hope to everything in this world you chock and die on it.”

Cydney pressed end and turned to Tony. Her mouth was set in a firm line. “Okay, I’m going with you. You don’t need Ryder. We’ll record the whole thing and make sure to send it to Pepper and Rhodey.”

Tony looked down at his hands, sniffing lightly. Crap, he wasn’t supposed to get torn up all over this. Cydney knelt before him.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Cydney said. “We’re going to be the best dressed at this award shindig. I’m going to yell so loud, when your name is called that they might just have to escort me out.”

Tony looked up to her smiling.

“It’ll be alright, Tony. I’ve got your back,” Cydney said, flashing her bright smile again.

Tony wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close to him. Maybe he would be fine as long as Cydney was here. Cydney pulled him closer and rested her head on his shoulder. Tony placed his chin on top of her head and played with some locks of her hair, watching as it fell between his fingers.

“I love you,” Cydney whispered. “You don’t have to say it back or anything, but I do. I just…yeah thought you should know. It doesn’t have to be weird or anything.”

Tony’s heart hummed in his chest and a pleasant feeling seemed to overwhelm him. He didn’t say the words back…he couldn’t not yet. But the thing was he didn’t get the terrifying feeling that he would never be able to say them. Looking at her now and holding her, all thoughts of Ryder gone if only for a second…he believed that one day he could look at her and say those three words. It was only a day later that Tony was in his same spot albeit alone this time.

He was standing before the door length mirror, in his room. Adjusting his tie, he looked at his reflection. Maria had always told him that he would grow into a handsome man.
His phone rang for a good few seconds before cutting off. Tony let the phone ring, seeing as though no one should be calling him at this time. Cydney was on her way and she had told Tony he would let her know when she was outside the dorm building. He hadn’t received the call yet, but he remembered how Cydney often times forgot to call, until she was actually outside his door.

He walked toward his closet and grabbed his shoes. Sitting on his bed, he began to put them on until he was distracted by the phone ringing again. He let it go unanswered. That was until it rang again for the fifth time in the last fifteen minutes.

The phone rang again and it was an unknown number. Groaning, he grabbed his phone and angrily answered it.

“Listen here if you’re another IRS scam I am going to…”

Tony was not allowed to finish before a deep voice broke through the phone.

Cydney…

…robbery.

Dead upon arrival.

Suspect…

…gone.

The phone clattered to the floor and he refused to pick it up. This was just another scam. Some little idiot decided to play a prank on him. There was no way Cydney was shopping just minutes before they had to leave. There was no way she should’ve stopped to get something at the shop…why did she have to stop.

The phone rang again and Tony answered it. He didn’t even look at caller I.D. before he picked it up.

“Tony,” Ryder’s voice cut through the phone. “I just got the alert on my phone from campus police about Cydney…I fuck that’s awful.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about. Cydney’s on her way here. She hasn’t called yet, but that’s probably just because she’s still driving. She’s not at a store. So stop playing whatever prank you’ve concocted. It’s not funny anymore.”

“Tony I am not playing. Campus police and some witnesses said Cydney was getting some present for you, when a group of thieves came in…and by the time the medics arrived it was too late. They managed to get the suspects in custody though.”

“What was taken?”

“Excuse me?”

“What was fucking taken? I know you may not have a brain, but I know you still have your ears attached to you,” he snarled and he had to loosen the grip on his phone before he broke it. “What did they take that was worth her life?”

“Tony.”

“What was fucking taken,” he growled holding onto the phone even tighter.
He muttered something incoherent. Tony asked that he repeat what he previously said.

“Nothing.

“This is all your fault,” Tony managed to brokenly get that accusation out.

“This is not my fault. I was nowhere near her,” he said with a thin voice.

A weight settled on Tony’s chest when he said that. This was his fault.

“No, this is your fault! She would have been here with me if it weren’t for your stupid fucking useless ass! You were the one supposed to come with me and Cydney decided to take your place. Cydney was never supposed to come, but she did because you can’t seem to make good on your promises,” he angrily announced, chest rising with anger.

“Tony, things happen like this. It is an unfortunate event-”

“Unfortunate event?” he mimicked back angry by what he was suggesting. “Just shut the fuck up.”

“Tony that is no way to talk to me. Goodness, what is going on with you lately? Having girl troubles?” Ryder joked. “Oh wait, the only girl you were interested in is gone.”

The air was knocked out of Tony’s chest. “Fuck you. Just fuck you.”

Tony breathed harshly, the edges of a panic attack clear from the way his vision was blurring and his hands were shaking.

“I can talk to you any way I want you bastard. Maybe if you would check in sometimes you would know,” he seethed. “Don’t tell me how to talk to you.”

“Tony.”

“I have nothing left to say to you.”

He hit end before he was able to reply. Then he threw the phone at his wall and watched with a dull satisfaction with how it broke.

A knock at his door startled me. Tony turned his head away from the useless phone and back to the door. Maybe it was a joke. Cydney said she had set to arrive around 6, so maybe it was all a mistake. Energy curled at his chest and danced across his fingertips.

He threw the door open and smiled wildly in hopes that Cydney wouldn’t see his frown. With a second thought, he wiped angrily at his eyes. It was all just a joke. But then he took his hands away from his eyes and saw Rhodey and Pepper standing there looking nearly as bad as I felt.

“Surprise,” Rhodey whispered, dressed nicely in a suit. “Cyd…Cydney invited us. Told us that Ryder abandoned you…crap and then we...”

Rhodey stopped speaking, looking to Pepper for help.

“Tony,” Pepper started eyes red. “We came here as soon as we heard.”

“Get out,” he whispered softly.

So it’s true.
This wasn’t a dream.

Tony pinched himself to see if he was still dreaming.

The sharp pain echoed the pain in his heart.

“Tony man hey let’s sit down for a sec alright,” Rhodey instructed hands reaching out to clasp him on the shoulder.

He wrenched out of his grasp before he was able to fully get ahold of Tony.

“Get out or do I have to throw you out?”

“You shouldn’t be alone,” Pepper whispered, eyes catching Tony’s.

“Tony come on we’re just trying to help,” Rhodey announced

“I don’t need your help. I need Cydney back. That’s what I need. And unless you have her hiding somewhere I need you to leave,” he told them pushing at Rhodey’s shoulders.

“No, Tony. It isn’t good for you to be alone in this head space. We can just sit in silence.”

“Get out!” he screamed because apparently they couldn’t hear what Tony had been saying.

“Tony,” Pepper cried, tears running freely down her cheek.

“Gosh, Pepper just leave me the hell alone!” he snarled turning around to punch a hole in the wall. His eyes widened at his actions and Tony’s chest began heaving up and down. “Get out.”

By then the two were just outside of Tony’s door. Moments before they began to step back inside, he shut the door in front of their faces and quickly locked it. He trained his eyes to listen and see if they had truly left.

The front door had not opened and closed so he knew that they were still here. But Tony couldn’t focus on that. He quickly lost his breath as today’s event began spiraling in his head. He kneeled over his bed and began to pant. His breaths came out short and ragged. Tony felt like everything was tilting off of its axis.

“Fuck,” he whispered. “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” he repeated louder and louder each time. The anger that rested on his chest continued to grow and he felt the need to get his hands on something. He picked up the desk lamp and threw it against the wall.

“Fuck you Howard! Fuck you Ryder! Fuck you both to hell,” he shouted with his head tilted to the ceiling. “Fu…fuck you.” His words caught on his breath and he noticed that it was beginning to get harder to breathe.

“Cydney,” he cried into my arms. “Cydney. You can’t leave me alone. You and I were just getting to….”

Tony started throwing things around his room. He needed to destroy something, everything. A string of curses left his lips and he didn’t care who heard him. Pepper and Rhodey could hear Tony and he decided he simply just no longer gave a damn.

He could hear their muffled voices outside of his door. Pepper had told Rhody, “Rhody what do we do? I’ve never seen him like this and it is terrifying me. I…what if we’re not what he needs to help him? What if we’re not enough?"
He wanted to tell her that wasn’t true. They needed to be pushed away from him. He couldn’t let them be drawn in to his life. Look where it had gotten Cydney and Ryder. He tried listening to them again, but the sound of his beating heart muffled out their words.

He thought he heard the word promise. Then he heard another voice come into the mix. It was Ryder. He was telling them to go home and get some rest and he would tell them to come back when Tony was ready. At least he was good for one thing. Though Pepper and Rhodey put up a fight for a while they left with the intent to come back tomorrow.

He wouldn’t let them in then either.

Tony sat down in the middle of his destruction. He only noticed the door knob turning once Ryder was fully inside my room. Dang it, he totally forgot that he had a copy to his door key after he had locked himself out that one time.

Ryder looked at his hands and left the room. He was too tired to close the door once he had left. When he came back, he had the first aid kit and some tweezers. He stepped over all the things Tony had on my floor and sat down beside him.

“Go away, Ryder. Didn’t want to come so do the one thing you said you would and just don’t be here right now,” Tony tiredly told him. “I need you gone.”

“You shouldn’t use your hands to destroy. You should use them to create Tony. A certain genius told me that one time,” he said taking Tony’s hands into his.

“He’s stupid. He doesn’t know anything. Apparently hands can destroy, just look at everything around me,” Tony blithely stated. “Look at you.”

Ryder frowned, opening his mouth to say something, but didn’t.

“Why are you here? Shouldn’t you be living it up with dear old dad?” Tony questioned.

Ryder looked at Tony, before looking down. “I’m sorry. I just heard and came to help.”

“If you’re going to try to be useful how about instead of trying to get this glass out of my hands, you go get me a drink and leave me the hell alone.”

“I’m sorry,” Ryder said looking at him, but going to do what Tony asked.

“I highly doubt that you are,” Tony said crawling into his bed.

They didn’t speak anymore and Tony was finally thankful for the silence.

Tony remained silent, but let another memory wash over him. His mouth was telling the story before he even realized what he was saying.

He kept staring at the box that Ryder had given him as a present for his first time, its edges worn from his many times of tearing at the sides. He already knew what was inside, but he always asked if it’s the same. He wondered if it changed, but he always knew the answer. He was in constant awareness of the answers to the questions swirling in his head.

So many things had changed, especially his relationship with Ryder and the absence of Cydney. He
wondered if this one material thing would have stayed the same, unmoved by everything happening around him.

He didn’t want to open the box, and mar it with his dirty finger prints. He just wanted that little piece of happiness to not become tainted. Ryder and he had been truly close at the beginning, surely things had not become so bad between the two that Ryder would just not care about him anymore.

Ryder and his dad were about to spend four months together, but Tony was already feeling the absence. Howard had said he wanted to get to know his apprentice. At the time Tony was thankful it wasn’t him and that maybe if his dad had someone who really enjoyed what he did, he would get his stick removed from his ass. Instead Ryder and Howard began to share that same stick.

He remembered trying to talk to Ryder about that small fact, just only a few hours ago.

“Stark just stop sounding so childish,” Ryder snarled, deep voice sinking into my ears. “Grow up.”

“Oh, so I’m Stark now?” Tony hissed, pointing an accusing finger against his chest. “And news flash I am practically still a child, as you have told me many times.”

“Your father is right. It’s time you become a man.”

By then their living area had become the picture of the aftermath of a tornado. Both of them had thrown objects at each other. Curses have flown into the room and rested on our shoulders. Jesse had come in smoothly to watch the affair, before plopping down in the living area and turning on the tv.

“Yeah, you know what you must like eating ass because you sure do suck up to Howard’s a lot,” he jeered, eyes probably wide with anger.

“Gosh, Tony must you be so effing crude.” Ryder’s face is of pure disgust.

“Learned from the best,” Tony snarled.

He shook his head back and forth as if unsettled by something. “Whatever, I’m tired of arguing over the same topic with you.”

“We wouldn’t have to argue if you would just stop being around Howard every single waking moment!” By now Tony’s voices was hoarse from yelling and he felt as though his body would collapse from the sheer lack of energy he had.

“That’s just being selfish. You got him your whole life. I’m just getting to have him around for four months. Why does it bother you so much?”

“Look I get your’re having daddy issues-”

“Daddy issues? Pot meet the fucking kettle,” Ryder sniped back. His phone rang and he looked down at it. “Whatever. I’ve gotta go meet Howard at Stark Industries. I’m pretty sure we’ll continue this conversation later tonight when I get back.”

And as always Ryder had to get the last word, seeing as though he left immediately upon his last statement. Tony’s eyes burned with unshed tears. All they seemed to do lately was argue back and forth. He had never argued this much with Pepper and Rhodcy because they never let it get this bad. But Ryder was too much like Howard now and Tony just didn’t mesh well with those type of personalities.
He rubbed his eyes in anger. Heading toward his room, he shut the door behind him.

So here he was eyes flitting over the objects in his room and it was bare except for the small box laying against my bed. Every other object that could be easily thrown had been taken out of his room and used as a weapon, except for the box and what was within the box.

Everything was breaking around him and that was the only thing that remained.

Now he looked at the small box, anger pricking him in the back. Furiously, he took his watch out of the box and without a second glance threw it against the wall. He heard it crack against the wall and felt his heart thud against his chest.

Immediately, regret stroke him and he ran over to where it lied brokenly against the wall. His chest heaved up and down and a broken sob crawled up the back of his throat.

“No, no, no, no, no,” he whispered brokenly. He knew it would be easy to fix, but the fact that he broke something again, hit him like a wave. He clutched at the watch in his hand, its broken pieced falling into his palm.

“No, please stop,” he whispered to the watch as though it could listen to his please. “Stop saying that.”

No matter what, the recording of Ryder’ voice sounded through the room from that small device. Although everything broke, his words kept repeating as if in a loop. He could have moved somewhere else, but Tony found himself staying rooted to where he was. He needed to keep hearing those lies, even if they never meant anything from the person who said them.

I won’t leave you Tony.

I won’t leave you.

He wondered if he had ever met a person who meant them.

“Tony,” Steve breathed, the impact on the story just increasingly pressing against his chest. How long had Tony had to keep all of this to himself? He wanted to know what on earth told Tony to stay or even give this man a second chance when he came back.

Tony’s eyes widened, when he realized he had said aloud the last three statements. He closed his eyes, suddenly feeling like he was back in that moment. And all he wanted to do right now was curl into his bed and sleep forever.

“So yeah he left, but...he was the only one who ever came back,” Tony muttered.

Steve wanted to argue that wasn’t the case. He had come back, but then he realized what Tony was saying. Someone that had come back for him. Despite what he wanted and hoping he had the greatest intentions, even Steve knew that at first he had come back because he needed a purpose again...he needed to be Captain America.

He faulted himself, for not realizing that Tony was actually the main reason for coming back and maybe he had always known deep inside of him that was the case. However, he had never dared to actually voice this even aloud to himself. But maybe that was the time that he should have.
He was just about to speak up and see if Tony was about to continue his story, until he looked down at the man under him. Steve knew there was more to the story, but he could see Tony’s eyes strain to stay awake. He smoothed out the lines in his forehead, from him trying to force himself to stay awake.

“It’s okay, go to sleep,” he whispered to Tony leaning down to press a kiss against his lips. “I’ll be here, when you wake.”

Tony hummed and allowed his eyes to flutter close, safe in the comfort that Steve was beside him and not going anywhere. His eyes studied Tony’s sleeping features and he took comfort in seeing how the tension from telling the story was melting away. There was still a frown, but even that frown smoothed out as the minutes passed.

Steve was just about to raise from the bench, when he saw the nurse approaching him.

“Mr. Rogers, it’s been three hours,” the nurse said, disrupting

“It’s okay. I’m taking him home,” Steve said, gathering Tony in his arms.

“But…you can’t just…Mr. Rogers.”

Steve shifted to make sure Tony was safe and not waking up. Tony only curled tighter and pressed his face against his chest. Steve looked down briefly, before he turned his attention back to the nurse.

Steve smiled at the nurse and the nurse was shocked with the grief that weighed heavy in his eyes. He hadn’t known a hero as bright as Captain America could have eyes as dark as his. He wondered what they had been talking about.

“I’m taking him home because he wants to go home. No offense, but this hospital isn’t a place where he feel safe or where he can even recover. Just send the stuff to Dr. Banner and we’ll cover it from there,” Steve announced.

The nurse seemed to struggle with something, until he nodded. He looked between the both of them.

“Okay, just let me supervisor know and check him out,” the nurse instructed. “Promise me you’ll look after him though.”

Steve’s throat tightened.

“I won’t leave his side.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, I have no other excuse than I got the little procrastination bug. Hopefully, 13k word chapter made up for it. Also I couldn't get all of Tony’s past with Ryder during college in one chapter, so we'll be continuing that in next chapter as well and then we'll get to his last part of his talk with Steve :)

Thank you all for your continuous support through comments, bookmarks, and kudos. I genuinely appreciate all of them and look forward to hearing from y'all. Have an amazing Saturday loves.
When Steve went to the tower, he first ignored the several glances from the other team members looking at him oddly. He knew without a doubt that they had questions regarding Tony’s sleeping figure in his arms. Unfortunately, for them right now all Steve wanted to do was place Tony in his bed and watch over him for now. The questions could come later. He allowed his own tired feet to lead him to Tony’s room. He went in there easily, passcode already on his lips as he went into the room. Before he had fully entered, he made sure to leave the door cracked.

The first thing he noticed, when entering Tony’s bedroom was that the room had been neatly cleaned and everything had been placed back in its original position. He didn’t know who had thought of that, but he was thankful. Everyone had felt the steady heavy absence of Tony and would occasionally more often than not find themselves in his room. It was the only place, besides his lab, where it still seemed like they could feel Tony’s existence etched onto the walls and every center of the room.

He remembered nights spent in that room, his own hands clutched tightly around Tony’s pillow as Natasha ran her fingers through his hair, her own eyes unable to close for sleep. He remembered Clint, after calling to check on his wife and kids, crawling into Tony’s closet and making a makeshift shelter in there composed of his clothes and other various items Tony had somehow mistakenly put in there…they once found a toaster amongst his shoes.

Bruce would be sitting down at the bottom of the bed, his face in his hands and going through a meditative mantra. Natasha kept a foot against his back to keep him grounded, to keep him aware that he was still there with them. Thor, whenever he was able to break away from his other duties and Loki, came to the room, knelt by Natasha’s side, and began braiding her hair. Natasha sometimes leant into the touch, but only when she was so tired that she had become unconscious of her own responses. Loki had surprisingly come by sometimes when Thor came and would just silently look on, his mouth tilted in either deep annoyance or deep concern.

Steve didn’t really inspect the differences between the two looks.

Wanda and Vision would be talking to one another in hushed tones. Wanda would often be going over what she had found out about the CMPNY from her trips down to those members that they had found.

Sam was always the one sitting at Tony’s desk, reading through the various books that Tony had scattered around his room. Sam noted with great fascination that Tony had a list of books that could rival his own back home. He had made it a mission back then to read as many as he could, so that when Tony came back they could have conversations about it, maybe grow in their own friendship.

Steve casually picked up a book that was left behind in the cleaning and placed it on the bookshelf as he made his way to Tony’s bed.

Whenever Pepper was free from keeping things together at SI she would come to the room, look at who was on the bed and approach. Steve would always move to the center of the bed, so Pepper could move behind him and close her eyes to fall asleep. Later Steve realized that Pepper had dibs on that side, Tony allowing her to have it whenever she came to him. Rarely, if ever Pepper got to the point where she just caved in and needed the comfort of someone else near her, but she knew that
when she did she always had Tony to go to.

She never told them that those moments spent in his bed, surrounded by so many people, but not Tony was one, if not the most gut-wrenching experiences of her life.

Rhodey, himself would often set to fixing the various items broken in Tony’s room. There were many. Steve knew that it was likely Tony had taken them apart in interest of seeing if he could make something better. Tony always could. Rhodey only ever wanted to attempt at fixing them, just so that when Tony came back he could tease Rhodey for even trying and then jokingly telling him it was better than when Rhodey had fixed it.

Bucky would come in silently, content with providing surveillance and making sure all points of entrances were covered.

The saddest part was watching the kids come into Tony’s room those days. Steve would watch as they entered the room, eyes hopeful that things were just a dream and that possibly Tony was waiting for them in the room. Seeing that hope in their eyes, felt like a revival. It felt like all Steve had to do was hope that they would find Tony in time.

That hopeful light diminished as soon as their eyes fell onto the noticeably lacking Tony presence in the room. They never stayed. Miles was too confused and sad to be in a room where he knew his baba should be. So Peter and Harley would take him back to his room and play games, until Miles was tired out and resting in his room. That was when they would come back and go into Clint’s little fortress of solitude.

Steve woke the two up and more often than not the two young boys would have an item of Tony’s clothes hanging off of their shoulder or using it as a blanket. He hated the disappointment of sending Peter home to his aunt and felt even greater guilt, when May turned toward him and asked if they had found him yet.

But that was all then. Steve had to try and not get too caught up in remembering how things were. He would have plenty of time to do that as he pretended to trick himself to falling asleep. He knew his dreams would now be a compilation of trains, icy water, Siberia, and Tony’s hand falling outside his grasp. He knew and accepted all of this.

However, he knew and accepted that all of that would come at a later time.

Right now, he needed to place Tony in his bed and watch over him. He pulled the covers back, realizing that they were warm as though fresh out of the dryer. He didn’t know who had come in and done that, but he sent an internal thankful to whoever it was.

Tony’s body went pliant as Steve laid him down. Steve left for a second to gather something more fitting than the hospital gown that they had placed on Tony’s body. He reached in for some warm pajama pants and a hoodie, both of which helped with the coldness that Tony might wake up feeling.

He pulled the hospital gown and his fingers trembled as it fell easily off of his shoulders. He could see the hand shaped bruises leaving trails all over Tony’s body, some of which rested near his hip bone and disappeared underneath his boxers. There was scrapes at his knees as though Tony had tried crawling away and the carpet had burned them. There was the obvious weight loss, the way Steve could see Tony’s ribs as he inhaled.

Steve swallowed the knot in his throat and blinked away the tears that wanted to fall.

His shaking hands wanted to soothe the bruises left behind, he wanted to kiss every trace of visible
skin and mutter praises into them. He wanted to offer comfort to Tony, hold him in his embrace and be a steady presence behind him.

He wanted to prepare the greatest meal for Tony. He wanted Tony to create a playlist of songs, constantly telling Steve his own was outdated, while secretly listening to them in his lab. He wanted to take Tony out and wrap his arm over his shoulder, bringing him closer as they walked to their destination. He wanted to tell Tony more about himself. He wanted to hear more about Tony, more than what could be found in papers and more than what Tony had told him in that hospital garden.

No.

No, that wasn’t what he truly wanted. Well, yes he wanted all of those things, but they weren’t at the top of his list.

What he wanted was to simply be there for Tony. He wanted to be there like he wasn’t before.

He took the ointment and soothing medicine that the doctors had given him and went to apply it on Tony’s cuts and bruises. He warmed it between his hands and meticulously made sure he covered every point of hurt. Steve would stop any time Tony would scrunch his nose or shift, but he resumed when his body went still again breaths evening out once more.

Once he was done, he set the bottles aside and went to place Tony in his pajamas. Steve pulled up the covers and tucked him in. For a few soothing minutes, all Steve did was stare overwhelmed by the fact that he was here. He didn’t want to close his eyes and mistake this all for a dream. He had those dreams one too many, while Tony was still missing.

He hated waking up from a dream where he was holding hands with Tony, only to wake up and go back to the conference room and hear that they still hadn’t covered more ground in regards to where Tony was. Steve wondered if he would ever stop feeling that fear, that he felt lingers on even still.

Steve kept his hand over Tony’s, realizing that even in sleep Tony’s hand seemed to be in constant movement. His own mouth tilted upward in a smile, knowing that one of the many things Tony would want to do as soon as he woke up would be to go to his lab.

Steve needed to start coming up with ways that would occupy his time, until Tony would be allowed back into his lab. That was one of the promises he made to the hospital staff, in exchange with letting him take Tony home early. He had promised he would make sure Tony wouldn’t be doing anything too physical or requiring extensive energy for the next few weeks.

This was going to be a mission that was for sure.

Once Steve had gotten his fill, he stood up and checked the parameter. He wanted to make sure they hadn’t missed anything of Ryder’s. At first they were contemplating whether they would move all of Tony’s stuff to a different room. However, they all knew how attached Tony was to this certain room overlooking the horizon and the buildings before him. Tony had picked this room for a reason. It would seem wrong to make a decision like changing his rooms, without Tony’s input.

But if Tony indeed wanted to change rooms, Steve would gladly pack everything onto his back and do it for him. Steve was just about to grab Tony’s desk chair and pull it by Tony, when a knock came at the door. Steve’s shoulders went tight as he turned sharply to the source of the sound, breathing out with relief when he only saw it was Bucky holding a bowl of soup.

Bucky looked at him curiously and then at Tony. “Guess, I lost that bet.”

Steve furrowed his eyebrows. “Bet?”
“Yeah, we were seeing how long it would be for you to spring Tony out of the hospital. We all gave you the maximum four weeks, until we stepped in and sprung him ourselves,” Bucky hinted teasingly. “But how’s he doing?”

Steve closed his eyes and walked near Bucky. He knew that Tony was asleep, but he didn’t want their voices to bring him out of it. After all that had been going on, Tony needed all the rest he could afford.

“He’s…I don’t know Buck. I don’t wanna say he’s alright because crap if you…if you heard the things he was telling me there’s,” Steve rubbed a hand over his eyes. “I don’t know. He’s talking to me and he’s telling me about his relationship with Ryder and it’s already a lot. And he hasn’t even gotten to the recent stuff. Now I feel like I’m going to literally want to find Isak, Ryder whatever and just wrap my arms around their neck and squeeze because he’s managed to keep ahold of Tony’s life for this long and-”

“Hey, Steve breathe,” Bucky said putting the bowl of soup down. He placed his hands on Steve’s shoulder and looked into Steve’s eye. “No one told you that either of you had to do this alone. He’s got the team, he’s got his family. This is a joint effort, where no one will stay benched on the side. Let that weight be shared with all of us, ‘kay punk?”

“I don’t want it to be shared,” Steve muttered, cheeks flushing as he admitted this to Bucky in the silence of Tony’s room.

Bucky let his hands fall from Steve’s shoulder. “Why on earth would you think that we would let you and Tony deal with this alone?”

“No, I have to make up for it Bucky. I can’t…I have to be enough this time to protect him. It has to be me this time,” Steve told him sternly.

“Why would you think that it just has to be you protecting him?”

“Because! Because I couldn’t find him by myself, I couldn’t bring him back. I had no idea where he was. If it was just me, he would still be there Buck. He would still be there,” Steve rasped out, his breath hitching from trying to control the way a sob wanted to break out.

“I couldn’t even depend on myself to bring him back home. I am the leader…I’m Tony’s…I’m his… I have to be the one to help him because I didn’t even do anything to bring him back. All I did was wait on the sideline, until Wanda and that guy were able to bring a location. And even then Natasha was the one who found him. I did nothing.”

“That’s not true, Steve. You did all you could and even we have limits of where our skills are. But we got him back Steve. Feel very grateful for that. But don’t you dare-”

“I have to. I needed to be the one-”

“That’s incredibly selfish of you,” Bucky muttered.

“Excuse me?” Steve said. “How on earth is that selfish?”

“You think that anyone on this team, this composition of a self-made family will be okay with you being the only one to help Tony heal? You think this will be helpful for them, in letting just you be the one to make Tony feel home again. And you should feel thankful that you have members of your team to be your strengths when you are at your weakest. So what if Natasha was the one who found the room he was in, at the end of the day the end result was Tony is here. It would be good for you to remember, it wasn’t just you that missed Tony.”
Steve licked his lips. He clenched his jaw, all the while thinking about what Bucky had said. He knew there was merit in what Bucky was explaining to Steve. Steve just always figured he had to do things alone. Quite possibly that was the main reason for the things that led up to Siberia. If only he hadn’t thought he could shoulder everything with Bucky alone. Possibly if he had let Tony in and…

Not right now Steve, he thought to himself belatedly.

“I know. You’re right,” Steve finally admitted, once his thoughts had silenced.

“Of course I’m right. You know I thought all this time, you would finally realize that I am often the voice of reason in our relationship,” Bucky said. “But I’m serious you can’t do this on your own and you’re even foolish for thinking anyone would let you do so. I’m pretty certain Pepper would stab you with her heel, if she had any idea you were going to keep Tony up in here.”

“I wasn’t going to do that. The last thing Tony needs is to be kept somewhere confined,” Steve grit out, mind flashing back to how Steve had found him in that hospital.

Bucky nodded twice. “Good. Anyways I brought some soup, Bruce made it.”

“Ah, thanks,” Steve said picking up the soup that Bucky had placed down.

“Yes, FRIDAY notified us, shortly before the hospital staff wanted us to confirm that you indeed were taking him home to rest. You should have seen Bruce’s face though, before you had come in carrying Tony. He looked like he had swallowed a sour lemon, when he learned that Tony had left the hospital. But he was fine, when he learned that you were bringing him back.”

Steve shrugged a shoulder and pulled his body to the ground so he could sit down. Bucky followed the action and mirrored Tony’s position.

“But I actually came here for a more serious reason other than just checking in and bearing soup,” Bucky said, shifting his legs underneath him.

Steve paused midway in bringing his food to his mouth. “Okay.”

“Fury got in contact with the hospital Isak was staying at.”

Steve grew more interested in this. “And?”

Bucky’s eyes grew bright and his facial expression took on this dark and mysterious look of amusement. “Isak told Fury he would do everything he could to make sure things were cleared up. He’s being brought in by SHIELD in five days.”

Steve nodded, taking great pleasure in the fact that Isak/Ryder had no idea what trap he was leading himself to.

“You going to tell Tony about this change in development, or…” Bucky trailed off.

All of them had been wondering whether they should leave Tony in the dark or tell him about what was happening. There were heavy arguments for both sides.

“I’ll tell him, when I’m certain who I have,” Steve added. “I don’t want to tell him something and then later find out it’s the exact opposite. He doesn’t need the confusion right now.”

Bucky agreed.

Steve brightened at this. “So five days, yeah?
“Yeah,” Bucky said. “What’s that look for?”

Steve was smiling, eyes alight with joy and relief. He tilted his head to look at Tony, before looking back at Bucky and easily saying, “Nothing. It’s just I can be very creative with the ways I want to torture him in the span of five days. Very creative.”

Bucky had no doubt about that. He knew and now the others were about to realize just how ruthless Steve could get, when someone came across a person he loved. Bucky had been there on two separate occasions and without a doubt, Bucky knew this would be the worst one.

And he knew without a doubt, he and no one else was going to care to stop him.

They would help.

Chapter End Notes

A little break from Tony's talk 'cause baby needs to rest a little bit and go to sleep. That took a lot out of him. (Also because I needed a break from that angst lol). It will resume next chapter.

Thank you all so much for the continuous love and support. All the comments, kudos, and bookmarks go straight to my heart. :)}
Tony woke with a slow awareness of himself. First he stretched out his legs, thankful that he didn’t feel the stinging numbness in them as he usually had for the last few weeks. Then he stretched his arms beside his body, making sure he could curl his fingers into the cool sheets. He wanted to make sure all parts of his body were able to move, that he hadn’t been drugged or those patches weren’t on his body.

As though fearing that there was still a chance for either, he let his hand travel alongside his stomach in search for any patches there. That had been Ryder’s favorite place to put them.

With hesitation lacing his body, he blinked his eyes open. They settled on the darkness first then to the source of light coming from his windows. He breathed out a sigh of relief. He craned his neck to pinpoint more familiar points in his room.

Someone must have cleaned his room at some point, as evidenced by the feel of new sheets. Maybe he would get FRIDAY to tell him later, so he could send them some fruit basket or something. His body sank into the bed and he wanted to cry in pure happiness that he was back home away from that room and that hotel. He looked to the door and realized it had been cracked slightly to the point where it was nearly closed, but just open enough that Tony knew he could leave if he wanted to.

As he focused on the door, he noticed it open more slightly. He raised himself on his elbows, defenses already high. He wondered if somehow Ryder had come back and now was going to take him again. Thankfully, before he could allow himself to become submerged in that strain of panic, he saw blonde hair that accompanied a body.

Steve’s note of surprise on his face did not go unnoticed. However, it eased into something softer when his eyes rested on Tony. He went into the room, hands holding a bowl of soup and a cup of water.

Tony’s mouth nearly salivated at the thought of some food. He had wanted a burger, but he figured he could get Steve to bring him one later. He made grabby motions to the food, not yet wanting to speak into the serene silence that wrapped Tony like a blanket.

Steve handed off the soup, a warning on his lips about how hot it may be. He then placed the bottle of water on the bedside table and took a seat at the edge of Tony’s bed. Tony had wanted to complain and ask why he was so far away.
Unfortunately, Tony’s thoughts hardly ever allowed him to say what he truly wanted to say. Instead he swallowed his first bite of soup and told Steve, “I fell asleep.”

Steve looked at him, a bit of amusement warming his face. “That you did. I didn’t want to wake you up and I’m honestly surprised you managed to stay sleep during the whole trip back home.”

“How’d you manage to get me home? No, I know what it was. You just used that oh golly smile on the hospital staff and promised them something like liberty and they let you spring me free. Probably added in a promise of puppies and rainbows for the next two weeks.”

Tony raised an eyebrow waiting for Steve to disagree, but he was admittedly surprised when all Steve did was nod seriously.

“You’re right. I also hope you know that you may have to pay for the thousands of puppies that I promised the hospital,” Steve noted.

“Thousands? Wow, Rogers you really take the cliché of go big or go home,” Tony laughed.

“Hey, if it’s getting you home then yeah. I always will,” Steve said.

Tony swallowed and averted his gaze. Not quite knowing how to respond, he stuffed a spoonful of soup in his mouth. Steve was completely fine with it. The two relaxed in the silence of the room, comfortable with just each other’s presence. Tony felt his back relax against the headboard and Steve sat up closer to Tony.

A few minutes had passed, before Tony turned to Steve.

“I didn’t finish my story, did I?” Tony questioned, looking down into his soup.

“I don’t know,” Steve said. “We don’t have to pick up, if you don’t want to. We can just stay here for a moment. It’s whatever you want.”

What he wanted?

Now if that wasn’t something he had always struggled with.

Tony shrugged. “Well, that’s not too much more to it honestly. We started drifting apart and soon I stopped caring what the reason was.”

*His eyes trained on his lab assignment before him, the low grade marked heavy in red. For a few moments, he had been struck still barely able to comprehend the grade before him. He didn’t know why though, it wasn’t as though things were completely going his way as of late. It seemed the perfectly constructed world around Tony was falling apart and he didn’t have the foundation to keep it standing for too much longer.*

*Cydney was gone. He was failing two of his classes. Ryder was off frolicking with his dad. His mom was off somewhere vacationing with her friends.*

*And he was here in this lab room, body cold because the professor refused to set it any higher than 68°. Usually, he would have been prepared and brought his MIT sweatshirt. But somehow that added onto the list of things that were missing from Tony’s life.*

*He brought his hand to his face and slowly made his way to the front of the room. The professor had*
her eyes trained on some other students’ lab assignments, before raising her head to acknowledge
Tony.
Tony shifted uneasily from foot to foot with the graded paper.

“I assume you’re here to talk about your grade report? Would you prefer to come during office
hours,” she questioned, setting aside her grading pen and giving Tony all of her attention.

“Oh, no ma’am. I just…look I realize some of our lab assignment grade counts in group work.
Unfortunately, my lab partner has lately become unreliable. And I know I won’t pass, if I continue
having my lab group assignments end up unfinished like this.”

“Oh, now dear that certainly is a problem. Your partner is Ryder, yes?” she questioned, swinging to
her computer. “Mhm, he has been late to a few of my cases. Have you reminded him that three
absences make your grade drop one letter grade?”

“He’s read the syllabus, so I’m positive he knows,” he added, hoping to reign in the bitterness so
that his professor wouldn’t mistake that tone toward her.

“Okay, since we’re only three weeks in, I can go ahead and assign you a new lab partner. You’ll
possibly be in a group of three, if that’s alright?”

“Yes, that’s good,” Tony agreed.

“Alright, let me look at the roster and see who I can put you with. I’ll email you back by tomorrow
morning. If you haven’t seen anything from me by then, please feel free to stop by my office or email
me to remind me,” she claimed.

He left her lab, feeling just a little bit lighter. Thankfully, this lab wouldn’t weigh to heavy on his final
grade average.

Two days later he received a voicemail from Ryder tersely asking why he had received an email
saying he had been dropped as his lab partner as well as a notice for a failing grade. It continued
for a few minutes. Some sentences were spoken with desperation, begging Tony to understand he
just didn’t have all that time with his internship.

Ryder had wanted Tony to be understanding.

He hadn’t hesitated to delete the message as soon as he heard it in its entirety.

It was interesting how Tony didn’t feel his absence as strongly as he did at the beginning. He barely
realized when Ryder was at home versus when he wasn’t. It had gotten to the point where Tony saw
and held more conversations with Jesse.

So it was a surprise, when Ryder came knocking on his door two months later. Tony opened the
door, revealing Ryder’s tired figure. His eyes were swollen red and his lips were pressed tight in a
firm line. But beyond that, he looked the same.

He looked just as he did the first time Tony met him.

He kept his hand from reaching out, instead placing them in his jean pocket.

“How are you?” Tony questioned, feeling awkwardness shape his body.

Ryder’s eyes flicked up then down. “Ummm, good. And you?”
“Good,” Tony repeated.

The two remained in a tense silence until Tony decided to disrupt it.

“So what are you here for? Came to pick up some fresh change of clothes,” Tony teased.

“Came here to pack everything.”

It was said with such a casual tone that Tony almost missed it. Then he repeated his statement in his head and Tony stopped short.

“Everything? What you moving in with my dad now or something?”

Ryder scoffed. “No, I’m transferring schools.”

“Oh,” Tony breathed.

“Oh,” Ryder repeated dumbfounded. “That’s all you have to say?”

Tony’s frown increased. “I’m sorry. Is there something else I should be saying? I mean I don’t even know why you’re still at MIT anyways seeing as though you barely come to campus anymore.”

“You don’t…” Ryder breathed frustrated. “There’s a whole lot you should be saying right now.”

“Like what? Anything that I’ve tried to say before was quickly put down by you with the excuse saying you needed to do work for Howard or you needed to be at this meeting. I’ve tried talking to you a lot, so please do forgive me if after so long I just don’t have anything else to say to you.”

“I don’t…I didn’t come here to fight,” Ryder backtracked.

“But yet that’s all we seem to do,” Tony confessed.

Ryder’s facial expression darkened. Tony had never seen the shadows hit his face so strongly. It looked odd etched on a face that was so vibrant and kind. He wondered if his dad truly had some power to drain a person completely. He would have felt guilt, if he hadn’t warned Ryder away.

“When did we let things get like this between us,” Ryder questioned.

“When you decided you wanted to be Howard’s lapdog, more than you wanted to be my friend or your own person,” Tony admitted truthfully, delighting in how Ryder winced with the severity of his statement.

Ryder swallowed.

“When do you leave?” Tony asked, suddenly wanting this conversation to be over.

Ryder lifted his eyes to meet Tony’s. “Leave?” he softly said, his voice contrasting with the harsh lines in his expression.

“Yes, to your other school?”

“You’re not asking…you don’t want me to stay?” Ryder rasped, his voice breaking slightly in disbelief that Tony hadn’t tried hard in asking him to stay.

“I would have, if I ever felt like you actually were capable of doing so.”
Ryder bit his lip. “Thing really have changed between us huh?” Tony refused to acknowledge that with an answer. “Well, for what it’s worth I truly am sorry for my part in destroying whatever friendship we had. Maybe one day we’ll meet again.”

Tony highly doubted that and sincerely believed he wouldn’t be so open in welcoming him back, if he ever returned. Tony had believed that when he closed his door that would have been the last he ever saw of him.

All throughout the story, Tony’s back grew tense and his fingers were now clutching the bowl of soup tightly. It was as short and abrupt as the end of his friendship with Ryder had truly been.

His eyes were trained on the window, but now they slid back to Steve.

Steve watched him carefully, wanting to see how Tony was handling dredging up all of these memories that for all he knew, Tony had pushed aside. His hands wrapped around the ones holding the bowl and slowly eased it out of Tony’s hand.

Tony let the bowl be lifted from his hands. He didn’t register Steve placing it on the table. His mind was on other things now.

His mind went to how easy it was to let Ryder go and how easy it had been to forget it all. Maybe he should have done more to remember and hadn’t forgotten it along with all the other people who had ever done Tony wrong. He tended to forgive, but more oft than not also forget.

He wondered if him forgetting had in turn made it all too easy to let Ryder back in.

Chapter End Notes

Seriously, thank you everyone who is continuing to comment, kudo, and bookmark this story. I love you all and I can’t wait to take you on the journey that these last ten chapters will be :)
Steve grabbed another bowl of soup, seeing as how the one Tony had been eating was empty. He had heard Tony’s stomach growl. Tony had waved him off saying he was fine, but Steve knew that whenever Tony’s body loudly admitted that it was hungry Tony really needed to get food or he would be found slumped over his work bench.

Also if he didn’t give him something now, he had no doubt in his mind that somehow Tony would find a way to get some coffee into his system. Steve walked back into the room, holding the now steaming bowl of soup. Tony accepted it easily, blowing onto the spoon before feeding himself some.

“This may be the best thing I have ever eaten in my life. I don’t know if it’s because I am actually starving or whether it’s because Bruce is an actual food genius. I’m going to go with the fact that I’m starving because I refuse to admit that Bruce is quite literally amazing at almost everything,” Tony rambled.

“I’ll be sure to pass on those exact sentiments,” Steve said grabbing a spoon and taking some soup from Tony’s bowl.

“Hey,” Tony whined. “You were just in the kitchen. You could have made yourself a bowl.”

Steve looked at him, imploringly widening his eyes a bit.

“Oh, stop that. Fine we can share. Better be lucky that this a big bowl,” Tony joked.

“Yes, I did choose this bowl for a reason,” Steve joked right back.

The two ate the bowl in silence, until Steve put his fork down and looked at Tony. Tony ignored the look, until it grew so heavy that he felt it boring down into his soul.

“So…you know how I re-met Ryder, but I didn’t really let on how much it went to shit. I thought here’s one of my old friends from college and I had a crush on him. No one was really here with me. Pepper was handling SI and Ryder was recovering. You all were gone. And it was just me.”

Tony smiled sadly and looked down. “So…I felt like this was the world doing me a kind service. It brought back someone that I didn’t think I had wanted to see again. And it started off well enough, but then it just quickly stopped.”

“What happened?”

“Everything,” Tony tiredly answered.
He wondered, if he should wake up. Steve was removing his shoes and then pulling the covers over him. Tony could feel his hand hover above his body potentially about to pull the sweater off no doubt acknowledging how much Tony looked overheated with his red cheeks. Tony was seconds away from groggily wiping his eyes to fake the "I just woke up look," until Ryder’s voice swelled in Tony’s ears.

He already knew that he was in store for an argument, after Ryder had thrown that bottle at him in anger. Tony had been hoping that Ryder would still be packing for his trip to Honduras, just so he could have a full night’s rest of sleep.

He allowed exhaustion to take over him as the added voices of Ryder and Steve swept over him. Apparently Tony was right in his thought that Steve was about to take off his heavy sweater. If not for the bruises that it had hidden, Tony would have allowed his limbs to lose their tension and let Steve pull it off of him.

Fuck, it was hot.

“I’m sorry. It’s just I was putting him to bed...not like that! He fell asleep in the kitchen and then I brought him here, but noticed he was sweating so…”

“Steve, it’s fine,” Ryder laughed. “I’ve got it covered now, but thanks for taking care of him.”

“Of course,” Steve said quickly stumbling out of Tony’s room.

He heard the door close behind him and Tony waited a few seconds to see if Ryder would say anything. When he was satisfied that he wouldn’t, Tony tried letting his mind be submersed in sleep. It had been a rather long week, month for him. It just seemed like everything was happening at once and Tony might not have been equipped to handle all of this at once.

So sleep sounded like the best thing ever in the world right now.

Of course Ryder had to ruin it for him.

“I know you’re awake, Tony,” Ryder said, pushing his weight near Tony’s head. He ran his fingers over the shell of Tony’s ear and Tony shivered at the coolness of the touch. “Come on. Let me see those beautiful brown eyes.”

Maybe if he kept them closed for a minute, Ryder would actually believe that he was asleep. Eventually, Ryder would grow bored and return to packing for his trip. Tony let small puffs of air escape his lips even as Ryder tried coaxing him out of sleep.

“Tony,” he said again. “I know you’re awake. You don’t fall asleep that fast.”

I fall asleep this fast, when I’m fucking exhausted is what Tony had wanted to say. Of course he valued his safety, so he didn’t really press back. He flinched when Ryder’s hand softly trailed around the space where his arc reactor was.

“Ah, see I knew you were awake,” Ryder crooned. “I just wanted to talk to you, before I leave for Honduras.”

Tony sleepily raised his body up and was met with Ryder’s penetrative stare. He didn’t know what Ryder had to say. Ryder himself, seeing Tony awake reached out for Tony’s wrist. He pulled up his sleeve a bit and stared down.

Tony hissed between his teeth as Ryder pressed down on his wrist. The skin there was already
bruising from how hard Ryder had gripped him. Tony stared at the space and noted the fingerprinted marks on there, not having known how truly physical Ryder had gotten until he saw this proof just jumping at him.

Had he gotten so used to Ryder leaving marks that he hadn’t even checked for the angry red marks to appear, after Ryder had left the kitchen. Bile rose in his throat and he swallowed it roughly.

Ryder caressed his skin, a contrast to the violent throbbing that was permeating in Tony’s wrist. Tony cut his eyes across the room because he didn’t want Ryder to see his eyes. He was afraid that Ryder would see then how much Tony disliked him…almost hated him. But hate was such a strong word. So dislike…he could settle with dislike.

“You know I hate to hurt you like this,” Ryder softly mumbled. “I had just meant to grab you, so you would look at me. You know how much it irritates me, when the person I am talking to doesn’t look me in the eye.”

That statement was spoken with hint of a warning, Tony only knowing that because of how he was avoiding Ryder’s gaze. So he forced himself to look at Ryder and smooth out his expression.

“You…I don’t understand all of this,” Tony finally said.

“Understand what?”

“I don’t understand why you’re so attracted to the bruises on my skin. I don’t understand why you like watching as I limp to go the bathroom. I don’t understand why you are staying, when it seems like you don’t even like me. I mean who does this to people they’re supposed to…” Tony’s voice trailed off a bit.

Ryder frowned, looking searchingly at Tony. “No, you’re wrong. I don’t like seeing you suffer. Also those bruises are just little love marks. I have a thing for people knowing that you’re mine.”

“I’m not some object you can possess,” Tony exclaimed.

Smirking at this, Ryder nodded. “Of course. Simple misuse of words. I just love knowing that I’m the only one who gets to see you like this. That I’m the only one allowed to touch your body. Everybody may want a taste, but I’m the only one for you and you’re the only one for me.”

Ryder pressed a kiss against his lips.

“You still didn’t answer my question. Maybe we rushed into things too quickly. Maybe we should’ve taken things slower. Got to know one another better.”

Like how one of us likes his punches more than his kisses, Tony bitterly though.

“I mean we haven’t even really talked about how we left things in college. We kind of just jumped into this relationship head…”

“Oh, come on Tony. You and I both know there was always something between us. After all I am the first guy you ever…”

“But apparently that didn’t mean anything to you. I distinctly remembered you not even talking about it again.”

“When would I have the time to do so? I was getting ready for my internship. Are you seriously questioning how we left things years ago? Tony that was in the past, we have both grown since
“Possibly, but we never addressed those things. I don’t know maybe you kept some things bottled in and want to punish me, however way that might be. You want to punish me for introducing you to Howard? I mean it was awfully convenient that you came just at the right time in my life,” Tony muttered.

Scoffing, Ryder rolled his eyes. “Really? Paranoid much Tony. I let go of the past a long time ago. When I met you again, I realized we were just two adults who had a past together. I never once blamed you for introducing me to Howard. That time was amazing and I told you that plenty of times.”

Tony breathed out harshly in agreement. “Then what?”

“What?”

“There must be some reason why you turned into some asshole. I remember your words used to be biting, but I never knew your touch was going to be rough this way. And yes we need to talk about our past because the way we left things was toxic.”

“We don’t need to talk about the past,” Ryder hissed.

“Why the fuck not? Don’t you want to tell me really why you transferred? Want to let me know why you told the whole school I was some attention seeking whore who was ready to spread my legs open for anyone who so much as said hello, after you had packed your bags and left for Harvard.”

Tony would have nearly laughed at Ryder’s shocked expression, if he hadn’t felt so gutted right now.

“Yeah, didn’t think I knew that, huh? Kali told me about that little wonderful rumor you had started spreading. Oh, or maybe you would like to tell me what is it about our past that you’re just so willing to forget because I fucking can’t.”

“That’s fucking bullshit.”

Tony’s heart started throbbing in tandem with the pain in his wrist. “Yeah, and how is that so?”

“You’re getting pissed at me for not wanting to indulge in our shared past, when you’re fucking housing the rogue Avengers and having little talk sessions with Steve on the kitchen floor.”

“You truly want to get mad about me housing the Avengers? They have nowhere else to go. That does not meant that I have forgiven them. That certainly does not mean that I haven’t forgotten all this mess with the Civil War and the whole Accords deal. But that is different. We have to work together in order to ensure the safety of this world. You and I…”

“What? So what do you want to do, huh? You want to break up with me. Is all of this because you want to let go of what we have. Well good fucking luck finding anything better because you’ll be alone all in this house, even with its current occupants.”

“Stop making things complicated. All I wanted to do was address our past and quite possibly find where all this restrained anger is coming from. I don’t enjoy being your daily punching bag and if that’s how it’s going to continue to be then I don’t think this will work. My dad emotionally and verbally abused my mom and me. I will not suffer under that again.”

“Suffer? Tony you’re not suffering. I have apologized for when I hit you. I have gotten onto my knees and kissed your ankles. Your dad probably never once did that. So don’t you dare put me on
the same level as him.”

“That doesn’t matter. You can ask for forgiveness all you want, but if change doesn’t happen those words are empty.”

“And what of Rogers’ words? Are they as empty as mine or are you just more willing to believe him because you think that maybe this time he’ll love you. Maybe this time instead of being the monster, he’ll save you from this monster you’ve made me out to be. Do you dream about him saving you as my hands are wrapped around your neck?”

Tony pursed his lips close together.

“Do you think your precious Steve will actually give a damn about anything that happens between us? You want to go run off to him or your dear friend Natasha and tell them I give you little boo boos at night. Fine, go fucking show them your hickey. If I remember correctly, Rogers gave you a much bigger bruise on your chest than I have ever marked on your body. But hey let’s all forget about that and give them free housing.”

“Fuck you,” Tony rasped, hand automatically going to his chest.

“Excuse me?”

“I said fuck you.”

“You’re just mad because I am telling you the truth. Come on Tony. No one knows you better than I do. Though we may have been apart for years the connection between us is undeniable,” Ryder said pressing his body over Tony’s. “You know this. So I don’t know why you keep trying to rile me up, especially with the way you let Steve carry you into our room.”

Tony bit back a scathing remark at the “our” room comment. It wasn’t their room. Ryder rolled his hips downward, and Tony pressed away saying no.

“Let me show you how much you mean to me. You’re so focused on making me out to be the bad guy, but let me show you I’m not.”

“No.”

“It’s okay Tony. I swear, if you allow me to have this tonight I promise we’ll sit down together and talk all about our past, when I come back from Honduras. We can even do couple’s counseling. I really want this to work, can’t you tell how much I want this?”

Tony looked up into his eyes, almost swaying with how soft Ryder’s words seemed. Then he looked into those lust filled eyes, filled with neither passion nor forgiveness.

“Not tonight Ryder,” Tony hissed pushing away at Ryder’s body, annoyed with how much Ryder was pressing this. Ryder pressed closer. “I said fucking no. Get a hint. No means-”

The slap came unexpectedly and it almost seemed to shock Ryder, to the point where he was hurriedly wrapping his arms around Tony. It was either that or to stop Tony’s flailing arms from hitting him. Ryder wrapped his arms around him, pulling him close to his chest. He pulled Tony’s head forward, fingers pressing into his chin so he could direct his head movement.

His head turned slightly to the open door, Miles' wide expressive eyes peering back at him. His lips barely formed the word Miles, before Ryder turned around and Miles went running. His breath fanned out around him and he pushed away from Ryder to get off the bed.
“Stay,” Ryder commanded shakily. “Just stay. Your face is growing red and… just stay. I promise we’ll talk. I’m so fucking sorry. I didn’t… just stay here okay. Stay here.”

Tony numbly did as instructed, watching as Ryder left the room.

“Stop,” Steve rasped out, the command coming out, before he even thought of it.

Steve pulled back and pressed the palms of his hands against his eyelids. Tony stopped the story, seeing the movement. Steve pressed harder, wanting to ease out the stinging pain that was filling his head. He wanted some way to stop how his heart thundered and his mouth filled with acid as Tony despondently told this story, in a detached manner as though trying to save Steve.

His mouth opened, in the form of a question. He felt the story wasn’t over, but he had been holding this question in him, ever since Tony had first started talking to him. He wondered if an appropriate time to even discuss that question was now. He didn’t know if it would be alright to even bring something up that was that traumatic, not that anything else Tony had said wasn’t traumatic enough on its own.

He wanted to tear at his limps because they felt too heavy on his body. All at once, he could remember how they had found him in that room. He could see the bruises left on his body, some larger than the others. He could see Tony’s dazed eyes going back and forth across the room. He could hear Tony screaming out, “No touching. No touching.”

He wanted to ask if Ryder had ever…

The word desperately clung to his lips, not ready to let go of its grasp quite yet. Steve told himself it was to not have Tony talk about something he may not be ready to discuss.

Steve knew that maybe he wasn’t ready to hear it. He wasn’t ready to hear that the man he loved could have been…

Because if Ryder could so easily hit him and apologize, then he could just as easily force him to…

The acid burned in his throat. Tony looked at him worryingly and then his eyes widened. Steve forced himself to close off his expression, so as Tony wouldn’t feel the need to comfort him. He didn’t want Tony to know how much he desired to know everything, but also feared knowing what happened under this tower and all the other places the two had ever been alone.

Had he done something at the Christmas Charity Gala, when Miles had come to them asking for help in finding his baba.

All of a sudden, he couldn’t stop his body from bowing over. Everything came to him at once and Tony stayed there all the same rubbing a hand across his back, whispering, “It’s okay.”

Nothing about this was okay.

How could Tony be handling things and Steve was breaking down?

But Tony wasn’t handling it was he? He should have known that with how he found him on the floor that day in the hospital. Steve pressed at his heart, hating how it sank to his stomach and infused with the swirling bouts of anger, fear, and sadness.

He brought his body up and looked at Tony. Tony stared and Steve felt as though Tony knew
exactly what questioned weighed heavy on his mind.

“Would it help it, if you knew? If you knew the answer to whatever question you wanted me to answer,” Tony whispered, his own eyes having a thin sheen of water over them.

Steve bit his lip and looked at him. “Would it help you, if you were to tell someone? If I asked you, and you were to answer…would it…would it help?”

Tony looked down at his hands, before turning to face Steve.

Fuck, his eyes.

Steve was gutted at the spot. Tony’s eyes were all at once full of emptiness and desperation that Steve just know from looking into them. And he did. And by everything he wished that he could erase that expression and have stopped the reason from that expression ever existing in Tony’s eyes.

He wanted to ask, when. He wanted to know how long into their relationship it was, before Ryder decided to…

He couldn’t even see Tony sitting in front of him anymore, all he could see was Tony in that room drugged out with whatever Ryder had been giving him, bruises strewn across his thinning body, and a swollen lip. He could hear Tony’s screams echoed in his ears. He could feel the ghost of Tony pushing at his chest.

Tony’s jaw worked. “Do you want me to stop talking?”

Yes, because if you don’t I may just fucking say hell to it all and go find Ryder my damn self and kill him on the spot, Steve thought.

“No.”

“You sure? I can…I can always just talk to my therapist about this. I mean I probably will tell him everything, but I thought it was nice to tell…because I can’t exactly see my therapist right now. But I didn’t think about how much it might mean for you to…”

Steve held his hands between his. “No, I want…I need to know. I promised I will listen. I’m not leaving and you don’t have to keep it in. Had to be silent about it for too long, yeah? Don’t have to be silent anymore.”

Tony leaned into the touch. “Okay, so…”

Tony breathed out as he watched Ryder get into his car and leave for Honduras. He hadn’t known what he had said to the rest of the Avengers to leave whatever Miles had told them alone for now. Once he was satisfied that Ryder had left, he headed to his son’s room.

When he entered, Miles already had a book open. His eyes were attentively glancing over the words, no doubt more interested in the colorful pictures that were underneath them. Tony closed the door behind him and went to Miles’ bed.

Miles hadn’t acknowledge his presence, until he was sitting down beside him. Miles set his book aside and climbed into Tony’s lap. Looking at him for no more than three seconds, he grabbed Tony’s face in his and pressed two loud kisses on the red mark on Tony’s cheek. He patted it with as much care as a child could, before he settled against Tony’s chest.
Tony wrapped his arms around him and rocked him back and forth. He wondered, if somehow his child just knew. He then wondered what type of father it made him, letting Miles experience his baba get hit. He had known how awful it was to see Howard berate his mom, so he didn’t know what it did for Miles.

He hoped it wouldn’t leave a heavy impact on the child. Tony cursed himself for letting this happen in spaces where Miles could potentially see. No, Tony cursed himself for having let Ryder in the first place.

“You’re hurt baba,” Miles muttered softly against Tony’s shirt. “I don’t like when you’re hurt.”

“I know bambino. I know,” Tony rasped, trying not to let the tears fall.

“Why did he hit you baba?”

Tony was stopped short, not knowing how to explain this. He started with different scenarios in his head, but none of them sounded right. He didn’t have a right explanation to give his child. Miles looked at him again.

“Baba?”

“I don’t know. He was angry, but he shouldn’t have hit me, okay? Hitting is never okay. No one should ever hit someone because it isn’t nice.”

“Made you cry?” Miles said, his small face scrunching up as he wiped at the tears Tony hadn’t even known had started to fall. “You sad baba?”

Tony swallowed on a lump. Crap, where had he gone wrong. His child should not be having to see this, nor understand this at such a young age.

“Yeah, it made me sad. But you’re making me so much happier. All I needed was a hug from my bambino,” Tony whispered into his hair.

“If he hits you again, I’ll beat him up,” Miles said seriously.

It appeared that maybe Miles had been listening on to his and Rhodey’s conversations far too many times, seeing as though Rhodey’s favorite phrase toward the Avengers had been, “I’ll beat them all up. I’ll beat him up, I swear Tones. Just give me the go ahead.”

Sometimes it was said jokingly, others Tony could very well tell the true meaning intent of threat in Rhodey’s voice. He was nearly surprised with how much Miles was able to mirror that exact tone.

“I love you baba,” Miles said with a kiss to Tony’s cheek.

“I love you too bambino.”

Tony rocked him back and forth until Miles was lulled into sleep. He laid him across his bed, covering him up with his blanket and resting Mr. Penguin by his side. Tony allowed himself a few more seconds, before he stood up to go to his own room.

He cut on the night light, before leaving. He cracked open his door and just as he was about to leave Miles’ room he saw Steve head to his door. He stood there for a few seconds, until his hand raised into a fist to knock on the door.

Tony waited.
Steve knocked at the door again, looking intently at the door as if hoping that it would open. “Hey, uh Tony don’t know if you’re still up, but I just wanted to check in on you. Uh...may not want to talk to me, seeing as though you’ve probably seen enough of me today.”

Insert deprecating laughter.

“Just uh, well Miles came to us and just wanted to check and make sure you were okay. Not that... not that you exactly needed anyone...or crap...ummm...I could just be talking to a door. Or you’re ignoring me, which is fine. You talked to me way more than I expected today.”

Tony wondered, if he should step outside. Wondered whether Steve would notice the swollen red mark on his cheek and listen as Tony smoothly lied about it, and maybe Steve would see through that lie. Or maybe Tony would tell him the truth, after all hadn’t they just mentioned trying this honesty thing?

He pressed his hand against the mark that Ryder’s hand left, hissing at its tender skin. He breathed out and opened the door to greet Steve. Maybe he would tilt his head to the side, make it obvious so Steve wouldn’t have to ask. He would just know. Maybe Ryder had done the right thing in actually for once making this mark visible...he could...

Tony walked out, just as Steve gave up and walked away. Tony could have went after him. He truly could have. He was going- His phone buzzed.

From Ryder: I know we left things on a bad note, but I am all for working things out. I know that I am not perfect, I am rather far away from it. But I have found love in you and I am hoping that you allow me to fight for it. I won’t leave you like the others. So I would only hope you extend the same faith. Can’t wait to see you soon. Expect a bouquet of lilies tomorrow. I know they were your mother’s favorites.

Tony closed the door and slipped back into Miles room. Well, the mark was already fading anyway.

Steve breathed out harshly, turning away for a second to discreetly send out a group text message. He had been so close to potentially stopping Tony from going back to Ryder. If only he had stayed at the door, until he came out. Or he should’ve called his phone and urged him to come outside. He should have done something, maybe then he wouldn’t have suffered so much.

His hatred from Ryder grew even stronger and Steve hadn’t even realized he could feel so strongly like this before. He had only felt like this once and it was against Hydra. Steve couldn’t make the distinction between either now.

From Steve: I need someone to come watch Tony for a second. Don’t want him being alone right now, but the more he tells me about Ryder the more jumpy I’m getting. I don’t need him to see me like this right now. I may punch a fucking wall.

Fuck, he should have looked closer. Should have known something wasn’t right.

“It’s not your fault,” Tony whispered.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to say that aloud. I just...”

“I know,” Tony exclaimed.

From Natasha: Don’t even need to explain.
From Clint: Be there in like five seconds. Thor and the others said they’ll be there in a sec. They’re having a competition to see who all can make the best Lego Avengers tower. The top three, will be judged by Tony. Unfortunately, Thor has a bit of a sore loser complex right now so he’s destroying all that are better than his….which honestly isn’t much

From Bruce: In short. I’m handling that. Natasha and Clint are on their way.

From Steve: Thanks.

“You okay, Steve?” Tony questioned. “I know it’s a lot, so if you want to maybe cool things down a bit…I know you were like interested in me, but maybe knowing all of this you aren’t anymore, which is totally fine. ‘Cause hey I get it not everyone wants someone who…”

“Hey, no. You’re nothing short of beautiful, amazing, perfect, genius, and all the other good words in the world. Knowing all of this won’t make me feel any differently about you. It just makes me upset and highly ticked off that someone wanted to taint and abuse all the goodness inside of you,” Steve stressed

Then he added, “Sorry, if my face is screaming murder. It’s not directed toward you at all. It’s directed to that fucking asshole who I’m pretty certain, when I…its definitely not directed to you sweetheart, never to you.”

Tony’s cheeks warmed up. “That’s…uh good.”

“Whoa, Captain who knew you could curse like that. Definitely going to be on Santa’s naughty list this year,” Clint said winking at Tony coming into his room and cutting on all the lights. “Alright, up and at ‘em Steve. Our time for Tony bonding is happening right now.”

“Excuse me,” Steve said, but inwardly was grateful that Clint had stopped that outward train of thought. Tony didn’t need to know right now all the ways that he was planning on destroying Ryder. He sent out prayers once again, that the sadistic asshole that was Ryder truly was pretending to be his brother.

“Oh, come on you’ve kept him with you hole up for far too long,” Natasha said, following Clint into the room and throwing herself down onto Tony’s bed.

“It’s been one day, Nat.”

“One long day. Now up, let Tony and us have some time together. I know Tony would like to go to the lab for a little bit,” Natasha teased, looking at Tony.

Tony’s eyes brightened with the power of the sun. “I vote time with my favorite deadly assassins, please.”

Nat looked smugly at Steve. “See, let’s give the man what he wants.”

Steve shook his head. “I promised the hospital staff, Tony would wait until he’s a 100% recovered.”

“Steve,” Tony whined. “The lab is part of my recovery. I need to stretch out my limps and get my blood flowing. Plus it’s not like the doctors are here. What they don’t know couldn’t hurt them.”

“What’s this I hear about going to the lab? Oh, are we blowing shit up. Please tell me we’re blowing some shit up. I haven’t done this in forever,” Clint exclaimed. “Let’s go now.”

“No, lab,” Steve stressed.
Tony turned sad eyes to him. Steve struggled for a minute, before eventually his strong will wavered.

“Fine, but do not exert yourself. I don’t need you pulling stitches or anything. Natasha and Clint watch over him….actually Natasha please make sure Clint and Tony don’t manage to blow up the entire lab. You’re in control.”

“I don’t need to be babysat,” Tony muttered, but allowed himself to be pulled up by Natasha.

Natasha helped bring Tony to his feet, smirking brightly. She led Tony out of the room. Clint turned to look at him.

“Oh, you don’t even know the mistake you just made,” Clint snickered.

“What mistake?”

“Natasha often sometimes gives us the ideas,” he laughed, before skipping away.

Later, Steve would know exactly what having Natasha in control meant.

He went down to the gym, knowing exactly what he needed. He went through about forty punching bags in one hour, just all imagining them as Ryder’s face. He wondered if Bucky or Natasha would teach him how to use a knife in some creative ways. He wondered how many ways he could perfect, before the five day time span was up.

He went through several exercises, still not feeling the need to cause damage leave his body. He didn’t even feel it leave, when Bucky offered to spar with him. During his sparring, he hadn’t even noticed his arm swinging to Bucky’s left causing him to fall harshly onto the floor.

“Hey, save that for the one you’re intending it for alright,” Bucky muttered a bit breathlessly.

“Sorry,” Steve muttered, reaching out a hand to pull Bucky up.

“It’s cool. How ‘bout we go get some breakfast, yeah? Maybe get back some of this energy, we exercised off. It’s the morning anyways,” Bucky exclaimed, throwing a water bottle at Steve. “Probably won’t be a lot of people out, so they won’t be scared off with the killer vibe you’re giving off right now.”

Steve tried smoothing his expression as he caught the water bottle, but by Bucky’s unimpressive glare he hadn’t managed to do so. He lifted the corners of his lip in a smirk and took a swig of his water. As he did so, his eyes caught onto the date on his watch.

He looked at the time and shockingly observed that it had become the next morning. All this adrenaline in his body, kept him from feeling tired at all.

Four more days, before Isak/Ryder would be here.

He let a satisfied smirk spread across his face, before punching the bag that Bucky was holding. Four days would go by easily enough, at least with his mind thinking of the many ways he could make sure Ryder regretted the day that he was even born.

He looked at Bucky.

“Sure, breakfast sounds great. Yeah, just give me a few minutes to shower and clean up,” Steve exclaimed throwing a towel to Bucky.

Bucky nodded. “Yeah, I’ll do the same. Meet you in the kitchen.”
Steve walked off to his room and immediately went into his bathroom and ran the shower water. He waited until it was warm, before stepping inside.

He had never appreciated the soundproof rooms that Tony had installed, until now. He had questioned it at first, but now he never knew their importance.

“No touching. No touching.”

“He slapped me. I don’t know why I ever expected that he would stop.”

“This is a dream. You’ll be gone.”

“Thanks, umm thanks for coming to get me.”

“Let go of me! Let go of me! I said no touching! No more touching. Stop.”

“You don’t have to ask. I’m not some fucking fragile person to be careful of touching. Fuck, Ryder’s done a hell lot worse, I’m sure you could tell. A little hand holding isn’t going to kill me.”

“No touching. No touching.”

“I like my dreams. In them you always care about me. Always love me in my dreams. But when I wake up you leave me. Always leave me. Left me in the cold once and in the cold again. I don’t want to wake up this time. It’s too cold. Always too cold.”

“No touching. Please, no more touching.”

“But sometimes when I looked at him, I just remembered the guy that was my first friend at MIT, the one who taught me how to play beer pong, or the one who brought me snacks to the labs on campus even when it was fifteen minutes walking distance from our dorms.”

“No touching. Please, no more.”

“Easy to let someone in, when you don’t have anyone anymore. It’s awfully easy to accept a guest into an empty home.”

“No touching. Please.”

“He was my first guy, you know?”

“No touching.”

“Do you ever stop feeling cold?”

“No touch…”

So yes, he could clearly see the value in the soundproof rooms now. Because at least now the others couldn’t hear the sobs that wracked outside of Steve’s body as he struggled to breathe against these echoes of the past and the thundering of Tony’s crying of, “No touching. No touching.”

Knowing full well that Ryder had never listened.

Chapter End Notes
Thanks for all the support guys. Love hearing from you all, seeing the comments, kudos, and bookmarks. Have a great Saturday and see y'all next week :)
So I figure since you all have been so amazing and open with me, I thought I would share just a little bit of myself. Recently, my aunt passed because she just couldn't find anything in this world to keep her going. It knocked me off of my feet because seeing someone lose the battle that you've been struggling with is f'ing terrifying. What's even more heartbreaking is thinking to yourself, "She stopped and the way she did it would be all too easy." And that kept me up at night because I thought I was getting better. Everything was rainbows and sunshine and I felt like that sadness was defeated, you know? Because it just feels wrong, the way I was raised to let emotions take control of me like that.

Fortunately, I have amazing friends that I can depend on who have helped me through this emotional time and I am so thankful for them. I am doing so much better and I am at a place mentally where I feel at peace.

And I wanted so much for this chapter to be light and happy. Unfortunately, there was no way with the mental state I was in that I could deliver a chapter like that. So I took some time off. So thank you all for being patient. I love each and everyone of you.

Also if you're ever feeling down and don't have anyone to talk to, talk to me. I know we may not know each other, but that doesn't mean we can't be a support system. Also I know this story is super heavy at several points (my next story is going to be way lighter lol, but still with angst because I'm apparently a sucker for it) so if you at any point feel like I need to add any more tags as to warn people and help them, please do let me know.

Have a great day! Next update is scheduled for 7/27 (Friday) and then we'll restart back on our Saturday updates :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Despite what any of them would say later, Tony did not limp to his lab. No, he walked gracefully there. The throbbing in his right big toe was not from stubbing it on a wall. Rather it was the cause of the numbness, from not walking around in a bit, setting in. He certainly was not going to address how both Natasha and Clint shifted closer to them, shoulders a hair width’s apart, when Tony noticeably started growing more tired. Unfortunately, Tony was never the one to outwardly address he needed support. So while he knew it was there, he couldn’t find it in his behavior to rest a hand on Clint’s shoulder to shift the weight off his throbbing leg or to ask Natasha if they could slow down because the pain in his ribs was fucking tearing him apart.

His thoughts were cut off shortly, when Natasha wrapped an arm around his waist somehow allowing Tony to lean on her and decrease the weight on his leg. Clint also took to noticing trivial things in the Tower, making them walk slower.

Tony kept his mouth silent through it all, silently wondering had he always been this transparent. Perhaps, he couldn’t quite master the men of Stark iron mask façade his dad had proudly boasted. Today he couldn’t find it in himself to care for how didn’t embody the Stark men are made of iron.
Natasha looked down at him softly, brushing back a stray hair that had fallen as Clint argued about the hole in the wall. Tony knew without a doubt it was from when Clint tried seeing how fast he could throw an apple at Bruce. He didn’t know how the challenge had started, but he knew it ended up with the apple creating a sizeable dent in their hallway wall.

Clint was arguing that it had been caused, when Tony was testing one of Natasha’s widow bites. Clint was a dirty liar. He knew that wasn’t Tony and that’s why him and Tony were playfully arguing over this hole that no one had even given mind to, despite it being three years old. He wondered why they never had it fixed.

Oh…right. Shortly after that the whole things with the Accords, Civil War, him finding out about his parents, the whole course of things…Tony hadn’t taken time to actually get someone to fix the wall. In actuality, he had all the time in the world given as to how he wasn’t in official Avengers business.

He told himself it wasn’t because he wanted a physical reminder that the Avengers had been there, even when they were miles apart.

He shook those thoughts out of his head, resolute to not spend any more time thinking about the past. The past often took him in his dreams, they had no place to exist in the now with him.

Clint kept on pointing out things in the wall, until he got to one particular crack in the wall that had Tony’s body tensing and locking up. Clint’s eyes widened, head tilted to the side. He pointed at the mark curiously. Tony wished the ground would swallow him up whole and of course Clint could just go past this hole.

“Goodness, Tony. This might be the winner of all the holes in the Avengers tower. Did the Hulk make a guest appearance some time or did Thor’s hammer find its way kissing the wall,” Clint joked, eyeing the dent not aware to how Tony’s body was starting to get cold.

Natasha noticed, once a shiver went through Tony. His whole body vibrated with the force of it. His teeth chattered and his vision blurred. Natasha took one glance at Clint and spoke to Clint, Russian and a mixture of ASL. Her tone was hurried and rushed as though she didn’t want Tony to understand the meaning of it, despite Tony knowing neither Russian nor ASL. Sure, he had picked up a key few phrases from living with the two of them over the years. But with Natasha going the way she was going there was no way he could focus on interpreting the message.

Also Tony’s ears felt clogged up and his tongue felt heavy. He wanted to insert a joke and say it was left over from the time he brought a one night stand over and things got a little heated. He didn’t say anything, in fear that his transparency would leak over into his ability to actually lie. He hadn’t wanted to tell them how this huge hole in the wall was from the time Ryder had shoved his body so hard against the wall that his shoulder popped.

He didn’t want to say how he tried getting someone to fix the hole, but Ryder had insisted it stay there as a reminder. Tony had forgotten what he had done to trigger that response, but he did remember how whatever it was Tony had stopped doing it without even questioning.

He was so caught up in the shivering, that he didn’t even notice when they made it to his lab. He could hear Natasha whisper, “Five days,” as she grabbed a spare blanket and draped it over Tony’s spare shoulders.

“If only I could make the days go faster,” Clint hissed. “Sorry, Tony.”
“It’s okay,” he chattered, fingers wrapping tightly around the blanket.

“It’s really not,” Natasha broke in, hands reaching out to wrap herself around Tony, but stopping shortly. “Can I–” she started, the intent clearly in her actions.

Tony, so caught up in his thoughts, simply acknowledged her intent with a head nod. Clint did the same and soon the three of them were all huddled up on the floor of Tony’s lab, backs against his desk. DUM-E whirled by them and Tony leaned his body forward, bring Natasha and Clint with him. DUM-E spun in a circle, beeping excitedly at Tony.

“Aww, look the bots missed you,” Clint teased lightly.

Tony smiled warmly. “I missed you, DUM-E.”

At the sound of you, U came from its corner around the lab’s couch and pushed DUM-E aside. DUM-E made a noise of discontent whirring closer to get to Tony. A huff of raspy laughter broke through as Tony watched as DUM-E and U fought over who was able to get closer to Tony.

U, having thought it won as DUM-E left, came closer to Tony only to get knocked off as DUM-E came whirling by knocking U onto the ground.

“DUM-E that wasn’t nice,” Tony reprimanded as DUM-E grew closer. Tony noticed the coffee cup in DUM-E’s hands and took it. “Thanks, DUM-E. Coffee is just what I need.”

“And just what the doctor’s said you couldn’t have,” Natasha added, pulling the cup away, but not before DUM-E tried to intercept her movements. “No, DUM-E. Tony can’t have coffee. It’s not good for him right now.”

“Coffee is always good for me. Natasha don’t teach DUM-E how to lie. Don’t be that bad influence,” Tony mulled back, rather childishly. Of course he wasn’t going to admit that change of tone to anyone, including himself.

DUM-E looked to the ceiling, as though contemplating whether or not to challenge Natasha’s words. Clint took everything in with a sense of amusement, even furthering to get U in, by telling U that Tony was clearly paying favorites and no parents should have any favorites. If Tony’s elbow sharply hit Clint’s side, he certainly didn’t notice.

“Natasha is correct,” FRIDAY inserted. “Might I suggest DUM-E that you find Tony something that is actually drinkable. I doubt his body would handle lighter fluid particularly well.”

Natasha scrunched up her nose and raised her body up slightly to put the coffee mug and its offending drink out of reach. DUM-E beeped discontent and grabbed U. U didn’t seem all the keen on being pulled away, but went nonetheless. Later they both came back with three of Miles’ juice cups.

Natasha took them, gave one to Tony and set one aside for herself. Then for Clint, she took his and poked the straw where it was supposed to go in.

“I’m not a child Natasha. I know how to put the straw in the juice cup,” Clint said, but still taking the offered drink.

“Really?”

“Really,” Clint said.

Clint visibly paled and took to drinking his juice cup.

“What happened then?” Tony said not being able to ignore the way curiosity welled up inside of him like a storm.

“Should I tell him or would you like to spin the lies as you so often do about how you’re actually a grown full-functioning adult,” Natasha commented, eyebrows raised in slight challenge.

Clint shrugged his shoulders. “Whatever, Nat. You can tell him, but just know Tony that she’s probably blowing this story way out of proportion.”

Natasha shushed him and turned to fully face Tony. “Okay, so were we doing some work for SHIELD in Washington D.C. It was a pretty routine mission, nothing too extreme. But we had some down time. And I know sometimes agents like to portray themselves as using the downtime to catch up on some sleep or get a head of the game. Unfortunately, when you have a child as a partner you do not.”

Clint rolled his eyes, but let Natasha carry on nonetheless.

“So he’s bored sitting perched in the hotel room and after hours of whining-”

“I don’t whine,” Clint complained, mouth titled downward.

Natasha quirked an eyebrow at him, as though that statement alone refuted what he had said, which in all honesty it did.

“Clint you so whined. He whined for three hours, saying, Oh Nat I’m so bored. Oh, just save me from this boring dungeon. It was amusing for the first 30 seconds, but then he continued. So I figured like a child he would appreciate going to some amusement park or something.”

“You all went to an amusement park?” Tony said, thoughts of the coldness slowly fading into the distance.

Clint muttered something under his breath.

“Oh, yes we definitely went. So we go to Amusement Park, yes. I had to pack snacks for Clint because as I previously mentioned he is a child. We go inside and somehow, someway in my bag are ten different juice boxes,” Natasha noted.

“You’re acting as though stuffing ten juice boxes into my bag is spy worthy,” Natasha deadpanned.

“Not my fault. Those juice boxes were faulty.”

“Stop trying to blame it on them. Want to tell Tony how you made a little girl cry over the juice box?”
Tony turned wide eyes to Clint, who by then was turning an impressive shade of red.

“I’d rather not.”

“Good, because I would much prefer to do the story-telling myself,” Natasha claimed. “So this little girl sees Clint struggling and since she is very kind she offers to punch the straw in for Clint.”

“You could’ve offered and we wouldn’t have even been in this mess,” Clint told her.

“It was fun watching you struggle over such a mundane task,” Natasha laughed.

“So what happens next?” Tony questioned, slightly impatient and wanting to know just what happened.

“Right, so she reaches out. Mind you she’s about four feet tall and Clint snatches the juice box out of her hand and I quote, he says,” Natasha paused, making sure she had Tony’s full attention, which she did. “If you don’t back up from me now little girl, this straw will go straight through your hand. I can open a juice box on my fucking own. Ooops, sorry bad word. Don’t say that.”

Tony turned gob smacked to Clint in complete and utter disbelief. Clint averted his eye gaze and his lips turned downward.

“Okay, that wasn’t my greatest moment,” Clint admitted.

“Yeah, the greatest moment was when you told her mom that her daughter shouldn’t be going around offering to open a stranger’s juice box,” Natasha claimed. “Needless to say we were kicked out of the amusement park and if it weren’t for some big payoff I’m pretty certain Clint would have made headlines with a picture of him holding a juice box by a sobbing little girl.”

“I apologized and I bought her like fifteen stuffed animals,” Clint added. “I felt terrible. Juice boxes are hard stuff, man.”

All of a sudden, laughter welmed inside of Tony and tumbled outside of his lips. Bright tears poured out of his eyes and he struggled to control the gasps that accompanied the peals of laughter. Natasha looked all too entirely pleased with herself as her shoulder bumped into Tony’s.

Tony had calmed himself down, all to look at Clint sip at his juice box. And that was how the others found them.

Bruce, Thor, Sam, Wanda, and Vision all came in. Thor was seen pushing a cart that had three different Lego sets on it. Tony raised an eyebrow in question as Thor brought it in front of him.

“Aye, man of iron we have come to the conclusion that you must judge which Lego building is the most wondrous to your eye,” Thor explained. “I would like to proclaim that mine is the best fitting toward your test. I have created the most desirable building across all of the galaxies. Loki would attest to this, seeing as how he gave a few suggestions.”

“You consulted with Loki,” Bruce said raising a brow. “How did you even do that?”

Thor narrowed his eyes at Bruce and tilted his head in confusion. “I called him.”

Bruce let out a soft, oh.

“Yes, he actually has quite the eye for architecture. I believe if he weren’t so occupied with mischief, he would probably be quite the household name in the world of architects.”
“Really?” Clint questioned, by then letting Natasha open his juice box.

“Aye, yes. I have seen the solid structure of many buildings he has constructed. As children he was quite fascinated with capturing me in enclosed spaces. They were awfully quite brilliant and the floorplan was often pretty,” Thor laughed. “Once he made this entire building with no doors. The walls were really lovely to look at. He was only four then, at that moment I knew he had great potential.”

All of the others stared at him silently, not even knowing how to approach any of what Thor had just confessed. This was fairly similar to the time Thor jokingly told them how Loki had tried poisoning Thor’s bathwater, when they were children. He knew sibling rivalry was a thing, but with Thor and Loki it just seemed…well Tony didn’t know quite how to describe it. However, it seemed like things were shifting between the two of them with the recent development from their homeland and displacement.

“So, I am quite certain mine is the best,” Thor said finally, grabbing his building and placing it on the floor.

Tony was reminded of those cake wars on the Food Network as Thor put his little Lego presentation down.

Sam rolled his eyes. “Okay, no clearly mine is the best. Okay, I even added a little tiny Iron Man.”

And yep there it was a Lego Iron Man, perched on top of Sam’s building.

“So, obviously I care about you the most here,” Sam smiled.

“Debatable,” Clint coughed. “Pretty certain Steve cares the most.”

Sam rolled his eyes.

Natasha stopped them, before they could get in an argument. “Boys, we all care. Now, Sam please step forward present your Lego building and state your argument as to why you should win this Lego War.”

Tony stifled his laughter in his blanket.

Sam nodded seriously, grabbed his building, and set it next to Thor’s. He held his hands behind his back and stood taller. He cleared his throat and stepped forward.

“Hi, I am Sam Wilson. Today I am presenting before you the Infinity Fortress Tower. It is marked with four different floors, each floor has three bedrooms. There is a main living area so as to movie nights, seeing as though that is a big part of our lives, when we lay our superhero personas to bed for the day,” Sam addressed.

“How is it infinity, when it only has four,” Bruce coughed.

Sam rolled his eyes. “Silence.”

He pointed toward the Iron Man Lego. “Now this is the protector of the tower. He’s on shift right now, watching over everyone in the tower…even though he doesn’t have to because he’s got this bad ass AI system. AI Systems is the little light coming from the fourth wall, which I have used red Lego blocks for.”

“Nice, very structured,” Tony commented.
“Agreed. Seems like a lot of thought went into this,” Natasha added, helpfully.

Clint nodded his head. “Yes, but you used 651 Lego blocks. I believe the maximum was 650. I am afraid that—”

A Lego block was promptly thrown at Clint’s head.

“There, 650,” Sam said cheekily.

“Nat, did you see that,” Clint said throwing the block right back.

“And I also saw that. Like I said you’re just a child,” Natasha said leaning back and pulling Tony slightly into her.

“I did not know we had to give speeches. I wish to redo my entrance,” Thor said, going forward to grab his Lego building.

“You can’t do that,” Sam stated. “It’s against the rules.”

“Rules of which were never specified,” Thor asserted. “Therefore, it seems as though the only one who can decide whether or not I get a redo is the judge himself Tony. Tony, son of Stark, man of iron, brother in arms…will you allow me the honor of redoing my presentation?”

Tony pretended to think this over, even at some point sharing a series of facial expression with Natasha all of which meant nothing, but were hilarious to act out. Finally, Tony pulled back and nodded.

“I will allow it this time,” Tony claimed.

“Thank you,” Thor said. “Now, mine is the best.”

“I would like for it to go into the rules that you cannot say yours is the best,” Sam announced.

“I would like it for it to go into the rules that this winged creature, who is without wings be silenced while I present my building. I was silent during yours, I would like to be given the same courtesy,” Thor said, pushing away at Sam’s shoulder.

Sam raised his hands in defense. “Fine.”

“Before I was interrupted, I was going to say that mine has a stable foundation. Even the winds of the mightiest force will not shake this. Even if I were to set Mjolnir hammer against its walls it shall not waver.”

Sam raised a brow. He looked to Thor then to his building. His brow furrowed and he looked at Tony slightly. Tony caught the mischievous look and briefly wondered if he should intercept what Sam was planning. He knew he should, it would be the proper adult thing for him to do.

Well, today Tony didn’t feel like being a proper adult. Sam must have seen the slow acceptance in Tony’s eyes because he rocked his foot back and then tipped it on Thor’s Lego building making one side of his wall collapse.

Thor turned to Sam in fake anger, nodded his head twice solemnly. Then he turned to Tony.

“Excuse me, Tony. It seems that I must avenge my tower.”

Sam backed away laughing. “Hey, you were the one who said yours was basically impenetrable. I was just testing that…hey Thor fuck put me down I’m a grown ass man!”
Tony’s eyes followed the two as they playfully fought throughout his lab, DUM-E and U each coming to either Sam’s or Thor’s defense.

“Okay, while the children are at play let us show you our-” Wanda began, but was interrupted by Sam who head had been tucked under Thor’s.

Sam pulled his head away. “Our? Excuse me this wasn’t a group project. You can’t work together,” Sam disputed.

“It is rather the opposite,” Vision claimed calmly. “Working together was beneficial.”

“They cheated. You can’t do that.”

“Yes, we can. They said 650 Legos for each person. They never said we had to work alone,” Bruce slyly said, turning to Sam and Thor.

Sam and Thor collectively looked at each other. “We want a rematch then. Tony’s on our team and it even things out.”

“That’s not fair.”

“You started this,” Thor said to Bruce. “Plus Sam already messed mine up. Let’s start from the beginning. Alright Tony come help us.”

“And who’s to say I want to be in this competition?” Tony questioned, but still leaned forward a little bit. “I want the red and gold Lego blocks.”

“Well, everything has to be placed in its original order. All blocks must be separated by color. Each group has a limit of 1,950 Lego blocks,” Natasha instructed.

“Alright, let’s hurry. Natasha and Clint can be judges,” Bruce offered already taking apart his, Wanda’s and Vision’s building.

“Actually, my little black widows are coming to visit Tony in five days, so how about we have them be the judges. The girls really missed you and would love to see you,” Natasha said, turning to watch Tony.

“Yeah?” Tony said, his cheeks warming with the thought of how he had been missed.

“Definitely, they miss you so much. You missed Julie’s birthday. She was very sad, she couldn’t share her cupcake with you. Also they have a little surprise that they’re particularly excited about sharing with you.”

“Well, how about we have them come here tomorrow instead? It’s not like I have anything particularly planned,” Tony announced, handing a block over to Sam. “Also Miles will be here, since I’m back home now and it’ll be his first day back. Oh, and Harley too of course.”

“Oh, well they actually have things planned. So you know it’s best they come over in five days. They still have things to get together,” Bruce told Tony. “It’ll be a fun time though. We’ll have cake and everything.”

“Mhm, well five days is fine with me. I certainly wouldn’t want to rush them,” Tony whispered. “Don’t put it there Thor. Yeah, I want this thing to look like its fucking levitating. Those girls are going to be amazed by ours.”
Natasha looked up and Tony missed the way she frowned at the others, each sending back their own varying levels of that same serious expression. When he looked up, all their expressions had been smoothed over and Natasha was handing Tony a Lego block.

“You should put a little quinjet on yours, maybe make a few little black widows, yeah? The girls will love that,” Natasha exclaimed.

“If I heard correctly, it was groups of three not groups of four,” Clint muttered.

Natasha threw a block at him. “Shut up. Go to Bruce’s team and make it even then.”

“Fine, I will,” Clint bit back. “Ours is going to freakin’ rock. Bruce come on let’s add some fire to it.”

Bruce scrunch up his noise. “We’re not adding fire.”

Clint whispered conspiratorially to Tony. “We’re totally adding fire.”

“I heard that,” Wanda asserted. “And we’re not doing it.”

Tony chuckled at that. “I don’t think that will go over well with your teammates.”

Clint shrugged and leant close to Tony, so the others wouldn’t hear him this time. “Don’t worry I’ll sneak into the vents later and find our buildings and add some explosion thing to it. Come on, I know you like blowing things up in your lab. Let’s make it cool. We can even add glitter to it.”

“Please don’t,” Tony said.

“What I hear is a yes,” Clint said patting him on the shoulder. “I’ll add glitter.”

Tony tilted his head as though considering it.

Bruce looked at Tony and Clint huddled together and shook his head. Tony sent a bright smile to Bruce.

“Hey, Brucie bear,” Tony chimed, blowing him a kiss. “Aren’t you looking devilishly handsome today.”

Bruce’s cheeks warmed and Tony watched as the color swept into his neck. “Can we get to building this Lego building?”

And so they set out to build it, a mixture of actually building it, throwing blocks at one another, joking around, and taking turns to bringing snacks into the lab.

*God, it felt good to be home,* Tony thought to himself letting that last remaining bit of coldness ease its way out of his body. He leaned further into the hold of Clint and Natasha whose arms were now tightly wrapped around him as they leaned over to grab different blocks. He felt peaceful, telling Thor and Sam where to build a certain door.

So sure maybe emotion stuck heavy in his throat, from how much he wanted it to stay like this forever. Maybe his head felt light from how much his body was laughing and smiling. However, none of those things concerned him, not now when these few things had been all too few between him and others.

And for once, he thought he could keep this, keep them. For once, he felt what it could possibly be like to have this group of wonderful people who he has grown with and has fought beside, be his
family.

And he feared that having felt this once, he would quickly lose it.

But quite possibly, the more days spent like this surrounded by the people he loved this fear would diminish. And he was looking forward to seeing the others come to the Tower. He had always promised Karen and the children there that they would visit.

He couldn’t wait till those five days were up.

It was going to be the best day of his life, Tony was sure of it.

Chapter End Notes

Man, it feels good to be back.

P.S. I'm super behind on comments, but I'll be responding to them very soon!

Thanks again to everyone who commented, gave a kudo, and left a bookmark. You all continue to make my day :)
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

Sorry there was no update on Friday, I just kept re-writing this chapter. Anyways here's the result of all the rewrites lol. Please enjoy and see you next Saturday!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Five days had passed and Steve thanked everything that it was a fast five days. Now he was here in the interrogation room at SHIELD, eagerly waiting to get the proceedings on. This is what had filled both his dreams and his nightmares for the past few days. On some occasions, he had to wrap himself even tighter around Tony as he slept.

So now here he was, ready to get everything started.

Steve sat opposite of Isak, eyes searching for any clues that informed him that the man before him was actually Ryder. Unfortunately, there were no outward appearances that Steve could take note of that separated the two. From the images and the stack of confidential info the team had been given beforehand, Isak seemed to be exactly as he said he was.

Though Fury had still seemed slightly weary over handing over a seemingly innocent civilian for questioning, he had nevertheless willingly given away the background information on the two individuals. Fury had rather them have all the information at hand over the Avengers trying to fill in the missing gaps.

Steve had extensively read over all of the material, in hopes of it being used just in the wonderful case of Ryder slipping and revealing his true identity. Steve had dreamed of that moment, ever since it was said that he would be arriving. So now he held the sleek black folder in his hands, some of the information redacted, but Steve remembered it all.

His eyes narrowed as he watched Isak shift uneasily in his seat. His hands were clasped tightly in front of him, eyes darting back and forth from Steve to the door. He licked his lips once and then twice, before letting out a breath of air. The actions repeated.

He seemed to be waiting for Steve to say something, anything to give him a reason as to why he was being questioned by Steve and having two other Avengers posted at the corners of the room. He opened his mouth to question it, but thought otherwise. He learned one thing in his government classes was to always keep silent.

Steve placed the black folder on his lap, stretched out his legs, and then crossed them at the ankles. He let an easy smile cross his face, hoping to ease the tension settling in his room. He thought idly of pulling Isak into this false sense of security. His mind was still having trouble adjusting to thinking of Ryder as Isak, but for now he would stick with calling him Isak. Play some part in this game, until his hand was revealed.

When he was certain that the few minutes of fear had settled in, he began to talk.

“So, Isak. How are you doing today?”
So, Ryder. How would you like to be acquainted with my fist going through your teeth?

Steve shook himself of his thoughts correcting his question.

Isak looked down. “I…I’m not sure really. It’s just I was at home having a nice family outing with my family, you know since everything with my brother…and then some of your agents I guess…erm SHIELD came and picked me up. They didn’t really tell me anything, but maybe you could? I’m certain my wife is very concerned.”

Steve tried reigning in the need to scowl and roll his eyes. Instead he nodded as though understanding the man’s confusion.

“You know we just had some questions in regards to your brother’s death and seeing as though not only were you his closet relative, but also with him at the time of death we thought we could ask you some questions,” Steve explained.

Isak stretched his hands out toward him in a placating manner. Steve wondered what it would take to get his hands cuffed tightly, so that they bruised whenever he shifted.

“Ah, umm actually I don’t know if you really need me for that. I’m pretty certain that hefty folder you have is actually more helpful than me. I didn’t really keep in contact with my brother. After…after everything he did to my family and to me…. Isak looked down, swallowing a lump in his throat.

“I couldn’t keep those ties with him and so I let him go. I didn’t keep up with him and I wanted to forget that he was ever related to me. I mean…I obviously wished that he would get well, but I didn’t care for him to get well near me. So when I was old enough I went to Sweden and created a new life for myself.”

“Yes that you wanted to sever all ties with him, yet you readily accepted him into your home and then went on a ride with him,” Steve addressed disbelievingly. “It doesn’t appear to me that you were all that separated from your brother as you say so. Leads me to wonder what exactly else you are hiding.”

Fury had told Steve that he could not purposefully bait Isak into making any self-incriminating statements. He couldn’t be seen as coercing Isak into a confession because just on the rare chance that Steve and the others were wrong, it could lead them to another scandal that they didn’t need still fresh off of the Civil War and Accords business.

Steve, himself, had no doubts that Isak was not who he claimed to be. He had all been so ready to tell Isak he knew that he had planned all of this, it was all too convenient. Also he had some prisoners changed informants of the CMPNY that told him the CMPNY was still receiving instructions. That could only happen if someone in charge was still telling them what to do.

So now Steve had the dangerous job of getting Isak to claim he was Ryder, without input from Steve.

He retraced his steps letting his previous statement of, “Leads me to wonder what exactly else you are hiding” fade away, in favor of asking, “So why did you follow your brother into that car? What made it worth going after him, after all of the trouble he has caused for you and your family.”

Isak stared at Steve, expressive eyes dulling for just a second. His eyes shifted to Bucky and Natasha who were at the two opposite corners, before his eyes found Steve’s again. He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose and smiling self-deprecatingly.
“Because I can’t seem to let myself let him go entirely. I keep holding onto this childlike fantasy that I could save him. I don’t know something like the prodigal son, returning home and all that yeah. So when he showed up in what seemed like forever, I thought maybe it had all changed. I thought…I thought he was on his road to redemption and the first stop was me,” he exclaimed.

“And so you let him in, just that easily?”

“You don’t understand. My brother wasn’t always like this. He was warmer as a child, bright, and full of incomprehensible joy. It used to make me jealous with how easily he seemed to find light in certain situations. I remember the time my dad got laid off from his job and my mom had pneumonia. My older siblings and I were sad because it seemed like the weight of the world was bearing heavy on our shoulders, but Ryder he somehow managed to find my dad doing something he loved and spoke to one of his friends whose mom was a doctor. He was always helping us.”

“So what changed? What made him go from that to killing your whole family,” Steve proclaimed.

Even he could hear the sharp intake from Bucky at the hard callous way Steve had phrased the question. Steve quite frankly couldn’t find it in himself to care.

“Even that I knew wasn’t his fault,” Isak whispered. “He said it was an accident and I believed him. After all it was just the two of us left then and I didn’t want to be alone,” he commented.

Steve grit his teeth together at the performance Isak was giving. He wanted to shake his shoulders and pour out of him the truth that was stifled behind his lying lips.

“That isn’t what you said in your police statement,” Steve said picking up the black folder and flipping to the document, which detailed the gory event. “Tim Deaver, age 12. Recount of the event…”

Steve began to read part of the official police report. It detailed:

At approximately 4:48 p.m. the Deaver family was involved in a tragic car accident, with only two remaining survivors. Of those survivors include the Deavers’ sons Tim, aged 12, and Ryder, aged 19. Tim recalls his brother telling him how he intentionally messed with the breaks.

Car did show tampering with. The driver attempted to disengage from oncoming traffic, but was unsuccessful. Airbags did not go off on impact. The youngest son only survived, through the oldest, Ryder, shielding his brother. All others quickly died on impact.

Note, the young child wishes to be separated from his brother. Child shows great distress over mentions of his brother. When placed together, Tim grows despondent and quickly asks for his brother to be removed.

Suggested course of action is to separate the two brothers.

“And so you changed your name, your place of residency…does not seem to me like you believed this was an accident. As a child, you knew this was a murder and you wanted to get as close to safety as you could.”

“And what are you trying to imply?” Isak said, mouth pursing into a thin line. “What is the meaning of dredging up this painful history? Do you wish to cause me to go down memory lane of one of the most awful instances of my life?”

His voice sounded gutted as though he was deeply impacted by the memory. Steve wondered how much was for show. He wondered if it was possible for Ryder to even demonstrate such a
demonstration of blatant sadness.

“I’m not suggesting anything. I am simply stating what is on the paper. I make no assumption, but only say what is on the paper.”

“You assume I went to Norway because I was scared of my brother?”

“Was there any other reason?”

“You only did for Bucky what I did for my brother. I assumed that he could change, but as to where you were met with success I was met with the same repetitive destructive repercussions that my brother leaves in his wake. Though this time it was at his own destruction.”

Steve grew enflamed at the comparison of Ryder and Bucky. Bucky had been brainwashed and used against his will. And even then Bucky had still shown great remorse for his actions. He hadn’t tried hiding away from the consequences of his past life. He didn’t try to make a new identity and pass himself off as someone new without the scars of his past clinging onto him.

No, Ryder was not like Bucky. He could not be saved. He had no chance of redemption and Steve would be damned, if for a second Isak would believe that there was a chance for Ryder to feel an inkling of forgiveness whether it be in life or death.

“Those two instances are not the same. Your brother did everything on his own. He was not manipulated into acting out criminal offenses,” Steve told him.

Isak sat up straight, as though a string was pulling him upright. He tilted his head to the side, left and then right. A flicker of regret crossed his features and then pulled tight into discomfort. He made a clicking noise with his tongue against the back of his teeth.

“Tell me why I am really here. I have doubt that you called me in here to talk about an incident that happened years ago, when I was a kid. Surely, you wish to get some other matters off your chest because I had never realized just how much the Avengers pay attention to civilian affairs.”

“It does gain our attention, when these civilian affairs are interwoven into our own,” Steve gritted out.

Isak straightened, looking decidedly more interested. “Oh, I had no idea you were close to my brother. He didn’t mention it, though he didn’t mention quite a lot on that short ride.”

Steve tried relaxing his hands because his nails were beginning to bite into his palms. He tried reminding himself that he couldn’t somehow make Isak say anything self-incriminating, but it was like Isak knew that he was baiting Steve with his inability to actually get Isak to reveal himself as Ryder.

“I wasn’t close to him,” Steve told him.

Isak raised an eyebrow. “Oh, then who was? Was my dear friend close to the scary man with that shiny arm or that devilishly beautiful woman opposite of him? Please do not tell me wife, Eva, that I described you as such,” he said with a wink to which Natasha pulled out her dagger and discreetly took pleasure in Isak paling.

“It matters not of who it was, but I am fairly certain you know,” Steve hinted.

Isak’s eyes brightened and he snapped his fingers as though the answer was suddenly brought to his attention.
“Ah! I had completely forgotten about my brother’s infatuation with the Stark heir. I knew that he had a crush on the man a while ago, but I never kept up with him seeing as though I was living with my foster family in California at the time. However, he often would write me saying how he was interested in this Tony fella.”

Isak smirked.

“I suppose he had some success with Tony, huh? Is this why you had me called here? Did you want me to somehow tell him how Ryder loved him and would want him to move on? I am sure that his sudden death would have left a heavy burden on his heart, if they had engaged in a serious relationship. Though I shouldn’t presume they were involved. Tell me Steve, was my brother happy in this relationship should he have been with Tony?”

“No.”

“No?” Isak mirrored back, but where Steve’s tone was definitive Isak’s was more inquisitive. “Why such a strong response?”

“Your brother,” and damned if Steve hadn’t playing along with this game.

“Your brother,” he repeated again, “Was in a relationship with Tony Stark, yes. It was not a healthy relationship.”

“It wasn’t a healthy relationship? Pray tell me what you mean by that? I distanced myself from him, but from what I heard he had at least changed his behavior what with all his service as a doctor.”

“I think you know,” Steve let on.

Isak’s brows furrowed. “I truly do not. Did he cheat? Or did he somehow let business come before pleasure. Though perhaps he was not as changed a man as I assumed.”

Steve recoiled at the thought of him simply reducing Tony to a thing of pleasure.

“Neither. Your brother physically, verbally, and emotionally abused Tony.”

Isak’s jaw tightened. “That’s an awful statement to make.”

“Says the one who has suffered from the violence that his own brother has reared. Tell me do you think that car accident was truly an accident or it was intentional and somehow you were the lucky one that survived.”

Isak lifted one shoulder. “I cannot presume to know about my brother’s life as I have told you previously, I did not keep up with the man. Sure, I had hoped that he would change, but I had hoped he would change far away from me. However, in saying this I am deeply apologetic for whatever pain my brother caused your friend.”

Steve’s jaw tightened so tight, that Natasha and Bucky could visibly see the ripple in it. He leant forward, placing his elbows on his knees. With a hardened expression, he stared at Isak noting how Isak simply leant back casually and smiled softly in response.

“Ah, now I see why it is that you want me hear from. You should have just asked from the start,” Isak suggested rolling his shirt sleeve up. “It will be of no problem of mine to ask what is on your mind.”

“And what is the question you think I need to ask of you?”
“Whether or not I can apologize on behalf of my brother. I understand that the two of us look fairly alike and it may be easier for him to move on,” Isak explained voice tinged with pity. “I am certain that if I explained that I suffered the same mental trauma from my brother and healed from it, your Tony could find it in himself to heal as well.”

And it was at that point Steve lost it. Just the thought of him getting anywhere near Tony had him seeing red. He was out of his seat, without a second glance. Even Bucky and Natasha weren’t able to clasp a hand onto his shoulders so that he would remain in his seat.

“You fucking sick bastard,” Steve rasped out, hands coming to rest thickly on the junction between shoulder and neck on Isak. “You’d be a fool to think I would ever let you near Tony.”

“Oh, I am sorry if I thought that is what you wanted to ask. I apologize if I have offended you in any manner,” Isak said, slowly trying to breathe roughly through his mouth. “Did you instead wish to ask me if I was a part of my brother’s CMPNY. The answer to that is no.”

Steve growled, something deep and dark under his breath. His knuckles whitened with the tension that they were exerting. His eyes searched deep into Isak’s and he had no doubt within him whatsoever that this was Ryder.

And he wanted to kill him.

“So, if that was all you wanted to know, then I think you have to let me go. After all, this whole interrogation thing is bordering the side of illegal. I know my rights and you are infringing upon them.”

“You have no rights here,” Steve said. “You think you have everyone fooled here don’t you. You think that you’ve mastered this game of deception, but I see through you.”

And then Isak smirked, something so unique to Ryder. It was a smirk that lifted first on the left corner, before sliding down to become an even smile.

“You can make this accusations all you want, but you have no proof…unless,” Isak sighed. “No, you would never agree to that. I would be of course a fool to think that is possible, but it would ease your worries and allow me to go back home to see my wife of course.”

Steve stepped back, but still clasped his hand on his neck. Isak took this as a go ahead.

“Why don’t we have Tony come talk to me and decide for himself whether or not I am the man I say I am. After all, he is the one who spent the most time with Ryder. He is quite possibly the only one who can decide whether or not I am who I say I am, which I do.”

“Like hell I will,” Steve growled, upper lip curling upward. He rammed Isak into the wall and bent down so his forehead was only a hair width’s apart separating them. “I’ll be damned if I let you go anywhere near him. I know you’re not Isak, Ryder.”

Fuck, self-incriminating. Steve knew.

“Steve,” Natasha warned, but Steve ignored her.

“You abused him, you fucking sick bastard and have the nerve to try and apologize on behalf of this persona of your brother you took. How stupid do you think I would have to be in order to believe this barely constructed façade,” Steve said, pressing his hands deeper into the skin of his neck.

“Steve,” this time the warning came from Bucky.
Steve noted how neither Bucky nor Natasha made any moves to stop him. Perhaps they knew there was no stopping Steve or perhaps just like Steve they hadn’t cared too much for the rules Fury had placed in motion anyways.

“I swear to my mother’s grave I am not lying. I have never met Tony Stark. I have never laid eyes on the man. Please, just let me go. I can’t breathe.”

“No,” Steve growled, standing even taller over the man. “How many times has Tony asked or pleaded for you to do something and you didn’t.”

“Please, I just want to see my kids. I honestly don’t know what you want from me. I am deeply regretful that your friend experienced such pain, but it isn’t due to the cause of my own actions. I would never hurt anyone in my life. I have never laid a hand on anyone, not my wife, not my children, and certainly not a man I have never personally met,” Isak explained.

“Stop lying!” Steve shouted.

He was now only waiting for the second Fury kicked him out of the interrogation room.

“Look man, you are noble as your Captain America title suggests, so do the noble thing and let me go. You have no proof. You refuse to bring Tony in here to back me up. He spent the most time with him so he should know. So I don’t know what it is that my brother has you so infatuated with him—”

“I’m not infatuated with your brother,” Steve pushed out and almost wanted to throw up from how the statement passed across his lips. He swallowed back the acid.

“Are you not? This whole thing seems to be centered on Ryder? Are you wishing that I am Ryder simply because you had a secret crush on him,” Isak hinted. “I wouldn’t be surprised people are often enamored with personalities like Ryder and maybe that’s why your friend stayed with him so long. Maybe they were in love.”

“A person in love would never do something like that to someone they cared for. You can cut the crap Ryder. I have seen your hand and it has revealed everything.”

“You have seen nothing because there is nothing to show.”

A tap on the window. Fury probably recognized that they weren’t getting anywhere. Natasha nodded her head to Bucky, who went over to Steve.

“Let’s take a break. Leave him alone with his thoughts for a minute,” Bucky suggested. “He’s going to cave and if we have to make this a waiting game, we can. Change the level of tactics against this man. We may not be able to get him to confess now, but we will by the end of the day.”

Steve looked hesitant to leave the room, but decided he may need to reevaluate his tactics. After all most of the things he wanted to do to Ryder was thrown out of the window, when Fury had warned him he couldn’t leave a mark on the guy…at least not until they did not have a coerced statement where he revealed that he was Ryder, leader of the CMPNY and kidnapper, abuser, and attempted murderer of Tony Stark.

He couldn’t wait till he could send his fist through his teeth. He pulled back his chair and stood up with the binder.

“We’ll be back. I want his hands cuffed,” Steve told to Natasha.

Natasha nodded and opened the door, in search of said handcuffs. Bucky held the door open for him
and waited for Steve to pass through.

“Oh, do tell Tony I hope he gets a good night’s rest. Perhaps, he could take a trip to the Winston estate in California and relax a bit,” he said, eyes bright with mischief. “I heard the place is... transformative.”

Steve’s body completely froze and a burning red anger surged within him. He didn’t know how he crossed the room. He swore that his vision went black for a moment because the next thing he knew he felt bone crush under his hand. He noted with a level of dissatisfaction that it hadn’t sent him unconscious.

Isak laughed softly, licking at the trickle of blood coming down his mouth. “Oh, I’m sorry did I touch a nerve? I hadn’t known that mentioning vacations was also a taboo subject. Though such a beautiful man as Tony does need his beauty rest, though something tells me he’s gotten a lot of it recently.”

This time Steve did have the satisfaction of knocking him out.

Fury stepped in, just as Steve started taking great delight at the slumped figure on the ground. He wondered if he could wake it up to the sound of his fingers crushing. Just when he was about to step on his twitching hands, he was pulled outside of the room by Bucky.

There he was met with the rest of the Avengers, minus Tony of course who was back at the Tower entertaining some children from Karen’s and hanging with the boys. Clint locked the door behind him and went to stand behind Bruce, whose skin was verging on a dangerous green.

With one look at Steve, Bruce shook his head. “I need to go, before I do something I...actually may not regret.”

They all waited until he left, before Steve turned around to face Fury.

“Did you not hear him! He literally just gave himself away.”

“By what saying that Tony needs a vacation,” Fury frowned. “We can’t do anything with that Captain. It seems to me you have forgotten my rules for this interrogation.”

“I haven’t forgotten them so much as I don’t agree with them,” Steve claimed. “You and I both know that he’s Ryder. We’re wasting time playing this game. The place he would take Tony was called the Winston estate. Hell, Fury that’s where we found him.”

“Yes, and that building that was in the middle of nowhere disappeared as soon as we found Tony. So we don’t have any physical evidence that could even use against him.”

“So what do we do, huh?”

Fury looked at Coulson and opened his mouth, but stopped with a firm shake from Coulson. Steve noted the reluctance and turned sharp eyes to Fury.

“What?”

Fury looked back at the one way mirror, to see Isak still lying unconscious on the ground.

“He was right about one thing,” Fury said stiffly as though he hadn’t wanted to even say it. “If we bring Tony in-”
“There’s no way in hell I’m letting Tony near him. Did you not hear me, when I told him the exact same thing? Like I’m sorry did we all not see what he did to Tony and we want to bring him in as what…bait,” Steve hissed. “That’s happening over my dead body.”

“It’s either bring Tony in or let Isak go,” Coulson stated, not wanting to agree with Fury on this, but not knowing how to solve this situation any other way. “It’s the last thing I want to do. Trust me, but unless we have valid verbal proof it will look like Captain America and his Avengers are coercing a civilian to admit criminal offenses, due to emotion and the public will turn on us.”

“Screw the public,” Clint ground out. “Come on Phil, you can’t honestly think that bringing in Tony will help.”

“It’s the only way that Ryder may slip,” Fury told them. “Look, this is a man who is probably the best person at hiding and manipulating people around him. And if I’m being honest there’s always just this small margin of error that we do have the wrong-”

“We don’t,” Natasha told them. “There is no margin of error with this decision. The only one under that though is you. I do not agree with bringing Tony in as well. Tony himself doesn’t even know that Ryder is in the same vicinity as him. We can’t just pull the rug underneath his feet, when he’s barely just getting settled back in.”

Steve’s mind immediately began to filter in and out everything that Tony told him about Ryder. The malice he felt thrumming inside of him needed to come out. Hot breaths came out of his lips and he clenched his teeth so hard that pain trickled into his jaw.

“It’s not happening Fury. We’re not bringing in Tony,” Sam said. “No one else agrees with this. It won’t be helpful nor healthy for Tony’s recovery to place him back in the same, might I add closed space, of his abuser.”

Fury for his part did look ashamed, but did not seem to regret mentioning what they needed to do.

“I do understand this, but you all know that if we hold him any longer Eva is going to get suspicious. Things will be eventually tied back to us and we can’t afford that to happen. I’m only saying what needs to be done,” Fury said.

“Fuck what needs to be done. I’m the leader of this team. You are not. Be mindful of that, when you’re suggesting what you believe one of my teammates should do. I am the one who cares for their livelihood and their well-being,” Steve said.

“I do care for all of your well-being.”

“Then you would have never suggested to bring in Tony, if you actually had cared,” Steve told him. “So no, he’s not coming. He’s staying as far away from this situation as he possibly can.”

“And you’re okay with keeping another secret like this from him,” Fury said, trying for one last chance. “I don’t think we all need a reminder of how well keeping secrets goes for this team.”

Steve looked down at his feet, before turning his gaze up to meet Tony’s. His eyes were heavy with the burden of a thousand weights. Fury could see the tension running all throughout his body, yet Steve remained a solid sign of strength. His shoulders were still straight and his gaze hadn’t wavered, since he started looking at Fury.

“I would rather Tony never forgive me, then for me to let this man who abused him near him and finish what he started,” Steve said, voice cracking. “Don’t ask me to do that Fury. I would go against every rule you have set in place, if you dare suggest anything to me like that again.”
Steve left the room, with every intent of coming back, when he had gathered himself. The rest of the team followed their leader, not even giving parting glances to Fury.

Fury looked back at the unconscious man then at Fury. Coulson deciding he knew what Fury was thinking, resolutely shook his head. There was nothing that could possibly justify bringing Tony in and Coulson knew that now.

“No, Fury. You heard what Steve said,” Coulson told him. “Don’t be the one to do this.”

Fury’s eyes shone wet, but if anyone ever asked he would say it was the dim lighting.

“I can only pray that they forgive me of this.”

“Fury, if you do this you can only pray that they don’t kill you for this,” Coulson argued, trying to speak sense into Fury. “Come on, don’t play with fire.”

“Sometimes one has to play with fire, so the others know not to touch it,” Fury explained.

“Fury, I am begging you. Do not go against their wishes.”

“And let this man go? The CMPNY is very well the next Hydra and this Isak…Ryder whatever dude could very well leave and continue building this organization and he could use his resources to get Tony back. And do you know what would happen if this team lost Tony? If this world lost Tony?”

Coulson looked up, waiting for Fury to answer.

“Neither the world nor I am ready to even see a future without him in it,” Fury said. He picked up his sunglasses and put them on his face, therefore hiding any strain of emotion that could have possibly shone. “If they ask where I went, lie.”

“How do you expect me to do that?”

“The same way you remained dead for all those years,” Fury stated. “Now wish me luck. After this, I may or may not be on this earth for much longer.”

Coulson grimaced.

“Please, don’t even joke about that.”

Fury smiled. “I wouldn’t, if I thought it wasn’t true. I’ll be back.”

“And I assume, it’ll be with another person.”

“Unless, my conscious deems otherwise.”

“Which it won’t.”

“Which it won’t,” Fury agreed, before leaving.

Coulson collapsed into the chair, placed beside the window and pressed the palm of his hands into his eyes. He breathed out sharply and tried reigning in the sense of panic at everything that was going on. Ignoring his panic, never fared well for him.

And neither would this situation.
This wouldn’t end well, Coulson was sure of it.

Now Coulson just had to see who this wouldn’t end well for.

He wondered in some world, if it would be him.

Chapter End Notes

Again thank you to everyone who has ever commented, bookmarked, or left a kudo on this work. I appreciate it with all my heart. Have a great day, loves :)

Steve couldn’t calm the thrumming of his heartbeat underneath his chest. He couldn’t quite manage the ability to cease his mind’s thoughts about who was currently occupying the interrogation room. He had tried to stop his train of thoughts from wrapping his hands around the neck that provided breath for that man to continue to lie.

He had made it five minutes, trying to stop himself from going back…going against Fury’s orders. Unfortunately, he hadn’t been satisfied the way he left the interrogation room nor had he been content with Fury’s option of bringing Tony into conversation with that man.

The thought of it made him ill and become so vibrant with an anger coursing through his veins. For a moment, his vision swam and he had to rest a hand against the wall in order to steady himself. Bucky and Natasha had followed him. Both had been figures that had grounded him as he struggled to deal with how Fury suggested for him to leave the room and bring Tony in instead.

Clint, Thor, and Sam had by then also followed. All of them were content to wait until Steve gave them an order. Something.

None of them vocally admitted that they hadn’t agreed with Fury’s offer, but Steve could see it in their faces.

No one wanted Tony to be placed in a position where he had to see Ryder again.

Steve would be damned, if he let that happen.

So without saying a word, he turned on his heels and headed back to the interrogation room. He only saw Phil sitting there, staring at Ryder from the one-way mirror. He brought his face up to meet Steve’s. His eyes flickered to the others, as they had followed without a word.

Sighing, Phil tilted his head to Ryder. “You don’t have long. Nick will be here in around 45 minutes.”

Steve took of his gloves and cracked his knuckles. “That’s all I need. If he arrives earlier than expected, I want you to tap on the window. Bucky, Natasha.”

Natasha and Bucky looked at him.

“I need you to make sure I don’t go too far, before I get a confession,” Steve announced.

“Of course,” they both agreed, stepping to the side so that Steve could enter first.

Steve then had to make the mental switch from Ryder to Isak in his head again. Damn, this was all so confusing.

Isak, looked up at them and smiled softly. Beneath it was a desperation that Steve found unsettling.

“Well, I can say that I did not think you would be back to visit me all this soon,” Isak said. “I guess I should feel flattered the Avengers think I am someone of such importance that you must occupy your day with me. Unfortunately, it is not for the reasons I wish. As I have told you I am not my brother. I
do not know what I must do for you to get that through your heads.”

“There’s nothing you can do.” At Isak’s pause, Steve continued, “Because there is nothing that you
could possibly do that would make me believe you aren’t Ryder. What I don’t understand is your
compulsion to keep lying to my face.”

Isak hummed lowly in the back of his throat. He looked down briefly, before turning his direct
attention back to Steve. He licked the corners of his lips and brought his cuffed hands to wipe at the
moisture lying there.

“I am not lying and I do not appreciate you making me out to be a liar,” Isak professed. “Now, I’ll
admit your teammate, Tony, is rather handsome. Had I not been married and straight I definitely
would have tried pursuing him. However, that it may be I am not attracted to men in any type of
manner and I am married to an amazing woman, with whom I have children.”

Steve raised his eyebrow and shifted in his seat, allowing for his legs to splay slightly open. He hated
what he was doing, but sometimes you had to play the part. This was just another simple undercover
thing that he was doing. But instead of it just being a mission, it was for the benefit of Tony.
Opening his legs, just for Isak’s eyes to potentially show interest even for a second was fine, if it
meant Tony didn’t have to open himself up to get Isak to announce his true identity.

He leant back, causing his neck to lengthen and then leaned over himself in order to grab the black
confidential folder. When he looked back to Ryder underneath his eyelids, he was surprised to see
that there was no interest in there whatsoever.

Steve didn’t let that deter him though. He tracked Isak’s eyes as he opened the file again. Clint
knocked on the door, three times. Bucky went back to Clint and received another black folder that
was being handed to him. Clint’s eyes briefly matched Steve’s and Steve hesitated with knowing
what was in the folder. He didn’t like the look in Clint’s eye nor the reluctance with which he gave
Bucky the folder.

Clint slipped out of the room, almost as quick as he had come in.

Steve prepared himself, mentally. He hadn’t known that there was another folder associated with this
case. He opened the file and his stomach sank. He hadn’t known…when had they…Tony had to
have known about this, because it looks like it was all taking willingly…but…

Fuck.

There in that folder was just all of the documentation, photos, transcripts of an interview with Tony.
He had remembered Tony leaving briefly two days ago, for a few hours. Is this what he had been
doing? Some of the photos looked like Tony had taken them himself.

And they had the person right here…

“Fuck,” Steve said this time aloud.

Isak stretched his neck to see what had gotten Steve so bothered. Steve closed the folder out of
respect for Tony, but then remembered Isak had already seen all of this. Isak raised an eyebrow at the
sudden action, but said nothing.

Steve let that folder be for a bit, not wanting Isak to lay his eyes on Tony no matter it being photos or
else.

“So you’re straight,” Steve repeated.
“Yes. I have never been interested in men. I know my brother was open to everyone. He was always more free as a child. Have to say though his relationship with Tony might have been the most healthy one he’s had in a while.”

Steve gritted his teeth and steeled himself to his chair, just so that he wouldn’t choke the living daylight out of this man. Healthy relationship?

“There’s nothing in Ryder’s and Tony’s relationship that was healthy,” Steve told him.

“It must have been if Tony never left,” Isak said, rolling his shoulders, once and then twice before settling.

“Tony did leave.”

“No, Tony did not leave. You all came and retrieved him from the little confines that my brother kept him in.”

“How do you know all of that,” Steve said, hoping that this was the moment that tipped him off.

Because the news outlet hadn’t received any information about Tony’s disappearance or the abusive relationship he had with Ryder. It was Tony’s decision to keep everything close to the chest.

Pepper had helped him cover it up with an international SI meeting and saying that Ryder had been caught up in some illegal stuff and had been arrested. That was of course days before, they learned of his “death.” Then it was Dr. Deaver had passed away, while in prison.

Steve hated all of the covering up, but Tony hadn’t wanted his face to be in the spotlight any longer than he had. He knew that if he was to be brought in a light like this, there would be demand for interviews, documentaries, and just anyone wanting to get the story that was hot at the moment.

And Tony had feared there may have been a few out there who said he deserved it being the Merchant of Death and all.

Steve swore to him up and down that he would kill anyone who dare even suggested that Tony or anyone else in that case ever deserved to be abused. Tony had talked him down out of that, but still rested with the fact that he didn’t want anyone knowing what he had been through.

He had told him, “It’s bad enough that you and the kids know. Plus the SHIELD agents. That’s more people than I have ever wanted to-”

He had broke off, then not being able to continue before tears pricked his eyes and Steve’s arms wrapped around him. Steve remembers how Tony tried to stifle his sobs, but Steve kept him in his arms and offered soothingly that he let it all out.

Steve hadn’t being in the presences of the man behind those tears and not being able to do anything about it…yet.

“But…I have to say it’ll make for an interesting documentary. They always love that stuff. I mean come on billionaire, former playboy, philanthropist, and Avengers stuck in the abusive relationship then kept captive for however long…and then he’s rescued. Man, can someone say Golden Globe awards,” Isak said cheekily.

Steve nodded to himself, getting out of his chair and punching Isak straight clean across his face. He kept punching, until he felt blood come back on his hand. His hands pressed tightly against Isak’s throat and felt it spasm with how much he was trying to gasp for breathe.
“How dare you try to laugh this off as not something serious,” Bucky said, for once speaking up from his corner. “This isn’t some game.”

“Well, it must not have been serious with how long he stayed. Did you ever ask him, if he wanted to leave?” Isak questioned.

Natasha scoffed.

“I mean he is an Avenger, so he should have been able to leave, if he really so desired. My brother could have easily been overpowered,” Isak announced. “My brother isn’t that strong.”

“You don’t have to be physically strong in order to manipulate someone. And surely as his brother, you were a victim of this covert manipulation as well. It probably started off as emotional manipulation and or abuse. Your brother was a masochistic. He was verbally, physically, and mentally abusive. And for you to defend him is for you to be complacent in his actions. I am sure neither your wife nor children will appreciate you supporting your brother’s actions.”

“I thought Steve was the only one interrogating me,” Isak said lowly, mouth hinting toward a secretive smile. “Now you sure do love painting my picture in the bad light. What’s the saying…oh let’s not speak ill of the dead.”

For once Steve was finally getting a response. He saw the way his eyes darkened and clouded over with malice. His hands twitched in the cuffs and Steve noticed the discomfort settling in his body.

Steve picked up the folder and opened it up, breathing harshly through his noise before turning one picture to Isak. Natasha took a sharp intake of breath and Bucky crack his knuckles.

“It’s not possible for us to paint Ryder in a bad light, when he did that all for himself. This is what he did to Tony. There were probably more before him. He left these bruises. He was the one that kept Tony and tortured him.”

“Torture is such a strong word to use,” Isak said.

Steve took notice of how his breathing had softened and his voice had gained a little bit of lightness. But he didn’t pay any more attention to it, instead going through the other pictures.

“You know that Tony had fractured ribs, broken fingers, and much more. There were instances where there was damage done to the arc reactor. Ryder could have very well killed him,” Steve said and that admittance got stuck in his throat.

“Mhm,” Isak voiced again with that bright sigh.

Steve looked up for a moment and watched how Isak’s eyes darkened. Isak shifted in his seat and placed a hand firmly against his lap. He licked his lips and tried scooting closer in order to get a closer inspection of the pictures Steve was showing him.

Steve paled, when he realized that Isak…Ryder was getting sexual satisfaction from this. He picked up on the dilated eyes and the breaths coming in harsh pants as his eyes greedily soaked in the bruises littered on Tony’s tan skin. His mouth parted and his tongue stuck out to tease at the bottom lip.

Steve was so distracted with not wanting to find his shield and put it through Isak’s neck, that he hadn’t noticed Bucky taking the folder form him, closing it, and keeping it underneath his arm. Isak’s eyes immediately closed off and an easy expression overtook him once again.
“I thought you were straight,” Steve rasped out, pulling his chair closer to Isak. “I didn’t know straight guys could get…physically turned on by pictures of guys.”

“I’m not. Okay, well maybe a little. But that was back when I was in high school. Experimented a bit, but it didn’t get me going. But hey Tony this guy has a pretty face. I’m sorry if that’s inappropriate,” Isak apologized.

And hell, who even got turned on by pictures of someone clearly abused. Probably this fucker right here, all smiling and acting like he hadn’t been affected. Steve was really going to have to do a cursing cleanse, once he was done dealing with this man. He sent apologies to his ma, who was probably chastising him from above.

He figured she would forgive him, given the circumstances.

“Maybe that’s what he wanted,” Isak muttered.

Steve would like to think he misheard him, due to him sending apologies to his ma for his cursing.

“What did you say?” Steve said. “Because I’m not quite sure I heard you right.”

“Stop, he’s baiting you,” Natasha whispered, hands reaching to clutch tightly at his shoulders.

“What did you say?” Steve said. “Because I’m not quite sure I heard you right.”

“Stop, he’s baiting you,” Natasha whispered, hands reaching to clutch tightly at his shoulders.

“I said maybe that’s what he wanted,” Isak told him. “I mean haven’t you heard about roleplay, kinks, BDSM, and you know all of that. Never mind, I forget who I am asking. Forget that you are Mr. Cookie Cutter All-American Golden Boy USA and all that.”

“This was not some consensual thing that Tony engaged in,” Steve argued. “Tony never once said he consented to that abuse. That is not something he has ever been interested in.”

“Oh, and how would you know?” Isak asked.

Natasha pressed firmer into Steve’s shoulder. “Steve, keep your head on your shoulders. He’s just trying to manipulate you into doing something that gets him free. You know that if we potentially harm him more than within reason, without a confession we have no choice but to let him go and we could potentially get into trouble. Save all of this energy for when we have a confession. Then I would gladly assist you in putting a dagger through his eyes.”

Isak…

No Ryder…hadn’t even looked mildly surprised by Natasha’s words. Instead he seemed oddly fine with her statement as thought it was of no meaning to him.

Steve’s chest prickled and he just felt his body need to get out of the seat and want to beat Isak. He had never felt this strongly in his life and he wanted to push Isak over a cliff and have his body bounce off of the cliff’s rocky edges. He wanted to poison Ryder from the inside out.

He knew this was Ryder and he wasn’t leaving without hearing a confession…and if Steve had his way he wouldn’t be leaving here alive in any case. He’d be lucky if he got sent to the Raft and even then Steve had plans implemented to go into action should Ryder be sent to the Raft.

“Or maybe he didn’t do it quite right, in order to leave Tony satisfied. Maybe he needed a firmer touch,” Isak hinted. “And I suppose you could give him that, huh Steve. You weren’t jealous of Ryder in the sense that you wanted him, but you were jealous of what he did with Tony. You wanted to be that firm hand, huh?”
And he kept talking, just pushing Steve closer to grabbing the nearest object and slicing his tongue on it so Ryder wouldn’t ever be able to speak again.

“I mean, hey you have to admit he looks rather beautiful all bruised up like that. There is something gorgeous in having ownership over someone. My brother just probably wasn’t able to do it properly. Maybe they were still ironing out the kinks in it. He was never good at taking care of things for a long time,” Isak said.

“I suggest you stop talking now, if you are going to keep suggesting that anything in these folders was safe, sane, and consensual,” Steve bit.

Isak shrugged. “I think it was. I mean Tony stayed with him for nearly a year. Ever think maybe he was just trying to save face, when you all rescued him. Maybe he didn’t want you all knowing that he likes to take it rough and be diminished to nothing. I mean maybe he just fabricated everything.”

Natasha pressed deeper and this time her nails left a nick in Steve’s neck, from the sudden movement of Steve leaping out of his chair, once again and grabbing ahold of Isak from the chair and swinging his body to the wall.

He heard a crunch and Isak barely winced, but instead smirked through it all, even as Steve’s grasp tightened around his neck.

“He already has so many things going against him, he probably didn’t want you all knowing this dirty little secret of his. I mean hey what people do in the privacy of their homes…but to bring my brother into this lie he constructed,” Isak shook his head. “Is awfully shameful.”

“Your brother is not some victim in this,” Steve growled. “And you’re not Isak. I don’t know what’s messed up in your head for you to play this mind games and act as though you are not Ryder, but I know everything. I saw the little cues you give, when you think I’m not watching you. I see the way you favor your right hand, when you reach to wipe your lips. Isak’s left handed asshole.”

Isak only nodded. “Mhm, nice detective skills. I’m ambidextrous though…so. Nice try. Now as I was saying, maybe…just maybe the media would like to see how much of a whore your little teammate was. He probably got off on being reduced to that.”

Steve hated how he just swept over Steve and didn’t seem to mind. Steve had never met someone so unbothered by anything. Steve had never once been in the presence of someone like him, a true psychopathic person.

“But I mean no offense, some like having that weight of control off of their shoulders and being reduced to nothing. My brother probably just gave him what no one else would,” Isak laughed. “But pretty boys like him often don’t last without that need for long. He’ll be off trying to suck off the nearest guy who can leave a nice sized bruise on his waste in a little bit. I’m just thankful Eva never needed me to do that to her. I can’t do those type of touches. I gear more toward positive touches and love.”

“Natasha give me your knife,” Steve bit out, ignoring the touch on his shoulder. “I’m tired of listening to this bullshit, and I think that it’s time to cut it out.”

“Literally,” Bucky said lifting an eyebrow, but appreciating where Steve was going nonetheless.

“Steve,” Natasha said warningly. “Without a tongue, he can’t confess.”

“Screw confessing,” Steve said. “We don’t need a confession from a dead man. We covered up Ryder” last time, we can do it again this time. We’re the only ones who have to know.”
“Steve,” Natasha said, but this time she didn’t feel like representing the side that Fury was on. She had been in this room for too long and had listened to Isak…Ryder try to dig himself out of whatever whole he had screwed himself in and she was tired.

She was tired of listening to him try to justify his brother’s actions and place everything on Tony.

“Natasha, give me the knife. Or I will take it from you or go find my own,” Steve said.

Natasha pressed the knife coolly into Steve’s unoccupied hand, who then pressed it against the corner of Isak’s mouth. Isak smirked, causing the knife to dig softly into the skin there and leave a trail of blood.

“I suggest you do as we have been asking, one more time. Confess that you are Ryder or I’ll leave a mark on your tongue for every single lie you have told since you first entered Tony’s life. Then I might get a bit creative and leave some more on your body. I’ve been told I am quite the artist. Guess, it’s time to add body artist to my portfolio.”

Bucky, whistled lowly and then said, “Shit.”

Bucky and Natasha knew what was about to go down and were ready to come in with the assist.

“Please at least don’t leave a mark. My wife likes me the way I am,” Isak laughed, all seemingly unconcerned with the knife currently pressed on his lower lip.

Just as Steve pressed the knife, closer to his lips he heard the door knob shake.

The door creaked open. He stopped with the knife pressed tightly against Isak’s neck. Beads of blood followed the blade of silver and Isak’s eyes lifted to the person who had opened the door. The look of amusement and sexual interest lit up his eyes, before cooling down into a passive expression.

The heat that had burned in Steve simmered down to a chill. He didn’t want to turn around and have his fears confirmed. He looked to body behind Fury’s and his expression shut off, before he dropped Isak’s body and in two long strides came to the door.

Bucky and Natasha followed both looking at Fury darkly. The others immediately started saying how they had come in without them even noticing, which was crazy…but then they realized Tony could get into anything if he really wanted and Fury had access to every single door.

They had forgotten that there were two separate entrances to the interrogation room.

Steve took one look at Tony and was about to push him aside, plead with him to leave and let him handle this. But Tony’s eyes were focused on the body lying on the floor, hands cuffed. Steve tried stepping in front of him to direct his attention elsewhere. He was somewhat successful, when he was able to wrap his arms around Tony and try pulling him away from Isak…Ryder’s line of vision.

He had almost managed to get Tony to consider leaving…all up until three seconds later, when someone coughed, spit out some blood loudly, and spoke in a raspy voice. Steve could feel Tony’s body tightened and his wide eyes search his, expression seemingly lost but determined.

The man repeated his statement, as if Tony hadn’t heard him.

“Hey, Tony. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

Damn.
Steve should’ve cut his tongue out.

Chapter End Notes

"Hmmm," is all I can say about this for now...but don't fear Ryder will be getting his due very, very soon I promised you all and I always keep my word lol.

Thank you all for the comments, kudos, bookmarks, and just generally love you have given this story! Love each and everyone of y'all and see you next Saturday!

Have a great week :)
Tony sat back comfortably, nursing a cup of orange juice that had mysteriously wound up in his hands. His mouth was tilted up in an honest genuine smile as he watched the children run back and forth through the house. There were instances where he had to warn them not to run because he had seen some of the smaller children trip.

Tony’s heart was nowhere near the point where it could take all that stress of one of the kids potentially breaking something. Thankfully, Peter and Harley were rather helpful in keeping the running to the minimum…that is when they weren’t engaged in the running itself.

Karen was seated opposite of him, her own smile mirroring his own. To say that she was happy to have Tony back was an understatement.

She had taken a few hours to visit Tony at the hospital, but by the time she arrived he was still asleep. And unfortunately being in charge of the orphanage meant that Karen couldn’t stay away for long, no matter how much she wanted to stay and make sure that Tony was going to be okay.

So when she got the call from Natasha five days ago asking if they could come over, she enthusiastically agreed. After all, the children had most certainly missed him. There had been many voices of discontent when Karen had to remind them once again that Tony would not be making his weekly visit.

“I’m glad you’re back,” Karen voiced, her voice slightly louder than the children’s shrieks and occasional bouts of laughter.

Tony moved his eyes around the room, before settling on Karen’s.

“I’m truly glad to be back, Karen. I miss the little ones. And I’m sorry that I wasn’t around to help out more and make sure that you guys still had everything.”

“Nonsense,” Karen said, waving her hand dismissively in the air and stopping Tony from having any sense of guilt. “We were taken care of. Every time you visit you make sure that we have enough to last us a few months.”

She took a second to look at Tony, before continuing.

“And besides we missed you more than what you could ever give us. If you had to stop bringing the toys and everything, that’s fine. I never needed you to do all this stuff, despite how grateful I am. I just wanted you to be here, Tony. That’s all. Your presence has always been more than enough for me and for the kids.”

Tony swallowed, eyes nearly growing heavy with how much the compliment had affected him. He coughed in order to clear his throat.

“Well,” Tony started, “I’m glad that you all want me more than my money.”

Karen’s brows furrowed. “Is that…goodness Tony is that why you think I’ve been wanting you to come back every week?”
Tony shrugged. “Of course not.”

Karen did not seem comforted by that answer.

“Tony look at everything around you. Those children’s smiles are because you have enriched their lives far greater than money ever could. You have fed into their lives so much more than their family members, friends, and hell sometimes me ever had. Tony these kids are inspired by you. Sure, toys are great, but they don’t last. But you Tony…the lessons you impart on them and the comfort they receive whenever you talk to them is all they ever need. All they need is love and you give that to them so much that it overflows.”

Tony blinked his eyes rapidly, trying and failing to keep the moisture from clinging to his eyelashes.

“Really?”

Karen leaned over and took the mug from Tony’s hands. She reached out to him and clasped her hands over his, smoothing her thumb over Tony’s wrists. She looked down once, before turning to look up at Tony and smiling brilliantly.

“Yes, really you goof,” Karen laughed. “And you’ve done so much for me and my staff. You’re family to me Tony. You’re like the older brother I never even knew I wanted. For so long I was satisfied with you know just it being me, the kids, and my employers. But then you decided to come one day and I latched onto you like a moth to a flame.”

“That is true,” Tony commented. “I mean goodness you blew up my phone with compliments. You should know that flattery gets you nowhere.”

The teasing tilt to his voice had Karen laughing and clutching his hands even tighter.

“Okay, I’m sorry. It’s just you were like my idol and hello you gave me your number. Stop looking at me like that,” Karen said, her cheeks flushing. “Don’t pretend you don’t know how awesome you are.”

“Idol, eh?” Tony laughed, cheeks turning red from laughter.

“I said were which implies past tense. Then I got to know you and you became that annoying big brother that refused to let me go on a date with that fine sexy firefighter. Like do you know how much I have fantasized about that firefighter using his dick like a water hose and-”

Tony snatched his hands away from Karen. “Ah, nope, nope, and nope. Stop it. I refuse to hear anymore. And I did a background check with him and he had an underground dog circus ring. So like you’re welcome.”

“A dog circus show isn’t the worst thing,” Karen defended herself, leaning back in her chair and taking a sip of Tony’s orange juice.

“Oh, come on. When they came by the orphanage did you not see how he literally bent over backwards for his mom?”

This confused Karen.

“What? Sugar momma. Tony what on earth are you talking about?”

“Oh, come on. When they came by the orphanage did you not see how he literally bent over backwards for his mom?”
“So what he’s a momma’s boy?” Karen said, feeling the need to defend her sexy firefighter, with whom she never got the chance to date.

“One, he just met his momma two years ago. Second, they’re not related. Third, did you not take to notice how she ate that banana in front of him and then he fed her some of his spaghetti.”

“That’s not—”

Karen’s eyes widened.

“They were probably looking for a third member in their little family,” Tony said.

And then both of them couldn’t take it anymore and fell into bits of laughter.

“Oh! It all makes sense now. Oh, ew,” Karen finally said.

“See I saved you from being a little sugar baby.”

Karen scrunched up her nose and then shook of how the conversation had turned.

“But seriously I love you and I need to make sure you know that. Do I need to like tell you that every day and give you hugs and kisses like I do for the kids,” she said, her laughter calming down.

Tony started to protest to an already standing Karen. Karen’s giggling made his way to his ears, before she landed a wet smack on his cheek. He pushed her away, his own laughter causing him to fold over himself as Karen began tickling him.

“Stop, get off of me you nuisance,” Tony said dodging a kiss from Karen.

Karen continued her relentless attack and then chose to focus on tickling him. “Never. Admit you love me and I’m like quite literally the best adopted sister you could have ever wanted.”

“More like annoyance,” Tony mumbled.

“Ah, you love me. I know how to hear the truth behind your lies,” Karen joked.

Karen finally stood from her position, tickling Tony. She sat back in her chair and faced Tony, who was trying to regain his breathing from laughing so hard. Karen smiled kindly at him, allowing him a few moments to recollect himself.

“You think they’re done judging your wonderful masterpieces?” Karen questioned, tilting her head to where some of the kids had gone.

Tony and the others had all come in the morning. They had come in with their buildings and set them aside. Natasha had explained how they needed to judge which one was the best in their eyes and the children had readily accepted the task.

Harley and Peter, along with Julie insisted that they were going to be the hosts of this gameshow competition that the kids had elected to put on.

It was only a few minutes into their visit there that Natasha, Thor, Bruce, Sam, and Clint all had to leave. They said it was just some business they had to take care of and seeing how Tony was not yet cleared to go into active field duty, he decided to stay.

So now he and Karen were just waiting for the little judges to finish scoring the buildings. Tony knew his was going to win and if he didn’t someone clearly bribed one of the kids with some candy.
Then Tony would bet it was Clint that had been involved in bribery.

Just as Tony was about to answer Karen, Harley and Peter came into the room. Both wore serious expressions on their faces. Peter sighed loudly, almost expressing his exhaustion. Harley then echoed the same sentiment.

Karen rose an eyebrow amusedly at the two of them.

“After long deliberation and countless arguments from our judges, we have finally reached a winner. Ms. Karen and Uncle Tony, if you could kindly follow us,” Peter addressed them.

Tony stood up offering Karen his hand in order to help pull her up. Karen followed him and they were led to one of the playrooms. The buildings were all placed up against the wall. The kids themselves were sitting down in the room, bodies full of unrestrained energy.

Jaime, who had been holding one of the younger toddlers came by Tony. “So I’m pretty certain Ms. Natasha’s little spies voted for you and that’s a considerable amount.”

“Hey, no talking to the competitor Jaime,” Harley announced, grabbing ahold of the kid in Jaime’s arms. “Or I’ll have to disqualify you for going against the rules.”

Jaime laughed. “Rules? Sure, what rules do we exactly have in place?”

“Rules,” Harley snuffed out. “Now may you two please be seated? Our judges would first like to address the buildings, before they give their final statement on who wins.”

Tony sat down beside Miles, who was already brimming with excitement. Tony wrapped a hand around his son pulling him closer to him and sniff at his hair. Miles giggled softly and brushed his hands against Tony’s cheek.

He leaned up closer to him, his small body almost in Tony’s lap. Tony then had to situate Miles so that he wouldn’t fall off of him. Turning his head away, Miles looked at Tony as if he wanted to say something. His mouth opened and his eyes grew brightly, before he was yanked up by Peter.

Peter quickly silenced whatever Miles was about to say. “Okay, Miles. What did we say about being quiet?”

Oh, so Tony had definitely won. He was so going to rub this in Clint’s face later on. He wondered to himself whether he could forever have his creation on display in the communal area of the tower with the word winner written above it.

No, he could probably do a picture of it instead. Yeah, a picture would be better.

He was broken out of his thoughts, when Julie cleared her throat thus effectively silencing any and all chatter. She winked at Harley who in turn grew red in the ears. Seemingly pleased, Julie went back to gain everyone’s attention.

“Thank you everyone for deciding to come out here this wonderful evening. After much careful consideration, our judges have made their final pick. We will allow our judges to speak on the competition, before we announce the winner,” Julie claimed. “William, you may go first. What was your thought on the competitors?”

William, who at the time was nine, at up straighter form his spot on the floor.

“Well, Julie all of them did well. I like a lot of color, so I really liked the one with all of the colors.”
“Yes, the colors were rather exquisite,” Marley, a thirteen year girl, voiced in a heavy English accent.

William looked at Marley sharply for interrupting him. Marley shrugged her shoulders and lifted her hands up in defense.

“Sorry.”

William nodded in forgiveness.

“Yes, as I was saying,” he sang, “The one with the colors was really nice, but I didn’t like how small it was. It wasn’t as big as the others.”

Oh, Clint was going to love this.

As it had been Clint and his team could never quite decide on what to do. Therefore, it had resulted in an almost incomplete building. Clint kept on insisting in adding some lasers to the Lego building, over Bruce’s protests and Wanda’s insistence that she would not.

Meanwhile Natasha, Sam, Thor, and Tony had all worked rather diligently on theirs.

“Who cares about how tall it is. The colorful one rocks,” one kid added.

“Shh, we have already made decisions. Last minute statements will not be put into consideration, especially from one not having voiced his own opinion when we actually needed it,” Julie said, eyebrow lifting and lips pressed together in a smooth smirk.

“Yeah, well,” the kid said shuffling back.

“Exactly. Now that William has said his piece, Marley you may have the floor.”

Marley tilted back her head and grabbed her cup containing apple juice. She swishes it around two times, sniffed it, then took a sip.

Karen tilted her head downward. “Where did you learn that from?”

Marley tossed her hair over her shoulder.

“Darlin’ one does not simply learn, one experiences,” she drawled again in her fake heavy accent.

Tony had to bite the insides of his lips to stop from laughing.

“Yeah, well one better be experiencing nothing,” Karen said.

Marley smiled and nodded. “But of course dear Ms. Karen. But of course. Now building one was indeed colorful. The use of colors was how do you say…vibrant. So vibrant so that it nearly blinded my eyes.”

“What happened to her voice?” Miles whispered loudly to Peter.

“Yeah, what happened to your voice,” another kid, Kevin, questioned. “It sounds funny.”

The kids laughed and tried mimicking Marley’s voice, to which she rolled her eyes and stated that, “This accent is a level of high standing.”

“High standing,” Kevin mocked, his own accent rougher and mixed with laughter.
“Yes, which you wouldn’t know, since you still pee in the bed.”

“I do not pee in the bed!” Kevin shouted.

“Yes, you do! You’re a bed wetter,” Marley shouted and had by then lost her accent.

“I am not,” Kevin said. “I don’t wet the bed!”

“Anymore,” Marley drawled, taking back on her accent. “And my dear that’s not impressive seeing as how you only stopped a year ago, when you were twelve.”

“That’s a lie!”

“No, that’s the truth. Fair maidens such as myself pride ourselves with honesty,” Marley delicately said, raising her pinky and

“There’s nothing about you that is fair,” Olivia, a nine-year old girl, who was actually Marley’s sister, said.

Marley shot her eyes to her sister like daggers. “Be careful what you say, Liv.”

“Or what?”

Julie watched all of this with unbridled amusement, knowing that she should probably step in, but she was just enjoying it so much. It was Karen who eventually decided that enough was quite enough.

“Children, children. Stop, fighting. And Marley stop trying to aggravate Kevin. We all know that Kevin didn’t wet the bed” Karen said. “Now may we please say our apologies and hug.”

“I don’t want to hug him. He probably smells like pee,” Marley sniffed.

“Marley I will not ask twice. Apologize. You were entirely rude to Kevin. Kevin you also apologize. You know Marley loves playing with accents, so I don’t know why you decided to mess with her.”

Kevin grumbled something under his breath.

“Excuse me sir,” Karen spoke. “You both know this is not how we behave. And why am I still not hearing apologies or seeing you two hug.”

Marley shuffled closer to Kevin and pinched her nose, her reason being that she didn’t want to smell Kevin.

“You don’t wet the bed. I’m sorry,” Marley said, her voice stuffy from her nose being pinched.

“I’m sorry that I said something was wrong with your voice,” Kevin apologized.

The two hugged and went back to their respective places. Marley let go of her noise and then let out an exaggerated breath.

“I can finally breathe,” she said fanning herself.

Karen narrowed her eyes.

“Sorry,” Marley announced.
“Looks like you have a little actress in the making,” Tony whispered to Karen.

Karen rolled her eyes. “You don’t even know the half of it. After snack time, is when she starts using her best materials.”

“Oh, well then I will have to stay for that.”

“See that you do. Right now, she’s been performing pieces from *Mama Mia*, so let’s see if she’ll move on from that,” Karen joked.

“Alright, Marley was there anything else you wanted to add?” Julie questioned.

Marley tipped her head back in consideration.

“Well, I mentioned how the colors were vibrant. It reminded me of this chaotic order. It was quite interesting and made me think. However, I do lean more toward structure. The other building had such a wonderful and well thought out design. Also the personal addition of a floor level dedicated to the kids, wins my favor.”

“You’re not supposed to say what direction you leaned toward,” Harley leant down and whispered.

Marley actually turned bright red.

“Well, actually both of them won my favorite. Ah, how I wish both could win.”

“Right,” Peter laughed.

“Now onto our final judge. Mr. Miles can you please talk about what you looked about the two buildings.”

Miles pushed away from Peter’s arms so that he could be placed on the ground. He gave Tony a kiss on the check and patted the spot twice.

“I still love you baba and you’ll still love me, even if you don’t win?” Miles questioned.

“Of course,” Tony said, even knowing that he was definitely going to win.

There was no way his own son was going to vote against him.

“I like baba’s,” Miles said.

And that was it.

Peter facepalmed and Harley snickered to himself. Karen raised an eyebrow and muttered something along the lines of, “of course.”

Julie herself didn’t even look shocked. Instead she just shook her head.

“Alright, well then Miles would you like to announce the winner.”

Tony began to sit up.

“The winner is the colorful one!” Miles shouted excitedly.

A moment of deep, deep confusion settled in. Clint, Bruce, Wanda’s, and Vision’s building had actually won, but Tony was 100 percent certain that his team was going to win. Okay, so he wasn’t
being cocky or anything, but he was confident that they won.

So no, he wasn’t going to question the judges’ decisions. They were small children.

He wasn’t going to question their actual thought process and wonder just what had happened.

Nope, he was going to swallow his pride and…

Then that was when Miles pulled out a purple lollipop that looked mysteriously like the ones Clint sometimes had in the house. He allowed himself five seconds to fill the betrayal, before he went over to Miles.

“I was sold out for a lollipop,” he said leaning down.

Miles shrugged and smiled wildly, lips already purple. “Don’t hate the player, hate the game.”

“I know for a fact Clint probably told you to say that, didn’t he?” Tony asked. “I like to say that the other team should be disqualified, since they were bribed.”

Harley himself looked shocked and so did Peter. It seemed as though maybe the two hadn’t known of this bribery. For all intents and purposes the both of them could have sworn to Tony that his team was going to mean.

“Is that true?” Karen questioned. “Did you all get something in return for voting for the colorful one?”

Marley nodded. “They did. I didn’t fold into the pressure. Besides purple is so not my color and I don’t want my lips to be stained. Mr. Clint told William and Miles, if they said he won they would give him lollipops.”

“I cannot believe this,” Tony said. “I am hurt, right here in my chest.”

Miles came closer to him and stuck out the hand, holding the purple lollipop.

“You can share it with me,” Miles said.

“No, I can’t share with people who have betrayed me,” Tony teased, turning his head to the side.

Miles frowned and stuck the lollipop in his mouth. Leaning closer to Tony, he grabbed a hold of his face.

“I’m sorry,” Miles said, from around the lollipop.

“I guess I can forgive you,” Tony said bringing Miles forward and kissing him on the cheek.

“Eww, baba stop,” Miles laughed, pushing Tony away from him.

“Okay, now I am definitely hurt. First you vote for my enemy’s Lego building and now you won’t accept my kisses. Oh no mister this won’t do,” Tony said grabbing ahold of Miles and smothering him with kisses.

“Stoop,” Miles sang. “Harley, Peter help me!”

Harley laughed and grabbed Miles by his hand. Peter meanwhile followed Karen into the kitchen to help get the lunches ready.
Tony sat back looking around himself and smiling softly at just the pure happiness that was encompassing the room. Harley by then had taken to playing with Julie and Miles. Miles meanwhile kept “discreetly” making kissing faces at the two.

Julie simply took it all in good faith, even taking some time to make her own kissing faces to a brightly flushed Harley.

“Mr. Tony can you come play dolls with us,” one of the younger little girls, Amina, inquired.

“No, we need Mr. Tony to help us with a secret, secret mission,” another girl, Sophie, exclaimed.

“A secret mission,” Amina said, eyes growing wide with interest. “Is this a special mission?”

“The most special,” Sophie said. “And we need Mr. Tony for it.”

“Yes, it is a delicate one that need the most utmost attention,” Marley said, leaning heavily on Sophie. “I am quite certain it might be the most important mission of your life, kind sir.”

Sophie shrugged her shoulder. Marley crossed her eyes at Sophie in return.

Tony didn’t like how all of a sudden, he was surrounded by nearly eight girls all wearing mischievous expressions. Sophie seemed like the ring leader of whatever mission this was, until Julie came by and stepped in.

Her own expression nearly matched everyone else’s.

Tony looked back to Harley and Miles who had looked shocked at the sudden departure from their playmate. However, they didn’t look shocked for long, deciding that they would just go play outside.

“Mr. Tony, now this is a very time sensitive,” Julie began, but was stopped by the sound of his phone vibrating.

Tony silenced it, rather easily.

“Okay, what mission do the infamous little black widows have for me today?”

The girls all laughed, shaking in excitement and ready to explain just what they were about to do. That was up until Tony’s phone rang again.

This time he decided to check it and was surprised to see Nick Fury calling him. He picked it up and answered.

“Hello.”

“Stark,” came Fury’s deep voice.

“Yes, Fury now what do I owe the pleasure of having you call me on this fine evening,” he said, while making a funny face to the girls.

“I need you to come outside.”

“Why?”

“Just meet me outside near the side of the house.”

“Um, okay. This isn’t weird at all. You’re here right now?”
“Yes,” Fury exclaimed curtly.

He made excuses to the girls, telling them he would be right back. He ignored Karen looking at him as he passed through the kitchen outside.

When he went outside, he was met with Fury leaning against the brick wall. He was about to question why this secrecy, before Fury narrowed his eye.

“We have Ryder in custody,” Fury stated without any hesitation.

Whelp, that was one way to rip the Band-Aid off. Tony tried to stop the incoming trembling of his fingers, by putting them in his jean pockets. He swallowed the giant lump that had somehow appeared in his throat.

Fury for his part didn’t even look like he wanted to give this news to Tony.

And Tony had been in the dark from all of this. He hadn’t even wanted to know what had happened to the CMPNY or Ryder. He was just thankful he was out of there and that was it. He hadn’t really questioned where Ryder had gone off to.

He had just assumed-

Well, guess his assumptions were wrong.

“So he’s in custody. Is that all?”

“No. Look we’ve been interrogating him, right. But look Ryder has somehow managed to make himself look like and behave similar to his brother, Isak. From an outside perspective we’re holding an innocent man, who was unfortunately roped in with his brother’s schemes. But we both know that’s not right.”

“You can’t just have him go missing? I hear you do that a lot with people,” Tony hinted.

Fury shifted uneasily on his feet.

“This is different.”

“How so?”

“Look Stark. He has a wife and kids, both of whom know that he is in SHIELD custody. If he goes missing, the first person they are going to point fingers toward us. Now we can’t really afford to go through a scandal like this.”

“And there’s no other way?”

At Fury’s silence, Tony knew that there wasn’t.

“So you want me to what go prove that he is Ryder and get him to confess…” Tony didn’t finish his statement. “I need to be in the same room as him and…”

“You won’t have to be alone.”

“You think he’s going to confess with anyone else, besides just me in there?”

Fuck, this was such a mess. Just when he thought he was over it all…done with Ryder
“Fuck.”

“You don’t have to do this.”

“But I do. You just said, if I don’t he gets to go home free. And I don’t even want to think about what would happen if he-”

Fury wasn’t good at comforting people and there were instances where he wish that he was. He wished that he could say the right words, to take that gloomy expression off of Tony’s face. He had hated to see the pure look of happiness dissolve just so that one full of grief could over take it.

“Okay, well I have a car waiting-” Fury said, almost regretting coming here and making Tony make this decision. But he couldn’t take it back now.

“Ms. Natasha said you aren’t supposed to leave,” Julie said biting her lip, her gaze looking hesitantly at Fury.

Tony turned to look at Julie who had wandered outside and wound up standing by the two.

“Julie, what are you doing out here?”

“Your phone call took a while. I got worried,” Julie answered honestly. “You have to stay here, Mr. Tony.”

Tony looked back into the house and smiled wearily.

“Well, sometimes you have to diverge from the specific plans.”

“I know, but…it’s just Ms. Natasha put me in charge to make sure you kind of stayed here,” Julie whispered. “I can’t fail.”

Julie looked concerned over potentially disappointing Natasha, so he looked down at her softly.

“You won’t be disappointing her at all. I promise. I just have to do something, okay?”

“Is it a good something?”

Tony searched for the right answer, before settling on, “I don’t know.”

“Can I go with you?” Julie settled on.

Over his dead body.

“Not this time, kid. But hey when I come back we can do the secret mission and I’ll even let you make some gadgets with me,” Tony said. “Now, go back inside. Tell Karen, I’ll be back in a few hours or so.”

“You’ll take care of Mr. Tony?” Julie said, speaking to Fury for the first time.

Fury nodded, but chose not to add anything else.

Julie still looked uncertain, but chose to do as Tony said.

“Alright, let’s go,” Tony said, following Fury to the unmarked car.

“Stark-”
“Not, now Fury. Please just…” Tony said, sliding into the car.

Fury nodded at him, before following Tony’s lead.

Tony leaned his head back against the seat.

He noted with a rather sudden detachment how the cold that he had gotten rid of not too long ago was now steadily creeping back in, first starting with his trembling fingers.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again for all the support y’all. Appreciate the comments, kudos, and bookmarks.
Have a wonderful Saturday :)
“Remember, when you need to leave you say,” Steve trailed off, waiting for Tony to finish.

“Merchant,” Tony finished, knowing the word that he had given Steve as a sign of showing he was getting uncomfortable in the interrogation room.

That was the only way Steve and the others had agreed to putting Tony in the room with Ryder alone. Tony had argued his case, saying Ryder was much more likely to say it was him, if he felt that it was only Tony. Add the others and you would just get defensive statements.

“It doesn’t matter, if it’s a minute into it. You just say the word,” Natasha said, piggybacking off of Steve’s sentiment.

Tony broke away from Steve’s grasp and headed toward the door. “Got it. Merchant is my safe word. Now, let’s get this over with. This certainly hadn’t been in my plans for the evening.”

Fury held his head down as Tony entered the interrogation room. He sat down in the chair opposite of Ryder, who was smiling at Tony as though Tony wouldn’t know.

For a few moments, he played the game that this was Isak.

It was not a fun game.

He had given him a drink, saying that he was sure he was thirsty. He told him that the others may not have cared about his comfort, but he did. So he tilted the cup to Ryder’s lips, saying how it was a favorite drink of his. Ryder’s mouth easily fell open, accepting the cool liquid.

Tony smiled as he placed the empty cup at the feet of Ryder.

Tony sat back in his chair, fingers pressed against his lips in contemplation. He could feel the crack in where he had bitten his lip too hard. He licked at it to soothe the sting and tasted the cool copper taste of his blood.

Ryder followed the movement easily, eyes particularly drawn to the blood that was swept away with Tony’s tongue.

Tony refused to play this game any longer. He refused to make it seem as though he was truly oblivious and that Ryder was that great of an actor. He had been a little unsure toward the beginning of the conversation, with how comfortable Ryder had seemed by it all.

So that’s why he hadn’t come in guns blazing. There had been room for error, but Tony lived with this man for long enough to know his mannerisms.

He knew the way his left eye twitched ever so slightly as he was in the first stages of telling a lie.

That had been the first thing Tony had noticed, whenever Ryder would tell him he wasn’t ever going to hit him again. His left eye always twitched just the slightest.

To any other observer, it would be hardly noticeable. But Tony had picked up on those slight alterations in his expression. He had too. Those changes in expressions, often saved him from the
hard press of a palm going against his cheek.

He knew when Ryder was growing agitated. He would make a clicking noise with his tongue against the back of his teeth.

Whenever Ryder was feeling mildly defensive he would tilt his head to the side, left and then right. Then he would begin speaking in defense of his actions.

Tony knew this because Ryder would usually do that, before telling Tony he wouldn’t have hurt him if he had just done what he had asked.

“I have been so gracious and kind. It kills me when you don’t listen to me,” he had said, one evening to him, standing over Tony who was gently holding his fragile hand in his wrist.

Tony watched as he tilted his head. He tracked the action. Left and then right. His mouth opened again to say just what Tony had done wrong, but by then Tony had stopped listening.

Something told him, to pay attention just so he would never do it again.

For once, he hadn’t listened to that small part of his conscious.

He was tired of listening and obeying Ryder. So he let his silent rebellion fuel his own anger. And for the first time in months, since their relationship became violently physical he felt like he owned his body again.

He would lift one shoulder in amusement, if something ever managed to amuse him so.

He never really smiled. No, it was smirks that came first on Ryder’s face. Then from there it would smooth out into this type of thin smile.

Tony used to think it was so charming. He used to dream about making that small easy smirk cross Ryder’s features.

In college he had been so excited the first time that smirk was directed at him. It made him feel warm, but now it only reminded him of the malicious intent behind a smirk that dark.

So no, Tony was not going to play this game any longer than he had to. He had made sure Ryder was comfortable, enough for him to believe him. He had established a certain level of trust and the assurance that Tony had still…

…loved him.

Saying that to himself made him cringe inside.

Ryder needed to feel like Tony was on his side, even in his death. It would make it that much easier for them to get a confession.

Tony opened his mouth, to push the final nail into his coffin.

He leaned forward, hands pressed on Ryder’s knees. He dug into the skin there so tight that Ryder wouldn’t notice how his hands hadn’t stopped shaking.

He prayed for once that they would stop long enough for him to give a believable performance. He widened his eyes, looking imploringly at Ryder from underneath his eyelids. He ran his thumb over Ryder’s knees.
He then took Ryder’s cuffed hands in his own.

“You don’t have to lie to me. We may have lied to the outside world, but there was one thing we
never did. We never lied to each other, did we?” Tony whispered, soft enough that it would only fall
to Ryder’s ears.

He had a feeling Steve wasn’t going to like what he was going to do next.

“So please don’t lie to me now. Don’t put me through this pain of thinking that…the person I love
isn’t here.”

He swallowed the gallon of nails that suddenly appeared in his throat.

“You loved him?” Ryder said, his voice matching Tony’s softness.

So they were still going with this Isak portrayal.

Okay.

“I loved him dearly. So it…”

He allowed a break to exist in his voice, faking emotion that he no longer held from the man opposite
of him.

“I just wish he was here, you know? I mean surely you wished that your brother was here just as
much as I do.”

Ryder looked about the room, for whatever reason Tony could not understand. No one was in the
room and only he knew of who was really listening from outside of the room. Ryder kept his focus
on the mirror, eyes peering into it as though it would reveal all that were behind him.

Slowly, Ryder returned his gaze and leant closer to Tony.

He barely managed to restrain the need to pull back. Ryder’s cheek pressed against his. His soft
breathing fell hotly across his cheek. Tony moved his head slightly just so he wouldn’t be in such
close proximity to Ryder.

“Are you saying what I think you are saying?” Ryder questioned.

Tony blinked his eyes back owlishly. “I’m saying it’s a mighty shame that Ryder is gone. I sure do
miss him and if he were here…well.”

“Well…” Ryder said, leaning back from Tony, eyes searching his own.

Tony shrugged and fell back into his chair, grateful for the distance. If he moved his chair even
further back just a little, Ryder certainly hadn’t noticed.

“Unfortunately, he’s not here so I guess that will have to stay between myself and his grave,” Tony
teased, mouth tilting upward in a ghost of a smile.

Tony hoped that this was going to end the way he wanted it to. There was a reasonable sense of
doubt that Ryder may just claim he is Isak. Then with the way Tony is leading him to believe that he
truly misses him, then he may come to Tony one unsuspecting day and reveal himself.

Tony hated that string of doubt.
He needed Ryder to reveal his hand now, where there were people watching his back.

He sighed, closed his eyes and prayed for once that he didn’t screw this up.

“You would tell me, if you were really Ryder, right? You wouldn’t be so cruel as to have me believe
the one person that has ever loved me truly and has taught me true love and sacrifice is dead. So
please, Ryder,” he whispered his name.

Ryder’s eyes widened, after a brief moment of panic seized them.

He tried once more.

“As long as you tell me the truth, you won’t be punished. Everyone out there already believes that
you’re Ryder. So you don’t have to lie to me, never to me. I know it’s you. I’ve slept beside you for
months and I am saddened that you think you could hide yourself from me,” Tony explained, softly.

Tony swallowed the dryness in his throat.

“I know the instances that drove you to take on this persona of your brother, but you should have no
fear. You know I will always have your side, Ryder. I just need you to trust me. I can make all of
this go away, but you need to let me know,” Tony tried again.

He saw Ryder’s will slowly wavering.

All he needed was a verbal confession.

That was all it took.

Tony simply hated that it took him being in this room and the fact that it was taking longer than
expected. He forgot how well Ryder was at lying and manipulating a situation.

Tony hung his head down and channeled the theatre lessons he took, during boarding school. Tears
sprang into his eyes.

“Please, I can’t live like this. Like knowing that Ryder isn’t here. I don’t know, if I’ll make it another
day. He is…was everything that I had. He was the one that needed and wanted me. He always told
me he was the only one that was never going to leave me. Now look at us, he’s gone. But…if I’m
right…Ryder…please don’t make me live another day without you…please.”

He added desperation and heartbreak into his voice.

He wondered at what point he had stopped acting. The emotions had certainly become real, even if
the words coupled with them had no ounce of truth to them.

“Oh, okay,” Ryder whispered.

Tony brought his head up, looked at Ryder’s face.

“Okay?”

Ryder moved his chair closer to Tony. He moved his head to the side, inquisitively. He gave a
second pause. It was a second too long because it suddenly had Tony thinking that maybe he had
gone too far. Maybe he just shouldn’t have come here and quite possibly they could have found out a
way to lock his ass up some other way.

He knew it was Ryder.
Why couldn’t his own word count?

If he managed to leave the room, without one bit of repre…

“I didn’t know you missed me so much. If I had known, I would have come back sooner. I wouldn’t have pretended to be my brother for so long,” Ryder proclaimed.

“I sure did miss you, when I came back to the hotel,” Ryder rasped. “I saw bodies lying all over the building, but my main concern was finding you. It nearly broke me, when I found out that you were gone.

“But then Cali called me, saying that you all had come to save you and that I should leave. So I hightailed it out of there. I didn’t too much mind being on the end of a witch hunt. I knew you weren’t the one who was trying to leave. They just took you.”

“Cali…told you,” Tony whispered, waiting for the betrayal to settle in his heart. He had trusted her. “You…why are you talking like you don’t know what happened. Like you weren’t there?”

“What exactly happened, Tony?”

“What do you mean…I…what didn’t happen?”

“Well, if you’re quite certain I know all that happened why are you asking me? Surely, we were in the same room when the events transpired, or whatever events you’ve manipulated yourself into believing has happened.”

“I…”

Ryder did not allow Tony a moment to respond.

“My question to you is why you are settling on the what, instead of the why. Seems like a curious genius like yourself would want to ask more questions. I assume, that I unfortunately fell right into your trap, which made me give a verbal confession. Of course I know, if that is all you came for you would have hightailed it out of here as soon as I revealed myself.”

Ryder grinned lecherously.

“So don’t you want to know why?”

“What?”

“Don’t you want to know why I did all of this? They always do.”

At Tony’s look of confusion, Ryder explained his statement.

“Oh, please don’t be honored. You think you were the only one who I had a relationship like this with? Oh, no you were just the only one that wasn’t strong enough to endure what I had to offer. Funny, how I was using all of them as preparation for my time with you. But at the end of it, you were the one that wasn’t ready. Stark men are made of iron has never meant anything, has it?”

Tony held in the compulsion to answer him with a yes. He had wanted to know why. He wanted an explanation beyond the reasoning of why Ryder had just gone mad. There had to be something that drove him to do this…drove him to treat Tony like this.

Tony couldn’t admit to himself that Ryder had always been like this.
Even if the signs were always present, after the first month since he had reunited with him.

But if he were to ask why, he would be placing control back into Ryder’s hands. For once, he wanted to not do that.

“I don’t really care for why you did it. It doesn’t matter to me, when you’ll be locked up so far away from me, I’ll forget you had ever existed.”

“No, you won’t. You won’t forget I existed. Don’t think I don’t know some marks on your body won’t fade. It’ll be a nice little reminder of all the things I did to you won’t it?”

Tony clenched his jaw and looked at the ceiling as though it would give him the answers he needed. He turned his head back down to face Ryder.

“Why?”

“Excuse, me I didn’t hear you,” Ryder, smiled seemingly thinking that he now had the ball in his court.

Tony clenched his jaw as his teeth gritted together. Feeling liquid anger stream through his blood, he took a few calming breaths.

Right now, he could just forget his brief moment of weakness and leave.

He had gotten what he came here for…but was it enough?

No.

“Why?” Tony repeated, this time more firmly.

“Well, Tony that is quite a wonderful question, one which I would love to answer,” Ryder explained. “Because you’re a drunk just like your mother. You’re a murder and thief just like your father. And you’re more desperate than a whore on the street of a corner begging for change. You want all your friends to know how you just accepted what I gave you. You probably told them you were a victim, but you weren’t.”

“Ryder-”

“But really the reason why is because you ruined my life. You and your father. There was some point in time that I truly thought I loved you, but that all changed when you allowed your father to take me out of MIT.”

“Ryder, I didn’t know…”

“Sure, you didn’t. Just like you didn’t know that your dad’s interference took away all my scholarships, so I had to take three years off of college trying to pay back loans and save up for college. My reputation was in the dirt because your dear old dad.”

“I told you not to get involved with my dad-”

“You should have tried harder.”

“You can’t fault me for your mistakes.”

“I can fault you for everything!”
“No, Ryder. You really can’t. It’s crazy that you want to hold onto this imaginary grudge against me. And even if I had been the so called reason for you leaving MIT, that gives you no reason to treat me as you did. You were…fuck Ryder,” Tony breathed out harshly, anger taking everything out of him.

“Oh, don’t go throwing pity parties.”

“Can you even hear yourself right now? You’re-”

“Is this all? You got your confession. And yet you’re still here. Clearly, you want more. Perhaps you would like another go around with me.”

“You’re disgusting,” Tony laughed hoarsely, rolling his eyes. “In what world would I ever want to do things over with you?”

“But here we are with you still sitting in this chair. You got what you wanted. So how about you do the one thing you’ve been saying you’ve had the strength to do all the time.”

Tony breathed.

“Leave.”

Tony sharpened his eyes at Ryder. Ryder looked pleased with himself as he had been, during this whole conversation.

Tony wanted to rip the pleased expression right off of his face. The images that were supplied in his conscious were satisfying.

Tony inhaled, trying to stop the murderous thoughts that were surging in his mind.

“But I both know you won’t. Your misfits know that you won’t. You know you won’t leave. And the times you tried, well…”

Ryder tsked in the back of his throat.

“I bet the reason you stayed was of how good it felt not to be lonely. I know you had realized that everyone around you disappointed you one way or another, mine was just a little physical. But hey, on somedays it wasn’t as bad as Howard’s, right? You remember how he could get?”

“Tony,” Steve’s voice echoed in the room.

“And man, you just made it so easy, falling apart at my hands. Never knew how touch-starved a person could be. You made it easy for me. Now don’t fool yourself into thinking you were ever going to leave me because you weren’t. You and I were probably going to stay together, if your little band of misfits hadn’t arrived. And that scares you, huh?”

“Tony,” Steve repeated.

“Knowing that you would have stayed. Spreading your legs open for any ounce of affection. Man those days you would cry out for me. You confused me, never knew if you wanted me to get off of you or pull you closer. You know that? You were the one that was manipulating things. I mean how could you say you wanted something and then change your mind?”

“I didn’t…”

“Ah, but you did. Guess you weren’t strong enough to handle it. But my I loved watching you try to pull away, when you were nearly drugged out. But know this, I never slept with you while you
weren’t aware. No, I loved knowing you were completely comprehending what was happening to you. Every drag, every pull, every scrape, every whimper, every moan of pleasure…ahh yes there were some good moments, right?”

“No-” Tony said, the refusal stuck in his throat.

“Come on Tony, don’t try to deny it. You can’t deny how you would come with a string of curses on your lips as though you were offering praise to me.”

“I never…”

“Oh, right. That was probably when you were off fantasizing about absent boy wonder. Wonder how he would feel knowing that one of his teammates had a little crush on him, since he was a toddler. Think boy wonder would take well to you lusting after him?”

“Ryder-”

“Please, don’t act as though you didn’t want any of what I did.”

“That’s enough,” Steve said, breaking Tony out of his reverie. “I said that’s enough.”

“Don’t you dare come in Rogers,” Tony hissed.

“Yes, don’t come in. Who knows maybe Stark here will uncuff me and we can give you a little show of all the things Tony and I did. All the things Tony wanted, but never told anyone,” Ryder hissed. “Come on, uncuff me. I miss touching you. Don’t let us be separated any longer.”

“Come on, Tony. I know you want this. I know you want me. You always have. Just admit that you won’t ever have anyone better in your life. Think of all the ways that I’ve treated you kindly. I let you kept Miles.”

“Let me? I think I recall that night after adopting Miles very differently. Seems like you forgot the baseball shaped bruise you left on my ribs, after I told you that Miles was staying and you could leave!”

“And guess what I did. I changed my mind. I let him stay because I know what makes you happy.”

“No, you don’t! Have you always been this crazy and out of tune about what I wanted!”

“I always knew what you wanted,” Ryder yelled, eyes growing wide with fury. His mouth was also taut with unrestrained anger at the way Tony was getting vocal with him.

“I never wanted it! Everything that you did for me. I never wanted a single touch of yours not after the first month of us dating. I never wanted it,” Tony screamed, feeling his voice bounce against the walls.

“Yes, you did. You begged for it. Everything that I gave you, you wanted it in waves. Don’t be shy in front of your friends. Certainly, a genius like you could remember pleading on his knees asking me not to leave.”

Ryder then began to act out the way Tony had pleaded with him.

Tony stopped short, eyes welling up. He felt his breath catch in his throat, remembering the exact moment all of his strength had left him.

“Please, Ryder, please. I promise…whatever…whatever it is. I won’t do it anymore. I won’t. Just tell
me. You have to let me know so I can do better,” Tony pleaded, hands clutching at the pants leg of Ryder. “Just, don’t leave me.”

“Really? Now, you want me to stay. You weren’t saying that last night. No, I distinctly recall you telling me to hurry my ass out the door and never come back. So I’m finally listening to what you’ve been saying. Isn’t that what you want?”

“No, I didn’t mean it. I...Ryder please. Look, I flirt with everyone. It’s just casual, okay? I don’t ever mean anything by it. It just makes the donors seem more likely to up their donation.”

“And you did all of this without even thinking how it would make me feel. You didn’t have to see your boyfriend whoring himself out for some extra change for Karen’s orphanage.”

“Whoring? Ryder listen that’s not-”

“How many of them have you let into your bed, huh?”

“I never-”

“Bet they got to see just how easy it is to bargain with the Tony Stark.”

“Ryder, don’t say stuff like that. You know I would never-”

“Oh, do I? I remember the playboy part of your title. Seems to me like it’s not in the past like you insisted.”

“It is in the past! I swear. Why aren’t you listening to me? Look, I’ve apologized. I’ve done the grown-up thing now can’t you for once do the same fucking thing.”

Tony’s mouth immediately tensed up as the statement left his lips. He prepared himself for a slap against the cheek, hopefully it wouldn’t be in the same spot he had marked yesterday. Then his cheeks could be matching sets of the same purpling bruise.

“You know I love it, when you apologize. But never in public,” he hissed, his lips leaving a burning trail against Tony’s ear. “Do you understand?”

He forgot what he had been apologizing for in the first place.

The flirting sure. But Ryder usually hadn’t gotten so angry over stuff like that. So this was only a cover of what Ryder was really upset about.

He only remembered mentioning buying Miles’ a toy car. Certainly, that couldn’t be the reason. There had to be something else. And just why couldn’t he remember why he was apologizing and why his head hurt like he had fired his own repulsor at himself?

“Do you understand?”
“I understand.”

“Tony.” That time it was Natasha’s voice breaking through and knocking against Tony’s head like a warning sign.

“That-”

“Was a beautiful moment. And it brought us closer together, didn’t it Tony?”

“No, are you out of your mind? There was nothing beautiful about our relationship. It was like a prison for me. I hated that I told myself to stay. I hated how I let you back in, forgiving you, thinking that I was the problem.”

Tony scoffed.

“Foolish me, thinking that everyone eventually hurts me. But see with you I tried seeing if as long as I accept the hurt, you’d stay. Unfortunately, you did and you almost killed me.”

“Careful, Tony. You might just hurt a guy’s feelings,” Ryder teased darkly. “Have me thinking that our moments weren’t special. I for certain thought that you would remember me fondly, after all I was the first man you ever slept with.”

“I was the one who taught you how to drive a car. I was the one who brought you home-made soup, when you were sick. I went to your awards’ ceremonies. So you may have all of these bad thoughts about me, but they will always be matched with all the good I did for you. And that’s going to conflict you for the rest of your life.”

“That’s not true,” Tony said scoffing his head. “You know what this is over. I got what I needed.”

He began to stand up, but was once again stopped by

“Isn’t it though. Look at me and tell me honestly that you never loved me,” Ryder said smugly. “In all that pain, there was pleasure mixed in it. Happiness, even. You were always so soft and kind for me. Can’t claim you’re a victim, if you love me.”

“I don’t-”

“Tony,” Steve said harshly, but Tony ignored him again.

“Yes, you do. Otherwise, you would have put that knife, that the pretty little assassin gave you, straight through my heart,” Ryder announced. “Oh, didn’t think I knew about that, huh? I knew you wouldn’t have it in you. After all, you can’t kill the first person you ever loved. You and I both know how you’re still haunted by Obie’s death.”

Tony’s eyes blinked and he felt the weight grow heavier in his chest.

“Yeah, so if his death still haunts you, just imagine what killing me would be like? Having memories of whatever so called abuse, memories of us laughing and making love, and then you killing me. Just imagine the mix of chaotic feelings.”

Tony’s breathing came in stuttered gasps, fingers clutching at the legs of his chair.

“And you thinking to yourself,” Ryder’s voice grew to a faint whisper, “whether you had gotten it all wrong.”

“Merchant, fuck Tony. Merchant,” he heard Steve say, as the doors swung open.
Steve came in two long strides and stepped between Tony and Ryder. Ryder laughed something deep and dark. He managed to clap his hands together in the cuffs.

“Looks, like boy wonder has come to save the little damsel in distress,” Ryder proclaimed. “How sweet. I suppose I am the dragon in this story.”

“Shut up,” Steve hissed, getting into Ryder’s space.

“Oh, testy I see. Jealous that I was the one who Tony let into his heart and in between his thighs. Don’t worry, he’s an easy lay. If you want him, he’ll spread his legs easily for you.”

Steve didn’t give Ryder a chance to say anything else, before his hand went swinging against Ryder’s cheek.

“Don’t you dare talk about him in that manner, in your short lived life, ever again,” Steve hissed, flexing his fingers.

Tony stood up, pushing Steve away from Ryder. Steve stayed still for a moment, but stepped aside when Tony nudged him once more. Steve left room, only enough for Tony to be in Ryder’s line of vision, but not close enough for Ryder to be able to touch Tony.

“You like that drink I gave you?” Tony questioned.

The question gave Ryder, a moment of pause. He looked toward the empty cup that was now beside his feet.

“What?”

“You know that drink I gave you? I mixed it with two pills. Highly poisonous might I add. It slowly stops your body’s functions. Before you know it, you’ll be paralyzed. Your motor skills will have completely degraded. You won’t be able to speak as your tongue will feel so heavy to even lift itself from your mouth,” Tony steely said.

“Then the chill will set in, you may get hypothermia. May lose a few fingers to a limb or two. Your vision will deteriorate to the point where you won’t even be able to recognize the physical changes to your body.”

He moved closer to Ryder and grabbed ahold of his chin, staring down at him.

“I don’t know how long or how short it will take for this changes to take into effect. But I know they will. Gotta admit to yourself, all throughout this conversation, your limbs grew numb didn’t they?”

Tony chuckled to himself.

“Can I have a high-five?” Tony said, holding his hand up.

Ryder tried lifting his arms, but was not able to do so. Wide terrified eyes looked up at him and he struggled in his chair, rocking his body forward or so he thought. In all actuality, he had never moved.

“Oh, right. Guess the effects work faster than I thought. I’ll have to congratulate Bruce on that,” Tony said, moving his head to the side and studying Ryder. “It’s going to be hard for you on the raft. You have a lot of former CMPNY individuals there who are not satisfied with the way you left them to take the fall. I hate for it to get out, that you’re completely paralyzed and defenseless.”
Tony clicked his tongue against the back of his teeth.

“But they ought to know what happened to their infamous leader, right?”

“What did you do?” Ryder growled.

Tony shrugged.

“A little bit of everything. Don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll be fine. After all you were the stronger of us, didn’t you always remind me of such. So surely you can handle this,” Tony slyly said.

He removed his hand off of Ryder’s chin.

“And the nurse there…or at least the semblance of a nurse will give you a pill every day. It is your option to take this pill. But know the pill can have two separate effects. One can cure you completely of everything that I inflicted on you. The other could automatically kill you on the spot. Either way, you won’t know because they look identical,” Tony smirked.

Ryder visibly grew nauseated and his mouth gaped open, finally coming to terms that Tony was being serious.

“Now, me. I’m personally hoping you get the one that kills you,” Tony honestly replied. “And part of me hopes that you don’t ever take the pills and just remain in this sad state of never-ending pain.”

“Tony-” Ryder began, but was cut off by Tony.

“But I hope that when the day, mercy finally grants you the chance to die, you are welcomed into the arms of something greater than hell,” Tony said, fingernails clutching so tightly into the chin of Ryde that beads of blood streamed down.

He leant back and patted his cheek, sharply. He turned his shoulder away and began to exit the room.

“You can’t do this to me! Tony! Come on, don’t do this to me! Tony!” Ryder screamed, drool already foaming at his mouth. “You can’t do this to me, Tony! Tony!”

Tony turned to look at him, once more.

“I already did.”

And left.

Steve followed him and quickly closed the door behind him. All of the others were in the room, in the same spots that Tony had left them. No one dared say a word, waiting to see what Tony would do next.

Fury on his part managed to look completely gut-wrenched. He wanted to apologize for asking this of Tony, but he knew it was the only way. Now that they had verbal proof, physical proof, and more thanks to Ryder’s need to talk they had the ability to put him away for the rest of his life…however long or short it would be.

Coulson’s mouth was tense and he kept looking at Tony then back to the floor again. He hadn’t known it was that bad. He’d have to retract a lot of what was said from the official document, when it was handed over to the people at the Raft. They didn’t need to know what happened.

Bruce had somehow managed to not Hulk out, during the whole interrogation. Part of it was
Natasha’s tight grasp on his hands. He had to take a few calming breaths to keep himself rooted in
the room and not to where Ryder was. He had done his part in providing the two pills for Tony to
mix in Ryder’s drink.

Bruce wished that alone could have satisfied him.

Clint’s eyes were tinged red and if anyone would later ask him, he would freely admit that yes he
had cried. He had cried tears of anger and frustration. He had cried over how he hadn’t been there
for Tony, when he and the rest of his team should have been there for him.

Clint wished that he could put an arrow through his shoulder. He resolved to do that as soon as
Fury’s watchful eye was gone.

Natasha kept her hands firmly in Bruce’s. While everything was happening in the interrogation
room, Natasha had been mentally preparing what she wanted to do with Ryder. Surely, no one
expected for Ryder to leave without being graced by the Widow’s bite.

Natasha wished that she could act now. She was going restless with knowing that Ryder’s eyes
hadn’t been gauged out yet. Might as well speed up the blinding process.

Wanda and Vision were at each other’s side, communicating to one another softly. Wanda’s body
had a faint red glow to it and Vision hadn’t seemed too concerned. In fact, he encouraged the
thoughts that Wanda was sending out.

Wanda wished that she could have some alone time with him. She knew that she could pull the fears
to the forefront of his mind. She could make him scream in desperation, claw at his skin as thought it
was his enemy, and cry to the heavens for forgiveness.

She would do it all.

Sam picked apart his at his palms. He wanted to check-in and make sure Tony was okay. But how
could he be okay, right now? Sam resolved to find a way to help Tony in whatever way he could.
He hadn’t really been there for him before, what with his role only being really to help Steve with
Bucky, but he would change that.

After all this was a family…he just wished he had realized that sooner.

Bucky took to rotating his shoulder, menacingly. He looked at Steve and saw a cold reserve take
hold of his eyes. Bucky brought his hands up to his ear then to his mouth, with which Steve repeated
the action.

Bucky grinned, though it was not an action born out of happiness.

Thor wished that he could communicate with the gods right now and find a way to strike lightening
into the heart of Ryder. He wondered if he would be allowed for Loki to use his bit of mischief
against the man.

Steve was pressed beside Tony, not wanting to crowd his space, but also not wanting Tony to not
have physical comfort. His hand hovered over his shoulders, before he placed them by his sides,
unsure of what touch could mean to Tony right now.

He looked down and saw that Tony’s hands were trembling.

“Tony your hands are shaking,” Steve whispered, trying to grab them in his, but not before Tony had
flinched away from his gesture.
“Sorry, sorry,” Tony mumbled.

“There’s no reason to be sorry. Here, come here,” Steve said coming closer. He kept his hands in front of him this time, so as to not frighten Tony away.

Despite that, Tony stepped back twice. His back hit the wall.

“No… I’m… sorry. Sorry, you all had to hear that. I didn’t want that. You all, I never wanted…” Tony stuttered, falling all over his words. He didn’t know how all of that had spun so out of his control. The end result was fine, but getting there. He hadn’t known Ryder would try explaining everything.

“We know,” Bruce calmly asserted. “We know. Everything he said was a lie.”

“I knew I should have taken you out of there sooner,” Steve grit out.

“No, I told you not to come in unless I gave the word. I didn’t. It was stupid of me to not do that.”

“Stupid, stupid. I… fuck. I’m a mess. This is a mess, mine which I dragged you all into. Fuck, this is going to get out and when Miles’ is older he’s going to hear about this as though he isn’t already going to know how much of a fuck up his baba is. Shit, I can’t believe that I-”

“Tony, perhaps we should leave the room. Calm down,” Natasha offered.

“No! I don’t need to calm down. Don’t… don’t tell me what I need. I don’t need. Don’t tell…”

“Okay, okay,” Natasha said, moving away from Bruce and sliding her hands out of his. “Okay, that’s fine. Whatever you need. But maybe let’s just get out of this room, okay? I don’t think anyone of us want to look at Ryder, right now.”

“Sorry, fuck I’m messing this up. You’re just trying to be nice and I… I can’t breathe. Nat, I can’t breathe,” Tony rasped, hands clawing at his throat.

Panic took ahold of his body and Tony felt it wrap tightly around his chest, forcing air out of his lungs. The edges of his eyesight became blurred and he could no longer differentiate who was standing in front of him, hands outstretched to touch Tony. He pushed the hands away, when they came close enough to clear up in his vision.

His legs felt heavy and as though they were just trying to get him to collapse. His skin felt like it was being pricked with several tiny needles. Voices came in his ear like a loud symphony and his ears screamed at them to stop.

He felt tears stream down his face, he could hear yelling.

He wondered at what point it had become his own.

He clawed at his chest, trying to find some way to open it up so he could breathe. It didn’t make sense, but it did. He just needed to find a way to breathe, but he couldn’t.

And he was cold, so fucking cold.

It was like someone had dumped his body back into the cold bath water of the room. He felt hands pushing him down, trying to drown him. He pushed aimlessly at them. He could feel them at his shoulder and he twisted, nearly knocking himself down.

Heat mixed in with the cold and the sharp turn of temperature disoriented him. He felt dizzy and
fragmented...like he didn’t belong in his skin.

How could he get out of this fucking useless body that was stifling him?

How come he couldn’t get out!

“Tony!” Steve yelled, trying to break through Tony’s panic. Then softer he said, “Sweetheart. Stop, you’re hurting yourself. Sweetheart, come here. Don’t...don’t scratch your throat. Give me your hands, please.”

Steve stepped closer to where Tony had found himself kneeling on the floor. He wrapped his arms around Tony, who didn’t return the embrace. He fought against Steve’s touch, fists coming like blows against Steve’s chest.

Steve didn’t complain, but just let Tony let it all out.

Everyone looked on with varying levels of sadness and at a loss of what to do.

“Stop,” Tony rasped, tight fists clutching at the material on Steve’s chest. “Sto...Steve. Steve.”

“Shh, it’s alright. I’m right here. I’m right here, Tony,” Steve said.

“I don’t feel so good,” Tony said pushing away at Steve. “Let go...”

Steve didn’t, but only soothed his hands over the back of Tony. That was the moment, Tony’s body decided to repel all the acid that had been building up in his body. Tony kept throwing up, despite his mind telling his body not to. All through it Steve hadn’t let go.

“Sorry. I told you to let go,” Tony bemoaned.

“I know, you told me. It’s fine. Okay, no need to say sorry. I should have moved away. Let’s get you all cleaned up. Can I take you to get cleaned up?”

Tony’s head nod was the only way that Steve knew it was okay.

“Don’t worry, we’ll clean this all up,” Fury said. “Take care of Tony.”

Tony sniffed and looked up to Fury.

Fury looked back and curled back the thoughts of, “What have I done?”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” he said, pressing his face against Steve’s neck. He closed his eyes trying to ignore the pain throbbing in the back of them.

“It’s okay,” Steve muttered, picking up Tony and hooking one arm underneath his knees and the other supporting his back. Tony curled into the embrace and opened his eyes, dazedly looking at everyone.

“I lied,” Tony said. At everyone’s silence, he continued. “There aren’t two pills. Every pill he’ll get is a placebo. His mind is just going to go crazy with wondering why he isn’t dead or why hasn’t he been cured.”

“Good job kotenok,” Nat said, moving to kiss him on his fevered forehead. She stepped back and looked at Steve.

Tony closed his eyes back in shame, not wanting any of them to look at him, after knowing
everything he had done. He tried to force himself to sleep.

He was just so tired all of a sudden.

His spirit felt drained.

“Guys,” Steve said, soft enough that Tony’s head didn’t want to scream at him.

“We’re going to stay here, for a bit longer. Come here, when he’s put to bed,” Natasha whispered the final part just for Steve’s super soldier hearing. “We have some things we need to finish.”

Steve nodded, but not without saying, “Leave enough for me.”

They all nodded and Steve left the room. Steve carried Tony into the quinjet and headed straight for the tower. Tony had fallen straight asleep and Steve couldn’t blame him. As soon as they arrived Steve went to his room, since it was closer.

He took his shirt off and then Tony’s. He wasn’t sure how Tony would handle water right now, so he grabbed a washcloth and sat Tony atop of his bath counter. Tony’s head lolled to rest on top of Steve’s shoulder.

“I didn’t want that. You have to believe me,” Tony muttered, sleep covering his voice.

“I know. You don’t have tell me.”

“You still love me,” Tony said, mouth pressing against Steve’s collarbone. “Even if I puked on you.”

“There’s never a reason I could ever stop loving you. Puke and all,” he said, adding a kiss to Tony’s forehead. “Alright, let’s get you all cleaned up and then put you to bed.”

“The boys?”

“Are with May. She has them, once I told her to pick them up from Karen’s,” Steve said, already knowing what Tony’s concerns were.

“Good,” Tony sighed. “Gotta make sure they’re taken care of.”

“Yeah, they’re taken care of. So now that you can rest easy with that, let me take care of you, yeah?”

Tony leaned back to look into Steve’s eyes. Brown eyes searched blue ones and Tony found what he was looking for. He smiled softly and placed his hand on Steve’s chest.

“Okay.”

Steve smiled and began to clean Tony with the wet washcloth and the lavender and vanilla soap Tony loved so much. In between cleaning, Tony had indeed fallen asleep much too tired with all the events from the day all the way from spending time with the kids to dealing with Ryder.

Steve hadn’t minded. Instead he had made sure Tony was all taken care off. He placed him in a pajama set that Clint had given him jokingly. Though it was slightly large on Tony’s smaller frame, Tony hadn’t minded all that much when he had to wake up and change into it.

Steve had sat beside him on the bed as he pulled the covers near Tony’s chin. Tony fell back into rest easily and Steve gratefully noticed the worry lines ease themselves out of Tony’s face as sleep welcomed him.
He spent the next hour or so, watching Tony and soothing him any time a whimper crossed his lips. Sleep had just begun to entreat Steve into its hold, until Natasha came into the room. He could see where she had tried to clean the blood from her fingernails.

She picked at them and then looked at Steve. Her gaze was haunted, but there was something loose in her shoulders. She hadn’t looked as tense as she did before. Though she still looked as though a burden bore heavy on her back, it didn’t seem to stretch all throughout her body, like it had before.

“You have two hours, before he heads to the Raft,” Natasha explained. “If you want to do what you planned, before he’s gone. I suggest you do it now.”

“I need to watch Tony,” Steve said.

“I’ll watch him, until you get back. This is the last chance you’ll ever get. Fury granted us now between Ryder’s final leave.”

Steve bit his lower lip and conceded to the fact that he did want to do what he had been planning for five days. He breathed out through his nose. He leant down to brush a curl sticking to Tony’s forehead and kissed the skin there.

Okay, just make sure the blood is gone from you. I don’t want Tony seeing that,” Steve said, passing Natasha on his way out. “And leave the door cracked, just a little.”

Natasha tersely nodded. “Thanks for letting me know.”

Steve left and threw on a shirt that was lying on his floor. He hadn’t a need to see if it was dirty or not. He was sure, it would get dirty with what he needed to do.

When he arrived back at the interrogation room, only Clint and Bucky remained. Natasha had texted him, while he was on the quinjet saying the others had arrived back at the tower and were going to look after Tony, just in case he woke up.

Steve opened the interrogation room to where Ryder was still cuffed. He certainly did look worse for wear. His eyes seemed frenzied and lost. There was an arrow sticking outside of his shoulder, blood seeping through the wound.

A hand-shaped bruise was blossoming against his throat. His face was almost to the point of being unrecognizable. Steve thanked them internally for leaving that for him. Bucky noticed him first and then Clint, who had been going away with breaking Ryder’s fingers.

Ryder let out a barely restrained painful gasp as Bucky punched him in the jaw again this time with his metal arm.

“Are you quite done,” Ryder said, spitting another mouthful of blood at Bucky.

Finally noting Steve’s entrance, he rolled his eyes.

“Oh, boy wonder here to join the fun. I am delighted to admit, that we’re actually quite done here. Seems your time is up,” Ryder said cheekily.

“Oh, I am quite the opposite,” Steve said. He placed his hands on opposite ends of the chair Ryder was in. “I’m just getting started.”

“Can’t be any worse than what these band of misfits have done. Captain America doesn’t have a dark side,” Ryder said, mouth heavy with blood.
“You just haven’t seen it, yet. But lucky for you, you’re about to.”

He pushed the broken finger even further back, calm at the painful groans that Ryder was emitting. He leaned close enough to him that Ryder wouldn’t mistake what he was about to say.

“Welcome to hell Ryder.”

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for such a late update, this chapter started at 5 pages and then quickly became 20+ pages. I just wanted all of the expectations I laid out for Ryder’s consequences to be the way I promised. Hope it was good for y'all as much as it was for me writing it!

Next chapter will be a little time jump (or if you people want to know what Steve does to Ryder, I guess I can add that chapter in before the time jump *wink* just comment and let me know.)

Thanks for all the comments, kudos, and bookmarks. I appreciate them dearly. Enjoy your day loves!
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

There are not enough excuses or even the most sincerest of apologies that could make up for this 7+ month hiatus. So I shall not bother you all with that, after all you came for a very much overdue update. Needless to say I am thankful for your patience (and also really nervous for the response of this chapter. I feel literal butterflies in my stomach) and hope this chapter is thoroughly enjoyable because I truly enjoyed writing it.

Much love,
Brixon

See the end of the chapter for more notes

My love, for I have given unto you the depths of my soul
And to my soul you have granted the sweetest mercy
For which I thought of myself as undeserving
So when I see you turn away and shield yourself from me
To hide the grief that you believe is not mine to bear
I pull you into my arms
And tell you to point to me where
This path that the person who hurt you has stumbled upon
And it is in that darkened direction
I march with greatened speed
To reach that of whom-
has been the reason for your pain
And by God bless the poor soul
Who stands at the end of this pointed path
For hell shall be but only that of a dream
Once I have shown them my wrath
-Brixon

For one sacred minute, no one said anything as Steve reentered the room they had been interrogating
Ryder in.

It was full blessed silence.

Ryder looked at him expectantly, head cocked to the side as if in amusement. Steve internally scoffed over how there was no inch of remorse on Ryder’s face.

He supposed a man like him would have no reason to pretend…at least not anymore. Steve stepped forward, the presence of Clint and Bucky grounding him and the comfort of knowing Tony was safe where Natasha was watching over him gave him a sense of ease.

“Welcome to hell,” Ryder repeated Steve’s worked back to him, a lisp forming from the broken tooth that was now also cutting into his lip. “Now, dear Captain I don’t suppose you would be the one greeting me to my descent. Though I must say it is a nice surprise.”

He glared leeringly at him, once and then once more, the second glare looking just a bit too long on the point where Steve’s pulse thrummed underneath his neck. Bucky’s hands reflexively tightened on his gun. Clint moved forward two steps.

Steve remained calm and impassive.

“What? Not going to say anything? Lover boy use up all the words tonight?” Ryder joked.

Blood flew from a wound on his shoulder and Steve hoped with a sort of rampant satisfaction that it would be enough for him to bleed out. However, Natasha was always deliberate in her attacks. She had left enough not to kill, but to permanently wound.

She had left the decision of Ryder’s fate within Steve’s hands.

And then the wound on his shoulder left from Clint’s arrow was also bleeding. Steve hoped both arms would lose function.

Ryder sighed loudly and shook his shoulders. Again Steve said nothing, but instead walked toward him and sat in the chair opposite of him. Steve noted that their positions were now slightly how they were, when they first began speaking. Steve had talked a lot. He had engaged because he had needed a confession to get the bastard everything that he deserved.

But now?

Well, he didn’t need much words to get his point across. Plus he knew that Ryder would just thrive if he were to engage. His power had often been in his ability of manipulation through language. Of course now he was having to deal with someone who would not so easily be entreated to how masterfully he corrupted the human language.

Ryder’s mouth kept moving and Steve tuned him out. His voice had only become a sort of aggravating buzz vibrating against his ear. He would let him talk his speed, but eventually fatigue would hit. His eyes were already dropping and his words were slurring.

He fought with himself over whether it would be morally right to just end Ryder right now.

Captain America.

The title which brought with it an array of connotations whether positive or negative depending on the day.
“I’m sorry.”

That broke Steve out of his thoughts.

“What?” he forced out, before he was even able to filter himself.

Ryder looked at him and then lowered his eyes. Steve realized it for what it was, but didn’t note it aloud. Bucky and Clint no doubt had also saw this act of “submission” for what it truly served to be.

“I’m sorry,” he said, slower that time. “I do apologize that my relationship with Tony has ended this way. Had I known my actions would have brought such pain and heartache I would have sought to rectify that immediately? However, you know Tony, Captain. I am sure you know.”

Steve’s lips tilted upward in a scowl.

“I mean Tony never admits what he truly needs. He just expects people to know his moods, likes, dislikes, and everything underneath the sun. And trust me I tried. Captain, you must believe me. I tried ever since we were young men just becoming adapted to college life. I tried so hard.”

“Bullshit,” was Steve’s one worded response.

Ryder had the audacity to look surprised. His eyes widened imperceptibly.

“I tell no lies. Tony never let on that he did not like what I was doing. Our relationship was fine, until you came along. Then you come along and Tony begins distancing himself. I tried to revitalize our relationship. I gave him everything and I assumed that was never enough, since I could never live up to his childhood crush on the great hero of all time Captain America.”

Steve should’ve cut out his tongue when he had the chance.

“And I know I’ve said this many times, but it begs to be repeated since none of you are getting it through your heads,” Ryder said, taking a cursory glance over all three of them, “Tony needed this. He needed someone taking control again and since you could not fulfill that role I stepped in.”

Steve’s jaw was tensed so tightly together, one could hear its grinding echoing through the room.

“Plus, I had to live up to the high expectations that you clearly set for yourself. I mean back when we were young and before your little brain damaged friend didn’t kill off Tony’s parents,” Ryder smirked.

Bucky stepped forward to stop Steve who had moved toward Ryder, hands stretching outward.

“Like I was saying,” he continued as though Steve wasn’t mere seconds away from choking him to lifelessness. “You’ve probably read up on Tony and noticed he was kind of troubled as a kid getting up to all types of nonsense.”

Steve looked at him to continue.

“Well, I remember one time I came home to Tony sporting a bruise on his cheek and Howard telling him that Captain America would disapprove of Tony running rampant through the town doing as he pleased. And then he said Captain American would have done far worse to discipline him, he wouldn’t take that type of attitude from his fellow soldiers.”

Steve couldn’t breathe.

Surely…
It was not possible that the man who he had stood beside would ever...

Surely, Howard would not have used him as justification to beat on his kid.

All too sudden, he felt acid burning at the back of his throat.

He knew times were different back then, but still those were things you didn’t-

And by everything holy no wonder Tony had hated him, when they first met.

“At that moment I knew. I had the validation of Captain America on my side to make any and all things I had justifiable. Besides Howard had already planted that little seedling of doubt…”

The chair screeched back from where Steve had been sitting. Bucky shout out a stay to Ryder. Ryder wiggled in his chair and rose an eyebrow as if saying, “How could I possibly move?”

Steve left outside feeling nauseated all at once. How much had Tony gone through? All Steve had wanted to do was give a few hits to Ryder make him unrecognizable and send him to the Raft or in a body bag.

He hadn’t wanted to know that…

…Howard had…

Steve threw up into the wastebasket that was brought in as a precaution after Tony’s accident. All of the morning’s contents and acid flew outside of him. Hot scorching tears burned bright at his eyes.

Fuck.

He was glad those mirrors were only one way.

He hadn’t wanted to let Ryder knowing that he did get to him.

Damn.

He felt a cold cloth being pressed into his hand. He took it without bothering to see if it was Bucky or Clint who had given it to him. He wiped his face, took a few calming breaths, and with the nerve of steel he walked back into the room.

Ryder continued the conversation as if it had never stopped.

“And you know sometimes on those nights, when we laid together I’d whisper to him,” Ryder petered his voice off to a whisper, “that Captain America would have left bruises far deeper and darker than the ones I had. After all, that’s what happened in Siberia. You made it so easy. If he was so accepting of the bruises from you, that made it all the more easy to justify the ones I gave to him. After all, yours was done out of poorly misplaced anger. Mine was done out of love. Every bruise, every scratch, every single piece of smooth skin that I ran over with my teeth and—”

Steve didn’t know what came over him or perhaps he did. Quite possibly it was Ryder trying to use Tony as the excuse for his own violent actions that made him do it. All he knew was that he had heard more than enough. It was surprising that he had even allowed him to speak for this long.

Besides what more could Ryder say that would ever possibly change or alter the events of the past or the ones that were meant to surely arrive in the near future?
He knew that Bucky could have stopped him, before the first shot rang out. He had the skillset to prove it and if not Clint was more than capable of diverting Steve’s next actions.

Both were uncaring to the bullet wound making a gaping hole in Ryder’s side. Neither did they care also for the strangled gasp that gurgled out of Ryder’s throat as his body reeled with the impact. He reached forward and pressed three fingers into the wound, watching as the skin gave way and stretched painfully.

Ryder chocked out a sound of pain, before he realized his mistake and moaned lecherously at him. Steve immediately brought his hand back and pressed at the jugular of Ryder watching as his throat spasmed and Ryder’s eyes flickered open and shut.

He could end him just like this.

A few more seconds and it would be over.

Steve wasn’t satisfied with his pain ending so soon.

So he pushed back and took his hand from around Ryder’s neck to his shoulders, grazing another wound that had been marked. His eyes stared at that for a moment as he watched with a determined ease that Ryder was slowly, but surely losing.

He stepped back and took a few calming breaths and handed the gun back to Bucky, who then placed it in his holster.

“Well, you sure do put up a nice fight,” Ryder exclaimed, spitting out blood onto the floor.

“Do you ever shut up,” Clint asked, getting tired with hearing Ryder’s voice the more he talked. Honestly, he was debating taking out his hearing aids.

“Only when I’m gagged,” Ryder sneered. “Though that’s more of my partner’s things. Heads up, Tony particularly likes being cho-”

“And we’re back,” Bucky said, this time not even stepping to stop Steve as he took the gun he had taken from Bucky and shot Ryder once in the kneecap.

Ryder let out a startled groan, tears beginning to mix in with the dirt and grime of his face. “Fuck,” he whined. “Not gonna lie that hurt, golden boy. Though I must say I am disappointed that you don’t do more. I mean these are just baby bruises.”

Steve growled, menacingly, in the back of his throat.

Ryder began taunting him, “Come on Captain. You want to hurt me, so hurt me. ‘Cause what you’ve done in the past few hours is only an increment of what you think I’ve done to Tony for almost this whole past year.”

Ryder smiled then spat out the tooth that had been dangling.

“Or are you too weak to defend the one who gave it up so easily at the first sign of anything resembling comfort,” Ryder joked. “Pity.”

Steve really needed to stop taking anything that Ryder said as something outside of him wanting to illicit some type of visceral response from himself.

Steve stepped closer, anger spurring him on.
Steve realized his mistake, when Ryder pulled his head forward in order to ram his head into Steve. Steve pulled back just enough for the impact to only hit him on the left side of his face. The bruise wouldn’t last longer than a day…but this anger well it certainly wouldn’t pass along so quickly.

“We’re finished,” Steve said. “There are no more reasons to continue this interrogation. It’s over. You can’t hurt Tony anymore. And before this day is over I’ll make sure that you never even say Tony’s name again.”

Steve stepped closer.

“See, what you have failed to come to the understanding is that I may be Captain America, but I did fight in the war. This mantle was not just for show, so don’t delude yourself to thinking that I was ever going to let you leave with the thought that you would win.”

“Sure, golden boy. I’m sure you just have a dark side waiting to pop out. Let me guess, it’s like the little grumpy in Snow White. That was during your time, right? Or, are you like a little bad guy in a Care Bears movie,” Ryder laughed.

Steve smirked and stepped even closer. Bucky backed away knowing that this was not going to end well for Ryder. Bucky was fully aware of what Steve could do. He wondered if Steve ever told his team about the time he left a guy paralyzed, after a fellow soldier had called Gabe Jones a derogatory term.

Gabe had tried handling the situation civilly, but when Steve had heard about it…well everyone knew that Steve hated bullies. He was just getting used to his new body too and that could be explained with the force that Steve sent that soldier across base camp, but Bucky knew better.

He had seen the calculation in Steve’s eyes a sign that he had known that a paralyzed soldier would not be able to continue up the ranks, no less be around other soldiers who he thought were less than himself because of the color of their skin. He wanted him gone and he knew that was the best time to do it.

Then there was the time in sophomore year, when Steve had dislocated a senior’s collarbone when he stated that he had plans to deflower Steve’s next door neighbor’s daughter, who was only thirteen at the time and then leave her by herself. When one of the boys questioned what would happen if she fell pregnant, the senior had said it would be fine. They didn’t expect much out of those girls in that neighborhood anyway.

Steve had promptly stood up from his chair in the cafeteria, stalked over, and socked him right there on the collarbone. Later, the senior would say he just wasn’t expecting it. Bucky knew that Steve had the strength of armor in that first of his.

So his Stevie well he always had this darkness in him, but only in the case to defend others. It had never gotten this bad to the point where Bucky could see death reflected in Steve’s eyes.

Bucky wondered if Clint could see the same. But looking at Clint now, whose eyes had widened curiously, Bucky knew that this team had never seen what Steve was capable of. But now Clint was getting a front row seat to it all.

Steve looked over at Bucky and smiled, knowing immediately where his thoughts were. Bucky smirked back slightly, mouthing, “Punk.”

And that was all Steve needed. He needed that reassurance that Bucky had his back like always. Then looking toward Clint, he got a silent nod of approval and ran his hands over his bow looking
satisfyingly at the wound he had left on Ryder’s shoulder.

Steve cracked his knuckles and stared deeply into Ryder’s eyes.

“You know Tony once told me he doesn’t trust a man without a dark side. To be frank, I’m glad he’s never had to see this side of me,” Steve said. “Because sometimes I can’t come back from it so easily. It takes me a while to recover.”

Ryder glared back at him.

“But, since you’re so under the impression that I’m weak and you can take me on how about you just prove to me you can do just that. And I’ll prove to you that I have a dark side and you better pray that I can recover enough that your body will be recognizable when I’m done with you,” Steve rasped.

Ryder actually began to look fearfully at him, hearing the way Steve’s voice had deepened and his stare had deepened into this cold glare.

Steve watched as his chest heaved up and down, the way it stuttered as Ryder struggled to breathe. He watched as Ryder struggled to come to the conclusion that he was at his end and Steve was the one who was going to bring it to him sooner rather than later.

He would be lucky, if Steve managed to pull back just enough to send him to the Raft.

“So come on, prove to me you can go head to head with me. You like fighting so much, yeah? So fight me.”

“Aww, Captain you wound me. Have you never heard of the term pick on your own si-”

Ryder’s statement was cut off with a sharp knock against his head that had his vision immediately swimming and blood pooling the inside.

“How can I fight you, if I’m at an unfair advantage?” Ryder questioned motioning to his tied up legs and arms.

“Steve,” Bucky whispered in warning.

Clint repeated the motion, his own concern growing.

Steve listened to neither warnings, instead choosing to unlock Ryder from his confines.

Ryder rubbed his bleeding wrists and stood up from his chair. He staggered a bit, but quickly found his balance and as soon as he did Steve landed a punch straight into his abdomen. The punch reverberated in the room and Steve was certain that he had broken at least two ribs.


Ryder pressed forward on shaky hands.

He stumbled.

“Come on. Fighting should be easy, given how many times you’ve fought Tony when he was defenseless. I don’t like repeating myself, Ryder. I said get the fuck up,” Steve said pulling him up by the tattered clothing off of his back.

Clint had never seen Steve like this before and to say he was surprised would be too little of a
statement. He had rarely even heard Steve curse before.

Ryder’s head lolled to the side and he tried raising his hands to punch Steve. His movements were too haggard and slow and resulted in Steve pushing his body against the wall behind him. Ryder bit his lip in anger and chose that to compel him to charge forward pushing against Steve.

Steve remained still and let Ryder try his assuming best. When Steve was done entertaining him, he twisted Ryder’s arm sharply against his back aggravating the still bleeding wound. Ryder hissed in pain.

“What’s wrong, Ryder? Am I hurting you? Do you want me to stop? Huh?”

“Fu…fuck you,” Ryder garbled spitting out blood into Steve’s face.

Steve harshly pushed Ryder away and wiped at the blood on his face. Ryder fell a few steps away and hunched over, eyes alight with malice.

“I’m done running in fucking circles with you,” Steve laughed without an inkling of humor. “And that was your whole point. You wanted more time and you knew that everything you said would make me want to act on it more.”

Ryder looked up from where he was holding himself up and winked. “Ah, now there’s a little bit of intelligence underneath that golden smile.”

“You liked this attention. You craved it even more so and I gave it to you,” Steve said in disbelief. He shook his head and ran his tongue against the inside of his cheeks. He swallowed a lump in his throat.

“But it’s over now. No more games, no more running in circles,” Steve said. “You have no more time.”

Ryder’s knees buckled and he fell to the floor, too weak to keep himself standing any longer.

Ryder had a moment to open his mouth and Steve knew enough from everything today to realize that he had heard enough. His foot came crashing against the back of Ryder’s head, effectively rendering him only unconscious.

“Lights out, bitch,” Clint snickered.

Steve stood outside the cell that Ryder had been placed in. He was unconscious all from the interrogation room at SHIELD to the Raft. He hadn’t even woken, when the guards had taken his body and began moving him.

Steve, Bucky, and Clint all trailed after the guards neither of them comfortable with just leaving him there. They all needed the assurance that he would be in that cell, once they left for good. The guards had told them that the majority of the CMPNY were here in the Raft and the other lesser offences had been relocated at other prison holdings. Admittedly, some CMPNY were unhappy with Ryder’s role in their capture.

Steve wondered whether this unhappiness would translate well, if he were to “accidentally” let a few into Ryder’s cell tonight.

Steve shook himself out of the thought as he watched the guards lock the prison cell that Ryder was
in. He was content to leave then and there that was until he saw Ryder had the sign of waking and Steve truly wanted to be there the moment Ryder realized he was never getting out and never getting near Tony again.

Finally, Ryder blinked his eyes open and saw that he was in a cell that was roughly 15x12. He felt caged in and he suspected everyone outside was watching him like an animal. His thoughts were confirmed when he saw Steve and his little band standing just outside his prison cells.

Steve watched as Ryder struggled to come to terms with his position. Ryder began pacing the room, angrily spewing at Steve, red hot anger alight in his path. Steve said nothing. Ryder pushed forward against the glass wall separating them and beat his hands bloody against it.

His teeth chattered and he looked as though he had finally lost it. His last grip on sanity was falling away before their eyes. Though Steve had doubts that there was even much of it to begin with.

“You can’t keep me here. Tony is going to come get me. He will always come and get me. He and I are forever. He’s mine. Mine, you hear me,” Ryder yelled, hands scratching at his skin. “You can’t keep us apart. You tried…but he’ll come back. He always does and if not I’ll get to him.”

“You won’t,” Steve said.

“Why? Why?” Ryder bemoaned. “I can do everything! I am the leader of the CMPNY. I have more power in my pinkie than you do in your entire being.”

“Yet you’re in there and I’m out here,” Steve truthfully answered.

Ryder elected not to hear that.

“What lies did you tell him? You can’t do this to me! Get Tony back here. I have to explain. I have to explain everything. I didn’t have enough time last time we spoke. He promised me to stay!”

Steve looked on with disgust as Ryder deteriorated before him.

“He wouldn’t leave his oldest friend, his love like this. Just let me speak to him again. Last meeting was spent with so much anger. He’s probably calmed down. Why aren’t you calling Tony?”

“It’s the ramblings of a mad man,” Bucky spoke, watching inside the cell with a narrow speculative expression. “There’s no sense in staying any longer.”

Steve shook his head. “Let’s leave this sad man to his delusions.”

“Delusions? I am not delusional,” Ryder screeched, blood flowing easily as he stretched. “He loves me. He’s coming back. He always does. Even after the first time at Winston’s he came back. You don’t know him, Steve. He’s weak. He’ll break me out of here.”

Steve tensed at how sure of himself Ryder seemed to be. Bucky as if noticing Steve was going to say something, pulled on his arm and shook his head. It was time to stop giving this man what he wanted.

Their attention.

He began mumbling to himself. “It’s not true. It’s not…Was it true?” Ryder questioned. “What Tony said about this…it couldn’t be true, could it about the pill? Because he wouldn’t do that to me. He loves me. He would never do anything to hurt me. You think you might have-”
Ryder cut himself off, finally aware that Steve and his companions were making moves to leave.

“He’s never going to be the same,” Ryder said, hoping to get the last word in. “After everything we’ve done together. After all the marks I’ve left on him, do you honestly think he’s going to get out of this the same?”

Steve didn’t bother turning around to say sharply, “You’re right. It’s going to take time and he will not be the same as he was.”

Ryder smiled as if content that Steve had finally come to see his side of things.

Steve looked over his shoulder, eyes peering into Ryder’s bruised and swollen ones.

“He’s going to be even better.”

Steve had turned back just enough to see Ryder’s expression of self-assurance stutter and the cracks of his identity begin to burst.

The doors closed to Ryder’s manic screaming and pleading that Tony would come back for him. Steve continued walking away, until he saw a familiar face being brought in by two guards. Her face was stretched into a somber expression, mouth pressed into a line sharp enough to cut through ice.

Cali.

Her eyes suddenly met his and her gaze lowered.

Steve didn’t either telling Bucky or Clint why he was moving toward her. The guards greeted him.

“Cali…what are you doing here? For your assistance in helping us find Tony, Fury should have at least sent you to the prison in Brooklyn not here at the Raft.”

Cali shook her head, somber expression deepening even further.

“No, I deserve this Raft here. Steve you don’t know even half of the things I’ve done for the CMPNY or for Ryder.”

Like what?

Steve had wanted to ask, but was unsure whether he wanted the answer. Thankfully, Cali saw through him. She stared over Steve’s shoulder and slumped forward as though trying to make herself appear smaller.

“I may have never been involved in the physical aspects that Ryder often had my sister or other agents enforce, but I was his informant. Anything he wanted to know, I had everything made available to him. I gave him files on…children…sick children whose parents wouldn’t miss them when we would do experiments for our serum. I changed hospital records to make it seem like it wasn’t Ryder’s fault that his patients were dying.”

With every sentence Cali spoke, it seemed that she grew in more anger and despondency.

“I gave him Tony’s schedule. I informed him of everything about how you all disbanded and helped him see that he could finally get the form of vengeance he had been seeking. I told Ryder that you all were on his tail, all the same time that you were coming to get Tony. I was the reason Ryder was able to leave and kill Isak. I’m the reason a mother is a widow and her children are fatherless now.”

Cali bit her lip and laughed humorlessly.
“So no Rogers, this is exactly where I belong,” Cali choked. She looked at the two guards holding her. “I’m ready to leave now.”

The guards turned and headed to her cell, but Cali looked back once more.

“For what it’s worth Rogers, I truly hope that you can heal everything that we’ve managed to break.”

And then she was gone, way before Steve was able to fully comprehend everything that she had told him.

When they were back on the quinjet, Steve finally allowed himself to hunch in, shoulders coming to the shells of his ears. No one said anything and he had been grateful for the silence. Even Clint who could ramble almost as fast as Tony did not dare to even breathe a word.

Steve inhaled shakily rubbing his hands with the back of his palms. He felt the unevenness from where there was dried up blood caking in between has handprint. For a few seconds, he kept his palms at the balls of his eyes just trying to escape any source of light that could stream through.

When he looked back, both Clint and Bucky were looking at him solemnly. Steve offered a tentative smile which stuttered as soon as all the events that led him to here came rushing forward.

Suddenly, he was going back to that room where they had found Tony after 52 days of fucking searching and never feeling like they were close.

Then he was there back in Siberia.

And crap had he…had he only served to strengthen what Howard told Captain America would do to Tony?

Only the harsh pinch to his side, startled him from his thoughts.

“Don’t go there, punk,” Bucky said, his own voice hoarse from disuse.

“How can I not?”

No, Clint signed back, having taken off their aids once they had left the Raft. You are not going to let Ryder get into your head too. The bastard has been put away for good and he is not going to ruin…he is not going to touch what any of us have here anymore. So don’t put yourself through that rabbit hole. If not for yourself, then for Tony.

Bucky agreed, his eyes watching the rapid movements of Clint’s hands.

“Agreed. Ryder felt pleasure and no remorse in his actions. Your actions were misguided and we all effectively hurt each other, but we’re learning. And I know you…you would never maliciously hurt anyone. So Steve don’t let him fool you into believing yourself as something you are not. It’s a disservice to you and Tony.”

Don’t let him take away this, Clint pressed his hand against Steve’s heart. Do not let him control anything or anyone anymore.

Steve looked at the both of them, eyesight blurred by tears. He nodded his head.

“Yeah, yeah you’re right.”

“Look, you’re not alone. All of us are going to help with moving forward. I mean we still have those
group therapy sessions and hey don’t look at me like that,” Bucky announced as he looked at Steve’s wincing.

Steve shrugged his shoulders and admitted, “I know… I know I’m still just trying to view therapy not as a form of weakness or punishment.”

Clint quirked an eyebrow in silent understanding.

Steve looked out the window of the quinjet, silently observing the view below them. How infinitely small they were compared to everything up here. He wondered if Tony thought the same thing every time he flew as Iron Man.

Bucky reached to him and placed a hand on his knee. “Whatever you need, we’ve got you.”

Agreed, Clint rested his hand on Steve’s shoulder. *Cliché as it is we are a family and though we have strayed we can heal. We can make sure Tony receives all the help and love he needs. We will listen to him, communicate more effectively, and not let him get so far into his head that he can’t trust us.*

Then Clint added, *And also showing him through not only our words, but also our actions that he can trust us again not only as teammates, but people who love him.*

Exhaling slowly, he didn’t outwardly express his gratitude for the strength Bucky and Clint were grounding him in. However, his smile which had the tense lines removed away from it was enough sign of gratitude for the both of them.

Once they arrived back at the tower, they immediately went to grab something to eat. While they were cautious that they needed to clean up, their stomachs were so hungry that they quickly washed their hands and grabbed whatever was available on the counter.

It looked like Bruce had made something quick for Tony and left what was remaining on the table. Thankfully, there was enough of it that it ceased the thrum of hunger resting in all of their stomachs.

The few minutes spent in the kitchen passed without speaking. All three men had been worn down by the day’s events and just looking at them anyone could see that they were a few moments away from falling asleep from their spot in the kitchen.

Clint was the first to leave, squeezing Steve’s shoulder in comfort.

Bucky was next, deciding to make sure Steve actually finished his meal before retiring to his own quarters.

Now left alone Steve took the time to slump forward and just let the fact that Tony was safe cloak him in a sense of security. His eyes drooped and he figured he could fall asleep right there if he just took a few more steps he could be sitting at the kitchen table and take a quick nap.

Unfortunately, Steve was more than dirty to be in a place like the kitchen. In fact, he had half the mind that they should have washed up at the communal showers on the third floor, before returning to the main one.

Of course in his hurry to get home Steve hadn’t thought of that. All he knew was that he wanted to get to Tony as quickly as possible. However, looking down at himself and seeing the scratches, bite marks, and cracked blood on the part of skin that was visible he told himself that Tony did not deserve to see him like that.
He had to clean up even just a little bit. He didn’t want to come see Tony and smell like quite literally blood, sweat, and tears. So he resolved to check on Tony briefly to let him know he was there, take a quick shower, and then return to wherever Tony was.

Then Steve had the plans of just watching over Tony, at least until he fell asleep if he wasn’t already doing so.

His trek to Tony’s room was stopped by Natasha running into him.

He had to thank her incredible skills for not dropping the two glasses, nearly filled to the brim. She rolled her shoulders back and looked at Steve quizzically, before turning completely to him to speak.

“So tell me is he rotting away in his jail cell or doing so fifty feet underground?”

Steve shifted his weight.

“He’s at the Raft.”

Steve wondered whether that was a look of disappointment in Natasha’s eyes.

“And?”

“And are you fine with that?”

Steve gritted his teeth, not answering because truthfully he was not.

Natasha nodded once and pat him on the shoulder. “Wash up and get some rest. Also Tony spent this whole time worrying and did not go to sleep once. So make sure he gets well rested. In the morning, when I come to check on him I want those bags underneath his eyes to be lessened at least a little, ya?”

“Ma’am, yes ma’am,” he mock saluted.

“Cheeky, no wonder Tony loves you,” she smiled, kissing his cheek. “Get some rest both of you, Rogers. We don’t need dad and mom being sleep deprived.”

Steve moved toward Tony’s room, but not before Natasha stopped him.

“Where are you going?” Natasha called out.

“Umm, to Tony?” he stated as a question.

Natasha smirked. “He wanted to make sure that you would come back to him.”

“And I did, sooo,” Steve drawled.

Natasha rolled her eyes. “He’s in your room. Here you can take these waters off of my hand then.”

“Oh,” Steve muttered half in response to Natasha, and half to his own self.

“Yeah, oh,” Natasha laughed, walking away. “Oh, sweet, sweet love. I need some vodka.”

Steve walked in and thought first of going to see Tony, but then thought otherwise. He went to his bathroom, which was only two doors down from his bedroom door, which was cracked open enough so that Steve could slide his body through it without even opening it further.
He could hear the television on and imagined what Tony was watching. Well, he would have more than enough time to figure out.

A smile rose on his face.

Tony had found comfort in his room.

Tony had waited for him.

And if Steve waited any longer to hop in the shower, Tony might actually fall asleep.

So he hurried himself in the bathroom, stripping himself of his uniform. Dry cleaning was going to be awful.

The cool water was a nice opposite to the fire licking up and down Steve’s skin. Brief moments of Ryder’s mocking taunts and Tony’s pained expressions were interspersed with one another. He wondered quietly to himself how long it would be, before those vivid images would become muted.

In a distressing manner, he felt deep within himself that perhaps these images would always stay rooted in his mind coming up every once in a while…just like the coldness that came in fragments as a memory of his time spent frozen.

Tilting his head up to the ceiling, he let the water hit his neck. He let it wash away the bloody finger prints that had wrapped across his neck in Ryder’s last ditch effort to get a semblance of dominance.

Steve turned to grab a towel and wash himself clean.

It was white.

And something that far removed from dirt, would take an incredible time to get rid of blood stains. He still didn’t know why they had white towels in the tower with as much dirt and grime the Avengers seemed to rack up.

So instead, Steve resolved to wash himself with his hands that were equally as bruised and bloodied as the rest of him. However, he could not find it within himself to particularly care for his state of being, since he was so satisfied with how things had ended.

He had enjoyed that look of haunting desperation on Ryder’s face. He had marveled at how Ryder appeared to just wilt before him. He hated the fact that Ryder still believed Tony would come for him.

The bastard.

“Language,” he said aloud to himself. “Come on, Steve.”

After that, he took more time actually washing himself off of the day’s events than spending time ruminating about all that had taken place in what seemed like forever. He looked down at the bite marks left on his forearm and picked at the swollen skin there.

Sighing he grabbed onto soap, and pressed it into his skin. In some places, the scented soap soothed an ache that had been long buried just enough for Steve to settle in his revenge. Still Steve wondered if it was enough. He wondered, if all that he had done today would make him content later.

He hoped to all things above that days…no even years from now he wouldn’t wish that he had put a bullet through Ryder’s head or had pressed the kill switch that Bruce had handed to him, before
Tony had left the interrogation room with Ryder. That kill switch, the simple command of saying yes, and having that little detonator go off in his body was compelling.

The bar of soap broke between his hands.

Steve took a few calming breaths, put one half of the soap bar to the side, and used the other to finish cleaning himself. He calmed himself down with thoughts of Tony laying asleep in his bed, curls lying loosely on his pillow. He brought to mind the soft puffs of breaths that only he could hear. He thought of how good it was to be able to be near him and hold him close without fear of him leaving. He liked to think how there was still enough space beside Tony, that had Steve thinking that Tony may have chosen his position on his bed on purpose, as though he was making room for Steve.

And for those reasons alone, did Steve finally finish taking the slowest shower to mankind and get out.

He stepped outside the shower, quickly toweling off, and threw on a pair of sweatpants and a loose t-shirt. He didn’t even chance looking at the mirror, knowing that he looked tired beyond belief. But damn if it had not all been worth it.

When Steve closed his bathroom door to step inside his bedroom, he was surprised to see Tony hovering over his StarkPad, one he had no doubt gotten very interested in as Natasha had left to go get some water. A warm smile brightened his equally tired expression. Steve wanted to run his hands through Tony’s hair and entreat him to get a few more hours of sleep.

Instead he choose to lean languidly against the door frame, arms crossed loosely against his chest. There was a moment of stillness as he looked at Tony’s face lit by the cool hues that radiated off of the StarkPad and listened to the muted voices on the television. Tony only became alert to his presence as Steve rasped his knuckles gently against the door frame, alerting Tony that he was here.

Tony tensed slightly, before the tension eased off his shoulders and a soft smile lit up his expression. He placed the StarkPad down in favor of looking at Steve fully, who by then had stepped closer into the bedroom and was now near the foot of the bed.

“Hey,” Steve said, hoping that his voice sounded smooth.

Tony leaned forward bracing his elbows on his thighs.

“Hey, yourself,” Tony spoke.

The two smiled stupidly at one another and it was as though for that split second in time that all of this turmoil and paint that had happened had vanished. Steve felt his chest loosen at the thought that Tony was here and he was safe. He had no thoughts in his mind that Natasha was not capable of protecting Tony, but it was better seeing him safe and sound with his own eyes. Tony seemed to be doing much of the same, eyes traveling all at once over Steve’s body, tracking for any signs of scarring or blood that had not been there when they were last in each other’s spaces.

Steve was content to let him look for a bit and chose to uncross his hands from his chest and ran one through his hair. Tony’s voice stopped him from doing the motion halfway.

“Is he dead?” came Tony’s voice, scratchy from either misuse or tiredness.

Steve tilted his head, then followed Tony’s line of eyesight. Apparently, blood is pretty hard to remove from your fingernails. Steve resisted the urge to place his hands behind his back, and instead stared at Tony.
He searched his eyes to see, if Tony would give him the answer of what he wanted. All he needed was the resolution that Tony would prefer Ryder dead and he would go back and do it, forget the consequences of marring his All-American innocent persona...those who even still believed in that image were fooling themselves.

Tony looked back with as much concentration, blinked slowly, and tried to figure out what he wanted Steve to say.

“Would you prefer to know the answer?” Steve questioned back, closing some of the remaining distance between the two and sitting opposite of Tony who was now perched against the headboard.

Tony inhaled deeply and shook his head once, allowing his head to fall against Steve’s shoulder. He shrugged his shoulders and heaved a heavy sigh.

“I’m not sure,” Tony whispered. He began picking at his fingers, a nervous tick Tony had developed as a child.

“On one hand who are we to play judge, jury, and executioner you know? Like surely there are lines drawn and this...knowing he’s at the Raft should be enough. It is enough,” he quickly added looking at Steve.

“It should be enough,” he whispered soft enough that it was nearly muffled. “I’m sorry my thoughts are all over the place. I kept on debating with myself over which conclusion was better.”

“That’s okay,” Steve said as he wrapped his arms around Tony’s waist and pulled him closer to himself. He tightened his grasp when Tony tilted his head to rest between Steve’s collarbone and his chin.

Tony nodded his head against Steve, before pulling away slightly just so he could look Steve in the eyes. Tony reached out tentatively to run his fingers across the mark that was beginning to blossom under Steve’s eyes. It was small, but Tony hated the idea that he had placed Steve in a position to be hurt.

Steve as if knowing Tony’s train of thought, brought Tony closer to him and kissed the top of his forehead. Tony melted into it, seeking the comfort which Steve was more than happy to be a consistent source of.

“I...on the other hand I feel like it would be better knowing that he’s dead...that there’s no possible way for him to get to me, which is stupid because he’s at the Raft. But somehow I can’t help thinking that if he’s alive he still has the chance to come back. I mean I thought he was out of my life, once he left MIT and he came back. I have seen what all Ryder can do and maybe I’m just too smart to put such faith in the Raft to hold him...I mean you all escaped the Raft and Ryder may not be on the same skill level-”

Steve looked down and was about to tell Tony to breathe, but Tony kept going.

“Which is terrifying, Steve. It terrifies me that he could have the ability to take me back to that hotel room, take me away from you all and...” Tony cut off there and his breath hitched in his throat.

Steve tightened his hold on Tony as Tony reached up to rub furiously at the tears that were threatening to fall.

“I would never let that happen.”

The unspoken word again did not go unnoticed by either of them.
Tony pulled back to look at Steve, wanting that statement to be a promise. However, he struggled with himself seeing as though he hadn’t had the best luck with promises anymore.

“I want you to promise me, but also…” Tony bit his lip and looked to the side of the room, narrowing his eyes like he was training them not to betray him and release the waterworks.

“But also” Steve repeated, gaze never wavering from Tony.

“Ryder made me a lot of promises. Promises to be better and never hurt me the way others have. He promised to stay and that’s the only promise that I wished that he had never fulfilled.”

Tony laughed bitterly and the noise pierced at Steve’s ears.

“And he didn’t Steve. He never did,” Tony gasped wetly. “I kept trying. Everything that I did was because I believed in those promises that he would get better. I lied to my son. I lied to Rhodey, Pepper, all of you. And for what?”

Steve swallowed what felt like knives crawling up his throat.

“And I promised to be patient. I…I let…” Tony sniffed and could not finish his statement.

“Hey, Tony no,” Steve began to argue, shaking his head fiercely.

“I let him do this to me,” Tony said, trying to push away from Steve, but Steve only drew him closer.

“No, Tony. Hey, no,” Steve said placing his hand on Tony’s chin to bring their gazes matching each other. “You did not let him do anything to you. Everything that happened to you was not because you let it happen.”

“Steve-”

“Ryder manipulated you at a time where you were feeling vulnerable and he knew exactly just how to make everything fall into place. He knew that the people you trusted, your friends, your family had all but gone off to separate corners of the world.”

Tony pressed his face closer to Steve’s chest, not wanting to look him in the eyes anymore.

“And I…I should have seen it. We all should have seen it. Even Miles was trying to tell us-”

At the mention of Miles, Tony froze up. He could not stand the fact that Miles had known and that he had placed him in a position to witness how his baba let someone hurt him. Tony did not want to hear that at the moment and Steve realized all of that without Tony even saying anything, but what he didn’t expect was the complete shutdown of emotion that passed Tony’s expression.

It was as if everything shuttered off and Steve wished he could retrace his steps back to when those warm hurt-filled brown eyes were staring into his own, hopeful that Steve could protect him for the night and hopefully for the rest of their lives.

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore. Not right now, not tonight,” Tony said stiffly.

Steve nodded, knowing not to push. Tony breathed in and tilted his head up to look back at Steve.

Tony stared back to the bruise blossoming on Steve’s face and caressed the skin.

“I’m okay. It’s nothing I haven’t been through before. And for you I would do anything,” Steve admitted, grabbing the hand that Tony had on his face and brought it closer to him in order to kiss the
Tony’s eyes fluttered, half from tiredness and half from a little curl of adoration licking up against his heart.

“I never wanted any of you to get hurt,” Tony muttered falling back to rest against him again, this time his nose in the crease of Steve’s neck breathing in the scent of soap.

“And we never wanted you to get hurt,” Steve whispered back.

“Mhm,” Tony whispered. “Just want everything to be...” he trailed off, eyes drooping even more.

“Are you falling asleep?” Steve laughed softly, his voice rumbling Tony slightly.

“No,‘s just been a long day,” he said, the yawn escaping his lips arguing against what he just said. “Not sleepy though. Come on Steve. I once went on a 72 hour work binge.”

Steve raised a brow.

“Which is a reason that Pepper gave me a code to make sure you never are allowed in your lab after you go beyond twelve hours at a time,” Steve replied back. “No one is supposed to stay awake that long.”

“The traitor. FRIDAY disable Cap’s code. No one gets to tell me how long I can work,” Tony huffed, rubbing at his eyes tiredly.

Steve tried to manfully stifle the coo he wanted to make at the adorable tired expression. He notably failed, when a quick awe slipped his lips and Tony raised one eyebrow artfully at him in response.

“Sure, as soon as I receive permission from Miss Potts,” FRIDAY responded cheekily.

“Damn, Pep. How is it that my girl is taking orders from Pepper? What has the world come to?” Tony bemoaned. “Anyways...movie?”

“Huh?” Steve questioned, albeit a little lost as to why Tony was suggesting a movie, when he looked like the perfect spokesperson for some nighttime sleeping commercial.

“We could watch a movie. Yeah?”

“Not tonight, sweetheart,” he said, hoping the term of endearment would lean him some favor in getting Tony to rest.

He leant Tony back so he could be positioned lying against the bed.

“You need rest and I’m pretty certain Natasha will kill me tomorrow if she realizes I didn’t do the one instruction she left me with.”

Tony’s arm tightened instinctively around him.

“No, I promise I’m awake. Steve we can watch a movie and I’ll stay awake. Look I can even go grab coffee, there’s no reason for me to leave right now. Look night time television is the best...okay actually it’s the worst. Nothing is on, but infomercials. So Netflix it is. FRIDAY girl can you que up Netflix?”

His bright eyes staring at him would have been adorable, if it hadn’t been for the thinly veiled edged of panic taking over his expression.
“I’m not going to make you leave Tony nor am I going to leave,” Steve said shifting so that Tony could lay even further down on him.

“You need sleep, I need sleep. There’s this comfortable bed both of us can share.”

Tony nodded, curling his hands around the bed sheets. “Don’t leave.”

Steve strangely felt a sense of Déjà vu and called to mind the time that Tony had woken up from a nightmare and told Steve not to leave.

“Never again,” he promised reaching forward and tucking a stray curl behind Tony’s ear.

Tony rested his head underneath Steve’s chin and traced imaginary shapes on his chest. His breathing that hadn’t evened out all the way was the only indicator that Tony was not falling asleep.

A few minutes passed of this comfortable silence, before Tony muttered, “Close your eyes Steve and rest.”

“I’m going to in a bit,” he said.

Tony reached forward with his hand and closed Steve’s eyes. “Sleep.”

“Okay.”

Steve waited for Tony’s breathing to event out and a few more minutes to wait until he was actually truly asleep. Steve was thankful that Tony was a relatively hard sleeper, so he didn’t hear Steve’s breath pick up nor feel the slight change of their resting positions.

How could Steve go asleep with not making sure someone was watching over Tony? He would have time to get a few seconds of rest in tomorrow, but for now his own sense of paranoia crawled at him.

He looked and saw the door was still cracked and that the television was providing a nice source of light.

As Tony laid asleep, tucked underneath Steve’s chin, Steve started wondering if he had done the right thing or if he should have done more.

“FRIDAY,” Steve spoke.

“Yes, Captain,” FRIDAY answered.

“I still have access to the kill switch with Ryder, yes?”

Steve awaited FRIDAY’s response.

“Yes, you, sir, and Director Fury are still the only ones have full authorized access to the switch. Would you like for it to be activated, Captain?”

Steve mulled over this and paused.

His thoughts shifted as he pushed the question aside, not quite ready to give an answer.

He remembered first meeting Tony and the words he had carelessly thrown at him, so angry that he had been displaced in a time where he knew nothing and no one, yet there was Tony so sure of himself and the world around him.
He searched back for the first time he felt comfort in Tony’s smile as Steve fumbled with the new StarkPad Tony had gifted to him. Told him he should move on from the archaic use of pencil and paper and move onto some digital art.

Tony had been the first person he had drawn on the app installed on his new StarkPad. Steve remembered shyly showing it to Tony who had then proudly ran around the tower officially saying, “I’m Captain America’s muse.”

Clint had raised an eyebrow in amusement and spoke around an apple saying, “Always knew he wanted to draw you like one of his French girls.”

Steve argued that he didn’t have any French girl to draw, which resulted in both Clint and Tony snickering for the rest of the day.

Steve had been unsure of the meaning, but as he watched the movie with Tony that same week his cheeks had burned with an embarrassing sense of want. He had turned to tell Tony that he would be honored to draw him like one of his French girls.

Of course Tony had been fast asleep, dead to the world and hopefully being accepted into his safe world of dreams.

He would do anything to protect those he loved, but most of all Tony. He couldn’t even imagine to know all of what Tony wanted but he had gotten fairly good at figuring out how his facial expressions translated to what he was trying to say.

“I love you,” he whispered into Tony’s hair.

“I love you so much that sometimes I feel like I can’t breathe because you’ve taken nearly all the air in my lungs. And it scares me,” Steve admitted. “It scares me because I never want to lose you. I’ve lost so many people in my life and I had gotten used to it, but now…”

Steve shook his head.

“Now I feel like I’m whole, you know? I look at you and I see the reflection of everything that I have ever hoped for in my life. I loved you from the very moment that I realized that you were the one and you’re probably wondering ‘hey Steve why are you getting all sappy when I’m sleep like a loser,” Steve broke off laughing.

“And then to that I would probably say something like you were the very first thing I was terrified in this brand new century. And that was because I found out to me you were love in its simplest forms and I hadn’t had that since Bucky and my ma.”

“If you were awake, I wonder if you would laugh at my poor attempts of waxing poetry. Though for you I’d tell a thousand sonnets,” Steve said his voice taking on this sort of melodious presence.

He hummed softly, closing his eyes and feeling the weight of Tony’s body on him center himself.

He remembered the sonnet his mom had spoken to him, whilst she was teaching Steve to read. Though they never had much the money to get a proper education, his ma had always been adamant to teaching him the power of love transformed and translated through language.

He could remember his ma, her arms wrapped around his thin frame as she recited word from word the sonnet she loved so dearly.

*His ma had turned to look from his father toward him. He had only been eight at the time and his*
father was still a presence, albeit unreliable presence in their lives. That following year, he had finally left them.

Steve had starred up in admiration of his ma, whose bright blonde curls framed her face like an angelic halo. Even his father had sat silently, watching on with unadulterated love. Steve leaned back as a racking cough shattered through his chest.

“Shh, my love,” his ma had soothed, while rubbing her hand against his chest in efforts to calm the burning within.

She knew it was futile, but she had hoped that her love could be woven into his small body and heal him.

In order to take his mind off of the pain, his ma had grabbed her journal and flipped open to a page. Her voice sounding like the gentle breeze after a hot summer’s day flew into Steve’s ear. He pressed himself closer, wanting to keep that sound for himself.

As her hands ran through his sweaty hair, his ma began to speak from her journal. Later, his ma would tell him that Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s sonnet, “How Do I Love Thee,” had been her favorite sonnet as a child. His father who silent at the time, finally spoke up and claimed that she had even recited some verses to him as her wedding vows.

His ma in turn blushed and winked at her husband.

“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of being and ideal grace.
I love thee to the level of every day’s
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for right.
“Now you Steve,” his ma welcomed. “It’s your turn.”

Steve looked at his mother and back down at the paper. With her help, he began to speak hoping his voice sounded nearly as half good as his ma’s did.
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.

I love thee with the passion put to use

In my old griefs, and with my childhood’s faith.

I love thee with a love I seemed to lose

With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,

Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,

I shall but love thee better after death.

Steve at some point had begun reciting them aloud, but he was too far gone to stop now. He was only glad that Tony was still resting peacefully. His fingers ran through his hair, much like his mom did when he was younger.

He stared up at the ceiling, weighed down by this love. He had never known he could love someone so deeply before. Sure, he had loved Peggy, his ma, Bucky. But those loves were different.

But this…

Steve had nothing to define it, but by love in its simplest and purest forms.

And maybe love is what compelled him to do what he did next.

He hadn’t talk to his ma like this in years, instead choosing to do it inwardly in passing. He wondered if his ma was disappointed that he had forgotten her in all of the mess that he had found himself in.

He had no tomb to kneel over and offer flowers, but he had this silent moment here in the room he felt the safest in.

“I love him ma,” he said, feeling a giddiness swell inside of him. “And you would love him too. I’m sure of it. You told me to protect the person I fell in love with, to always hold them close, and to just feel freely without regard to how anyone might try to ruin us.”

Steve blinked away the tears.

“And ma…there’s been so much that went wrong. But I’m trying. I’m trying and I need you to give me strength. Speak to me and tell me how to love without feeling like I’m going to do something wrong. Because I can’t live without him…”

“…I tried. Ma, I tried and I nearly lost myself finding reasons to stay away and now that I’m here I never want to leave his side. He’s everything you used to tell me about finding someone you love.”

“Whoever you love Stevie they have to love you back,” his ma, Sarah, had told him, one night when he was twelve and his father had long since packed his last remaining bag and skipped town.

She had sat Steve down, after he had told her his crush, Rachel, had rather harshly rejected his invitation to their school dance. Steve had nearly been brought to tears as she told him that she could not dance with someone who would break as soon as she wrapped her arms around him.

Therefore, Steve had resolved to never ask anyone to dance again. Who cared if everyone was finally learning to dance and get dates to those said dances.
It was fine.

But it hadn’t hurt less, when Rachel had coyly turned to Bucky and asked whether he was going to ask, to which she would readily say yes.

Steve bright with anger did not stay to hear Bucky’s refusal, but had ran out the school and headed home.

Walking home, Steve just resolved never to learn to dance. Besides Rachel was right he would never find the right partner who would even dare “risking” his small fragile body or even worse be seen with him attempting to dance. Nearly half of the girls in his grade were half a foot taller than him.

He had told his ma that he had loved her that morning, before he asked her out. So when he came home and his ma saw the dried tear tracks on his face, she had automatically known what was wrong and thus began to impart some wisdom on the young boy.

“They have to be someone you can grow with. Never be with a person who can’t continue to learn beside you. No one is exempt from getting better every day. Stay cautious of the ones who are stuck in the past with no hopes for the inevitable future.”

Tony exemplified always growing, learning, and being cautious of the past and present while also being in conversation with the future.

“And it doesn’t hurt if they’re good looking as well,” his ma had winked, squawking slightly when Steve pushed away her hand. “But seriously, beauty…as cliché the statement is…comes from within. A good heart far exceeds a beauty which can wilt as seasons past.”

“Then why can’t anyone see my good heart ma?” his voice broke.

“Oh, darlin’ the ones who can’t see it are the ones not worth bothering. If they can’t see how brilliant, loving, caring, amazingly talented artist, and just genuine all around the best son a mother could have…then they are not worthy to even be given a second glance,” his ma had soundly said and the power in her voice made him believe everything she said was sacred and true.

And how many times had Tony told him how wonderful his art was or how nice of a person he actually was aside from his title.

Sure, he commented him on his body, but after seeing at sometimes made Steve uncomfortable, because for Steve the experiment had still only happened a short while ago and he was having trouble adjusting, Tony had begun complementing him other ways.

At first it had been his skills in battle. Then when he learned about his art, Tony was always commissioning him for something to put in his lab even if it was just a sketch of DUM-E. Tony would smile at him, brightly eyes searching to make sure Steve was alright and taken care of.

He made Steve feel as though he belonged in this future.

And the best thing was, he was the first one who saw him more than just a soldier.

“And what happens when I find someone I love who loves me back like that?” Steve tentatively questioned. The question even sounded farfetched coming from his own mouth. After all, the only people to have ever unconditionally love him were Bucky and his ma.

“You do everything in your power to protect it, my son,” his ma said with a kiss to his cheek. “And trust them to do the same.”
"I will," he said, his back standing taller. If anyone ever loved him like this, well he would sure as heck try to make sure nothing broke them up ever. He’d be the best husband in the world. How couldn’t he be, especially with his mom telling him everything about love?

"Captain," FRIDAY repeated, patiently awaiting Steve’s answer. “Would you still like me to send a transmit to the Director at the Raft enabling the kill switch?"

“And what happens when you love someone and they get hurt” this time it was Bucky asking his ma the question.

His ma had been hovering over the stove, face sweaty from the heat swelling up in front of her. She turned to face the two young men and looked at them curiously. She had not expected the teenage boys to be home this early.

They had come back from their spring dance. Steve had gone stag of course and Bucky had gone with Belinda a girl two years his senior. Belinda was a sweet girl. Okay, no Steve was being nice because Belinda was Bucky’s dame, but goodness heaven that girl was a nightmare.

A complete and honest nightmare.

Steve swore that he had pulled out more blonde hairs in frustration over Bucky’s blind love for Belinda than he had ever done so before.

Of course he had told Bucky, to which Bucky explained that Belinda just had character. Character my ass had almost slipped Steve’s tongue, before he remembered the bitter taste of lye soap that his ma had made him wash his mouth of with one time muttering on about, “Language.”

Bucky slumped onto the over worn couch taking off his tie he had borrowed from his dad. Steve followed suit and loosened the collar on his shirt. Bucky pinched Steve’s smaller body, when Steve refused to remove his feet from the little wooden coffee table.

“You know your ma ain’t like your feet on her table like that,” Bucky conspiratorially whispered, waiting for the moment for Steve’s ma to turn her head slightly and see Steve’s still shoe covered feet resting on her table.

Steve rolled his eyes, but listened to the advice anyways. He didn’t need his ma needling him about how unsanitary it was to rest his feet on the coffee table.

A few minutes later, Steve’s ma came in carrying three bowls of soup and sat down in the rocking chair opposite to Steve and Bucky.

And now here they were. Bucky’s question left hanging in the air as Sarah blew onto her spoonful of soup, before swallowing it. She rested the bowl on the table and crossed her legs at the ankle.

“Is there something that I need to know James?” his ma said pulling out his full name.

Bucky lifted one shoulder. “I mean I don’t know. It’s not like serious. I can just tell she’s been sad a lot lately and I want to help, but don’t know how. Like we went to the dance and everything was fun. We were just dancing and then I don’t know she started crying all of a sudden.”

“Girls cry a lot Bucky. She may just be hormonal,” Steve said, mouth full of burning hot soup.

“Like you?” Bucky teased back.

Steve pushed him, jostling his own soup.
Sarah rolled her eyes fondly at the two of them.

“Well, in my experience when you see someone you love is hurting and you don’t know why you talk to them. Try to figure out the source of the hurt and be there in the steps of them moving forward in their healing process in whatever shape or form that may be in.”

Sarah had known she lost Bucky by his confused expression.

“Okay, let’s say Steve is hurting and I want to help him,” Sarah began.

“Why am I being used as the example?”

“Because you’re a sad moody artist,” Bucky chuckled.

“At least mine fits with my persona. What’s your reason, drama queen?”

“Boys,” his ma interrupted. “Am I going to have to separate you two?”

“No ma’am.”

“No ma.”

“As I was saying, I love Steve, so I want to protect him from whatever thing is causing him sadness. However, in order to do so I want to know what is going on. Then I can help by either giving advice, removing any external or internal factors that are giving him grief, or being there for him to talk through whatever is happening.”

“And what if they don’t talk? Like Belinda won’t say anything to me. We left early to walk her home because she wouldn’t stop crying or looking all sad and I asked what’s wrong and she was like you wouldn’t understand.”

“And sometimes you won’t. Sometimes you won’t understand and that’s okay.”

“But how am I supposed to make things okay, if I don’t understand?”

“Yeah, like we can’t make everything bad in the world go away and also we are affected by different bad things in the world. So how do I help someone with someone whose situation I have never been in?”

Bucky’s question was hinted toward Belinda.

Steve had asked because he wanted to help Bucky and saw how much this whole Belinda thing was tearing him apart. Even though Belinda was a nightmare in purple, she apparently was Bucky’s nightmare.

Steve shivered.

Steve and Bucky waited as his ma gathered herself, trying to answer their questions. Sarah had thought she had a few more years, before she had to deal with these hard hitting questions. She wondered if she was fully qualified to even speak on this given her own failure at her own marriage.

But she loved her son and she loved Bucky as if he were her own as well. So she gave them the best advice a mother in her position could.

“In my understanding, you learn. I know it may not be what you want to hear, but it’s true. Everyone deals with pain differently and the way they heal from it may not be the same as I do, or
you Bucky, or even Steve does. That does not go to say that it’s hopeless to try.”

Bucky frowned, sinking into the couch even further.

“With Belinda, you be patient. Let her move at her own pace and trust that when she is ready and comfortable she will confide in you about what troubles her. And until then, just stay. Stay rooted in the love you have with her and let her know that you’re beside her every step.”

“And when I find out what’s troubling her? Can I punch whoever it is?”

“Why so violent?” Steve snickered.

“Oh, like you’re an angel. How about we tell your ma how you were found in the hallways fighting Willie?”

“All I hear from your mouth are lies,” Steve whispered, turning his head to look at Bucky.

“Excuse me? Steve what have we talked about getting into fights at school?”

“Bucks is lying mom,” Steve hissed, pinching Bucky subtlety.

Bucky yelped sharply, staring daggers at Steve. “Of course Steve, you’re an angel.”

“Now, we don’t have to lie about that,” Sarah inserted.

Bucky roared with laughter as Steve let out an outraged, “Ma!”

“But can I punch them?”

Steve looked at his ma imploringly.

Sarah sighed deeply, wondering how on earth she had been saddled with such fight driven young boys to be around.

“Violence is never the answer.”

“I’m hearing a “but” there Ms. Rogers,” Bucky grinned.

Sarah picked up her bowl of soup and raised an eyebrow. “But in the cases it is the answer, you make sure that they don’t leave standing and are never in another position to even think about hurting the one you love.”

Steve looked at his ma in a new light. “Speaking from experience?”

Sarah smirked. “Let it be said that you may have gotten your artistry from you dad, but those defense skills are all me.”

“Ooooh I like this side of you Ms. Rogers,” Bucky laughed. “Tell me more.”

Steve shook his head and they all resumed eating there lukewarm soup and planning whether they wanted to see the new film coming out tonight.

“Captain?” FRIDAY repeated.

Steve looked to the ceiling closed his eyes.

Inhale.
Exhale.
Inhale.
Exhale.

He opened his eyes and pleaded for his ma to speak to him just this once. And then as if through an underserving grace or his half sleep-riddle mind he heard her.

Many miles away, from which all transcended time, a voice the sound of a soft breeze whistling through the trees spoke into the night.

“And to this I tell you my son,” the voice echoed and Steve had no thoughts in his mind to write it off as his imagination, far stranger things had happened in his life. “That of whom his love has brought closer to me in the years that have been unkind. Sleep my son and rest. The decision weighs heavy on your heart, but your love shall ease its burdens.”

FRIDAY repeated the question.

And this time he had not hesitated to answer.

I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where,
I love you directly without problems or pride:
I love you like this because I don’t know any other way to love,
except in this form in which I am not nor are you,
so close that your hand upon my chest is mine,
so close that your eyes close with my dreams.

- One Hundred Love Sonnets: XVII; Pablo Neruda

Chapter End Notes

Next update will arrive this March 16 because I have to work at a film festival next weekend and won't be near my computer. (But be rest assured I have made certain precautions to make sure I actually update after all we only have three more chapters to go!!!!).

Thanks for all the comments, kudos, and bookmarks. I appreciate them dearly.
I'm just going to go ahead and say it's been hard for me to keep on an actual set date. I know this was supposed to be updated on 3/16 but I kept pushing it back. Anyways now that I've finally sat down and wrote it I just need to edit and it'll be posted this Saturday. So Ch. 38 WILL BE POSTED ON SATURDAY

I just wanted to let you all know because I was getting antsy like lol I haven't posted in so long! So instead of actually saying when to expect an update just know I will update within a month and a half span for Ch. 39. May be within a week, may be within a month. Sorry for the delays and sporadic updates.

But here's a little short teaser to tide you by until Saturday.

Three weeks had gone by, since Tony had last seen Ryder. Three weeks had slowly passed by, spent with looking at blank ceilings as Steve tried coaxing him back to sleep. Tony had counted those three weeks, always noticing that the time was moving forward even if he felt like he was still in the same spot that he had been in. His therapist said it was okay to feel like this. Tony of course had greatly disagreed, citing the fact that he just needed to fucking move on. He was tired of these weeks draining him, how Ryder’s presence still lingered long after he had left.

It had been two weeks, since Tony caved and asked FRIDAY to tell him what happened to Ryder. For whatever reason, he wanted to keep Steve away from his reaction of it all.

FRIDAY told him, with certainly no feelings withheld, that the Captain had enforced the kill switch and Ryder would die within the next week or so. FRIDAY explained the effects of the kill switch were debilitating and would be felt with extreme pain as his body slowly shut down.

Tony had muffled his cries in his towel as he sank to his bathroom floor. He cried in sorrow for feeling like he had lost something and then he also cried because of the sheer relief he felt. He had never known how much he had wanted Ryder’s presence not only gone from his home, but also gone everywhere.

Later, Tony would wonder if wishing death upon someone in that way was justified. Later just wasn’t going to be in any near future.

It had been one week, since Fury had given Tony information that Ryder had died.

When Tony questioned how were his remaining seconds, Fury stared at him and stated, “In pain, kept saying the fire was melting everything inside of him.”

Tony clenched his jar and nodded, feeling all at once even a little more satisfied even by Fury’s short account of his death.

He hated how soon after that he had to remodel his entire floor and nearly almost all of the main floor just to erase the footprints and hand prints Ryder had left behind. Never mind the fact that the hand
prints and footprints on Tony’s body were healing as well, some only but a faint shadow on his tan skin.

Tony wondered sometimes if it was easier having a physical reminder of Ryder’s abuse on his body. He questioned himself and why it was hard to reconcile his belief that as those physical bruises on his body faded away, the ones felt sometimes even deeper on his heart, soul, and mind were mending far too slowly for Tony’s liking.

Tony blinked his eyes up at the ceiling again, this time calming his breath.

He didn’t want Steve waking up, worried eyes stretched toward his in concern. He just…

Not tonight.

He didn’t want those concerned eyes that pleaded with Tony for him to just help.

All Tony wanted to do was leave the comfort of this bed and curl up into his closet to hide. He wanted to submerse himself in that darkness in hopes that it could silence the thousand thoughts whirring through his brain.

He had always had problems sleeping, mind too busy for rest. But it had floated with ideas, schematics, and visuals for new programs.

Now…those dreams were still there as were the occasional happy ones, but sometimes the bad ones would creep in.

Tony never got much sleep after those ones.

So yeah he wanted the darkness.

And perhaps that is why he tightened his hold on Steve’s shoulder.

His therapist would be happy for that.

Steve mumbled softly, nosing into Tony’s neck. Tony looked down at Steve who had his head against his chest and arm thrown tightly over Tony’s waist even in sleep. Tony smiled at that level of unconscious protectiveness.

Submitting to the urge, he tilted his head downward to press a kiss against Steve’s forehead. He brushed a few stray golden hairs that stuck to the skin there, behind his ear. His hands softly caressed the shell of Steve’s ear and then they made their descent toward his jawline.

Touch never seemed to wake Steve, at least not the soft barely there touches that Tony offered at night where he felt he just needed a reminder that Steve was here with him. Steve would wake immediately at the first gasp or startled cry, but in his sleep he would turn into touch and nuzzle the back of Tony’s hand as Tony caressed his cheek.

Tony smiled warmly.

They didn’t usually sleep like this, since Tony was often uncomfortable with having so much steady pressure on his chest. But sometimes when Tony was going through work or even reading a book, Steve would come to bed

And it sounded stupid, but Tony felt like Steve was weightless in those moments and even the weight resting on his chest was grounding. He liked the fact that the same comfort he could find in
Steve’s arms, Steve felt the same.

Steve shifted closer, lips opening slightly.

He sneezed.

Tony noticed he did that a lot in his sleep. It was very endearing.

He needed to remember to ask Steve, if he knew he sneezed a lot in his sleep.

He’d ask him tomorrow.

Sighing again, Tony decided he needed to do something besides stare at this ceiling all night. While he knew he could just as easily head back to sleep, he didn’t want to. He wrestled with himself a little longer, before he finally decided he’d just get up and grab a late night snack.

He looked at the time on the clock Steve had brought to his...their room not too long ago. Tony had teased Steve over his old man clock, to which Steve had shyly blushed and teased back with saying he could teach Tony how to read one.

Tony grins at the memory, almost content to stay wrapped in this bed with one of his favorite people. But alas a snack actually did sound good right now. It was as though that now Tony had been trying to get on a healthier diet, his body was punishing him and wanting to eat nearly every second of the day.

Sighing, Tony tried maneuvering himself from underneath Steve’s hold. It was something short of a miracle that Steve didn’t wake up. Tony placed the arm that had been on his waist into the now empty space that he was leaving.

Tony watched for a moment as Steve curled into the lingering warmth that Tony’s presence was leaving on the bed.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” he whispered to Steve, not caring that Steve wouldn’t even be awake to notice his absence.

Nonetheless, he pressed a short kiss on Steve’s shoulder and pulled the covers up slightly. As he left, he made FRIDAY note to alert him if Steve showed signs of waking up. He should have another three hours, before he got up before his run but sometimes Steve woke up a little earlier.

He walked out of his bedroom and headed a few doors down to Miles’ bedroom. He just wanted to check on his son and make sure he was sleeping okay. It was the first week that Miles had not insisted on sleeping in Tony’s room.

It had been hard getting Miles to not stay attached to Tony’s hip, when May had brought him back. Tony couldn’t hardly blame him. He didn’t want to stray too far away from his bambino either. So he had allowed Miles to sleep in between Steve and himself for those past few weeks.

But it had seemed that Miles had realized that perhaps Tony wouldn’t be leaving this time. The first night Miles hadn’t come to his bedroom, Tony went to go see if everything was okay. Miles had been in his bed, a coloring book laid upon his lap, and fast asleep. He had woken up a little after Tony had sat down on the edge of his bed. Miles had blearily looked at him, tossing aside Mr. Penguin in favor of climbing into Tony’s lap.

“Baba,” Miles had whispered sleepily and wrapped his arms around Tony’s neck.
“You decided to sleep in your room today, bambino,” Tony affectionately said into Miles’ curls. Miles nodded his head and had decided there on Tony’s lap was just as well another comfortable position to fall asleep, because he had fallen asleep mere seconds later.

Tony shuffled him back onto his bed and pulled the covers over him. Miles easily went back to sleep and Tony stayed for a second longer, before he decided that he could go back to bed.

But now here Tony was looking at Miles’ bedroom that was distinctly missing a little boy’s presence. His bed was still made and the nightlight in his room was nowhere to be found. He entered the room in hurried paces. There was no reason Miles should have

FRIDAY would have alerted him if something had gone wrong. At least that is what Tony tried telling himself. He went into the closet, remembering that Miles had suddenly developed an interest in seeing how high he could climb on the clothes rack shelf and stay there. The first time he had caught him hanging upside down on the hanger, Tony felt his heart beat out of his chest suddenly imaging all the different scenarios in which his small child would lose his grip.

He then went to the bathroom and still no Miles. His heart began to erratically pump and no reason was entering his brain. Perhaps his fear, had shut down the fact that he didn’t even ask FRIDAY to let him know where Miles had run off to.

“Sir, perhaps I can direct you to Miles’ location, if you would please calm down for a second.”

“FRIDAY,” He finally said albeit a little stressed out.

“He’s in Peter’s room. Small sir has been there, since later on this evening as soon as Peter came to visit for the weekend,” FRIDAY answered back.

“Thanks,” Tony breathed out, limbs feeling shaky all of a sudden.

He didn’t know where that crippling fear came from, but the past year had been a lot so it would just be the icing on the cake for his son to disappear right under his nose. He walked quickly to Peter’s room and softly opened the door.

There in Peter’s room was a makeshift pillow fort. It looked as though Peter and Harley had all taken their individual pillows and sheets from their bedroom and loaded them in here. Tony could see Harley’s head peaking just outside the fort and next to him laid Miles with his hands grasped tightly on Mr. Penguin.

Tony breathed out a sigh of relief, not noticing the bathroom door creaking open.

“Uncle Tony,” Peter questioned, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand.

It never failed to warm Tony’s heart when Peter affectionately called him uncle. Goodness, how did Tony end up with such an amazing family beside him.

“Hey, kiddo. I was just checking up on Miles and saw he wasn’t in bed.”

“Oh, yeah,” Peter sheepishly replied. “He’s been having trouble sleeping. So he’s come to Harley’s room a few nights and mine whenever I’m here.”

“He said he’s been having trouble sleeping?”

Peter yawned and sat down on the edge of his bed. Tony followed.
“Yeah, but I mean its fine. Harley and I don’t mind. He’s a quiet sleeper anyways. My problem is mostly Harley. Guy sleeps like its trouble breathing,” Peter said smiling. “I’m surprised Miles never wakes up from his loud snores.”

“I didn’t know he was still having trouble sleeping. He’s been in my bed for the past few weeks and when

“Peter,” Tony started. “Is there something I need to know?”

Peter shrugged. “I…well I mean it’s nothing you need to like worry about, but um there were some kids at Karen’s a few weeks ago that might have heard Miles talking to one of his friends. He heard he still slept with a night light and

“And what?”

“The kid said only babies do that and that it’s weird having a dad who’s a superhero and he still has to sleep in your bed,” Peter said, brow furrowing in past restrained anger. “I mean he’s twelve so he should have known better than to say that to any kid. I guess Miles took that to heart. Said he was a big boy and he shouldn’t be scared…said he was too old to not sleep alone.”

Tony clenched his jaw, angry that some child had told his own how to deal with his fears.

Peter took this and said, “But we told Miles don’t listen to him. That kid was probably just taking out his anger unjustly on a kid smaller than him. But either way he didn’t want to seem like he was a baby, so Harley and I have been letting him sleep here.”

“Thanks Peter,” Tony whispered. “I…I really appreciate that.”

“Yeah, I…well you know he’s like a little brother and I gotta make sure he’s okay, ya know? Plus I figured if he saw we weren’t scared then it’d be fine.”

Peter looked down at his hands and picked at the skin there.

“But I…I told them it was okay. They didn’t have to be scared because I wasn’t. We didn’t have to be scared and if so we had each other,” Peter said, voice catching in his throat.

Peter’s eyes moistened. “I was scared. We all were, but…I tried you know being there for Harley and Miles because I’m the oldest but it was hard. Sometimes, they asked if you were coming back and I told them yes.”

He lifted his eyes up. “But every time it felt like a lie, as the days went by. I’m so sorry. I’m so so sorry,” he said lip trembling. “I thought this is it another person in my life gone. And I got so angry. So angry that you never told us.”

“It’s okay, I’m here. I’m here,” Tony whispered.

“It’s not okay,” Peter rasped. “It’s hard because I still wake up expecting to look at my calendar and mark down another day you’ve been missing. And I’m trying to get…to get over this fear of getting a call from Aunt May saying no one’s found you.”

“And I’m sorry I’m not stronger. I’m Spiderman and I can’t…I can’t lose you. God, Uncle Tony I can’t lose you.”

Tony tried speaking up, but Peter kept rambling in half panicked bursts of breath.
Peter clutched on tighter to him. “You can’t leave again. Miles needs you, we need you…I need you. Don’t…don’t keep us out again please.”

“Can…can you maybe stay here tonight? There’s enough room in the fort. I mean if not that’s totally fine…just I can’t” Peter whispered, afraid of hearing Tony’s answer.

Chapter End Notes

Enjoy Endgame. Remember don't spoil it and I will see you all on Saturday, unless you all will be recovering from the movie. Much love :)

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