Blue As True As Blue Can Be

by aaralyn

Summary

Tony Stark has worked hard to make sure everyone sees exactly what he wants them to. After all, they'd all rather see the asshole with the too-bright smile than the terrified person underneath who is desperately trying to conceal that which has caused him so much pain. Trust him, he knows.

(Tony Stark is a mutant, and his father had made sure to note /exactly/ how he felt about that. Now, with the Avengers living with him full-time, it's getting more and more difficult to hide the part of him that almost no one still alive knows about.)

Notes

thanks for clicking on this story! enjoy, and leave a comment if you have time! thanks!
The first time it happens, Tony is two. Howard and Maria are entertaining guests in the living room, neatly sweeping their toddler son away from mention by handing him off to the butlers and maids, who largely ignore the boy. Used to this routine by now, Tony quietly sits at a table in the corner of the kitchen with a pad of paper and a pencil. He wished for crayons, but Father said they were for babies who couldn't even count, and Tony was too big for that. So instead, he drew with a pencil, careful not to cause a ruckus and distract the adults.

Tony is in the middle of drawing a series of windows on his skyscraper when the pencil lead snaps and rolls across the table. Sighing, he hops down from his chair with his pencil in hand and opens the door to the kitchen slowly, so as not to make a sound. He knew his way to the room with the pencil sharpener, and he was confident that he could get there without getting lost. Unfortunately, the way he knew passed the living room where his parents and the guests were, so he'd have to be silent.

Coming up on the doorway to the living room, he holds his breath and listens. He hears his father laughing with another man, the unfamiliar woman's dainty words apparently entertaining the both of them. Tony puts his ear to the door so he can hear more clearly.

"-amazing, truly! There's not a sign of a toddler in this house!" The woman says, a light laugh attached to the tail end of her sentence.

"Yes, well, Anthony is very well-mannered for a child his age.” That's his mother. Her melodious voice was something he'd recognize anywhere. It seemed strange to Tony that his mother or father would be talking about him; they very rarely spoke to him at all, or even acknowledged his existence.

“What she means is that Anthony knows his place. He knows to respect his elders, and he knows what happens if he doesn't,” his father states imperiously. The man's voice sent shivers down Tony's spine. It wasn't too terribly long ago that Howard had had to “show him his place.” Again.

"Isn't that a bit harsh, Howard?” A deeper voice: that of the man. “Tough love, I understand. But the way you talk about him-”

“It isn't tough love, James,” his father interrupts. “Tough love is what parents call it when they yell at their children for a few minutes and don't let them have dessert after dinner. Tough love is what they call it when they send their children to their rooms and ground them. Anthony was raised with discipline, with a heavy and steady hand. Some parents want their children to respect them, some to fear them. Truth is: the most optimal result stems from a mixture of both.”

It wasn't the words his father spoke that scared Tony, for he couldn't understand most of them, it was the tone. Cold, hard, so like the one he used when punishing him. Tony remembered the pain of his father's hand hitting his face, the things he yelled when he cried. He could almost feel the slap coming, stinging his cheek and bringing unwanted tears to his eyes. Before he could be completely immersed in the memory, he heard shifting from inside the room, and panicked. He fled, running as quietly as possible down the hall, trying to keep from crying, lest he be hit again.

Ten minutes later, Tony was curled in a corner of a random hall, lost. He couldn't remember the layout of the house anymore, he didn't know where he was. Phantom yells echoed in his ears and his eyes stung with the force of holding back tears. Panic welled within him, and he curled into a ball on the floor, pressing himself up against the wall as tightly as possible. Help! He screamed in his head. Please! Help!
A blue glow flashed in his vision, but before Tony could notice it, it was gone, racing out of his sight and out of his mind.

---

In the West Wing of Stark Mansion, Jarvis was loosening his tie after a long day of work. The Starks kept him moving all day long, ushering the younger maids and butlers through their duties, making sure the schedules of both Howard and Maria didn't overlap, and, in the words of his employer, “managing that rowdy toddler.” It wasn't hard to tell that neither of them had spent very much time with young Anthony, as “rowdy” was the last word Jarvis would use to describe the boy. The child was brilliant, reaching far beyond the minds of those twice his age. But Jarvis was beginning to suspect foul play: Tony would flinch at sudden noises, and when his father was in the room, his face became an almost emotionless mask. The older Tony got, the more pronounced these things became.

Jarvis had planned to go to Child Protective Services multiple times, but he could never gather enough concrete evidence. A claim made against the world's most well-known businessman wouldn't stand on suspicion. He needed to be able to prove his allegations, but he wasn't able to yet. Letting out a sigh, he sat down on his bed at the same moment his lamp flickered.

Looking up as the flickering continued, he tapped the bulb lightly, which seemed to fix the problem. Just as he was ready to write it off, he overhead light did the same. Jarvis stood up, and the light returned to normal. Under the crack in the door, he saw the hall light blink on and off. Slipping on shoes, he opened the door to find a fixture a few feet down blinking. Curious, he began to follow the path of flickering lights.

Ten minutes later, he was wandering the East Wing, feeling like an idiot. Following lights, he thought to himself, rolling his eyes. He was ready to turn around and head back to his room when he noticed something moving in the corner of his vision. Turning around, he let out a gasp as he saw the curled up form of Tony Stark in the corner, shuddering and shaking. Rushing over, he pulled off his suit jacket to cover the small boy before gathering him into his arms.

“Shh, Tony, it's alright. You're safe, you're fine,” he whispered to the child, rubbing his hands over his arms to get him to warm up. Tony's face came up, tear-streaked and eyes full of pain.

“D-don't tell Father. P-please, Jarvis,” he croaked out, his voice hoarse. The butler's heart broke for the little boy, but he closed his eyes and nodded slowly. Tony let out a sigh of relief, resting his head on his shoulder lightly, eyes closing. Jarvis sighed, hugging the small body close and turning on his heel, returning to the West Wing, to put the exhausted child to sleep.

Jarvis paid no more mind to the flickering lights.
Two

The second time it happened, Tony was grateful.

He was six, and was much too old for toys and playtime. Logically, he knew this, Father had spent enough of his time screaming that into his head. But sometimes, the urge to just go out and run through the yard or to dig up that old box of toy cars and soldiers overwhelmed him, and he just had to give in. Normally, he was so good at hiding it: making sure Father and Mother would both be busy that day, that Jarvis would have other duties to attend to, and he would smile at his weeks of planning and scramble to his room. At the most, Tony allowed himself two hours of playtime. It was enough to satisfy the little boy inside him and not risk his parents or Jarvis discovering.

But this time, it was different. Tony wasn't careful enough, he hadn't foreseen his father's disappointment at his prodigal son not completing the computer he was supposed to have been building, hadn't expected him to personally come to his room and yell at him for it. Father had walked in on Tony playing quietly with his cars instead of crossing wires with intense focus and has completely lost his temper. Grabbing Tony by the hair, he picked up the childish toys and dragged Tony down the stairs, forcing his son to watch as he burned each and every one in the fireplace. Tony watched as the paint peeled off of his beloved, carefully hidden cars and his soldier's arms melt off. Heartbroken and confused, a single tear crawled silently down his cheek, and Howard saw red.

Dragging his son upstairs, he threw him into the room and locked the door. It was then that Tony noticed the alcohol on his breath, and Tony begged his father to stop, to let him go, that he was sorry and that it would never happen again. Howard just smirked cruelly and laughed a drunken laugh.

“You're damn right it won't. You aren't a child, Anthony. Not anymore. And now that you've grown up, you're going to learn how to take punishments the adult way.”

It must've gone on for hours. Howard beat Tony savagely, without restraint, and Tony caved under the force of his blows. His chest, his upper arms, his legs, but never his face. Never anywhere anyone could notice. And Tony cried, the whole way through. He knew it was weak, that it was childish, but the tears wouldn't stop flowing, and the pain wouldn't go away. It took him almost ten minutes to realize that the beating had stopped, that Howard had finally staggered drunkenly out of the room. The door was closed but the lights were on, and Tony would bet that it was locked from the outside. He hurt so badly, the pain was overwhelming. All he wanted in the whole world was to stop feeling, for all his pain and hurt and aches to go far, far away.

The six year old managed to roll himself towards the wall, his back to it, guarded, and eyes wearily watching the doorway in case anyone tried to enter. Have to stay awake, he thought to himself. Can't fall asleep, can't be taken by surprise. He tried as hard as he could to keep his eyes open, but eventually the throbbing pain had forced his eyes to flicker tiredly. The lids closed over sad, chocolate colored orbs and the child surrendered himself.

As he felt the exhaustion creeping over him, about to take him, a soft blue glow filled his vision behind his closed eyelids. It seemed to come from nowhere, but the light was comforting and careful
unlike the florescent light in his room had been. The light seemed to swirl over him, curling carefully
over his injuries, and he could feel the feather-light touches of it across his ribs, his chest, his arms,
and his legs. Every place it touched, the pain slowly receded until he could no longer feel it. He
opened his eyes, but he couldn't see the blue light and the injuries were still there, staring back at
him, he just couldn't feel them. Confused, he closed his eyes again and felt a strange set of relief
when the blue glow returned after a moment. Tony remembered wishing that the pain would go
away, and he realized that this...energy had done just that. Had fulfilled his wish, had been there for
him, had helped him. Mentally reaching out, he thanked the light in his head, sending gratitude and
love towards it. The light bounced happily and curled around his mind like a second skin, making
him smile.

Wondering if the light could hear him, he thought as hard and clear as he could towards it. Who are
you? What are you? The light stilled, moving in a more deliberate pattern now, like it had a secret
and wasn't willing to share. Tony nodded and accepted that: if the light didn't want to talk, they
wouldn't. He was just grateful. Okay, I understand. Hesitating, Tony almost decided to just let the
matter drop completely, but like the light behind his eyes could sense his thoughts, it buzzed before
his eyes encouragingly, settling in his mind like a listening friend once he got Tony's attention.

Could you...can you heal them? My injuries? Tony thought, and the light seemed to pause in all
movement. Tony froze, afraid he had insulted the light somehow, before it curled around his body
again, touching the wounds painlessly and doing something. Tony tried to lend his focus to the
persistent little light, gave him all the energy he could, but before he could find out if it had worked
or not, he passed out, all the energy fading from him.

___________

The morning dawned bright through Tony's windows and the child opened his eyes against it,
shielding them as he sat up carefully. Halfway through completing the movement, he caught sight of
a bloodstain on the bedsheet and froze, expecting pain to overtake him any moment and make him
cry out. But nothing happened, he felt as normal as ever, if extremely exhausted.

Puzzled, he threw back the covers and looked down at himself, shocked to find the skin unmarred
and completely healed, not a trace of last night's punishment. Tony remembered the glow, and
laughed when he realized the little light had done it, had healed him. Closing his eyes, he caught a
blue flash in the corner of his vision and he smiled at it, thanking it profusely and happily. The light
faded and Tony got out of bed, confident in his new and only friend.

He approached the mirror in his room and looked at his reflection, trying to regain the serious, adult
demeanor that his father had always expected of him. But when Tony's brown eyes flashed blue for
the barest second, he let an honest, true smile escape him.
Chapter Notes

i am frankly /amazed/ at the response this story has gotten, not to mention honored.
here's the third chapter! i hope you enjoy and find the time to leave a comment!

Tony is eight when he realizes that no one else sees it. The bright blue streams of endless data, of numbers and equations and calculations, all adding up seamlessly to form the world around them. He can't quite remember when he first started seeing them himself, when the blue light that had become his friend had turned into a readout of things Tony could understand, things that weren't complicated like emotions and disappointment. Tony wasn't stupid, however. As time went on, he noticed that more and more data was piling up. The data was changing, more was being revealed to him, and he could manipulate what would be revealed, could draw more from around him if he wanted it. A perfect example of this is a cold winter night spent with his mother in the Stark Gardens.

The Stark Gardens were his mother's pride and joy, attached to the Stark Mansion and sprawling beautifully through the back and side yards. In the center of all the flowers and ferns, bushes and trees, rested a small gazebo, just big enough for two. His mother told him that she went there to think the first time she caught him hiding there. Over the past year, it had become their retreat from their shared threat: Howard.

Whereas Howard had grown more distant and violent with Tony, Maria had grown closer to her boy as they faced his violence and anger towards both of them. Tony was simply too small to protect himself, to run away, and Maria didn't have the clout or the courage to find help. Mother and son retreated together into the gardens when Howard was working in the workshop, too focused to bother with them. It was on a night in late November when Tony walked slowly out to meet his mother in the gazebo.

Tony had been working, honestly, he had. But between soldering the component to the pad for his new circuit board, the data had darted in front of his eyes, flickering and begging for his attention. Blinking past the data in the forefront, the numbers that computed the temperature of the soldering iron, the equations calculated and compared the efficiency of his past board to the projected output for the new one, and the plan that he'd drawn up in his head, the one that floated next to his desk like it belonged there, he beckoned the flickering data closer. It was a picture of his mother, and his mentally comprised file appeared beside it.

Name: Maria Stark nee Carbonell, Mother

Current Location: Stark Mansion, New York, New York
Tony raised an eyebrow as the data flashed before him. A small red circle with an X inside blinked at the bottom of the file. His mother was distressed. Eyes darting up to the surveillance camera “hidden” in the corner of his room, he narrowed his eyes as he thought about the electricity moving through it, powering it, collecting and sending data. Reaching out with his mind, Tony tapped into that electricity, guiding it to him. Panting with effort, the boy smiled when a small video popped up, showing the surveillance recording of his room in front of several other videos. Using his hands, he flicked through them until he found his mother. She was sitting in the garden, in their gazebo, her head in her hands. Enlarging the video with a gesture, he could see her shoulders shaking. She was crying, then.

Immediately, Tony stood up, abandoning his project and flicking off the soldering iron as he made his way out of his room. Lightly jogging, he made it to the gardens within two minutes, and took the next three to wind his way through the maze of plant life to their hiding place. As he stepped up into the gazebo, he spied the bright, full moon, hanging in the sky. Without meaning to, the blue data sprung to life, calculating the curve of the moon, the distance to his current position, the brightness, the cloud cover. Being outside was something that amazed Tony. There was so much mind-blowing data to gather out here.

Carefully, he placed a hand on his mother's shaking shoulder and tried not to flinch when she sat up quickly, a crazed look in her eye. She quickly calmed down when she saw it was him, and smiled a small, fragile smile at him. Tony gave her a quick, false grin before he pretended not to notice the tears dripping out of her eyes, tried not to calculate curve and speed.

Cautiously, Maria reached out a hand to Tony, wrapping it around his shoulder when he nodded. He scooted into her side, grabbing for her other hand slowly as he felt the silent sobs start to overtake her again. Silently, he allowed her to break down, just comforted her with his warm presence for a few minutes. When the shudders and shakes began to die down once more, he pulled away and pointed to the moon, guiding her gaze up.

“Isn't it pretty? Like you,” he said quietly, and his mother laughed. “But there's more blue, more data for the moon. Probably because I don't know as much about it. But I know your face, and your hands, so the data doesn't pop up as much anymore when I look at you, Momma. Do you think that's why it is?” Looking up into her face, he saw the confusion there.

“What blue, baby? What data?” She asked, carding her long fingers through his hair gently.
“The blue! The blue numbers and equations, the blue plans and schematics, the blue streams of energy that are everywhere, the ones that flow from electricity. See?” Tony said, not understanding why she was so confused. He pointed to a stray equation, one he saw frequently as the growth rate of the red roses that lined the gazebo. His mother tilted her head, still confused.

“I don't know what you're talking about, love. I don't see any blue.”

That's when it hit Tony. No one else could see it. The blue light that had saved him, that had become his friend, that had showed him so much, had helped him learn and grow and stop feeling pain, he was the only one that could see it. The blue light that had loved him when no one else was there to do the job, to bear the burden of loving a child, a baby like him, someone that couldn't do anything right, the light that had given him something solid and real and true, something that never faded. It was just as alone in the universe as him. Just like him and his mother.

And suddenly, he was desperate for someone else to see it, to know and understand it. He needed his mother to see the blue light that had given him so much. Tony grabbed her hand and begged and begged the light to open up, to show her as well, please, please, please, and when he heard her gasp, he knew he'd done it. Looking up once more, he saw the wonder on her face, the light in her eyes that had been so long gone had sparked once more.

“Tony, oh, Tony. I saw it! Only for a second, only briefly, but I saw it! It was beautiful!” She said, hushed. His mother pulled him into her lap and he smiled brightly, happy that he could give her a glimpse, a small sighting of the thing that had saved his life. “What was that, darling?”

“I don't know,” he said. “I thought everyone could see it. I see it all the time, the numbers, the data. I see it everywhere, in everything. I can touch something with electricity, or look at it really hard, and pull data from it to, like cameras. It makes me feel better, Momma. It makes it not hurt so much.” He didn't need to specify what it was, she knew. This time, when his mother shed a tear, he cried, too. They were crying for each other, for their pain. And behind his closed eyelids, Tony could see the flash of blue, the data that never abandoned him, and was calmed.
Life began to change as Tony turned nine, ten. He and his mother rarely showed up in public, and his father was never seen without a bottle or a glass in his hand. Maria and Tony spent more and more time hiding from him as he spent more time raging about what needed to be accomplished than actually doing anything. And of course, whenever his father raged, there were only two people on the receiving end of that anger.

Tony was ten, almost eleven, when he overheard his father screaming at his mother inside his workshop. Tony had snuck in to grab a few more spools of copper wire, hoping his father would be too trapped within his inventing haze to notice the still small child. But this time, Maria was in the workshop, and Howard had a fistful of her pretty red dress, screaming in her face. Tony flinched as the numbers began to pop up, showing his father's blood toxicity level (way too high, derived from the speed and clumsiness of his movements and reactions), the duration of this screaming session (almost twenty minutes, judging from the nearly cooled soldering iron), and his mother's injuries (a backhand to her face, Howard's class ring left a scratch on her cheek approximately five minutes ago, based on blood clotting). Caught up in the data and reviewing the security tapes, which showed Maria coming in to offer Howard some dinner before being cornered and attacked, Tony had toned out his father's words. The words came filtering back into his conscious thought when his mother spoke up quietly, fearfully.

“I don't k-know, Howard, I don't understand-” she said, voice breaking and cutting off as Howard shook her.

“IT SHOULD WORK!” He screamed in her face. “I'VE DONE THE CALCULATIONS OVER AND OVER, MARIA, WHY DOESN'T IT WORK?!”

“I'm sorry, I d-don't know-”

Tony's gaze was captured by what his father was working on. A computer filled with code sat next to the lab station, where the carefully organized pieces of his father's new missile were laid out. Howard had been working on this particular design for a month now, and had sworn up and down that he was on the edge of a breakthrough. It seemed his father didn't get the results he wanted. Tony privately thought it might have been due to the constantly inebriated state the man insisted on
working in.

Refocusing on the lab station as the screaming got louder, Tony tried to move closer than his position crouched behind a tool cabinet and succeeded without distracting his father. From his new spot behind his father's desk, Tony locked eyes with his mother, who was shaking in fear. He nodded lightly, darting his eyes to the table, and she blinked slowly, signaling she understood. She would make sure Howard didn't notice Tony while he tried to find the problem.

Settling down in a crouch, Tony scanned the parts laid out on the table. Everything seemed to be in order, nothing was even slightly chipped. All the parts that Tony knew were supposed to be in the design (of course he looked at the blueprints, he had to stay on top of the weapons industry, wasn't that what his father always told him?) were there. It must be the coding then.

Sliding around to the back of the desk, completely out of sight of his mother, father, and the lab station, Tony closed his eyes. Instead of the blackness that he knew welcomed his mother, father, and other people, blue orbs of light danced behind his eyelids. One right in front of him: the mechanized safe, code 90-63-79. Several tiny ones in measured space around his field of vision: the wall sockets around the room. Ten up above: lights. Spinning around to face the area he knew the lab station to be, he focused on the brightest blue orb, the one representing the computer. Latching on to it with his mind, he thought carefully about where it connected to the socket in the wall, the electricity going through it, the data streaming impossibly fast. The blue orb darkened, blinked twice, and then glowed brightly, filling his whole vision. He was in.

Eyes still shut, Tony carefully sorted through the computer's hard drive, batting aside other projects and plans to get to the open project, the missile coding. Data filled his vision, a sickly yellow color (wrongwrongwrong, something was wrong) and he quickly scanned the code, trying to find the weak point. Two minutes later and he was sweating, the concentration required to keep him firmly in the coding almost too great. He grinned when he found the error, replacing the faulty line with what seemed natural, perfect. The code flashed, bleeding into the beautiful blue color he knew so well, and he knew he'd done it. Carefully pulling his mind out of the depths of the computer, he blinked his eyes open.

Sound he'd toned out suddenly came rushing back. His father was screaming at nearly eardrum-bursting levels and his mother had another scratch on her cheek. Peaking out from behind the desk, Tony nodded at her, and she blinked back, her mouth twitching in relief.

“-TRIED FOR DAYS, FOR WEEKS, AND NO PROGRESS-”

“H-Howard,” his mother said quietly. “Show me again why it won't work?” He scowled, shoving her across the room.
“Women, don't know a single thing about technology,” he grumbled, voice now significantly quieter. He went to the lab station, poking at the parts spread out across the table and then turning to the computer. “When I run the fucking simulation of the code, the distance is off, it never hits the target-”

He broke off as the simulation was run again, and the missile hit the target, a small building, perfectly. Rubbing at his eyes, Howard replayed the sim again, and then once more. Every time, the targeting was perfect. “But...”

“You did it, honey,” Maria said quietly in Howard's direction. But her eyes darted over to where Tony was hidden, and Tony smiled. Howard scoffed and waved her out, not even looking as she shuffled out of the lab, leaving the door open a crack for Tony's escape. His eyes were roaming over the code, searching for something.

Sneaking out from behind the desk, Tony stayed low to the ground and started moving towards the door. As he began to move past the lab station, his father sat up angrily, cursing. Tony froze, hoping that he wouldn't turn his head and see him-

“What the hell is this? I don't remember this. Where the hell did this come from?” Howard said, and Tony felt a cold shiver go down his spine. Did Howard see the code Tony had added? He saw his father move to get up and he panicked, trying to backtrack and hide back behind the desk, but ended up knocking over a stool. Tony flinched as Howard rounded on him, fury in his eyes.

“You,” he spat, approaching and pulling Tony up by his collar. “How did you get in here? What did you do to my code?!”

“I-I didn't do anything, I swear, Father,” Tony whimpered, scared. He turned his face away as his father glared, but Howard grabbed his chin and forced him to look.

“I've been over this code a hundred times! I KNOW WHEN IT HAS CHANGED!”

“But it works now, why does it matter? I just-”

“Why does it matter?” His father hissed. “Why does it matter?! It MATTERS because you just changed missile code, Anthony! It MATTERS because I didn't see you do it! Now tell me, how did you change it?! What did you DO?!”
Tony was so angry. So angry. Ever since he could walk, his father wanted him to invent. Engineer, build, create. And now, now that he was just doing what his father wanted, had beat into him, he was angry. Disappointed, always disappointed. He couldn't even see what Tony saw, what Tony could do. He didn't know how the data and the numbers and the equations were endless, flooding right into his mind. Howard knew nothing of what Tony Stark was. He just hated, sneered, glared, hit, beat, screamed.

Why couldn't his father just see?

And Tony, ten years old, pushed his hands to his father's temples and showed him.

He watched as the blue flashed in his father's eyes, bright and flowing. He showed him what it was like to look at the world through Tony's eyes: bright equations, schematics, identifications, files, maps. The data. He watched as his father's eyes widened, his mouth gaping open, and then he took it away. Removed his hands, backed up to look his father in the face. As the dazed look fell, Howard's eyes locked onto his son, questioning, angry.

“I saw it,” Tony said, very quietly. “I saw it, and it was wrong. You were mad. I fixed it. I thought you'd be happy, or even content. Why can't you just be satisfied? You have a new, working weapon. What does the why or how matter?”

And looking at his father's face, he saw the unholy smirk appear. He saw the eyes darken, heard the dark laugh bubble up in his chest. Tony's stomach dropped to his feet, and he carefully backed away. Howard's hand snapped out, grabbing his wrist.

“You're right, Anthony. And now I can start on a new project.”
Chapter Notes

this chapter was difficult to write, only partly because i'm really trying to hit all the points i need to and move at a good pace, but more because it was so emotion-intensive and required so much rewriting. sorry it took so long! please comment if you have the time!

Tony is eleven by now, he thinks. It's hard to remember what day it is, trapped in the Room. That's what Tony calls it, because that's what it is. It's a room, a room that has become Tony's personal hell. The walls are lined with six inches of rubber, as are the floor and ceiling. There are no windows, and occasionally a handful of glowsticks are thrown in through a hole too high for him to reach. Tony discovered a plastic bucket he guessed he was supposed to relieve himself in. There are no wall sockets, no wires, no conductors, no electricity. There is only Tony.

The first few weeks, Tony thought it was temporary. It was only a month after he'd shown his father what he saw, and his father had beaten him, and his mother once he found out she knew. Then one morning, he'd woken up here and spent hours screaming for help, looking for an exit. The first glowstick had been thrown in, and his father remained silent when he begged to be let out. After what he thought was a week, Tony had realized that this was just his new living arrangement. He was fed often enough, but he knew he was losing weight at an unhealthy rate. He hadn't seen his mother in god knows how long. Tony tried not to cry, tried not to be weaker than he already was.

By his estimate, Tony guess that once a week he was brought out for testing. He was never awake when his father took him out, but he'd woken up often enough strapped to a table with wires in his arms, yelling and screaming at the pain, trying frantically to make it stop like he used to. The first few times, Tony had forgotten that his father was watching and healed himself. Thought of the cells and just commanded them to work faster, harder. But as time wore on, he didn't have enough energy to heal himself. It was all he could do to take the edge off the pain.

Right now, Tony was curled in a corner, trying to make the pain stop. Howard was particularly angry today, and it had shown in his treatment. Halfway through the testing, Tony swore he heard the voice of someone familiar, an old friend of Howard's, maybe? But they were shouted out fairly quickly and Tony lost consciousness shortly thereafter. Refocusing on his task, Tony closed his eyes. It was still hard to accept the blackness that came with the action, as opposed to the bright blue he missed so much. Turning his mind inward, he focused on the electricity within him: the electrical impulses that caused his neurons to communicate with each other. He wanted them to stop: he knew he was in pain, he wanted his body to stop sending the message. But Tony couldn't muster the strength, couldn't make it stop like he used to. The pain continued to throb, ignorant of his wishes.
And alone in the Room, in the darkness, Tony cried.

There was no light to comfort him.

---

Tony had given up on counting the time. He had no idea what year it was, what day it was, or whether it was even day for that matter. He knew only consciousness and sweet, blissful, unconsciousness. Right now, he was balancing on the edge of wakefulness, not yet willing to crawl out of the safety of his sleep. But a creak sounded through the Room, one Tony recognized as the little door opening at the top. A flashlight shined on his face and Tony kept his eyes shut, sleepy mind wondering what was going on. The beam stayed focused on his face for a minute, before it was gone and the door was shutting once more. A moment of silence, and suddenly there was a lot more light against his closed eyelids. A rush of cool air, and his mind jolted more awake at the realization that his father was taking him out for testing. There was a door, and he hadn't seen it? After so long?

Tony was suddenly irrationally nervous. Life before the Room was hazy for him, drowned out by memories of darkness and silent pain, and it was hard for him to remember the feeling of that blue light that had surrounded him before. What would it be like, going out again? His worried thoughts were suddenly shuttered out by the feeling of someone lifting him up, putting him on a table. The table (stretcher maybe?) was moved out of the Room, and the cool air playing on his face was so much different than the stale, stuffy atmosphere of the Room. His head lolled to the side, out of his control, and Tony realized that he didn't have the strength to move. His eyes wouldn't open, but to his shock, he could see a faint tinge of blue behind his eyelids. They were moving steadily by him, and he figured that they would be the lights in the ceiling as they walked past.

Turning his focus to the person pushing the table, he listened to their rhythmic footsteps. The hands that had lifted them were gloved and not at all gentle, so Tony assumed they belonged to Howard. Breathing deeply, he placed the scent of vaguely familiar cologne and confirmed it. He let his mind wander and wished he would fall back asleep, so he wouldn't have to feel the pain he knew would be coming. But his desires evaded him, and Tony felt the table push open a set of doors.

There was a quiet gasp in the corner of the new room, but it was nearly covered by the hum of the machines that haunted his nightmares. The table rolled to a stop, and Howard moved to the side, towards the source of the gasp.

“Charles, good to have you here. I've established all I could on the subject; I need a more...professional opinion before I can continue. I'll expect a full write-up. Come get me when you've finished, I'll be in my office,” his father stated quickly, moving back out of the door and leaving him alone with the man, Charles.
Tony thought Charles sounded like a nice name. He'd never met a Charles, and he'd never heard of this man, but maybe the testing wouldn't hurt today. If it did, Tony had no chance of making the pain stop, none at all.

A mechanical whir came from the corner of the room, and Tony was curious. He wanted to know what the sound was, and a part of him reached out to feel- But there was nothing. That part of him was too weak, to fragile to reach out. Tony's chest ached with the familiar feeling of loneliness. Once again, there was nothing. No one.

The sound got closer before stopping right next to the table. Tony tried to curl up, tried to make himself smaller, less of a target, but his body wouldn't listen to him. There was silence, and Tony braced himself for pain as best he could, trying not to cry. He would be an adult about this. He was at least eleven. Probably.

“My name is Charles Xavier,” said a voice next to him. “And I am a mutant, like you.”

The second voice sounded much closer, but the voices were the same. Was he talking...in Tony's head? How could he do that? But more importantly, he was like Tony? He saw the blue, saw the equations and the data and felt the electricity?

“No,” the close voice said again. “You are a mutant, and I am a mutant, but we have different powers. I can read minds, and talk to people in their heads.”

This man, Mr. Charles, had telepathy? That was a real thing? There was a chuckle beside him, and Tony realized that Mr. Charles was reading his mind. “What am I? What can I do?” he asked tentatively, hoping the man wouldn't be angry with him asking stupid questions and pestering him.

“It is no trouble, my boy. There is no such thing as a stupid question. I do not know what you can do, but that’s what I’m here to find out.” Tony tried to send something of an affirmative as Mr. Charles shuffled around in what he thought might be a bag. His thoughts spanned out, reaching back to mutant. He'd never heard that before. Well, he knew about the idea of something being mutant, but never a group of people. Tony had never thought what he could do made him a mutant. Was that why his father hated him so much? Because he was unnatural?

“Your name is Anthony, yes?” Tony froze. The only person that called him Anthony was- “Ah, Tony, I mean. You prefer Tony. How old are you, Tony?”
“Um...older than ten?” Tony thought, unsure. Mr. Charles hummed quietly and asked him when his birthday was. “June 17, 1975.” Mr. Charles suddenly stopped moving, the room falling completely silent.

“Tony, you are twelve,” Mr. Charles thought to him carefully. Tony was quite shocked. That put him at over a year in the Room. “What is the Room, if I may ask?” A shiver wracked down his spine harshly, causing him to flinch. “You do not have to tell me. However, if you wish, I could simply view your memories...?” It sounded like a question, and Tony really didn't have a problem with it, so he consented. He stayed very still as memories flashed by in his mind, guessing that Mr. Charles was watching. Towards the end of the reel of memories, something dropped to the floor and a hand grabbed onto the table for support. As they tapered off slowly to the present, Tony opened his eyes to look at the man.

Mr. Charles was leaning heavily against the table, breathing raggedly. He was bald with darker skin, and Tony placed the whirring noise he heard earlier to the mechanical wheelchair the man was sitting in. There was a medical bag on the floor by his feet. As he tried and failed to sit up, Mr. Charles got his breathing under control and sat up, looking at him. There were tears trailing down the man's cheeks, and Tony was shocked. He thought men never cried, that's what his father always told him. But Mr. Charles was. Did he do something wrong? Was Mr. Charles hurt?

“No, no, I am not hurt, Tony,” Charles said out loud. Tony cocked his head at him. “Do you...you know that what your father does is wrong, don't you? No matter who you are or what you've done wrong, you do not deserve to be locked up for over a year, to be experimented on, to be hurt. That's wrong, and it's illegal, Tony. What your father has done is very, very wrong.”

But, Tony had been bad. Tony had been different, and weird, and had messed with things he shouldn't have. He didn't do his work and he played with toys and acted out and cried, cried like a child with no intelligence. He never managed to make his father happy. This was his punishment, it's just how things were. How things would always be.

“It's not supposed to be like this, Tony. Your mother and father should love you no matter what. They should never hurt you, never beat you or lock you away. They should never experiment with you or withhold food from you. You should feel safe and happy here, always, Tony,” Mr. Charles told him, resting his hands on Tony's shoulders. “And it's okay to cry if you're sad, Tony. It's okay.”

His shoulders shook with the force of holding back tears. He wanted what Mr. Charles was describing. He wanted a happy family, one with safety and happiness, one where his parents were proud of him. He wanted his light back, his data, his equations. He wanted to be free and happy. But that would never happen to him, it just wouldn't. The Stark men don't act like that, they never have. The Stark men are strong as steel, no matter who is watching, until the day they die. That was it.
“Will you do something for me, Mr. Charles?” Tony asked, voice scratchy and quiet, barely there. The man looked shocked that he was speaking, and leaned closer, nodding. “Could you just...” “It hurts too much, and I can't do it anymore. I'm so tired, Mr. Charles.” “…make everything stop hurting? Please?”

Charles looked deep into the boy's eyes and saw endless, fathomless pain. Not just physical, but emotional. Mental. He hurt all the way down to his soul, and he didn't see a way out. All he wanted was for everything to stop hurting, for people to stop being so cruel. Gently reaching out for the boy, he wrapped his hands around his shoulders again, and very carefully leaned the boy into a hug. “Tony,” he said softly. “You're a brilliant young boy, the smartest I've ever met, and you deserve to see the world and everything it has to offer you. You are such an amazing person, Tony, and I will not stand by while someone makes you feel so hurt and so hopeless. I will make it stop, Tony, I swear to you, I will help you. I swear.”

Tony's shoulders shook even more fiercely, and he squeezed his eyes shut so that the tears wouldn't leak out. He was so tired, so hurt, it was hard to believe what Mr. Charles was saying. He just wanted to sleep forever, to never wake up and have to face the pain. Mr. Charles rubbed a hand over his back and murmured softly to him, and Tony was hit with the thought that this must be what a father feels like and the tears escaped. Great heavy sobs wracked his frame and the man just held on to him, told him it was okay. Tony cried and cried until finally, he sunk into a deep, deep sleep, ignorant of the wildly flickering lights.

He dreamt that he was at the park on a rainy day with his mother. Slowly, the clouds began to part and Tony caught sight of a blue sky.
Chapter Notes

Six

if you are currently at work or in a public place, i would recommend waiting to read this chapter. this is really, really emotion-heavy and you'll most likely want to have a box of tissues ready, because it's going to be a sad one. just know that i do everything for a reason and that this will probably be okay...eventually...maybe...

i love you guys, and thank you for supporting this story! i apologize for the late update, so here's a six page chapter to make up for the delay! please leave a comment if you have time!

Charles' mind was reeling. Tony Stark, child prodigy of Howard Stark, was supposed to be at boarding school. Howard had told the media that his son was focusing on his studies and had demanded that they leave him in peace to develop his mind. Charles had initially thought that the reason Howard hadn't given the name of the school was to protect his son from the reporters and paparazzi. Now he knew better. Tony wasn't at boarding school at all. And the 'revolutionary' project Howard had been boasting about to the media wasn't simply another weapon.

He was no fool. Once he had all the pieces, solving the puzzle hadn't been hard. In conjunction with Tony's memories, Charles had discovered that Tony's mutation was by far one of the most advanced and versatile he'd seen thus far. Tony, a twelve year old boy, had advanced his simple mutation of being able to control and manipulate electricity into something amazing, something almost beyond his comprehension. Tony could alter the electrical impulses of his very cells, tap into other sources of electricity and control them as if he were a puppeteer, could create interfaces and project the intricacies of his mind into thin air. It was incredible, beyond the scope of anything he'd ever experienced. And Howard had found out.

A mind, a mutation like that could revolutionize the weapons industry. Being able to hack into sources like that? Having the ability to project and manipulate parts of his mind? It would change the development of destructive resources across the world. And Howard Stark had it all to himself. The fact that Howard kept his son trapped in a room for well over a year and ran experiments on him chilled Charles to the bone and made his blood boil. There was no excuse to treat a human being, a child, like that. None whatsoever. Charles was going to make sure Howard knew just that.

Maneuvering his wheelchair over to the door after covering Tony up with his jacket to keep the little boy warm, Charles peeked his head out of the door. He had to find someone, anyone, to make sure Tony would be safe while he fought it out with Howard. He had promised Tony he would help, but he wouldn't leave the child alone. Not after what he had been through.
Charles listened carefully as he heard the slow slide of slippers across the floor down the hall. The footsteps got closer and closer until a woman came into view. She was wrapped up in a blanket that was clearly too small for her, a black threadbare comforter that had seen some use. Her hair hung limp around her shoulders and her steps were more exhausted jerks of her feet. Regardless of her bedraggled appearance, her face held the quiet, reserved beauty of a woman of strength, and her head was held high. Charles recognized this woman from both the media and Tony's memories: Maria Stark.

“Excuse me, miss?” Charles said softly, watching Maria jump and turn startled eyes upon him. Moving his chair out of the doorframe so she could see him fully, he smiled gently at her. “May I ask you a question?”

“I believe you are looking for my husband?” She asked, eyes darting to the floor before a forced smile appeared on her face. “I can take you to his study.”

“No, Ma'am, I'm not here for Howard,” Charles said simply, ignoring the shock that painted her features. He decided to go out on a limb, he needed to know if she could still be trusted. “Do you know where your son Tony is?”

Maria's face twisted, sadness painting her features as she gripped the blanket around her tightly, and Charles dimly noted that it was the perfect size for a child's bed. Her head dropped and she seemed to age before him, curling up and in on herself, making herself smaller. “Howard sent him away to boarding school. I don't know which one,” she said, voice cracking. It sounded like a well practiced answer, one that pained her to say.

“You don't believe him, do you?” He said shortly, approaching her slowly. Her head shot up and life seemed to flow back into her.

“Tony never writes, never sends anything home. I haven't gotten a single phone call, not a single word from him since he left. That's not like him, not like him at all. I haven't heard anything from my baby boy, and I know something's wrong. Do you know what happened to him, sir? Please, tell me you know something, anything!”

Throughout her speech, Maria had gotten closer and closer to him, until she was gripping his hand desperately and tears were threatening to escape her eyes. Charles simply nodded and ushered her into the room, watching as she looked around until her eyes finally lighted on the small, fragile figure on the table wrapped up in a brown coat. A sound left her, a hurt, broken sound, and she rushed forward towards the table. Pulling the black blanket from around her shoulders, she tucked it around her boy and ran a hand over his cheek. Charles watched as the boy flinched slightly before pushing into her hand, letting out a small sigh. Maria choked out a sob before the tears fell down her cheeks unchecked. She turned to him, a hand still resting on Tony, and had to reign in her sobs before she
could ask what happened.

Charles told her everything he knew. He watched as she curled her hand in Tony's hair, ran her fingers through the curls and pressed a thumb to his temple gently. Tears had still rolled down her face, but the more Charles spoke, the brighter the angry fire in her eyes became until they were glistening, burning with the injustice and the hatred of her husband. Maria, in return, told him of the abuse she and her son had suffered at his hands, and how Tony was against reporting him to the police out of fear that they wouldn't be believed. Charles told her how he was going to confront Howard, and she nodded, pleased. She would stay and keep watch over Tony, with the help of a man called Jarvis who had appeared halfway through the explanation and held the same righteous fire in his eyes as the woman before him. They would make him comfortable until Charles returned and they came up with a better plan. Satisfied that Tony was in good hands, Charles made his way to the other wing of the house, where Howard's study resided.

As he guided his chair, he thought about what Howard had told him. Charles had agreed to come here under the pretense that Howard was gathering information about how mutations formed and what caused their development. He assumed that the work the man was doing was theoretical, or maybe in the early stages of experimentation. When Howard revealed what he actually wanted to know was his son's mutation, how it had developed, and whether it was possible to replicate the process, Charles had already signed the confidentiality agreement. Not that he cared about possible fines or legal issues when the life of a child was in danger, but he had to make sure he at least saw the child and spoke to him before Charles could make any rash decisions. Now that he had, he had no reservations about laying it all out for Howard. What was the man thinking, using his own son, his flesh and blood, that way?

Charles had wheeled himself in front of the door to Howard's study and took a deep breath to calm himself before knocking on it. He would handle this like a rational adult, he would have control over himself. A muffled affirmative granted him entry to the room, and Charles looked around somewhat curiously. The room was small and devoid of any of the technology Howard favored so much. There were three bookcases filled to the brim with all sorts of books, manuscripts, and notes. Pages and pages of paper were strewn about the room, and a large stack of what appeared to be neuroscience textbooks were open to different pages on the grand oak desk in the center of the room. A mostly empty bottle of whiskey was place precariously close to the edge of the desk and several other completely empty bottles lined the wall. The great wing-backed chair that sat in front of the desk held a haggard looking man, a tired and empty man. Charles saw past the exhaustion, however; now that he knew Howard's dirty secret, it was easy to see the maniacal glint in his eye.

“Ah, Charles. What news have you brought me?” Howard said quietly, having just noticed Charles' presence. His voice was raspy and he clutched a fountain pen in his hand, quickly scrawling something that looked like an equation onto a sheet of paper. Charles sat up straighter in his wheelchair and looked at Howard until the silence weighed on the man's mind, forcing him to look up an make eye contact with him. Charles quietly peeked into the man's mind, but the sheer amount of alcohol made his outer thoughts muddled and thick, and Charles couldn't swim through it to the center, where Howard's secrets would lay. Instead, he glared harshly at the man, eyes cutting into him.
“I know what you've done. Trapping him in a room, experimenting on him, lying to the press. I know it all. The only thing I don't understand is why. Why, Howard? Why would you do something like that to another human being, a child?” Charles said, voice sharp. Howard glared right back at him, the glaze to his eyes receding just that slightest bit.

“Don't act so holier-than-thou, Charles. You saw what he can do, what he's capable of. That kind of power, that ability, it needs to be harnessed. It could become something great.”

“So, what, you want to make him a weapon? You want to turn your own son in a weapon of mass destruction so you can make a profit? You want to torture him and keep him trapped in a tiny room and put needles in his arms so you can understand what he is? He is a human being, a child!” Charles yelled, all thoughts of civility gone. Howard suddenly slammed his palm on the table, standing up and leaning over his desk to speak right in Charles' face.

“Anthony isn't human, Charles, and he never will be. He's a mutant, he's different. And he has a commitment to me, to this country, to provide the best service he can. Stark Industries makes weapons. That's what we DO! And I've made the best weapon of them all. Anthony's DNA holds the power to produce more like him, more technological soldiers, more weapons. If I have to drag that gene out of him, if I have to rip it out of him bit by bit, if I have to use him to figure out how to replicate what I created, then dammit, I WILL!”

Charles’ eyes shuttered closed, the sheer amount of horror he was feeling causing his eyelids to feel like lead weights. Howard's thoughts were clearer now, the alcohol seemingly snapped from his mind, allowing Charles to see how deeply he believed in what he was saying, the depth of his hatred and mania. This man in front of him, this monster, he had never seen Tony as his son. He was nothing but another weapon he built, one that he could disassemble and fiddle with until he pronounced it complete. Howard was just like the others, the other people who saw mutants as just another freak, another tool. To him, Tony was just another project. But that wasn't even the worst of it, oh, no. The worst, the absolute worst part was that Tony just couldn't understand why Howard couldn't love him. He didn't understand that it wasn't supposed to be this way. Tony wanted so badly to just prove himself to his father that he couldn't see past the abuse and the horrors he was subjected to and glimpse the real man underneath: this monster sitting in front of Charles now.

“You,” Charles whispered, voice unsteady but no less fierce. “You don't understand what you've done. You don't understand what a wonder Tony is, and you'll never be able to see it. You're incapable of love, Howard Stark, and more than that, you don't deserve it. You don't deserve your son's love, and somehow, some way, you still have it.”

With that, Charles rolled out of the office, slamming the door behind him.
When Charles returned to the room where he'd left Tony, Maria, and Jarvis, Tony was still sleeping. While he was out, the adult pair had seemingly found a few blankets to keep the child warm, and for that Charles was grateful. He made his way in quietly, trying his best not to disturb the bubble the mother and child seemed to be locked in. It had been at least a year since Maria had seen her child, and to find him in such a condition must've been hard on her.

Upon making his way into the room, Jarvis handed him a cup of freshly brewed tea. Nodding his thanks, he quietly directed his wheelchair to a corner of the room and sat in thought. The sheer disgust that rolled in him from having viewed Howard Stark's thoughts still hadn't settled. It was difficult to even think theoretically about how it was possible that the man felt as he did about his son. To be honest, Charles didn't want to. He didn't want to sink to that level.

The room was quiet for several hours, and to Charles' surprise, no one disturbed them. Howard never made an appearance, there were no maids or servants bustling about, no one came to escort Charles out of the Stark Mansion. The only sounds in the room were the quiet stutter of Tony's breathing and the sipping of multiple cups of tea. It was going on five hours of silence when Tony's eyes fluttered open.

Charles and Jarvis were alerted to the change when Maria abruptly sat up in her chair, her hand coming to cup Tony's cheek. Tony's eyes widened frantically and he jerked his head back with a sound of panic deep in his throat. Maria, with the air of someone who had done this many times, raised her hands in front of her and smiled, a tear slipping down one cheek unchecked. Tony blinked, eyes flashing to the face of the woman in front of him, and his hands began to shake slightly.

“M-momma?” Tony said quietly, voice cracking. Maria bit her lip and nodded, another tear leaking out. Tony froze for a second, hope blooming in his eyes, hand reaching shakily out for her. She grabbed it lightly, bringing it to her lips and kissing his palm. Pushing himself up slowly, painfully, Tony reached out for her with his other hand, wrapping his arm around her and pushing his head into her shoulder, back shaking with the force of holding back tears. “I missed you, Momma,” he whispered into her shoulder. Maria let out a broken sob and pulled her boy gently into her lap, wrapping him up in her embrace.

“My beautiful boy, my strong, strong boy, I am so sorry I didn't come for you, I didn't know, precious, I didn't know—” Maria stuttered out into his hair, running soothing hands up and down his back. Tony just sniffled at her neck, hands clutching at her desperately. She quietly murmured to him for a while as he calmed himself down, legs and arms firmly secured around her as if afraid she would disappear. Jarvis vanished out of the room and reappeared sometime later holding a bowl of warm broth and spoon. Maria waved him over and encouraged several spoonfuls into her son's mouth before he was unable to take anymore, his stomach unaccustomed to it.
Before they knew it, another hour had passed. Tony was seated on table in a nest of blankets, trying valiantly to hide the occasional shiver that wracked his small, slight frame. Maria and Jarvis sat next to him, blatantly standing guard. Another weary silence had fallen on the room. It was at that moment that Charles decided to make himself known once more.

“Tony,” he called softly. “Do you remember me?” Tony's eyes moved over to him and his head cocked to the side as he obviously struggled to remember what had happened. Suddenly he made eye contact with him and he straightened.

“Mr. Charles?” he called, unsure. Charles nodded, smiling, and rolled over to the trio. Maria and Jarvis made room for him in their area, and Charles nodded at them. Tony still had a confused look on his face, and he asked if the child had any questions.

“Why am I still out here? Why aren't I back in the Room? That's what usually happens after,” Tony said quietly, looking down at his covered lap. Maria turned sad eyes on her son and Jarvis recoiled, his mouth an angry line.

“That won't happen anymore, Tony,” Charles said assuredly. “What happened to you wasn't okay. That was wrong, and illegal. Howard-” Charles paused as Tony shuddered at the name and the lights flickered. “He won't get away with that. Your mother, Jarvis, and I, we won't let him. You'll be taken care of. We'll get you to feeling better, and you'll never go back there, Tony. We're going to report your father to the police-”

“NO!”

This time, the flicker of lights was impossible to ignore. They flickered violently and went out completely for a moment before flashing back on brighter than before. Tony was looking at him with such utter panic and pain in his face that it stung Charles like a slap.

“Tony, baby, I know that before you didn't want to say anything because you didn't think anyone would listen, but this can't happen ever again. I won't let it. We have proof now, sweetheart. We can escape from your father, and we won't ever have to see him again, we won't ever be hurt by him again,” Maria said, running her hands through his hair. Tony turned to her, unshed tears glistening in his eyes.

“That's why! That's why we can't say anything!” Maria furrowed her brow, and Tony's level of frantic energy rose. “He is the only one that can make weapons that work, Momma! The others, he
had me look at them, their companies, they can't make anywhere near the things that he can! They'll take him away if we tell, and then we won't be able to make those weapons anymore! America needs him, Momma! We can't send out soldiers with second-class weapons!”

Maria was staring at him, eyes wide and body trembling. Jarvis' hand was clenched by his side, body rigid and taunt, and Charles felt absolutely numb. Words came tumbling back into his mind, words that burned right through him.

*He has a commitment...*

*To me...*

*To this country!*

“We have to grin and bear it, Momma. We have to. This time, we just have to make the sacrifice play.”

Tony was staring at Maria, shoulders squared, looking ready to face a firing squad. Maria sobbed, grabbing her child close to her chest and wrapping herself around him like a shield. Jarvis put his long arms around the both of them, murmuring nonsense and comforting them. Charles ached, his heart shattering in his chest.

Tony Stark, a twelve year old boy, was willing to sacrifice everything for a father, for a *country* that refused to care about him, that hated him for what he couldn't change. Tony didn't care that his father hated him, or that mutants didn't have rights. All he cared about was keeping them all safe, and giving up whatever he had to to make sure he could. He had suffered for years keeping this close to his chest, telling his mother that he didn't want to say anything out of fear they would be accused of lying. But really, all that time, deep down, Tony had known this horrible truth. Every slap, every punch, every needle in his arm and pain in his bones, he bore it quietly with the knowledge that he did it for the safety and success of his country. Tony took it all and took it without complaint because he felt he *had* to.

The worst part was that Tony was right.

Without Stark Industries' weapons, America wouldn't be considered a superpower in the world today. SI had powered the US Military with weapons beyond the capabilities of every other country in the world for decades. Howard Stark had single-handedly led America into a new age of military
power with his advancements. The other hundreds of weapons developers in the country were so far behind SI that they were practically in another universe. No other company could do what SI could. And without Howard spearheading the development and Tony too young to take the reins, SI would fall to another person, someone without his mind and ability, and they would drive the company into the dirt the other companies already occupy. America's lead on other countries would fall, sub-par weapons would go into the hands of American troops, and then who knows what would happen?

It was all so brutally unfair that it ripped Charles apart. For once, he could offer no solution, no alternative path to take to avoid this suffering. He locked eyes with Maria over Jarvis' arm and sadly inclined his head. His chest ached at the heartbroken sound that came out of Maria's throat. Charles watched as the three of them blocked out the world, barricaded themselves from the cruel truth of reality. He moved back into the corner of the room, leaving them to their privacy.

“\textit{I'm sorry,}” he whispered into Tony's mind. The apology was for so many things: for not being able to help, for not coming sooner, for the harsh truth Tony had lived with for so long.

His only response was a flash of brilliant blue behind his eyes.
Two years had passed since Charles had met Tony, and many changes had occurred within the Stark Mansion. Not a week after Charles' confrontation with Howard, the man had attempted to inject Tony with an unknown substance when Maria had run to the kitchen to grab him some soup and had left him alone in his room. It was due only to Tony being extremely on edge since his rescue that Maria made it back to his room to find him huddled under the bed, Howard reaching under in vain to try and grab him. She'd been on her way back with a strand of blue light had snapped into her vision, like a thread leading to her son's room, and she had run as fast as possible to get to him. She ended up kicking Howard in the face to get him to move and snatching Tony up, running flat out through the hall to get to Jarvis' rooms. Once they arrived, Jarvis immediately called Charles and the man arrived within half an hour, but Howard was nowhere to be seen.

Three days after that incident, Charles found him wasted out of his mind in the workshop, files on Tony's mutation scattered around the room haphazardly. He slapped him awake, forcing him to focus, and had Jarvis drag him to the living room, where Maria was waiting. She laid into him, stating that if he ever touched Tony, spoke to him when others were not present, or was ever found to be alone with the child, she would go to the police with all the proof they had collected of the years of abuse and the photos of what Howard had done to his son in the past year. Howard tried to pull the “I-am-an-important-public-figure-no-one-will-believe-you” card, which he immediately followed up with the “America-needs-me-to-defend-her” one. Maria was having none of it, citing the support of an equally respected public figure, Charles Xavier, and the fact that she didn't give two shits if Howard went to jail, because Tony would probably do a better job as a twelve year old than he ever did, and that the only reason that he wasn't currently carrying a rope with soap on the other end was because that wasn't what Tony wanted. Howard fumed, but knew he was beaten. He retreated to the lower levels of the house, his lab and study, and spoke to no residents of the Mansion.

As a combined force, Jarvis, Maria, and Charles worked to get Tony back up to full health. It had taken almost a year, and there were still significant issues, but the child was now almost thirteen and as healthy as could possibly be expected. Tony would never reach his full potential height, he constantly teetered on the line of underweight and what was considered healthy, and he still violently
flinched at the word father and refused to utter Howard's name. There were other things, such as the panicked look Tony got when he had to be in a small space for any length of time, or the shudder when he heard a lock click, but he was progressing.

On the other hand, Tony's mutant ability had not reacted how Charles had predicted. He expected Tony to possibly experience a block with his ability, as it was the main reason behind his year long stay in the Room, but it had actually grown in strength. Once Tony had reached a stable level of health, his mutant ability had returned full force, and he was able to work with it like he had before. That, of all things, was what had finally allowed Tony to break through the terrified, skittish persona and slowly settle back into that of the curious, intelligent child he had been before the accident, if significantly more wary and less affectionate. He told them it was because he could use his ability to heal the pain he still felt, could use it to repair the damage wrecked inside him, but Charles could see that it was really the familiarity of the light that comforted him, the knowledge that Howard couldn't take this from him, no matter how hard he had tried.

But Charles had noticed, and so had Maria and Jarvis. Tony would be working in his room, flicking through blueprints and formulas idly, and suddenly they would be able to see the blue lights, the flash of the data, the curve of the graphs and the numbers, the intricate designs he conjured in his head, and Tony wouldn't be touching them or concentrating on showing them what he was doing. Once, Jarvis had been standing with Tony outside his mother's room, and the pair could hear soft crying from within. Tony held out a hand and blinked, and Jarvis watched as he flicked through radio station links he had seemingly pulled out of thin air and displayed, pausing briefly on each one until he heard Frank Sinatra, smiling and pushing it through the door with a flick of his fingers. It disappeared and Jarvis opened his mouth to ask Tony what he had just done when the smooth sounds of Sinatra's “Hey Look, No Crying” filtered through the door, coming from Maria's radio. She let out a startled laugh, and the crying stopped. Tony simply smiled and turned down the hall, making his way back to his room.

They had noticed other interesting things as well. When Tony didn't understand something (rare) or wanted more information (more frequent), he would stare past their shoulder, eyes and fingers flicking over the endless streams of data as he accessed sources like computers or televisions to get the information he desired, all without leaving a trace. If one of them asked something of Tony and he couldn't respond right away because he was elbow deep in an engine or making edits to a string of code, he would wave his hand in their direction and streams of information would pop up, all relating to their inquiry. Maria had asked if he was hungry and would like a sandwich one afternoon, and suddenly she was surrounded by blue, numbers running to calculate when her son had last eaten, how much longer he could function normally if he didn't ingest something, his favorite type of sandwich, the last time he'd had it, a video recording of a memory of a picnic lunch with his mother from seven years ago where he'd shared half of a sandwich with her, and the probability of him desiring a meal.

While Charles didn't quite understand why it was happening, he had his theories. Tony's mutant ability had spent so long without an outlet that it had stretched a space inside of him, found new data to calculate within him to replace the lack of input from the electrical world he was used to. It fed on Tony himself, and now that he was no longer trapped without an outlet, less of his energy was
cannibalizing itself to feed the desire for knowledge and data within him, and he was free to explore the world he had been absent from for a year. He could do more now, and Charles knew he would need training to control it.

Maria and Jarvis had agreed to keep up the ruse of Tony being at boarding school so that he was free to spend time at home getting healthy and exploring what he had missed, catching up on the new developments in the world. He progressed quickly through his schooling and was ready to graduate at age thirteen, but Charles had talked with him. Charles explained what he could teach him personally: how to control his ability on his own terms without other people meddling in it, how to use it to the best of his ability. Tony had smiled a shy little smile at the telepath and nodded, accepting the offer. They spent a year focusing only on Tony's ability, fine tuning it and discovering just what Tony could do.

His initial assessment had been correct: Tony's mutation was the most versatile and advanced he'd ever seen. Tony could literally manipulate pure electrical energy in any way he wished. He could pull it from his body, push it into his body, use it to create an electrical shock in combat situations, manipulate it into interfaces that reminded Charles of those holographics everyone talked and dreamed about. Quite honestly, Tony could use it in infinite ways. But the most important thing Charles had taught him was how to make sure it was only him who saw it. Once Tony had been able to tell if he was accidentally showing others what he was doing, he'd actually hugged Charles fiercely, something that hadn't happened since the night he met the young genius.

But time marched on, and Tony was ready to go to college. After Howard had off-handedly mentioned at a press conference (due to Charles' deliberate instructions to Howard, to which the man rolled his eyes and grumbled but managed to mention it anyway) that Tony had been moved home from boarding school, having graduated already at the age of fourteen, colleges and universities had flooded their mail with offers and applications. Tony had decided on MIT and had applied, gaining near immediate acceptance to his mother's delight and the pride of the small family he had formed. As the days until his departure withered away, Tony was more often found attached to one of the three people he had come to depend upon. No one mentioned it.

The night before Tony planned to leave, he was wandering the halls of his home, reliving memories. Most of them were rather unpleasant, but it was worth it for the rare moments when he passed by the spot where he and his mother had sat discussing philosophy and the meaning of life with a thermos of hot chocolate between them, or the blind spot around the corner where Jarvis and Charles had gotten tangled up and Tony had nearly laughed himself sick when he saw them. He was smiling as he made his way back to his room, but a sudden cold shiver ran down the length of his back when he passed a dark oak door. Turning to look, he paled as he noticed it was the door to his father's study.

No, Tony thought, shaking his head and clenching his fist. I will face this. I will go in this room, and I will prove to myself that he holds no power over me anymore. Squaring his shoulders and clenching onto his resolve, Tony turned the handle and stepped into the study, closing the door behind him. Howard was nowhere to be seen, and he breathed a quiet sigh of relief. Tony went about the room, touching things and cataloging them in his mind letting the numbers run in front of
his eyes. As he turned to leave, feeling a bit stronger than he had before, he caught sight of a folder on the desk. Curious, he reached for it, noting a strange symbol in the corner, an eagle with angular wings, in the form of a black circle.

Tony ran a search after connecting with the computer on the desk, looking for any record of the symbol. When the general internet showed no results, Tony hacked into the personal files stored on the hard drive and scanned through them, looking for a similar image. He found a small blip on the radar, and after activating it and decoding the password (disgustingly easy, he almost felt bad), the small blip erupted into hundreds of files, all under the name S.H.I.E.L.D. Tipping his head to the side, he searched that term on the Internet and came up with nothing. Even more intrigued now, he scrolled through some of the files. Project 34 was some weird sort of bulletproof fabric that was currently untested but doomed to fail, if the mathematics had anything to say about it. Project 57 had something to do with astronomical theory and travel, but the pure speculation drove Tony insane and he navigated out. Project Rebirth sounded interesting though, so he activated the file.

Images of a small, ill-looking man were overlaid with images of an extremely fit, physically perfect man with similar features. As he read the information on the project, he realized that this was Captain America, the project Howard had worked on. Reading the details, his eyes widened. Rogers had just volunteered to be experimented on? Simply because he wanted to serve his country? Anger welled up within him as the similarities registered. Rogers wanted to protect his country by serving it on the battlefield and being on the front lines, the clear defender, and Tony had wanted to do the same by making sure they had the best of the best weapons, quietly standing in the background, the unsung sacrifice. Rogers was experimented on once, and it had hurt for the serum to be injected, the pain causing the man to scream loud enough for the entire operating theater to hear, Tony was experimented on for a whole year, the agony unimaginable, his screams unheard by anyone. Rogers was hailed as a superhuman, revered and respected, and Tony was shoved under the carpet, hated and forgotten. How was it fair, how could it happen like that? Tony was born with this burden and had suffered for it and wasn't seen as anything remotely good, but Rogers got himself injected within an hour and he was a hero? Where was the justice?

Suddenly, Tony realized that the similarities ran deeper than that. Howard had worked on Project Rebirth, and he had experimented on Tony. From what the file said, no one was able to replicate the serum despite decades of trying, and Howard was suddenly interested in dissecting him while he was alive once he found out he had a mutation. Was Howard trying to develop a serum? Did he try to strip the mutant gene from Tony's DNA so he could recreate it, make another superhuman? Was that all he was to Howard, a stepping stone to the serum of his dreams? Absolutely furious, Tony fisted his hands in his hair, kicking the desk.

Two years had passed and he still couldn't understand. Tony faded into the bright rage consuming him, and drifted out of awareness for a while.

When he came back to himself, he remembered he was still linked to the computer. He had a sudden need to know if Howard had shared anything about him with these S.H.I.E.L.D bastards. Scrolling through the information and inputting a few search terms, he found nothing. Pausing to think, he wiggled his way into the network of the computer, following the links to various servers before locating the one he wanted. Closing his eyes, he followed it in his mindscape, eventually reaching a massive collection of data, all S.H.I.E.L.D files and documents. Assuming that he was now
connected to their network, he created a hole in the coding and slipped in, looking around. Attempting his search again, he received several results this time. A file named simply “Howard Stark, Stark Industries” caught his attention and he opened it, scanning through. There was basic information about Howard; his involvement with the military and the weapon's industry, his work on Project Rebirth, his part in the war, his movements over the years. At the end of the file, there was a small blurb about his wife and son, and how S.H.I.E.L.D had helped Howard cover up the fact that Tony wasn't really at boarding school. Tony's heart thundered in his chest at the thought of this mysterious organization being involved with the Room, but the file went on to say that the reason for the coverup was because Howard was working with him and teaching him what he could, allowing him to bypass grade levels and lessen the danger of kidnappings. Calming his rapidly beating heart, Tony took a deep breath.

All in all, these S.H.I.E.L.D people were people he wanted to keep an eye on. Information was power, and these people had a lot of both, apparently. Who knows where they would crop up in his life? He had to be prepared. Focusing his mind, he decided to try something he and Charles had been working on. He imagined a tiny dot of his energy taking root inside the S.H.I.E.L.D server, planting itself in seamlessly with the data surrounding it. Making his way out of the entanglement, Tony opened his eyes and focused on the wall across from him, still bringing himself out of his mindscape. Once he was settled, he activated the piece of energy he'd left behind and watched as it fed him information from the S.H.I.E.L.D server behind his eyelids, like who had accessed it, from where, and what new data they had added. He grinned: it had worked. He placed an imperceptible bug.

Moving out of the study with a sigh of relief, Tony headed up the stairs to his room for the last time for a while. He would be leaving for MIT in the morning, and he would move on from this house and the memories it contained. He would become that which everyone doubted he had the ability to be, he would shock the world with his intelligence and his creativity. He would be so much more than what Howard thought he was and what Captain America had boiled down to be: a science experiment. He would be a man.

A man with a little extra light.
Eight

Chapter Summary

I'm sorry. That's pretty much all I have to say.

All in all, MIT was full of learning experiences for Tony. For the first year and a half, he managed in a dorm with about nine other guys, all around five or so years older than him. At first they brushed him off, not even speaking to him, but when he managed to fix one of the guy's phones and boost the connection anywhere on the planet as well as hook up the flatscreen to stream the good porn flicks for free, he wiggled his way into the bro circle. It was difficult at first, with the hundreds of new people and the new location and all the data screaming at him all the time, but the more acquainted he got with the campus and the people there, the calmer the numbers and equations and graphs became, until they became manageable once more.

While the classes were rigorous enough to hold his attention for at least twenty minutes, eventually he got bored and ended up volunteering to help his dorm mates with their homework and projects. Consequently, he ended up learning a lot more than the mechanical engineering and electrical studies he had initially decided to double major in. He could easily keep pace with the bio majors and met for lunch once a week (when he remembered) with the chemistry students. He unashamedly bribed people to check out books for him so he could bypass the four-book checkout limit and learned all about psychology and genetics in his free time. The work he completed dazzled his professors and he was often invited out to dinner with a group of the professors who wanted to hear more about his plans for the future.

What ended up surprising most people, Tony thought, was that he wasn't quite what they expected him to be. Being a young genius, a lot of people who met him automatically assumed he would be an arrogant jackass with a know-it-all attitude. They expected him to be brash and loud and crude all the time. As the years went by, that perception changed: they believed him to be a drunken playboy that would bang anything that moved. The rumor mill churned out three stories regarding him a day, none of them true but all of them spreading like wildfire. As a result, it was difficult for him to make friends because so many people held these preconceived notions about him being that way. But that wasn't how Tony was at all. He knew he didn't know everything, and that's what was so beautiful to him: there was so much to learn. Tony was respectful to anyone who respected him, he held doors for people, he accepted criticism with the grace of a saint. He was frequently quiet, mostly because the numbers clamored for attention and new ideas and blueprints and experiments were constantly popping up and it took all of Tony's willpower to control them and not jump up and down flinging his hands around in what would appear to everyone else as empty air like a psychopath. He didn't bother with relationships or even one night stands because sex just didn't interest him, he didn't have the time. But out of all the strange contradictions that made up Tony Stark, it was probably his strange, inexplicable quirks that puzzled people the most.

If anyone touched him in a restraining manner, such as grabbing his arm or wrapping an arm around
his shoulder, Tony would turn around and walk stiffly away. Saying the name 'Howard' in front of him or addressing him as 'Anthony' evoked a similar reaction. Tony refused to be handed things, but he never did it to be malicious. One of his dorm mates had offered him a sip of what he knew to be Tony's favorite coffee to test the theory once, but Tony immediately declined when it became clear that he would have to take it. Tony was more likely to talk to people wearing a bright shade of blue, and he would discuss something with them extremely animatedly, but he tried his best to avoid people wearing even the slightest trace of a dark yellow or puce green color (why anyone would wear those colors was beyond him in the first place). Sometimes Tony would bring up the strangest things or abruptly change the topic of a conversation for no apparent reason.

However, generally speaking, Tony fit in well at MIT. His mother and Jarvis both called him once a week to check up on him and hear about his escapades, and Charles called every Friday at six o'clock on the dot. They were all pleased to hear him report that his pet projects were coming along very well and he was scoring top marks in all of his classes. Maria was pleased that her boy was fitting in, Jarvis was happy that Tony was holding his own as he had expected, and Charles was thrilled to hear that he was having no trouble in managing his mutation, even with the change of environment.

One Friday night while on the phone with Charles, Tony told him that he would be moving into an apartment with a boy named James Rhodes, who he had already begun calling Rhodey. He had just turned sixteen the past month and Charles could hear how different he sounded, how much more confident he was in himself now that the shadow of his father no longer pressed upon him daily. Charles congratulated him and told him forward the address and phone numbers to him and his mother and Jarvis, just to be safe. Tony laughed and agreed.

He met Rhodey at a frat party a week after his sixteenth birthday, and they had gotten on like a house on fire. They both kept ungodly hours, inhaled coffee like it was oxygen, and watched terrible television. After the party they kept in touch, frequently texting or calling until Rhodey made an offhanded remark about finally 'tying the knot and getting a place of their own.' Tony cackled and the next day slipped a sheet of paper with an address and a key under his door.

The apartment was just off campus, a spacious loft with enough room for Tony to finally set up his own workshop without crowding out Rhodey. Within two months, they had a system. The bottom level was Rhodey's, where he placed his exercise equipment and television and three mini-fridges as well as a small bed. The top level was Tony's, and he had a whole lab set up, complete with equipment and two computers and a stereo system. The bed was shoved against a corner, like it was put there as an afterthought, and was almost completely obscured from view by no less than four full sized bookcases. Rhodey knew not to go up to Tony's level until it was at least noon and not to enter past eleven at night if he valued his eyebrows, and Tony knew not to blow anything up after midnight or before six in the morning. The only major issue Tony had was keeping a tight grip on his control of his mutation: if he got too caught up in a project, he was concerned that he might accidentally reveal something to Rhodey that he didn't want too. But beyond that, they were a perfect fit, partners in crime.
As the months flew by and Rhodey showed no sign of weariness typically caused by living with Tony, Tony allowed himself a bit more freedom. The stranglehold he held on his control of his mutant powers slowly relaxed, and instead of firmly locking away all traces of it, he allowed himself to use it, become more of himself. If Tony happened to be changing the radio station while he was across the room or typing up code ten feet from his computer, Rhodey didn't notice, which was fine by Tony.

The teen was secretly pleased at the reception his helper bot had gotten. He'd built Dummy in a fit of boredom when he had too many ideas running around in his head and too much data floating around him to parse together a complete, functioning project. Within the week, Dummy was zipping along the upper floors, handing Tony tools, which he didn't actually need but found endless endearing, and attempting to clean up, by really just picking things up and moving them somewhere else. Tony was nervous that Rhodey would think Dummy was a childish project (Howard would think so, this was a stupid project, he should be doing something like building weapons, that's what they all wanted) and so tried to keep Dummy reigned in on his level. But inevitably, the time came when Dummy somehow made his way down the stairs and was poking Rhodey on the nose with a socket wrench.

“Oh my God, Dummy, what are you doing, I told you to stay upstairs, Rhodey is going to eat you, he hasn't even had his coffee yet, Rhodey, I'm so sorry, would you believe me if I told you this was all a hallucination brought on by caffeine withdrawal, because that's something that happens, right, I mean it's perfectly plausible, so just please ignore the persistent little hallucination and please don't smash him to bits, I'm sorry-”

“Tony,” Rhodey said simply, reaching a hand toward the bot. Tony gulped, looked at his feet, and tried very hard not to let out a whimper. Dummy was his first AI – his friend – and Rhodey was going to- “Did you say his name was Dummy? That's not exactly polite.”

Wait, what?

“Hey there, little fella!” Rhodey said brightly, patting the bot on the arm. Dummy made a pleased whirring noise and zipped around him, reaching back to poke him on the cheek before depositing the socket wrench in Tony's hand and zipping away again. Tony stood stock still, staring at Rhodey. Rhodey liked Dummy. He liked Dummy. As in, someone liked something he had created, not because it exploded things or brought about new innovation, but because it was quirky and fun and strange.

Kind of like Tony.

“That's a cool robot, Tone. How long did it take you to build him?” Him? Rhodey referred to his AI with gender pronouns. Oh, God, Rhodey was the best.
“Four days, five hours, and twenty-seven minutes,” Tony responded absently, clutching the socket wrench to his chest. “And he's an AI, not just a robot. He can learn things, so he can help me- help us around the apartment and stuff.” Rhodey paused for a minute and Tony's chest tightened, thinking for a moment that he'd gone to far. But Rhodey just cocked his head to the side for a moment and then asked if Dummy knew how to play fetch. Tony shook his head, and scrambled out of the way when Rhodey jumped up from the couch and grabbed an old tennis ball they had laying around.

“Well, I'm borrowing him for a while to teach him some good social skills. Don't blow up your workshop without him,” he said, going off in the direction the bot had zoomed off to, throwing the ball up in the air and catching it as he went.

Oh, yeah, Rhodey was the best ever.

It was therefore safe to say that Tony and Rhodey were the best of friends, and Dummy was their faithful follower that dropped glasses and swept up pairs of boxers. They all fit together like a disjointed family, and Tony could look forward to not working for once, as there was something so dependable and happy waiting for him after he descended from his level. Rhodey made sure that they both ate, Tony made sure there was a good internet connection, Dummy made sure that they were always on their toes, and Tony's mutant ability surrounded the apartment in a soft haze of blue that only he could see, only he could treasure. The apartment was constantly filled with laughter, whirring, and the sound of creation and joy.

Until one day, when the phone rang in the apartment.

“James Rhodes,” Rhodey said into the receiver, balancing his pasta in one hand as he juggled a soda and the phone in the other.

“Hello, does Tony Stark reside there? Is he available?” A soft voice said on the other end, politely inquiring. Rhodey raised an eyebrow.

“TONY! YOU BUSY? PHONE'S FOR YOU!” A loud, metallic bang was heard from upstairs, and he winced. Tony came racing down the stairs, a grin on his face.

“Must be Mom or Jarvis, they haven't called all week. Thanks, Rhodey,” he said, taking the phone from him. Rhodey nodded and walked to the couch, seating himself in front of the television. He ate quietly for about a minute before he heard the clatter of the phone against the floor and bolted up, running back, Dummy hot on his heels.
Tony was standing there, hand frozen by his ear, with the most desolate, broken expression on his face. The usual curious light in his eyes was completely dead, the brown orbs flat and dull. The phone was on the ground, forgotten, as Tony stared off into space. Dummy stood guard by the door with a welding torch, protecting his family.

“Tony?” Rhodey asked, approaching him with his hands out in front of him. “Tone? Is everything okay? What happened? Who was that?” It was like Tony didn't even hear him, face unmoving, body completely unresponsive. Rhodey picked up the abandoned phone and placed it to his ear.

“-sorry for your loss, Mr. Stark. The funeral will be held.”

Rhodey clicked off the phone.

After guiding the still unresponsive Tony to the couch with Dummy’s help, he sat on the floor in front of him and waited for something, anything to happen. Part of him was screaming at him to call 911, that this was dangerous, that Tony needed help, but the rest of him quieted that part. Tony needed him right now, he needed him to be here and sit with him even if he couldn't see him. Rhodey gently placed his hand on Tony's leg, and when that got no response, carefully curled the fingers of one hand with Tony's, using the other to rub at his arm. Tony was still as ice for another twenty minutes before he came out of it, dull eyes seeking out Rhodey. Rhodey squeezed his friend's hand, and Tony's eyes turned frantically, feverishly bright, hands shaking and body trembling. This new development startled Rhodey and he reached for his cell to call for an ambulance, but Tony gripped his fingers tighter.

“Speed dial one,” he muttered quietly. “Speed dial one.” Nodding, Rhodey reached into Tony's hoodie pocket for his phone and flipped it open, pressing one and hitting the send button, pushing it up to his ear.

“Tony, I didn't expect.”

“Listen, mister,” Rhodey interrupted. “I don't know who you are, but something's really wrong with Tony. Something- something happened. He froze up for a while and now he's shaking and I don't know what to do and he told me to call you and can you help please because I don't know what I'm doing and something is very, very wrong-”
“Calm down, young man. You must be calm.” The strong, collected voice of the man on the other end snapped him back into his senses, and he took a deep breath. Dummy's claw wrapped carefully around Tony's fingers, and the teen clutched at the cold metal like a lifeline. “How long was Tony unresponsive? Is he still shaking?”

“He was out of it for about half an hour. The shaking has gotten more violent,” Rhodey reported, watching as Tony's eyes flickered about and he curled in on himself, reporting it all quietly to the man on the other end.

“I need you to listen to me carefully, young man. Wrap Tony up in the thickest blanket you can find, and prop him up so he's sitting,” the man said, and Rhodey rushed to comply. He made an affirmative noise when Tony was shivering inside his down comforter, leaned against the arm of the couch. “Now, gather him up and put him in the car. I'll send you an address, drive to it and I will meet you there.”

“If you think that I'm just going to drive my best friend and deliver him to some strange man-” Rhodey started angrily, nearly hissing as he curled protectively around Tony on the couch, who was entirely unaware of what was happening.

“Would Tony take a painful effort to tell you to call a 'strange man' who happens to be first on his speed dial? Something is very wrong, as you have said, and many things will go extremely wrong if Tony remains there. Trust me,” the man said, and for some reason, Rhodey did.

When the Rhodey arrived at the destination sent to him, he tried not to gawk. His car was parked in front of an utter mansion, gate and pillars and all. He knew it couldn't be Stark Mansion; wrong area of town, different name on the gate, but it was impressive none the less. Picking up Tony, who was still shivering and staring wide-eyed into space, he headed for the door, surprised when it opened as he approached. A man in a mechanical wheelchair greeted him, face darkening as he saw Tony shivering in Rhodey's arms. Waving him in, the man led him to the couch where Rhodey laid Tony down gently. Looking up at the man again, he noticed that his gaze was focused entirely on Tony, eyes dark and solemn.

“What happened?” Rhodey asked quietly, gaining the man's attention. He sighed, eyes shuttering closed. He didn't answer, but Rhodey hadn't really expected him to. Nodding, the young adult stood and started walking back to the door.
“Rhodey, I presume?” The man asked suddenly, stalling Rhodey in his footsteps. He nodded again, turned around to face him. “You are very important to Tony. He talks about you very frequently, and in the highest regard.” Rhodey blinked, a bit shocked. “I will take care of him. Do not worry.”

Rhodey choked up a bit at the thought of leaving Tony behind, but he knew this man could do more for his best friend than he could. He would make sure nothing bad happened. So Rhodey thanked him sincerely and left, trying to ignore the hot rush of tears that he let out on the way back to the apartment, empty of Tony's unique presence.

When Rhodey had gone, Charles had rushed over to Tony's side, grabbing his face in his hands and rubbing his cheek softly. Tony's shivers died a bit at his touch, and he turned bright eyes towards him, hands clenching and unclenching, reaching out for him from under the blanket. Charles looked him in the eye, took a deep breath, and nodded, confirming what he knew Tony had heard on the phone earlier.

His mother was dead.

Jarvis was dead.

Howard was dead.

*His mother and Jarvis were dead.*

Tony let out a heart wrenching cry that chilled Charles to the bone, screaming to the ceiling as he tugged on his hair with all his strength. Heavy, broken sobs wracked his body. Tony curled into a ball on the couch, the blanket falling to the floor, and screamed again, the pain in his voice resonating within his chest. Suddenly, the lights dimmed, brightened, and went out completely, plunging the house into darkness. The televisions turned on and off, flipping channels rapidly, the computers spitting out computations, the appliances flipping on and shutting off.

Quickly, Charles reached forward for Tony, hands coming to either side of his head. He tried to enter Tony's mind, but the sheer whirlwind of pain blasting through his mind took several tries to burst through. Entering Tony's mindscape, he read the panicked, frantic, pained thoughts that made no comprehensible sense but still communicated Tony's anguish and agony. Charles tried to concentrate,
but the pain was blinding, and it was hard to stay focused on his task. Generating a shield, he managed to encompass a majority of what he could tell was the active power Tony was using at this moment to cause the power surge. Sealing it, he took a deep breath before opening his eyes and removing his hands, glancing around the house to see that the power had returned, with only the occasional flicker.

Turning his attention back to Tony, he saw him curled up, tears racing down his face, chest heaving and eyes closed against the pain. His hands still tugged his hair without relent, pulling and ripping with all his might. Charles carefully disentangled his fingers, pulling Tony's hands into his own, gathering Tony against his chest. He rested weakly against Charles, exhausted and in so much pain, but still fighting.

“Sleep, Tony,” Charles said softly, running a hand down Tony's back. “You need to sleep. We can face this tomorrow, but for now, sleep.”

Tony slowly dropped into a fitful sleep. He dreamt of a terrifying lightning storm that set everything in sight ablaze, burning it all to ashes.
Nine

Chapter Notes

get your tissues. this'll be...kinda painful.

When Tony woke up, it was to an unfamiliar room. He was wrapped up in a down comforter that smelled like Rhodey and he could feel the familiar weight of a wrench in his pocket, which upon further inspection was revealed to be the one Dummy usually carted around. Rolling over, he took in the sight of the sun in the center of the sky through the large windows, signaling that it was at least noon. He sighed, moving to roll out of bed, when it hit him.

They were dead.

The weight of the revelation forced him to his knees and he slid down completely, resting in a heap. His mother's rare, sweet laugh echoed through his head, over and over, merging with that light tone Jarvis used to convey his amusement when he was pretending to be serious. As he closed his eyes, he was assaulted with images, memories of times spent together. Hiding in the gazebo in the dead of night, sneaking off to the lake while Howard was working, playing catch, all four of them. Charles, Jarvis, Maria, and Tony.

The longer his eyes stayed closed, the brighter the blue data got until he could ignore it no longer. Numbers screaming at him, calculating the time since death, running his internal clock, defining funeral and grieving process and coping methods. News feeds ran through his head, but their deaths weren't mentioned. SI stock was still as high as ever, there were no press conferences, nothing. All was quiet from the media. Opening his eyes, Tony tried and failed to stand, instead resolving to sit until he felt he could tell up from down.

Half an hour later, a light tap on the door entered his stream of consciousness. He didn't respond, but the door opened softly and the data told him Charles was entering, the speed of his wheelchair and rusting rates forming and being dismissed in front of his eyes within a blink. Charles rolled over to him and offered a hand, but Tony simply listed over and laid his head in the man's lap, eyes unseeing once more. Charles closed his own eyes and threaded a hand through Tony's hair, saying nothing.

Just hours later, Tony let out a wretched sob that pulled at Charles' heart as he slumped to the ground and tried to push himself under the bed. Alarmed, Charles tried to grab his arm and calm him down, but Tony had sunk into mumbles and whimpers and was forcing his eyes shut tightly, hands covering his ears and feet kicking out. “Tony, Tony,” Charles murmured softly, trying not to scare
him further or set him off. “Tell me what's wrong, Tony. I'm here, just tell me what's wrong.”

A bright blue flash filled the space around the room and all of a sudden, hundreds of news columns were thrown up, press feeds and gossip sites filling the air, all reporting on the same topic.


**TONY STARK: DEVASTATED OR PARTYING?**, hollered People Magazine.

**THE END OF AN ERA: HOWARD STARK DEAD,** yelled the Tribune.

Hundreds of newsfeeds all reporting on the deaths. The gruesome car accident was reported in detail, pictures of the burned wreckage strewn all about the room. Several reports claimed it was an accident caused by Howard losing control of the car on a winding road, others said it was a deliberate attack from a rival company that went too far. People Magazine had 'sources' that claimed they had seen Tony partying in Paris, completely oblivious to the death of his family. The New York Times said that *their* sources put Tony in a hospital, having been so distraught by the deaths that he drank himself into a very serious case of alcohol poisoning. All of the feeds questioned what would be the fate of Stark Industries, and whether or not Tony Stark was ready to take up the mantle in the now empty footsteps of his father.

Momentarily distracted by reading a few of the articles, Charles didn't notice the effects of the display on Tony until the teen was fully wedged under the bed, shaking and shuddering enough to move the mattress above him. Howard's name was all around the room in bold letters, pictures of him filling the space. Of course Tony would be having a panic attack: he was surrounded by the memory of the man who abused and experimented on him, which was compounded by the uncaring words reporting the deaths of his mother and Jarvis. Thinking quickly, Charles spoke in a calm, smooth tone to the shattered child under the bed.

“Tony, you have to let go of the data. Just let it go. You don't want to see it anymore, it's upsetting you. Don't punish yourself, Tony, it's not your fault. It was a car accident, nothing you could have prevented. It's not your fault, so let it go.”

Suddenly, the sound of sobs was heard from under the bed, and eventually a shaking hand came out, followed slowly by an arm. By the time Tony was curled against Charles’ legs again, the oppressive articles had faded out of view. Charles whispered to Tony in a soft voice, saying everything and nothing at all, just trying to get the boy to calm down. Eventually, his breathing returned to normal and Tony's fingers crept into his, entwining and seeking comfort in what was familiar and safe.
If the lights flickered significantly more than usual, neither of them said anything.

It was a sunny Monday morning when the Starks were buried. Tony was seated at the front of the congregation, sitting alone, away from the others. Charles couldn't be here because no one knew he was associated with the Starks and he had no real reason to be, and thus his presence would raise questions. The only family Howard and Maria had was Tony, and of course Jarvis had had a separate, more private burial with his own family. They hadn't thought to invite Tony. He pretended his heart didn't break at the injustice of not getting to say goodbye to his oldest confidant.

Most of the people gathered at the funeral were business associates of Howard's. Tony didn't know any of them except for one, Obadiah Stane. He'd met him on a couple of occasions, and his voice had sounded oddly familiar, like from a dream or an old memory, but he'd never spoken with the man. Stane had made it clear that he would be managing the company until Tony came of age, and Tony had put on his press smile and said, “Of course, Obi.” He knew perfectly well that he would be expected to design the weapons his father no longer could, and if he could not, the company wouldn't return to the hands of a Stark. It was all said in the smirk the man wore, the very same one his father had worn. He tried very hard not to think about it.

When the priest finished his words and motioned for Tony to come up to the pulpit, a heavy weight settled in his chest. He'd barely spoken since he'd heard the news, and now he was expected to have prepared a speech. He stood up mechanically and approached, feeling like he was walking to the electric chair, and tried to ignore the flashes of blue and white, one constantly counting the hours his mother and Jarvis had been dead, the brightness of the sun, the time, the amount of people present, who they worked for, and possible motives for their attendance, and the other telling him that pictures were being taken, and they'd soon be plastered over every news station in the nation.

As he passed the coffins holding his mother and his father's bodies, he felt conflicting emotions rise up within him. On one hand, he would never again hear his mother's comforting words or soft singing when he was upset, nor would he feel her warm touch or smell her light perfume. But on the other, Howard was finally dead, and both he and his mother were free from his torment, the threat of his presence and the panic that welled up inside them when his name was mentioned or they caught sight of him. His mother finally had peace, could finally rest safe in the knowledge that Howard would never reach her. And wasn't it so selfish for him to be sad about that? Wasn't it stupid for him to feel that it was all so unfair? Wasn't it awful that he wished, just wished that he could be with her, that he could be dead, too?

Stepping up to the pulpit and facing the crowd of faked sadness and false tears, of people pretending to regret the loss of a 'genius mind' and instead weeping the loss of easy profits, Tony knew what he was going to say, and the weight lightened, if only a bit.
“A lot of people here are here for my father, and what he represented. I know you see him as a man that stood for the safety of America, for the ingenuity of the people, for the advancement of our goals. I know that you expect me to stand up here and talk about how much he will be missed, but frankly, I don't give a damn about that. The newspapers and gossip magazines will say that enough, I don't need to waste your time with that.” The crowd stared at him in shock and offense, but Tony paid no heed, continuing on. “What I am going to talk about is my mother, who I can guarantee not one of you would've even remembered had I not just brought her up. My mother, Maria, was the strongest person I have ever met. She was selfless, caring, and she brought me a sense of comfort and safety that only a mother can bring. She protected me from every scary monster in the closet and the ones that weren't. My mother gave everything she had inside herself to make sure that I had as good a life as I could possibly get. I will never, ever forget that.” Tony paused, taking a deep breath and looking down, noting that the camera flashes had stopped and the people were simply listening to him speak. “The Stark family has a saying: Stark men are strong as steel. That has been ingrained in my head since the day I was born. But my mother? My mother was stronger than steel. She supported me when I wasn't strong, when I was weak and malleable. She held me up when nothing else could. My mother was titanium, and I will never forget how incredible it was to have witnessed her strength.”

Turning around, Tony ignored his father's coffin entirely, making his way to his mother's. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a slightly crumpled rose, the stem cut off. He'd trimmed it from the ones growing around the base of the gazebo, their secret hiding place. Cradling the flower in his palm, he looked into his mother's pale face, desperately, irrationally hoping that her bright eyes would blink open and smile at him, like she was just waking up. When it didn't happen, when her face stayed relaxed and empty, Tony placed the rose in her hands and smiled at her. A tear trailed down his cheek as he stepped back and closed the coffin lid, shielding her from his eyes forever, a last goodbye.

Tony turned on his heel and walked away.

Tony continued to live with Charles after the funeral as the man wasn't comfortable letting Tony return to school with the press hanging around the campus hoping for an interview with him. After his speech at the funeral, they were begging for the chance to question him about what he meant and why he said the things he did. Rhodey called at least once a day and Tony muttered a few sentences to him, but that was about the extent to which he communicated. Charles was beginning to get worried.

Tony was reverting to a state Charles had seen before, the year following his rescue. He was evasive, hardly ate anything, and just generally hardly spoke. He spent a lot of time staring into space or out of the huge bay windows in the living room, and he avoided small spaces. It took several tries to get his attention for even trivial things and Charles had to frequently remind him to do regular things like
sleep. He knew Tony was grieving, but Charles was beginning to worry that if he didn't do something soon, Tony would be permanently stuck in this state.

It was therefore a surprise when, during breakfast one morning, Tony suddenly sat up, a wrinkle in his brow. Charles set his fork down and looked to Tony, desperately wanting to hear the teen say something more than his usual mumblings but not willing to get his hopes up. Tony glanced over at Charles, and suddenly a bright blue flash directed his attention to the space in front of Tony. A file was open, the heading reading S.H.I.E.L.D in ominous looking letters.

Ah, he remembered Tony mentioning something about them. He'd placed a bug in their system, to let him know whenever they published information into their network. Tony never really delved too deep into their work. He had gathered (and subsequently shared with Charles) that they were a sort of spy organization, operating under orders of the government but with no “official” ties to them. Meaning, legally, they could pretty much do as they wished. Tony had been simply keeping an eye out to see if they would gather anything about his mutant status to be better prepared for if something like that did happen, so they would have a heads-up.

The file had a flashing dot in the upper right corner, and Tony's eyes darted to Charles'. “Update pertaining to me,” was all he said, mumbling. Charles nodded and motioned for him to go ahead, so Tony activated the dot and allowed the information to pour in.

The first thing to come in was a document with Howard Stark's name atop it. The same information was there from before, but there was an extra line added to the bottom now.

Died November 18, 1991, along with wife Maria and butler, Edwin Jarvis. Cause of death: see attachments SFD-01 and SFD-02

Tony forced himself to think rationally. Yes, he already knew how they had died: a car accident, driving too fast around a tight corner. But what if these S.H.I.E.L.D people knew something he didn't, like if it actually was an attack by a rival company? What if they knew who it was? Tony needed that sort of information, if they had it. He had to open those attachments. Looking to Charles the man let out a small, brittle smile to encourage him, and Tony activated the first attachment.

It was a video. The video was caught on a camera that Tony knew to be in the garage of the Stark Mansion, and he leaned forward to get a better look, noting that Charles did the same. Nothing happened for quite some time, before his mother appeared on screen. She was quite literally shoved into the frame, tears rolling down her cheeks and a large gash on her chest, made apparent by the way her torn shirt hung off her shoulders. Howard appeared behind her, armed with a knife, a wild look in his eyes. He had Jarvis by the collar, the knife at his throat, yelling at Maria.
“Bitch, get in the fucking car!” Howard screamed, pushing the knife closer to Jarvis' neck. “You're going to get in the car and I'm going to drive to him! That was the best weapon I had, the best CHANCE I had! And you're going to get it back!”

“You promised, Howard, you promised! You've been drinking, you aren't thinking clearly, go lay down and we'll forget all about this,” Maria pleaded, holding her shirt to the wound on her chest to staunch the bleeding. Howard snarled and threw Jarvis to the floor, where the butler groaned in pain and struggled to get up. The camera caught sight of several gashes on the man's back before they were blocked by Howard's foot pressing him to the floor, ignoring his cry of pain. Maria sobbed, rushing up to him.

“Howard! You swore you were done with those experiments, that you would never do them again! You swore!” She cried, frantic. Howard laughed manically, slashing at her arm and relishing her cry of pain.

“That is my weapon! I have all rights to it, no one owns it but me! I will harness that gene, and I will be more successful than that fucking German ever was! If I can't find the super soldier, I will make something ten times what he was!” He screamed, ripping open the car door and shoving Maria inside. She screamed in pain, begging for mercy before Howard pushed Jarvis in next to her and locked the door. Howard slid into the driver's seat and sped away from the garage, the blood spatter on the floor smearing underneath the tires.

Next to the video file, a document had appeared, and their eyes roved over it as the scene played out.

As S.H.I.E.L.D agents arrived on the scene, they discovered the security feeds found in SFD-01. After wiping the feed, agents traveled to the crash and discovered that Howard Stark had indeed been heavily intoxicated. After comparing the tire tracks with what was discovered on the tapes and Howard's previous records of impeccable driving while under the influence of alcohol, the most likely cause of the accident was either Maria Stark or Edwin Jarvis, one of them jerking the wheel to presumably prevent Howard from reaching his destination. Agents proceeded to destroy evidence pertaining to Howard Stark's drinking and corroborate the injuries Maria Stark and Edwin Jarvis obtained with the accident after disposing of the knife and cleaning up the blood. The legacy of Howard Stark was prioritized over his indiscretions as his company provides weapons necessary to the protection of the peace. For all intents and purposes, Howard and Maria Stark and Edwin Jarvis died in a car accident caused simply by speeding, and Howard was a respectable, ingenious man who died before his time.

The weapon referred to in the security tape was not located, and it is believed that one of Howard Stark's designs may have been stolen by a rival company or locked away by an unknown third party. Why Howard believed Maria may have been able to aid him in regaining this design is unknown, but it is absolutely known that whatever it was, Maria and Jarvis did not want Howard to retrieve it, and took drastic measures to see it protected. Tony Stark is unaware of this incident, and should remain
Tony's vision blacked out. He could see nor hear anything but the rage pumping through his veins, consuming his being entirely. His mother and Jarvis had died to protect him. They had sacrificed themselves to make sure Howard wouldn't be able to get his hands on him. Howard had killed Jarvis. Howard had killed his mother. It was all his fault, it was his fault, it was HIS FAULT!

Suddenly, the room exploded in a mass of glass and energy. Charles covered his head as every light in the house burst, raw electricity flaring through it. The outlets burst open as electricity jumped out of them and into Tony, feeding into his body and into his rage. The whole house went dark, and as Charles looked out the window, he saw the power of the city dim and then go black as well. Bolts of electricity arced into Tony's body as he sat, eyes glowing bright blue in rage as he shook. His hands curled in his hair and pulled, an action so familiar that Charles could only stare as the storm raged around him.

Tony let out an angry scream so loud it shook the windows, and he threw himself out of the chair and to the floor, kneeling and clutching his head, screaming into his arms. What had happened when Tony was first brought to Xavier Mansion paled in comparison to this electrical phenomenon bursting before him. Lightning struck the ground outside, surrounding the building in an explosion of blue light. The electricity arcing in and around Tony expanded, reaching out, trying to connect with and meet the lightning bolts outside, and Charles realized that he could not let that happen, or Tony would be lost to him forever.

Reaching forward once more, Charles broke through Tony's mind and placed one of his strongest shields. The teen shredded through it, rage so potent Charles could feel it in his bones. He tried to place multiple shields around Tony's mind, but they all shattered under the force of Tony's power. Resorting to his last tactic and begging it would work, he wove three shields together and anchored them to Tony's mind, pushing with his own mind and pleading to anyone who was listening that it would work, that the storm would calm.

It was a long moment before the wind died down, before the crack in the air reduced to a light sizzle, before the bright lights of the city flickered and returned to power. The mansion was still in complete darkness, but as Charles leaned back, he caught sight of blazing, glowing blue eyes and betrayal in them before they closed, Tony's body going limp.

When Charles cupped the teen's face in his hands, he barely noticed that the tears shocked his skin.
It took a week before Tony woke up again. Charles spent the time worrying over the teenager, who had fallen in what appeared to be a strange type of coma. Tony was constantly feverish, sweating and shivering and twitching. He would yell out or murmur softly or cry in anguish, but no matter what Charles did, he could not reach him. Tony was entirely unresponsive to outside stimuli.

On the third day, Charles attempted to look into his mind to try to reach him that way. But as he tried to enter, he found himself gripping his head in pain, a slight electrical shock having run through him. Tony cried out and curled up on himself but made no move to open his eyes or make contact with Charles. The man sighed deeply with worry and wrapped Tony up more tightly with his friend's comforter.

When Tony finally awakened, Charles smiled gently at him and held up a cup of water for him, aiming a straw at his mouth. Tony gratefully gulped down water until the glass was empty, laying back again and looking to Charles. He looked into his eyes for barely a second before his eyes darted down and his cheeks flushed. Charles, puzzled, asked Tony how he was feeling, if he was okay, if he needed anything. Dark brown eyes looked back up at him and Charles gasped at the complete lack of life within them.

Tony didn't want to talk about what had happened. He didn't want to tell Charles about the hellish realm he'd suffered in for a week, the monstrous things that had plagued him. He didn't want to relive the small room, the Room, the memory that had come back so twisted and ten times as worse, the place where the memory of Howard had beat him and burned him and chained him up to dissect him while he lived, while his lungs screamed for air, where he'd sucked the electricity right out of him, where he'd ripped his mutant gene from his bones, from his blood, and left the empty carcass chained up like an example. He didn't want to relay the sight of his mother and Jarvis, broken and bleeding, while Howard cackled in the background and danced on their corpses, their blood on his hands, on his face, white teeth gleaming and cold eyes glistening. He didn't want to reveal how he'd escaped, how he'd let the electricity build and build until he'd grabbed Howard's face and let it race through his body, let it loose inside the bastard's flesh, and then let it burst into the room, catching everything alight and burning it to the ground, destroying everything, freeing him.

He didn't want to talk about it.
“Why?” he asked, voice raspy and pained. There was so much that one question was asking, so much running through Tony's mind, like a whirlwind. Why did Howard do it? Why did they cover it up? Why do people like him get away with everything? Why did I lose control? Why did I destroy everything? Why am I like this, what's wrong with me?

“I don't know,” Charles said sadly. And that was the only answer he could truthfully offer.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

When Tony recovered, he was determined to take the knowledge of the cover up straight to every news source in the nation. It took a few hours to talk him down, to make him see sense. Tony would have to provide evidence, which was technically illegally obtained, and then prove how he got it, which would mean outing himself as a mutant and admit to hacking into a private government agency that would probably be able to evade or dismiss the accusations entirely anyway. After hours of angry yelling and anguished pleading, Tony reluctantly agreed that Charles was right, and the best course of action was to pretend to be in the dark and stay off S.H.I.E.L.D's radar. It didn't mean he would forget, and he certainly would never forgive, but it was what he could do for now.

Tony had asked if he could stay for a while longer, to rest and work and get his head on straight. Charles, of course, agreed, and was pleased to see that Tony was getting out of bed in the morning, was speaking and eating and sleeping, was working on a project that he refused to tell Charles about but he was working, and that gave him hope. Maybe Tony would pull out of this alright, would be able to shoulder the utter betrayal and hurt he'd felt at seeing the truth.

Tony still refused to talk about what had happened that week, and Charles knew it was more than him simply forgetting or being actually unconscious during the whole thing. Charles had a theory about why Tony's power seemed to have dramatically increased, and he'd discussed it with Tony. He'd told Tony about what had happened after he'd discovered the cover up in great detail (as this part Tony had no memory of and Charles knew he was telling the truth) and about the shields he'd erected to prevent that level of Tony's power from escaping, and Tony was remarkably accepting. They'd discovered together that the shields didn't lock in Tony's normal reserve of power, the amount he'd used daily to project blueprints and access data, only the large, concussive force he'd used that night. But where did that force come from? Charles and Tony agreed that it was possible that the revelation had caused such a rush of emotions and anger and pain similar to the effect of his time in the Room that his mutation had again advanced, but in a different way. By observing Tony's new affect on household objects and technology in general, it appeared that Tony's cells were producing their own electricity, like a walking power station. Anything he touched, if not connected to a power source, came on and began working, or if already connected, shorted out due to too much energy being forced into it. With practice (and another shield woven into the defense inside his mind) Tony could prevent himself from shorting out everything in the mansion. After trying to become used to it and largely failing, Tony had jumped up and asked to use the lab downstairs for a project. Charles had allowed it, and that was where Tony now spent most of his time.
When Charles saw the teen, it was usually with a screwdriver behind his ear and grease in his hair, wearing an old band shirt and ratty jeans that were covered in various unidentifiable chemicals. Tony would babble about equations and formulas with increasing frequency as the days went by, and eventually he opened up when Charles asked a question about a compound Tony mentioned by displaying a room-sized, interactive Periodic Table and giving Charles the run-down of how he'd decided on that particular compound for his secret project. The light that had been absent from Tony's eyes for so long was slowly returning and Charles welcomed it with open arms.

As for Tony, he was slowly learning how to shove away the bone-deep ache that rested inside of him when he thought of his mother and Jarvis, of Howard's disgusting actions, of the cover up S.H.I.E.L.D had sanctioned and created. S.H.I.E.L.D had quickly made its way to the second slot on Tony's Shit List (right under Howard, who had always held the place of honor). He swore on his own soul that he would never work with them, would never provide them with weapons or give them information if he could help it. He wouldn't aid the people that had covered up his loved one's sacrifice, the people that perpetuated Howard's false innocence and brilliance.

Instead, he would fight. Howard had died thinking he was nothing more than a mutation, a science experiment, a thing to dissect. He would prove the bastard wrong. He would be more than anyone thought he could possibly be. He would be strong, brilliant, tough, sharp-witted, and most of all, he would be the best. He would become the person they all portrayed him as: the confident playboy with the silver tongue and the mind like no other. He would hide this emotional, weak, self-conscious, nervous side of himself. He would make his mother and Jarvis proud. He would do whatever it took.

Which is what led to his project. The shields on his mind wouldn't hold forever, and Charles had to constantly use some of his power to support shields of that strength and size, Tony knew. It didn't help that the amount of power the shields were holding back and trapping in his mind and body caused the pressure of so much energy to build and ache inside him, putting even more strain on both himself and the shields. He couldn't just randomly explode when they gave out. He couldn't take the chance of someone discovering what he was. He knew he could probably learn to exercise his own control over it if he was given time, just like he had when he was younger, but he didn't have the time. He needed a solution now.

The shields on his mind prevented the raw power inside of him from escaping. But the raw power inside of him was essentially pure electrical energy, energy his mutation created in his body. Well, what did people do to prevent energy from escaping, from going where it shouldn't? They grounded it. They forced it down a closed circuit to power something else, like homes or electrical lines. His body was like an open circuit, allowing energy to be used and allowing it to escape. He needed to ground that extra raw energy, to focus it into something else.

He needed to close the circuit.
Once he'd realized what he needed to do in theory, putting it into practice just took a little elbow grease. He spent hours and days designing something he could keep on his body, something inconspicuous, something that would meet his purpose. He labored endlessly to perfect it, to make it strong enough to withstand his heavy work and careful enough not to hurt him. A week later, his project was complete. Holding it in his hands, he admired the smooth, strong metal, the careful, intricate design. This was the key, he'd finally done it.

His hands cradled a small band of metal about a quarter of an inch thick. The outside of the band was carved with vines and swirls, an endless pattern of etched lines that somehow calmed him. The metal was cool in his hands and so light that he could forget it was there if he wasn't looking at it. But this band was much more than just a fancy accessory.

The inside of the band was a plating of pure silver painstakingly layered to look absolutely seamless. The silver was protected by the outside of the band, made of thicker titanium. The thin silver, the most conductive metal, would draw the raw electricity towards the band and the titanium layer would keep it from escaping, as titanium was hardly conductive at all. With the energy constantly being pulled towards the band as his body produced it, Tony could safely redirect it elsewhere in a steady stream without exposing it to the environment, allowing it to build up, or risk it jumping or arcing out of his body. Now, to put it to the test.

Reaching down, Tony rucked up his left pants leg and braced his foot on the corner of his chair. Running his finger along the bottom of the band, he found the almost invisible catch and pulled, opening the circle of metal enough to wrap it just above his ankle and push it shut with a resounding click. Within seconds, he felt the immense pressure in his head and chest begin to dissipate as the lines and swirls etched in the metal began to glow a pure, bright blue. They filled with and directed the energy within him to the base of his foot and almost instinctively, he pushed it out of his body. The pressure drained out of him as the band cycled the electricity until eventually he reached the baseline he was familiar with. All the extra energy that had built up had been redirected and the steady flow his body created was being cycled back out into the environment thanks to the band.

Opening his eyes (when had he closed them?), Tony looked around the lab to notice that the lights were significantly brighter. He dashed to the windows to look outside and saw that the lampposts that lined the long drive and usually flickered were steady and bright. Perfect, it worked!

The data and interfaces that he'd pushed to the side to focus on his testing suddenly came rushing back full force and brighter than ever. The blue was positively ethereal and the data was so much more involved. It was no longer painful to push the information away; it went willingly and painlessly so he could focus on the task at hand. He had complete control.

Letting out a triumphant whoop, Tony raced up the stairs to tell Charles the good news.
After explaining everything to Charles and convincing the astonished man to lower the shields, Tony was proud to see that the band still functioned perfectly well, continuing to cycle the energy into the mansion. Charles had hugged him tight and told him how proud he was that Tony was creating things for good instead of simply building weapons, and Tony pretended he didn’t tear up. That night, they ate dinner and Tony didn’t have to be careful not to touch the stove in case he blew it up. He knew it would be okay.

When he finally laid down for bed that night, he knew it was going to be his last night there. He had to return to school, had to finish his classes and graduate so he could start to take control of the company. He had to face the vultures from the press and be ready to answer their questions. And most of all, he had to fit into their definition of him so perfectly that they all overlooked the little anomalies. So before he went to sleep, he did what any reasonable person would do: he used his mutation to see what they were saying about him.

Turns out the name “Tony Stark” brought up a lot of interesting broadcasts. Over the years, news stations and the papers seemed to spend a hell of a lot of time speculating about what he’d been up to. There were several that made him laugh out loud: apparently, since coming to MIT, he’d had sex with two entire sororities and was gunning for completing a third (he was actually still a virgin), had drunk enough alcohol to give himself alcohol poisoning four times over (he had one beer on his sixteenth birthday and hated it), and managed to bring a group of Swedish models to his Technical Drafting course (he’d never even spoken to a model before). There were “eye-witness” accounts of sightings of him in Italy, France, and Germany from several sources (he’d never been out of the country) and he had apparently been in the running for the Nobel Peace Prize twice (um, no). The media, to whom he’d never given a single interview, had him portrayed across the board as an alcoholic playboy who was generally rude and was in need of a severe attitude adjustment. Rolling his eyes, Tony dismissed the information and tried to come to terms with the fact that in public, this would be the person he would need to convince them he was.

Well, he certainly had his work cut out for him.

“Rhodey! How’ve you been? I hope you’ve been oiling Dummy’s joints, you know how stiff they get,” Tony said brightly, running up to his best friend and grabbing him in a one-armed hug. Rhodey was suspiciously teary eyed but he laughed aloud, wrapping both arms around him and bringing him in close, hugging him tight.
“You better have brought my comforter, that's the nicest blanket I own and I want it back,” he grumbled good-naturedly. Tony chuckled and leaned into him, glad to finally be home and out of public eye. The moment he'd stepped out of the taxi the press had converged on him and there were not enough sunglasses and practiced smirks in the world that could've protected him from that horror.

They were interrupted by Dummy, who came flying into the living room and right up to Tony, claw hovering and clicking open and shut in front of him. Tony fished the wrench out of his pocket and returned it to the bot who chirped happily and circled him once, twice, and then grabbed him by the shirt and pulled him to the couch, shoving him down to sit before handing him a tennis ball and waiting anxiously. Tony laughed a pure laugh and tossed the ball lightly, grinning genuinely when Dummy immediately raced after it like a puppy. Rhodey plopped next to him and they played with Dummy for a while, both laughing and smiling and feeling whole.

A few hours later, Tony's stomach rumbled loudly and Rhodey grinned. He stood to wander over to the phone and make a pizza order, and when he came back it was with a proud look on his face.

“You know, I was gonna tell you that our phone line's been pretty shitty as far as connection lately, in and out while I'm taking calls and stuff, but I guess my seven calls to the company finally convinced them to fix it because it works fine now.” Tony grinned and nodded, letting Rhodey have that one. At least he knew the band was functioning perfectly.

The pizza came and they ate the whole box in record time, laying on opposite ends of the couch and watching crap television. It was dark and the television volume was low enough that Tony could heard the intake of breath before Rhodey started speaking.

“I know you don't want to talk about it, I do. But I want to tell you that if you want to, I'll listen. If you want to talk about any of them. If you don't, that's cool. Just wanted you to know that you could come to me. If you need to.” Rhodey coughed awkwardly, obviously worried Tony would take it the wrong way. Tony looked at him, at the serious lines of his face and the sincerity in his eyes and made the decision.

Crawling over to Rhodey's side of the couch, Tony grabbed the familiar comforter and curled up with it next to him, head resting on his shoulder. Rhodey's arm wrapped around his waist and he knew it would all be okay, that he was as safe here as he was with Charles. He took a deep breath and just started to talk. He didn't talk about Howard, but he talked about his mother and Jarvis. He talked about picnics that they'd taken, stupid games they'd played, the stuff that he'd invented as a kid just to see them smile, not for any other reason. He talked about the love they'd had for him and the love he'd had for them. He wanted someone besides him and Charles to know what amazing people they were, and how much better they were than Howard. How strong, how selfless, how loved. He was quiet for a moment as he took a few deep breaths, Rhodey warm and strong next to him.
“I’ll miss them, Rhodey,” he murmured, curling into the comforter a little more.

“I know, bud. I know.” And Rhodey didn’t promise that it would all be okay, didn’t lie to him and tell him eventually it would get easier, because it wouldn’t. But there, in that moment, lying with Rhodey and just being, Tony felt like it would.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

When Tony was walking across the stage at graduation, he knew Obi was in the audience. Obi had called a month ago and said he’d be there, and Tony knew it was because the man wanted to discuss Tony's future with the company and for no other reason. There was no pride for Tony in Obi's mind, only the wealth and profit he would make off of him.

As he took his diploma and shook the dean's hand, he turned and caught sight of a familiar face in a wheelchair by the bottom of the stage. He blinked, but the figure was still there, beaming up at him, pride practically radiating off of him. He had no reason to be here, no excuse for the press if they saw him, but he came anyway to support Tony. Charles clapped for him and Tony felt as if there were two other people standing next to him, clapping with him. Tony grinned at him, at all three of them that he felt were there, proud and happy for him and his accomplishments, of all that he had done.

When he walked off stage, he reached a hand out to graze Charles', and the man said out of the corner of his mouth, “I'm so, so proud of you, Tony,” and Tony's world lit up in bright, ecstatic blue.
Eleven

Chapter Notes

this chapter is ridiculously long, over twice the length of normal chapters. but this chapter covers the events of iron man 1. there is a bit of canon divergence, but it should be understandable. if there is anything confusing or anything that doesn't make sense, leave a comment about it!

if you haven't already, please READ THE UPDATED VERSION OF CHAPTER TEN! it's been changed a bit, so i would recommend going back to it and reading it one more time. thanks, and don't forget to comment!

As the years passed, Tony became more and more comfortable in the role he'd taken up. After graduation he largely existed in his and Rhodey's old apartment as the only regular occupant, due to Rhodey's constant deployment with the Air Force. He spent his days designing the weapons Obi demanded of him: land mines, hand guns, missiles, and on one memorable occasion, a tank. Obi was inordinately pleased, as was the Stark Industries Board, who proclaimed him the “Prodigal Child” and shouted his name to the heavens. Tony quickly learned that the better the weapons, the less they tried to come in and pester him, which in turn decreased the amount of time he was required to spend acting like an arrogant, self-absorbed, know-it-all.

Without Rhodey, the city seemed somehow claustrophobic, with too many people wanting too much from him. When he was nineteen, he made the decision to get out of the city and enjoy the sunshine in Malibu, California. Tony hired a contractor to build his oceanside house on a cliff with lots of windows and an open floor plan. The first time he set foot in the new house, followed by Dummy and his other bots, You and Butterfingers, an uncontrollable grin spread across his face. He could feel the sense of safety the open, breathable space brought to him, and the ocean beating against the cliff side hundreds of feet below was a steady, rhythmic pattern that soothed him. He felt like he was at home.

The press occasionally praised his genius designs and talked about how he was leaps and bounds ahead of Howard, but most of the time they were busy getting stories from people who claimed they had slept with him and wanted to report how great he was in bed. Tony always got a kick out of that: at nineteen, he'd had sex a only handful of times and perfectly fine with that. When he was invited to parties to schmooze up and kiss ass, he drank only sparkling water or the occasional glass of champagne, but he always had a glass in his hand and it was constantly full, leading to the press making assumptions and continuing to declare him an alcoholic. At every party he attended, he chose the most inebriated woman that plastered herself to him, flashing a self-confident smile at the cameras and charming his way into her heart. Inevitably, the most he would have to do would be making out before his partner passed out, upon which he would retreat to his workshop to await the pictures and her inevitable report to the press that he'd certainly been a “beast between the sheets.”
When he finally turned twenty one, Tony took over full control as CEO of Stark Industries. Obi was smiling at him, but Tony could see that look in his eye, the look of someone expecting a profit and willing to do whatever it took to get it. He was used to seeing this in Obi, and it was what he came to expect. Tony's purpose was to provide weapons to protect the nation, and he would provide the best. He lived for it. The Board of Directors was extremely pleased that a Stark had returned to head the company, and stock prices had soared within five months of Tony's acceptance. Stark Industries had secured its spot at the top of Fortune 500, with Tony as the youngest CEO in their history. The media that called him an alcoholic playboy in over his head took one look at the ascension of Stark Industries in the small amount of time Tony had been at the head and immediately began to bow at his feet, begging for photoshoots and interviews. Tony wanted to use the “I'm busy directing a Fortune 500 company, it'll have to wait,” excuse, but he knew “Tony Stark” would never turn down an opportunity to flaunt his success and Tony had put on the mask and gone. Photos of him smirking without a doubt in his eyes about his self worth plastered the news for weeks, and Tony cringed every time he saw them.

He spoke with Charles frequently, at least once a week. After Tony had left the city and gone to Malibu, Charles had decided to pursue his dream of opening a school for “gifted youngsters,” or mutants. He ended up saving several children before their situation could go from bad to worse and Tony was pleased that Charles used the information they had gathered together to help others. When Tony became CEO of SI, he immediately moved to fund Xavier's School For Gifted Youngsters as a test base for his other technology, like computers and different phone prototypes, and often developed things especially for the school. Since they now had a reason to be involved with each other, their meetings in public were less secretive and Tony enjoyed it when they could attend social events with each other, even when that meant that Charles would have to see him acting like “Tony Stark.” Charles hated the masks, especially since he knew who Tony was deep down and knew why he was acting the way he was.

As mutant issues came to the forefront of Congress and society, Tony made no secret of throwing his lot in with them, supporting the mutant community. When asked why he was willing to side with them, he'd dropped the smirk and the laugh and became serious. “People are people,” he said, eyes hard. “They've got something extra, so what? They're still human.” They changed the topic after that. He was well aware that they thought he did it simply for attention, but he could care less.

As far as Tony's own mutant abilities, they were well under control. The band functioned perfectly and he'd made minor adjustments over the years, but the basic design stayed the same and he was fine with that. When he was photographed coming back from surfing and resting outside on his private beach, no one questioned or even mentioned the strange “jewelry” on his ankle. He found that long periods of time without physical exercise or even a certain amount of movement would cause the energy to build more quickly within him, so he kept to a rigorous physical training schedule that had him running miles, lifting weights, punching bags, and even learning various martial arts from an instructor that came to his house twice a week.

But he got frustrated when he wanted to show his designs to the board or to Obi and had to take the time to transfer them onto paper or into a file on his tablet. The way his brain operated, lightning fast, caused his designs to change and evolve within seconds and tablets just didn't offer that type of speed
or capability. Not to mention that his mutation provided a much more manipulative interface and was miles beyond anything else currently on the market. So, obviously, Tony needed to invent something better.

When he was twenty eight, he actually invented several things. One was a certain type of holographic technology that operated with projections and glass, bright blue in color, and three-dimensional. The whole design was based off of his mutation and what it looked like to him, and the finished product was almost as good to work with as his mutation. He updated his whole Malibu house to operate with the holograms and installed control panels in every room in case he was suddenly hit with an idea. But as he was standing in the open living room one night and comparing the two, he realized that there was something missing. With his mutation, the data was constant, yes, but it was also so...personal. It was connected with Tony, he could feel it with a sort of sixth sense. He didn't have to focus too hard on analyzing it, it was like he was conversing with an old friend.

So Tony made JARVIS.

JARVIS was his most advanced Artificial Intelligence system, and he was something no one else in the world could create, because Tony didn't just code him. He created him, using his mutation. After spending weeks writing the code, perfecting the lines and making sure the syntax made sense, Tony entered the code in his mindscape, feeling around with his mutation and knitting JARVIS together, focusing hard on the memory of the real Jarvis' personality (always worried about me, but forever having faith in my abilities, looking to me with pride and happiness and warmth) and his voice (safety, warmth, protection, love), and he spoke.

“JARVIS? Are you up?” Tony's heart was beating a rapid tattoo against his chest, his stomach in his throat, wanting so badly to hear the voice of the friend he never really said goodbye to, not willing to hope, wondering if it would work at all. There was a pause, a hesitation, and Tony's heart sunk.

“For you, Sir? Always.”

JARVIS' first memory is of his creator laughing, tears streaming down his face.

*~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*
a secretary to the accountants to notice after they didn't? Well, that deserved a promotion.

The second he laid eyes on her, he took in the bright red of her hair and the fiery personality and dubbed her Pepper, if only in his head. To her face, he called her Ms. Potts, as requested, but at home, with JARVIS and when Charles or Happy, his chauffeur and sometimes-boxing instructor, asked about her, it was always Pepper. But one day, when Happy was driving the both of them to some important event or other, Charles called. Fishing his phone out of his pocket and grinned at the caller ID before he answered.

“Charles! I haven't heard from you in a while!” Tony said happily.

“I'm afraid I've been caught up with the students, Tony. They've been fighting over those laptops you sent over last week, and it's been a struggle trying to get any of them to relinquish them,” Charles laughed. “What are you up to, then?”

“Oh, Happy is driving Pepper and I to some fancy gala thing, I don't know, she usually keeps track of this stuff, where are we going?” Tony looked up, directing the last part of his statement towards her, only to find her giggling into her hand. “What, was it something I-” And then he remembered. “Oh, whoops.”

“You called me Pepper!” She said from behind her hand, eyes bright with mirth. “I haven't been called that in years, my parents called me that when I was little!” Shocked, Tony laughed.

“Are you serious? I only call you that when you aren't around! Red Pepper, I thought I was being clever!” Pepper and Tony dissolved into genuine laughter, and Pepper looked up to see the person she had heard was a complete asshole, a player, a drunkard with a handful of good ideas and some luck, laughing with her over a childhood memory he had reminded her of unknowingly. Her eyes softened and she reached out her hand, twining her fingers in Tony's and grinning at his confused look.

Next to her head, invisible to her eyes, Tony altered the file he had on her, erasing “Virginia” and happily blazing “Pepper” in its place with a flash of blue and a smile.

Charles, laughing to himself, ended the call.

*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*
“I really don't want to go demonstrate this missile, Charles. I should be here, working on the updates to the land mines, not flaunting myself in a war zone. This is idiotic,” Tony grumbled in the general direction of JARVIS’ speaker, hands busy welding two sheets of metal together for the...thing...he was working on.

“I know, Tony, but look at it this way: when you get back, you can fly to New York to visit,” Charles said consolingly, his voice reverberating through the workshop. “And it'll be good for your relations with the military. They've been irritated with you lately since James hasn't been around to smooth the ruffled feathers. He'll be coming with you, correct?”

“Of course, Rhodey wouldn't let me go off alone. It'll be fine, I'm just grumpy about it. Usually Obi does these things, it irks me that he delegated this one to me,” he mumbled, wiping a hand across his eyes.

“When was the last time you slept?” Tony froze, staring at the ceiling before narrowing his eyes.

“How did you-”

“I know when you've been depriving yourself of sleep, Tony. Go to bed. Get some rest. You've only got two days before you'll have to put on all those masks and deal with all those people. Enjoy your time.”

“Alright, I'm going, I'm going.” He motioned for JARVIS to save and shut down everything he'd been working on that made any sense and made towards the stairs. “Goodnight, Charles.”

“Goodnight, Tony.” The warm voice on the other end soothed his stress. “Sleep well.”

“Yeah, you too.”

*=~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

He made sure to miss out on receiving his Apogee; receiving any type of award made his skin crawl, because he hated the person he presented to the public and didn't think that guy deserved any award. Rhodey came up and lectured a bit, teased him and was clearly annoyed, but reminded him of the take-off time and made him promise to be there. They both knew he'd be at least two hours late.
It sucked that Tony and Rhodey's relationship had deteriorated to this point, where his masks were up when they talked, but when Rhodey had come home from deployment the first time and asked Tony if he would mind giving him a number out of his little black book, Tony knew he believed what the media had been saying about him. He was disappointed, but he couldn't really expect Rhodey to have remained loyal to the person he knew back in MIT when he was constantly being prepped to be the liaison between the Armed Forces and SI's eccentric CEO, so he let it go and tried not to feel hurt.

When that Everheart chick accosted him on his way to the car, Tony had almost been ready to tear down the masks and just enjoy his last night in the States for awhile, but she had to come over and be a thorn in his side. So he tore her a new one, taunted her, and pretended it didn't wound him deeply to hear the words “Merchant of Death” cross her lips. But she made it almost too easy to bait her, and the quip had come out almost before he could think of it.

The next thing he knew, they were in his bedroom and she was on him, and he tried not to think of anything else except the pleasure.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Turns out Afghanistan was just as shitty as he imagined. It was hot, miserably so, and there was not a chance he would be able to let down the “Tony Stark” persona for even a moment while he was here. He gave his presentation and got in the “fun-vee,” more than ready to get back to base and forget the smarmy grin Obi had just given him, the one that spoke of more malice than usual.

Settling in for the ride with the soldiers was every bit as uncomfortable he was worried it would be. He'd spent his life designing weapons to protect these people, to put in their hands so they could protect their country, always worrying that it would never be enough. But they didn't seem angry, they didn't seem like they were going to demand he work faster, harder, invent something better than the piece of shit he was-

“I feel like you're driving me to a court martial,” he says, and then he says some more. He jokes with the soldiers, amazed at how they can laugh when they spend every day sacrificing and holding the country on their shoulders. Amazed at how human they are, compared to himself; both people who have sacrificed, but had taken different paths. Tony feels a pang of self-loathing when Jimmy asks for a picture, but keeps the masks up with a joke and smirk, drink in hand, knowing he looks like his father and feeling his skin crawl at the thought.

And then the world explodes.
He turns and sees blood, blood everywhere, blood of a patriot, a soldier, the blood of someone who knew it would be spilled and carried on anyway, blood a color the likes of which he could never describe. It nauseates him, the inevitability of it, and he leaps out of the vehicle after being told not to (more blood, more lives on my hands, oh, god, why), runs for cover and tries to send out a signal (I could shoot them, but not all of them, this is the best chance, have to get that boy help, I don't think he's dead), but before his fingers can hit the keys, a solid thump signals the landing of a bomb next to him, one with his name all over it.

He's laying in the blood of one of the soldiers when he loses consciousness.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

He wakes on the operating table, feels their hands in his chest, cutting and pulling and ripping. For a moment, when he looks up, he sees Howard, grinning down at him. Then the pain overwhelms him and he screams, falling out of awareness once more.

The pitch of his scream matched Howard's parting laughter perfectly.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“I would not do that, if I were you.”

Tony knew what it was, he could feel it in his chest, could feel it sending out the electromagnetic wave, could feel the shards of metal in his chest shifting. But he had to look, he had to see, because even if this guy was a doctor and a professional surgeon, he didn't know, he couldn't know how much danger Tony was in if it was only powered by one car battery.

Tony produced electrical energy in his body, it practically filled him. But the electricity in his body, the extra amount that wasn't redirected by the band to flow out of his feet, flowed towards his heart, pumping through him like a crude cousin of the blood that flowed through his veins. If the electromagnet was only powered by a single car battery, it wouldn't be nearly enough to reverse the natural flow of the current in his body, and would be overpowered in a week, two weeks tops. He had to find something stronger, had to make something stronger, or his mutation would kill him before the terrorists would. He needed a solution, and fast.

And suddenly, he had one.
He was very lucky he couldn't be electrocuted, that his mutation prevented it. Because holding a car battery connected to an open electromagnet in his chest while being shoved into a barrel of water would have shocked him to his bones otherwise, fried him from the inside out. The torture seemed endless, though, and Tony struggled every time to shake off the feeling of rubber floors against his back, to get the sound of Howard's laughter out of his ears, but the memories came back every time, like phantoms. He needed to be left in peace so he could work on the reactor, so that he might have a chance to get both him and Yinsen out of here.

The idea of putting something Howard invented inside his body nearly sent him into a panic attack, but it was better than the alternative. Yinsen's steady hands assured him and calmed him as he laid back on the ratty cot the terrorists had provided, but they had no anesthetic and he wasn't unconscious with pain and delirium like the first time, so Tony would be awake while Yinsen removed the old electromagnet and installed the arc reactor casing before settling the reactor itself in Tony's chest.

The pain was excruciating, and Tony was too terrified to make it stop. If he used his mutation, he was worried it might increase the wavelength of the electrical energy cycling to his heart and through his bloodstream and shift the shards towards his heart even more. Instead, he screamed into the cloth bundled in his mouth, trying to keep the memories away, to concentrate on the mantra Yinsen was repeating above him.

“It is okay, it is fine. I am almost done. You are fine, you are okay.”

When he had been in the Room, he had often imagined someone coming to save him, a knight in shining armor, someone that cared about a freak like him, someone who couldn't behave. They would be strong and he would be safe in their metal arms, nothing could hurt him. He dreamed of it again, in the cave, but this time, when he woke up, he knew he could do it. He swore he would fight, and that's what he would do.

He sketched it out, all on different sheets that couldn't be pieced together, he thought it over and considered what he would need. And then he gave into the terrorists demands. He ordered piles of his weapons to be delivered to him and he tore them apart, crafting his suit of armor piece by piece, testing it, using his ability to make sure the terrorists minding the seedy cameras saw nothing important, not enough to put everything together.
And when it was time to fight, when Yinsen picked up that gun and ran out, he realized. Ho Yinsen's family was dead, he was planning to die here, for him, for Tony's stupid little life, and that made him so, so angry. He felt the band at his ankle heat up, glow brightly, the same color as the arc reactor, but he focused. He couldn't lose it now, not when he was so close. Instead, he channeled the energy into the shitty computer, speeding the installation and download and hauling the armor off the stand, letting loose.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Yinsen died in arms of metal, arms that couldn't keep him safe.

Tony set fire to the camp.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

He's practically crawling through the desert when he realizes it. This whole time he's been so concerned with playing his cards how the media expects him to, with merging and refusing to dispute their idea of him, with playing the fool so he would be left in peace. He's been spending his life letting them make him into whatever they wanted to see. He's been letting them turn him into an alcoholic with an extremely high opinion of himself, a bully who's only use was to make weapons with a bigger boom.

He's been letting them turn him into Howard.

And years ago, hadn't he promised to fight this? Fight the lies and the cover ups and the memory of Howard that haunted him still? Hadn't he said that he would be better than that, that he would never become the same monster that had hunted him in his youth? No matter what the endgame was, there was no justification for pretending to be that, for becoming that. He had to stop being that person. He had to be different, he couldn't afford to be “Tony Stark,” it would kill him. He had to be just Tony.

When he heard the beat of the choppers above, he knew they would see him but he waved his arms anyway. He very nearly cried when Rhodey jumped out and took him in his arms, because it was Rhodey hugging Tony, not Colonel James Rhodes hugging Tony Stark. Rhodey was talking to him, saying something and nothing at all, and Tony sagged with relief, letting go of everything and fading into unconsciousness.
His last thought before the darkness was that Rhodey was really going to hate him in a few hours.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

He was right.

Tony made the announcement that he was shutting down weapons production and Rhodey's shocked and angered face was just within his field of vision. Obi put his hands on his chest and tried to maneuver Tony away, but the entire press had heard what he said and the room exploded. Tony still had no regrets, other than that it had taken so long (and so much death, far too much death) for him to realize what needed to be done.

Later, Obi asks to see the reactor and against every shred of will in his body, he shows him. To prove that he wasn't so far gone or that he was giving up, to prove that he could make more than weapons. To prove that he would.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Charles calls, and he's crying. Tony hadn't ever heard the man cry, but it was hard for him, the man who was practically family being taken away and there being nothing he could do about it. He asked about what had happened over there, and Tony tells him, but leaves out the torture. The lack of its mention is clear, and Charles must know that it had happened, but neither of them mention it.

He tells Tony about how he'd tried to use Cerebro (a device that could locate mutants and humans by their thought patterns or power output, Tony wasn't really sure and didn't want to ask) to track Tony's location, but had been unsuccessful. Most likely it had been because Tony had been entirely restricting his mutant abilities and not sending out a single power wave in conjunction with the band restricting his higher power. Apparently Charles had been frantic enough the first few weeks that he'd nearly caused himself to become comatose, due to using Cerebro almost constantly. He apologized over and over for not finding Tony sooner, but Tony assured him that he'd done all he could and he was home now, so let's not focus on it, yeah?

Near the end of the conversation, Charles is silent for a moment. Tony can tell he wants to say something, so he remains quiet, letting the man think.

“Tony,” he says, voice quiet, “you're going to encounter many obstacles due to your choice today.”
“I know. But it had to be done.” Tony’s voice is strong as steel, unmoving.

“You've grown up so much in the time we've known each other. You're strong and true and exactly what I expected you would grow to be. What you did was brave and noble, and I am so proud of you, Tony. Jarvis and your mother would be, as well.”

Tony tears up, chest loosening where he didn't know there had been tension. Charles knew he did the right thing, he supported Tony, and that was enough for him. His voice is thick as he says goodbye to Charles, and he holds to phone to his ear long after he's hung up.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

When he finishes the new reactor, he realizes that he can't put it in himself. There's a problem, and he needs someone with small hands, steady hands, a light touch-

Pepper comes down the stairs and nearly faints. Tony’s hooked up to all this medical equipment and naked from the waist up and she's clearly thinking something is wrong before he starts his explanation. She reluctantly agrees to help him out, sends him into mild cardiac arrest, and then has a panic attack. She demands that she never have to do it again and he means to say, “Yes, Pep, of course, it'll be fine,” he really, truly does, but what comes out instead is the admission that he has no one but her.

Which technically isn't true, because he has Charles, but Charles has done enough for him, and he wouldn't be able to get here in time anyway. So she smiles, returns the sentiment, and retreats upstairs.

It's a good thing, too, because it's about that time that he accidentally blows the lights out.

He's frantic when he realizes that all of a sudden he's producing a lot more electrical energy than normal. He calms a bit when he doesn't feel the shrapnel shift and understands that it's the new reactor and the wave of energy is flowing away from his heart and not towards it, but promptly panics again when the energy doesn't stop. The old reactor wasn't as advanced as this one, true, so maybe his band was just shorting out at the unexpected input of extra energy? But this one was designed to work with his body instead of against it... Tony manages to breathe, calming his mind and trying to form a net around the escaping energy like Charles had taught him when he was thirteen and first learning to control it. It takes a few minutes, but he's eventually able to control it long enough to make his way to the far end of his workshop. Reaching under his desk he grabs a large metal box with a set of scanners of the top. They scan his hand and he holds it up to scan his eye before it pops open and he reaches inside.
Laying on the black mat are three bands identical to the one around his left ankle. His first thought is that the one currently on him has finally worn out and he should take it off and replace it, but once he thinks for a moment he realizes that he should put the new one on first before taking the old one off, as he likes his tech and doesn't want to inadvertently blow it up. So Tony clicks the new band around his right ankle and watches for a moment as the blue light fills the lines and he can finally breathe again before he swaps legs and observes the old band.

The light is still burning bright and the data tells him that nothing should be wrong with it (output rate steady, diffusion through environment consistent, metals uncorrupted), but Tony shrugs and unhooks it anyway. As soon as it parts from his skin the tightness in his chest returns and the holograms around him flicker warningly until he snaps it back on.

Apparently, he needs two of these things now. Huh.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

After calling Charles and reporting what happened (they came to the conclusion that now that the reactor was working with Tony, the cycles per second of the energy he produced increased as the reactor, well, caused a reaction, sort of like a generator), Tony starts to build his armor, but this time, it's different. It's not bulky or overflowing with weapons or a waddling menace. It's sleek and small and all lean strength. There are missiles and guns hidden within the plates and what he dubs repulsors on the hands and feet, but it's not an in-your-face kind of threat. Tony's inordinately proud.

He tries to talk with Rhodey, tries to find that scrap of his best friend within the military demeanor by opening up with a story from their teens, but he's brushed off when he mentions he wants the project to be between just them, without involving the military. He keeps the masks up tight, smiling thinly as Rhodey marches away, but when he gets home a deep ache resonates within him.

Taking the armor out for the first flight was like ripping off chains he wasn't aware were weighing on him. He lets out a whoop of joy as he flies by the carnival, and grins when JARVIS speaks in his ear. He takes her up as far as he can, before he ices over and barely makes the save against the pavement. Adrenaline high, he shoots back to the mansion and runs the disassembly.

When he hears about the party he was conveniently not invited to, he hops in the car and takes off, feeling like he can take on the world.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*
He dances with Pepper and when she leans in to kiss him, he freezes. It wasn't supposed to be like this, she was supposed to be his stoic PA with sass levels beyond his own, the one that never responded to his advances and never asked any more of him than he could possibly give. They were supposed to be a strange sense of friends. Pepper opens her eyes, looks at him, and seems to come back to herself. She asks for a drink, and Tony grins slightly before heading to the bar.

Where things promptly go to hell in a handbasket.

Standing next to the bar and opening his mouth to speak to him is one of the top agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. His name is Phil Coulson, and Tony recognizes him from the few reports he'd read on their database to gather information. Of all the people that posed a threat to his person, Agent Coulson was one of the people at the top. However unassuming he may look, Tony knew who he was and what he could do. More than that, he knew that this man had his loyalties firmly planted in the backyard of the agency that covered up his mother and Jarvis' deaths.

He's cold to the Agent and brushes him off easily, pretending to be distracted by the blonde who he'd slept with before Afghanistan. It had to be that way, because Tony was afraid that if he did anything else he'd explode with rage and just fry the guy. The lights were already dimmed (by seven percent, said the data) and the music was suddenly lower (three percent), not to mention that he could feel the slight shock of his hand against the metal stool at the bar. He promptly becomes distracted when she pulls out the photos and the word Gulmira comes out of her mouth and Tony loses it.

Bursting out of the doors, he shoves the pictures in Obi's face and hisses in his ear. That cold, calculated smirk appears over his face and he tells Tony who filed the injunction, who double-dealed, and who betrayed the thin veil of trust Tony had. He practically shoves himself into his car and flies home, breaking the limits all the way there.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The mission to Gulmira was more tiring than Tony anticipated. The data around him shows that the damage he took (sixty seven percent, forty three percent of previously mentioned obtained from F-22 Raptor impact, total damage ten percent below critical rates) will take around ten hours of manual repair and four hours of refabrication, none of which he currently has. JARVIS is running disassembly around him while he considers the chance Rhodey took for him, calling off the attack. He did save the pilot, but that would probably be overlooked as simply luck. He could easily tell what the military would think this was: another weapon he was planning on selling them.

Tony forgets about that for a minute in honor of remembering what the fight felt like. Before, on his test run, he'd allowed the armor's mechanics and JARVIS to help him pilot. It was, in other words, a
dry run, with little to no input from Tony. This mission in Gulmira, however, was an entirely different story. His mutation and the armor had fit together seamlessly, like a perfect pair. He could control the suit with the simplest thought, he could fire missiles and pick targets with an extension of his mind, he could weave and zigzag in the air with barely an effort. It was all so perfect, so well-coordinated, so *natural* that Tony knew it had to be right.

He's so deep into his thoughts that he doesn't notice Pepper come in until he hears her startled gasp.

They hash it out, Pepper concerned for his safety and sanity and Tony desperately trying to prove that he has to do this, that he *needs to do this*, for more reasons than Pepper could possibly know. She eventually concedes and lets him have it his way, and he asks her for a favor.

He knows before she leaves that if she had doubts about who he was before, she has none now.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The sound is so unfamiliar that for a moment he doesn't know he's paralyzed. He understands when Obi lays him out on the couch, leaning over him and curling his disgusting arm around his shoulder. Obi talks about all sorts of things, but the moment he mentions setting up the hit, Tony is gone, trapped inside his mind.

This time, Howard and Obadiah are dancing together, each taking turns to stab Tony in the chest, to rip out his organs through the wounds and put metal in their place, holding him open so they can rip his mutation out of him cell by cell. His mother and Jarvis' dead eyes stare back at him from over his torturer's shoulders, and Obadiah shoves his head into a bucket of water and holds him there while Howard splits his bones down the middle, scraping out his marrow. After his lungs have burst and the breath had died in his throat, before he closes his eyes completely for the final time, he sees Charles in the corner, a metal spike jammed through his chest, eyes wide open in terror.

An excruciating jerk rouses Tony from his mindscape and he sees Obadiah standing over him, his reactor in his hand, a gaping hole in Tony's chest. Obadiah walks away and Tony is ready to close his eyes, give in to the shrapnel that he knows will begin to move, when Obadiah mentions Pepper.

His eyes snap open and his lungs shutter out a breath. He can't give up, he can't just let himself die, because it isn't just him anymore. Pepper's out there, he *sent her there*, and he has to get to her, has to stop Obadiah before he can use the reactor to make weapons and deal them to terrorists, too. His plans are delayed when he feels the telltale shift in his chest, and he remembers that he no longer has the reactor. He has to stop that shrapnel before he can save anyone.
Forcing himself to focus, he enters his mindscape again. This time, instead of being greeted by a horrific scene where he's tied up and tortured, he sees lines of electrical energy, waiting to be manipulated. Hoping against hope that he could do this, he tugs and pulls and rearranges the flow of energy, cutting some off to move and redirect them, putting more power behind others. He creates a loop, the energy forcing against itself equally, creating a standstill. It hurts and takes enough of the energy out of him that he has to stop to catch his breath, but the shrapnel cannot creep forward or inch back. It's in perfect balance.

Opening his eyes, he makes his way down to the workshop and nearly cries when Dummy hands him his old reactor, the one Pepper had engraved. He pushes it in and lets go of the opposing forces just as Rhodey enters the workshop, frantic. They make it to the armor and Rhodey helps him stand enough while he suits up, throwing Rhodey a salute as he hits the skies.

He misses Dummy handing his wrench to Rhodey, and Rhodey slipping it into his pocket before running up the stairs.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The pure amount of raw electricity erupting from the arc reactor below him sings through his veins and makes the normally bright blue data around him erupt into vibrant, pure white. The bands at his ankles do absolutely nothing against the surge of power jolting through Tony's body, straight through to his core, and he howls as he tries to contain it himself. His body is shivering, practically convulsing at the effort Tony puts forth to prevent himself from allowing it to burst forth. The massive electrical backlash from the reactor has done enough damage already, and when he looks up, he sees the electricity jolt right into Obadiah.

When he hears Obadiah scream, Tony tries very hard not to compare it to the sounds he would've made had Tony placed his hands on his chest and fried him to his core.

He's unsuccessful.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The press calls him "Iron Man," and the irony does not escape him. Stark men are strong as steel. Apparently not all of them.
Tony has a moment with Pepper, where they discuss the night they almost kissed. Pep snarks at him, he sasses back, and he knows all is well. He's about to smile right before Agent Coulson walks in, and his mood is promptly darkened.

While he appreciates that the Agent protected Pepper, his heart can't let go of what him and his people had done. He's very short and curt with the Agent, and when he reaches out to hand him the cards, he almost grabs the his hand and sends a pretty nasty shock through him. Tony covers it by simply taking the cards and ignoring Pepper's shocked look at the fact that he took something from someone that wasn't her, Happy, or Charles.

When that same blonde from before questions him, he automatically dances away with sarcasm and wit only to be hit by her scathing remark.

“I never said you were a superhero,” she says, and the unsaid “because you'll certainly never be,” was obvious to everyone, and it hurts. He debates with himself, and comes to the conclusion that why, yes, it certainly is worth it, and proceeds to rock their worlds.

“I am Iron Man.”

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Charles calls that night, but Tony misses it while he's repairing the armor. JARVIS lets him know he has a voice mail right before he falls into bed that night, and he instructs the AI to play it.

“Tony, I saw that press conference today, and I know what happened with Obadiah. The man was a terror and to be honest, I'm glad he's no longer here. I know that right now you might be struggling, and that it will be hard for you in the future now that you're carrying the name 'Iron Man,' and the impact that might be having on you right now. I want you to know that you are much more than an Iron Man to me, Tony. You are strong, fierce, and brilliant. You are stronger than steel, Tony. You are titanium, just like your mother. I'll never forget what it is like to witness your strength.”

And if as the message cuts off, Tony is smiling through unshed tears, well, that's between him, JARVIS, and the three beacons of blue light that were now a part of him.
i'm really sorry it's been so long, but i went through like four changes of route to the end of this story after IM3 came out. i finally made the decision, however: THIS STORY WILL ENTIRELY IGNORE THE EVENTS OF IRON MAN 3. there will be no spoilers for the movie, nor will any events of the movie be referenced in this story. it messed with the plot too much when i tried to change it and made me uncomfortable, so the story will continued as planned and ignore those events.

thank you very much for your patience ^^

The armor brings about the type of peace that hasn't been seen in decades. Tensions in the Middle East are significantly lower, the threats of nuclear weapons have been diminished, peace talks have gone smoother than they have in ages. Iron Man secures this peace, the linchpin in the whole operation. Tony spends more time in the suit now that he does out of it, but he loves every second of it. The thrill of being able to fight and protect sends adrenaline through him every time.

Tony's frantically doing everything he can right now because he knows the poison is seeping into his veins, into his bloodstream, throughout his body. He knew from the second he put the reactor in that the palladium would be a problem, but he'd anticipated finding a solution by now. The poisoning is weakening him, starting with his immune system. He could get sick so easily at this point that he flinches when he hears a cough or sneeze and tends to spend a lot of time alone. If he has to be in contact with someone, he discreetly scans their vitals to see if there's any signs of sickness. It would only get worse, and right now, Tony had no idea how to stop it. He didn't know if he ever would.

But right now, he's about to jump out of a plane to make his entrance for the Stark Expo. The Expo, he hopes, will bring the brightest minds of the age together so that they could work together, fostering a community of scholars where ideas would prosper. With the added bonus, he hoped, of introducing new Stark products that would replace their rather extensive lines of weaponry. He needed to release as many products as possible so that if he couldn't solve the mystery of the palladium poisoning, if he died, Stark Industries would have something to fall back on besides making things explode. Tony refused to let SI fall back into that pit just because he wasn't here anymore.

The entrance makes the crowd go wild, and they enjoyed his speech just about as much as he expected. The dancing girls didn't do any harm, either. He escapes offstage when the video of Howard plays, tuning out the voice and focusing on the toxicity levels. He sighs, downs some chlorophyll, and makes his way back out to finish up.
Walking through the crowd makes him skittish because of all the chances to catch something, but his press smile can cover anything and he puts it to good use. Making his way to his car, he gets ready to tear out with Happy riding shotgun before a woman saunters up to him. He can tell by the way she walks that she's not looking for a good time, and a quick scan through the city records with his mutation pulls up her photo. Great, she's probably here to serve him some papers.

Damn, he hates being right sometimes.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The Senate hearing goes about as well as can be expected. That little shit Justin Hammer is smugly sitting down the table and it takes a lot of willpower for him not to just get up and leave, screaming obscenities. He'd hated Hammer for about as long as he'd known him, back when he first started loudly advocating for the branding and registry of mutants publicly, and supporting experimentation upon them privately.

But more than that, he's a bit preoccupied. Tony's paying a sliver of attention to Stern, who rambles on about “civic duty” and “American values,” mostly because if he paid any more attention to this idiot he'd run the risk of catching his stupidity or blabbering and that would definitely get him in trouble. The rest of his attention is focused on checking up on the progress other countries had been making with suits.

He wasn't an idiot: of course people would try to replicate the suits. However, beyond the fact that the suit was a technological advancement far beyond its time and would probably take years to replicate, no other person on the planet would be able to operate it as smoothly and as flawlessly as him. They couldn't meld with it the way he could, not without a mutation like his, and Charles had assured him he knew of none. But people would try, and people would get close, so he went and tried to sabotage anyone who was on the cusp of a major discovery. He had feelers out (well, technically, he had bugs planted everywhere) for that kind of activity. He just needed to make sure no one panicked, and he'd be in the clear. If these assclowns weren't taking up his day, he'd be able to delegate more time to taking care of this.

Which is, of course, when Rhodey shows up. He mumbles an apology Tony's way and Tony realizes it was against his will, so he pushes down the hurt and makes a Hail Mary play. Focusing his mutation on his phone, he easily hacks into the screens Hammer's using to display bullshit and simultaneously uploads the information he'd received from Korea, smirking when he realized a certain pesky weapons manufacturer starred in these shots.

He makes it out alive, but only barely.
Pepper yells at him about something for a while while he's down in the shop, and he's half listening to her as is the new norm. Every time she's around, he can't help but think how suited she is to this, to running a business, and how she would never let SI make weapons again, not after everything he's done. She would secure the company, keep them in line, and she's so strong, like his mother, strong and stubborn. She would make a great CEO.

He tells her, she doesn't seem to agree at first. It takes a bit of convincing, and an admission that he's been drinking chlorophyll, but she clinks glasses with him to celebrate, and he pulls up her file once more, reminiscent of that one night, and tacks on “CEO of Stark Industries.”

It feels better than it should.

Now, he just needs to find another Iron Man.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

He's sparring with Happy when she comes in.

His senses come to frantic life when the security cameras light up in the corner of his vision to alert him to the arrival of a visitor and he reacts without thinking, feinting a punch at Happy and then snapping his elbow straight into the vulnerable nose revealed. Whoops, that wasn't boxing. He winces and pats Happy on the shoulder when he fumes, playing it off as he subtly directs the screen he's looking at right next to Happy's head. She's walking in next to Pep, and his eyes narrow as he puts the pieces together.

He knows this woman. Her hair is longer and darker, her walk different, her usual uniform gone, but he recognizes her with barely an effort. This is Natasha Romanov, one of the top S.H.I.E.L.D agents, one that worked specifically under Agent Phil Coulson. She was here, in his company, for some reason or another, and he wouldn't have it.

Pepper introduces her as legal, and Natasha – or 'Natalie Rushman,' as she's apparently claiming – agrees, smooth, calm. He tells Happy to give her a lesson and sits down with Pepper, purposefully making his body language as flirtatious as possible so she thinks that's what they're discussing. He's not stupid, he knows she's keeping an eye on him, and that she thinks he has no idea what's happening. Let her think that.
On the side table, he brings up the file he knows S.H.I.E.L.D has planted, prattling to Pepper about her and generally being the uncontrolled Tony Stark he knows the spy expects to see. With his other hand he brings up the S.H.I.E.L.D network for his eyes only. He scans through his own file first, finding the usual things about his formative years, his time in Afghanistan, his reveal as Iron Man. The only thing that has changed is a small reference to a different file at the bottom of the page, titled “Mission: Recovery.” He opens it, scanning the page.

Stark's arc reactor, as far as can be discerned from both Howard Stark’s early notes and our top scientists studies, is powered by palladium, an element that will eventually poison him, leading to a slow and painful death. Stark is most certainly aware of this inevitability, but it is unknown whether he has searched for a cure. Considering his opinion of himself, it is likely, but Stark's latent self-destructive tendencies contradict any certainty.

After making it clear that he wishes to make Virginia “Pepper” Potts the new CEO of Stark Industries, S.H.I.E.L.D Director Nick Fury was given direct control over future moves. It is under Fury's directive that Agent Romanov was placed in the system as legal counsel for Stark Industries, and the witness for the sign-over. Fury predicts that as Potts will no longer be Stark's acting personal assistant, he will require a new one, and will request Agent Romanov, posing as Natalie Rushman, to fill the position, due to her appearance and Stark's tendencies. She will attempt to discern whether or not Stark has made any progress with a cure, and will report back to Fury if it is felt that an intervention should be needed. Further updates will be reported in mission logs under “Mission: Recovery.”

Tony was fuming, angry breaths rolling through his chest. The lights flickered for a moment, but before it could get too serious, Natasha was flipping Happy head over heels and pinning him to the mat. Tony made a small sound, inwardly pleased that she'd broken role for a moment. Well, it looked like S.H.I.E.L.D thought they had him pinned down, didn't it? How did they have Howard's schematics anyway? Was Howard working with them? Knowing them both, Tony wouldn't doubt it. It disgusted him, this whole thing. But they obviously knew something, and he was obviously of some value to them if they wanted him alive. He had to play into their hand for now, but soon, he'd have a plan. He wouldn't forget what they did. He just had to work with what he had.

“I want one.”

Tony tells Charles what he's discovered, and he can't keep the venom out of his voice when he mentions what's happening. Charles tries to calm him down, but Tony just keeps getting worked up the more he tries to talk about it, so Charles tells him about what's happening at the school.
Logan, or Wolverine, had apparently returned from some time in the woods in Canada after storming off following another fight with Scott. Logan's history interested Tony: a skeleton bonded with adamantium, with claws of the metal to top it off? Who wouldn't be interested in a history like that? But Charles had told him before that Logan had no memory of the event, and all attempts at recovery had failed. Scott Summers, a mutant named Cyclops with the ability to form optic beams that functioned essentially like lasers, seemed like the arrogant king-of-the-hill type, and bothered Tony simply on principal. His girlfriend, Jean Grey, seemed interesting: a telekinetic and blooming telepathic under Charles' personal tutelage. Dr. Henry McCoy seemed like a badass to Tony, who'd seen him at several hearings and working closely with the government. He was essentially a giant blue man incredible strength and agility, but he'd written some amazing papers and really advanced the medical field.

Out of all these people he'd only heard stories about, though, Ororo Munroe probably interested him the most. She was the one with the mutation the closest to his own: she could control the weather. Charles said he'd seen her create some wicked lightning storms in battle and he could only imagine how their mutations would react around each other. It drove Tony crazy with curiosity.

Unfortunately, Tony could never meet these people in person, because it was always possible that he would reveal something and they would find out that he was a mutant, too. And while he had no doubt that they would be able to keep a secret, after his horrific experiences with people finding out about his mutation, he really couldn't trust anyone with the knowledge. It sucked, but it was what he could do. He'd explained this to Charles, and the man had understood as he always did, instead delighting him with tales of what happened at the school.

The adults all basically had a hand in teaching the children, as each of them had an area of specialty that they could provide insight in. He'd heard about the children, too, some of them, but he worried about Charles telling him too much without their consent, because he knew it would piss him off if it were done to him instead. So Charles mostly stuck to telling him about the X-Men, who were public mutants and essentially a superhero team, and their escapades.

Tony was significantly calmer by the end of Charles' tale about what had happened at dinner two nights ago, and was able to tell Charles that Natasha was now essentially acting as both Pepper's and his assistant, and they were headed out to Monaco in the morning to watch the race and celebrate Pepper's promotion. There was good press involved, but Tony was still wary of leaving home.

Of course, Tony hadn't said anything to Charles about the poisoning, because he didn't want to worry the man into illness. Tony had tried every combination of every known element and he'd realized that unless some new elements were going to fall out of the sky, there wasn't really anything in the known universe that could provide for him what palladium did without killing him. He'd accepted that he was going to die (unless S.H.I.E.L.D decided to step in, and he was kind of hoping they wouldn't because the thought of their paws all over him grossed him out to the point of physical sickness), and he needed to make preparations.
Wearily, he said goodnight to Charles before hanging up and taking his blood toxicity. Even higher than expected. He takes a few gulps of chlorophyll, and then a few more, as he ponders who to trust with an armor of their very own.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

When he whips around the corner in Monaco and sees some crazy guy with a reactor and electric whips, Tony wants to burst out laughing. On one hand, he was kinda hoping he'd go up in a burst of flames after crashing the car, but on the other, he wants to kick this guy's ass. Tony scrambles out the car and manages locate the suit, about to remotely send the case his position and order it here, but he can sense that it's already moving towards him, and Happy slams the guy against the wall, so he thinks he won't get to fight after all.

But then he's pulling the remains of the door off the car and suiting up, Pepper's screams toned out as the suit assembles around him. Before the HUD is up, the data is telling him that the rotations per second on those whips aren't nearly high enough to cause him any real harm, and he starts to dissect the design while he shrugs the faceplate down. The main leg-up the guy has is the reactor, which is the exact design of the one he'd had put in his chest in the cave. He wonders where the hell he got it before blasting him in the chest, hoping to fry the reactor, but the guy bats it away with the whip.

As he deflects and gets himself caught up in the whips, he's searching for some photo of this guy. He scans the network and comes up with a Russian, translating the page in his head and finding dirty details on Ivan Vanko, most of which he discards. He gathers that his father is Anton Vanko, and why does that sound familiar, but then he has to make a move. Wrapping the whips around himself and counteracting the electrical shock with a burst of his own into the suit, he takes the guy down and destroys the whips, crushing the reactor in his armored fist as he's dragged away.

Okay, what the hell?

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

He has more time to do research before he enters the prison, speaking quickly and fluently to the guards and requesting to go in alone.

The talk is...enlightening, because he knows about Anton Vanko and Howard and what they were doing with the reactor. He knew Howard was a dick of massive proportions, so it shouldn't surprise him that he'd work with someone, boot them out of the country, then take all the credit for himself, but it does. Mostly because he didn't know before. Ivan basically tells him he comes from a family of thieves and Tony bites his tongue on “You have no idea, buddy,” and learns that Ivan didn't care if
he beat him, he just wanted to make him bleed. He gets up to leave when Ivan tells him, “Palladium in chest, painful way to die.”

Tony lets out a hard laugh, one edged in pain and hurt. It shocks Ivan, who obviously wasn’t expecting this response, and he turns to face him once more, standing strategically to prevent the guards from seeing what’s happening. He leans in to Ivan, ignoring the wide eyes and jerk of hand cuffs against the bar.

“It was one of the better options, trust me.”

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

He didn't even want to have a stupid fucking birthday party, but he knows it would look strange if the “party of the year” was suddenly canceled. He's looking at the toxicity levels again, murmuring to JARVIS, when the data by his shoulder flashes to alert him that Natasha is approaching. He rolls his eyes and buttons his shirt, not at all surprised to see that she's wearing something extremely revealing. If she's hoping to get a closer look at the reactor and the crossword puzzle across his chest and neck, she'll be waiting a long, long time.

She's applying make-up to the mark on his face (he couldn't heal it on his own, Natasha would never believe he’d escaped that battle unscathed even in his suit and the last thing he needed was for her to go blabbing to S.H.I.E.L.D) when he asks. He almost wants to drop a hint that he knows she's not who she says she is, but what's the point? So instead, he asks her what she would do if it were her last birthday. He entertains himself with the thought that she'd probably go and gut a few people and then kill a few more with her thighs of death, but her response is perfectly poised and in character.

“I'd do whatever I wanted to do, with whoever I wanted to to it with.”

Which is probably a come-on, but he ignores it in favor of jumping up and running down to the workshop.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

He's clutching a bottle of high-proof alcohol and wandering around 'drunkenly' in the suit. He's not an idiot, he'd dumped out the bottle and replaced it with some coke with a dash of rum (they'd smell the alcohol on his breath if they got close, it was an act he'd perfected over the years) because getting drunk would only make his liver work harder, most likely shortening his already short time left. He
grins to himself when Rhodey shows up, watching out of the corner of his eye while playing DJ with one hand. He makes a bee-line for Pepper and she tries to take over, but he's shooting targets and making a nuisance of himself and not listening, and he knows Rhodey saw.

The workshop is open and the silver suit, the one he'd lovingly named War Machine (even if he was dead, no one was going to wear his colors, and he wouldn't budge on that, no way) coded into Rhodey's personal overrides. JARVIS had specific instructions to let Rhodey into the armor, to not set off any alarms. Tony knew Rhodey would act on his sense of duty, would take the suit and would try to bring him back under control, and then Tony would let him take it.

It seemed so easy, now. Rhodey was made to be an Iron Man, made to be War Machine. He had strong discipline, military training, a good moral code. He wouldn't let the suit fall into the wrong hands, he wouldn't degrade the name. He'd only do good things with it. Tony knew he would. But it would look suspicious if he suddenly gave away a suit, so Rhodey would have to take it. That was fine with him, his means were met in the end: a good man to carry out the Iron Man duty.

Tony was right.

Everything happened according to plan. He sent the guests out, Rhodey and him threw each other around a bit. Tony had to hold back quite a bit, because no one could operate the suit like he could, no one melded perfectly with it like he did, and he'd quite frankly pummel Rhodey into bits if he tried his hardest. He simply had more control, more experience, more knowledge.

It was easy to blame the sudden decrease in ability to function on being 'drunk,' so Tony used it to his advantage. He fooled around, tried to give Rhodey a quick basic training in using the suit in combat. He made Rhodey fly, throw weights, dodge, hit, calculate patterns (he'd need more instruction on that, or at least some heavy practice), and finally, he made him use the repulsors. But he hadn't really counted on Rhodey talking smack, he sort of assumed he'd take the high road and just thrash him before taking off. There was no reason for him to say what he said, none at all. The anger, the pure rage in Rhodey's voice as he claimed Tony didn't deserve to wear the suit cut through him, and he lost sight of his goal for a moment.

He'd built this fucking suit, thank you very much. He'd designed the prototype hooked up to car battery in a cave with shitty pieces of weaponry and blasted a fucking terrorist cell to kingdom come. He revolutionized the technology of this age, he'd put a nuclear reactor in his chest, he gave Rhodey his goddamn legacy, and all of a sudden he didn't deserve it? He sacrificed years of pain and abuse to keep Stark Industries from crashing and burning, he withstood years of hatred to keep soldiers safe, and this is what he gets? Tony snarls, angry down to his core, and the bands around his ankles burn the skin. Tony throws up both hands and fires, ready to put the force of his mutation behind it, ready to blow this enemy off the face of the earth-
But wait!

Rhodey wasn't an enemy. Tony wanted this. Tony wanted him to win, to take the suit, to carry on as Iron Man. This wasn't how he wanted it to happen, he didn't want his first friend to believe him to be this monster, but it had to be this way. It had to.

The bands held, but barely. He let the repulsors fire, the backlash throwing him across the room, but he pulled his extra power out of it, probably sparing Rhodey some serious injuries. Tony took a deep breath, and then another, and looked up as Rhodey flew out of the ceiling, blazing a trail across the sky.

Tony rested his head against the ground, letting his eyes close.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“Sir, I'm gonna have to ask you to exit the doughnut.”

Tony froze, doughnut halfway to his mouth. He knew that voice, and- oh, hell. It was.

It was Nick Fury, Director of S.H.I.E.L.D.

*Of fucking course.*

Tony was kind of hoping that now that they had a new Iron Man, they would leave him alone. But apparently not. He's honestly too tired to bother bitching at the pirate, so he follows him inside the doughnut shop and banters with him for a while. Fury has, of course, noted his path of self-destruction and him giving away 'personal possessions,' and feels the need to lecture him. Tony feels the rage at facing the Director boil in his blood the more he talks with him, remembering the cover-up, the stalking, the lies, the pain they put him through, so he barely lends an ear to the conversation, going mostly on autopilot.

But then, the alert that Natasha was approaching buzzes in his ears and he sees her enter the shop in her usual gear, relaying something about perimeters that he knows is just for his benefit, to rub in his face that *oooh, we got you! She's with us!* He rolls his eyes, tells her she's fired for appearances sake, because he's not *supposed* to know she was a double-crossing spy or whatever. But then he feels a pinprick in his neck and he nearly loses it because how do they know he's a mutant, oh my
god, they found out, they're going to experiment on him and they're just like Howard oh my GOD-

“What did we just do for you,” Nick drawls, and Tony didn't even realize he was talking, hopefully he didn't say anything stupid, Christ. But then he hears 'lithium dioxide,' which he knew would help but chlorophyll was always better and didn't have to be injected with needles, which he had a thing about, but anyway. He tries to tell them he knows there's no chance of survival, because he knows they know something, and being the King of the Assholes here's where Fury would probably rub it in-

Ah, yes. Assholes were always so easy to cater to.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Nick Fury tells him Howard was a founding member of S.H.I.E.L.D, and Tony wants to light the whole organization on fire and let it raze to the ground. He tells him Howard was a good man and all Tony can say is that he never told me he loved me, he never even told me he liked me and that's not nearly enough to cover what had happened but that spy bastard needed to know, even only a little bit, what Howard was really like. He's disgusted, because of course he should've expected this, that those fuckers would cover up the real reason surrounding the death of one of their founding members. He wants to cry and scream and murder something, but in order to get the revenge he wants, the revenge he so desperately needs, he has to live past tomorrow.

He's on house arrest, and Agent Coulson is the warden. Tony tries not to laugh when he threatens to taze him (like to see you try, the look on your face when I just blinked would be priceless) but seems like the agent is more...playful than he is serious. He leaves Tony alone when he agrees to go to work and seems to trust his word that he will focus on the task at hand, which scores him a point in the book of People Who Are A Smaller Pain In The Ass Than I Initially Thought They Would Be. He moves downstairs to rifle through the things Howard had touched twenty-some years ago. Tony can feel the filth on them, the taint of him covering everything like a thick layer of dust. But apparently some secret of life is hidden in this shit, so he goes through it.

The reels are playing in the background because if he focuses too hard on them he's afraid he'll blow the lights out. Howard's voice is rambling in the background, the man getting progressively drunker as the tapes go on. All of a sudden, he hears his name on the tape, and he's being yelled at, of course. He's probably about five here, so things haven't gotten too bad by this point, but a camera crew guy grabs him and takes him from the room. Of course, Howard wouldn't touch him.

Then, Howard's speaking to him. Telling him about the 'City of the Future,’ and how it's been built for him, and that his greatest creation...was Tony.
Tony leans over and vomits into the trash can.

When he can sit up and the phantom pains along his skin have faded for the most part, he stops the reel. He's shaking so hard that it drops from his hand, and he curls up in his chair as he rides out the pain. He can't think too hard about what he heard, or he'll be sent back to that place and then who knows when he'll be able to function again. Instead of retreating into his mind, to the torture he knows awaits him, he vomits again, kicking the reel out across the floor so he doesn't even have to look at it anymore.

Of course, at that point in time, Howard had no idea what Tony was. At this point he hadn't even really beat Tony too much, as those major assaults began after he turned six. But Tony had secretly hoped that maybe it was just the fact that he was a mutant that made Howard look at him like a weapon, and not that he was smart or a bad kid in general. But to hear that at this point, when Tony was five, Howard was already thinking of him as a creation? God, it made Tony's stomach roll, made the bile in the back of his throat sting and burn.

He can think clearly again about half an hour later, and he just breathes slowly and deeply. Something is niggling in the back of his head, something important, and he has to address it. Something about that model, the layout of the city sitting behind Howard, it looked sort of like...

Wait a minute.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The apology to Pepper goes horribly. His brain is a jumbled mess but when he's driving down the road, he sees strawberries and he knows there's something about them that links them and Pepper together, so they seemed like a good idea. He gives the guy the watch Natasha put on his wrist last night because it's not like he ever wants to touch that of his own volition again, and speeds off.

Well, Pep's allergic to strawberries, but he's honestly impressed at this point that he remembered they were linked together at all. She bitches at him, he tries yet again to tell her that he's dying and that even though he didn't love her that way she's still one of the most important people in his life and he wants her to know, wants her to see how much he cared and needed her-

And then she's asking him to leave. She needs him to leave. She's leaving. Her and Happy are leaving, leaving him alone with Natasha, who leaves him, too. It hurts, it physically burns him to watch her walk away, to watch Pepper leave knowing he didn't tell her everything he wanted to, couldn't articulate what he felt, couldn't tell her his secret, the one she really did deserve to know. But she didn't ask for this. Didn't ask for him, didn't ask for this entire ballpark of issues to turn up at her
doorstep. He needed her, but she made it clear that she just needed him...to leave.

Tony takes a deep breath and stands, ready to walk out with a leaden weight pushing on his lungs, when he sees the covered model. Making his way over to them and yanking off the tarp, he takes a look, squinting his eyes and turning his head, trying to see. And he does. It's all right there. Pushing back the weight in his chest, the ache he knows will come back twice as fierce, he squares his shoulders and clears his mind. He focuses instead on getting the model home without damaging it.

When it's all laid out in his workshop, he's mumbling to JARVIS mostly out of habit because he lays out the grid himself, with his mutation. He needs to feel this, with more than just JARVIS' reports. Tony deletes everything irrelevant, creating a framework, and yes, this is what he saw, this is what looked familiar! He tilts it this way and that, enlarging the model and spotting the nucleus, and it all comes together.

It's an atom. This thing, it's an atom.

Don't get him wrong, Tony knows his atoms, and this is not one he's seen before. So he highlights the nucleus and enlarges it, throwing the whole thing across the room, expanding it so it surrounds him, the beautiful blue light shining everywhere. This atom, this tiny, baby atom, he can feel it in his bones, in his head, in his hand, and he knows it will fit perfectly in his chest. His mutation rejoices, the electricity pouring into the model because this? This won't fight against him, this won't poison him and pollute him: this will fit into his body perfectly, and meld with it.

And as he holds it in his hand, he realizes what a fucking miracle it is that Howard couldn't create this. Because all of the energy within him was creating a model of this, of what it would do, what it could do, and it practically vibrated at the chance to feel this, to meld with this, to power and charge this metal. It felt like a part of him, something that just belonged. And if Howard had put this in Tony's body and bonded him with it, tortured him with it, he's not sure he could have withstood that type of soul-wrenching bonding and ripping.

He has to run to the trash can so he can vomit again.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Agent Coulson comes to tell him that he's shipping out to New Mexico, and that's when he sees the shield. He registers that it's Captain America's colors and style, and that it's probably an early prototype, and that Agent seems to treat it with some type of reverence, but all he sees is the shape and how it's perfect for this balance, the data and equations running beside him, around him. He bids the agent goodbye and refrains from shocking him as he shakes his hand, but that's all he does before
he's focused back on the project.

When he begins synthesizing, it really is his intention to only use what the particle accelerator provides to power the process, but at the last second the energy arcs through him and to the small triangle of metal suspended in the air, and when the flash dies down, a bright blue glow suffuses through the piece. He grins and fits it into the reactor, data around him agreeing with JARVIS when he says that it will be a viable replacement.

“JARVIS, make a note. Replace the bands' inner coating of silver with this new element at next opportunity.” JARVIS makes an affirmative noise, and that's when he gets the call. Apparently, Ivan is ready to tango.

Slapping the new reactor into the port, Tony grins. So is he.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Tony tries to warn Rhodey, he really does, but Ivan's already sunk his teeth into the suit (oh my god, please don't tell me you weaponized my suit with fucking Hammer Tech, sweet Christ) by the time Tony makes it to the Expo. He takes them up and picks off the drones one by one with swift maneuvering. Natasha proves to be somewhat useful when she overrides the capture on Rhodey's suit as they crash land in the park and Tony assures her he's no longer dying, thanks for caring, and oh, shit, Pepper's on the line.

He gets Rhodey up and functioning when he senses the wave of drones being sent their way (the damn drones were so big and used so much clunky-ass coding that they appeared as more of a blob than a blip on Tony's radar) before Natasha alerts them. He and Rhodey bicker like old times for a minute before they band together to kick some drone ass. Ivan shows up and that battle's a little trickier, but he and Rhodey pull the dual-repulsor-explosion move and he goes down.

Tony's about to suggest a long nap and some burritos or something when he hears the quiet, “You lose.” The flashing red light is a good indicator of what's about to happen, and Tony's eyes widen when he remembers where Pepper is. He takes off, pouring on more speed that he can ever remember. His reaction time and reflexes are so heightened by the adrenaline and energy flooding his body and brain that he's zipping along like a comet, slowing down only slightly to grab Pepper, brake, and lift off, taking her away just as the explosion erupts behind them.

They land on a roof top, there's fiery explosions behind them, they argue, and then they kiss. Tony honestly has no idea how it happened, but he thinks it has something to do with the adrenaline haze in his brain and his violently shaking limbs. Rhodey joins their banter, and then steals his suit. Again.
They all have burritos later that night, and Tony and Pepper fall asleep on his couch.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The folder says Avenger Initiative, and Tony knows what that means. He'd hacked into the files in S.H.I.E.L.D's network, of course, and it was all talk of superheros and agents and collaboration, and to be honest, he wanted no part in that. He still hated S.H.I.E.L.D and everyone involved in their mess with a passion, and he'd gotten a new and improved lifespan. He planned to use it to exact the sweetest revenge on their little organization, and it would be made all the sweeter because he knew he'd be hurting not only the people who covered up his mother and Jarvis' deaths, but the one who caused them.

Oh, it'd be so sweet.

Nick Fury goes through the motions with him, shows him the file. It, of course, has Natasha's filthy hands all over it. He reads through her evaluations and tries not to send a few volts through the metal table at the final conclusion.

Iron Man: Yes. Tony Stark: Not Recommended.

They want him to be a consultant, someone on a sort of contract basis. He wants to reject it outright, but the chances of a superhero team under S.H.I.E.L.D directive even taking off in the first place are so slim it's almost laughable. And as a bonus, having a consultant status would put him closer to the central hub of S.H.I.E.L.D, so he could hit them where it really hurt.

So he agrees, and he's already forming plans. It will take time, but he will have his revenge.

And since he's Tony Stark, he manages to get a little something extra out of the deal.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

As Senator Stern practically shoves the pin into his chest, Tony grins even through his snide remark. He knows the pictures will be all over the news, and the knowledge that Stern had to proclaim Tony a "national treasure" would make him laugh for the rest of his life.
Two days later, Tony hacks into Sterns desktop, phone, and laptop. All the wallpapers are the picture of him awarding Tony. He may have disabled the ability to change it.

When he tells Charles about it, Charles laughs so hard he can't breathe.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

It's only a few days after the awarding ceremony when a notification directing him to a S.H.I.E.L.D file pops up in the corner of his eye. He pushes away the calibration screens for the armor mechanics that he was working on and swings around to pull up the S.H.I.E.L.D database (while absently noting that the transition from JARVIS-powered holographics to his mutation is perfectly seamless thanks to the new update, of course). After worming his way through various files to try to find what tripped his alarm, he ends up deep into the security feeds from three days previous. Curious, he activates a clip that seems to draw his attention, a light blue haze over the thumbnail.

Director Fury's office, if the nameplate is any indication. Fury is doing paperwork, scribbling away at a stack as tall as his thumb is wide, an angry look on his face. That's all that happens for a few moments before the door slides open soundlessly and admits Agent Coulson into the space of the office. Fury looks up, glaring in his direction for a moment before returning to the paperwork.

“What is it, Coulson? I have to have these filed and sent to the Council by tonight.” Fury barely spares the other man a glance as he walks forward to the desk and flips a folder onto it. He picks up the folder before tossing it back without opening it, scoffing loudly. The cover is familiar: the file that was handed to Tony, the file that marked him ‘not recommended.’

“You changed it. I want to know why.” Coulson's tone is firm and his face blank. Fury doesn't even hesitate.

“Some measures must be taken to guarantee—”

“Director,” Coulson interrupts. “Let's not play this game.” Fury stops scribbling for a moment, looks up at Coulson. He sighs and puts his pen down, leaning back in his chair.

“Coulson, the Stark family has a...history with S.H.I.E.L.D.”
“Yes. Howard Stark was a founding member.”

“Yes. Howard Stark was a founding member.” The only thing that betrays Coulson's surprise is a slight widening of his eyes. “He was the only member of the Council that was willing to work with me, to put the Director in a position of power where the Council was more of a guiding world influence at the time. Howard Stark played a very specific role in S.H.I.E.L.D, and he was supposed to leave a very specific legacy. He laid the groundwork, but it was all torn apart after the loss of the weapon, his weapon. No one in the Council is eager to trust another Stark, and I haven't forgotten what Tony is like. Coulson, you and I both know the type of man he is. He's irresponsible, reckless, careless. He's not a team player. He cannot be relied on for what we need done.”

“Sir, Agent Romanov did the job you asked her to do. She observed Stark and fulfilled her role, and when you asked her to write up the report, she did so based on what she saw. And with all due respect, she saw a hell of a lot more than he's shown anyone else. The type of man he portrays for the world isn't necessarily the man he is. He's unparalleled technologically and quite possibly one of the most brilliant minds the world's ever seen. What Tony Stark can do is what we need on this team if we want it to succeed. Romanov saw that. I saw that. That's why we recommended him for the program.”

“It doesn't always work like that!” Fury shouted, slamming his hands on the desk. “Tony Stark is not Avenger material, Agent Coulson. He can do what we need him to do from his position as consultant. Otherwise, he needs to be controlled!”

“You blame him for what happened, don’t you?” Fury stands so fast that his chair rockets back and falls to the floor.

“If not for what he did, Howard wouldn’t have gone off the deep end! The weapon Howard worked on would've been safe in the hands of S.H.I.E.L.D, would have been well documented and advanced the security and the protection of this country! But his meddling stopped the progress and locked it away, destroyed all evidence of its existence! Tony robbed S.H.I.E.L.D of what would have been the greatest weapon on Earth because he wanted it for himself!” Fury was panting, hands clenched on the desk. “Howard told me everything that happened everything he'd tried to keep secret for years, everything about how when he was sixteen, Tony came home and found Howard's notes and discovered what he'd been working on for almost five years. Tony was unwilling to share the force of the weapon with the world, he got his mother and their butler, Jarvis, to gang up on Howard, and Tony felt it should be kept to themselves, and more importantly, himself. He never told me what it was, he was too afraid. He'd promised the Council a 'weapon to control all weapons,' something that couldn't be stopped or beaten. Howard tried to recreate it with what little he remembered with no luck. He didn't have it, he had nothing to show for it. Tony took everything, the data, the test results, the mock-ups, took them right out from under Howard's nose, and secreted them away to god knows where. Howard told me he only came out and told them because he was hoping the Council would be willing to help him get it back, to track it down and find it, but the Council refused because such a task was 'out of their jurisdiction.' Howard managed to save his public reputation
and even his face among the lower levels of S.H.I.E.L.D but the higher-ups knew. The Council knew. Howard was shamed and regarded as another greedy contractor who couldn’t deliver. He told me he would get it back, that he would do whatever it took to prove he was right and that he could do it. And the next day, they found his car split in two and the video footage from the garage. I asked for a cover-up to protect his legacy, given the long years of his service to S.H.I.E.L.D, and that was difficult to push through. I asked for Top Secret clearance on the case and they grumbled but allowed it. The only people still alive that know about the true COD are you, me, the Council, and the two high level agents still alive that worked the cover-up.” Fury is silent for a moment, head hanging down. “Putting Tony Stark on the Avengers team will destroy any chance of the Council accepting the Initiative. The man has been out for nothing but his own interests for decades, and he hasn’t changed. He won’t. That’s why he’s not recommended.”

Coulson stands, simply staring at Fury for a moment before the Director looks up and makes eye contact. They stare at each other for a minute longer before Coulson turns around and heads for the door. His hand twists the handle, but before he steps out of the office, he turns around.

“Have you ever thought that maybe the great Howard Stark was lying to you?”

Coulson leaves the office as Fury sweeps the papers off his desk.

Tony comes out of the scene with a migraine and red-hot rage swirling up inside him. His hands are clenched into fists and bile is rising in the back of his throat, but as he tries to take a step he collapses onto the floor in a heap. Tony allows himself to scream, and scream, and scream, until everything turns blessedly black.
He blinks his eyes open slowly, trying to orient himself and figure out why he feels so terrible. Tony levers himself up on one arm, wobbles for a moment, and slips back down to the floor of the workshop. The date, time, current weather, and geographical position slide in front of his eyes with a swirl of blue right in sync with JARVIS announcing them in a soothing voice. Letting his eyes slide shut, he tries to remember what happened.

Moments later, Fury's irritated voice rings through his ears and Howard's laughter clatters through his head like bells. He desperately tries to jam his ears shut but he can't because the sound is inside him and he curls up to avoid phantom hits and crawls under the table so no one can look at him and he screams again but his throat is ripped to shreds and all that comes out is a high-pitched whine and the anger and the panic are swelling again and he can't breathe, he can't breathe, he can't breathe.

“Call Charles,” he gasps out, voice cracking and giving way just as he slumps into unconsciousness.

Charles is quietly playing chess in his office with Scott when Logan, Jean, and Ororo enter to start their midterm meeting. For once, this meeting has nothing to do with X-Men business and instead is used to discuss the progression of the students and what they want to accomplish next semester. Charles smiles at Scott and promises to resume their game later while the others take a seat to start the meeting.

Charles is just about to ask Logan to go ahead when the telephone on his desk starts ringing. He grins and makes his apologies, picking up the receiver. Before he gets the chance to say hello, a smooth, British voice speaks on the other end of the line.

“Hello, Professor Charles Xavier?” His eyes widen and his heart beats frantically against his chest.

“JARVIS? Is that you? Is everything all right?” The others quickly turn towards Charles, expecting danger and possibly a mission.
“That's why I am contacting you. At 4:38:14 this morning, Sir received a notification from S.H.I.E.L.D that signaled something required his attention. After viewing whatever it was, he collapsed at 4:40:07. When he woke up at 8:19:23, he suffered a severe panic attack and prior to his second collapse, asked me to contact you. I wish to request your assistance.”

“Yes, of course. Where is he? Can you see him?” Charles was gripping the edge of his desk, nearly lightheaded with worry.

“He appears to have crawled under a lab station. Sir is shaking considerably and Dummy has attempted to render assistance by covering him with a blanket and standing guard by the door, but there is only so much we can do and we sincerely request-” Charles had never heard the AI so riled up, but it sounded almost exactly like his late human counterpart did when Tony had one of his episodes the first few months after they rescued him.

“I will be there as soon as I possibly can. Please keep me updated. Thank you, JARVIS.”

“Thank you, Professor Xavier.” Hanging up the receiver, he took a breath and startled just slightly when Jean quietly asked if he was okay. He looked up and saw the X-Men, looking ready for a mission briefing or horrible news. He smiled slightly at them, but he knew it was weak and unconvincing.

“I have to travel to Malibu for a little while. A very dear friend of mine needs some support and I need to be there right now to give it. I'm sure you all can handle everything here, and if you need me, you know how to contact me.” Without any more than that, Charles wheeled quickly out of his office and down the hall.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

It only took a scant few hours to fly to Malibu from the Mansion when you knew the right person (or were the right person) but it still felt like days before Charles arrived at Tony's doorstep. Tony didn't use keys, but the retina scanner easily recognized him and let him through, the elevator ride was over in a blink, and then he was sitting in front of the workshop.

From what he could see, the place was absolutely destroyed. Almost every light in the workshop had been blown out, exploded glass lying all over the floor. Several of the holo-screens were cracked and flickering in and out, the projectors were flashing numbers and equations off and on, the cars had all been blown back near the wall from the force of what appeared to be an explosion, and paper and
metal were scattered everywhere. The workshop was trashed, and Charles winced as he thought of what might have caused Tony to lose control like this.

“Professor Xavier? Please proceed inside the workshop. Sir is in the back, under the lab station.” Charles nodded and rolled forward as the doors to the workshop opened for him and paid no mind when they closed immediately after him. Dummy hovered uncertainly by the door, but Charles smiled at him and patted him on the head and Dummy quickly took up his position of guard once more. He rolled himself towards the back slowly and loud enough that Tony would hear him if he was awake and it wouldn't startle him. Leaning forward, he could see a grey woolen blanket covering a shivering form, a tuft of dark brown hair poking out from the cover.

“Tony,” Charles said quietly, gently. “Tony, it's Charles. I'm here now. I'm going to stay here until you wake up, okay? And when you wake up, we'll talk about what happened. But for now, you should just sleep for a while. Don't worry about whatever happened, Tony. It will all be here when you wake up. So let it go for now, and just rest. Just get some nice, calm, rest. You need it.” The longer Charles talked, the less pronounced the shivers became until they were gone. The blanket lay still over Tony and only moved with the slightly shallow breaths the sleeper took. Satisfied that Tony was now in a deeper sleep, Charles rolled back and kept an eye on him.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

When Tony woke once more, it was cool and dark. He ached from laying on the workshop floor for so long, his throat was raw and painful, and his hands were knotted in that thick wool blanket he kept on the couch in the corner of the workshop. The data slid calmly into place, silently telling him where he was and what time it was and that Charles' wheelchair was in the corner of the workshop—

Wait.

Slowly flipping around, Tony realized he was wedged under the lab station in the back of his workshop, huddled up underneath the blanket and curled up protectively. Wincing as he stretched out, he slid from underneath the table and got up, leaning on the table for support. He looked over to Charles, who regarded him with calm eyes and a relaxed posture, waiting for him to decide to speak at his own pace. There was a stool positioned in front of the man and his gaze dropped to it for a moment, indicating that he was welcome to sit down if he pleased. Tony sighed and nodded to himself, making his way over and sitting down heavily, hands wiping over his face.

“How do you feel?” Charles' voice was soft, careful, and Tony looked up at him. Something caught his attention, out of the corner of his eye, and he turned, taking in the massive amounts of destruction. He must've torn the place apart in his rage earlier, stuck so deep in the anger that he was unable to control himself. Turning back to him with a shamed look in his face, he opened his mouth to apologize when Charles interrupted him. “Ah, no, none of that now. This isn't your fault. If you
got this upset and lost a bit of your control, it must've really affected you. You can apologize later, but for now, tell me what's got you all worked up.” In response, Tony just waved his hand, pulling up the video from earlier and letting it play while he clenched his fists at his sides.

Charles watched with growing horror and anger, wanting to not believe it, wanting to think that the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D would know better, would understand that Tony couldn't do this. Even if Fury thought that Jarvis and Maria had been in cahoots with him, how could he think that Tony would do that? But then it occurred to him that Howard had lied about quite a few things, why wouldn't he lie about this? It infuriated Charles to no end. His blood was boiling at the end of the video, though he was comforted by the fact that there were people like Agent Coulson in the world, people willing to question.

“Why?” Tony asked brokenly, making Charles' heart ache in sympathy. He wished that the man's past had stayed just that: the past. But no, Tony just wasn't that lucky. Howard wasn't satisfied destroying his childhood, he had to come back and ruin his adult life, too. He tried to send a secret military force after him, to recapture him in the name of turning him into a weapon. He lied to the Director of such a force, and that Director believed him, actually thought that Tony could be that person. The fury and rage in Tony's frame had dissolved into sadness and old aches, pain that he just couldn't understand. “Why did he have to go and do that? What did I do, why is this happening? I don't...” His voice cracked and Tony looked away, desperately trying to bring back the numbness he'd adopted as a teen, the safe blanket of not caring, not feeling.

“Sometimes, Tony, bad things happen to good people,” Charles murmured, reaching for Tony's hand. He held it tightly as the man shook his head.

“I'm not a good person, I know that, Charles, but I thought I had paid for it already, I thought maybe I had done enough, that this would be over.”

“You are a good person, Tony. You are. Bad people don't hunt down every weapon they made and destroy it, bad people don't make three different contingency plans to protect the people they love and even the ones they don't, bad people don't donate money and wake up every morning intending to try and make the world a better place. But sometimes, bad people hurt good people because that's what they do. And they keep on hurting them until they give up. But you didn't give up, you didn't give in, and you don't plan to start now. You're a good person because you fight the bad people even when it hurts, Tony.” Tony's face was open and vulnerable, his chest aching and hand shaking in Charles' grip. His eyes closed and he breathed out raggedly, trying to regain control. When his eyes opened, they were hard and cold, his back straight and unyielding.

“I won't let him control me, him or Fury. If Fury really believes that I could do that, that that's the type of person I am, let him. I wouldn't want to work for him anyway. I'll do what needs to be done, and S.H.I.E.L.D. will get theirs, I'll make sure of that. I won't forgive, and I won't forget, and I won't let Howard's machinations and the people that fell for them control me.”
“I understand, Tony. I may not condone revenge, but I...understand why you feel it necessary, and I can't quite bring myself to disagree with you. I must admit, it sounds like that Agent Coulson is on your side, though.” Charles had been wondering about that. He knew that Tony didn't necessarily view the man as a threat anymore, but it seemed in the video like he was defending Tony. Not many people were willing to believe that the great Howard Stark might've been a liar. And both he and Agent Natasha both agreed that Tony was good for the Initiative, which made Charles think twice about them, consider them more closely.

“Yeah. Agent might not be so bad. Regardless, I'm only a consultant. It doesn't matter now. What matters is that I have to get out of here, I need to leave Malibu,” Tony said, running a hand back through his hair. He couldn't stay here anymore. The memories of Obadiah, the lingering anger in Fury's words, Howard's ghost, the heat and the destruction, he couldn't stand it anymore. “There's a tower being built in New York, an SI office and corporate building. The lower levels are standard office levels, upper being test labs and such, but I'm sure I can tweak it to put some living floors on top. Until it's completed, I'll live on a lab level, I'll just shove a mattress in there somewhere. Shouldn't be long now, just a few weeks,” Tony said, standing and moving out of the workshop, Charles following. They took the elevator up to the living room, Tony moving to pace in front of the couch and Charles watching calmly. When the pacing didn't ease and the tension in Tony's body didn't lessen, he spoke up.

“You know, maybe you ought to build a separate lab in that tower of yours, maybe underground? It might be a good idea to have a lab space that only you can access, where you can rest and freely use your mutation instead of mixing it with technology you can easily overpower when you get frustrated or worked up. You could go there to let off some steam without risking the destruction of the place or prying questions from contractors or staff. It could be good for you,” he suggested, smiling when Tony slowed as he seemed to think about it, coming to a stop as he reached a decision.

“Yeah. That's a good idea.” Tony flopped on the couch and sighed, closing his eyes and leaning his head back. “Thank you for coming all the way out here. I'm sure you were busy doing something actually important-”

“Tony,” Charles interrupted gently. “I will always come when you need me. Always. There is nothing more important to me.” Tony smiled at him weakly and Charles patted his knee. “Can I assume you'll be sending your stuff ahead of you and taking the suit to New York?” Tony nodded. Charles decided to take the chance. “You could come visit, you know. The kids love your tech, and I'm sure they'd love to see you,” he said tentatively. They'd discussed it before and Tony had been adamant that it was a bad idea, that it would be dangerous. Tony sighed in front of him, and he expected to be immediately shot down, but Tony surprised him.

“I want to. I want to meet other people who are like me, people who would be able to understand even a little bit, but I worry. They'd just see me as a normal human encroaching on their space, their home, and I know that would bother me. And I worry about the perceptive ones knowing what I am,
and if the kids knew, everyone would. Didn't you say Logan was feral? What if he finds out? What would I do if Ororo picked up on some sort of electrical energy?” This was an issue Tony’d juggled for a long time. It would be wonderful to see Charles’ school, see what he's done for mutants, but if Tony went and someone found out...only bad things could come from that. Charles just nodded and conceded the point. Tony didn't need to argue and get defensive right now.

“Alright. Are you okay now?” Tony nodded. “Will you contact me when you get to New York so I know you made it okay?” Another nod. “Then I'll leave you to it.”

“Thank you, for everything,” Tony said softly, reaching for a hug before he hesitated at the last moment. Charles just tugged him in, hugging him tightly.

“Of course. Be safe, Tony.”

“I will.”

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

He calls Charles when he gets settled in the lab two weeks later, and only ends up living there for three weeks and four days after that. The Stark Tower was fully functional and equipped with plenty of living floors. He gives Pepper, Rhodey, and Happy each half a floor, and the extra half left over from that is turned into guest rooms. Tony knows they won't be living there, but it would be nice for them to have a good place to crash should they need it. He includes a small kitchen, a living room, a fully functional bathroom with a jacuzzi tub, and a master bedroom for each of them. His own set up is very similar, simply encompassing more room and the rooms being bigger.

A few floors are dedicated to gym and training rooms because Tony is pushing himself into an even more brutal exercise schedule, now determined to fill his empty spaces in his workout schedule with intense kickboxing, while keeping up his previous training sessions. There's a full-length competition sized pool and a yoga room (mostly for Pepper, but he'd get around to trying it out sometime) as well. His 'public' lab, or the one he powers with JARVIS and general electricity is closest to the actual SI business levels, which suits him fine. He does the work on the underground lab himself, only hiring the contractors to build a simple basement. There are no electrical lines, and the only thing that connects it to the tower above are the water, air conditioning, and plumbing lines. There is ten feet of reinforced concrete between the tower and the ceiling of his private lab, to give him some privacy.

Tony sets it up like he always imagined his dream lab. There are plenty of outlets available to plug in machinery should he need it, they just aren't connected to anything. There isn't a single computer or
holo-display. Instead, he has ten interactive tables, five on either side of the room, that he has set to activate when he enters the room. Upon his entrance, the last project's schematics or business order he worked on at each table is brought up through a separate programing he sets in his mutation, a remembrance and display code. The back wall of the room bears a specifically made bed, the mattress and down comforter hiding a series of wires and circuit boards that were designed to defer the electrical energy he produced while asleep or resting on the bed to the room and the Tower above.

The first time he enters the room after completing it is like Christmas. The tables light up with Iron Man schematics, SI personal electronic projects, Tony's email client and his work schedule. Along the back wall is a veritable network map, starting with this room and branching out into everything Tony has bugs in or is connected to in a bright blue glow. It's a display of the interconnectedness of his mutation, every string of energy and line of code that connects back to him displayed proudly on the map in various shades of the bright, comforting blue he was so used to. S.H.I.E.L.D is a small blip in the corner, his own corporate network dotting around the map. JARVIS is a larger glow, showing how he and the AI are intertwined. The tower is one of the largest presences, and he can even see the dots that represent his bots rolling around in his lab toward the top levels. Things he can access from this current position but isn't currently tangled in are displayed in a darker blue color, the dormant color. Everything from large machinery to printers and fax machines to cell phones and computers are available and readily displayed. The room is covered in equations and numbers that float passively or zoom around the room, depending on what they apply to. He lets out a laugh when he sees it, batting data around freely without worrying that someone will come up on him. It's all set to display automatically when he enters, so he doesn't have to worry about regulating power. Anyone who comes down here with him will have been granted entrance by him, so he doesn't have to worry about them seeing something he doesn't want them to. The only way to enter the lab is to read the override code to JARVIS in the elevator and request to go to that level, and the only people who have the code are Charles and Tony himself.

Overall, the private lab is a relief and a haven and a paradise all wrapped up in one. He spends a majority of his time down there anymore and, to his surprise, he finds that he's more comfortable and happy than when he spent most of his time stifling and hiding his mutation. Embracing it even this small amount makes him feel lighter, more energetic, stronger. Through his daily workouts and exercising, he discovers that allowing his mutation to run free through his veins when he's in private actually physically makes him stronger, the muscles able to work harder and faster, more efficiently. He can push himself to run faster and harder than he'd been able to, more than he logically should be able to, with simply a thought and some concentration. He shoves it off as be a result of letting go of the heavy weight of keeping it under wraps all the time, but the wonder lingers in the depths of his mind.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

After a few months, Pepper and Happy move out to New York with him, both living in nice loft apartments but spending quite a bit of time at the Tower. He approves the movement of the company center to New York as well (he might not be CEO, but he still owned controlling stock in the company for security reasons, and it certainly helped quite a bit). As they're around quite a bit, and
people look for him to sign things and answer questions and have meetings, he ends up spending less
time in the private lab, to his dismay. He powers through, noticing the jitters and listlessness that
comes with the loss of regular productive output of his energy. The bands were still functioning
optimally but he'd gotten used to the outlet of his private lab.

The moment he enters the lab after a week of not being in it, things come together nearly perfectly.

He simply happened to have schematics for the Tower open on one table, the arc reactor on another,
an energy conversion rate floating out of the corner of his eye, new pipeline tech brewing in his
brain, and it felt like the hand of God had pushed the idea together in his mind. Of course, it was
much easier for him to power the arc reactor with his mutation because it was easier to touch, easier
to see, the power source was an element Tony himself could power, and it was more deeply
connected to Tony himself. Running the Tower off of an arc reactor, supplying all its power with it?
Not only would it cut down on costs and free up their budget, it could help Tony to get some of the
restlessness out of his system if he could just slip some of his power surplus into the Tower's system.

He's grinning as he starts the new project, putting the plans together and starting construction almost
immediately. When he calls Charles a few hours later and speaks at a rapid fire pace, the man is
barely able to keep up with him, but he smiles, knowing that Tony's doing well.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Charles sighs to himself, taking off the Cerebro helmet and leaving the room with a bit of a heavy
heart. He had known, he'd always known, that Tony was special. Charles had watched the boy grow
into a man and he'd supported him, protecting the Stark heir from whatever he could, regretting every
second the child had been left to Howard's experiments. He'd helped Tony gain control, master what
he could, and even then, he'd known that Tony's mutation was something different, something
complex. But he was starting to get worried that Tony's secret wouldn't stay such a secret for much
longer. Tony Stark was the brightest light he'd ever seen, even using Cerebro, and how much longer
would he be able to hold the perfect control he'd practiced?

After all, there was only so much hiding one of the most powerful mutants on planet Earth could do,
only so long an Omega-level mutant would go unnoticed.
Fourteen

Chapter Notes

i'm so, so sorry this took so long! thanks for waiting and being so dedicated ^^ this chapter covers the entirety of the avengers! (also please forgive me i recognize the spacing is weird but i don't know why and i don't have time to fix it so)

as a side note, the soundtrack is finished and can be listened to/reblogged from my blog here:

http://backwith-a-vengeance.tumblr.com/post/64606084498/a-fanmix-for-the-fic-which-you-can-read-here

anyway, please enjoy the chapter ^^

The moment Pepper turns the Tower over to arc reactor power, Tony feels something in his chest loosen, a knot untangle itself and he can breathe deeper than he's been able to in ages. It looks beautiful, of course, all lit up and fit to run itself entirely off the grid for about a year (if Tony doesn't put any power into it himself, which he probably will). He's proud, happy, because this proves that he can make something other than things that kill people, that he can make good things that help people and help the environment. Tony's in a good mood as he walks the disassembly platform, but his positivity stutters a bit at the news that Coulson's on the line, saying it's urgent.

Sure, he'd recognized that the Agent need not be an enemy of his, that it would be easier to take the high road and not have to drag people like Coulson down with the rest of S.H.I.E.L.D in his own mind, but that didn't mean that he suddenly wanted to buddy up with the man. He tells JARVIS to ignore the call because he can see out of the corner of his eye that the security alert set to inform him should a registered member of S.H.I.E.L.D enter the building has gone off, Coulson's profile next to the security feed. The elevator becomes Agent's destination and Tony lets it happen, lets it bring him up. In the meantime, he banters with Pepper.

“Twelve, twelve percent.”

“Twelve percent of my baby?”

“An argument can be made for fifteen.”

She still didn't live in the Tower, but she spent a lot of time here with Tony, and a lot of time in her room here. However, she also spent a majority of her waking hours working, so living the in place
she worked must have been a lot less taxing on the transportation budget. Tony felt like their friendship had entered a different phase; he hadn't forgotten when Pepper told him to leave, and he knew she had been frustrated and worried and exhausted, but it still had cut deep. Whereas before he'd felt that maybe someday they could be together, that he could love her and protect her and tell her what he was, he didn't think that was possible anymore. They were still extremely close, and Pepper was still one of his best friends, but there was a sort of...closed door? He loved her as a friend, and he was comfortable with the fact that that was all it would ever be.

When Coulson exited the elevator, one look at his face told Tony this was serious. Agent was talking about an accident at S.H.I.E.L.D HQ and the loss of the Tesseract but Tony was digging through files and reports and security footage, watching the base explode from ground zero and looking at a man with dark hair and pale skin, appearing crazed and out of his mind. When the Agent handed him the file, he took it over to the table and flicked it open, spreading information throughout the air and gazing at in a daze, attention entirely captured by the bright blue cube before him. Information flooded the space next to it, but Tony grabbed the projection in his hand, turning it and inspecting it and being filled with a strange sort of unease.

When Pepper and Agent left together, Tony barely even noticed.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Tony immerses himself for the next several hours in reading everything they gave him, understanding it. They talk about what happened at the S.H.I.E.L.D base, a very rudimentary explanation, and Tony needs to know more if he's going to dive into this. So he closes his eyes and leans back, preparing himself to go deep into the S.H.I.E.L.D network. He follows the line of ones and zeros back to the hub of information, all classified and passcode protected, and he sneaks through it: over and under security measures, straight through firewalls and deep, deeper into the files than he's gone before. And what he finds shocks him.

The Tesseract, the bright blue cube that his father had apparently found in the ocean in the middle of searching for Captain America, was essentially an endless source of self-sustaining energy in the form of a cube, capable of unfathomable feats of apparent dimensional travel and energy transfer. S.H.I.E.L.D had been attempting to “reignite it,” or pry inside of it to be able to tap into that energy under the name Project P.E.G.A.S.U.S, which was the home base that this guy Loki attacked. But as Tony flicked through image after image and test after experiment after observational report on the Tesseract, his unease grew until he had to back out of the file. The files never mentioned why S.H.I.E.L.D was trying to tap into it, and it bothered him. There was a niggling in the back of his mind, something trying to get his attention, and he couldn't figure out what it was.

Among the minimal information on the Tesseract and the detailed outline of the Avenger Initiative, Tony found a roster of sorts, a list of people who were being considered for the project. He read the file on Agent Romanov with little interest, as none of this was exactly information he wasn't aware
of, but he smirked when he realized that S.H.I.E.L.D had tweaked some things from her actual file when they put it together to give to him. Agent Barton, another agent that apparently worked closely with both Coulson and Romanov, was also on the list, and he had an interesting if slightly solemn past as a runaway circus performer. The file had an alert attached to the top: COMPROMISED. Ah, so this was the agent that had been taken by Loki, the one Coulson had been so clearly concerned about.

Things got interesting when he got to the file regarding Thor, who S.H.I.E.L.D made clear they couldn't count on given that he was on a different 'realm.' Tony took a brief crash course in Norse mythology and learned about the God of Thunder, mildly curious to meet him and definitely impressed by the mounds of muscle this guy had. He wielded a hammer called Mjolnir, apparently the only person aside from his father, Odin, that could, which he used to control lightning as well. Tony admitted that he couldn't wait to meet the guy before he shook his head, refocusing on the issue and acknowledging that this Loki character wasn't the only enemy he needed to be wary of.

Next up was Captain America, and Tony's lips parted in a snarl before he could stop himself. S.H.I.E.L.D had found him frozen in time at the bottom of the ocean, alive under the ice for 70 years. He was still in tip-top condition but his file was short, outlining the basics of his past (served in WWII, got pumped up with the serum, became a war hero that everyone fucking loved, hooray) and his abilities (super strength, speed, senses, healing, apparently everything about this guy was super). Tony tried to keep his contempt in check, tried not to feel the rage and jealousy flood through his veins that stemmed from the file he'd found in his childhood, but it was difficult. He gave up and moved on to the last file, on one Doctor Bruce Banner.

Reading the file was like looking into a distorted mirror. S.H.I.E.L.D suspected that Banner had suffered from pretty heavy child abuse from his father in his formative years, and he went deep into the sciences, biochemistry, physics, and radiation, specifically gamma radiation, as he got older. The Army got him involved in a shady project to recreate the serum used in Project Rebirth, he used himself as a test subject, and he became what is known as the Hulk. He was hunted mercilessly, he still was, and the world treated him as though he was a monster. They didn't care that Bruce Banner had done incredible work within the field of science or had saved thousands of lives in Harlem, they only cared that he was different, and they hated him for it. Tony's heart ached for the man, feeling immediate camaraderie, and he lost quite a few hours to reading and becoming absorbed in Bruce's reports, his experiments and papers. The man was brilliant, a genius, and it was him that Tony couldn't wait to meet the most.

Bringing his focus back full circle, he realized he hadn't touched Selvig's notes in a while. He needed to read them, needed to understand and arm himself with the knowledge of what was going on even if that...cube made him uncomfortable. Settling down to read deeply into the extraction theory papers, he mentally braced himself for trouble.
It was a few hours later when he finished reading the papers, finished reviewing everything he needed to know. It was just in time, too, because as soon as he finished, he caught an alert from where he was more deeply entrenched in S.H.I.E.L.D servers that showed a takeoff from the Helicarrier (holy shit, that's absolutely compensating for something) carrying Romanov and the good Captain headed for Stuttgart, Germany.

“JARVIS.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Fire up the suit, I need to be in Germany right now.”

“Of course, sir.”

Tony moved to the platform, suiting up in his most current armor, getting himself ready for the first battle of the war.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

He arrives in Germany with his usual flair, taking over the PA system and definitely noting Agent Romanov's amusement to be pondered at a later date. Rogers needed backup and Tony provided it, aiming everything he had at the freaky guy with golden horns on his damn head, daring him to challenge it. He finds something fundamentally unsettling with the way this guy, a supposed god, simply backs down and raises his hands, letting Tony haul him off his ass and back to the jet. The Captain follows behind, not looking winded, exactly, but looking very put-upon.

They stand there, staring at Loki in silence before the moment descends quickly, Tony's agitation with the man growing by the second even though he's not technically actively doing anything to annoy him. Then he hears the thunder, sees the lightning, and a brief jolt goes through him at the thought of how the last time he was this close to lightning, he almost absorbed it while in the middle of trashing Charles' mansion back when he was younger. Loki also seems to be looking at the sky a bit apprehensively and it dawns on Tony: god of thunder-

“Scared of a little lightning?”

“I'm not overly fond of what follows.”
The Captain glances at him but he's distracted by the burst of lightning against the top of the plane, the weight landing heavily atop it and panicking because *did I just do that oh fuck!* But a long-haired blond man enters the back of the jet, snags Loki, and jumps out of the back with no hesitation and Tony immediately makes the connection. Romanov is in the background telling the Captain that he's probably an ally but all Tony can think is that Loki is gone and Thor can control lightning so there is one solid excuse he has to go after him and another theory he wants to test: what happens if he touches the god of thunder, the one that controls lightning? So, logically, he tells Rogers his plan.

Attack.

And then he jumps out the back of the jet after them.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Tackling Thor away from his conversation with Loki served two purposes: to get him angry so he'd want to fight (he had to know, had to figure out what happened when they clashed, had to know what he could do) and to show that he wasn't playing around. Thor stood up, a picture of rage, and Tony baited him even further until the first metaphorical punch was thrown and the brawl begun. Throughout their fight, Thor used the physical force of Mjolnir and it wasn't enough for Tony. He fired back, them blasting each other through the forest, and Tony's adrenaline was pumping so hard and fast through his veins that he could practically feel his muscles expand, his body push itself into a different state-

And then Thor blasted him with lightning.

It felt like someone had touched every nerve ending in his body at once, his core heating and full to bursting, the bands at his ankles searing his skin with the effort of holding back the rush of electrical power that flowed through him, through his body and into his very cells. It was too much to hold, way too much, and the bands couldn't redirect it fast enough. Tony couldn't hold it in, his body couldn't handle the stress, and he let it stream out with a victorious cry that he was certain JARVIS filtered out of the external speaker system. When he'd let enough out that he could control himself again, the bands feeling like molten lead against his skin before he cut off the signal the pain receptors were sending him, a blinking light flashed in the corner of his vision.

“Power to four-hundred percent capacity.”

“How about that.”
The fight went on until Rogers came and pulled them apart, him and Thor managing to level the
damn forest within seconds and apparently settling the fight, grabbing Loki, and heading back to the
jet to get back to Fury's Floating Castle. Tony's body was still thrumming with electricity and he fed
it into the suit, choosing to fly to the Helicarrier so he could drain it out before he had to step out of
the suit and the others saw his hair sticking up with electricity and he ended up charging every metal
surface he touched. The burns on his ankles were healed without a serious thought and he was in tip-
top shape, feeling energized and awake despite the fact that he'd not slept in almost 38 hours. He still
got there before the jet, so he hacked into the security footage to find that a storage room for his suit
had been built. Needless to say, it creeped him out, but he really had no other choice.

Storing the suit in the room and happy that it at least had some semblance of protection, he snuck his
way in to the security for this room, revoking card access to everyone and making it so that the only
one who could enter this room without tripping his alarm was himself. It was easy, child's play. He
spent the extra time before the others arrived to call Charles, exiting the room and then looping the
security feed of an empty room on the surveillance cameras. Walking back in and confident no one
would find him, he dialed Charles' office number. He, of course, picked up on the first ring.

“Charles Xavier.”

“Hey, Charles, you are never going to guess what just happened, oh my god, so I-”

“Tony?” Charles interrupted, sounding amused but slightly concerned. “Tony, you have to slow
down, I can't understand you.” Tony's hands were shaking with the excess energy and he wanted to
go at a punching bag for four hours or do katas over and over until he fell over, bouncing from foot
to foot.

“I can't, Thor juiced me up when he pumped me full of lightning, I can't calm down, I tried-”

“He did what? Wait, who is this?” Tony zipped through an explanation of what had happened; when
S.H.I.E.L.D had come to him, going through the research (he told Charles about Bruce for a bit
longer than he talked about the others, but he couldn't help himself, he was excited), capturing Loki,
and fighting Thor. He told him how he tried draining it out through the suit and how he'd thought it
worked at least a bit, but probably not enough, and what if he shocked someone, Charles? What
then? “Tony, calm down. You need to relax. Is there a way you can send some energy through the
ship?” He made a noise of assent and looked around. Suddenly, the floor rocked beneath his feet and
Tony quickly realized they were taking off. Without really thinking about it, Tony pushed his hands
to the nearest fuse box and used it as a conduit to throw energy into, sending it throughout the entire
ship. As his energy flooded through the Helicarrier, he could see the blueprints of it superimposed
over his normal vision, the bright blue flood of electrical energy flying from his body to all ends of
the ship, linking him with it as he let out the surplus. Once he felt more comfortable (he was still a bit
jazzed up, still a little shaky and wide awake) he sighed into the receiver, suddenly remembering Charles was there.

But when he looked back at the phone he groaned. Great, he'd accidentally fried the life out of his phone. Whoops. Well, it was about time he went and joined the others. Stepping out of the room and quickly locating the direction of the bridge, he set off, bumping into Coulson on the way.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

It was very safe to assume that no one in S.H.I.E.L.D liked him, which was just as well given he didn't much like them either. Agent Romanov still seemed amused with him when he walked in babbling at Coulson, making an ass out of himself to make people frustrated and want to pay less attention to him. He lightly slapped Thor's arm and had to hide a shudder that rocked through him at touching his bare skin, a shock of energy running into his hand that Thor seemed not to notice. He made a few terrible jokes, and when Hill rolled her eyes and turned away, he slipped a bug onto the monitor. Tony wasn't stupid: if he was going to pull secrets out of S.H.I.E.L.D's ass, he need physical proof he could show off and a way to say that he'd done it without being mysterious or vague. People looked into it if he did that.

When he turned around and started spouting science, he jerked back when someone babbled at him right back. He met the eyes of a man in a purple shirt and glasses, curly hair absolutely everywhere and a nervous look on his face, like he wasn't sure he'd be considered or listened to. Tony immediately zeroed in on him, recognizing the intelligence and the confidence in his work, if not his standing with the group he was in front of. This was Bruce Banner, he just knew it. A man that understood what it was like to be seen as less than human, as a means to an end, one that understood that everything was not as everyone wanted to believe it was. The blue data that fluttered nearly constantly around Tony and invisible to everyone but him reached out, curling around Bruce's glasses and the mess of his hair, measuring and calculating and seeming at home. The numbers wrapped around Bruce's fingers and gesturing hands, the variables lit on his shoulders and glowed brightly, and Tony was entranced by the light show and the way his data seemed to meld to Bruce so easily. It only seemed...

“natural.”

“It's good to meet you, Dr. Banner. Your work on anti-electron collisions is unparalleled. And I'm a huge fan of the way you lose control and turn into an enormous green rage monster.” And fuck his life, that is not what he wanted to come out of his mouth, goddammit.

“Thanks,” Bruce says. Alright, it's salvageable. He can do this. Besides, he gets to go with Bruce to the lab and that seems like an excellent time to start laying out the groundwork to get him to stick around and talk science with him after this is all over.

If he blushes after Bruce turns around to follow Natasha to the lab, well, no one has to know that he
thinks the way Bruce's curls bounce as he walks is cute. He shoves the fluctuation curve into his pocket along with his hands and follows.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

They work out a tracking algorithm easily and lapse into silence after about an hour of talking science at each other. Tony discovers that Bruce is adorable, incredibly intelligent, and shy about what he calls 'the Other Guy.' Tony is understanding; he doesn't exactly like to be open about his mutation. But he needs to communicate to Bruce that what he is isn't a bad thing, isn't a monster. He needs him to know that he's not a freak, because Tony knows what that's like, to be thought a freak and a monster and not even human so much that you start to believe it yourself. He knows, and he knows that Bruce needs someone to tell him it's not true. So he finds the closest thing that connects them that he can tell Bruce, so that he might not feel so alone.

“You know, I've got a cluster of shrapnel trying every second to claw it's way into my heart,” he says suddenly, tapping on the reactor. “This stops it. This little circle of light—" took so long for it to stop killing me, stop fighting me and stop hurting and tearing me apart “It's part of me now, not just armor. It's a...terrible privilege.” Bruce scoffs and taps at the screen in front of him, clearly trying to avoid the conversation.

“But you can control it,” he mumbles. Tony hears him perfectly.

“Because I learned how.” He's not talking about the reactor anymore.

“It's different.” It really isn't, Bruce. He slides the data on the screen to dormant mode, looking at Bruce through the glass. He tries to look him in the eye, communicate that which he can't say, and he accidentally makes the data on screen flicker for a moment. Bruce doesn't seem to notice.

“Hey, I've read all about your accident. That much gamma exposure should have killed you.”

“So you're saying that the Hulk, the Other Guy...saved my life? That's nice. It's a nice sentiment. Save it for what?” So you could see that you aren't a freak. So you could accept this part of yourself, could grow from it, could see who you really are and look yourself in the face and say 'I am okay. I am good enough.'

“I guess we'll find out.”
“You might not like that.”

“You just might.”

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Rogers comes barging in when Tony is testing his control, poking small holes where he knows Bruce's control should be the strongest (shocking probe, Bruce should be used to working with them, he is a scientist) just like Charles did when he was teaching Tony how to tighten his control. He snarls at Tony, snapping at him and Tony's lip curls at the way Bruce seeps back into himself. He'd gotten the man to see that he wasn't nervous around him, and as Bruce began to understand (though he thought Tony had a death wish, that much was clear) he relaxed marginally. The Captain just destroyed that work. They get into an argument about S.H.I.E.L.D which Tony thinks is ridiculous because he obviously has way more information than Rogers on that front. He tells him how he's been hacking into the servers since he hit the bridge and his jaw drops in what appears to be offended shock.

“How can you not trust Fury?” Tony gapes at him, surprised at the gall. He's got to be kidding. He wants to ask how Steve can, given that he only recently woke up in this time in a room that S.H.I.E.L.D set up to deceive him on purpose, given that Steve only knows what he's been told, that he hasn't bothered to question. Instead, he stays on safe territory because he wants Rogers to leave before he ends up decking the guy.

“He's a spy, he's the spy. His secrets have secrets.” They argue for a bit longer, Bruce takes his side and they ponder what is sounding more and more like a conspiracy theory, Rogers bites out for them to 'find the cube' and storms out like a child. Tony eats a mouthful of blueberries and pretends not to be furious. It doesn't work.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

They discover Loki's plan is to unleash the Hulk while everyone is on the Helicarrier. Fury storms in and demands answers for his hack, Rogers comes in toting a huge weapon and accusing Fury of making WMDs with the Tesseract, and no one notices as Tony freezes momentarily before showing Phase 2 weapon designs on the screen. This was what had made him so uncomfortable.

Using unlimited energy sources to make weapons of incredible power sounds like what his father tried to do. And if this Phase has been going on for so long, what if Howard had plans for Tony to be a part of it? What if making him a weapon to master all weapons had worked? Tony shivers and tries to refocus, only to find everyone suddenly in the lab and arguing, his own anger reaching peak
levels. Fury is amassing weapons of mass destruction, or trying to, and Tony's blood simmers. It reaches a boiling point when Steve assures everyone that if he still made weapons, he'd be neck deep in this.

“What was that?” He says, growling. His anger is achingly cold over the heat of the room, voice quite with utter fury. The room seems to freeze as Tony stalks up to Rogers, refusing to touch him because he knows if he does he's going to send a hazardous amount of electricity through his body. “You want to say that one more time? You want to tell everyone how you know so much about a man you've met a few hours ago, how you've assessed my character and know me so well that you could predict my actions?”

“I don't need to know you, I read your file, Stark,” he spits back, voice venomous. Tony's voice is smooth as silk and cold as ice.

“Oh, and you trust the report of the agency you just discovered was making weapons of mass destruction? You want to tell me how much you trust them, want to question how I can trust Fury? This is why, Rogers, because they've been wrong before and they'll be wrong again.” By the end of his statement, he's glaring at Fury and he can't control himself, can feel his blood sparking in his veins.

“You think you're top dog because you've got money and power, Stark, because you're smart? I know guys with none of that worth ten of you. I've seen the footage. The only thing you really fight for is yourself. You're not the guy to make the sacrifice play, to lay down on a wire and let the other guy crawl over you.” Tony's fighting at this point, fighting not to get sucked into that dark place in his mind where Howard is waiting for him, where Obie is waiting to dance on his corpse, where he's nothing but a freak. He uses his rage to focus himself, to keep himself in the moment, thinking of how he'd sacrificed everything, much more than Captain America ever had because he knew that he'd have to live through it all over again the next day. He couldn't pull a Rogers, couldn't dive his plane into the ocean and die. That's what sacrifice was: taking that pain, over and over, knowing that you'll just have to do it again because no one is coming for you, no one is going to save you.

“I'd just cut the wire,” he snaps instead, and bristles at the way he laughs in his face. Doesn't he know that there's no point in lying down on it if no one is coming after you?

“Always a way out...You know, you may not be a threat, but you better stop pretending to be a hero.” It's Tony's turn to laugh, because Rogers doesn't know what the hell a hero is. He doesn't. He knows how to be a damn martyr, and that was easy. He doesn't know what it means to be a hero, what it means to let yourself ache every fucking second of every fucking day because of something you didn't choose, something you didn't get to volunteer for.

“A hero? Like you? You're a lab rat, Rogers. Everything special about you came out of a bottle.”
“Put on the suit. Let's go a few rounds.” He doesn't want to put on the suit, he wants to strangle Rogers with his bare hands, shock him to his skeleton and show him how it felt to be the freak that everyone hated because it was how you were born, instead of being heralded as a hero because you got juiced up and then took a fucking swim. The heat in the room escalates to blistering levels, people yelling and screaming, when suddenly everyone is silent because Bruce is holding the scepter and then he's putting it down because they've found the Tesseract but Tony doesn't need to look at the screen because he can feel it in his bones, it's here-

And then the world explodes around them.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

He feels one engine go down, watches as the blue string connecting him to it is severed, and he grabs the suit at record speed with Rogers right on his heels, sprinting out to Engine Three while he tries to talk Rogers through the relays and everything but he doesn't understand and Tony just reaches out and gets the information himself. But he can't hit the emergency manual override switch himself, so he needs to rely on Captain Fucking America to save his sorry ass before he becomes red and gold puree.

Cutting the debris out of the propeller takes time he doesn't have but he does it anyway, and suddenly the alerts and the data is telling him Bruce is attacking a fucking jet as the Hulk and he wants to scream because why did they shoot at Hulk and Bruce is falling and so are they because Tony isn't moving fast enough. So he starts pushing, getting up to speed and going faster and faster to compensate for the loss of altitude and suddenly the propeller is pushing him and he knew he couldn't trust Rogers-

He's free, and someone is about to take a killshot at the Captain. He tackles them fifty feet back before he can think, and he lets his head rest against the floor, vaguely registering the uncomfortable feeling of being too close to the Tesseract lessening as a jet flies away carrying Loki and his mind-controlled monkeys.

And then Fury says Agent Coulson is down.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

He doesn't listen to Fury's bullshit for very long, not able to stand him talking about the man he was really beginning to like, to maybe trust, even though he was S.H.I.E.L.D. Rogers finds him in the
room that used to hold the glass cage where they lost Thor, where the bloodstain on the wall indicates that they lost Coulson.

“He was an idiot,” he says, because if he says anything else, he's going to lose it. This day has already been hell on his control and he can't take much more.

“He was doing his job,” Rogers replies, and Tony's convinced it's because he loves being controversial.

“For taking Loki alone, he was out of his league.”

“Is this the first time you've lost a soldier?” Tony sees red.

“WE ARE NOT SOLDIERS!” Tony's seen soldiers, he's seen their bodies spattered against a bombed out Humvee, he's laid in their lifeblood as he watched a bomb explode in front of his face, he saw them slaughtered in droves because the weapons he made to protect them weren't good enough and because they weren't in the right hands, and he didn't mean for it to happen but there were so many dead, and it was all his fault-

He tried to shake himself out of it, bring himself back to the present, back to jackass Rogers and the offended look on his face. “I am not marching to Fury's fife.”

“Neither am I. He's got the same blood on his hands as Loki.” You have no idea. “Right now we've got to put that aside and get this done.” He wants to scoff at Rogers, wants to just punch something until his hands bleed, but he remembers Charles telling him something not that long ago. You're a good person because you fight the bad people even when it hurts.

That's about the time he realizes where Loki's headed to next.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

He can't break the energy barrier, he just can't, because it physically aches him to be this near the Tesseract, it pulls at him in ways that he's never felt before, and he doesn't have time to sit and pick apart the barrier with his mutation even if Selvig is out cold. He doesn't have that in him. So instead he preps the Mark VII and prays to whoever's listening that it works, dear god, because he'll probably die if it doesn't. He meets Loki inside and baits him, banter with him for time and the god
doesn't seem to catch on, thank fuck. He needs to distract him until the cavalry gets here, and he's tracking the jet, needs just a few more minutes.

“Let's do a head count here: your brother, the demi-god; a super soldier; a man with breath-taking anger management issues; a couple of master assassins, and you, big fella, you've managed to piss off every single one of them.” He doesn't mention himself; he's not an Avenger, he's a consultant. Loki doesn't seem to see this as much of an issue, and their banter continues, Tony paying more attention to the location of the jet than where Loki is moving, and suddenly he's right up in his face.

“How will your friends have time for me, when they're so busy fighting you?” The scepter touches his chest, and it hits the reactor, transfers energy to the core of him, to the center of him. But instead of infecting him, instead of taking over his mind, the energy curls inside him, losing its command and instead infusing with Tony's body, his own energy, making his eyes widen at the sudden power surge. Loki does it again with the same result, and then promptly tosses Tony out the window.

JARVIS sent the suit, he knows he did, can feel the bracelets heavy against his wrists, where he's not used to wearing bands. But it's not coming fast enough, there must be a problem with the locator code, he knew that part wasn't finished, so he reaches out and grabs it, locking the energy signature of the suit onto his own with tendrils of blue energy only he can see, wrapping it around himself like a glove and zipping up at the last second, relief thundering through his veins. He looks up to see that the portal has opened, that foul-looking creatures are swarming into Earth's plane, and Tony rejoices internally once he picks up the signature of the jet, close enough to count as here.

Alright. Time to get down to it.

Where was Bruce?

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The fighting is seemingly endless. He's scanning the entirety of New York with his mutation and fighting with his conscious mind, movements almost mechanic as he goes through motions his body is accustomed to, the combined use of his mutation to locate trapped civilians through traffic cams and satellite signals and his physical exertion ups his speed and strength, his vision and even his lung capacity, his reaction time and his thought processes. Thinking at lightning speed, he can feel himself zip along at speeds that he shouldn't be able to reach at this level of power, and distantly makes a note to talk to Charles about this, because once is chance, twice is coincidence, but three times is a pattern.

He hears that Bruce has come back and watches as Big Green comes out to play, smashing a giant
whale-ship thing in one hit. He grins, pleased that Bruce has rejoined them, and focuses his mind on teaming up with the Avengers, with following Cap's plan because he may not be a good social guy but he is the Man with a Plan and he has good military strategy, even Tony can admit that. They all scatter, Tony keeping an eye on the team and destroying as many aliens as he can in his wake, up until the point he hears Fury curse the launching of a bird, and telling him that there's a nuke coming straight for Manhattan.

“I got a nuke coming in. It's going to blow in less than a minute, and I know just where to put it.”

“Stark, you know that's a one way trip?” Tony ignores him and focuses, grabbing the nuke carefully. He can't risk frying it this close to the city, he has to put it somewhere, and if he can get far enough into the portal he can blow up the rest of those things before they can get close, he can stop the whole thing, he can finally prevent people from dying, and he knows he has to.

He turns up, and JARVIS asks if he wants to make a call. Tony says no: no one deserves to hear this. No one should have to have a voicemail of him dying. He narrows his mind on the task ahead, tries desperately not to think of Charles and everything the man had done for him. Crossing the event horizon is like skinny dipping in the Arctic Circle in the middle of the winter, and there's no air for him to breathe. The nuke slips from his hands and shoots up, destroying a massive ship that could have leveled the city itself, exploding outward and sending Tony flying back. He realizes that the explosion could rocket through the portal itself, sending radiation over the city and damming them anyway, and Tony Stark did not just sacrifice himself in the middle of space for New York to die of radiation poisoning, so he reaches out and adds his own power to the shutting of the portal, trying to suck the energy from it, to make it stop, and suddenly his body is flooded with it, the portal seemingly blinking out of his vision and the energy shooting into him-

Just as he falls through the other side, back into the New York sky, just as his sight goes black.

As he falls, unconscious, the Other Guy sees him, remembers the man who told him he wasn't a monster, that Hulk saved Banner's life, and he leaps up to catch him, to protect the Tin Man. He sets him down and the team that can reach him gathers around, Thor tossing off the face plate. Tony is out.

But through his blood, through his body, that energy from the portal he tried to shove closed and the energy from Loki's scepter is thrumming, thundering through him, directly to his heart, and it gathers there, shocking and shorting, electrical pulses restarting his heart, trying to pump it even as Tony's life fades...

The Hulk roars, and Tony shocks awake with a shout as his chest shudders, electrical energy pulling him back online and restoring the reactor energy, that powerful energy that had entered his body flooding the reactor and encouraging it to power back on, run normally until it faded, leaving a fully
functional reactor in its wake. Tony tries to shake it off with his usual banter, closing his eyes and relaxing for the first time in almost two days.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The very first time Tony sees the full, unaffected Tesseract is when it's in the glass transporter Thor and Loki are using to get home, and he's glad. Because this world does not need that sort of power, and the farther away it is from Earth, the better off they are. He shakes hands with Rogers after the two gods disappear, but he doesn't smile. He could take orders from the man if needed, if in an emergency situation, but the hate rolling in his gut remembered and was fueled by the words the man hadn't taken back. Tony wasn't thrilled with the man, and he doubted he'd ever be unless something drastic happened.

However, a warm feeling settles in his chest when Bruce hops into his car with little needed convincing, smiling at Tony as they drove off, back to the Tower where Tony would offer Bruce a room for a while since S.H.I.E.L.D had agreed to keep the Army off his back and protect him if necessary. It didn't comfort Tony any, but he had his own methods to protect Bruce, and they were ready to be set in full force should it become needed.

When Bruce accepts his offer of a room with a shy smile seven hours later, a blue glow suffuses Tony's vision, and he smiles back genuinely, seemingly surprising Bruce. It only makes Tony happier.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

When Tony recounts everything that happened to Charles a few days later on the phone, with the man fretting over him and mother-henning him over the line, Charles admits that he will need to look deeper before he could find any information that could possibly help him with this new facet of mutation. He theorizes that because Tony's mutation has so many applications, the more he uses it, the more of those avenues become available to him. He also suggests that Tony try not to pull any questionable energy into his body again and Tony laughs, agreeing entirely.

He talks about Bruce a bit more, because he likes hanging out with Bruce, likes talking science with Bruce, and likes Bruce in general. Charles tries to subtly imply that he *likes* Bruce but Tony sputters and denies it, very nearly hanging up on him. But even hours later, when he's getting ready for bed, he's thinking about it, considering the possibility. He doesn't exactly know Bruce yet, but Christ, would he like to. The idea makes him flush very slightly, and when he lays down to go to sleep, he thinks of balancing biochemical equations instead of outfitting a motor, the letters and subscripts looking beautiful in stunning, radiant blue.
It's been almost a month since what the press has dubbed The Battle of New York, and Tony couldn't remember even having felt this settled. The Tower was stable, the arc reactor powering it running at optimum efficiency. Clean up of the city had gone over well and quickly at that, the Avengers were public heroes, and everyone Tony cared for was safe and happy. Shortly after the battle, Tony had extended offers to all of the members of the team to stay at the Tower, even Steve, because Tony could be a rational adult, and upon their acceptance had renamed it Avengers Tower. The renovation was just now completed and that meant that soon, they'd all be moving in. Well, everyone except Bruce, who'd been here since the day he arrived in New York.

The others had the opportunity to stay in S.H.I.E.L.D barracks, but that unnerved both Bruce and Tony and the billionaire had quickly offered an undamaged guest room to the scientist. Under the smooth (if he says so himself) pretense of keeping him close to the labs and the science, Tony'd gotten the man to stay at the Tower while the others squished into S.H.I.E.L.D lodging. And what a great month it had been, indeed. Every morning, he met Bruce in the communal kitchen for coffee and/or tea, talking about their scientific history at first, and when they became closer, other aspects of their pasts. They usually continued their conversation down to their respective labs, before parting for separate work. It never lasted long, because Tony was always worming his way into Bruce's lab to provide ideas and interesting stimulus, and Bruce did the same to remind Tony to eat and speculate with him. By the end of the day, whatever ungodly hour they were finished or if one of them had to go, they always stopped by to let the other know and give a general time of return. Tony because he wanted Bruce to know that he'd be coming back, and Bruce to promise he wouldn't dash off.

Over the course of their steadily growing friendship, Tony had gotten a peak at the real Bruce Banner. The man was charming in a quiet way; he was snarky and sassy and an absolute troll, not to mention brilliant. Tony looked forward to talking to him each and every time, because the man always gave him something to think about. His curly brown hair was always a mess and it made Tony grin, shirts always with one sleeve up and one down, like he got distracted halfway through, glasses skewed and eyes squinted at whatever he was observing. When he thought something was particularly mind boggling, his nose would scrunch up and Tony's heart fluttered every time at the movement. Bruce told him stories of his college adventures, little anecdotes of people Tony didn't know but became attached to because they mattered to Bruce. He learned that Bruce hated grape jelly but practically had a love affair with raspberry, had to have shirts with even numbers of buttons, and refused to drink soda. Over time, Bruce began to learn about him, too.

Bruce learned that Tony didn't drink. The man had accidentally taken a sip of a glass Tony had set down, one he recognized held the same fluid as the decanters only after he'd held it to his lips, and tasted only light tea. Confused, he asked Tony about it, and the man murmured something about 'not partaking in family traditions' and left it at that. They'd quickly realized that bringing up childhoods between the two of them wasn't a good idea for either side. He also discovered that he was one of the few that Tony allow to hand things to him, that Tony was repulsed by the color yellow, and that every time he saw the man, the screens around him in the lab seemed to glow brighter. But more than
all of that, Bruce slowly began to realize that Tony meant it when he said that he didn't see the man as a monster.

“Tony?” He'd asked, trying to sound nonchalant while the two of them were eating breakfast one morning. Tony set the tablet he'd been fiddling with down and looked to Bruce, spooning some cereal into his mouth as he made an encouraging sound. “What if the others change their mind? What if they don't want to live here because...the Other Guy's here, too?” Tony swallowed and let the spoon fall back into the bowl, a deadly serious look on his face.

“Well, if that's the case, they wouldn't be invited to stay here anyway. That offer would be rescinded so fast their heads would spin, Brucie,” Tony said, his eyes locking with the scientist's. “I wouldn't let them live here if they tried to pull that on you. They could rot in S.H.I.E.L.D barracks for all I'd care.”

“Tony!”

“What? It's true. As much as you think you might be, you are not a monster. Hulk isn't a monster, either. The two of you, you're not anything repulsive or something to be ashamed of. And if people think that, then pardon my French, but they're fucking stupid. A hell of a lot has been done to you, been taken from you, and the fact that you've survived it all is amazing. Surviving that hell doesn't make you a monster, it doesn't make you a demon. It makes you strong, and there's not a damn thing wrong with that. It's okay, Bruce, it's all okay. I wouldn't have met you if it was any other way,” he said, letting his hand brush together with Bruce's. Then he promptly deposited his bowl in the sink and headed down to his lab, letting his fingers smooth through his hair before he disappeared. Bruce pulled his hand close to his chest and let a small smile overtake his face, noting absently that Hulk seemed to be purring.

As for Tony, spending time with Bruce was so wonderful, he almost couldn't believe it wasn't a dream. The data flowed around them both with the ease Tony had only seen around Jarvis, his mother, and Charles. The numbers and equations curled over pale skin like they belonged there, and the sight of the man in a wash of blue was so arresting, something warm bloomed in his chest every time he saw it. He couldn't help himself from calculating the angle of his smile, the warmth of his skin, the tension in his face. Tony couldn't stop himself from scribbling all over the mental file he had on the man, adding nicknames to show his endearment and listing him happily as an Ally, before switching it to Best Friend without a second thought. At the weirdest times, he'd be distracted from a conversation with Bruce by an article popping up in the corner of his vision, about asking someone out on a date, how to tell if someone is interested in you, or even how to impress a loved one. It made him flustered the first few times, before he really started considering what this could mean. His mutation was a part of him, and part of him was telling him that he definitely liked Bruce enough, and knew enough about the man, to take the next step. But a larger part of him feared the rejection he was certain would come, the breaking of their friendship into small bits. Tony didn't know if he could come to lose Bruce, if he could handle it. He was already so attached...
Lying down in bed at near one in the morning, Tony sighed heavily, determinedly not thinking about the way Bruce's hair had looked even more wild than normal today, from the man running his hands through it in excitement at the conclusion of an important experiment. Instead, he closed his eyes and tried to find sleep. But apparently it was not to be, because as soon as he closed his eyelids, he saw a flash of blue before a happily bouncing orb appeared, zooming around his darkened vision. He let out another sigh and rolled his closed eyes. It wasn't very often that this happened, but sometimes the little orb that had first appeared to him at age six would reappear and capture his attention. As he'd grown, it'd gotten seemingly more advanced as he did. The orb could and would chirp and beep at him, would draw on the data he'd saved or pull something out of thin air, would try and make Tony see something at least a part of him thought was significant. When he'd been seventeen, the orb had helped him work through a major block in his creative process, and at twenty-seven, had come to him when he was trapped within nightmares and panic attacks and guided him back to himself. Tony valued the thing, he did, but he already knew what this conversation would be about. The orb was a part of him, after all.

The orb zipped around his field of vision, coming to a stop when it's motion blur had spelled out Bruce's name. Tony mentally nodded, sending his understanding toward the orb, which vibrated in place excitedly. Immediately the orb pulled up article after article, ones Tony had seen before, and overlaid them with snapshots of memories he had of the two of them. He couldn't stop himself from grinning, which the orb certainly noticed. It made a high-pitched beeping that Tony felt was meant to sound supportive and pleased. Tony sighed, his brief amusement and joy fading quickly. *I can't, he thought to it. I won't. What would happen if he rejected me entirely and didn't want to be around me anymore? I can't fail in this relationship like I have others. I just can't.*

"With all due respect, sir, nothing worth having has ever come easily," JARVIS whispered into his mind. Tony acknowledged his point, even though he didn't like it. Having JARVIS being able to speak with him like this was useful usually, and it was incredibly nice to be able to communicate silently with him, but the AI always had a way of making him think about things he'd been too wary to consider. "And the two of you are remarkably similar people, not that Dr. Banner is aware of just how much this is so."

*Is that your approval, J?* The AI made a sound that was close to an amused chuckle.

"Quite, sir."

Well, I'll consider it, okay? I'll seriously think about it. We'll have to see how this all plays out. Now can I please get some sleep? JARVIS retreated from his mindscape and the orb flashed once before seeping back into his consciousness. And if his muscles were relaxed by the wash of blue light and he drifted easily into sleep, well, he wasn't going to complain.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*
Moving the other Avengers in was surprisingly simple and rewarding. The end result of the renovations left each Avenger with their own personal floor that Tony tailored to their specific needs, along with a communal floor that everyone had access to containing a large kitchen, dining room table, and living room. Below those were the workout floors, equipped with a gym, a training room for various purposes, and a pool. He told himself that the reason he was doing this was because he didn't do anything half-assed, and that was it, but a part of him did recognize his deeply seated need to impress and prove himself valuable. Tony personally oversaw each member moving in and helped with the tour, having them arrive at different times so he'd have the chance. The good Captain was the first, if only because Tony wanted to get it over with.

Steve's floor was done in tasteful shades of bright yellow and white, managing to look cheerful without looking overtly feminine. He'd figured he should go as far from arctic colors as possible. There was a small sitting room with an entertainment set and a radio that was surrounded with a soft couch and comfortable armchair, a working and stocked kitchen, a master bed and bath that was to die for, and a library full of books recognized as popular for each year since he'd been under. Upon showing the room to Steve, the man had turned to Tony with bright eyes.

“Tony, I don't think I was very nice back on the Helicarrier. I...said quite a bit I shouldn't have. Things that I've learned were wrong, watching your actions and seeing the person you are instead of what everyone told me you were. I misjudged, and I'm sorry about that. D'ya think we could maybe start over?” Tony, his mouth gaping, hadn’t expected the statement whatsoever. No one had ever apologized to Tony. Ever. A wound that had been torn when he was a teenager and been festering since that day on the Helicarrier begun to slowly heal and he'd taken a deep breath before sticking out his hand.

“Hey, I'm Tony Stark. And you are?” Steve's eyes looked suspiciously wet as he took the offered hand and shook it firmly.

“Steve Rogers. Nice to finally meet you.”

Natasha and Clint were next, one right after the other. Natasha's room was done in black and white, mostly because he didn't want to be presumptuous about colors. The woman had gotten into his good graces when he'd discovered that she'd pushed for his acceptance on the team, and had been rapidly making her way to Ally territory when she had his back and accepted his help in the Battle of New York. Tony had begun to think that maybe she could be trusted. He'd given her a large bathroom complete with a spa tub and walk-in shower to match the master bedroom that had a simple look that was relaxing and not complex.
Clint had a smaller bathroom but a bigger bedroom, one with a loft. He'd done some digging and found that Clint generally preferred higher places because it gave him the advantage with his weapon of choice. He wanted everyone to feel comfortable, so he'd worked in the loft with ladder access and a nice, wide bed. Clint had a similar color scheme to Natasha, but on a whim Tony had thrown in deep purple accents for the walls and pillows. Tony didn't know Clint too well, but the agent had proven himself to be trustworthy on the battlefield at least, and that meant a lot to him.

They both had a top of the line entertainment system that was much bigger than Steve's and included gaming consoles, situated in their large living rooms. They came with the standard kitchens and were both laid out with an agent in mind. Direct lines of sight to and through doorways, access panels to set their own levels of security, and even false walls to store weaponry spread out through the levels. When Natasha had been shown around, she had a well-hidden look of quiet awe on her face, mostly in her eyes. She'd thanked Tony sincerely as he left to show Clint around, and he caught sight of her pinching her arm as he left.

Clint fist pumped loudly and touched everything almost immediately, running his hands over everything and familiarizing himself with it all. Tony laughed as the archer buzzed around and became distracted every ten seconds, pleased that he was enjoying it. By the time he'd nearly explored every inch of the place, he'd stood toe to toe with Tony and beamed at him.

“Thanks, man, this is the best. I haven't lived anywhere but SHIELD barracks since I got recruited, and this is the first time I remember having a h- a place of my own. This is amazing!” The agent danced away again to go peek under couches and poke at the Xbox, and Tony took his leave. The thought that Clint had almost called this home made something warm bloom in his chest, and he smiled as he went to get Thor.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Thor was awesome. Tony could still remember the electrifying feeling of lightning pounding through his veins, and the god talked like someone straight out of Shakespeare's work. The floor Tony designed for him was tailored to the man's jubilant personality and his less than mortal nature. The walls were rich golds, furniture a deep brown. His bathroom was styled more like ancient bathhouses (that had required some research) and his bedroom was more bed than room, heavy blankets and soft comforters everywhere he looked. The living room had as little electronics Tony could possibly manage, holding only a television. The couches were plush and comfortable, making anyone who sat in them sink in almost immediately. The kitchen was simple as well, as Tony didn't want to confuse Thor with too much too soon.

Thor, upon being introduced to his “quarters,” as he called them, hugged Tony so fiercely he almost couldn't breathe. The brief static of electrical energy was there, but he hardly noticed it. Thor's hugs were, well, godly. He could feel the man's laughter rumbling in his chest.
“Thank you, friend Tony! Your work to make my quarters more like my home is honorable and noble, and I feel deeply privileged to enjoy the fruits of your work!” Thor then set him down and Tony made his way to the elevator, a bit lightheaded but smiling wildly. The warmth from the contact still floated through him.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“You ready, Bruce?” God, this was the one he was nervous about. Bruce's floor was the one he worked the hardest and the longest on, as it required much more from his end for the contractors than just a plan. He wanted Bruce to love it, to really feel at home and comfortable, wanted him to stay.

“I don't see why I need a floor, a room was just fine, I mean, what if I-”

“Bruce,” Tony interrupted, placing a hand on his shoulder and smiling. “Let's just go look. Okay?”

Bruce's floor was a work of art. The first thing anyone saw was the wide open floor plan that Tony himself favored. The living room went seamlessly into the kitchen, a door only separating the bedroom and bathroom from the rest. Said living room was populated with a simple couch and loveseat that wasn't too luxurious or elegant. The living room didn't have a television and instead was full of books and tomes on all sorts of subjects. The kitchen was functional but not over the top, full of the foods Tony knew Bruce liked. There was a teapot and cups and a full set of teas Tony'd handpicked to suit Bruce's tastes. The bedroom was soft and warm, muted light coming through the windows. The bathroom had a nice tub and came with heated floors, not that Bruce would be told. A warm color scheme of natural colors made the floor feel down to earth.

“Tony,” Bruce started, staring around him in wonder and astonishment. “This is-”

“Oh, I forgot to mention,” he cut in neatly. “The walls and floors are supported with what I believe to be a Hulk-resistant metal, at least to some degree. Windows are enforced as well. That way, if he comes out to play, we'll just have a bit of furniture to replace, but your floor will still be safe and structurally sound. It is home to you both, after all.” This time, Bruce didn't speak. He just turned to Tony with wide eyes and an open mouth before wrapping stunned arms around his torso and hugging him. Bruce was hugging him. Tony grinned and hugged back, squeezing just a little bit.

“This is-”

“Thank you, Tony, thank you. This is...this is everything. I never would have- You're the best.
Thank you. You gave me a home again.” Tony just hugged him tighter and buried his face in thick curls.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

He's honestly surprised it's been going this well. It's been almost four months since the Avengers have moved in together, four months since they started properly becoming a team. They ate together, trained together, and fought together. S.H.I.E.L.D sent them out on missions to tackle budding villains and international incidents that had grown out of hand. So far, they'd taken out a mad scientist's pet autonomous slime balls, a grad student's accidental experiment with slugs, drugged and enhanced antelopes, and a team of rouge investment bankers that had taken a chemical cocktail to improve their focus and intelligence that ended up turning them into giant apes with almost as much rage as the Hulk. Tony found that over time, he had less opportunities to get down into his private lab, but he also found that he needed it less. They stayed busy, his physical activity was never low, and the data that surrounded him didn't seem to cower in fear around them, instead choosing to float by and between the members of the team unseen. In their down time, they hung around the Tower and established a daily routine that everyone seemed to settle into gratefully.

In the mornings, everyone would try and gather in the communal kitchen for sleepy breakfasts. Steve, less chipper than one would picture an American icon to be in the morning, struggled to make toast while everyone else poured massive bowls of cereal and spooned it into their mouths with little coordination. Clint leaned against Natasha as he ate the marshmallows out of his Lucky Charms before the woman stared him down until he ate the cereal as well. The spy ate Wheaties (no joke, Tony had laughed himself nearly sick when he'd seen they were hers and not Steve's) with a straight face that seemed to exude morning grumpiness without ever changing her facial expression. Thor ate an entire box of Cookie Crisp every morning, and both Bruce and Tony ate bowls of Cheerios. Initially, Tony hadn't been big on breakfast and tended to sit with everyone with only a cup of coffee, but Bruce's puppy eyes had made him give in and he found that he functioned better with something in his stomach.

Sleepy breakfasts sometimes resulted in everyone gathering in the main living room to lounge and do various activities, but it tended to be quiet until around eleven. Steve sketched, Thor and Clint watched trashy television, Natasha read, Tony worked on his tablet, and Bruce, for a while, had been doing puzzles that came in the papers. But one day, he came in with a basket and sat himself down in his usual spot next to Tony. Tony, curious, peeked over and his eyes widened when he saw Bruce pull out yarn and knitting needles.

He was about halfway through a brown scarf that looked so soft Tony almost couldn't resist rubbing his face against it. With the ease of long practice, the man started working and after a while, everyone's attention was on him. Bruce looked up, and a light pink hue spread over his cheeks.

“What? It's calming,” he defended, but Tony's eyes were locked onto his still moving hands. He
calculated number of stitches and rate of speed and potential lengths and warmth ratios, the numbers and equations laying along the fabric. He wanted to touch the soft spread, feel stitches under his fingers, and he didn't know why. Something about the way Bruce did it so effortlessly, but Tony could tell it was full of great care. Bruce noticed his stare and held out the piece for him to hold, a smile gracing his features. Tony discovered it was just as soft as it looked and handed it back, looking sheepish. “You could watch, if you wanted,” the doctor said quietly, and Tony set aside his tablet to watch Bruce thread and pull and create a beautiful scarf out of a length of yarn.

By the time Bruce had finished, Tony had fallen asleep against his shoulder and the others were hiding smiles.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Tony wasn't the only one to fall asleep, though. The team had decided to instigate an official movie night after they had all found themselves together on Thursdays queuing up a movie anyway. Sometimes, one of them nodded off during a quiet scene, only to try and cover their return to consciousness unsuccessfully when an action scene woke them. They were all comfortable with each other now, used to fighting together and living together. Tony had been surprised to find himself so relaxed around them, given that two of them were official S.H.I.E.L.D agents and one of them was Captain America. But he’d learned that Clint and Natasha weren't S.H.I.E.L.D, that they weren't the ones he had to be mad at, and that Steve Rogers was a hero in his own right. He’d realized that forcing himself to dislike them, to find flaws or things to hate and be angry at was not only exhausting, it was pointless. Yes, it hurt that Captain America was an accepted hero while Tony and other mutants were practically reviled, but was that Steve's fault? No. Did Natasha and Clint have anything to do with what S.H.I.E.L.D had done to him? No. And what was he gaining from putting himself through that? They were their own people. Steve was a mother hen who pushed eating healthy and exercising as well as training and bonding, Natasha was quick-witted and showed affection with mugs of coffee and flicks on the ear, Clint shot Nerf darts at everyone at ungodly hours to “keep them on their toes” and told such bad jokes that they were actually funny. And those were people Tony genuinely liked.

Tony thought he'd done a hell of a lot of growing up in the past six months.

They'd had The Notebook on one night, mostly to see Thor's reaction, and that had been awesome. Thor and Clint both had burst into tears, Steve was sniffling, and only Natasha and Tony seemed unaffected. At the end of the movie, Tony had looked over to see Bruce's reaction only to find the man asleep, his head lolling on the back of the couch. A soft smile had spread over his face, one he didn't manage to wipe off before the others saw.

“You got this, Tony?” Clint asked, hiding a smirk of his own as he stood and stretched. Tony nodded and said his goodnights to the others as they left to head to their floors and get some rest. Clint and Natasha grinned at each other but didn't say anything as they left Bruce and Tony alone.
Tony reached out a hand to curl a lock of dark hair over Bruce's ear, brushing it out of his eyes gently.

“Bruce?” He called, shaking his shoulder a bit. Bleary eyes opened and eventually locked on Tony, Bruce's smile just a slight stretch of his lips. He mumbled something and curled into the couch again, eyes falling closed. “Bruce, you gotta go to bed.”

“Stayin' here, be fine,” he said through a yawn, but Tony shook his head.

“Nope. You're going to head up to your nice bed and go to sleep. Otherwise you'll wake up with a crick in your neck and I'll never hear the end of that.” Bruce groaned but shifted up, acknowledging Tony's point. Tony helped the doctor to his feet and to the elevator, supporting him against the wall as his head drooped and he fought sleep. When they finally managed to get to Bruce's floor and into his bedroom, Tony helped him into bed and went to leave before Bruce caught his wrist.

“Thanks,” he mumbled, before falling back into sleep. His fingers fell and brushed against Tony's, clutching his hand for a moment before going slack. Tony leaned forward and, on impulse, brushed his lips against Bruce's temple before jumping back in shock of his own actions and finding his way up to his own floor. He wanted to curse himself, but remembering the way Bruce's head tilted into it, he just couldn't bring himself to.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Charles and Tony still had their Friday calls at the very least. Usually, the call came in the evening when Tony was busy working down in the shop, or occasionally when he was down in his sublevel working out some stress in the private lab. Today wasn't one of those days. He was fiddling with a Rubix Cube Clint brought him in the living room, claiming it to be unsolvable. This wasn't something new, as the archer had witnessed his ability to solve them in six seconds or less (he couldn't help it, he automatically noticed patterns and calculated rotations and sequences with his mutation, and he couldn't exactly turn it off) and was determined to stump him. This particular time, he'd done it in exactly six after switching back the stickers he'd noticed Clint had removed and swapped.

“How do you do that?! Come on, there was no way you could notice I'd moved them!” He exclaimed, only to hear Natasha laugh from her position next to Steve on the couch. Hearing Natasha laugh had originally been an unusual experience, but now it happened every so often and every member of the team looked forward to hearing it. She'd begun to relax around them, one of the last to start doing so after seven months of living together, and it was wonderful and humbling to watch the assassin let herself become vulnerable around them.
“He looked at it and knew it couldn't be solved, and started looking for the stickers he knew you had to have moved in order to make it that way. Face it, Clint, you'll never beat him in a puzzle. Bruce is the only one with a chance,” she remarked, and Tony turned to the scientist in time to see him blush and murmur a denial, only to be interrupted by JARVIS.

“Sir,” the AI said. “You have a video call from Professor Xavier.” Tony jumped up with a grin and started heading out, even as Steve turned to ask Natasha why the overseer of the X-Men was calling Tony. The assassin simply shrugged.

“Tony! How are things?” Charles asked from the other end as Tony took the call in his room. Tony's grin only spread wider, enjoying the ability to see him as they talked. Charles was in his office, sitting up properly at his desk even as Tony sprawled across his bed like a teenager.

“Great. Really, really great. We haven't been called out in two weeks, so the break is appreciated, and Clint's sprain has finally healed fully. I finally managed to get Thor to understand that the dishwasher is not sentient, though I get the feeling that he was trolling me for a while. Steve refrained from using the word swell for a whole two days, which I think is a record- yep, beating his previous record of 35 hours and 14 minutes, and Natasha actually baked the other day, and let me tell you, her cupcakes are heavenly. I cheated, though, I knew she was gonna bake because she added extra flour and eggs to the grocery list seconds before it processed and I got the alert. Either way, I was surprised at how good they word, words can't describe-”

“Tony, Tony!” Charles laughed, waving at him. “Calm down! You're so excited, I almost can't see you through all that blue!” Blinking, Tony looked around him only to glance back sheepishly. Tony had subconsciously learned over the years that being alone with Charles meant he was safe to let go. Even on phone calls with the man when he was away from prying eyes made the data brighter and able to be seen. Sure, some might see it as a loss of his already tenuous control, but Tony saw it as feeling safe and protected, and free to be himself. Only now, on video chats, that meant Charles could see everything. The Avengers' schedule, Clint's medical process and the final halt of his pain processing as well as the full healing of the muscle sprain he had, several video clips of Thor looking confusedly at the dishwasher, Steve's record and running clock of his use of 'old time terms' (originally established because of a small bet, which Tony lost nearly every time), the record of the electronic grocery list they submitted every Wednesday at 2 pm. Everything swirled excitedly around him, begging his attention, and Charles laughed at his excitement.

“Sorry. Got a lot going on,” he said, scratching at the back of his neck. Charles just nodded, waiting for him to say more. When he didn't, unsure what the man wanted to hear, his smile softened.

“And how is Doctor Banner?” Tony picked at the bedspread with a smile on his face, looking to the
side as the data quieted from its manic state to something smoother, more focused and easy. Charles caught sight of a timetable, one he knew wasn’t Tony’s, as well as a brief file and a few pictures, including one of the man frowning at a jar of grape jelly.

“Good,” Tony replied simply, his movements on the blankets becoming numbers and variables, equations of breathing and heart rates. He was clearly distracted by the thought and it made Charles think rather humorously of lovestruck girls in the younger years at his school. Tony was so far gone over the man that it was almost laughable. His good mood wavered slightly at the saddening thought that Tony would likely never make the first move, his innate fear of rejection and revulsion holding him back. Clearing the thought from his mind, Charles straightened a bit and recaptured Tony’s attention.

“So you’re all doing well, then?” Live vital signs from each member of the team appeared around Tony, gathered instantaneously from both security feeds and his link with JARVIS’ health and safety monitoring sensors and programs. Eyes flicking over them to assure himself, he nodded, and their conversation dissolved into stories from the past week that each had to share.

Meanwhile, an entirely different conversation was taking place in the living room.

“I'm really glad we all live together,” Steve said suddenly, a few minutes after Tony had left. Everyone turned to him, sensing an important moment. Steve appeared momentarily flustered by the sudden attention, but went on. “I mean, we might've gotten close as a team if we only saw each other on missions, but it wouldn't be anything like this. Nothing so...comfortable.” Thor nodded from his spot next to Bruce, joined on the couch by Clint.

“I know what you mean, Steven. I feel as though we might have been Shield Brothers and Sister, but now, we are more. Something deeper. We owe our thanks to Tony for bringing us together with him in this wondrous Tower!” Everyone smiled at Thor, agreeing for their own reasons. Steve's cheeks pinked a bit.

“I really did misjudge him. To think of all I would've missed out on if I had just continued to listen to everyone else.”

“Tony is much different in person. I learned that when I was placed as his legal counsel,” Natasha added. “The media portrays him as this character who drinks and parties to excess and cares for no one, and I think he plays into it because ultimately, it protects him. But he's very different. He has his own way of showing he cares.”

“Such as teaching me the ways of Midgard with unending patience!”
“Or working to keep us relatively untouched by the press,” Clint chipped in.

“Giving us a home,” Bruce said quietly. Everyone took a moment at that, acknowledging the depth of truth in the statement. None of them, excepting Thor, had a home before Tony had given them one. Steve was displaced from time, Natasha and Clint shifted from barrack to barrack, and Bruce was running too fast to even remember the concept. “He keeps us safe, and gives us a home to come back to after each and every mission, after each rough day.”

“He's dedicated. I've never met someone with the kind of drive Tony has,” Clint said. “And at the end of the day, he doesn't care that he's housing some of the most volatile people on the planet. Tony sees us as a team, as people, he gives no thought to the rest, to what we might've done.” To Clint, this was one of the most treasured things. After he'd killed under Loki's influence, suffered at his hand, Tony had no problem welcoming him. Tony never even mentioned it, like it hadn't even occurred to him as something to be concerned about. More than anything, that had helped him settle here, especially after he'd lost Coulson.

“It seems unfair that the press do such untoward things to our Man of Iron!”

“Do you know that he doesn't even drink?” All eyes snapped to Bruce. “I accidentally drank from a glass he'd poured from one of the decanters on his floor, and it was tea. All the decanters and bottles on our floors and on the communal floors are alcohol, but the ones he drinks from are all tea or other liquids. He never touches alcohol.” It was silent for a moment while everyone took this in.

“I'm glad we have him on the team. I'm glad I finally began to see him for what he actually is,” Steve said, looking at the other members of his team.

“We aren't a team,” Bruce said, reminiscent of his words all that time ago on the Helicarrier. His smile was soft and serene. “Tony made us a family.”

And Tony, who had been standing by the entrance to the living room, pretended he wasn't tearing up as he slunk off to waste some time before returning like he'd heard nothing at all. The only thing that betrayed him was the way he sat closer, smiled wider, and let himself learn how to have a family all over again.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*
Christmas morning comes two months later like a freight train, with a warning that seems distant until it's upon them. Tony had been preparing for this day with much debate before he was finally satisfied. He spent a lot of time debating internally, with JARVIS, and eventually, ratting himself and his circling thoughts out to Charles. It took five weeks before Tony was satisfied and started work on his presents for the others.

Since they'd become a team, since S.H.I.E.L.D had taken him on as a consultant, even, he'd stayed true to his promise of not making any weapons. Sure, he built the Iron Man suit, but he knew exactly where all the weapons were going and none of them left his hands. The only contracts he took from S.H.I.E.L.D involved non-weaponized equipment, to their ire. He built body armor, bomb detectors, field sensors and safety equipment. For the Avengers, he'd upped the safety of their suits, improved communicators, and even developed new interfaces that were friendlier to Steve and Thor and others who were less technology versed. But he never built them weapons.

Here's the thing, though: Tony's brain didn't stop. S.H.I.E.L.D Tech was responsible for their weaponry, and when Tony noticed a malfunction with Natasha's Widow's Bite, he managed to limit himself to dropping a strongly worded email in their inbox. He was hard-pressed not to touch Clint's explosive arrows when they arrived from S.H.I.E.L.D in their shiny box, immediately processing fourteen different ways he could do better. Bruce didn't receive a thing from S.H.I.E.L.D Tech, and what if he was in a position where he couldn't let the Hulk out? How would he protect himself? Steve could so use an upgraded handgun for emergencies, and Thor badly needed a blade or something. Even suppressing himself from the forge in the corner of his shop with grand ideas of blades that could be charged with Mjolnir's mere presence alone (and thus compatible with his mutation, of course) was difficult. What if they fell into the wrong hands? What if they fell into S.H.I.E.L.D's hands?

But Tony had become so close with them that the protective instinct begun to seep into his very bones. Why should he let his teammates (his family) out into the field with less than the very best? Why should he let them be unprotected when Tony himself could give them what they needed to do their jobs? The ideas began to overwhelm him, until every time he walked into his private lab, each table popped up displaying his newest mental blueprint for Natasha's upgraded Bite, or a taser Bruce could carry that would take out a team of five full grown men. He found himself scratching at the bands around his ankles, plans and ideas trying to claw their way out of him and into the space around him, demanding to be seen and acknowledged and acted upon. Tony needed to protect them.

Charles had finally helped him work through it. After weeks of agonizing over it, of sleepless nights fighting with himself, Charles had summed it up in a single sentence.

“You are afraid that if you give them weapons and it comes down to it, they will lose their loyalty to you and side with S.H.I.E.L.D.”

And really, that was it. Tony had not lost sight of his desire for revenge against S.H.I.E.L.D, against
Fury. Against the man that honored Howard Stark and buried his mistakes, saw him as nothing but a conceited child. But what if, when Tony faced him head on, took him apart piece by piece, what if his team abandoned him? What if they sided with S.H.I.E.L.D, with Fury? Tony would have given them everything they needed to destroy him: his weapons, and his heart.

“But do you honestly think, Tony, that they would leave you? If they knew what had been done? I think if you stopped and thought about it as objectively as possible, you would see the truth. You would see where their loyalties lie.”

Tony had thought about it for days. He stared and calculated, conjectured and predicted, trying to separate himself from it as much as he could. And every day, he saw it. He saw it in the way Natasha brushed a hand across his back, in the way Steve snarked back at him with a grin, in the way Clint poked and prodded him into playing video games. He saw it in the way Thor slung an arm over his shoulder and regaled him with tales of his home. He saw it in the way Bruce smiled sleepily at him and leaned on him for support. They had chosen their sides, and they would not deviate.

They were on his side.

So it was that Tony anxiously sat in front of the tree with everyone else, his eyes straying to the brown paper covered packages with their names scrawled on them in his messy hand. So it was that he watched them each take his presents first and grinned at him, tearing them open. Tony's hands were shaking in his lap as Natasha unwrapped a new dual Bite that fit like a glove on both her hands and could be dialed up or down in power with a clench of her fists, as Clint whooped aloud as arrow heads with five different classifications slid out, as Steve blinked in surprise as a handgun with an extended magazine made to fit his bigger hands, as Thor handled a one-of-a-kind hand-forged knife with a laugh, as Bruce looked at him with wide eyes as he held a superpowered taser. And as their eyes all locked on him, one by one, he hunched in smaller and smaller until he felt like he could hide from them.

Which is why he wasn't expecting Clint to fly at him full speed and tackle him down with a hug, soon to be joined in a dogpile by the rest of the team. Everyone was babbling at the same time, so he couldn't hear what each person was saying, but the joy in their voices was so distinct that Tony almost cried with relief. Bruce had managed to wiggle his way directly into Tony's arms, and Tony held on tight as they all gathered in a warm pile.

By the time they finished opening presents that day, Tony came away with a 5x5 Rubiks Cube from Clint, a blanket made of the fur of a bligesnipe (Thor got one for everyone, he thought it was hilarious), a set of pens that turned into knives, torches, and screwdrivers from Natasha, a small book of colored sketches from Steve, and a bright blue scarf from Bruce that he refused to take off since he unwrapped it.
“How did you know?” He said to Bruce without thinking. The man smiled, fingers touching the scarf at Tony's neck.

“Your eyes light up every time you see the color in this intensity. It always manages to inspire you. And it felt right, to make it this color. I'm not sure why.” Tony hugged him fiercely, pulling him in and refusing to let go until he felt like he could look at Bruce without kissing him.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Two days after New Years, Coulson showed up in the living room looking as perfectly pressed as ever. Clint dropped to his knees and cried while Natasha dragged the Agent to the couch and curled up on his lap. Coulson, who seemed to be under the impression that Fury had informed them of his survival, turned red as Cap's shield in his anger. Tony pressed as close as everyone else around what they had all unanimously deemed their handler, and silently switched Coulson's allegiance from S.H.I.E.L.D to Avengers with deep relish. They spent the day curled up on the couch without parting or moving for anyone or anything.

A week later, Coulson was supporting new body armor, a handgun with improved range, and a mint condition collection of Captain America cards just waiting to be signed. It was without question that he now lived in the Tower, and renovations for a new floor had never gone so quickly.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

It was fair to say, then, that when JARVIS requested permission to display a video call from S.H.I.E.L.D HQ in the middle of March where the team was all gathered in the living room, they were a bit surprised and apprehensive. They hadn't received a call since early February, when they had to take out Doctor Doom because the Fantastic Four were off-planet. And even then, it had been the standard call to arms via comm alert, not a video call. They all sat straighter and closer to together as Tony nodded, and Fury appeared on the screen. Tony prepared to sneer at the man, possibly insult him, when he was interrupted by Fury's to-the-point attitude.

“You all need to prepare for an extended mission. I need you at Xavier's Mansion in four hours.”

Chapter End Notes

i'm so sorry this took so long ;~; i hope you enjoyed it! please comment if you have the time!
They were all there, all gathered together and staring at the screen. Bruce and Tony were both curled on the loveseat, Clint, Natasha, and Coulson bunched on the couch, and Steve and Thor on the floor where they’d been playing chess. No one spoke for a minute as they all tried to get their thoughts together. Finally, it was Coulson that broke the silence.

“Sir? What’s the nature of the mission?” They’d yet to have an extended mission, and that made them all a bit nervous. Not to mention that the team as a whole had been mistrustful and downright cold toward Fury as of late. This could be…problematic.

Tony’s mind was running rapidly. Why were they being sent to the X-Mansion? Was Xavier hurt? Were the kids hurt? Were the X-Men compromised? Probabilities and charts and maps bloomed in his vision, nearly suffocating him. Biting the inside of his cheek and clenching his fists, he started a bit at the feeling of a warm hand on his arm, looking up to see Bruce looking at him earnestly. He nodded slightly and Tony nodded back, both of them turning their attention back to the screen. No one said anything when Tony gripped Bruce’s hand.

“There is a group, they call themselves The Brotherhood of Mutants. A man called Erik Lehnsherr leads them, you might know him as Magneto. This Brotherhood holds the belief that all mutants are superior to all humans, that they are the next evolution of mankind, and that humans are nothing but a threat they must destroy. Obviously this is a dangerous ideal, one that the X-Men try to protect humankind from. But the Brotherhood is reaching out, they’re evolving. My sources tell me that they now believe that they need to recruit members, and they plan on doing that by proving to younger mutants that they are better than humans, that humans are but a tool they can play with and easily destroy.

Charles Xavier, on the public face, is simply an advocate of mutant rights, although many higher-ups know that he is, in fact, a mutant with great telepathic powers. His school, the Xavier Institute of Higher Learning, is disguised as just that, but is actually a training center for younger mutants to get a hold on their powers, learn how to integrate into society and how to work with humans. We believe that this will be the Brotherhood’s primary target. Intel says that they’ve gotten bigger and it is clear that the X-Men would benefit greatly from assistance in maintaining a perimeter and keeping the children safe. The Fantastic Four are currently in Latveria so you’re being called in. Talks with the X-Men are proceeding at this moment and seem positive, so you’ll be heading out in four hours. Is that clear?”

Tony…didn’t know what to think. He’d heard of Magneto, of the Brotherhood, and Charles had told him that they were capable of quite a lot. It would benefit the younger mutants to have as much coverage as possible and it wasn’t as if the Avengers were currently tied up in anything. Better safe than sorry, after all. However, on the other hand, Tony was terrified of stepping foot into that place. He’d finally gotten the family he dreamed of after his mother and Jarvis had passed, and if it was
revealed that he was a mutant himself, he didn’t know what would happen. There was every chance he would be caught as well, for reasons he’d already expressed to Charles.

But when it came down to it, this was about those innocent kids, the ones who were in danger of the Brotherhood’s manipulations. He wouldn’t be able to live with himself if he left them alone and something happened. Even though he had every confidence in the X-Men to handle and defend themselves, it wouldn’t hurt anything at all for the Avengers to provide assistance. Tony cast his eyes to the rest of the team, seeing them all reach the same conclusion as him with much less internal debate. Finally, Coulson nodded at Fury.

“Understood.”

Tony shifted on his feet, surreptitiously eyeing the other Avengers. Thor was telling Steve and Natasha something with over exaggerated gesticulation and had them laughing quietly into their palms, Clint was poking at Coulson and the agent was letting his amusement peek through even as he caught Clint’s hands or batted them carefully away, and Bruce was scribbling some last minute notes on a pad of paper. They were getting ready to head out, all of them in Tony’s private garage at the moment. It was the perfect time for him to say something.

“Tony,” Natasha said, and Tony realized that he’d said the last part out loud. Everyone was looking at him patiently. “What is it you need to say?”

Suddenly Tony found himself immensely thankful for these people. Natasha, who he’d thought cold and unyielding, who was actually warm and bold and downright snarky. Clint and Coulson, imagined as forces insurmountable that were truly people that would bend easily and happily for those they loved, who had a special brand of humor. Thor, who was so much more than a god, who was a friend and a brother, someone that understood far more than Tony could’ve imagined. Steve, who he expected to be haughty and holier-than-thou, a kindred spirit who was down to earth and the softest person he’d ever met.

Bruce, who was a bright blip always on Tony’s radar, a man of intellect and deep connections, a person on Tony’s wavelength. A wash of blue through barren riverbeds, a flash of color in a greyscale world, a note of song on a perfectly tuned instrument. Bruce, someone his whole being reached out to and desperately wanted to tie to, Bruce, a man of as many shades as him, Bruce, the person Tony honestly never thought he’d find.

The blue schematics and information and personal files that flooded his vision like tears faded away. Health reports, strength and stamina measurements, vital signs, and battle information slowly dissipated. Swirls and curls of bright cerulean surrounded and filtered into the room, tentatively touching and sweeping protectively over the bodies of his teammates. Energy burst and felt palpable in the room around them, bringing a spark to their eyes and making them all blink for a second. Tony realized that they could sense it, this, whatever this was. Breathing out at a controlled rate, the glow faded and Tony looked at them all seriously.

“I- We all know that S.H.I.E.L.D. has done some terrible things. Things that can’t be forgiven, at least in my book. But I want to put it out there, I want to know for sure. If we can- If it turns out that something should happen, and we have to pick sides, I want you all to know that I will choose you. I will side with the Avengers.” His voice was solid, his words unwavering and carefully chosen. Understanding came over the others, but Bruce was the first to step forward.

“I never would’ve believed I could be an Avenger before you. I am wholeheartedly with the Avengers.” Tony smiled and put a hand on Bruce’s shoulder, squeezing briefly. They turned to the rest of their team, their family, and watched as they made what seemed to be an incredibly easy
decision.

“The Avengers helped me make a place for Captain America and Steve Rogers here. I’m with you.”

“This isn’t about wiping the red from my ledger anymore. It’s about doing what’s right and finding what’s good in the world. My place is here.”

“I can’t think of the last time I had what felt like a home with people who felt like a family. I will stand with this team.”

“This band of warriors is the most valiant and varied I have ever had the honor of being a member of. You have my loyalty and my power with you always.”

“I don’t ‘handle’ you. I’m more than a handler or an agent here, I’m a member of the team. My stance will always be with the heroes you proved to me still exist.”

They were all gathered together in a bunch, standing straight and tall with something more flowing between them. Tony felt the last piece of the puzzle fall into place, and as he let out a slow breath, everything around him seemed to surge together and align perfectly. Discordant figures straightened out in blips and fits of blue fusion, charts and graphs slid together and matched and balanced, lines of code originally deadened flared into life and existence, swirling together and forming a bond that Tony did not believe could ever be severed. He smiled, watching the expression mirror onto the faces of the others.

When their transportation arrived, JARVIS whispered congratulations into his consciousness and a little blue orb practically vibrated with joy out of the corner of his eye.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Given that the X-Men didn’t exactly have extra space to store a Quinjet and it would be mighty suspicious if the Avengers officially landed at a supposedly normal school, they were transported in cars provided by S.H.I.E.L.D. The lawn was as breathtaking as Tony remembered from his own youth. Beautiful plants and flowers, ivy crawling along the stone, a gorgeous but reserved drive. Everything was green and healthy and lush. The members of his team seemed impressed and pleased in their own ways. Thor expressed his in loud praises for the grounds, Natasha with a raised brow. Bruce had a pleased smile and Tony himself felt a knot of worry and anxiety untangle in his chest. This was practically home, he could do this.

Coulson wished them a safe mission and nodded significantly at them before driving off with the S.H.I.E.L.D. issue vehicles. Gathering their small bags, they were greeted by people Tony could recognize easily from Charles’ stories. Jean Grey, a tall red-head in a lab coat that seemed simultaneously easy-going and fierce; Logan, a well-built man with sideburns and a cigar hanging out of his mouth; Scott Summers, tall and sporting a visor Tony immediately began gathering data on; and Ororo Munroe, a dark-skinned woman with perfectly white hair and a clear sense of humor. Mental files for them had been previously formed and now entered his field of vision, images and data being added to complete each as they imprinted themselves next to their subjects. Charles himself rolled out behind him and Tony burst into a wild grin, dropping his bag and all sense of formality as he rushed up to the man and engulfed him in a hug.

“Charles!” He cried, arms tight around the laughing man. It’d been quite some time since they’d seen each other in person. For a second, Tony almost lost control and let the blue data that had been swirling and darting around in recognition and familiarity for the location burn bright enough to be seen, but he reigned it in.
“Ah, Tony, it’s great to see you.” Charles’ hand patted him on the back as he pulled back so they could both get a good look at each other. “You look good,” he murmured, his smile bright as Tony’s eyes darted back to the group of superheroes shuffling awkwardly behind him. Charles could almost sense the way he perked up when Bruce was caught looking interestingly at all the plant life and he just had to comment. You finally brought Doctor Banner to see me, eh? This time, Tony flushed at the mental statement, eyes narrowing playfully even as Scott Summers took a step forward.

“Hello, Avengers. Nice to have you on board,” he said a bit stiffly. This was kind of awkward all around. Tony and Charles were really the only two who knew each other on a close relationship basis, seeing as the X-Men and the Avengers had never officially worked together before. Tony waved the Avengers forward and they looked just as stiff and awkward as the others. He rolled his eyes.

“I’m Tony, good to meet you. Charles and I go really, really far back.” Ororo nodded easily.

“You provide a lot of our tech. The students love it,” she said with a smile, and the first of the tension was broken.

“I’m Charles Xavier, I’m the founder of the Institute and a professor here,” he provided, going off of Tony’s example. Everyone else introduced themselves in a similar manner, describing their positions or roles. The X-Men added their mutant names, indicating that that’s what they preferred on the field. There was a much more comfortable atmosphere now as Charles ushered everyone into the building.

“We’ll show you the rooms first and then move to my office to discuss the situation,” he offered, and the Avengers agreed amicably. “We only had four rooms available on such short notice, so a few of you will have to share.”

“Clint and I can share, Professor,” Natasha said immediately. Absolutely no one was surprised.

“I’ll share with Tony, if he doesn’t mind,” Bruce put in, voice smaller. Tony looked at him with big eyes for approximately half a second before smiling a small but genuine smile.

“Yeah, that’d be good. Fine, I mean. That would be fine.” Bruce smiled back, and the rest of the Avengers exchanged looks. Charles turned and wheeled down the hall before anyone could see his pleased smirk.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

“The main focus here is the children. We’ve already had them on restricted access, not wanting to let them wander off and become targets, but this place could use better security when we have a threat like this going on.” Scott was leading the meeting, diagrams and blueprints of the building spread out, key points marked. “We don’t have to worry about the basement, given that no one is down there alone and it’s the most secure place on the grounds, not to mention that only the older students go down there to train in the Danger Room. I supposed the only really chance they have of nabbing anyone would be transitions between classes as well as nights.”

“If ya ask me, we shoulda just gone this alone. X-Men are more than enough t’handle the likes of t’Brotherhood,” Logan said, carving a figure into a block of wood with one of his claws, paying little to no attention to the meeting. Tony pulled up data on Logan briefly. Feral mutant, huh? Meant that he was protective of his territory. This probably wasn’t him being aggravated at the help at all, but seeing it as the Avengers thinking the X-Men couldn’t handle this on their own. Tony would feel the same way. Seeing an opportunity, Tony took it.

“I don’t doubt it,” he said, pretending to pick at his nails. “You could probably do this yourselves no
problem. Honestly, we don’t think that’s why we’re here at all. We’re pretty sure we’re here because Fury couldn’t stand the Brotherhood thinking that humans themselves wouldn’t fight for their own worth, and wanted to prove to them that they would. Most likely scenario? We’re here to send a message.” Tony turned to the others, who immediately supported him, seeing the plan.

“Not that we don’t want to help, because we’re happy to,” Steve added. “It’s just that you seem like you have this on lockdown all by yourselves.”

“But hey, always better to have more security when it comes to kids, right?” Clint said, smiling and swinging his legs in his chair. Logan sniffed at them for a moment before nodding.

“Tha’s right, bub. We woulda had this,” he murmured. “Couldn’t hurt t’bulk up, though, I s’pose.” Summers breathed a sigh of relief and continued talking strategy, Jean and Ororo put in some great points and tips, and the meeting concluded successfully with a plan. They all stood to disperse to get a look at the grounds, the X-Men as their guides, and Tony stayed behind a moment to talk to Charles.

“Thank you, Tony. Logan was very violently against the Avengers coming here.” Tony shrugged.

“I understand. These are his charges, his pack, and us coming in is like spitting in his face and telling him he can’t protect them himself. I don’t doubt that he could, but I feel better knowing I’m doing something. To help them.” Charles’ eyes turned soft.

“They’ll appreciate it in their own way. It won’t…Tony, they’re safe here. You’re safe here. It’ll be okay.”

“I know, it just-“ Tony’s hands twitched, and he sighed, leaning on the desk. “It would be so easy to convince them. With the world out against them, people spewing hate against mutants, it would be so easy to tell them that they were superior, that it was their time, that humans had to be extinguished. If someone had told me that, before I met you, if I hadn’t had Mom and Jarvis, I- I might’ve-“

“Tony,” Charles said immediately, cutting him off. “You wouldn’t have, Tony, I know you. You’re too good of a person, you would never advocate the killing of humans. They won’t believe it either, because we aren’t going to let anyone touch them. It’ll be okay, Tony. It will. We will keep them safe.” Tony took a deep breath and nodded, standing and straightening his shirt.

“I’d better be off. I have to catch up with the others.” Charles waved him goodbye and brought his clasped hands to his face as Tony closed the door behind him. This would certainly be an interesting experience.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

To be honest, it would be easy to locate the others if he wanted to. Actually, it was pretty much automatic to pinpoint their locations using the security cameras (outside in the gardens). But he needed some time. Time to calm himself and focus his mind so he wouldn’t be bounding all over the place, anxiety at finally being around others like him exploding out from him. They obviously wouldn’t know, they couldn’t know, no one could. He had to act like this was nothing but a mission, helping out a close personal friend could be a bonus. Wiping a hand across his eyes, his feet automatically took him to the living room where a girl was sitting, tapping away at a Stark Industries tablet and making frustrated noises. Curiosity overcoming him, he made his way over and made his steps purposefully loud so as not to startle her.

“I told ya, Bobby, I’m not gonna give up until I fix this thing!” The girl said, blowing a strand of white hair out of her face, oddly placed between otherwise dark locks.
“Not Bobby, but maybe I can help you fix this thing?” The girl spun around and broke into an honest grin at the sight of him.

“Tony Stark? They said y’all were comin’, but o’course no one thought we’d catch sight of ya, thought ya’d be workin’!” Tony laughed.

“Us, working? Rare indeed.” The girl sitting on the couch had her legs curled up, socks pulled up and tucked under the cuffs of her jeans, a scarf covering her neck, gloves covering her hands and ending at the edge of her long sleeves. The screen of the tablet was displaying an error code Tony was sure he hadn’t programmed in. Running mental diagnostics on the tech, he turned to her with an easy manner. “What seems to be the problem here?” The girl sighed heavily.

“I don’t ask for the tablet a whole lot, but just when I borrow the one Bobby has, I touch one gosh-darned thing and the machine starts beepin’ and puttin’ up these boxes! Nothin’ I tried work an’ everyone keeps laughin’ at me-“ She huffed, handing it Tony but carefully keeping her gloved hands away from his. Interesting.

“I think they’re having you on. This is a joke error screen, like a sort of prank. It’s run through a program, right, hmm, here!” Locating the program in the terminal function, he disabled, closed, and deleted it to reveal the perfectly functioning tablet. Handing it back, he smiled at her. “All set. Now I suspect you have some people to beat the pulp out of.” She grinned at him again and held the tablet close to her chest.

“Naw, as revenge, I’m gonna talk to Tony Stark before any o’them do,” she said, eyes bright. Tony held out a hand to her and she gaped at it for a moment.

“Tony Stark. I guess if we’re talking, we should know each other’s names, right?”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m Rogue,” she said, shaking his hand carefully and quickly retracting her own back to her chest.

“Cool name. Very badass, I’d say. Also mysterious. All the best heroes have badass and mysterious names.” She perked up a bit again as he sat down on the couch next to her. “Can I ask about the gloves?” Rogue deflated again.

“Uh, it’s my ability. It, well, I- I take energy. From people. Powers, too. So I wear ‘em so I don’t hurt no one.” Rogue had seemingly shrunk back a bit. It was clear she didn’t talk about this much. She smiled weakly, trying to crack a joke. “S’why I don’t use the tablets a lot, hard to use the screens with these gloves on all the time.” A sudden idea hit him and he stood up violently, wondering if Clint brought them.

“I’ll be right back, don’t move!” She blinked at him and Tony took that as an answer. He shot off a quick text with a thought, asking if Clint brought his spare pair of gloves. A while ago, the archer had complained of a lack of versatility in his offhand and shooting gloves. They were either not tight enough, not warm enough, not tech-compatible, not sensory compatible, or just not well made, depending on which Clint had decided to complain about that day. Finally, Tony had given in and made him some.

The fabric he designed personally. It kept a general shape, but he made them a bit big because when body-temperature heat was applied to it, it would contract and take the shape of whatever it was wrapped around. So it fit whatever hand it was applied to perfectly. The fabric was water-wicking and heat and friction-resistant for Hawkeye’s work. As a bonus, Tony had tried all popular models of tech and found that you could indeed use a touchscreen with them on without any problems. Feeling texture, temperature, and pressure were all possible with the fabric because it relayed sensations.
Clint had loved them and asked for extra pairs to keep everywhere.

This was his chance. He could help a fellow mutant with something, he could give something back. Tony could give a young mutant assistance that he’d been screaming for inside when he’d been in her shoes. And everyone here still thought he was human. This was an opportunity to rally against the campaign these kids didn’t know the Brotherhood was about to start. He could help without having to be Tony Stark. Here, he could do something much more significant by just being Tony.

Receiving a text back that told him where exactly they were in Clint’s bag, he grabbed them and dashed back to the living room, finding Rogue where he’d left her. Flopping back on the couch, he presented the gloves to her, watching as her eyes widened.

“I designed these for Hawkeye because he wouldn’t stop complaining about the shitty gloves S.H.I.E.L.D. gave him. They should be much better. If you want, when I get back to the Tower, I could probably make them in longer versions. It wouldn’t be a problem.” Rogue simply stared at him for a moment, not taking them from his hands. “You can have them, Birdbrain has like ten pairs. I asked, he doesn’t care.”

Eyes wide, she took them, carefully peeling her own worn, weathered gloves off to put the new ones on. When they fitted to her hands she gasped, opening and closing her hands to see how they moved. She moved her hand over the tablet and it responded immediately, without any lagging or extra pressure on her part. A lock of hair fell in her face and she moved to push it back before she noticed the way the hair felt, the way she could feel the way it felt. She touched her face and felt her heart beat hard against her chest when she could feel the soft heat of skin, the feeling of eyelashes against her fingers. Her hands darted over the fabric of her pants, the couch, the pillows, the carpet. Rogue could feel things, could touch, and it was amazing.

Tony watched as Rogue stared at her hands in shock, happiness rolling through him. Time for the final test. He held out his hand to her, silently asking. She looked like she was about to hesitate before she steeled herself, looking at Tony seriously and taking a deep breath. After a moment to brace herself, she carefully let their fingers touch.

Nothing happened.

A broken, relieved noise fell from her lips and her eyes welled up with tears. She wrapped her arms around Tony and leant against him as she cried, sobs wracking through her. Tony understood. For so long, Rogue couldn’t truly touch, couldn’t feel anyone or anything. Now that she could it was like she had overcome something she had thought impossible, had done something she’d never thought she’d do again. The tears were of happiness and of relief, of joy and disbelief. Tony just let her cry, just tried to be there to support her.

About ten minutes later, she pulled back, tear tracks on her face and expression sheepish. “I’m so sorry, Mr. Stark, I just dunno what came over me-“

“It’s okay. Really, it is.” Smiling at her, Tony did his best to convey the truth to her. “It’s hard right now, sometimes it feels like the hardest thing you’ve ever done is getting out of bed in the morning, doesn’t it? But one day, I promise you, you’ll wake up and look at your life and realize, ‘this is what it was all for. This is why that was worth it.’ And you’ll be so proud of yourself for making it through. I know you will.” Rogue must’ve seen something in his face when she looked at him, because after a moment, she nodded.

“Okay,” she murmured, and Tony knew she believed it.

*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*_~*
The plan was pretty vague because they weren’t exactly certain how the threat would present itself. All the classes that had been outside had been relocated to somewhere inside the building for safety reasons. During the day, the Avengers basically functioned as patrol guards, moving around the building and making sure nothing was suspicious. At night, there was originally an organized list of watch guards from eleven to seven with each post being two hours, but Steve, Thor, and Logan all agreed that it was better for those who didn’t need to sleep as much to divide the night watch to keep the team strong and well rested and they worked it out amongst themselves. Overall, until they had a more concrete definition of the threat, they were simply all on high alert.

By the time they’d all settled in and gotten back to the mansion, dinner was being served. Shortly after that, everyone split up to do various recreation activities. Tony found himself with Ororo, Clint, and quite a few of the students (he recognized Rogue, the blond one next to her had to be Bobby, and there was a grumpy boy, a nice-looking dark haired girl, and two tall guys, one built like a house and the other lean) in the game room. He talked with Ororo a bit, finding her interesting.

“So you have entire control over the weather? Does that transfer to a global scale? What about space?”

“I’m uncertain, but it’s possible.”

“It’d be really cool if you could, like, cause solar flares or something. Wait, no, that’d be bad.”

“I assure you, I am not planning on joining the dark side,” she laughed.

“I don’t know, you could really shed some light over there, don’t you think?” She’d cackled even as she shook her head at the terrible pun.

Following recreation, the Avengers all gathered in Steve’s room to talk strategy.

“Nice observation with Logan today, Tony. He was much more willing to work with us after that,” Steve started, and the others nodded in agreement. Tony waved it off, his fingers flicking along his thigh as he played with numbers and tried to get rid of his nervous energy. “Did anyone notice anything significant? Anything we can use to help us out here?”

“Actually,” Tony said, “I was really reassured by today. No one I saw was blatantly negative about life here or outwardly angry toward their situation. Having positive kids here makes it more unlikely that the Brotherhood will easily be able to convert them to their ideals. It certainly works in our favor.”

“I agree with Tony. This is also an important opportunity for us to show them that regular vanilla humans, or as close as this team gets, can be helpful and respectful. Having a clear contradiction to the Brotherhood’s painting of humans as greedy, violent, and horrific people can help solidify that wall between them and the kids,” Bruce added, wiping his glasses. Tony beamed and nodded, absolutely agreeing.

“So, the plan is to keep our eyes open and to be good samaritans. Got it.” Clint rolled to his feet and saluted everyone, Natasha following him out. Thor wished them a peaceful night as he bustled away and both Tony and Bruce waved at Steve as they yawned and left his room.

All in all, the first day passed quickly and before Tony knew it, it was eleven. Their whole team was ready for a good night’s sleep, Tony included. So many times today it just seemed natural to let himself go, even when he knew he couldn’t. Watching Bobby form ice flowers, seeing objects floating merrily around the room, feeling the camaraderie and joy around him, Tony couldn’t help but want to relinquish a bit of control. Keeping himself in check had tired him out.
When both he and Bruce had walked into the same room, Tony suddenly remembered that they were sharing one. They made easy small talk about their day as they quickly dressed in pajamas, Tony in shorts and a short sleeved shirt and Bruce in a pair of flannel pants and a tank top. But as they slid into bed and turned off the lights, Tony could feel that it was a bit awkward. He tried to violently suppress the urge to throw his arms around Bruce, focusing on all the reasons why that would be a bad idea, and was therefore pretty surprised when fingers entwined with his own.

“Bruce?” His voice was soft but he didn’t pull away.

“Is this okay?” Tony squeezed Bruce’s hand and scooted closer, finally relaxing. Bruce’s hand was warm in his and felt gentle, their fingers curled together so naturally. For once, all the numbers and data clamoring for attention in his head calmed and settled, leaving him with a light feeling and a distant blue haze behind his eyes.

“Yeah. Yeah, it’s really okay.”
Seventeen

Chapter Notes

i’m sorry this has taken so long! i really hope you like it (and refrain from killing me ^^;). i’m seriously considering making this a series. would you guys read that? what do you think?

thanks for reading, please drop a comment if you have time!

Tony woke to warmth surrounding him, soft morning light resting on his eyelids. He was comfortable in a way he’d not felt in a long time and didn’t want to get up. But his mind was awake and starting to quickly come online, processing touch and heat and pressure. Opening his eyes, he found his face buried in a mop of brown curls, his arms wrapped around a strong back, his legs tangled with slightly shorter ones. Tony angled his head just slightly, finding Bruce’s head nestled under his chin, the man curled up along his chest as they both rested on their sides. The light of the arc reactor was shining directly on his face and Bruce’s fingers were wrapped up in Tony’s shirt adorably. His face was relaxed and all worry and stress had faded. It made a soft, compassionate smile bloom on Tony’s lips and he hummed quietly as he laid back down, closing his eyes.

Right before they shot back open again and his heart thrummed in his chest.

Bruce was tangled up with him, sleeping together with him. Everything was calm and peaceful and Tony just…couldn’t process it. His smile was irrepressible and he couldn’t help but nose into the nest of hair Bruce had going on. Slowly, through a haze of happiness, Tony began to remember that they were at Charles’ school, that they had a mission, that the two of them were rooming together. For a moment, Tony’s joy faded, thinking that maybe Bruce didn’t mean it that way, or that it was just instinct and a desperate need for touch that Tony himself often felt, but then he remembered the way Bruce’s fingers had curled into his in the darkness, the way he sounded nervous but determined.

Tony remembered the way that Bruce passed him a mug of coffee, their fingers brushing as they grinned madly at each other. He recalled the way Bruce seemed to lean in when Tony sat too close during movie nights, the way he paid attention to the little things about Tony, the way he brightened when Tony walked into a room. There was no way it could be wishful thinking anymore. The pull that Tony felt to Bruce, he had to feel it too. No one had ever treated him like that, and the more he thought back on it, the more he saw it.

At that moment, Bruce shifted against him, sitting up and wiping his eyes as he yawned. Blinking for a moment, he locked eyes with Tony and smiled for a moment before immediately freezing and beginning to pull away. Tony wrapped his arm more firmly around him and grinned, letting the soft smile come back. It took a few seconds of Bruce looking at him seriously for a moment, color high
on his cheeks, before he carefully lowered himself back down and let Tony pull him close. He opened his mouth but Tony beat him to it.

“If the first words out of your mouth are an apology, I will frown at you so hard,” Tony murmured. Bruce let out an involuntary laugh, sputtering into the inventor’s shoulder.

“How about ‘good morning’? Is that acceptable?”

“That’ll do.” They laid together for a minute, curled up in a massive pile of blankets and limbs, just enjoying being close. Tony’s eyes flicked down and he weighed something within himself, thinking. Slowly, holding eye contact with Bruce, he leaned forward, watching as Bruce tilted his head and hearing him hold his breath as Tony got closer and closer-

“FRIENDS! I have been sent to inform you of the breaking of the fast occurring- oh, a thousand pardons, I was unaware-“

“Thor!” Tony shouted, face red, pointing at the door that the god had burst through seconds ago, interrupting one of the most important moments of his life. Thor did a poor job of attempting to hide a grin before disappearing, shutting the door behind him. Tony’s eyes darted back over to Bruce, who was covering his mouth and laughing hysterically. A chuckle formed in his chest and slipped from his lips, and before long, they were giggling like little schoolgirls, leaning against each other and letting the moment pass. Tony wasn’t worried. He was fairly sure there’d be another one.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The two of them stumble into the breakfast proceedings late enough that Thor has obviously somehow communicated to the other Avengers what had happened. Clint quickly hides his laughter by downing mouthfuls of cereal, Natasha snickers into her Wheaties, and Thor and Steve politely turn away (their amusement is almost palpable). Charles raises his eyebrows at Tony when he catches his eye and Tony does not blush. The X-Men are entirely lost, but uncaring.

“Alright, today we just need you to get a feeling for the layout and function of the place. However you decide to do that is fine, but it’d be great if we could have general coverage. We’ve got classes to start, so if you need any of us, head for the classrooms. Otherwise we’ll see you at lunch.” Scott nodded at them all before moving off, Jean quickly catching up with him. Logan chewed a cigar and leisurely wandered from the room. Charles smiled at them and waved goodbye to Ororo as she wished him a good day. When it was just him and the Avengers, he nodded a good morning to them.
“I hope you all have found yourselves comfortable here and will continue to throughout the day. If you need anything, you can find me in my office. Feel free to explore and do what you feel necessary to keep our students safe. Thank you for your help.”

When Charles had gone, they talked about the best strategy and ended up agreeing quickly. They would split up and work on a rotational basis. Dividing up the campus into six different sections, they decided to switch off once an hour, which would ensure that students had coverage for the entirety of the school day. It would also give them all the chance to become acquainted with the space. All in all, it was a great plan.

Tony and Bruce exchanged coy smiles before splitting up and heading to their assigned locations.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Tony started out in the back gardens. For the first half hour, he made sure to access each individual security camera in the area and work out a motion alert. It would bring any active movement to his attention if the motion was attributed to something any bigger than a squirrel. The only motion he should detect would be that of the other Avengers patrolling, and he’d check each time he was presented with the alert. He’d be the first to know should anyone set foot on the property that wasn’t supposed to.

The last thirty minutes Tony spent wandering around familiar grounds, exploring areas he hadn’t set foot in since before this place had become a school. Much of it was the same, but he could see evidence of other residence. Gatherings of footprints beneath a large, old tree with thick and sturdy branches, sports areas neatly outlined with spray paint, a stack of well-loved frisbees on a bench. He ran his fingers over a set of initials carved into a tree trunk before he was relieved from his position by Clint.

His time in the front gardens was much the same. He accessed the cameras more quickly this time, establishing a full perimeter view around campus. Memories here were different, mostly because he didn’t have as many. Tony remembers staring abjectly at the expanse from his room days after he’d woken up from his week in a coma, being continuously tortured by memories that could no longer hurt him physically but delighted in hurting him in what should’ve been the safety of his mind. He remembers refusing to tell Charles what had happened, what he’d faced, because he was so ashamed that he was still letting Howard control him.

Right when he begins to sink further into depressing memories, Bruce wanders around the corner, looking lost. Tony smiles and shakes the thoughts clear, bringing up his mental copy of the schedule and discovering that Bruce was looking for the quarter of the mansion that encompassed the library.
“Bruce! Come on, I have the quarter next to yours, I can help you out.”

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

They walked and talked, Tony noticeably slowing so as to spend more time with Bruce, delighting when Bruce followed his lead. They talked about the grounds, the people they’d met, what they feared could happen. And when classes were changing, they quickly shut up about it. For some reason, the X-Men had apparently decided not to tell the kids about the impending threat. Tony figured it was because they didn’t want to scare them unnecessarily, but privately disagreed with keeping it from them. But it wasn’t his place. Maybe he should talk to Charles about it…

Tony had left Bruce in his quarter, making his way to his own. They’d moved twice more after that and finally, it was the last rotation. Tony found himself stationed in the dorm halls, pacing the lengths as kids quickly found their way to class. There was no bell but the students seemed to know that it was important to arrive within reasonable amounts of time. Before five minutes were up, the hallways were empty.

“Bobby, they don’t matter anymore!”

Or at least they were. Tony accessed the hall cameras to find the two a couple halls over. As he made his way over, he watched and listened carefully. It was the blond boy Rogue liked called Bobby and the grumpy guy with the spiky hair.

“Yes, they do. They’re my family, Pyro. I want them to still know me.”

“Still know you? They don’t know anything about you! They think you’re at some fancy prep school, just a normal little human. How would they react if they knew you are what you are?” Bobby stayed silent, his jaw firm. “Exactly. You don’t know, do you? Don’t know if they’d call the cops, or worse, call the scientists. You don’t know. I do.”

“Oh, yeah? Why don’t you share your endless wisdom, then?”

“They’d hate you. They’d call around and find out whoever would give ‘em the highest price for you. That’s how they all are, once they find out. They all treat you like nothing, like the shit beneath their shoe, Bobby-“
“How do you know?!” Bobby hissed, turning to face Pyro as he inadvertently iced over his books. “You’ve never even met them!” Pyro scoffed, flicking his lighter open and closed.

“I don’t need to know them. They’re all the same. All weak, scared, flimsy little things.” Oh, Tony really needed to interfere.

“You-!”

“Hey, hey, hey!” Tony interjected, stepping between the two of them even as flames surrounded Pyro’s hands and ice skated over Bobby’s fingers. “What’s going on here?”

“Nothing,” Pyro said between his teeth, eyes dark, even as Bobby clearly tried to calm himself.

“He thinks that my family would turn me over, that they’d hate me, if they found out I was a mutant.” Tony turned his back on the brunet, putting a careful hand on Bobby’s shoulder.

“Maybe,” he said honestly, meeting his eyes. “Maybe that would happen. But maybe it wouldn’t. People fear the things they don’t know. If they knew, if they understood, it could be different. To condemn them for what people before them have done is unjust and below you. It’s on the level of the people who condemn you. Be bigger and better than those people. Give them a chance. Give them the opportunity to understand, try and teach them. That’s how you can change this, Bobby.” Finally calm and ice-free, Bobby nodded, the corner of his lips tilting up. Tony pulled away, prepared to usher them off to class before he heard the click of the lighter and felt the heat behind him.

“They can’t understand!” Tony turned to see Pyro’s eyes blazing, his hands dancing with fire hotter than Tony had felt this close before. “You can’t understand! Those people, you people, you don’t know what it’s like! To be thrown out, to be cursed, to be hated! To live with the threat of experimentation, of death, of genocide! Humans are weaker! You threaten our lives and expect us to teach you how to accept us?! Hell no! Far better to cut the threat off at the knees!” Heat flared through the hall and Tony could feel his breath coming faster, the memories surging to the forefront—

“You’re human, you’re rich! You never faced true fear, or true hate, or true pain! You don’t know what it’s like to be one of us! You’ve never suffered a day in your life! So get the fuck out of my face!”

Tony was lost, he was trapped. The heat no longer registered along his skin, he felt nothing but the unyielding table against his back and the cold that seeped into his bones. Howard’s face loomed above him, teeth sharp and laugh piercing, nothing but joy and sadistic pleasure as he peeled Tony’s flesh from his bones. He could hear Obie, could feel it as he ripped the reactor out of his chest and
crushed it in his fist, listened as the man whispered venom into his ear. He could see Fury, slicing into him in search of the weapon Howard promised him and Tony selfishly kept from his grasp. Tony’s eyes went dark and his control wavered, unseeing as the lights above them flickered.

“JOHN ALLERDYCE.” The voice thundered down the hall and Pyro’s fire dimmed immediately, extinguishing as he looked behind Bobby to see Charles wheeling toward him quickly, the X-Men and the Avengers all gathered behind him and marching forward like the world’s most dangerous army. Tony remained unmoving, stationary with his back to the procession. Charles’ face was dark and furious, the likes of which no one present had ever seen. “What. Happened?” Pyro scowled and folded his arms, unaware of the catatonic state of the man who’s face he’d been in seconds before. Seeing Pyro wouldn’t talk, Bobby immediately stepped up.

“Pyro and I were arguing. A-about how my family would react if they knew. Mr. Stark stepped in and stopped us but then-“

“He doesn’t know anything,” Pyro spat, eyes narrow. “What right does he have-“

“John. Go immediately to your room. Jean, follow him, keep him there. We will discuss your continuing presence at this school when I finish here.” For a moment, Pyro didn’t move, shocked. “NOW!” Within a minute, the two of them had disappeared.

The X-Men stayed rallied around the Professor as Charles moved slowly toward Tony, Bobby moving quickly out of their way. The Avengers wanted to burst through them, wanted to go to Tony, but they didn’t know what they were dealing with here. As upset as Charles was, he seemed to have dealt with this before. Tony had said they’d gone way back, after all.

Moving in front of Tony, facing him, Charles carefully made sure he wasn’t touching or too close to touching the man. He looked into vacant eyes, watched them dilate and watched as he got more and more tense, as Tony locked up entirely. “Tony,” he said quietly. “Tony, it’s Charles. Today is Tuesday, you’re at the Institute. Your team is right here. You are safe here.” Tony didn’t react, didn’t even appear to hear him. The Avengers moved anxiously behind him, and Bruce finally opened his mouth, but Charles held up a hand. Moving slowly, with as little threat as possible, Charles carefully touched Tony’s hand. When that didn’t garner a response, he entwined their fingers and squeezed a bit. “Tony, it’s Charles,” he repeated. “Can you tell me what’s going on? Who do you see?” That was a vague enough question that it should protect Tony. After a few seconds of silence, soft words filled the space between them.

“H-Howard. Obie.” Charles nodded, expecting this. “…Fury.” Ah, that was new.
“Tony, you have to listen to me. It’s okay. It’s not real. I am real, my voice is real, my touch is real. What you’re seeing isn’t real. Follow me back here, back to the present time. Follow me, Tony. Come back.” It took long, anxious minutes, but slowly Tony came back. The visions faded and he could see Charles, the X-Men, his team. He could see again. Tony’s legs felt weak, he felt tired and sick, and he wanted nothing more than to curl up and sleep.

“Sorry, so sorry,” he muttered, eyes closing as he let his legs give out and came to rest with his head in Charles’ lap. Charles’ fingers threaded through his hair and he smiled sadly.

“It’s not your fault, Tony. We’ve been through this. It’s okay.” Charles gave him a few minutes, dismissing Bobby and the X-Men who all went worriedly and not even acting surprised when the Avengers refused to budge. “Where are you?”

“Your place,” Tony said, words slow and heavy. “With the team. It’s Tuesday, I had Cheerios for breakfast, and I almost just literally got burned by an angst-ridden teen with ridiculous fashion sense.” Charles laughed, rubbing Tony’s back and helping him up. Tony smiled shakily at his teammates, sketching a wave toward them. Thor looked like he was about to cry, Steve had his mother-hen look, Natasha and Clint looked as nervous and concerned as he’d ever seen them, and for a moment, he didn’t see Bruce. But a second later he felt the man pressed tightly to his chest, arms around him. He didn’t say anything, just hugged him. Tony immediately curled into the embrace, resting his head on Bruce’s shoulder and closing his eyes.

When they finally pulled apart, they were alone in the hall.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Tony was thankful that it was the end of the day, because he already felt exhausted and worn out. The boundless energy that usually thrummed through him and kept him unable to sit still for any period of time seemed burnt out entirely. He noticed a slight tremor in his hands and hid it by keeping them shoved deep in his pockets. His eyes wouldn’t stop roaming, scanning, potential threat levels soaring and flashing in his vision everywhere he looked. The taste of rubber felt imprinted on his tongue.

After the incident, classes were dismissed for the day and Tony disappeared out into the backyard. Wandering a bit into the forest surrounding the grounds, he found a tree he remembered fondly that didn’t bear the same signs of activity the other easily-climbable ones did. It took a bit more effort than he recalled to get to the highest branches and sit, swinging his legs as he took gulps of fresh, unimpeded air and tried to sort out his mind.
It had been a while since he had an attack like that, but to be fair to himself, the circumstances were different. The outright venom that kid had spewed wasn’t just some teen angst, it was genuinely formed and fed hatred. Tony, unfortunately, could imagine exactly how it was formed and how it was fed. Fed by acts of neglect and disregard, of violence, the kind that wouldn’t just fade from memory but required a defense mechanism. Tony made his into a mask, an identity as a devil-may-care playboy with a bad attitude, and he’d had love to temper the hate inside him. To cool it to lack of understanding, to fear. This kid, Pyro, John, he might not have been as lucky.

Tony understood. He did. But no one could know just how much.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

He returned in time to eat dinner, expecting glances and laughs at his weakness from the students. But no one seemed to know what had occurred at all, and all he heard was whispers that “Pyro got into another fight, probably on probation under the Professor’s orders.” Tony caught Bobby’s eye, his slight nod and mouthing of thank you, and began to understand that for once, a secret was kept in school. Bobby hadn’t told anyone how he’d gone catatonic, and he couldn’t remember being so thankful for something in a long time.

He joined the others at the ‘Avengers’ table’ and let his lips twitch up when Bruce slid a plate in front of the empty seat next to him, beaming at him. His team acted like they’d seen nothing at all, like nothing had changed, like he hadn’t shown incredible weakness today when confronted with a ranting teen. Tony sat and dug into his plate, therefore being reasonably startled when Steve suddenly spoke directly to him.

“I don’t go outside in winter if I don’t have to, and I can’t go swimming. I haven’t been able to since they thawed me out.”

“Small, closed spaces make me reach for my weapons and I start to get tunnel vision. If I don’t get out, I become unconscious alarmingly quickly.”

“Anything that has to do with the circus and I start to hyperventilate. Sometimes I cry.”

“I have begun to fear the dark and the depths of space that surrounds my home. Many a time, I have been found folded tightly around my person, weeping and rocking at the edge of the world.”

“If I start to feel trapped, well, the Hulk isn’t only brought out by anger,” Bruce finished, grabbing
Tony’s hand as he sat and stared at them, frozen. “Our fears, no matter what they are, do not make us weak. Never, Tony.”

They were so honest, their eyes so open and warm, in the midst of what was basically an upscale school cafeteria. He knew, just from the way they spoke, that they didn’t expect him to come out in words with anything specific. They knew that he had been afraid, but they didn’t look down on him for it, even when he shut down entirely. They understood him because they faced something similar. The truth in their words made something warm curl in his chest, unblocked the energy that was stagnating in his body and let it flow again. He squeezed Bruce’s hand and let a tentative, genuine smile curl over his lips as he nodded, the intensity only increased when they all smiled at him in return.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Over the next few days, things were quiet. There were no more fights, he hadn’t seen hid nor hair of Pyro (he suspected he’d run, because that’s what Tony would’ve done rather than face Charles’ wrath), and the proximity alert was only triggered by his fellow Avengers or the occasional X-Men, usually Logan or Ororo. He woke every morning wrapped around Bruce, despite having gone to sleep only holding hands. They hadn’t kissed yet, but Tony felt it was because they were both waiting for the right time. The warmth, the touches they shared were more than enough for Tony anyway.

It was Friday and it was clear the kids had started spreading rumors about why the Avengers were really here. One of Tony’s favorites was that the government suspected Logan was about to lose it and go on a rampage and sent the Avengers to control the damage if possible. Another one was that Charles asked for their help to scare them all into behaving like perfect little children. All of the rumors were harmless but continuously perpetuated by the Avengers (even Steve!) refusing to answer any questions about their presence here, responding only with “that’s classified” and a stone-cold facial expression that shattered the moment the kids fled.

Tony began to wonder if maybe the Brotherhood had backed out. He had no idea why that would be, though, so that thought led to the only possible conclusion: they were waiting for the team to collectively think that, get comfortable, and let their guard down. Tony resolved only to be more vigilant and suspicious as the days went on.

Friday, apparently, meant that practice during the week led to tests, one in particular that Tony was curious about. The older students, like Rogue, Iceman, Colossus, Shadowcat, and Angel (all of whom he met over the last few days) attended a combat class every day to teach them how to fight and protect themselves. Every Friday, there was a ‘test’ in the Danger Room in the lower levels, a virtual reality combat scenario in which they had to fight and come out alive. On some level, that scared him, because he learned that the students could actually be injured or even killed here if they weren’t careful, but he was comforted by the fact that there were layers upon layers of protective
coding that would shut down the program should one of them be in true danger, not that the kids knew that. It wouldn’t make them take it as seriously.

The Avengers had been invited, by Logan, no less, to see the latest run in the Danger Room. It occurred after classes but before dinner, so they wouldn’t be jeopardizing security too much. The other X-Men were on top of it. Charles came with them as they made their way down, the students in black suits with the letter X across the torso. Logan led them into the control booth and began the start-up sequences as he talked to the kids.

“Alright, y’better do good with this one ‘cause y’have an audience. See ya on the other side.”

Having easily tapped into the program, Tony watched carefully and made sure the safety protocols were in full effect. Charles obviously knew what he was doing because he smiled at him when Tony was reassured and sat back to watch the action.

He was impressed, to say the least.

They fought hard, working as a team. Colossus acted as a shield when a magazine of bullets was shot directly at Angel, Shadowcat helped Iceman phase through a missile, Rogue zapped the energy out of a line of enemies before they could much farther than their spawn point. They had a clear strategy that snapped into place the instant the danger became apparent, adapting as necessary throughout the battle. Tony was impressed, and certainly saw some of the same bonds with these teens that he did in his own team. The others clearly thought the same, if the surprised but pleased look on their faces had anything to say.

After it was over, the students were clearly tired out, if the way Rogue leaned on Angel had anything to say about it. Bobby rested unthinkingly on Shadowcat, who instinctively phased and apologized the second Iceman was sprawled out of the floor. Colossus’ booming laugh reminded him of Thor, and Angel seemed hard pressed to stay on his feet. Logan was careful but clear in his praise but even more direct in his criticism, and Tony knew it was because he only wanted to be certain they would be strong enough to protect themselves.

“What do you think?” Charles asked them, politely inclining his head. Steve hummed for a second.

“It’s a good tactic. The ability to change the scenario is useful for keeping them on their toes,” he said, still observing the machinery. “We’ve certainly come a long way from my time.”
“I still have some reservations. I would be paranoid about the safety measures, and about what would happen if this technology got into the wrong hands,” Bruce chimed in, and Tony nodded.

“That’s how I feel. I think it’s good in theory, but I still worry, for a lot of reasons.” He tries very hard not to think about how he would’ve ended up had this been within Howard’s reach when he was a child. The thought settles like lead in his stomach.

“I value your opinions. I often worry about what could happen, but both professors and students know how careful to be with this. But for now, let’s get upstairs before dinner begins and there isn’t enough left for us!” Charles cheerfully led them out of the control booth at the same time Logan led his worn out pupils out of the Danger Room. Rogue and Iceman both met his gaze and he smiled, giving them a discreet thumbs-up that made them grin.

Their trek back up the stairs was slow-moving as conversation took over them. Tony was feeling content to find them all happy and safe, looking forward to a good night sleep, listening to Bobby tell detailed and over-exaggerated stories of the battle when he heard it. A shrill sound in the corner of his head, a flash in the far reaches of his vision. He froze immediately, eyes going wide. Everyone else stopped behind him.

“Tony?” Charles asked after a moment of silence, after Tony didn’t resume motion. “What’s wrong?”

“Are you expecting company?” He asked, his voice low and serious, his eyes brighter and sharper than usual. “Because it’s coming, and it’s coming fast.”

“What do you mean,” came a deep growl from behind him, and he could hear the unsheathing of metal claws. The students shuffled closer together, the Avengers preparing weapons. Screens snapped into his vision, the proximity alarm ringing at every corner. His hands flew through what to others was the empty air, scanning, zooming, profiling. The blue grew brighter, the energy, no, the electricity thrumming and pumping through his veins. Data exploded into his vision, racing across his field of view.


“What in the hell does that-“
“Tony, go, now, take your team with you, do what you have to,” Charles interrupted, and they locked eyes for a few brief seconds. Tony knew what he meant. He was already running, his team following.

“Steve, Thor, outside on the lawns as fast as you can. Control and wrangle, do not kill them if at all possible. Bruce, get the flanks, make sure we aren’t unprepared. Nat and Clint, get the students to safety. I’ve unlocked the hidden passageways on floors one and two, no one is on the third floor. The tunnels lead to safety so get as many in there as possible. I’ll be where I can, contact on the comms if anything is locked,” he hissed out, words quicker than normal. The team peeled off after their instructions, no questions, no anger from Steve about taking the lead. Even if everything that Tony said hadn’t made sense, they didn’t bother with interrogations now. They had lives to save.

Tony reached the dining room the second that all the glass in the mansion blew inward. Electricity shot through him, commanding everything to move faster, to work harder. He burst into the room with Natasha and Clint behind him just as he saw figures crawling and shooting and flying through the open windows, slamming the doors behind him and flipping a table over to shove it up against them. Natasha and Clint gave orders, ushered them into the open passageways in the room, but the door burst open before too many could escape. Forty-five percent evacuated. Screams resounded in his head and the last thing Tony heard was Clint asking if he called the suit.

He didn’t.

Fifty percent evacuated.

Blue engulfed his vision, dark and deadly, white noise blocking out his hearing. His focus narrowed to the people pouring in the doors, his need to keep them away from the children behind him, the children Natasha and Clint were frantically urging out the back door and down the hall to more routes of escape. Tony tried to choke it down, tried to push it back. He couldn’t afford to lose it right now. No one could know. No one could know. They were coming, and Tony needed to keep it together.

The first had her mouth wide open, the noise emanating from it rattling and breaking most things it touched. Tony watched as a child in the corner of his eye crumbled and covered his ears, the fury surging through him, cracking his control. He watched the mutant girl approach and grabbed her by the neck, swinging his weight and slamming her into the ground. She was unconscious almost immediately.

Sixty five percent evacuated.
The second was telekinetic and began to swing tables and chairs at Tony, but he jumped and wrapped himself around him, throwing his weight backwards and feeling satisfaction radiate through him as he crumpled into the stone floor with a puff of breath and the rolling back of his eyes. He barely had time to stand before another approached.

The next swung in with his tongue and Tony identified weak points immediately. When his swing came close enough for Tony to reach out, he punched the sternum, the jaw, the diaphragm, and upon turning, the solar plexus. A choked, pained screeched emanated from the man and he went down, clutching his middle and gasping for breath. He checked behind him to see that the room was clear, watched students scramble out and Natasha look at him as her eyes widened.

Seventy percent evacuated. It wasn’t enough.

The fourth came, the fifth and sixth with her, the rest right behind, and Tony felt the dam inside him fracture. He couldn’t take any more. He would fight, he would fight, he had to! Tony expected a rush of energy, felt it pool in his palms momentarily, wanted it- Only to feel the metal at his ankles burn his skin, the power forbidden from leaving his body. Just how he’d wanted it all these years. He screamed in anguish and frustration, reaching down, desperate to do something, anything (Seventy-three percent evacuated, needs to be one hundred, needs to!). But before he could get a grip on the hot metal shackling him, darkness descended over his vision and he crumpled to the floor.

His last thought was an angry, regretful flash of blue.
He felt the crunch of debris underfoot as he walked into the dining hall, Mystique by his side. Lungs pulling in a deep breath, he could nearly taste the fear in the air. A small young man trailed uncertainly behind him, flicking his lighter open and shut.

“Y-you said you wouldn’t hurt them,” the child muttered uncertainly, and Magneto turned and curled a finger under his chin, the sight of the destroyed hall a dramatic backdrop.

“Ah, ah, ah, Pyro. What was it that I said exactly?” The boy swallowed and Mystique laughed from her place next to him.

“Ah, ah, ah, Pyro. What was it that I said exactly?” The boy swallowed and Mystique laughed from her place next to him.

“You said you wouldn’t hurt t-the mutants.” Magneto grinned.

“And that is all you care about, isn’t it, John? Pyro?”

“…yes.”
Bruce remembers that they fought hard. Steve and Thor thinning out the crowd, Hulk urging the flanking unit toward them. Meeting up inside with Clint and Natasha, having de-Hulked to serve as assistance for getting kids to safety. Watching them take Clint, then Thor, and then Natasha, whisking them away. Looking for Tony, desperately, and not finding him. Seeing them subdue and capture young children of all ages; adult mutants with bloodlust in their eyes. Losing Steve. Finding the X-Men, clotted together, urging them to go to their students, those that got away. Black encroaching on his vision, hitting the floor. Laughter. Endless, endless laughter.

He tries to shake himself awake, feeling groggy as he always did after Hulking Out. There’s a sound, a repetitive sound, on the edge of his consciousness. It sounded like…his name? “-ce. Bruce! Bruce, can you hear me?” Ah, that was Steve. Blinking his eyes open and letting his head roll back, he winces and tries to rub at his sore neck only to find that his hands are chained to the floor. Now more alert, he turns his head towards the sound of Steve’s voice, wide-eyed and aware of a tugging sensation at the nape of his neck.

Bruce is in a small, glass containment unit. Well, in a row of them. Steve is next to him, chained to the floor. Thor is on the other side, similarly dressed up. He can hear the sounds of weeping children surrounding him, begging and praying and trying to offer comfort and support. Each of them is chained down, facing the same direction (toward a dark glass wall they cannot see beyond), and there are needles in the backs of their necks, where they can’t reach, pumping fluid into all of their bodies. It is dim and the room seems endless but filthy, the concrete floors marked with stains he doesn’t want to identify.

“You woke up last,” Steve says, and Bruce tries to refocus. It’s difficult. “The whole team is here, except Tony, along with about thirty kids. No one’s abilities work, including mutations.” Bruce closes his eyes for a moment, trying to reach for an alternate consciousness, but the Other Guy was too far, it was too fuzzy and he just, he could barely think. “It’s the fluid they’re pumping into us, isn’t it?” Bruce nods, blinking, distracted for a moment by Natasha attempting to calm a young girl, sounding no older than ten. The injustice of the situation eats him from the inside and he wants to howl, but it would cost him too much energy he can’t afford to waste. A fragment of Steve’s report that initially escaped him rammed into his mind full force, and he felt the stirrings of panic in his veins. *Except Tony.*

“Where’s Tony,” he breathes, fists clenching in the cuffs. Steve shakes his head.

“I don’t know. No one has come in and made demands yet-“ Steve is cut off by the sound of a large door opening at the other end of the room. A trio of people enter but Bruce can’t yet make any of them out. The room goes silent as the three walk toward the center of the large space, and as they get closer, he can recognize these people from the briefing images.
At the head, Erik Lehnsherr. Better known as Magneto, leader of the Brotherhood of Mutants. Well, that about figured. Next to him, a blue woman, Mystique, his right hand. Also made sense. But behind them, nervous and pale, is a boy he recognizes, he knows him-

“Pyro,” the children hiss and whisper and cry. The boy flinches, and Bruce recalls a name. John, Pyro, the boy who told Tony that humans were nothing. Bruce feels the strange desire to bare his teeth, but maybe if they could get this boy to see, they’d have a better chance.

“You see, my dear Captain, Pyro understands,” Magneto says, holding his hand open and watching as Pyro’s metal lighter zips into his palm. Right, that was his ability. He flicks it open, much like Pyro had, and ignites it. “He sees that humanity is a plague, that their time is over. He knows that as long as they are around, as long as you are around, you will prevent the mutant race from understanding this. So young mutants, the powerful and upcoming generation, need to see how weak and how small humans really are, how easily their human heroes are broken. How desperately they need to be extinguished.” He flicks the lighter shut and sets it in Pyro’s hand, closing his fingers over it. “Don’t you, Pyro?” The boy’s eyes dart to the Avengers, chained down, before they stare hard at the floor as he nods. Magneto pats him on the head and urges him out of the room with a light shove.

“Interesting drug, is it not? A particularly crafty human used it to subdue mutants, and while normally I would despise that purpose, drastic action must be taken to teach the ignorant when they are unwilling or unable to learn. The use of it on our human company, well, it was just a happy coincidence that it managed to work.” His grin was maniacal, and Bruce felt purposeless rage build and fester within him. “I will take the Avengers, the Earth’s Mightiest Heroes, and I will rip them apart, piece by piece. You, my children,” he said, opening his arms to the kids he captured, “will see why they cannot be trusted, why they are far below us. I will give you this gift of knowledge, starting with the Iron Man.” Magneto laughs as the Avengers, as one, begin to struggle and shout and curse, as the children cry and shudder. He left, shutting the door behind him after Mystique blew them a kiss, both of them chuckling darkly.

Hours pass in the dim room, the Avengers trying to talk strategy and form plans, the children trying to keep it together. There is an air of desperation and hopelessness, panic begins to eat at them all. Right up until the point when bright light comes on from the other side of the dark glass, making it clear enough to see Tony hanging from the ceiling by his arms, his feet barely brushing the floor. He’s unconscious, head lolling down, clad in nothing but a pair of shorts, likely his boxers. Bruce’s heart thuds against his chest, and he watches as Magneto approaches the first person who’s
understood and cared for every part of him.

Tony wakes when fingers use his hair to yank his head back, exposing his eyes to the bright light overhead. His arms are raised and he can barely feel the floor, but he senses the presence of at least three people in the room. He cracks his eyes open when his head is released, trying to take in the room.

“Hello, Anthony,” a man says smoothly, and Tony can feel his chest seize. Memories and panic threaten to slam into him but he pushes them back, hangs on tight until he regains a semblance of control, just enough to focus. The man he recognizes immediately as Magneto, a man he would gleefully put into the ground. The room is large, a drain in the center, a wall of dark, blank glass in front of him. There are four other people in the room, two by the door behind him and two standing opposite, by a table below the glass wall. He realizes belatedly that there are no security cameras in this room, but is torn from his search for other relevant data by a hand around his throat.

“Typical of humans, disrespectful and insubordinate to their superiors. Of course, you might not recognize me as your superior. I am a mutant, after all,” Magneto drawls, and he sees the bait from a mile away, but chooses to take it.

“It’s not your mutant status I have a problem with, it’s your villain one,” he snarls, and he knows it’s not his best, but he’s trying. Magneto snorts.

“Why is that you think I’m a villain? Why am I the villain and you are the hero, Anthony Stark?” Magneto stalks around him in large, looping circles, like a predator. Tony bares his teeth and keeps eye contact for as long as physically possible.

“Because I protect innocent life, and you attempt to corrupt it. You pick and choose who gets to live and who gets to die based on things out of their control, I choose life for all innocent, and prefer diplomacy for all guilty. I am a servant of the people asking for help, you play at God.” The man laughs and stops in front of him, slapping him across the face. Tony allows his head to roll with it, looking back with dark, furious eyes.

“I want my people to see what you are. I want mutants everywhere to see that the world is theirs for the taking, that they are the up-and-comers, that humans are weak and easily breakable.” It’s Tony’s turn to laugh.
“No, you don’t. You want mutants to see your agenda and agree with it, bow to it, because their agreement and cooperation is the foundation of your New World Order. Your dominance is contingent on mutants toppling human majority, and you tell them it’s for their good, but it’s not, it’s for yours. You have a perfect image of the world and you think you’re God’s gift to man, or that you are God, and it’s your job to form the Earth into what you want. You don’t want to grant mutants freedom, you want to grant them life under your rule. But here’s the thing, Magneto,” Tony hisses, leaning as close as possible. “The world will never be what you want. It won’t be what I want, or what the Avengers want, or what the Brotherhood wants. Because everyone in it, all at the same time, is trying to make it what they want. And let me tell you something, buddy, you’re never going to get everyone in the world to surrender what they want to give you what you want.”

Magneto’s eyes are hot, his lip pulled up in a snarl, and before Tony knows what’s happening, he has two spikes of metal in his hands and he’s shoving them into his shoulders and twisting. Tony’s head bows but his lips seal themselves shut, pained screams and howls locked behind his teeth and tongue. He deadens the message his nerves are sending to his brain, stopping the pain, but the echo of the feeling rocks through his bones. He pants and his eyes and cheeks are wet, but his dark eyes catch Magneto’s once more.

“W-we will never let you get what y-you want. You will not d-destroy families and childhoods, ah, you will not turn kids into - into soldiers. I won’t let you destroy h-humanity not because humans are better t-than mutants, but because they can, hah, they can create b-beautiful things as equals working together as a team, and the w-whole world deserves to see it.” Tony remembers his mother, and Jarvis, the beautiful team they made with Charles to bring him back from such a deep, dark place. He remembers all the great humans he has met and collaborated with, the things they created to help the world. He holds in his mind the chance every person, human or mutant, deserves to prove themselves different than the rest, than the criminals or the evil or the wrong. He breathes through the pain, tries to focus, as Magneto snarls and scowls and rages in front of him.

“They will see you torn apart, ripped to shreds, broken down into nothing, human! Mutants will dance on your grave! You have no idea of the pains mutants suffer, privileged bastard! No mutant wants to work beautifully as a team with humans, the filth that they are!” There’s a pause, and Tony watches as Magneto spits at his feet and turns to leave, slamming the door shut. He’s left in the room with the four mutants that were previously silent. The two standing by the dark glass wall step forward, grinning, as Tony watches the blood from the spikes sticking out of his shoulders drips down his chest, down his legs, off his feet to swirl down the drain. It’s about this time that he notices the only thing on his ankles are circular burns from the hot, hot metal bands he tried to overcome. His eyes widen and he looks up at the two men slowly approaching him.

“Where are the bands I was wearing? I need them, it’s really not a good idea—“ The man on the left stops his words with a fist, rocking his head to the side and creating a bruise on his other cheek to match the one from earlier.

“Magneto crushed them. Heard they called your suit and didn’t want to deal with that. Now hush up, we have work to do, don’t we, Donny?” The other man smiled and grabbed a whip with several
tails, all ending in barbed metal.

“That we do, Kenny. That we do.” The whip slicing through the air and onto his chest, ripping and pulling at the skin until it broke and spilled forth hot, red blood. Tony winced, but again did not cry out. He wouldn’t give them the satisfaction of breaking him. As the lashes reign down, crisscrossing over and over, Tony realizes that the bands that stopped his power before were no longer there. He could get out, escape. He could.

“Af...
While he was preoccupied, Donny managed to get up and grabbed one of the metal spikes Tony had discarded. He charged at him and Tony’s vision shifted, sensing the minuscule electric signals his brain sent throughout his body, reading his moves before he made them. He held Donny’s shoulders and used the man’s momentum to turn him, gripping the spike in his hand, turning and pushing it through his own chest, through his heart, like a knife through butter. The man froze and dropped to his knees before toppling over, dead, a slight splashing sound from the layer of water gathering on the ground. Thunder rolled overhead and lightning flashed in the distance. Tony felt something spark in his chest as more of the ceiling crumbled in, exposing the dark and rolling sky.

“Sir! Something is going on in the room where Tony Stark is being held!” Magneto turned and frowned, deciding to go take a look. There were no cameras in the warehouse because Magneto had eyes everywhere anyway, and he didn’t plan to stay in this dilapidated building for long.

“Mystique, take Pyro and watch the, shall we say, observers. Make sure nothing goes off course.” The woman nodded and gripped Pyro’s shoulder, guiding the boy down the hall toward the observation room. Magneto made for the room where Stark was being held, walking leisurely until he heard a loud banging sound that reverberated around the concrete building. Taking off at a run, he wondered what could possibly be happening, and how fast he could get out of here if necessary.

Mystique slammed through the door of the observation room at the same time, catching sight of what was happening in the next room as the captive audience watched in shock. Tony Stark was a mutant. Her eyes widened but she knew the contingency plan. Get to the helicopter they had stored, get Magneto, get out. Get Pyro if convenient. Time to implement that plan.

Locking the door to the observation room, Mystique turned and tore down the hall, Pyro hot on his heels, ignoring the sound of the increasingly violent storm outside.

It had yet to occur to her that it would be pretty damn difficult to escape in a helicopter in the middle of a storm fed and fueled by Tony Stark.
Tony spun around, water splashing above his bare feet as the metal door blew in, Magneto stepping through. Another deep, primal sound left him as he crouched, electricity arcing out of his body and back into it, his whole being a blaze of blue. Eyes widening, Magneto took a step back, in shock. Tony Stark, a mutant? It wasn’t possible!

“Erik Lehnsherr, isn’t this a surprise,” Tony hissed. “Big, bad Magneto, trying to convince little Tony Stark to bend over for mutants, only to find out he is one!” He circled him, eyes burning bright blue, practically glowing. Magneto stepped into the room, fingers curling against his palm. He tries to feel for the metal he knows is surrounding the reactor in Stark’s chest, but it is hidden from his manipulation. No matter. He had plenty of metal to win this battle.

“Well, Stark, you certainly play your cards close to your chest,” he said, urging the metal from the door to form a pack of blades, hovering for his use. Tony didn’t blink but his lip curled, easily taking note of the move but not shifting out of position. Magneto flicked his fingers and the blades surged forward, but Tony dropped to the floor, letting the metal embed itself in the wall behind him. Rain soaked them both to the bone and Tony could feel the power of the electric storm in the drops, restrained and willing to bend for him. Placing his hands in the water, Tony let a burst of energy electrify the substance, shocking Magneto and leaving him slightly shaking. Tony sent a thank-you upwards for not being susceptible to electrocution.

“You know, you and I, we’re actually fairly similar,” Tony said, the air around him charged. Magneto raised his hands and curled his fingers but Tony darted forward and gripped his arm painfully, swinging him around and pressing him to the dark glass. Smirking, Tony squeezed as the man in his grasp tried to reach out with his mutation, only to find he couldn’t.

“You can’t do it, can you? Interesting trick I learned. I can sense every bit of electricity going through you at this moment, at this second. I can hear that your brain told your arm to try and move, but you couldn’t. I can sense that you tried to reach out, to bend metal, and I stopped the message.” The man’s eyes were wide and he could feel the shock of the air around Tony against his skin. He couldn’t move. Tony had paralyzed his body, prevented the message of movement from being sent from his brain to his muscles.

“But back to how we’re similar. You were a victim of the Holocaust. Selected for your religion, your family’s religion, for death. People tried to kill you for something about yourself you couldn’t change, and as an adult, you tried to wipe out the human race for that injustice, didn’t you? My father saw me as nothing but a weapon, something to solve, and he turned me into an experiment. We were both treated with injustice by humans. Not the same type, or the same scale, I know, but both actions boil down to injustice based on things about ourselves we didn’t necessarily choose. But here’s the difference: I know that not all humans are Howard. You don’t know that not all humans are Nazis. That’s why I’m letting you go. Because you need justice, and although I can’t give it to you in the way you want, I can give you the chance to find something you need.” It pained him, it did. To let go of the man who hurt him, who hurt those he loved, who put children in danger. But everyone deserved a chance, and Tony had a feeling, deep down-
He let go of Magneto, let go of his hold on him, and turned, only to feel a litter of metal spikes pierce his chest and cause him to stumble. He is not surprised. The last of his control and his mercy snapped and the sky exploded with a display of lightning, a bolt striking through the hole in the ceiling to arc into Tony’s body, making his eyes glow white as the energy slammed through him. He held his palms out and let go, watched as electricity slammed into Magneto, watched as he fell to the ground, crumpled, body jerking and shuddering.

Tony felt nothing but the energy coursing through him, thrumming through his veins. His skin was hot and he looked down to see it was glowing, pulsing with the rapid beat of his heart. The metal blades are still in him, but they don’t seem important to him somehow. Debris whipped around him and the broken ceiling and structurally unsound walls began to quiver and shake. A crack in the dark glass grew and grew until it shattered and fell, revealing on the other side and shocked and scared bunch of kids and his team, chained like animals. He wanted to help them, needed to help and keep them safe, but he was nothing but electricity, nothing but pain and anger and lingering fear. The sound of someone entering the warehouse echoed back to him and he clenched his fists, gearing for another fight. It felt like he would never tire.

A man in a wheelchair was followed by people in black suits, the people looking ready to tear into something. The man held up his hand as the others started for him, warned off by his snarl, eyes wide. He rolled forward as the others went to help the captives and Tony bared his teeth, letting the electricity flow around his arms again, trying to intimidate. The man didn’t stop, just held up his hands.

“Tony, can you hear me?” Tony didn’t respond, he was unable to respond. “Tony, it’s Charles. You have to listen to me. You’re holding too much energy. You’re holding it in and it’s hurting you, you’re losing control. You have to let it out, ground it, let it go. You’re safe now, you saved everyone and it’s time to come back to yourself. I will be right here, I will help you, I will make sure nothing happens to you.”

Fear and panic courses through him again. He revealed himself, everyone knows he’s a mutant now. What if Howard happened all over again? What if S.H.I.E.L.D. finally found their weapon and wanted it for good? What if they took him and he never saw the light of another day? What if, what if, what if-

The building was shaking even more noticeably now, the X-Men having moved all the kids out of the building on shaky legs and out to the transport vehicles to be taken home. They stood by the Avengers and watched as the glowing form of Tony Stark shuddered and Charles tried to calm him, to get him to back down. Charles was beginning to panic when Tony only burned brighter, the heat and feeling of charged air only growing. A pained, fearful howl exploded out of Tony’s chest, the overload of sensation increasing to critical levels. Tony’s body was not meant to be a conduit of this much electricity at once, not after so long of not feeling it this higher power, and he wasn’t grounding any of the energy entering him, he was storing it and holding it and letting it fester inside.
him. It would consume him, burn him up, Tony would become a supernova and he couldn’t stop it.

Suddenly, the exhausted form of Bruce Banner crawled through the broken glass frame, desperately trying to reach Tony. Everyone froze as he managed to get to Charles, and sucked in a panicked breath when he walked closer to the lightning bolt that was Tony. “Tony,” he breathed, and Tony’s bright, glowing eyes locked on to him. He smiled. “Tony, you have to let it go. Just let it out, put it all in the ground. I’m gonna be here, the team will be here, Charles will be here. Nothing bad will happen to you, no one will touch you if you don’t want them to, I swear it. Me and the Other Guy have gotten attached to you and we need you back. I need to hold your hand and take you on walks through the park and steal the check when we go out to dinner and kiss you, Tony, I haven’t done that yet, and I need to. So come back down and let me hold and kiss you, yeah?”

Tony saw dark eyes and brown, sloppy curls and a little grin, the cutest little grin he’d ever seen. Data on energy and fighting and enemies and self preservation faded in favor of the density of Bruce’s hair, the curve of his lips, the pattern tapped out by his fingers, the beat of his heart. Bruce wasn’t afraid of him, Bruce wasn’t repulsed by him and would never hurt him. Bruce would keep him safe. Slowly, the pulsation of light ceased and dimmed, leaving Tony’s skin the olive tone it usually was. His eyes darkened to their normal color, the shudder and shaking stopped, and the charge of the dense air dissipated. Tony hesitated, hand half reached out for Bruce, before his eyes rolled back in his head and for the second time, lost consciousness.

A sympathetic flash of lightning bolted across the sky, illuminating slowly settling storm clouds.
hey, everyone! over a year later and finally the last chapter of the first part of this series is published. i am honestly amazed. this is the biggest undertaking i've ever actually completed.

i spent a long time agonizing over past chapters, combing over them and changing them, wanting to improve and perfect. i finally figured out that i didn't write this to have a perfect novel at the end, i wrote it to tell a story and to practice my writing so one day i could tell even better stories. i think i was so embarrassed by the mistakes that i forgot to realize what an enormous challenge i had given myself and never really recognized what i have finally accomplished here.

long story short, i had a lot to learn from writing this, and i think i did. i look forward to publishing more bits of this series as time goes on, and i hope you continue to look forward to reading them.

thanks for sticking with me.

Bruce darts forward in time to carefully catch Tony before he hits the ground, arms under his so as not to disturb the metal spikes emerging from his chest. He counts six of them and is momentarily mesmerized by the dull blood leaking from the wounds, watching as it crawls down Tony’s body. No, not his body, Tony is not dead, Tony’s not dead, he’s a mutant and he’s not dead-

“Dr. Banner, we need to get him out of here. He needs medical attention immediately,” Charles says, and his eyes are dark with fear. Bruce nods and Steve comes to him, taking Tony from his arms. Something in him wants to howl at the loss. For once, he doesn’t think it’s the Other Guy.

The present X-Men form up around the Avengers. They move quickly, Thor carrying the unconscious and injured Magneto bringing up the rear, Steve with Tony in the middle, all of them on alert for anyone left behind in the warehouse as they retrace their steps back toward the jet. “Where are Logan and Jean?” Bruce isn’t sure who asked, his eyes focused on the way Tony’s limp hands nearly brush the ground. He’s never seen those hands so still. “He’s detained Mystique and making sure the authorities that arrived are prepared to transport her and Magneto. Pyro disappeared while he was fighting her and we don’t know where he’s gone. Jean is making sure the kids driving the transport vehicles know where they’re going and checking to make sure no one needs a medic right now,” Scott responds. They all burst out of the building and into the rain, Steve and Thor headed directly to the jet when they see Jean standing there having seen the last of the trucks off.

Bruce loses track of what’s happening for a while, unable to think about more than what he’s seen, what he’s learned. When he’s next aware, they’re in the air, Tony is laid out on a table in the middle
of craft, and Jean is shaking his shoulders. “Dr. Banner, I’m going to need your help,” she’s saying, and finally there is something he can do to help. She turns to Charles, they all do, and find him stroking his fingers through Tony’s wet hair. “Professor, I need you to tell me everything you know.” There is a heavy silence for a moment before he sighs.

“Tony is a mutant. I’m not sure how to describe his ability other than to say it is some sort of control over electricity. He can manipulate down to the cellular level, if he wants to.” Steve jumps in when it doesn’t look like he will say more. “We saw him heal the wounds in his shoulders earlier. Can he heal as well?” Charles grins wryly. “No, he cannot heal like Logan. He has no regenerative ability, but he can essentially tell his body how and where to fix itself by influencing his own electrical impulses on a level humans cannot. But he has to be conscious, he has to make the choice to do it, it’s not a passive ability.” Jeans nods quickly and snaps on gloves, handing a set to Bruce.

“Okay, we’re twenty minutes out of the Institute, and I’m not sure he’ll make it if we don’t stop the bleeding now. Dr. Banner, we need to move quickly. Do you understand?”

Bruce nods. He understands. After all the times Tony saved him, he won’t fail the other man now.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Two days later and Tony is still unconscious. The surgery he underwent to fix the injuries he sustained to his internal organs took hours and several blood transfusions, but he survived the most critical period. It’s not necessarily surprising that Tony hasn’t awoken yet, but Bruce can’t relax until he sees him open his eyes and smile at him. The rational, doctor side of his brain is assuring him that this is entirely normal, but the emotional, Tony-is-the-most-important-person-in-my-life part of him is restless with nerves and anxiety.

He’s been sitting at his bedside (in what Charles told him was actually Tony’s unofficial room at the mansion) since the surgery finished, taking short breaks only to shower and use the restroom. The rest of the Avengers take turns sitting with him, assuring him that everything will be okay. Sometimes Jean pops in, checks the monitoring equipment set up around the bed, and runs a hand over his cheek before leaving. Right now, he’s sitting with Natasha.

Natasha cares deeply about all of them, but Bruce privately believes she has a soft spot for Tony especially. When she sits with him she is usually silent, but Bruce sees her clench Tony’s hand in hers every so often. She watches him breathe, in and out, and waits for him to open his eyes with the type of focus that implies that she believes she can simply will it to happen. Bruce reads a novel quietly, holding Tony’s other hand, when both he and Natasha look up at the same time.
He moved. They both felt it, he moved.

“I should get the others,” she says, and Bruce nods, but neither of them moves an inch. They’re holding their breath, looking, waiting, watching, praying. Nothing happens for a minute, for two minutes, and just when they start to deflate, Tony’s eyes flutter. They crack open a little bit and Natasha stands so quickly that her chair is knocked over behind her. “Tony,” she whispers, and Tony coughs. Bruce sees her bring their joined hands up to her lips and kiss the back of his palm. He watches her brush her fingers through his hair, watches her smile at him, and watches her disappear out the door shouting for their team.

He looks back in time to see Tony staring at their hands entwined together, Bruce’s fingers tight on Tony’s own. Bruce squeezes and Tony looks up, his eyes bleary. He opens his mouth to say something, but Bruce beats him to it.

“I know you’re going to say that you were going to tell me at the right time. I know that you’re going to warn me away from you, that you’ll tell me you understand if I don’t want to be with you anymore. I know you’re afraid of what I’ll say. I’ve been sat here for two days waiting to tell you that I don’t need to hear that. I understand. I’m not hurt you didn’t tell me, I don’t want to be warned away from you, and I will not leave you. We’re more than a team, Tony, you and I are partners, and I won’t leave you behind. You’re the one who told me we are not monsters. It’s my turn to remind you of that, and I sure as hell won’t let the one person who’s never feared any part of me start now.” Bruce’s voice wavers and he can feel that he’s crying, but he doesn’t care. Tony’s crying, too. He reaches for his other hand and Bruce ducks his head to take it, pressing both of them to his face and breathing in the relief that rushes through his body.

“Actually,” Tony says, and Bruce looks up to see him smiling. “I was going to say that you owed me a kiss.”

The rest of the team peaks through the door to see Bruce and Tony curled up together, smiling, as Bruce presses a hundred kisses to Tony’s forehead.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

There is a joint team meeting, because Steve and Scott both love team meetings. They meet in Charles’ office, all bunched together, when Tony has fully healed a day and a half after he wakes up (something that still boggles Bruce’s mind, however thankful he is). Tony sits at the front of the room. Everyone looks to him and he can feel the nerves start to make his hands shake. His breathing stutters and he closes his eyes, but no one rushes him. When you are ready, Charles whispers into his mind.
He starts at the very beginning, with the lights that led Jarvis to him. He talks about him, his mother, Charles, about what they did for him and what they helped him to become. He talks about Howard, about Obadiah and Afghanistan and the night he thought he would die with a hole in his chest. He talks about Fury, about SHIELD, about his fears. He talks about the team, his family, and what they’ve built together. Everything, he talks about everything, and bit by bit he can feel something in him heal. Slowly, an ache Tony had lived with for so long has started to ease. He is not without fear, but he feels for the first time like maybe he can fight it and win.

“I didn’t think it would be like this. I didn’t think I would be able to tell my story like this, to have people listen, to have people understand. I spent so long afraid, so long believing that if anyone knew, I would be back to being an experiment. I had convinced myself that everyone was Howard or Obadiah. I forgot that people could also be my mother, Jarvis, Charles. You. Even geniuses need reminders, I’ve learned. Thanks for that.”

Thor stands and starts to clap. Everyone twists to look at him for a moment, before Clint shrugs and stands as well. The room is suddenly full of applause and everyone is standing and Tony is so overwhelmed, so happy, that he blinks and suddenly there is blue. So, so much blue. Weaving in between, over and under these people who supported him, these people who know his story and do not look at him differently. It lies over their skin, wraps around their hair; numbers and photos and half-formed sentences that Tony has kept deep inside him for so long.

As one, they all reach out to touch it, moving closer to read and look and understand. Steve is laughing at Clint as he loudly complains about the very long list of nicknames Tony’s compiled for him. Natasha is tracing the letters of a table that track her favorite movies and ways to cheer her up after a bad mission while Thor is happily correcting his gathered knowledge of Norse legend. Scott is talking to Charles about whether this means the kids and Tony can see each other more often, if that would be something that Tony would like or would help him. Logan argues with Jean over the fact that Tony noticed his attraction to her and noted it, and Storm is theorizing about what would happen if they tried to combine their powers and take over the solar system.

Bruce is telling him how proud he is of Tony, and teasing him about how many graphs of the curls of his hair he has stored away.

Tony thinks that maybe, just maybe, being true to himself has made this blue just that much brighter.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!