"Tony you shouldn't be working yourself up right now, this isn't the best time-" Sam says, trying to soothe but Tony isn't having it, he feels the snarl conquer his face.

"No? No this is the best time!" Tony screams out, voice already hoarse, vocal cords already straining, "No more explanations or 'But Tony you don't understand'." He twists violently to glare at Steve, a fist by his side and a finger pointing dangerously close to the super soldier's chest, "You, oh you arrogant piece of shit, you were going to sign the Accords!"

At that Sam pulls back, his gaze traveling to Steve and his brows furrowing, Bucky's as well.

"I told you amendments were more than possible, and, and I delivered! I told you Bucky would be transferred to an American psych ward for therapy, to get help! I offered to legalize everything you did to get Bucky, both you and Sam!" Sam takes a step back, a gruff noise escaping his throat. Steve won't look at him, he can't rip his gaze away from
Tony.

Notes

Tony Stark is my child and I will die protecting him.  
This fic is not a fix-it. Honestly, I don't know how you can fix anything after all that happened in CA:CW.

*no betas, all mistakes are courtesy of yours truly
Yep, definitely broken ribs.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The ground is cold. It's freezing. It seeps up slow through his armor and settles deep and sharp inside him like knives made of ice. It doesn't help that the wind bites at his face and the soft fall of snowflakes feel like slaps against his skin. His skin that bleeds, and is bruised, and God he cannot breathe are his ribs broken?

His suit's reactor is splintered through and dull, his suit is barely functioning, barely allowing him to lean over on his elbow. F.R.I.D.A.Y. is offline and for one of the many few times, he feels helpless in his suit.

It's been about half an hour since self-righteous Steve had limped away, dragging poor brain-fucked Bucky with him. Tony snarls and lets out an angry roar, breathing ragged and in pain. He shuts his eyes and feels them brim with liquid, the warm sting of unshed tears dam up in the back of his throat.

Yep, definitely broken ribs.

Tony takes a light calming breath, wincing slightly as the ache in his ribs still pound against him with every intake of air and beat of his heart. He drags a cold stare over to the abandoned shield, so easily tossed aside, then the metal arm.

Tony rakes his eyes over the torn pieces and burnt metal that have twisted themselves upon being heated up so fast only to be cooled down even faster. He feels vaguely proud that he managed to take something from him, take something that maybe matters to the Winter Soldier.

The rage is still coursing through him.

He wishes he had taken more.

Tony spits blood on the ground and tries to push himself up to stand. Immediately it's a horrible idea, nausea and pain shoot through him and he can feel the bile rise in his throat. He slams back into the ground and his whole body racks with pain. There's a dizziness in his brain and he suddenly becomes very sluggish, he can't even raise his hands.

When he gets home he is going straight to bed, maybe a shower. Good lord knows he needs both. Medical attention too probably. When he gets home...

But how is he supposed to get home? He only has one decent foot thruster and that's barely working. Not to mention his suit which is just... he will not be flying anywhere soon. He's got no communication, no one knows where he is. Not Rhodey, not that Parker kid, not Pepper and fuck does he not need to open that can of worms right now because he cannot stomach another-

The vomit forces its way out of his mouth, he doesn't even have the power to turn over. The sounds are grotesque enough, all liquid splashing and gagging that is slick and suffocating. The whole body force of expelling this particularly disgusting bodily fluid shudders through him all the way down to his toes and the pain spikes through him like a tsunami. Tony hears a sickening crunch in his side as another wave of vomit forces its way up, coating down his chin and rolling down the left side of his face and partially into his ear. The horrible stench makes him gag and the pain increases with his dry heaving.

The cold seeps into his skin, the rancid liquid pooling around his neck and into his suit.

His eyes begin to droop, too heavy from all the strain, and black creeps into his vision. Hot tears fall from his eyes and this time he lets them, too tired to care. There is after all, so much Tony Stark can take.

He isn't a machine no matter the implication his hero wardrobe brings.

There is a man in that suit.

His heavy eyes close shut and his breathing starts to slow. He hears a familiar tune being hummed by a female voice.

Goodnight my angel time to close your eyes
And save these questions for another day
I think I know what you've been asking me
I think you know what I've been trying to say
I promised I would never leave you
And you should always know
Wherever you may go no matter where you are
I never will be far away

Tony feels the pain ebb slowly as he hums away and slips into unconsciousness.

Mom, did I ever tell you that you have a wonderful singing voice?

He drifts in and out of consciousness, the pain doesn't register and he thinks that shock may be setting in. Tony does feel, however, the wetness between his legs at the top of his thighs. He starts to cry again and turns his head to the left, trying to look at the night sky. The crusted vomit falls deeper into his suit, he shakes with disgust.

Wait, night sky? How long...

Well it would explain his body's reason for pissing himself.

It's definitely colder at night, much colder. Tony can hardly feel his nose.

He tries to lift a hand to fling some of the muck away but he can't. This time not from simple exhaustion, but the dead weight of his suit. No arc, no power, no movement. No fucking luck.

Tony lets out a broken cry, half sob and laughter.

He falls back into a fitful rest and dreams of a calloused human hand on soft pale skin, of blood in
"Mr. Stark!"

He blinks, there's a voice, a young voice, and a hand shaking him from his shoulder. He winces as pain floods through his body.

"Mr. Stark!"

He looks down at the black gloved hand and travels up the black military uniform to a helmet covered head, black cloth covering their nose and mouth. The visor is up though and worried brown eyes look at him, eyebrows hitched together in fright. He's crouched down low, the tip of his right boot dangerously close to the dried pool of vomit on the ground, a med bag not too far behind him. Tony feels he should warn him about the mess so close to him but his voice doesn't seem to be working.

His eyes flit around instead and he spots at least a dozen of them. Guns in their hands, all black, all facing him.

_Hmm, Special Forces?_

"Mr. Stark we're here to take you home," The man with the young voice says.

Tony squints his eyes and nods.

"Sir I don't know how to get you out of your suit, so we're going to have to ride back in the chopper with it on. I know this may be uncomfortable, but I think I have something on the chopper that can help me get it off so I can check your..." The kid trails off, _can't be older than 24 good fucking lord_ his eyes running up and down Tony. Tony doesn't blame him. He must look like the definition of shit. Bruises, blood, vomit, hell anyone of them could probably smell the _piss_.

"Your injuries sir."

At least he had the decency to finish the sentence. Tony feels the corner of his mouth tug upwards. He likes this kid.

"If you've got a welding torch and some patience you'll be fine. Tear this fucker up, I have dozens at home."

His voice comes out horse and croaky from nonuse, but the kid nods his head and Tony thinks he can see his smile through the black fabric.

He see two more soldiers come over with a stretcher and struggle but manage to get him on it without too much of a hassle. Tony still cries out in sharp pain as they start to move, then just bears through his teeth with it. No one says anything.

_Quite the empathetic lot I got huh? Lucky me._

As he's getting carried away he notices a sharp glint of sunshine off of metal.
"Wait, sunshine. It was just night, I- nevermind."

"Wait!" He grinds out, loud enough for the worried soldier walking behind him to hear. They stop and the kid leans down.

"Mr. Stark?"

Tony takes a small even breathe before pointing to the objects in question.

"I want those. Those are mine."

The kid looks in the offered direction and pauses, looks back to Tony who has a grit to his glare before ordering two men to pick them up.

"No problem Mr. Stark, we'll pack them with your suit," He says and they resume their walking.

Tony lays his head back and lets his eyes fall to half mast.

"How long have I been here?"

"Almost 26 hours."

Tony would have whistled if it didn't pain him to breathe.

"How'd you find me?"

"Something...Friday? Contacted Mr. Ross, gave him the coordinates but they were a little wonky. She said to tell you sorry, something about her getting locked out of the suit. Then it took us a little bit to get the squad together and then find and search this place. Sorry for the wait Mr. Stark."

Tony rolls his eyes at the apology in mock offense.

"I wasn't in any hurry to be anywhere."

A moment passes and he winces once from being jostled before turning to the kid again.

"Pack any remnants of the suit that make it up for me will you? But don't worry about being *honorary* to the shield or arm. If you'd like to add a few scratches or hell a sharpie dick drawing or two I wouldn't mind."

The kid gives a chuckle at that.

"Noted Mr. Stark."

Tony gives an exhausted smile.

"Call me Tony. Mr. Stark was my-" Tony suddenly feels the raw deep hurt from before come spiraling down on him and it more unbearable than the pain that racks his body. "Was my father."

The kid pauses again, eyebrows pulling together again.

"Duly noted Mr... Tony."

Tony feels the prickle of hot tears filling his eyes and *damn, this won't stop soon will it?*

"Time to go home Tony."
And he's being pulled into the chopper.

*Home.*

First thought is the Avenger's tower. Disgust wells up in him, but Vision is there, and Rhodey,

*Oh Rhodey.*

The tears spill over this time.

*Home it is. Time to clean up the mess.*

*Again.*

He reads the note over and over and over again, every single time making his blood boil more and more and more.

*How fucking dare he.*

How dare he think that a note, a fucking note would fix everything that has happened? Offering this poor excuse of an olive branch that felt like burning flames in his palm.

*And the fucking phone.*

Tony squeezes the hard cheap commercial plastic in his palm. It creaks under the strain of his fingers, knuckles turning white.

"*So no matter what, I promise if you — if you need us. If you need me, I'll be there.*"

Why hadn't he been there when Tony actually needed him? Why did he turn his back on everything? Didn't even *look back.*

Tony's lips pull up in a sneer. There's so much rage in him he can hear the blood rushing in his ears.

He doesn't know how Steve could expect Tony to look at him, let alone stomach his voice. He throws the phone and letter into a drawer in his office and locks it. He wants to burn it, destroy every trace of it, but it already feels like fire in his hand and he can't stand to have it in his presence any longer.

He closes his eyes and steadies himself on the dark rich wood of his desk.

"*Tony?*"

He opens his eyes slowly and sees Rhodes in his wheelchair, sweat staining his workout shirt and his legs angled to the left, knee to knee, no spine brace on. He's peering curiously at Tony and with no small amount of worry in every nerve of his body. Guilt shoots through Tony's body and he would give *anything* for Rhodes to walk again.

"*Hey Peanut-butter how're you feeling?*" Tony asks, hoping to God it comes out semi-normal and playful. Rhodes narrows his eyes, he must have caught something.
"What happened?"

Cut right to the chase huh?

"Nothing, I-"

"Don't you bullshit me Tony it just pisses me off."

Tony raised his hands in mock surrender, raising his brows in amusement at Rhodey's snark.

"I was extended an olive branch by means of a cellular device from the stone ages and a fairly touching," Tony rounds his desk to cross his arms and sit lightly on the edge,"Quote me on the sarcasm would you Rhodes?" He points at his best friend which earns his a short but bright smile and fuck if that hasn't been his goal these past weeks, "But not quite apologetic 'I did what I thought was right and so did you, sorry it didn't work out. Yada yada, I'm still here for you Tony, call me beep me when you want to reach me.' and 'Here you can be leader of the Avengers, because it doesn't fit me any more, but I've also taken more than half the kids in the divorce.' But hey, he's Steve Rogers right. Steve Rogers wrote me a letter. Of all people. Me. I'm honored to say the least."

Tony gives a snort of a mock laugh and shakes his head. He grips the desk on either side of him and thinks he can feel the warp of wood under his palms.

He hears the light squeak of Rhodey's wheels coming towards him.

Those should be foot steps. Oh fuck.

"Hey, Tony, fuck him," Rhodes whispers in his most comforting voice, a smile on his lips. He reaches up and places a warm hand on Tony's elbow.

"I say put that ugly ass phone up on the wall next to his shield and his little boyfriend's bitch ass arm."

Tony throws his head back and laughs.

"Aren't I the one who's supposed to be comforting you?"

Rhodes let's go of his elbow and Tony misses the warmth instantly. He remembers the cold, remembers the smell of vomit and the pain of a shield splintering through his chest.

Rhodey shrugs noncommittally, "I don't wake up screaming in the middle of the night in a pool of my own sweat."

"Yes you do," Tony points out because it's the truth and Rhodes does not need to think of Tony as the only one suffering or being worthy of comfort. He's the least worthy when concerned with that.

"You more so then me Tony. Before my run-in with gravity."

Tony takes a sharp breathe through his nose.

Remembers Rhodey falling down through the air so fucking fast.

"Rhodes-"

Rhodey holds up a hand. The words die on Tony's tongue.
"Do not blame yourself for what happened to me Tony. It could've happened on any mission I had
gone on. I got hurt doing what I believe is right, what I still believe to this day is right. Everything
I've told you before is true. I'm not taking anything back and I sure as hell will not put any blame
on your shoulders. Lord knows you do enough of that yourself," Rhodey eyes him up and down
accusingly but with affection. Tony sighs and runs a hand through hair.

"Rhodes-"

"No. No more. Not unless we are going to talk about how you are doing and I mean how you are handling everything, or about my next set of legs because I am mastering those prototype bad boys," He throws a thumb over his shoulder to the gym, "and I am going to want a new pair soon enough to match Iron Patriot."

Tony stuffs his hands in his pockets and tips his head back so the tears don't fall, blinks them away
and plasters a small but genuine smile on his face.

What did he do to deserve Rhodey. Solid Rhodey, always there, Rhodey.

He walks around Rhodes' wheelchair to grab the handles, Rhodey huffs in annoyance but smirks in
victory and allows it.

"Okay Pina-colada, let's go see the amazing progress you've made in the last, hmm, what twenty minutes? Last time I saw you, you were like out of the womb Bambi. Also, War Machine, still has a better ring to it."

A challenging string of 'ohs' leave Rhodey's mouth and he shakes a finger up in Tony's face.

"Watch your ass Thumper I'll be Prince of the Forest in no time. Rude ass, Iron Patriot is the shit."

As long as I have Rhodes, Tony thinks, as long as I have Rhodes I'll be okay.

We'll be okay.

_____________________

"T-ony?"

"Mom?"

He's screaming, shouting for her, running through a forest in his pajamas with his arc reactor in
his chest. He can hear her faint voice, it always seems farther away every time he thinks he's getting closer.

The dirt and grass under his bare feet are wet and slippery. He almost takes a nasty spill a couple
of times but catches himself on a tree with rough bark that leave nice deep scratches on his palms and forearms.

"Tony!"

She's screaming and his heart is pounding in his chest. Fear laces through him and suddenly he's on a dirt road and he glances to his right and there's a car. Their car. A motorcycle is parked
behind it, the Winter Soldier at the passenger side door, human arm through the window.

No-

"Mom! Get the fuck away from her!"

He races towards them, blood roaring with the intent to kill. That's his mom. That's his mo-

He gets knocked back into the dirt with enough force to his chest he wonders if a semi just hit him. He looks down and sees his chest is torn open, chest cavity on display, plied apart with two arms. Metal and flesh.

His arc reactor is in the middle of it all, placed gently between his lungs, he can't see his heart. He doesn't have one, what is this?

He kicks his legs out as unrelenting panic sets in and looks back to the car where the bastard is still stealing the life from her. Then, there's a flash of blue in from of him.

Steve is straddling his stomach and Stark can't buck him off. His weight feels like finality.

"He's killing her! He's killing her!"

Steve cocks his head to the side, confused. His eyes unfocused and his brow furrowing.

"No he's not, he's my friend Tony."

"Can't you see? Fucking look! He's killing her!" Tony is screaming, pleading with Steve to help. Help her!

Steve turns around and slowly looks over the scene, looks back to Tony, this time no confusion. Just finality.

"You know I wouldn't do this if I had any other choice-"

"There's always a choice!" Tony spits at him, snarling and going for Steve's throat with his hands. He just can't reach. Damnit!

"He's my friend," Steve replies, voice going monotone and robotic. Tony stops struggling, tears spilling from his eyes. He hiccups twice and shuts his eyes painfully tight as he hears his mother's last audible breath. He shouldn't, not from this distance, but-

"So was I," He sobs out, broken, limp.

Steve reaches behind his back, grabs the shield. The shield Tony's father made.

He raises it above his head and smirks at Tony, blood somehow now dripping down the side of his mouth clouding over his teeth. Tony begins to hyperventilate.

"I could do this all day."

Steve's voice sounds marred, low and messed up like an audio recording that's received water damage. Yes, exactly like water damage. Underwater. Steve is under water.

And then he brings the shield down onto, into, Tony's arc reactor, slicing through the bare flesh of his chest too. Tony screams but he can't move.
Steve brings it down again, and again, and again.

Tony screams.

Tony wakes up violently falling off of his bed and slamming against his floor. He clambers up immediately, hissing in pain as his raw bloody palms scratch against the sheets for purchase. He looks around the room, grounding himself in the present and takes even, deep breathes. It's dark, too dark to even be morning, but he can see enough with the light he has.

He glances down at his palms and sees crescent shaped wounds, four on each palm and there's claw marks down his forearms.

Tony is covered in sweat and his face is swollen and wet from tears. His eyes burn and hurt and he falls to his knees and buries his head in the bunched up quilt found on the edge of his bed.

He can't get the image out of his head.

His breathing is still elevated and his heart is pounding like crazy. He runs his fingertips over his chest but doesn't feel the old semi-familiar rise of metal. No soft blue light emanating from his chest. No arc reactor. No open chest. Just the bump of scar tissue between his pectorals.

"Boss?"

F.R.I.D.A.Y.’s voice rings softly through his room and he relaxes as he leans back onto the back of his feet. One hand is still tangled in the sheets and the other still rests on his chest. He tips his head back and closes his eyes.

"Fry? Shouldn't you be sleeping?" He tries for the playful tone but fails, his voice cracks desperately and he grinds his teeth together.

"I could say the same for you."

She sounds worried, frightened.

"What can I say I'm a night owl," He teases, tries to. He gets up on legs that refuse to support his weight, and tosses his body onto the bed, stomach hitting the mattress because he doesn't trust himself not to rub his chest raw looking for the glass and metal that had been there once upon a time.

He pushes back his wet hair and grimaces at the sting of sweat salt in his palm.

"Boss?"

Tony turns his head to the side and closes his eyes.

"F.R.I.D.A.Y.?"

"...I hope you sleep well sir."
Tony lets out an exhausted sigh.

"Me too."

He does not go back to sleep.

He doesn't sleep much at all anymore.

---

Tony is watching the t.v. There's some kind of hostage situation in Paris, a future political candidate on the rise beaten and bloody and the newsrooms were airing the hostage tapes. They already knew what building they were filming in, the place surrounded by French policemen.

_French S.W.A.T.? What is the French equivalent of S.W.A.T.?_

He's rubbing a hand over his mouth in thought when Vision comes and sits next to him on the sofa. It seems likes he's floating and then he's slowly sinking into the over plush couch.

"The Accords committee had called over the situation in Paris and have told us not to worry about it. I agree with the decision that Parisian law enforcement should be able to handle it. I suppose we now just," Vision splays his hands out in front of him, quite human like. Tony grins.

"I guess we just relax? Lord knows we need some down time anyway-"

Tony gets cutoff buy the t.v.

"This coming in we have information of the team of Avengers- I'm sorry vigilante criminals, lead by Captain America- Sorry once more, Steve Rogers, have found their way in Paris and have infiltrated the hostage situation. Here we have some aerial footage."

The footage shows all of them running towards the building. The policemen are dumbfounded, they aren't going to shoot Captain America. Of course not.

He has guns now, no shield. No Bucky either, and something dark in Tony's stomach is happy.

But seeing them all, all of his friends, all of his _people?_ Work together, be a _team._

_No, not friends, not his people, at least not anymore._

They weren't his the same way he wasn't theirs.

He feels his jaw tick and he drums his fingers along the spine of the couch, feeling the leather smooth against his fingertips.

"You are a good man."

Tony shoots a glance at Vision who is staring straight at him.

"You are a good man," He repeats, saying it slower, softer.

Tony glances down, starts playing with the hem of his shirt.
"The niceties are wonderful but I don't-"

"You don't think you are, and you don't think you are enough. You've had far too many people leave you so easily," Tony snaps his head up again, "I trust in you Tony Stark. And I would like you to know that I am not leaving and I will never, not unless you command me of it. I confess I do not know what else to say to help you through..." Vision trails off but doesn't look away. Tony smirks and coughs to unclear his throat. It's awkward, no doubt about it, but it's sweet in an innocent childlike way.

"Are you trying to make your pops cry?"

Vision looks a split second worried but his face falls back into it's usual relaxed state, though the left corner of his mouth does turn up.

"I would prefer a change of program," Vision says motioning to the t.v. Tony barks a laugh and nods his head, his eyes sneaking a glance at the t.v. before it changes. Part of the building explodes, people are screaming, there is fire- 

"Ah look, *Man In The Iron Mask.*"

Vision clicks it hurriedly and spares a quick side eye of Tony. Tony nods placatingly and turns his attention to the movie.

But his mind wanders to the fire, to the explosion, to the screaming people.

*And he wasn't there to help.*

---

He's falling down. Fast and hard and he can hear the wind rush past his ears in his suit of armor. He's falling in New York, from the black hole. There's fire, it's exploding inside and the flames are so close to him even as he falls down, down, down.

He looks to his side and Rhodey is falling too.

"Rhodes!" He screams, but it just echoes back into his helmet, hurting his ears. His suit isn't working. Rhodes is falling at the same pace, he's about twenty feet away, all loose limbs. Ragdoll.

Then he's not beside Rhodey anymore but in the arms of the Hulk, being snatched up and swinging away from building to building until he's on the ground. They're all pestering him, touching him, worried hands.

He's still staring up at Rhodes, who just keeps falling. It's like there's never ending sky.

He looks around and Natasha is mouthing something, she keeps repeating herself before the words reach his ears.

"I'm not the one who needs to watch their back," She says, her face worried and lips still moving, not syncing up with her voice. Tony feels a tear in his armor and Natasha rips a chunk of metal from his back, it doesn't hurt but the implication is the same and it hits home in his heart.

He moves to run away, but Steve is there now, Wanda, Clint, Thor, Bruce, all begin tearing at his armor, ripping it away like paper. Start ripping into his skin. Like they want every piece of him.
Tony hisses in pain as his helmet is ripped fully from his head by Thor and the side scrape against his cheek. He takes the opportunity though, to look back to the sky to see Rhodey in his infinite loop, falling forever. Then Sam flies by, throws a thumb in Rhodes' direction and says, "Is Rhodes okay?"

Tony yells, "Help him!"

"Is Rhodes okay?"

"Fucking help hi-"

He stops when Bruce, skinny half naked Bruce, grabs him by the shoulders and opens his mouth wide, impossibly wide, and roars.

3 years later...

"Stark."

Tony looks up and meets Ross' questioning glare. He throws a slick oil salesmen smile at him in return.

"Just, pardon them. All of them?" Ross asks like he's talking to a child. Tony adjusts his suit and folds his hands in front of himself like a good little boy.

"All of them. Barnes has only turned up in the last five months, and if treated properly, he could give us all the information we would need. Who he killed, why he killed, to further what agenda? Really boring stuff right?" Tony's heart pounds in his chest.

Who he killed, why he killed, to further what agenda?

"Plus, they deserve a second chance to see what the Accords have to offer now that they've been amended."

Ross mulls it over before taking the seat right in front of Tony.

"What is this about? This isn't about Barnes' knowledge or the people that would return to the Avengers, bullshit team camaraderie and all. Tell me the truth Stark and I might let you have a pass with this."

Tony steels his gaze and feels the ice in his veins.

"I'm just a good guy who misses his...friends."

"Stark-"

Tony raises his hand and Ross quiets down, an amused glint in his eye.

 Fucking asshole. Tony bites the inside of his cheek hard enough to slightly taste copper.

"You do this for me, I will owe you. Within reason, just like this is, because the benefits of them coming back do not in fact just benefit me. Compromise Ross, that's what you said when you
brought that pretty little blue book to us the first time."

Ross makes a show of scratching his chin, trying to rile up Tony, make him think he has the option of mulling it over.

"Consider it done."

"You can do it?"

"You, Mr. Stark, are not the only person who owes me a favor. And with the number of times the world almost blew up or ended in an Alien invasion... It's safe to say we would be alright if the avengers reassembled much like they did before, but still with some ground rules."

Ross huffs as he stands and throws his jacket over his shoulder, turning to go before pausing in the doorway and looking quizzically at Tony.

"Do you think a fruit basket would be enough apology for the ones that were in prison?"

Tony smirks, fire on his tongue.

"It was only three days. A fruit basket should be fine."

Ross nods and leaves.

Tony waits ten minutes, then twenty, then thirty, then a whole hour passes before his hand goes to his pocket and removes the old cellphone he got three years ago in the mail.

Bile rises in his throat and he flips it open and dials the only number in its contacts. It rings a consecutive three times before someone picks up.

"Tony?"

Tony grabs the phone away from his ear and barely makes it to a trash bin before vomiting. He gags as mostly stomach acid comes up and leaves a sour taste in his mouth. He grabs the handkerchief from his front pocket and wipes his mouth off. The phone is still open in his hand, he's certain Steve heard him.

He gingerly places the phone back to his ear, now prepared.

"Tony? Tony? Jesus Christ-"

And then the snarl was back on his face and the heat back in his blood because Steve Rodgers didn't get to be concerned for him, not after where he left him, not after three years of nightmares.

"Rogers," He hisses out, his throat sore from years of pent up anger and remnants of bile stuck to his vocal cords.

The line goes quiet for a moment but he hears some rustling and he can almost feel all of their breaths on his neck.

"Some time today, T'Challa will be getting a datacopy message of all of your pardons. I will have the hardcopies at the Avengers base. Once you have picked up your contract you will then decide if you will sign the Amended Accords. If you do not sign the Accords, you will make the choice to forfeit your status as a superhero. Do you understand? With the datacopies there will also be a copy of the new Accords you may read at your leisure before you come pick up your hardcopies here at the base."
"Tony-"

"If you do not retrieve your hardcopies from the tower or sign the Accords on United States property in 3 months, you will forfeit your pardon. And yes, even your Bucky Barnes gets one."

"T-"

Tony flips the phone closed, the satisfying snap of plastic smacking together resounds through the room.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter we get a reunion.
Well, two reunions. One is happy. The other is fucking not.

*Thank you for the LOVE on this fic! It warms my heart to know people are enjoying it! Please leave a comment! I love them so much!
For the betterment of humankind.

Chapter Notes

Okay, let's heat it up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tony is sitting on the couch, the glare of the fireplace broadcasting his profile on the wall. There's a warm glass of scotch in his hand that he's been occasionally swirling its contents. It's a motion he'd seen his dad do quite often.

"So we just wait for them to come to us? We just wait for them to waltz in to be Avengers again?"

Rhodey's voice swirls around Tony's head like smoke. He raises his glass and takes a small sip, letting the slow burn of it travel down his throat. He locks eyes with Rhodes.

"They have to sign the Accords just like we did Rhodey."

"Yeah but they get to enjoy the cupcake that we've spent three years baking. Fuck them." Rhodey puts his hands on his hips and pointedly glares at Tony. He leans his weight onto one hip and his braces give a soft clink as they realign to the new position. Tony grimaces.

"How many hours did you put into the Accords? Hm? To help us out, to help out the world? They never gave it a chance and they sure as hell didn't stick with it to the end to see the results. Your results. I am pissed off Tony," Rhodes points at him, "And you are pissed off too."

"Duh," He replies, shaking his head in agreement. Rhodey raises his eyebrows.

"Then what the fuck are you doing Tony?"

Tony takes another slow sip of his scotch, swallows, then downs the rest. The burn threatens to seize his throat but he swallows that down too.

"If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle."

Rhodey drags a hand over his face and groans then starts rubbing his temples.

"Sun Tzu? Tony, really?"

Tony gives a small smile.

"The Art Of War. I think it's very fitting."

"That's because you're a drama queen."

Tony smirks in response and puts his glass on the small table next to him. He gets up and strides over to Rhodey, dropping his hands on his friend's shoulders. Rhodey looks at him with a questioning glare and a raised brow.
"I'm doing this because we need to have more than three people on our team if shit really hits the fan like New York circa alien invasion. Despite the pure unadulterated rage and anger I feel towards Team Fuckwad in Wakanda, I'm thinking about the people who are going to need us. And I'm doing it the right way. If I get them to sign the Accords, it's just another layer of security. They'll finally be responsible and they'll be able to functionally help people instead of running in blind to a foreign country, even if I worked for the breathing room they'll be getting." He feels Rhodey's shoulders fall with draining tension, "I'm trying my best to think of the people."

"For the betterment of humankind and such," Rhodey says with a small smile and a roll of his eyes. Tony smiles back and claps him on his shoulder. Rhodey playfully shoves his hand off.

"Okay Tony," Rhodey gives him one last look over before nodding his head, "I'm going to go to bed. I'll see you in the morning." Tony gives him a smile

"Well then sleep tight pumpkin, I love you."

Rhodes flips him the bird and he laughs.

Tony eyes Rhodes' back as he exits the room, the warm air suddenly leaving with him. He looks back to the fire place and makes his way over to the stone mantle.

He shoves his hands into his pockets, trying to stave off the cold. He stares into the flames and his jaw twitches.

For the betterment of humankind.

Tony turns around and grabs his empty glass from the small table. He twists it in his hand and feels the weight of it. His chest is rising with each deep breathe he takes.

"Fuck it."

He winds his arm up and throws the glass into the fireplace. The smash of glass eases something in himself and he feels like he can breathe easier. He hears some shards crunch under his shoes as he nears the fire again and watches as the flame licks at the glass.

He watches the fire consume it.

"You mean they want to do an open press panel on the Accords? With me answering everything?" Tony asks, eyebrow raised and hand under his chin. His leg is bouncing distractedly underneath him where he sits. Ross's mouth forms a tight line as he looks at the aforementioned leg.

"Stop that."

Tony glares at him.

Make me.

Ross takes a calming breath before leaning back in his own chair.
"Yes. You've done all this work on the Accords and suddenly it's your idea to invite all of your convict ex-girlfriends back onto the team. As you could guess the public is intrigued to say the least."

Tony scoffs.

"And I got chosen because? Why not one of the U.N. members? Why not you?" Tony throws out a hand in Ross's direction before swiveling his chair away to face the wall. He hears Ross sigh deeply and he counts it as a win.

"Because the people trust you. They also want one of their heroes to advocate for the others he wants to let in on his team. People haven't forgotten that Captain America and Co. decided to not only not sign the Accords, but run around and break the law. Lord knows how many foreign policies they've trampled on with the U.S. to blame," Ross let out another sigh, "They need you to help them trust these assholes again."

Tony shut his eyes, opens them again, turns his chair around.

"Okay."

Ross raises his brow.

"Okay?"

Tony shrugs.

"Okay."

Ross leans back in his chair, gives a Tony a small smile.

"Okay."

---

Tony is standing in a cave. It's barren but the familiar rock and dampness is enough to make his hair stand on end. There's no exit, no escape.

He walks over to a far wall and slides down to sit on the ground. He can feel the ache in his chest and he runs his fingertips back over the scar found there, the ridge is easy to find under his threadbare t-shirt. He closes his eyes and leans his head back against the cold rock wall.

"Big man in a suit of armor, take that away and what are you?"

Tony's eyes snap open and he scans the cave, but he's alone.

"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 sneers, fingers still rubbing over the scar through the fabric.

"Think what the fuck you want Rogers," He says to no one, his voice echoing off the walls. His
fingers are still rubbing the scar. Hard enough to bruise.

"You know, you may not be a threat, but you better stop pretending to be a hero."

"Fuck. You. Rogers."

Stickiness mars his fingertips and he looks down to see red. His shirt is gone and there is an arc reactor sized hole in his chest. There's blood dripping like honey down his torso and piling in the waistband of his sleep pants. His breathing becomes labored as he sees his heart start to fall out of the hole.

"I'm going to miss you Tony."

Tony struggles for breath and he can feel his throat close up. His eyes are getting heavy and his jaw aches from where his teeth are clenching together.

"No you won't."

And Tony slips into darkness.

He wakes up in his dark room covered in a cold sweat. He stares at the ceiling before moving sluggishly up and out of his bed. On shaky legs he makes his way to the bathroom, he switches on the light and it nearly blinds him. Tony eyes the toilet, then the tub.

Feels more like a tub night.

He slides his hands over the lip of the white porcelain tub before turning on the faucet to the hottest setting the water will go, he plugs up the drain.

With a hiss he lowers himself, pajamas and all, into the scalding water.

"A record night of five hours in the past eight months Boss. Did you sleep well?" F.R.I.D.A.Y.'s voice says softly.

Tony grunts as the water fills past his belly button.

"It's a tub night." He says with a small groan.

"That's better than the other option sir."

Tony looks back to the toilet and grimaces.

"That's true Fry, very true."

He waits until the water is chest level before leaning over and shutting it off. The water burns but at least he isn't cold anymore. He settles back and leans the nape of his neck on the rim so he can tip his head back.

"Boss."
Tony closes his eyes.

"F.R.I.D.A.Y. not tonight, please." His voice sounds broken even to his ears.

"You need help Boss."

"Everyone needs help Fry, what makes me so special?" Tony can hear the agitation in his voice, he doesn't care.

"Because you have 'tub nights'."

And, wow, did he program snark into her?

"I'm sure there are worse ways I could be dealing with things."

"That's the problem Boss, you aren't."

Tony squeezes his eyes hard together.

"La, la, la, not listening," He says as he drops down under the water's surface.

Vaguely he can hear F.R.I.D.A.Y.'s voice through the water, each syllable muted.

"Oh, Tony."

He stays under as long as he can, as long as he can.

There's the flash of lights everywhere, coming from every direction. Tony is glad he decided to wear his sunglasses.

"And how sure are you that these vigilantes will sign the Accords when only three years ago they refused to sign them and broke apart from the Avengers?"

The question comes from a petite brunette in a smart dark blue paint suit. She's got a hardness to her eyes that Tony has to respect.

Sort of like Pepper, his mind supplies but he shakes his head lightly before turning his attention to the reporter.

"They want to do good. That's all they've ever wanted to do. Back then the Accords..." Tony flexes his jaw but keeps a light smile on his face as he thinks of the right words, "The Accords were just too strict, too conservative, for some of the members and they decided that the best way they could keep helping and saving lives, was to leave and essentially operate out of the Accords and the United States."

"And the law apparently. Isn't that correct?" She bites out with a victorious smile on her face. Other reporters are scribbling madly on their notepads and their laptops. Tony fights down the sneer.

"That is correct, they did. I can't change that fact. I can only vouch that their intention was to help,"
More cameras flash, more sounds of scribbling,

"You're vouching-"

"Yes. Do you think I would give up three years of my life to amend the Accords just to toss it away on unreliable people? These are the same heroes you were respecting and rooting for when aliens fell from the sky. Yes they messed up. Yes they went against the law, but they're trying to do the right thing here. They have the option of signing the Accords and if they do that, they will be working legally in the system, and they will still be protecting the innocent and the helpless like they always have. I trust each and everyone of them."

Liar, liar, broken arc reactor.

"And you can promise all that Mr. Stark? What if they don't sign?"

"Then they don't operate. Early crime fighting retirement, a lot of them are fans of golf."

Tony makes sure to keep the smile on his face. The reporter's face is starting to get red.

"How can you assure us that even if they sign the Accords, they won't break the rules and go rogue again?"

Tony pauses, rubs his hands together.

"Do you want the honest answer?"

"Mr. Stark," She says with a smug smirk, like she's finally got him on the ropes.

Tony readjusts himself in his seat. He runs his hand through his hair, pushes it off his face.

"I can't. All I can tell you is, if they break the law again, there are no other chances for redemption. Second chances can only be given out so often. I will do everything in my power to stop them and bring them to justice if they break the law. You have my word as Tony Stark. That's all I can offer you, and I hope the public can trust me to make this decision about my prodigal teammates. I trust them with my life, I'm asking the public to trust me."

The reporter shuts her mouth with such ferocity, a loud click resonates from her mouth.

"I'm finished with my questions Mr. Stark," She says through gritted teeth. She falls into her chair and whispers harshly in ear of one of the cameramen near her.

Another reporter stands up, a younger man in a t-shirt and jeans, dark hair unkempt and sticking every which way. Tony quirks a brow.

"How's it been?"

Tony tilts his head. There was something familiar in that voice.

"I'm sorry do-"

Then he notices the brown eyes.

"Last time we met, we were in Siberia," The man says and smiles. He has one dimple on his right cheek and slightly uneven but white teeth. He looks like a-

"Kid?"
Cameras flash and reporters stand up and start shouting.

"Mr. Stark who is this man?"

"Mr. Stark what happened in Siberia?"

"Mr. Stark!"

"Mr. Stark!"

Tony let's a surprised smile fall on his face. The kid lifts his hand and offers a small wave.

"Hey Tony."

"I don't suppose a 'thank you' would be too late in the game to say?" Tony asks smiling and offering his hand. The kid, he means Benjamin Murphy (what a grown up name), reaches out with a smile and shakes his hand with good grip.

"Don't mention it, merely doing my, well old job," He says with a small embarrassed smile. Tony laughs before slumping back into his seat.

"Yeah, tell me about that, we still have, "Tony brings his wrist up to view the time, "around 20 more minutes before we reach the Avenger base."

"Uh, yeah sure! And thank you for the ride and, and the job offer this, this is a lot," Ben gives a light laugh, "I'm a little overwhelmed in all honesty."

"Don't be it's just me, you've seen me at my worst," Tony offers, with a grin. Benjamin smirks and leans back in his own seat.

"Bullshit, you're still Tony Stark. No amount of vomit can change that." Benjamin points at him and Tony feels his grin widen.

"So your job?"

Benjamin sits up straight and his eyes widen.

"Oh! Right! Well when I helped you I was part of the Marines, Special Forces. I'd been in the Marines as soon as I'd turned eighteen. Anyway, a year ago I got honorably discharged," Tony raises his eyebrows in question and Ben bites his lower lip, "It started with the nightmares, and then the sleep walking and soon enough I had found myself poised over one of my teammates with my pistol aimed at his head in the middle of the Sahara desert because the gum he was popping reminded me of gunshots." Ben sighs and looks at Tony.

"Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, it fucks you up apparently." Ben makes a gun with his hand and raises it to his head. He cocks it and pretends to blow his brains out. He makes little sounds of brain matter hitting the floor of the car. Tony stops smiling and searches Ben's eyes but he ducks his head low.

"Anyway, I've always been interested in journalism and I started working at this little newspaper right? Then I hear about this open press junket and how you're going to be answering questions, all
of them, so I volunteered to go. Well, I fought tooth and nail for it because for some reason I thought 'hey Tony, a familiar face' but not really because I don't know you, and then I was at the panel and it was my turn, and then I said 'hey' because I thought it was clever or something and now I'm in your limo and you've offered me a job and I'm rambling. Sorry."

Benjamin grimaces and puts his hand up in apology.

"You know," Tony leans forward, "I knew there was a reason I liked you in Siberia."

Ben lets go of a breath he didn't know he was holding and smiles.

"That's good. Hah! That's good!"

"How do you feel about being on a security detail?" Tony asks.

"How many other people?"

"Just you."

Ben shrugs with a smile.

"At least I can't almost murder a team member."

"So this is the 'living quarters' basically this whole base is just a glorified boarding house-" Tony starts as he and Benjamin walk off the elevator.

"Tony."

Tony whips his head to the living room and his stomach drops at the sight.

They're all here.

Steve is standing up in the middle of the room. Rhodes is standing opposite him, his shoulders squared and his face is flushed with anger. Vision is back by the exit to the kitchen, warily eyeing Wanda and then looking back to Tony.

Natasha is standing somewhat in the middle between Rhodes and Steve, Clint is sitting on the window sill, Wanda is sitting on the couch fiddling with the loose threads, next to her is Scott Lang who waves at Tony, and standing behind the couch is Sam who is leaning down and pointedly not looking at Rhodes.

In the corner Tony registers T'challa is standing there with...

Barnes.

Tony locks eyes with Bucky, who has the audacity to keep the stare. He glances over when he see a shine of metal.

Metal. Look who has a new arm.
"Holy shit," Benjamin whispers. Tony takes a step towards Bucky and in a flash Steve is in his direct line of sight.

"Tony-

"Shut your fucking mouth before I lose my goddamn mind."

Tony closes his eyes and takes a deep calming breath. This is all too much.

Too much, too soon.

It's been three years!

Too soon!

Tony opens his eyes and looks at all of them again. They're all looking at him now. Waiting for him. Waiting for him to what?

Tony throws back his head and he laughs. A real deep belly laugh that threatens to topple him over.

"Tony?" Rhodes asks, walking over to him, grabbing his arm to steady him. Tony wipes the tears from his eyes and claps a hand on Rhodes' shoulder.

"I'm good, I'm good buddy."

Everyone is still standing still when he makes his way over to the bar and he pours himself a drink, looks at it, downs it, then pours himself another.

"Okay," He says looking at all of them. He opens his arms wide welcoming them with a mocking benevolent smile.

"So, let's get this shit show started!"

"So, Wakanda? Sure you guys aren't spreading yourselves too thin? Jumping from one billionaire to the other?" Tony asks, swinging his hand with his drink around the room. T'challa steps forward.

"Mr. Stark-"

"No! Bad babysitter! Don't defend the kids when they did wrong. Also your encryption coding is good but it needs a little work, I broke through that on day two. Though, granted I was very determined to find enemy number one over here," Tony says pointing at Bucky without looking at him, sipping from his drink.

"Fuck you Tony, we didn't do anything wrong. You started this mess, don't throw blame on the people you threw in prison because they didn't agree with you," Clint sneers. Tony zeros in on him.

"One, you were retired. It was never your fight. Second this shit was never about the Accords. This was about Bucky. Thirdly, you break the goddamn law you go to fucking prison. What a twist."
"They had a fucking collar on her neck! A straight jacket! That wasn't prison, that was hell!" Clint roars pointing at Wanda who looks defiantly at Tony.

"You mean they shouldn't have taken precautions with the magic chick? Are you genuinely pissed at them for being smart about the criminals they were detaining. Might I add for only three days?"

"Because Steve broke us out," Wanda hisses. Tony scoffs.

"Because I let him," Tony snarls. Tosses back the rest of his drink. He walks over and thrusts it at Ben then points to the bar.

"Please?"

Ben stutters but takes the glass,"Sure, yeah."

"You don't think Ross called me? I ignored it."

Wanda's jaw twitches.

"Tony, we didn't come here to fight. We're here to talk about the Accords and get our pardons, we just want it to go back to how it was. It's been three years Tony," Steve says, taking a step towards Tony who backs up and circles him.

"You mean the pardons I got for you? You mean the Accords I amended? Glad to know there isn't any other reason you guys showed the fuck up."

Benjamin creeps over to Tony and offers him the refilled glass. Tony gives him his best smile in return.

"Of course we came back for you!" Steve shouts. His hands are fists at his sides, frustration lining his forehead.

"All is took was three years and a free ride back huh. Tony is useful again guys, let's go," Tony hisses.

Clint jumps up from his perch, walking towards Tony with a finger pointed at him.

"I haven't seen my kids in three years because I was a wanted man."

"You left them!" Tony screams, incredulous. He closes his eyes again, takes another calming breath.

"Stop it. All of you," Natasha orders, crossing her arms over her chest. Tony slowly rolls his head in her direction. Rage boiling in his belly.

"You don't get to talk. You betrayed me, and you withheld information about my parents death from me. You don't get a single fucking word."

"Is that supposed to intimidate me Tony? I didn't tell you about your parents, Steve didn't tell you about your parents. You didn't need to know that. You didn't need to see that."

Tony dropped his glass, letting it shatter by his feet, feeling the liquor splash his pants.

"So you decided to spare me? Who do you think you are to decide that? Either one of you?" Tony glares at Natasha and Steve, "You took that opportunity from me, you took away the answers I had been looking for, you took away my opportunity to grieve the right way. You took away my
decision to choose how and in what way I was going to get through my grief. You don't get to decide that shit."

Natasha glances down to the mess at the floor by Tony's feet, she won't meet his eyes.

"I said I was sorry in my letter Tony, I said I was sorry, but you decided how you were going to grieve when you attacked Bucky, you went insane."

"How was he supposed to go about that by the way?" Rhodes asks, stepping in front of Tony.

"What?" Steve asks, taken aback.

"What would you have Tony do? He acted like a human. He saw his mother strangled to death by your best friend. His father beaten by the man he had helped you rescue way back when. I saw the tape. I know. Don't you fucking dare make it sound like Tony flew off the deep end for no fucking reason. His whole world shifted the moment he saw that tape. Saw the truth. And you bet your ass any person would have done the same in his position. Don't you dare put this on Tony." Rhodes warns, eyes flashing danger. "Also, fuck your letter."

Steve's chest was rising with each breath, mouth hanging wide.

"You want the truth of the matter?" Tony asks, suddenly very tired.

"The Accords were never part of the problem. I don't know what the fuck happened to you but you had tunnel vision. You don't care about anything else when it comes to him," Tony gives a nod over in Bucky's direction, "When we had Bucky and that crazy fuck turned him loose, how long did it take you to subdue him? How long did it take to get him back to normal? Obviously enough time to find out what Zemo intended to do with super soldiers and somehow form a ragtag team of superheroes. Enough time to recruit someone from retirement, enough to recruit someone from a different time zone."

Scott is staring wide eyed at Tony.

"For the record I didn't know any of this-"

"And you still joined his side you fucking dumbass," Rhodes whispers under his breath.

"You had all this time but you couldn't bother to come back to base with Barnes and relay this information to the people who could help you. You made a little fucking team, and we fought needlessly. People were injured needlessly."

Shy eyes cast themselves over to Rhodes who sneers in their wake.

"I'm so sorry Rhodes," Sam says standing straight.

Rhodey eyes him for a moment before letting out a tired sigh.

"I've had three years to come to terms with what happened to me. Don't beat yourself up about it." Sam breathes a sigh of relief and he practically collapses onto the couch.

Steve looks at Sam before looking back to Tony.

"They would've killed Bucky."

Tony sneers.
"I'm happy you decided that on your own too. Fucking moron. We would've stuck him back in the box until we could make sure he wasn't a danger to anyone."

"That's no life to live Tony!"

"From what I gathered, he's been a human popsicle for the past two and a half years."

T'challa locks eyes with Tony.

"Also, your security cameras, need better codes, should probably get that fixed." T'challa bristled but didn't react.

"I will take that into account."

Tony nods his head in acknowledgement. He didn't have a problem with T'challa.

Well, at the rate he was going with friends...

Tony turns around, sees Benjamin in the corner eyeing Steve with a hardline etched in his brow.

"Ben?"

Ben's eyes slowly meet Tony's and he's momentarily taken aback by the raw hatred there.

"He left you there. How are you not talking about it?" Ben asks. He looks back to Steve who meets his gaze with a hard swallow.

"What's there to say? Everyone here has the jist of it," Tony says looking at the mess he made earlier, fighting off the cold that creeps up his back.

"I don't think they do. You were left there broken and bruised to die. What if we hadn't come?"

Ben asks taking a step into the fray.

"I-" Steve starts but to everyone's surprise Ben steps up to him, shoving him back.

"Fuck you man! Who leaves a man behind!" Another shove, "Who makes that choice! No man left behind remember! No man left behind!"

"I didn't have a choice!" Steve gives a broken cry and falls to his knees. In the corner Bucky turns to face the wall and shuts his eyes tightly and counts to ten.

"There's always a choice," Vision says from his corner. Everyone whips their heads to his direction, surprised at his interruption. He floats forward hesitantly.

"There is always a choice to be made. Tony often says this, but there is more truth in this statement than I believe you all understand. You all made the choice to follow the Captain here. Natasha chose to withhold information from Mr. Stark about his parents. She made the decision to let the Captain and Sergeant Barnes to escape. Tony chose to give you able time to escape before Ross could warrant your arrest."

Natasha closes her eyes in response. She turns away from everyone and walks to the window to stare down at the city.

"Clint chose to leave retirement to help Captain with a mission he barely knew about," Clint ground his teeth together in response, "He made the willful choice to break the law and aid the Captain and leave his family. Wanda made the conscious choice to break out of the base with
Clint, and... incapacitate me."

No one says anything about the bitterness in his tone and Wanda does not meet Vision's eyes.

"Sam chose to follow a friend, at that I cannot find fault."

Sam doesn't look up, just buries his heavy head in his hands and takes a stuttering breath.

Vision floats around the room and stops in front of Steve.

"You made the choice to leave Tony Stark in Siberia with a dysfunctional suit, broken ribs, and a severe case of shock. And then you chose to send..." Vision floats back and lands beside Tony. He lifts a hand and gently places it on his shoulder, never once taking his eyes away from Steve's crumpled form.

"You sent a letter."

The air leaves the room.

"He's right," Bucky croaks out from his corner. Steve sobs a moment later.

"I'm so sorry Tony, I'm so sorry, I don't know how I can make this up to you, I don't know how to make this fair-"

"Fair? Fair would be to let me go down to my work room, grab comrade's arm he left in Siberia, beat you half to death with it, and leave you in the snow, immobilized for twenty six hours. That would be fair." Tony makes to leave the room, Ben, Rhodey, and Vision close behind him before turning around.

"The hardcopies of the Amended Accords are in my office. You are all going to fucking sign them," Tony orders, glaring at each one of them.

"And then we get to work."

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will contain an avenger press conference where Siberia gets brought up again and Captain will have to answer to the public.

*Thank you so much for all the LOVE on this fic! Please leave comments I love reading them!
"Boss I've got updates."

Tony picks his head up from the table and Rhodey pauses the comforting pressure of his hand on Tony's shoulder. Ben flinches at the sound and looks around trying to find its source. Vision picks through the fridge distractedly until he has milk, eggs, and butter. He pulls a box of cake mix out and sets to work with a furrowed brow.

"Let's hear them," Tony mutters, running both hands down his face. He is so tired. He's drained."

"They've signed the Accords. All of them."

Ben's head twists around again and his hands splay in front of him like he's feeling for some mystical force.

"That's F.R.I.D.A.Y.," Tony says in amusement, twirling his finger up into the air. "F.R.I.D.A.Y. this is Ben. He's new security."

"Benjamin Murphy, twenty seven years old, honorably discharged as a Staff Sergeant, and has a habit of regularly posting pictures of his dachshund dog Frankie on Instagram. Pleasure to meet you, and thank you."

Ben's brows raise in surprise. He gapes for a moment before running a hand through his dark hair.

"You're welcome? I mean I don't know exactly what for ma'am but-"

"You brought the Boss home," F.R.I.D.A.Y. explains, voice going almost soft. Tony feels a corner of his mouth turn up and Rhodes starts chuckling when Ben starts floundering again. He doesn't seem to know where to look and there's a flush crawling up his neck.

"N-no problem!" Ben blushes and settles himself back in the corner he was in, fiddling with the bottom of his shirt.

Tony props his head on his left hand and drums the fingers of his right on the kitchen table.

"So, they signed the Accords huh? Well I guess it's time to notify Ross."

"On it Boss."

Tony nods and glances over at Vision who is mixing the batter steadily and staring intently at its consistency. Rhodes follows his line of sight and gently clears his throat.

"Vision?"

Vision looks up, still stirring.

"Yes?"

"You okay buddy? Seem a little," Tony pauses, rolls the word on his tongue and opens his mouth, but Rhodey beats him to the punch.
"Distracted."

Visions stops stirring and closes his eyes for a brief moment before looking back to them, locking eyes with Tony.

"I do not get distracted," He glances over to Rhodey before lowering his eyes and continuing his stirring.

"Not anymore."

A heaviness settles over the room and Ben shifts in his corner. He glances between the three superheroes and notices their grim expressions.

Ben bites his lips and swallows the question in his throat.

---

"Tony?"

Tony glances up from where he is seated before the fireplace. Vision is standing about ten feet away from him, they are both in their pajamas. Tony adjusts the grip of his mug to his right hand and waves Vision closer to sit in the chair next to him.

"How's it going Vis?"

Vision walks over, an unusual action for him, and sits primly in the cushioned chair before sinking in.

"I find myself unable to sleep," Vision half murmurs looking from the fire back to Tony. Tony chuckles, then takes a sip from his mug. He holds it for a moment under his nose and takes a long whiff, smiling.

"Do you need to sleep? I mean I know you do it but I don't think I've ever asked if it was a necessity."

Vision smiles softly in response, folding his hands together in his lap.

"I do not. The sensation though, from what I have heard, to me is much like meditation. I am very centered when I rest," He pauses, looks back to the fire, "In recent nights however, I find it quite eluding."

Tony settles back into his own chair and looks to the fire as well.

"You mean because she's here."

Not a question, a statement. Vision's mouth stretches slightly into a line and the fire gains more of his attention.

"It is not so much a matter of fear. I know what she is capable of and I do not fear what I know, it is the matter of trust. I cannot trust her to not-"
"Push you through seventeen levels of floor?" Tony supplies, one brow raised. Vision sighs and closes his eyes for a moment.

"Precisely."

Tony rolls his shoulder before taking another sip.

"I can completely understand friend," He murmurs under his breathe. Vision's brow furrows and he angles his body towards Tony, locking eyes with him in an almost earnest way.

"I find myself almost..." He seems to be looking for the right word, "I find myself displeased, no, not displeased. I cannot find the right word."

"Angry?" Tony supplies again. Vision tilts his head, like he is processing the word.

"Yes... Angry. I am angry that I can no longer sleep. I am angry at Wanda for taking, with her presence, something I take some measure of pleasure in."

Tony nods his head in understanding, flashes of a shield and a blue uniform fresh in his mind. He gazes back to the fire, hoping it can burn the images out of his eyes.

"You are not sleeping either."

Tony breaks concentration with the fire to quizzically look at Vision.

"I never sleep anyways, you know that," Tony says with a roll of his eyes, he picks up his cup to take another sip.

"You're sleeping schedule has dropped six percent in the past two weeks since the others arrived to inhabit the Avenger's base once again, and more often than not, you sit out here and watch the fire with a glass of some sort in your hand."

A glass? He didn't mean- Well damn.

Tony raises one brow and points at Vision.

"I will not be having another one of your and F.R.I.D.A.Y.'s interventions. My sleeping schedule is my own damn business," Tony leans back into his seat, "And can a man enjoy a cup of tea every once in a while? Good Lord."

"Tea?" Vision asks glancing down to the cup in question. Tony lifts it just near enough to Vision's nose.

"Jasmine. Take a sniff," He offers. Vision's nostrils flare slightly and he pulls away with a smile.

"Fragrant."

"Yeah, my mom used to drink this stuff all the time when I was a kid. For a while I thought it was her perfume, but I noticed every time she talked to me, especially at night when she would read me a story, her breathe carried this floral scent. I realized it was the tea that made her smell so sweet. Every time I saw her drinking her tea from then on I always asked for a sip and just for a little while my mother and I shared the same scent. I thought it was like a secret, that only when we spoke to each other our breathes would smell the same. Some sort of club."

Tony gives a small smile at the memory and glances to Vision who is staring intently at him with an emotion he can't place. It makes his stomach sink and his smile drops.
He doesn't want pity.

"It was a stupid notion though," Tony shrugs, "I was a stupid kid."

Vision regards him for a moment before relaxing into his chair and folding his hands together once more.

"I believe I have a proposition Mr. Stark."

Tony makes a show of eyeing him warily.

"Do go on Vis."

"Since the two of us find sleep evading, I propose that if one finds themselves restless through the night, we might see if the other is awake and accompany the other to this very spot and sit together."

Tony chuckles.

"You want to be tired insomniac buddies?"

Vision smirks in response.

"I find I like the scent of your jasmine tea," He looks over to Tony, "And I find the company enjoyable."

Tony shakes his head and smiles brightly.

"Okay, sounds like a deal. We can be insomniac buddies."

They both lean back into their respectable chairs, the warmth of the fire licking at their bare toes.

Tony closes his eyes and feels some of the anxiety drain from his body. He's safe right now. In this moment he is safe.

He's safe.

And Vision is safe too.

"We want another press conference," Ross says as soon as they're all sitting down at the long rectangle table. Tony is sitting at the head, Steve is across from him. Behind him is his star spangled team: Sam, then Bucky, Natasha, Clint, Wanda, and Scott. T'challa is in the back of the room, standing politely in a corner listening in. Tony has Rhodes behind him, Vision, and Ben who is fiddling with a notepad and pencil. Their side of the table finds itself... lacking.

"For what?" Clint snarls. He's eyeing Ross with deathly intent which the other man deflects with ease and a roll of his eyes.

"Because as I've so eloquently explained before. No one trusts you."
"We signed the Accords," Steve justifies. Tony starts rubbing his temples, feeling the oncoming headache approach with speed.

"Ah, yes, but around three years too late Mr. Rogers. Plus, you've all just been pardoned by the President of The United States earlier this week. It was televised. People now want your statements, you know, in response," Ross sits down in his own chair away from the table. He crosses his leg, ankle onto his knee and waves his hand forward, "Televised. They'd like a formal apology if you will."

"And who is they exactly?" Scott asks from the back. Rhodey sighs loudly and stares the questioning man down.

"The public. Obviously."

Scott raises his hands up in submission, offering a small smile. Rhodey eyes him before diverting his attention back to Ross.

"So this is some kind of publicity stunt?" Sam asks with narrowed eyes. Steve snorts angrily through his nose and sits back into his chair.

"It is isn't it?" He asks with bite. Tony grinds his teeth and the flat of his palm harshly meets the wood top underneath it. Everyone whips their head to his direction.

"Are you stupid? You run around all over the world, breaking hundreds of laws, hundreds of foreign policies, and you think that everyone in the world is going to love you?" Tony grits out.

"We were helping people," Steve says defiantly. "I'm sorry for Siberia but I won't apologize for not signing the Accords back then or for my actions the past three years."

Tony fights the heat coiling in his chest and instead looks away from Steve, dismissing him.

"You may think what you and your band of merry men have been doing is very Robin Hood-esque but you're forgetting the one thing you all overlooked way back when." Ross pulls out a projector pointer and clicks away.

Flashes of exploded buildings show up. Tony recognizes Paris, then Moscow, then Rome. There's Las Vegas, Guatemala, Hungary, and Berlin.

"You forgot about collateral damage. Now, how many people do you think you saved on these 'missions'? Give me your best guess."

Steve flexes his jaw and Natasha lets a harsh breathe filter through her nose.

"No? Okay I'll give it to you. Eighty four. Eighty four people you saved. That's a lot in three years. Especially high ranking ransom prisoners, delegates, and even a few royalty here and there. It's a lot. You should be proud of that," Ross sighs and pockets his hands. "Want to know what you shouldn't be proud of? How many people do you think you injured? Whether it be bystanders, or policemen doing their job attempting to arrest you? No? One hundred and twelve. Apparently throwing cement cinder blocks at a man's chest can sometimes cause a crushed ribcage, who knew? Want to know how much property damage was billed to the U.S. because of the majority of your citizenships? It's going to be great listen to this, two hundred billion. Honestly it's insane what some of these building are made of, much less what some of these science labs contain." Ross raises a finger to his lips almost as if in thought.

"How about deaths?"
Steve is breathing heavily, Bucky is staring at the grain of the wood with harrowing intensity, Natasha is the picture of calm but Tony can see the flashes of anger and guilt in her eyes, Sam is chewing the inside of his cheek roughly and Scott looks disdained. Wanda blinks back tears and Clint offers her his hand. He doesn't look away from Ross, glare still in place.

"We don't need-"

"But you do. You need to know the consequences of your actions," Tony half whispers. He's looking directly at Steve but his stare falters slightly when Bucky picks up his head and glances to him. The skin on his knuckles start to itch and his body starts to feel too hot.

Rhodey places a gentle hand on his shoulder, a calming enough gesture that Tony breaks eye contact with Bucky to look back at Ross.

"Death toll: Fifty nine. Would you like to know how many would have been avoidable if you hadn't run in balls deep on calf cooked information and data or with the tendency to blow things up? Twenty seven."

Ross lets the information sink in.

"This press conference is not a publicity stunt to show that the Avengers are back together, or a popularity contest. This is about winning back the trust of not just the people of America, but the now one hundred and thirty nine countries that are a part of the Accords. You have broken laws, defiled policies and statures, and had the audacity to do it without apology," Ross pointedly looks at Steve then moves on to the rest of the has been fugitives. "With this press conference you will be laid bare for the public's eye. There is no building up from your reputation, that got squashed the moment you fled the U.S. as wanted men. You're going to act humble, you are going to be apologetic, and you are going to acknowledge that you are able to reenter our great country again without a bullet hole somewhere in your body because of Mr. Stark here," Steve looks at Tony. "It's by his good graces and his word that the public and governments around the world agreed to your pardons much less the option to sign and act within the Accords."

"Goody goody, looks like we owe the Futurist here everything," Clint says under his breathe. Tony bites down the fire in his chest and swivels his chair to face Clint across the table.

"Oh you won't have to worry about the press conference Barton, you're retired."

Clint blinks once, then twice.

"What?"

"That was your position before our little civil war, and that's what you're going to be doing now. You're hanging up your bow and arrows so to speak." Tony smirks as Clint's face turns a special shade of red. Clint suddenly stands up, slamming his hands on the table. Ben jumps up from his seat and wastes no time rounding the table to stand in front of Barton.

"And what are you going to do kid?" Clint spits out. Natasha stands up, reaching out to him.

"Help an old man back into his seat," Ben bites out, subconsciously rolling his shirt sleeves to his elbows. Clint snorts in amusement and takes a step in Ben's space.

"Clint!" Natasha hisses. Clint looks between Ben and Natasha before turning around and gathering his things, dismissing Ben with a scoff and a wave of his hand.

"I don't have time for this shit. I'm retired," He snaps out, looking at Tony before sliding his
sunglasses on and leaving the room with heavy foot steps.

Tony feels something lift from his chest the farther Clint's footsteps fall away and he smiles lightly before noticing Wanda's snarling face.

"I didn't think you could make yourself even more of an ass than you already are but I was wrong."

"It would not be the first time you were wrong." Vision says lightly. He turns to look at her down the slope of his nose and Wanda blinks rapidly before looking away and busying herself with folding her hands.

Everyone is quiet for a moment before Steve stands up from the table gently, afraid of rattling the already hostile environment.

"We'll do it. We'll do the press conference."

The rest make their way to stand, gathering their things and waiting for Steve.

"We'll see you at home Tony."

A small shiver of disgust travels down Tony's spine as he watches them leave. T'challa bows his head at Tony before following after the lot. His throat is tight and he can feel the unease in his stomach. Rhodey stands up behind him, still looking at the doorway.

"Steve is a fucking prick." Tony can hear him murmur. He glances up at Ross who wears a small grimace. He looks at Tony and throws a thumb to the doorway.

"I'll be sending those fruit baskets soon. You can deliver Asshole VonBowandArrows his."

Ben snorts and crosses his arms.

"I'm going to shove that basket up his ass."

Tony laughs loudly and long enough that Ross looks at him with concern.

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"Sir."

He blinks, once then twice, trying to rid the sleep from his eyes.

"Sir, it's happening again. He's-" F.R.I.D.A.Y. is worried enough that she's allowing her vocal patterns to pitch high enough to hurt his ears, "I think he's going to hurt himself Sir."

With that information he bolts up, slips into his braces with practiced ease and bolts down the hallway, the crank and churn of his braces echoing behind him.

He's at Tony's door in record time and he flings the door open, scanning the room in the darkness before he notices the sweat human pile cascaded by moonlight at the foot of his bed.

Tony is swamped in sweat and hyperventilating, looking like he's trying to breathe underwater. His
eyes are open and wet, glistening with tears that spill down his cheeks and he's hitting the side of his head and chest with such ferocity Rhodey fears some kind of bodily damage. He crouches down nice and slow beside him, fast movement will only drive him further into his nightmare.

"Tony, Tony, it's me. It's me, Rhodes," He whispers, gently pulling Tony's hands away from beating on his head and chest. Tony's eyes flit around the room and his chest is still heaving with every breath. The look of absolute terror breaks Rhodey's heart right down the middle.

"Tony, Tony! Hey, Tones it's me. You're safe," He tries to reassure. Tony looks at him them, raking his eyes down Rhodey's face.

"He tried to kill me. He going to kill me," Tony manages to whisper from his lips. Rhodes' steals his eyes and he grips Tony's hands harder.

"I won't let him. He can't hurt you Tony."

"His shield -"

"He doesn't have it anymore. You are safe."

Tony starts to reluctantly nod his head. He closes his eyes and leans it back against the mattress's edge behind him. Rhodey see the hard line of his throat as he swallows thickly.

"Time to get you back into bed buddy, you're going to be sore as fuck tomorrow."

He stands up and gently pulls Tony up with him, pulls him in for a hug and keeps him there for a few minutes. Tony is so cold.

He pulls back the mussed up blankets and guides Tony back underneath them, tucking him in as he goes.

"Relax, that's it, just relax. You're safe, I got you buddy. I'm staying with you tonight, nothing getting by my watch."

Tony's eyes flutter close and his breathing starts to even out. Rhodey watches him fall fitfully back to sleep and runs a hand over his weary face. His hand comes away wet with tears.

When did he start crying?

He takes a deep breathe himself, shakes his head once to rid himself of all the negative emotions flowing through his body. He opens his eyes in time to see the flash of silver through the creak of Tony's door.

He makes his way stealthily over and flings it open to see Bucky standing a few feet away with wide eyes and a tight lined mouth.

"I heard some noise and."

Rhodey cuts him off by closing the door.

He locks it, walks to the bed, turns around and checks the lock again. He grabs the nearest movable object, which turns out to be a cushy blue ottoman, and sits on it in front of the door.

He keeps watch through the rest of the night.
Tony is fixing his cufflinks in his dressing room when Ben opens the door and pokes his head in.

"I've got the King of Wakanda here to see you?"

Tony scrunches his nose but waves his hand in Ben's direction.

"Yeah let him in."

Ben nods before turning away and mumbling something and then opening the door wider. T'challa steps in an all black on black suit. Tony whistles.

"I'll be right outside if you need me," Ben says closing the door. Tony nods once before turning his attention back to the king in his room.

"Can I help you with something your highness?"

T'challa gives a warm smile and spreads his arms out and shrugs his shoulders.

"I ask nothing from you Mr. Stark, only that you call me T'challa."

Tony shrugs his own shoulders and returns the smile.

"Done, but there's got to be a reason for you wanting to see me." Tony raises a brow before sitting in a cushioned chair and taking a sip of water. He motions for T'challa to take the chair opposite him. T'challa takes him up on his offer and glides down into his seat.

"I have come to thank you for your hospitality, but I must return to Wakanda. These past weeks have been very eye opening."

Tony snorts and places the glass down on the small coffee table between them.

"Usually when some one says something like that it doesn't mean a good impression has been left."

"On the contrary, " T'challa smiles, "I am leaving with a very good impression."

Tony smirks.

"Don't know how I managed that."

T'challa licks his lips before leaning forward.

"When I came here, to baby sit the kids as you said, I was really only concerned for Mr. Barnes," T'challa pauses, notices the rigid stance in Tony's back, "as you have noticed he has been fitted with a new arm-"

"Vibranium, very nice," Tony cuts in. T'challa just widens his smile.

"Yes, good eye Mr. Stark. My personal group of scientists and I fitted the arm for him after he came out of stasis, and only after we had helped his mind."

"You mean to say you've gotten rid of all that Hydra junk in his head?" Tony pulls a skeptical face. T'challa laughs loudly.
"No, by no means no, not all of it, but most of it. With a couple more years of therapy and practice though, he could be free of Hydra's control."

Tony grits his teeth.

"Amazing."

T'challa lets his smile slip and he leans back into his chair, splaying his forearms on the armrests of it.

"It will do you well to acknowledge that Bucky Barnes was a victim."

Tony snarls in response, flinging himself from his chair to walk around the room.

"You think I don't know that? You think I didn't care to read his file?"

T'challa's face doesn't betray any emotion and it spurs the anger on in Tony.

"I fucking know Barnes didn't kill my parents, I know that now. It was the Winter Soldier, the brain fucked assassin Hydra made. I know that. It doesn't stop the fact that the last touch my mother felt was the weight of his hand crushing her windpipe, or the fact that my father's last words were for Sergeant Barnes to spare her! It does not change the fact that I now associate his face with the murder of my parents." Tony stops pacing to stare down at T'challa. "Bucky Barnes may be a victim, but so were my parents."

T'challa stands up regally, making his way to stand in front of Tony.

"How do you feel?"

Tony splutters indignantly.

"What do you think? I'm fucking pissed off right now!"

T'challa quirks a brow and crosses his arms.

"At who?"

Tony takes a step back and crosses his own arms in defiance. His mouth gapes open then shuts harshly.

"Your parents were victims Mr. Stark, and so was Bucky Barnes, he still is. I have felt this anger before and I nearly let it consume me in it's fire at the wrong man. I am not telling you to stop being angry, that is for a man to choose for himself, but I am asking you to redirect it where it is deserved. You and Mr. Barnes may have more in common than you think."

T'challa gives a short nod of his head before turning and walking towards the door. He opens it slightly before turning back to Tony with a small smile.

"Good luck on your press conference Mr.Stark."

And he leaves just as fast as he had come.

Tony pushes his arms in front of him, questioning what in the hell just happened.

He runs a hand through his hair and paces his room again before there's knocking at his door. Ben pokes his head in again.
"It's time Tony."

Tony nods and takes a breath to center himself before heading out the door. He can hear the clicks of cameras and scraping of chairs as he nears the long table on the panel seating. He sees them all sitting down, his assigned chair next to Steve. He fights the heat that crawls up his back and forces the fist at his side to loosen and climbs the stairs efficiently, turning to smile and wave as soon as he gets into camera view.

He takes his seat next to Steve and is pleased to see they at least put Rhodey on his right, his best friend making his way up the stairs now. Tony glances to his left and sees Bucky two seats down, looking at him with sympathetic eyes. Tony feels the snarl pull at his top lip but looks away before it comes to fruition.

"You and Mr. Barnes may have more in common than you think."

Fuck that.

A reporter stands up just as soon as Rhodey takes his seat next to Tony. It's the pretty brunette from before, she's smiling viciously.

"My first question is for Steve Rogers."

Steve perks up and smiles at her warmly. She deepens her shark tooth smile and dread fills Tony's stomach.

"What happened in Siberia three years ago when Tony Stark, a.k.a Ironman, went to apprehend you and fellow fugitive Bucky Barnes? It is to our understanding Mr. Stark went missing for more than twenty four hours. Can you shed a little light on the subject for us?" She pauses and goes for the kill, "Captain America?"

Steve's smile falls almost as fast as Rhodey did that day.

Chapter End Notes

So I'm not basically a liar because there's basically a little bit of the press conference going on here right? Also I am so sorry it took so long for this chapter to go up! I'm helping my aunt move and it's exhausting and work is a bitch, and I'm so sorry my smol beans :'(

Also can we talk about all the love I'm getting for Ben! Thank you guys so much for embracing my OC! At first I wasn't really going to keep him besides the first chapter but some of you were curious about him and in turn that made me curious about his forming character. It was honestly one of the best decisions I've made, thanks to you guys!

But I do hope you guys enjoy this chapter! I really do!

*Thank you all so much for all the LOVE this story is receiving so far! I love reading your comments and they fuel me like no other!

Seriously, comments are my life blood.
"Siberia?" Steve asks low, tone even. His eyes are nervous and his mouth is in a thin line, but his back is rigid and he is looking straight at the reporter. He looks like a soldier preparing to accept his punishment.

Tony knows that look.

Steve is going to tell her, no the whole world watching, what happened in that snowy hell. Suddenly he's grown a conscious and wants to drop truth bombs and, and...

Tony can't allow that.

Everything he's worked for will just disappear. Three years of his life, working on the Accords, trying to show people that they deserve the leeway he fought for, for them to trust him, trust the Avengers again. If they find out what happened in Siberia, the public will become judge jury and executioner. How could they trust the Avengers to protect them when their leader, the shining star, the golden boy, America embodied, Captain America left their own to die in the cold? How fast would the fear travel through the masses like a disease?

Steve was going to ruin them. He was going to ruin Tony.

He can't let him. Not again.

Tony turns towards Steve, makes a show of smiling warmly and claps a hand onto his back. It burns the moment it makes contact with Steve's blue button up. Steve looks startled and furrows his brows in confusion at Tony but gives a hopeful smile. Tony wants to rip it off. This isn't for him, this is for the public. This is for the greater good.

He squeezes the bulging shoulder hard enough Steve winces and a satisfaction thrums through his veins.

"Don't worry, I've got this buddy."

Steve nods slowly and Tony leaves his hand on his shoulder long enough that the cameras get their fill before slowly lowering it and placing it on his own knee and trying to wipe away the remnants of Steve from his skin, discretely of course.

"You don't mind do you? Ms.?" Tony raises his brow in question, he tilts his head down. He gives a playful smirk.

She crosses her arms, tilts her own chin up in defiance.

"Rhonda Santiago. I work for the WYB network," She untucks an arm and motions for him to go on.

"I remember you, you're a hard hitter."

"I just want the truth Mr. Stark, it's what the people want."

He plasters a winning smile on his face.
"Well, first of all Siberia is a very cold place," That earns him a few chuckles, "The Captain here and Mr. Barnes made their way to Siberia when they gathered intel that a mad man named Helmut Zemo was going to activate some very deadly and beyond saving super soldiers. Zemo is also the mad that triggered Mr. Barnes... violent episode through the streets of New York. He also framed him for the U.N. building bombing that killed the previous king of Wakanda, T'chaka. I followed them as soon as I had all the information to not only aid them, but also bring them back to answer for their previous actions that went against the Accords of that time. When I arrived, Zemo had already activated the soldiers and we fought together against our assailants. The only way to stop the soldiers was to destroy them, however unfortunate. When the fight was over, I had Zemo in custody but the Captain here and his companion had made a swift exit, but can you really blame them?" Tony smiles and shrugs his shoulders, he hears some more chuckles. This is good, this is very good.

So why does he feel like throwing up?

"Anyway, I sustained serious injuries to my person thanks to a very aggressive super soldier," Technically he wasn't lying, "and my suit was barely functioning so I couldn't transport myself much less a criminal with me back onto U.S. soil, so I called in for T'challa and a special forces team to come retrieve and help me out, T'challa of course being the new king of Wakanda and the Black Panther that helped form and sign the first Accords with his father. So he shows up and he takes the prisoner back to out base in new York and I was dropped off to a quaint hospital in Lensk to get the medical attention I very much needed."

Santiago sucks the front of her teeth, like she's cleaning them just to sink her teeth in his jugular. Tony smiles back in challenge.

"What about the missing person's report filed by a Ms. Virginia Potts? Seems highly suspicious that the CEO of your company wouldn't know where you were and would be worried enough to actually file a report."

"Well, I was pretty injured and I was too tired and hopped up on some really good meds so I hadn't really had time to tell anyone that'd I'd miss a board meeting," Tony scratches the back of his neck and sheepishly looks up from under his eyelashes. He hears cameras flash.

"Besides, with everything that I put Pepper through, I'd be concerned if she wasn't worried. I should give her a raise!"

The majority of the audience in attendance erupt with laughter.

"Is that your story Mr. Stark?" Rhonda asks with a raised brow. Tony leans forward ready to accept the challenge.

"That's the truth Mrs. Santiago," Steve says confidently next to him. Tony glances at him and is met with Steve's blinding smile.

A sour taste fills Tony's mouth.

She shifts her weight to right hip and turns her attention to Steve before settling her attention back to Tony.

"You said Mr. Barnes was 'triggered' by this Helmut Zemo. What's to say he can't be triggered again? How can you possibly expect the people around the world to trust someone like him on your
team? How can you promise to protect us from someone in your own team? Not to mention all the reports that he's responsible for almost hundreds of assassinations from the past five decades or longer.

"Ma'am you wouldn't mind if I answered for Mr. Stark, considering it is about me after all?" Bucky says from his seat. She looks a little startled but faces the Winter Soldier head on.

"I was being held in a Hydra facility where they had tortured me in ways you couldn't even begin to understand. Mentally and physically I was broken down, I couldn't even remember my name, much less what I liked on my hot dogs," Bucky smirks and glances down, taps with his metal thumb on the desk before glancing up with a more somber expression.

"I was forced to do horrible terrible evil things. I remember everything so clearly, I remember each person I've ever hurt and it eats at me everyday," Bucky looks straight at Tony, "It never stops." He looks away, looks back to stare down the reporter. His eyes are hard, steely.

Tony wonders if that's the Winter Soldier or Bucky Barnes.

"I've overcome a lot of what they took from me, I'm gaining back some parts of myself now. All I want to do is help people, it's the reason I joined the army over a life time ago. I want to help the Avengers help people. And if I ever even come close to what I was before, if I have an inkling someone could use me to hurt another innocent ever again, I'll willingly lay my life down on the line. I want that out for the public to know. I'd rather die than become the monster I was."

Cameras start flashing wildly, people are yelling and scribbling at their note pads and typing on their phones. Steve is staring at Bucky with admiration.

Tony hates it.

"You heard him," He starts, drawing some of the attention back to himself.

"But hopefully it won't ever come to that. Between the technology and determination that T'challa and I posses, we'll have him freed from Hydra's control in no time. We're all going to help him. He deserves all of our help."

His mother's face flashes through his mind. Her face is blue from lack of oxygen and she makes horrid choking noises as her lungs fail to expand and her vocal cords are getting crushed. Her eyes are blood shot, the capillaries exploding. His father pops up next. There's a huge gash on his forehead and next to his eye where glistening white skull is shining through. The skin is torn and bleeding profusely.

Red beads fall on a dirt road.

Tony feels Rhodey's hand come up and rest on the middle of his back. He jerks his head up and gives him a reassuring smile. He's fine.

He's fine.

"We're a family, it's what we do," Sam says farther down the table, he shares an easy smile with Barnes and gently nudges his metal arm with his elbow.

Natasha and Steve smile at the display and Tony feels the rage coil deep in his belly.

"What about the Accords?"
They all snap their attention back to Rhonda.

"Why didn't you sign the Accords in the beginning?"

He takes a deep breath and looks to Steve who seems to be mulling an answer over.

Oh god, if he fucks it all up now-

"We thought the Accords were too controlling. We didn't see how we could help people if we had to wait for permission to save lives? We, I, thought I knew what was best. I thought we were being accountable for ourselves."

"You thought you knew better than one hundred and seventeen countries?" Santiago asks, placing a hand under her chin.

Steve laughs nervously.

"A bit presumptuous on my part right?"

"Almost insolent in fact."

Steve swallows thickly and looks at Tony. His eyes are bright and clear but Tony remembers the fogginess that clouded them in Siberia.

His chest suddenly hurts.

"Yeah, yeah a bit. But Tony here, he knew what was right. He waited it out, worked to amend the Accords so everyone could benefit, so the people could be protected to the best of our capabilities legally. He even fought for us to be brought back and to be included."

"You tore us apart when you signed those Accords."

"He's a good man," Natasha says looking at him from underneath her heavily mascaraed lashes.

"I'm not the one who needs to watch their back."

"Stark, Stark is yeah. Yeah," Scott says from all the way down the table.

Tony ignores the thumbs up and smile thrown his way, turns back to the cameras.

"Hank Pym did say to never trust a Stark!"

Santiago clicks her tongue and searches Tony out again, locking eyes with him.

"I can see why you vouched for them Mr. Stark."

Tony smiles and swallows the bile rising in his throat.

"I did say I trusted them with my life."

She taps a finger against her lips and accesses him with narrowed eyes.

"No more questions. Thank you so much."

Tony is going to be sick.
He heaves as more vomit forces its way out of his body and splashes into the cold porcelain toilet he's resting his head against.

"Okay, okay, good job," Rhodey whispers to him, petting his hair back from his face and holding his tie out of the water. Tony groans in response and tries to bat Rhodey away but scrambles for purchase when the next wave nearly chokes him in its urgency on its way out.

"Jesus fuck Tony," Rhodes breathes out. He rubs a comforting hand on Tony's sweat laden back, imprinting soothing circles into the muscles found there.

Tony takes a deep breath and rests his head against his forearm.

"Fuck me."

Rhodes laughs lightly and continues his gentle massage.

"I told you I don't swing that way."

Tony only manages a shake of his shoulders in silent painful laughter before raising a middle finger in the air.

"Don't be an asshole, I'm in pain," Tony grumbles. Rhodes laughs again. The sound echoes around them in the small stall they're in.

As soon as the press conference had ended, Tony took a few minutes for a few photo ops and then raced towards the nearest bathroom to puke steadily and desperately into the closest toilet he could get his hands on. Rhodey had followed him in soon after and removed his suit jacket and had been here comforting him as he slowly died.

Ben was guarding the door, making sure no wayward paparazzi tried to enter.

"This reminds me of college you know," Rhodey says suddenly. Tony lifts his head slowly and spits into the toilet bowl before smiling too.

"If this was the other way around, this would remind me of Barbados."

Rhodes groans loudly and leans away from Tony, he plants himself against the stall wall, running a hand down his face before pointing to Tony's prone kneeling form.

"That was never to be brought up again."

Tony smirks and shakily makes his way to stand on his legs. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and smiles at Rhodey whose face falls to that of concern.

"Tony."

He sighs deeply, recognizing the tone, he pushes out of the stall to the sinks and turns the faucet on, washing his hands and gargling fresh water in his mouth. He hears Rhodey flush his mess away before emerging from the stall, leaning on the separator and crossing his arms.

They're staring at each other in the mirror.
Tony grabs the edge of the counter and flexes his palms over the hard linoleum.

"I've lied to the press all my life. It was like a game to me," Tony pauses, he refuses to meet Rhodey's eyes and instead looks at where the braces latch around his waist like a belt. "I lied to protect what we built. I can't jeopardize that. I can't-"

Rhodey holds a hand up, silencing him.

"Tony, I understand. Completely. You do not need to explain yourself to me hot pocket."

Tony hangs his head down and let's a sigh of relief out.

"Thank god Rhodey because I can't lose-"

"Hey, fuck you man, you don't scare me!"

Ben's voice can be heard from outside. Tony and Rhodes both stand up right. They share a look and Rhodes edges towards the door cautiously with Tony edging along the sink coming up on the left side of the door.

"I'll shove your star spangled leotard down your star spangled throat! Hey- Oh! Bird boy wants an ass whooping too?"

There's a pause and something is thrown. The door gets pushed open slowly and Steve pushes his head in gently. Tony can see Ben and Sam in the hallway fists up. Sam has a busted lip and Ben is favoring his right side. Ben suddenly rushes Sam and tackles him to the floor with a grunt and a hard smack as they hit the tile.

Before Tony can see any further Steve sidles inside and closes it behind him. Tony regards him with a snarl and turns around to grab his suit jacket off the stall hook Rhodey hung it on.

Rhodey takes his place by the separator again and lazily scowls at the intruder.

"Your guy is, ah, very spirited," Steve says motioning to the now closed door.

"What do you want?" Tony grunts out, sliding his jacket on and fixing the lapels. Steve steps in some more and Rhodey straightens up. Steve eyes him before stopping from moving up any further.

"I wanted to say thank you for covering for me. You didn't have to save me or Bucky from all that-"

Tony sees red.

"First of all Rogers I don't want you to confuse me with one of those reporters that started to kiss your ass off the bullshit story I spun and the fact their childhood hero was back in the good graces of the public. Do not forget what really happened in Siberia and what you fucking did."

Tony's voice is ice and he can see it pierces Steve to the core. A wicked tendril of satisfaction pools in his belly.

Steve blinks rapidly and takes a deep breath, closes his eyes for a brief moment.

"Still, you didn't need to cover for us," Steve starts. Tony laughs incredulously, places both hands on his hips and stares Steve down.
"I didn't do shit for you, or Barnes. I'm protecting my investment. I have no interest in any single one of you other than the protection you can give the people when they fucking need you, and they won't fucking call us if they hate about half of the team huh?"

Steve flares his nostrils and he points at Tony, his face curling up in a snarl.

"There's more to that and you know it!"

Tony sees it then, the same face he had when he brought down that shield onto his chest and a spike of fear races through him making his breath quicken and heart beat frantically.

Rhodey must notice something is wrong and pushes to stand between them, facing Steve with a deathly glare.

"I can't feel anything below my waist which, fortunately for me, will come in handy when I shove my entire goddamn leg up your ass if you don't get the fuck out of here."

Steve glances at Rhodey before looking back at Tony.

"I'm trying."

Tony is still breathing heavily.

"Stop," He growls out, teeth bared, eyes wild.

Steve's eyes widen and he bows his head in defeat. It etches itself in the set of his shoulders.

"Okay. Okay, I'll go," Steve takes a step back, places his hands on his hip and throws his head back eyes closed. "Okay."

He gives a final painful look at Tony before making his exit. The door swings for a moment before closing.

A moment of silence passes before Rhodey turns to face him.

"You okay?"

Tony nods three times in quick succession.

The bathroom door opens and Ben strolls in holding his nose with blood pouring down his front.

"I really hate that Sam fellow."

His voice is muffled and wet sounding.

"Don't tell me you got licked kid?" Rhodes asks with a small smirk. Ben takes quick offense and points at Rhodey with a blood slick finger.

"I will have you know I beat the shit out of his ass. This," He points to his own nose, "is from all the excitement I was privy to not a hot fucking second ago."

"You got a naturally induced bloody nose after a fist fight?" Tony asks with a small smile and a raised brow. He's starting to calm down.

Ben rolls his eyes and disappears into a stall coming back out after stuffing toilet paper up his nose.
"How're you doing though?" Ben asks eyeing Tony warily. Rhodey turns to look at him as well.

"I'm fine."

"That's Tony speak for 'I am not fine.'" Rhodey says tilting his head back to Ben. Ben nods his head understandingly, crossing his arms.

Tony closes his eyes and shakes his head.

"I am fine. I just need a couple minutes alone. I'll meet you both in the car."

Rhodey opens his mouth to fight him on it but Tony raises his hand.

"I need some time alone."

Rhodey gives a deep sigh but nods his head. He and Ben leave quietly and Tony waits a moment before taping his ear piece.

"Fry."

"Boss?" F.R.I.D.A.Y.'s voice is tentative in his ear. She's coddling him.

"I need you to find a hospital in Lensk, hack into their records and put me down as a patient for three years ago for the Siberia incident. Transfer my medical records of my injuries, try to dilute them a bit though."

He hears her hum in his ear.

"Gotch Boss. Also, Ross is calling your cell in three... two... one."

His phone trills on the dot and he pulls it out of his pocket. Ross's name shines brilliantly on the screen.

"Thanks Fry."

"No problem Boss," She pauses, "See you at home. Vision is cooking an authentic curry dish."

He hums in response before sighing and bringing his phone up to his ear.

"Ross?"

He brings a hand up to rub at his sore eyes. God they'll be swollen for the next day or two.

"Saw you and the rest of the Spice Girls on t.v. You're a very good liar."

Tony drops his hand from his face and stares at himself in the mirror.

"So I've been told."

"It makes me wonder if you've been totally honest with me, Stark."

Tony freezes. Ross couldn't-

"Why would I lie to you Ross?"

"That is a very good question."
Ross hangs up the phone and Tony's hands begin to shake. He glances down at his shaking hand holding his phone before looking back into the mirror and making eye contact with himself. He's ashen, the color pulled from his face.

"You look sick baby, do you have a fever?"

"No, mom, I'm fine!"

"No you're not, oh Tony."

The shield is spinning in the middle of his bedroom.

He sits up in his bed, the covers pool at his hips. The moon light is glinting off the metal, casting a little fairy light that bounces off the walls.

"Hey sport."

Tony scans the room for the voice. He scrambles from under the covers, coming to rest on his knees in the middle of his bed. His room is dark but he notices movement from the corner of his room.

"Dad?"

Howard Stark emerges from the shadows. He's baby faced with dark black hair, a unlit cigar is hanging from his mouth, he's smiling.

"Hey sport."

Tony gives a small smile in astonishment. He runs both hands through his hair, twining his fingers at the base of his skull.

"Dad, oh my god."

The shield is still spinning and it throws spots off cool icy light over both Tony and his father.

"I-"

Tony gets cut off when he sees Steve step out from the other corner of the room and he plucks the rotating shield up from the floor with ease. The dancing light stops.

"My father made that shield! You don't deserve it!" Tony hears himself say, his voice sounds muddled, drowned out by wind. He squints as a bright light shines on him and he feels snow start to fall.

Steve looks at him, then looks back to the shield. He takes a step towards Howard who in turn, turns towards Steve.

"Hey sport."
Steve raises the shield and strikes it down into Howard's chest.

"No!" Tony screams, he reaches out to his father but a force pulls him back onto the bed, throwing him down onto his back into the pile of snow. He can't move. Tears stream down his face.

"You fucker! Why! Why! He was your friend!"

Suddenly Steve is over him, face inches from his.

"So was I. So was I. So was I. So was I."

Steve repeats in his face, mimicking his voice perfectly.

Tony screams again and struggles to get free.

He can't, God he can't move!

He can't, he can't-

"Tony!"

He wakes up being shook by a frantic looking Ben. He's lying on the couch in the living room, the sun is shining bright and pleasant through the windows. He feels sweaty and heavy, mouth dry and he can't catch his breathe.

He blinks the sleep out of his eyes as Ben slowly lets go of his arms and wow he might have some serious bruising later.

"What happened?" He asks, voice hoarse and sore. He sits up on the couch slowly. Ben takes a seat on the farther end.

"You took a nap remember, you were all kinds of tired after today's conference. We had some curry for lunch, Rhodes went to his physical therapy and the rest went to go train but I don't know where Vision went. He should be here somewhere."

"I mean why were you shaking me like a Baptist preacher in a pond in rural Alabama?"

Ben opens his mouth then closes it.

"You were having a nightmare."

Tony licks his dry lips. He leans back into the couch and uses the back of his hand to wipe the sweat off his forehead.

"Okay."

Ben eyes him for a moment, settles onto the couch himself, crosses his arms.

"I used to dream about all the people I killed in the line of duty coming back to kill me. I would be paralyzed in my bed and they would stare down at me with their glassy white eyes, then they'd tear me apart because they could. The pain felt so real."
Ben stares at the wall, leg vibrating with energy.

"You need to talk to someone."

Tony sighs and licks his bottom lip again.

"Ben I don't-"

"You have to. Otherwise you're going to find yourself shitfaced off of cheap blueberry vodka, staring at the pistol you keep in the lock box on the top shelf of the closet, except it'll magically be lying in front of you on your desk looking like a glass of water and you're a dying man in the desert. Then you'll really weigh how thirsty you are. How thirsty?"

Ben drags his gaze from the wall, stares at Tony.

"Blueberry vodka?"

Ben shrugs, breaks eye contact.

"It was cheap, I was in a rush to get wasted."

Tony pauses, fiddles with the hem of his shirt.

"My choice of drink was Jim Beam."

Ben scoffs, turns to face him with a raised brow.

"Jim Beam?"

"It was cheap, I was in a rush to get wasted," Tony repeats with a shrug finding the wall Ben had been looking at particularly interesting.

Ben hums, keeps his arms crossed.

"Hey Tony?"

"Yeah Ben?" He asks cautiously looking back to the younger man.

"I'm glad we decided that we weren't thirsty."

Tony meets Ben's eyes and feels the tears well up. He closes them and leans his head on the back of the couch.

"Me too Ben, me too."

Chapter End Notes

Okay so don't murder me about the press conference. I know you were all out for blood, but I just don't think the public would be able to handle that, especially with all the hard work Tony put into everything.

Sorry guys!

Also sorry the chapter is so short!

Next chapter we will meet Ben's dog Frankie, someone apologizes for acting like a
complete asshole and means it, and Tony shares exactly what he's lied to Ross about. I still hope you guys are enjoying this story though and you liked the chapter!

*Thank you for all the LOVE this fic is getting! please leave a comment of your thought, I absolutely adore reading them!
Tony palms the cup of coffee in his hand, watches the steam rise before turning his attention back to Ross who is sitting just across the table from him.

This damn conference room was becoming more and more familiar.

"Answer the question Stark."

Tony takes a small sip of coffee and appreciates the bitterness that swirls with the sweet crystalized sugar on his tongue.

"I don't know," Tony answers, shrugging his shoulders. Ross's eyes narrow and his mouth pulls taut. He sighs loudly and turns to his side, clicks a button and aerial pictures of the Barton's farm pulls up, well really it's just the plot of land. The house is missing and so is the barn.

Panic courses through Tony's veins but he schools his features before he can give himself away. He takes another sip of coffee and looks at Ross with a questioning glance.

"Thinking of starting a farm Thaddeus?" Tony asks, a hint of anger spills into his tone. Ross raises a brow and a small smirk pulls at the corner of his mouth.

"You seem a little tense Stark."

Tony places the mug down gently and follows the grain of the wood table with the tip of his thumb nail. His heart is racing a mile a minute and he takes a furtive glance back to the picture of the farm.

"And you seem like a little bit of an asshole but you don't see me going around and mentioning it. Manners Ross."

Tony smiles pleasantly at Ross and watches the other man huff amusedly in response. Dread fills Tony's belly and clenches his teeth together uncomfortably.

Ross points the picture without looking away from Tony.

"This plot of land was owned by our very own S.H.I.E.L.D.'s Director Fury, a no fly zone to boot. How strange hm?" Ross drops his hand and leans forward in his seat towards Tony. "There wasn't even a record of it on S.H.I.E.L.D.'s files, but we found it, oh we found it. When S.H.I.E.L.D. fell we dug into everything. How could the U.S. government not? There was a terrorist cell that had infected one of our own. Then when Nick Fury died, the deed to this little sanctuary was almost impossible to find for a while, paper trail always coming up cold or the family unwilling to sell, Grandma Fury is very feisty. But then guess who ups and buys that plot of land almost exactly three years ago?" Ross grabs a little file and slides it over to Tony.

Tony swallows the lump down in his throat, glances down at the offending file. Ross motions for him to open it, but he already knows, he knows.

He opens it anyway and there's the deed.
"I was looking at areas to build more Avenger's bases," Tony explains harshly closing the file and whipping it down the table back to Ross. He wipes the corners of his mouth in agitation and leans back into his chair, trying to project some semblance of calm. Ross's eyes sparkle in amusement.

"Before your company bought this plot of land, or should I say you bought it Tony?" Ross grins, "Before it was bought, the U.S. government got a couple of great aerial shots."

He clicks again and the empty plot comes alive with a corn field and the old barn and the Barton's house.

"You hired a demolition crew to clear out that land. Who was living there?"

Ross's disposition changes lightening quick, his hands are folded over one another and his eyes are steely. Tony feels his chest rise heavily.

"It was an abandoned safe house, one any of us could use if the time came for it. Nick cared like that."

Tony hopes his lie is convincing.

Ross cocks his head to the side.

"Tony."

Apparently not.

"You tried to hide evidence of someone living there. We thought for awhile you were helping the others hide from us right under our noses here, but that's not the case. Was this Barton's home? He's going to be pissed his house isn't there anymore Stark."

Tony stands up abruptly. He buttons his suit jacket with shaky fingers but looks Ross straight in his eyes with burning hate. His body is thrumming with it. He can't let Ross hurt them, he can't let Ross have them under his thumb too.

"Go to hell."

He turns to leave, makes it almost two feet away from the door before Ross stops him by grabbing his arm harshly.

"Are there kids involved?" Ross asks, his brow is furrowed and his grip tightens on Tony's bicep. Tony sneers and wrenches his arm out of the other man's hold.

"I don't- I don't hurt kids, whatever you think of me Stark, I don't go after families. The Lang's can attest to that."

Tony pauses and looks Ross over. His stance is open, body facing Tony. His lower lip is slightly trembling but his jaw is clenched and his eyes are strong in their conviction.

"Just find Barton. He may be retired but we can't lose track of an asset of his caliber," Ross takes a step back, runs a hand through his grey hair and straightens his suit. "Just find me Barton."

Tony clenches his jaw and points to the now cold cup of coffee on the table.

"That's some good coffee, tell your assistant or whoever made it that it has the Tony Stark stamp of
"We need to talk."

Tony pauses his welding and looks up to Natasha standing at the doorway of his workshop. The heat rising from metal in front of him feels like it's flowing through the air into his body and he rolls his shoulders as the anger at the sight of her prickles in his chest. The welding mask obstructs some of his view and casts her in a warped grey hue. He lifts it and sticks his tongue in his cheek, makes a humming noise as if he's thinking it over.

"No."

He flips the mask back down and continues to weld. It's a moment or two before he sees couture brown boots out of the corner of his vision and a pale feminine hand flips his mask up, he stops welding for his own safety and glares heatedly at her.

"I can see you're still on the war path to injure me."

She clenches her jaw and narrows her eyes at him.

He pulls away from the space she's invaded, places the welding tool onto the cart net to him and rips his gloves and helmet off. He pushes his sweat matted hair away from his face. He grabs his forgotten water bottle and takes a drink.

"We need to talk," Natasha repeats, slower this time. She crosses her arms and her light brown leather jacket crinkles at her elbows. Irrational anger pools in his belly as he recognizes it was Christmas gift he gave her the year before the whole Ultron fiasco.

Tony scoffs loudly, sets his water bottle back down and leans some of his weight against his work bench.

"Yes I thought we established that as soon as you desecrated my sanctuary with your presence. What could we possibly need to talk about?"

She steps closer to him but stops when his back goes rigid. She uncrosses her arms, put her palms up in submission. Tony sneers when he sees how she's trying to seem less dangerous.

"I'm not the one who needs to watch their back."

Tony hasn't forgotten.

"You're still angry-"

"Of course I'm still angry!"

Natasha takes a deep breath.
"Like I said, still angry. I'm here to make peace. I want to apologize."

Tony blinks once, twice.

"Get the fuck out."

He takes a threatening step towards her, she meets him with a hard glare and plants her feet firmly on the ground.

"Tony-"

"No," Tony is seething. "You don't get to come in here and apologize and think everything is going to be okay. You don't even get the choice when you want to make peace. That's my decision. I get to make the choice of when or if I ever want to speak to you again. Do you even know what you're apologizing for Natasha?"

Her chest is rising quickly and she's clenched her jaw.

"Yes, I know what I did! I'm sorry I didn't tell you about your parents! I'm sorry Tony! Jesus Christ I'm sorry! I'm sorry I betrayed you and let Steve and Bucky go, but you don't understand Tony-"

"Apologies don't have excuses in them."

She stops and swallows down whatever words were in her throat, her eyes are hardened in defiance. Tony clenches his fists at his sides, he looks her up and down and sneers in disgust.

"You signed the Accords, you fought with me, and then at the last moment, when it counted, you chose Steve."

Natasha flinches slightly, she crosses her arms again and turns slightly away from him.

"It wasn't about choosing between the two of you," She whispers pathetically. Fucking actress.

"Wasn't it though? Wasn't that exactly what happened in that airport? T'challa was right there, he could've helped you take them both down, but you chose Steve."

She rounds on him, face pulled up in a snarl. She points at him accusingly.

"I'd had enough of all the fighting! Steve- Steve wasn't going to stop! I did what I did to end the fighting!"

Tony sees red.

"Oh fuck your reasoning! Had T'challa and you worked together they both would have been taken in and the fighting would have stopped! No, you looked into Steve's baby fucking blues and decided he was suddenly better, stronger, his cause more noble or some fucking shit. For some reason you placed faith and belief into Steve when it should have been mine! You're no martyr, don't you for a moment think of yourself as one," Tony turns away from her, grabs one of his oil rags and furiously wipes away the grease stains on his forearms.

"Wanted to stop the fighting," Tony laughs mockingly, stops wiping at his forearms, "You recruited T'challa knowing it was going to lead to a fight! No, no."

Tony throws the rag down, faces her once more and notices the tear streaks falling down her face. It just fuels him some more.
"Don't you cry, crocodile tears don't work on me, especially from someone like you. You didn't just betray me, you gave up on me. You decided I wasn't worth whatever you paired me up against Steve with, and frankly, I've decided I'm worth more than you and that star spangled piece of shit. So get the fuck out of my sight, I don't have the time, I have work to do."

He turns around and throws the rag back down onto the metal cart and doesn't turn back around until he hears her footsteps get light and lighter as she leaves him.

He releases a shaky breath before stretching his shoulder and back muscles.

"Back to work."

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*He's in the ruins of Sokovia this time. Ultron's many metal bodies are strewn all around.*

*He kicks the head of one and watches as the sparks fly from it's neck as the head falls off.*

*He's right next to the bomb in the middle of the stone building where they had made their last stand against his creation. His creations. Tony sneers.*

*His pajama pants drag across the dust and rubble as he makes his way to sit down on one of the steps near an almost fully intact Ultron body. As soon as his ass hits the cold stone, the metal body wakes up next to him.*

"I knew you'd fail, didn't I tell you?"

*Ultron's voice bleeds out of the machine's mouth and Tony closes his eyes.*

"I didn't fail. I'm still here, the Avengers are still here."

*He hears metallic laughter flit into the air around him.*

"Are they? Are they really? Oh, open your eyes Tony, they want you dead more than I ever did."

Tony sighs and opens his eyes. Steve is standing above him, the rest of his merry gang is behind him. Natasha and Sam are staring down at him, hate bright in their eyes. Clint has an arrow drawn and pointed at him. Wanda is floating in the air encompassed in her red smoke, her eyes are red, there's no white in sight.

Hmm, wonder where the ant guy is, where's Bucky?

Tony lifts a hand to his chest, places it like a barrier between his skin and the shield he's sure is coming.

"Not this time buddy," Steve says and he steps back, then there's Bucky, metal fist raised to the sky. Oh, there he is.

Tony smiles as the tears begin to stream down his face.

"Well then what are we waiting for?"
His fist slams down on Tony's cheek, immediately he feels blood spurt out and down the side of his face.

It hurts, oh it hurts like hell.


"How did you not see this coming?" Ultron asks him.

Tony shrugs as he falls into the dirt around him. He sees the fist coming down for him again.

"I thought I was their friend."

Metal meets flesh and Tony does not get up.

Tony is sketching schematics (which means he's throwing new designs up all around him, the room encompassed in blue lighting) in his lab when his phone rings. Adele sings from his phone and he almost stops breathing.

He looks down at the phone before clearing his throat.

"Fry, put it up."

His schematics move over and in front of him Laura Barton's face pops up. She looks good, hairs a little short though. He can see the little ones in the back playing in the living room.

"Tony."

That's when he notices her furrowed brow, how her lips are pursed in a mother's admonishment. She narrows her eyes at him and points a finger at the camera. Tony struggles not to laugh.

"Care to explain to me why my husband just showed up on my doorstep at my apartment in Sweden?"

Tony shrugs his shoulders but the nervousness settles in his belly.

"He got pardoned L, and he's retired now. He can't be an Avenger. Besides I couldn't send him back to your farm, but I didn't tell him where you were. I just had F.R.I.D.A.Y. plant a clue or two in his phone is all."

Laura pulls back from the phone's camera view and leans towards where Tony knows is the front door.

"Oh so you're retired now? Sounds familiar huh babe? Sounds real fuc-" She looks down and puts a hand over her mouth. Tony sees a little head of brown hair bob past.

Definitely Nathaniel.

"Flipping familiar huh!" Laura finishes.
"Laura open the door!"

Tony hears Clint through the door. He sounds *pissed.*

Tony's smile is blinding.

"How long have you had him standing out there?" He asks taking a sip of his lukewarm coffee he'd forgotten earlier.

Laura looks back to the phone and rolls her eyes.

"He's been out there for only thirty minutes, but hey at least it isn't *three years!"* She yells the last part at the door. Tony whistles low.

"Who are you talking to?" Clint yells again, he pounds on the door.

"My boyfriend asshole!"

This time she doesn't stop the curse word and Tony hears a small gasp.

"Mom, swear jar," a tall preteen girl says. Lila. She's carrying Nathaniel who looks confusedly at the door before turning his attention back to Lila.

"Lila! And Nathaniel!"

Lila turns to the phone and smiles warmly, even waves.

"Hey Mr. Stark!"

"You're talking to Stark? Your boyfriend? I'm going to tear this door down!" He's pounded on the door again.

Tony smirks when he sees the look Laura throws to the door.

"You try it and see how fast I have the cops and Tony here!"

"So I'm assuming you haven't worked anything out?" Tony asks. He takes another sip of his coffee.

Lila rolls her eyes.

"Nope, and it's not even half as bad as if Cooper was here. I'm pretty sure he's going to fight dad when he gets back from the movies."

Tony raises his brows.

"How are you holding up kid?"

Laura glances between the screen and Lila.

"I'm fine. He's back right? Cooper never forgave him for leaving and Nathaniel barely even remembers him, but me? I'm *fine,*" Lila says, jostling Nathaniel to her other hip. Tears start to pool at the outer corner of her eyes.

Tony bites his lower lip, sets the coffee down.

"I think you need a good screaming session with your pops."
Lila laughs and furiously wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. Laura pulls her in for a hug and kisses the top of her head.

"Go to your room with Nathaniel."

Lila nods and leaves the view from the screen.

"Laura!"

Laura closes her eyes and puts a hand onto her forehead.

"Clint please! Stop!"

She lets out a deep breath and looks back to Tony.

"What do I do?"

Her voice is watery and the weight of those words crash down on Tony and he feels his own shoulders slump forward. He licks his lips and tries to collect his thoughts before looking back to the screen.

"I gotta tell you something while I have you on the phone. I thought if I didn't contact you it would help, but I have to tell you."

Laura nods, her face drawing tight in concern.

"Ross knows about the farm. He doesn't about you and the kids though, only knows that Clint used to live there," Tony pauses, "He asked me to hunt down Clint's location. He's an asset we need to have tabs on. If you, if you take him back, pull him back into your life, there's a chance you'll be found out. Ross tells me he doesn't go after family and I've seen proof with the Langs but you worked so hard to keep your kids safe. This is more than about Ross, how can anyone that wants to hurt Clint get to him if they don't know you guys exist? I just want you to know. I'm not going to tell Ross, I-"

"Tony, I know. I trust you. You've, oh Tony, you've done so much for us already. I can't repay you, I'll never be able to. You're saving my three babies," Laura smiles at the camera and Tony slumps in relief into the table behind him, "I understand about Clint, it's always been a risk, and I think I'm going to make the right choice. For me and the kids, they deserve some closure."

Tony nods and runs a hand down his face.

"If you need anything L-"

"I know, you got us."

She smiles again and Tony suddenly misses his mother.

"Laura! Please just, just open the door. I want to see you and the kids, oh please Laura."

Laura looks back to the door and chews the bottom of her lip thoughtfully. She looks back to the phone and Tony sees tears well up in her eyes.

"Hey, give him hell L. Give him absolute hell. Show him how hurt you are, how hurt the kids are, for as long as you need and don't you dare feel bad about it."

Laura nods once and wipes her eyes with her left hand, Tony sees a wedding band glint.
"I'm going to hang up now."

Tony feels his chest tighten and he nods once, plastering a reassuring smile on his face.

"Okay L."

She gives him one last smile and then ends the call.

The screen in front of him disappears and the schematics are back up in their place.

He takes a moment to breathe, leans forward and tucks his head between his knees.

"Boss?" F.R.I.D.A.Y.'s voice rings out softly. Tony focuses on his breathing.

In, out, in, out, in-

"Do you need me to get Rhodes?"

Tony sits up slowly, eyes closed.

"No, no I'm fine."

"Boss-"

"Hey Fry what do you think about black and gold?"

F.R.I.D.A.Y. pauses for a moment.

"If you're thinking stripes you'll look like a bumblebee."

Tony laughs, cards his hands through his hair.

"What about the top?"

"I think it'll look mighty fine Boss."

Tony throws some black coloring onto the design in front of him.

"Okay," He leans back, takes in the full design.

"Okay."

---

"I'm sorry."

Scott is in the opening of his office, duffel bag slung over his shoulder.

Tony eyes him warily. He doesn't necessarily know the man and hasn't made any attempt to.

Being on opposite sides of the war will do that to you.

"You're sorry?" Tony asks, because he's an instigator, because he can.
"I'm sorry, sorry for everything on my part," Scott shuffles the duffle bag on his shoulder.

"I'm not making excuses, I just...I want to explain what went through my head."

Tony nods at him.

"I'm so new to this hero stuff, all my life I was this low life crook and suddenly I had this opportunity to- I could help so many people. I could change everyone's opinion about me in the process," Scott bites his lower lip, "One moment I'm at this coffee shop and suddenly I'm waking up in a white van talking to my hero, *Captain America*, in the flesh. Asking for my help, help to save the world," Scott beams, "I felt so chosen. So I said yes because the world needed saving and Captain needed my help," His smile falls, "Except that's not how it was. Nothing was how I expected it to be."

Scott locks eyes with Tony.

"We fought the Avengers. I, I threw an oil truck, I could've killed one of you. I even risked being ripped in half for this fucked up mission. I mean if I died how would I see my daughter again? And that was on me, I chose all of it."

He pauses then whips out his phone, finds what he needs and advances slowly towards Tony, he shows him a picture of a little girl. She's beautiful.

"That's my daughter, that's Cassie and I'm leaving to see her," Scott takes the phone away and looks at it longingly, "I've been calling her since I got here. She, she wouldn't answer my calls at first, then once she did she kept asking me if I was a bad man, and I wanted to tell her no, no I helped Captain America, no baby girl, never. But then I thought about it, everything I've done, maybe I am. Maybe this whole time I was."

Tony's eyes are wide and he doesn't know what to say. Scott looks at him, his eyes a little watery and he smiles.

"But I think I can change that. Knowing what I know now? I'm going to try Mr. Stark. I'm going to try to be one of the good guys, one of the real good guys. I'm going to function under the Accords and- And I'm here if you ever need help Mr. Stark. I just want you to know that and to know that I'm sorry for all this, for whatever part I played into all this and my actions. Now, now I have to go home and I have a lot more people to apologize to. I have three years to make up for. Uh, thank you for everything."

Scott raises a hand in goodbye and Tony nods dazedly.

"Uh, yeah, no problem."

Scott Lang leaves and something in Tony feels lighter.

Ben walks in early the next day holding a dark brown dachshund dog, who may or may not be, a couple pounds overweight.
"This is Frankie, Frankie, say hi."

The dogs automatically barks and it's tail starts waving viciously. Ben sets the dog down and it immediately runs over to Rhodey who is leaning against the sink, and starts licking the tops of his slippers and even the sides of his braces.

"Tony?" Rhodes asks snapping his fingers so Tony raises his eyes from the fairly heart warming display going on.

"Yes Rhodes?"

"There is a dog licking me in your kitchen at," Rhodey checks his watch," seven forty-five a.m. and I have not even made myself a cup of coffee yet."

Tony hides his smile behind his hand and gently nudges Ben who saddles up besides him to lean on the kitchen's island.

"I can see that Rhodes," Tony turns towards Ben who is grinning like an idiot at the display.

"Why is your dog licking my Rhodes at, what was it?"

"Seven forty-five," Rhodes answers staring down at the dog again with a small smile.

"Yes, seven forty-five in the morning?"

"Well, she's my PTSD dog, she helps me if I'm having issues. I thought you guys could use her too," Ben scratches the back of his neck and looks at Frankie on the ground who has abandoned Rhodey's shoes in favor of sniffing the kitchen out.

"I have her bedding and her toys in a box in the living room. I'm going to miss her a lot but I'll get to see her every day too though so I guess it won't be that bad right? Any way I brought the rest of her food and treats-"

"Okay, whoa there tiger, what are you talking about?" Tony asks, settling a hand on Ben's shoulder. Tony's noticed he rambles when he's nervous.

"Well you guys have just gone through a lot and Frankie can help you guys and I know it hits you hard when you're sleeping and Frankie can sleep with you and help you out and comfort you when you need comfort but don't want an actual person with you and I mean I'm going to be sad cause she won't be living with me any more but I think it's noble right? So-"

"Nonsense," Tony waves him off and crouches low to rub behind Frankie's ear when she approaches him, tail still wagging fiercely.

"If Frankie's moving in so are you," Tony stands back up, Frankie jumps up and starts pawing at his knee.

Ben's face lights up and his smile is like the sun.

"I don't want to impose though, but, I mean that sounds amazing! I- thank you so much Tony!"

He dives in and hugs Tony who feels the air get knocked from his lungs. He pats Ben on his back reassuringly and laughs.

"Of course kid, your apartment was shitty anyways. I can't imagine poor Frankie getting a lot of exercise in that small dump."
Ben flushes slightly and lets go of Tony. He gapes for a moment before dropping down and waiting for Frankie to shuffle into his arms and carrying her back up with him with a huff.

"She-she has put on a little weight."

Vision floats through the wall suddenly and makes a beeline for the fridge.

"I am open to suggestions for breakfast but am inclined to make French toast for us all with possible eggs and bacon with fresh cut melon on the side if that is preferable-" Vision stops, rotates fort-five degrees to his right.

"There is a dog."

Rhodes bursts out into laughter and claps a hand onto Vision's shoulder.

"Tony has adopted two more into the family. Also, if you're about to get breakfast started, could you make a some coffee too? You know how to make it just right, I think it's this wrist thing you do when you poor the creamer in it..."

Rhodey's voice drifts off as they all watch Vision float tentatively towards Ben and Frankie and asks quietly with his eyes for permission to take her from Ben.

"Yeah! She loves being held go for it!"

Vision holds her close and she greets his with three long swipes of her tongue.

"Now that is just too adorable," Rhodey says smiling, whipping his phone out and taking pictures.

"What is her name?" Vision asks entranced and rubbing a soothing hand down Frankie's back who barks excitedly.

"Frankie, I named her after Frank's ballpark hotdogs. You know, because she's a weiner dog? It's fucking clever." Ben justifies that last bit to Tony and Rhodey who are doubled over with laughter.

"Oh my god now we need to keep her, that is beautiful."

"Her toys are in the living room-"

Vision starts floating towards the doorway.

"Hey what about breakfast? What about coffee?" Rhodes asks indignantly, throwing his hands into the air.

Vision merely turns Frankie's face towards them and says, "She was named after a hotdog company Mr. Rhodes."

Tony nods his head and looks over in Rhodes's directions.

"He's got a point Honeybuns."

Rhodes sighs loudly and reluctantly nods his head in agreement.

Vision smiles at them and continues on his way out the door to the living room.

Ben smiles as Vision disappears with Frankie. He turns back to look at Rhodes and Tony.
“See she's already doing her job, I've never seen Vis look happier.”

“I don't think he knows how to process all the cute coming at him at once,” Tony says smiling and making his way to rifle through the fridge himself for breakfast.

“Then how can he stand to look at me?” Rhodes asks grabbing a mug and making his own way over to the coffee machine.

Ben covers his mouth with one hand and makes a theatrically shocked noise.

“Rhodes, you-you don't know?”

Rhodey stops mid-stride and groans loudly as Tony tries to stop the laughter bubbling in his chest.

"Don't say it Ben, don't say it-"

”I'm sorry to inform you Mr. Rhodes but you've got a case of the ug-”

Rhodes throws an apple at Ben from the island's fruit bowl, and it lands dead center on his right thigh. A loud smack resounds in the kitchen and Tony finally loses his shit.

"Ow! Jesus Rhodes!”

Rhodey raises another apple threateningly.

"Exactly, I want to hear reverent pontifications when my name leaves your mouth. And you,” Rhodes turns towards Tony and throws the apple at his shoulder, "Stop laughing and make breakfast."

Tony laughs through the pain and thinks that maybe, just maybe, as he watches Rhodes get back to making coffee, and sees Ben pick up the apples from the floor with a smile, and hears Vision and Frankie playing in the living room, that his life was getting better.

Was better.

He could get used to this.

Chapter End Notes

Tony should not get used to this. Don't get used to it Tony.
So sorry it took me this long to get this chapter out!!
I promise the next one will up and out in the next couple of days!
I hope you guys enjoy the chapter!
and can we talk about how much attention this fic has gotten? oh my god I want to thank you guys so much for commenting and bookmarking and kudosing this story!
Over 8,000 hits, over 200 bookmarks?? Holy Shit!
I love you guys so much!! Thank you!!!
Also if you guys want to use Ben as an OC in your fics you are totally welcome to do so! I guess just try to tag me in it?
And you guys should totally read After by oshi on here because it is PHENOMINAL.
Thank you for all the LOVE this story is getting! Please leave a comment if you enjoyed and tell me your thoughts!
Tony wakes up in the middle of the night with a scream stuck in his throat and sweat dripping down his back like Niagara falls. For a few moments, as the panic and fear still race through his body, his eyes flit to every corner of his darkened room, searching for the outline of his nightmares.

He realizes he's safe when Frankie bounds into his lap from the corner she was snoring loudly in and starts lapping at his chin and cheek. He gently pushes her away and runs a hand over his face, wiping sweat and tears out of his eyes.

"Fry what time is it?" He asks, voice hoarse and slightly sore. His arm flops back to the mattress and Frankie makes quick work of gently licking at those too.

"Three thirty two in the a.m. Boss. You've still got three more hours of rest to go."

Tony snorts at the prospect of sleep and turns his attention back to Frankie who is sitting on her hind legs. He quirks an eyebrow at her.

"When was the last time you went bathroom?"

Frankie quirks her head to the right, her ears flopping adorably. He wiggles his fingers at her and her tail starts wagging.

"Need to go outside?"

Immediately she starts pouncing on him and yelping happily, tail on hyper drive.

"Okay, okay! Outside here we go," He laughs as he gets up from his bed and gently picks her up with him before placing her on the floor. Her steady tiny footsteps follow him as he leaves his bedroom and makes his way past the kitchen and living room to a pair of sliding doors that lead to an enclosed terrace with artificial grass.

"Go forth and pee."

He opens the doors and watches her slither out, trudging begrudgingly on the fake plantation. Tony shrugs at her.

"It's either this or we take an elevator ride and I chase you like last time all over the yard because you wouldn't come inside. This is your area, live it, love it, good."

He shuts the door and in retaliation she looks him dead in the eye as she squats down to-

"That's not pee. Okay, you'll definitely be a while," Tony mutters to himself. He turns away from the scene, giving Frankie her much needed privacy and decides to make his way to the kitchen.

He could use a drink of water.

He doesn't bother to flip on the light and grabs a glass and turns the faucet on, fills it up halfway and brings it to his lips before the hairs on the back of his neck stand up and he can feel the other person in the room.
"Sorry," They say. Tony forces himself to take a small sip, won't show them weakness. He gently places the cup down and turns.

Barnes.

"Planning on stabbing me in the back or do you leave that for Steve directly?" Tony manages to snark, crosses his arms and laces a superior smile on his face. Bucky smirks back at him from his position, leans down on the island, showcases his new shiny arm.

Tony feels the rage boil in his belly.

"I like the face to face approach personally."

"Except on back roads when you're on your motorcycle."

"Please, not Maria. Sergeant Barnes-"

Bucky bites his cheek and stands up straight, taps his metal fingers against the top of the counter.

"You deserve to be angry."

Tony uncrosses his arms and flexes his hands into fists.

"No fucking shit, so happy I got your blessing. Jesus Christ, you are exactly like Steve." Tony throws his hands up in the air and settles them on his hips. He grinds his teeth and feels the shocks of adrenaline in his body, fight or flight instincts kicking in.

"I'm sorry about your parents," Bucky says evenly, staring straight into Tony's eyes. Tony goes rigid.

"Yeah, that doesn't bring them back."

"They're dead, nothing is going to bring them back."

Tony rounds the island with lighting speed and lands a quick hard punch to Barnes's jaw that whips the super soldier's head to the side but otherwise leaves no impact.

His chest is heaving in rage and his knuckles are throbbing and he wishes he had his suit on right now to blow this son of a bitch to kingdom come.

"Don't you dare talk about them," Tony threatens, invades Barnes's space. The other man in question is just staring straight back at him, mouth in a tight line.

"Don't you dare," The words drip like acid from his tongue.

Tony takes a step back, takes a momentary glance to look at his swollen knuckles and makes his way over to the sink to run them under cold water.

"I deserved that. I deserved all of it, probably should've died in Siberia. Would've saved a lot of people a lot of heartache," Bucky murmurs softly.

Tony turns off the faucet, closes his eyes and flexes his hand, the pain was grounding.

"And yet here you are, Bucky fucking Barnes," Tony mocks, turning around slowly with his arms outstretched. He lets them fall to his sides with a loud slap. Rage buzzes under his skin and he feels the throb in his knuckles intensify.
"What do you want from me? What could you possibly need or have to say? What-" Tony growls out before he's cut off.

"I am sorry. That's all I have to give you, that's it. With every fiber in my being, I am sorry for what I did to your parents," Bucky fists both hands into his hair and pulls. He closes his eyes and opens them as they fill with liquid to gaze at Tony.

Tony licks his lip as it quivers but keeps his eyes steely and makes sure to look Barnes in the eyes.

"It's not enough, it'll never be enough. I look at you and I see them die again, and again, and again. I see you beating my father to death who is begging you, begging you, to spare my mother, but you round the car and strangle my mo," Tony's voice cracks and a broken cry escapes him, "my mom. You stole the life from her and I live every waking moment knowing it was your touch my mother felt leaving this world."

Tony rubs both hands over his face ferociously, his body shaking with unspent grief and rage. Bucky's hands have fallen from his hair and he is slumped against the refrigerator, eyes closed and shoulders sagging.

"I know it wasn't you, but, but it was. There is nothing for me to compare you with other than that scene. I don't know you. I don't want to," Tony shakes his head and looks up to the ceiling with his hands on his hips, "And I'm just realizing the fucked up part is that your apology means absolutely nothing coming from you. It, it wasn't you who killed my parents, it was him. The Winter Soldier. That's the real injustice of it all. Everything, everyone, is telling me you're innocent and I'm crazy for being so fucking angry."

Tony shakes his head again and huffs out a thicket of air.

"No, no, this is mine," Tony shakes and he points a finger at himself and takes a step towards Barnes who is looking back at him pathetically.

"I get to be angry at you, no one gets to take that away from me. Not you, not Steve, not T'challa, I, I, I need-"

Tony can't breathe and he falls to the ground, landing on his ass. Bucky immediately rushes over to him, goes to touch his forehead, Tony clambers backwards, hits the cabinets behind him with the back of his head. His heart is pounding.

"Don't fucking touch me."

Bucky clenches his jaw but draws his hand back.

"What should I do? Who should I get?"

Rhodes flashes in Tony's mind but he trashes the idea as just as fast as it comes. Ben? Vision? No he can't, he can't inconvenience them anymore.

Wait-

"Get Frankie."

Bucky furrows his brows and shakes his head in confusion.

"What-"
"Get the fucking dog!" Tony hisses through his gasping breaths. Bucky bolts up and leaves the kitchen, he comes back a moment later with Frankie in his arms. He puts the dog on the floor and she runs over to Tony, crawling into his lap and laving kisses and licking away the sweat falling down his face.

He raises his shaking hands to rub down her sides, feels the slide of her soft fur against his clammy palms. He focuses on how her breathing expands her tiny chest and tries to match it.

After a while she curls into his lap and his breathing is under control and his heart is no longer like a jack hammer. Bucky is sitting across from him on the floor by the island, knees drawn up and his arms resting on each of them. He's eyeing Frankie and glancing every now and then to assess Tony's complexion and breathing patterns.

"I saw you have a nightmare once, Rhodes helped you."

Tony swallows loudly and thinks,

Which time exactly? I've lost count.

"Yeah."

Bucky picks at his sleep pants with his human hand at his knee.

"I dream about them all the time. All of them," Bucky says without looking up.

"Good."

Bucky laughs softly.

"Yeah, yeah."

A moment of silence passes between them again, the only noise is Frankie's loud sigh every once in a while.

"Steve wants me to be this person he knew so long ago and I don't know how to tell him that he's dead."

Tony closes his eyes and leans his head back against the cool metal cabinet behind him. Frankie breathes even in his lap.

"Sounds tough."

Bucky laughs softly again, looks up and stares at Tony until he opens his eyes and meets them.

"You were handed the shitty end of a short stick and you have every right to be pissed off for as long as you like. If you need to hate me, then do it. I'm tired of everyone walking on eggshells around me and telling me to forget what happened and what I did because it wasn't me. It haunts me, my past. I can't let it go, it'd be doing a disservice to everyone I've ever hurt and killed."

Tony takes a long look at Bucky, looks him over critically.

"It's interesting to finally meet the man who's worth ten of me."

Bucky's forehead creases in frustration and his eyes narrow.

"What?"
"Steve," Tony says by way of explanation. Bucky's eyes widen in surprise before he chuckles darkly and leans fully against the island.

"Yeah, well Steve is a fucking idiot every now and then."

Tony snorts.

"Yeah. Every now and then." The ice is back in his voice and Bucky shrugs his shoulders.

"Yeah."

Tony straightens up a little, careful to not disturb Frankie in his lap. He motions between Bucky and himself.

"You know this changes nothing?"

Bucky nods his head slowly, regretfully.

"I understand."

Tony nods his head and places a hand over Frankie and lets his head fall back against the cabinets again. He hears Bucky get up from the floor and feels him stand there and watch him.

"Goodnight Tony."

Tony tenses slightly before it drains from his body. He hears Bucky leave and suddenly the floor is the most comfortable thing he's ever felt.

He dozes off with Frankie in his lap and doesn't say anything to Vision who finds him in the kitchen two hours later.

Vision eyes him softly before helping him and leading him to sit down by the kitchen table. Frankie happily follows by their ankles and plops down by Tony's feet.

"You are a godsend," Tony murmurs sleepily when Vision places a cup of coffee in front of him and smiles.

"Well, Thor did have a part in it."

Tony smiles into his coffee and takes a sip.

"You've got jokes."

Vision is still smiling when he turns around to get started on breakfast and soon the air gets warm and smells like bacon and eggs. Tony hears the toaster go off.

He gives Tony an extra helping of bacon on his plate. Rhodes and Ben shuffle in a short time later, grab some plates and sit on either side of Tony who is sneaking pieces of his eggs to Frankie who is shuffling under the table pawing at their knees.

"No begging Frankie," Ben says tapping her nose. She just licks his finger in response.

After a while Tony notices Vision keeps giving him long glances between his cooking and cleaning the counter.

When breakfast is finished, he passes by Tony and places a warm red hand in his hair and ruffles it.
Ben and Rhodes stare at the display with tired and surprised faces.

Tony gives Vision a questioning glance but it has no effect as the AI bends over and gathers Frankie in his arms.

"Good dog," He says and carts her away out of the kitchen.

Ben scratches at the teeny tiny stubble on his cheeks. He looks at the kitchen doorway before turning back to Rhodes and Tony.

"So, how was everyone's night?"

Tony takes another sip of his coffee and tunes out Rhodes dramatic retelling of his dream involving a flamingo.

"You know this changes nothing?"

"I understand."

"Okay, okay! I'm here so show me what you've got," Rhodes says walking into the garage, Tony is standing on his platform grinning like a madman wearing his suit's under armor.

"Looky," Tony smirks and claps his hands quickly before spreading them and his legs apart as metal parts of his suit fly and attach themselves around him. It's not a new sight for Rhodey but then he notices the colors and then the suit is finally on Tony and the arc reactor lights up as well as tiny others scattered on the suit.

"Your reactor is red," Rhodes says slack jawed. Tony's face plate flips up and he's smirking.

"Do you ever feel like you need a change?"

"You're black and gold."

"Like a major change? Something to spice up your life? I picked black because it's much more slimming don't you think?"

Tony turns in a circle, showcasing the suit. The black and gold compliment each other well. It's a good looking suit but something about it seems more...intimidating than Tony's red and gold suits.

"It looks good Tony," Rhodes says eyeing the suit appreciatively.

"Good? No, I don't make good, I make superb."

Rhodey lifts his hand up in mock submission. Tony rolls his eyes and gives him the finger.

"Nice to see the ego hasn't taken a hit," Rhodes eyes him again and puts both hands on his hips, "So you going to tell me why I shouldn't be worried you're about to go through a midlife crisis?"

Tony bites his cheek and narrows his eyes, mimics Rhodey's pose.

"I have no idea what you could possibly be talking about."
Rhodes raises an eyebrow, walks to the base of the platform and looks up at Tony. He points up at him with a pinched face in concern.

"I know you Tony, what is this? I mean granted the suit is nice, but what was wrong with your other suit?"

Tony shifts to lean his weight on one foot and scratches the back of his head.

"Nothing was wrong, this is just more... I needed something different. When I think about how we're going to have to go out with them again," Tony trails off. He turns around and walks a little farther onto the platform, crosses his arms as much as he can in the suit.

Rhodey thinks it makes it look like he's holding himself.

"I'm different now," Tony explains, looking at Rhodes over his shoulder. There's an unnamed emotion in his eyes and he looks years younger.

_He looks scared._

Tony never looks scared, not in the daytime at least.

Rhodey lets out a deep breath and his arms drop to his sides. His face loses its hard lines and his eyes soften.

"Good different or bad different?"

Tony huffs in amusement and his old smirk is back on his face.

"We'll have to find out won't we."

Rhodes laughs but a small shiver of nervousness runs down his spine. He pauses for a moment before making his way up the stairs to the platform, his braces giving off soft sounds as his knees lift.

He stands next to Tony and holds his hands behind his back. He looks over at Tony whose pulled up a small schematic in front of him and is moving pictures of parts of his suit around, bringing up pictures of the red arc reactor.

"You know, you look way more intimidating in this suit," Rhodes says offhand, flicks Tony on the shoulder with his fingers and the little clang of metal vibrates around them.

Tony looks at him and shrugs.

"That's the point."

He smiles at Rhodes before looking back to the diagrams and starts to ramble to Rhodes about how the smaller arc reactors will help the suit hold more power and the likelihood of total suit shutdown goes down fifty seven percent.

Another chill goes down Rhodey's back and this time it's fear.

He's scared for Tony.
"Drink with me."

Tony blinks the blurriness from his eyes as he looks up and sees a flushed looking Ben with an open bottle of scotch and two glasses. One has some brown droplets running down inside the glass. Someone started early.

Tony takes off his glasses and moves aside the papers the U.N. and Ross mailed him with details and concerns to look over for the team. He glances at his watch and it showed one thirty in the morning.

"We have a special occasion we're celebrating?" Tony asks as he motions for Ben to come in and sit in the chair across from him.

Ben staggers slightly in and sets the bottle on the desk with a loud thump and yes, you have definitely had enough young man.

Tony eyes the half empty bottle with raised brows and watches as Ben flops into the chair. He passes Tony a glasses and fumbles for the neck of the bottle.

Tony grabs the bottle first and pours his glass, watches Ben look at him in confusion. He's got red high on his cheeks and even his ears are flushed. Tony can't help the smile that forms on his face.

"I've had more experience pouring drinks drunk off my ass so I think I'll play bartender for the rest of the night," He says in way of explanation.

When he's done with his glass he fills up ben's and sets the bottle out of reach from the younger man.

He brings the glass up to his lips and takes a sip, feels the burn down his throat and hums in approval. He looks back to Ben and quirks a brow with a grin.

"So as I was saying, what's the-"

"Anniversary of my mom's death."

Tony freezes and feels his mouth gape.

"I'm sorry Ben."

His tongue feels heavy in his mouth and his body feels stuck.

Ben slams his drink back and gently places the glass on the desk with a soft clink. Tony doesn't miss the grimace and small hiccup.

"No it's, it's been like, twelve years."

Tony flexes his jaw and forces himself to take another sip, puts his own glass down.

"Ben-"

"I was doing good, doing pretty well when it hit midnight. I think Frankie knew what was up
though cause she wouldn't leave me alone. I, uh, put her in Vision's room. He really likes her," Ben
finds a pen and starts inspecting it, rotating it in his drunk clumsy fingers. "So closer to one I just
decided to get drunk and for awhile it was okay but I don't like to drink alone so here I am."

Tony reaches across the table and puts one hand over the pen and both of Ben's. Ben looks up and
bites his lip as he makes eye contact with Tony.

"It was my fault you know."

Tony opens his mouth but no sound comes out. He shakes his head and licks his own lips.

Ben laughs loudly and pulls his hands out of Tony's grasp to sit back in the chair.

"It's true. I killed my mom."

He rubs both hands over his face and Tony doesn't know what to do. He doesn't know how to help
Ben, doesn't know what the fuck Ben is talking about.

So he says, "Tell me."

Ben laughs again, like something is hysterical and rubs his bottom lip with his thumb.

"My mom was diabetic and her kidneys they were bad. She starts getting high blood pressure and
she starts to bloat up like nothing my dad or I had ever seen. So we go to the hospital and we find
out she's got edema, congestive heart failure, and low and behold, chronic kidney disease. She's,
she's in bad shape. And did I mention she was a BKA? Another side affect of diabetes, sometimes
you lose a foot."

Ben snorts and Tony feels the air get knocked out of him.

"So she's deemed a fall risk and they give her a Foley bag. Easy peasy right? They sort her out at
the hospital and she comes home, her kidneys are functioning better, she's got water pills for the
edema and she's got her heart medication, she's fine."

Ben cocks his head to the side and clenches his fist.

"But then she's not. It's summer so I'm helping her around the house and I notice she's getting tired
really easily. I just assumed she was still recovering from her time at the hospital. My dad was still
working days and didn't come home till late and he thought it was a little strange too but it didn't
ring any alarms. She starts taking naps during the evening and I start leaving to hangout with my
friends."

Ben stands up from his chair, stumbles as he paces the room, his breathing getting ragged.

"Her naps started to get longer and she'd go to bed earlier in the day and, and I actually started to
get frustrated with her! I was mad that we couldn't go do anything because she was too tired!" Ben
shakes his head at himself and turns to Tony with his eyes wide open, "What the fuck was I
thinking?"

"You were a teenager," Tony whispers. Ben makes a face in disgust and points at himself.

"I was supposed to be helping her! One day she literally collapses to the ground, falls down like a
wet rag, she keeps telling me she tripped and her prosthetic was to blame but I knew it was because
she was tired. So I tell my dad when he gets home, he thinks we should go to the hospital. She
doesn't want to go, says she's spent too much time there. I should've pushed her! A week goes by
and she's getting more and more out of it and she falls again. My dad is home and we decide to go to the hospital. She's slurring her words and she's barely conscious and she tells me 'You're a good son Ben,' except I was frustrated at her, I was mad because she didn't want to go to the hospital a week earlier and I had to cancel plans with this stupid girl I had a crush on.

"We get to the hospital and then, then there's chaos because she won't wake up. She developed MRSA, it's a stupid little infection you can get from the hospital. It was from her Foley bag. It's not anyone's fault it just... It's a horrible bacteria that can ruin lives. But she had the MRSA for so long that she developed sepsis and then her kidneys stopped working and we had to hook her up to this dialysis machine and, and she wouldn't wake up. The infection was too far gone in her body for antibiotics to work, her blood was literally poison and her organs started to shut down."

Ben hides his face behind his hands and releases a shaky breath as his shoulders fall.

"She was long dead before we decided to unplug her. I sat with my father and watched them remove all the cords they stuck to her, saw all the bruises her body had from needles and tests, and I watched that monitor flat line forty minutes later after they gave her a morphine drip. I just watched her body give up."

Ben let his hands drop from his face and the tears to flow freely.

Tony bolts from his chair, unshed tears in his own eyes. He pulls Ben into a tight hug and feels the kid grab onto his shirt and sob. The warmth of his tears scorched him to his soul.

"I killed her! I should have done something! I knew! I knew she wasn't okay! If we only went to the hospital sooner! If I made her listen-"

"Don't," Tony croaks out, his hands tight around Ben's shoulders, "Don't you put this on yourself. It was an awful combination of circumstance and coincidence. You didn't kill her, you did not."

Ben rubs his face into Tony's shoulder.

"Her last words to me and I was mad at her, how could I be mad at her?"

Tony tries to soothe Ben by raking his fingers through his hair. He feels his heart fall into his stomach.

"You were a kid, you didn't know."

Ben gently lifts his head and pushes softly at Tony to let him go.

"I should have."

Tony lets Ben pull away and lean back against the far wall. He has his eyes closed and his nose is red and his eyes are swollen. Tear stains streak down his shirt and Tony can feel cold seep into his chest where his own lie.

"Ben, you couldn't possibly have known what was going to happen, that's insane. You can't live like that, you gotta." Tony runs a hand through his hair, "You gotta forgive yourself."

Ben opens his eyes to look at Tony and gives a weak smile.

"I've tried, but it's my fault-"

"Ben," Tony walks over and places both hands on Ben's shoulders, "You are not the reason you're
mom died. Look at me, you did not kill your mom."

Ben gives a shuddering breath and locks eyes with Tony even as more tears fall. His lips quivers but he looks strong.

"I didn't kill my, my mom."

His voice is quiet and unsure but it's a damn good start.

Tony pulls him in for another hug and feels Ben sag a little in relief.

It was a start.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the angst train, everybody gets some!
sorry it took so long to get this chapter out, just don't trust me when I tell you the next chapter is coming out soon.
Also sorry there really isn't a lot of plot happening! THAT I can guarantee will be in the next chapter for sure!

Ben's mother's story = real life story

*Thank you for all the LOVE this story is getting! Please leave a kudos or comment telling me what you think! I love reading them and it spurs me on!
Tony's holding two cups of coffee standing in the doorway of Ben's bedroom, watching the younger man shuffle under his covers and groan pitifully.

"How're you feeling?" Tony asks with a smile from his spot. Ben stops his movement and pokes his head out from his quilted fort. He squints and blinks his way over the room before he settles on Tony's form and flops back down onto his bed.

"Oh fuck," He grinds out from behind the hand currently running over his face. Tony shakes his head but grins as he makes his way over to stand beside Ben's bed. He extends his arm with a cup of black coffee.

Ben glances up at him and gingerly takes the cup of coffee and carefully sits up, blinking the light out of his eyes. He takes a small sip and grins in satisfaction before his face falls comically fast.

"Oh my God," He groans out. Tony lifts a brow and takes a sip of his own coffee. Ben looks at him aghast and closes his eyes.

"Thank you for the coffee but could you leave me alone to die from equal parts of my hangover and embarrassment?" Ben opens his eyes but refuses to look back at Tony. Tony rolls his own eyes before taking a seat on the end of the bed.

"You do realize there's nothing to be embarrassed about right? It's not like you wore my Iron Man helmet and nothing else and swam in the Avenger's pool."

Ben raises a dark brow and smirks.

"Personal experience?"

Tony shrugs and returns the smirk.

"I throw amazing New Year's Eve parties."

Ben lets out a loud laugh before groaning and rubbing his temples with his free hand. Tony hum in sympathy and his eyes go a little softer.

"Should probably keep the volume down for the rest of the day, you did powerhouse through more than half a bottle of scotch."

Ben groans again in response and reaches over to put his coffee on the night stand before turning back to Tony. His face is flushing again like last night and the red peaks high on his cheeks. Tony tries to control the chipmunk jokes threatening to roll off his tongue.

"I am so sorry for how I acted last night. I, I shouldn't have unloaded all of my stupid emotional baggage on you that, that was not... You're already going through a lot and you don't need to feel like you need to take care of me. I'm a grown man I shouldn't be-"

"You shouldn't have been blaming yourself for something like that for twelve years and I am more than happy to help you heal from that," Tony gives him a pointed look before continuing, "And for
the record, you are talking to the king of emotional baggage and trauma and if I don't focus on
another person I get bored and turn that attention inward which leads to a lot of self destructive
tendencies."

Ben seems to struggle internally before sighing and falling back to sit against his pillows again.

"Thanks for getting me into bed. I'm sorry if my slobber and everything ruined your shirt."

It's Tony's turn to laugh and he's careful to not spill the coffee in his hand.

"It's fine, don't worry about it. Lord knows how many shirts I ruined myself when I was in less
than stellar condition."

Ben smiles again before his face turns into a more somber expression and he fiddles with his
hands. He looks up from under his eyelashes and his mouth becomes a thin line.

"Thank you listening to me last night, but I don't think I want to revisit it anytime soon you know?"

Tony's gut flips a little but he nods and makes a show of zipping his lips and shrugging his
shoulders.

"Talk about what? What's there to talk about?"

Ben's shoulders relax a little and he eyes Tony again before reaching over again to grab his coffee
and take a sip.

It's after a while of comfortable silence that Ben straightens up.

"I just don't want to forget you know? I think that's why I don't want to forgive myself." Ben's
voice is quiet and he still sounds so young.

Tony tenses and feels his jaw clench before he answers.

"Yeah, yeah I get that."

He takes another sip of coffee to keep his lip from trembling.

"This-oh fuck! Yeah, this never gets easier," Rhodes's grunts out as he slowly and painfully
attempts to walk between the two bars without his braces. His biceps and forearms bulge with the
effort to keep himself up and his legs are almost like dead weight as he inches down the small
path.

Tony's standing at the end facing Rhodey with his arms crossed and a supportive grin on his face.
He notices the sweat dripping down his best friend's face and how it soaks his t-shirt. The old guilt
he's carried around with him for three years blossoms in his chest, and he takes a deep breath in but
is careful to not let his mask slip.

*He needs to be here for Rhodey.*

"I guess the upside is your arms are GQ worthy."
Tony lets out a wolf whistle and Rhodey chuckles lightly, looking up to meet Tony with a smile. The guilt in Tony's chest becomes a rock, solid and heavy and it threatens to sink him.

Every time he sees Rhodey struggle something in him dies, it shrivels up and turns to ash.

"Hey Rhodes-"

He's cut off by his phone ringing and the feeling in his chest only grows heavier when he sees it's Ross calling him.

Rhodey gives him a concerned glance but keeps going.

Tony takes a deep breath before sliding his thumb across the screen.

"Where's Barton?" Is the first thing out of Ross's mouth and Tony takes the time to close his eyes and rub his temples before answering. As usual his Ross induced headache was making it's appearance.

"You know me Ross, I'm looking twenty four seven but Clint is one sneaky son of a bitch."

Tony can feel Ross's blood pressure rise through the phone.

"Stark."

"Ross."

He hears Ross grind his teeth and he lets himself enjoy a small amount of satisfaction to thrum through him.

"Don't push me Stark. I know you think you may have the upper hand in this situation, but do not mistake my allowing you to find Barton as some kind of admittance that we, the government of the United States, cannot do it ourselves. It may take a longer amount of time but you better believe we will find him."

Tony feels the snarl make its way onto his face. He looks up to Rhodey who's almost made it to the end with a glaring amount of alarm on his face as he observes Tony.

"Help me sit down," Rhodes murmurs and Tony quickly strides over to him and gets one of his arms over his shoulder to bear some weight. They both settle to the floor with practice ease and Tony still has his phone pressed to his ear.

"Then what do you need me for Ross if you're so very capable?" He hisses out.

"If we find his location we aren't going to just go by satellite proof. We will go out in the field and tangibly find evidence of where he is. If that happens I can promise it will involve a lot of uniformed men with very big guns," Tony's teeth grind together painfully and his chest was heaving at the thought of Laura and the kids's lives being ripped apart again. "Or Tony, you could cooperate and find him for us. We won't have to visit him, given you give us substantial evidence of where he is, and everyone keeps living their peaceful lives. So, are you actually going to cooperate?"

Tony swallows the words he'd rather say and tries to calm himself down. Rhodey keeps looking at him with flighty concerned eyes and a furrowed brow.

Tony turns his body away from him and his searching eyes.
"So do only sustain yourself by eating people food or do you have your cheat days and devour human souls too?" Tony asks in a biting tone. Ross chuckles on the other end of the line.

"You have a month. That should be more than enough time for you," Ross pauses, "Get it together Stark, don't throw everything you've built for some asshole who can shoot an arrow."

The line gives a sharp click and Tony drags the phone away from his ear. He drops it into his lap and aggressively rubs at his eyes and temples. He feels weightless and monumentally heavy at the same time. His stomach is in knots and he feels his heart in his throat.

Rhodey throws an arm around his shoulder and pulls him close.

"What's the diagnosis doc?"

Tony wearily lifts his head and turns it to look at Rhodes who is smiling lightly and encouragingly at him.

What did he do to deserve Rhodes?

"Diagnosis reached: Completely and totally fucked."

Tony closes his eyes and leans his head on Rhodey's shoulder. The t-shirt is still sweat soaked and sticky but this is Rhodes and this is Tony's safe place.

"I gotta find Barton, I gotta find him or Ross will and Laura and the kids... They've finally seen him after all this time. Even if they're angry at him, I risk ripping him away from them or I risk their discovery."

Tony gulps loudly and breathes out harshly.

"I promised to protect them. I gave Laura my word, I gave Cooper and Lila and little Nathaniel... I'm just going to hurt them either way. I can't win," Tony laughs pathetically against the fabric near his mouth and he feels Rhodey tighten his arm around him.

"Tony, look at me."

It takes a minute but Tony finally lifts himself up and looks at Rhodes who is staring back him with steely determination.

"You are Tony fucking Stark. When people give you A and B outcomes as options, you come up with outcome C. This is no different and I believe in you. You got that?"

Tony snorts and turns his face away, focuses on the wall across from them covered in exercise balls and weights.

"I don't know about this time Rhodes. Maybe I'm not Tony fucking Stark and I'm just Tony."

He looks back to Rhodes and gives a self deprecating smile.

"I've got a month-they've got a month. I don't know if I should warn them or let them have this time in peace."

Rhodes furrows his brow but doesn't say anything as Tony looks back to the wall.

"I'm so tired Rhodey. I'm really fucking tired."
He feels Rhodey nod beside him and sigh deeply.

"I know Tony, I know."

He's sitting on his couch in his old Los Angeles home. The exact one Obiediah left him on when he stole the arc reactor, except, Obiediah isn't here and the arc rector is still in his chest. And, and he can't move.

The room is dark all around him, but the small waterfall fountain next to him is giving enough light off for him to see a little bit in front of him.

Suddenly in the near distance, he hears the clip clop of high heels on the floor. The sound gets closer and closer and soon enough he can see tall black stilettos in front of him attached to long slim pale legs and-

"Pepper?"

She tilts her head, her strawberry hair falling to one side and exposing her moon colored neck.

"Hey Tony," She says with a smile and a little wave. Tony smiles back and tries to stand up but he can't.

He's still stuck. His heart rate begins to quicken and panic starts to set it.

Pepper takes a couple steps closer, close enough her legs brush his knees.

"You have to learn to stop Tony, you're always moving. Stop for me."

She leans down and runs a hand down the side of his face, cupping him just under his jaw.

Tony freezes when he feels how ice cold she is.

"Pepper, babe-"

She brings her other hand up and silences him with a finger against his lips. She's still smiling and something in his chest twists.

"You just have to stop for a while baby," She glances down then looks back at him, smile still in place, "And I know how to help you."

She trails her hand that was resting under his jaw down his chest, stopping over the reactor.

Pepper looks down again and giggles.

She always giggled like that when she finally had him on the run with something, she only did that when-

Pepper digs her fingers into his chest, twisting and pulling the reactor out. Burning pain shoots through him and he screams into the darkness. Tears fill his eyes and he can't breathe.

"Pepper! Stop it! No!" He chokes out as she wrenches the arc reactor out. The cable disconnects and he gives a shuddering breath as he feels the sharp pieces of shrapnel start slicing through his body to his heart.
When she finally has the arc reactor in her hand she bites her lip in a delighted smile.

"Tony! Tony look!"

He tries to blink back the tears and grits his teeth as he glances down to her hands.

In her perfectly manicured nails, is the little box she gave him god knows how many years ago.

'Proof that Tony Stark has a heart.'

Tony glances up from the box to look at her happy face and no amount of pain could stop the fear from racing through his body as she slowly morphs into a smiling Steve.

"Tony, look," Steve brings his hands up and where the box was is a heart.

Tony's heart.

Steve's hands are covered in blood and his fingers are caressing the beating organ. He looks positively giddy.

Tony is going to vomit, he's going to vomit.

Steve shifts the heart into one of his hands and he grabs Tony's chin with the other, smearing Tony's cheek with his own blood. Tony tries to flinch back but-

He. Can't. Move.

"This, this is my dark side," Steve whispers with a wide smile.

He lifts his hand holding the heart level to Tony's wide frightened eyes and squeezes.

Tony feels a pressure in his body and then-

Then blackness.

Tony bolts up in his bed, stomach feeling queasy and the acidic burn in his throat forcing vomit up. He slams into the bathroom door in his haste and doesn't even lift the lid all the way before he makes a mess across the bathroom tile. He manages to pull the lid all the way up by the time the second wave hits him.

He gags as mostly liquid leaves his stomach and splashes into the water below him. He heaves a few more times before he's convinced he won't be throwing up anymore.

He sinks to the floor and leans his head against the cold wall behind him. Tony pulls his knees to his chest and barely manages to escape the liquid puddle of vomit spreading out on his floor. He grabs some toilet paper and wipes his mouth lazily before throwing that into the toilet as well. His lungs hurt and breathing is painful. His throat is raw and tears flow freely down his face.

"Boss?" F.R.I.D.A.Y.'s voice rings out softly. Tony closes his eyes and swallows slowly, the acrid taste still in his mouth.

"Hey Fry."

"I can get someone to help, Vision is still awake. I'm sure he would help you clean up the mess and get you back into-"
"What's the time F.R.I.D.A.Y.?" Tony asks, eyes still closed and fingers cold.

"Four thirty two in the morning Boss, but as I was saying Vision is-" 

"Call, call Pepper."

F.R.I.D.A.Y. doesn't say anything immediately and for a moment Tony thinks she won't do it.

"Calling Virginia 'Pepper' Potts."

A small dial tone rings through his bathroom and he squeezes his sore eyes closed praying that she picks up.

"T-ony? Jesus what time is it?"

Pepper's sleepy voice rings out and Tony covers his face to stifle the sob that almost escapes his throat. When he's sure he's composed, he drags the hand away and wipes his nose on his arm.

"It's four something here Pep, how's Los Angeles?" It doesn't come out as steady as he'd like but it could be blamed on sleep.

He hears some shuffling around and a click of what must be a lamp.

"Well it's, it's pretty dark over here. It's one thirty something in the morning. Tony what's up? Something wrong?"

She still sounds sleepy but there's also the familiar worry and concern seeping into her voice. Tony grinds both of his palms into his eyes to try to stop the tears.

"Nothing, nothing is wrong. We just haven't talked in a while."

He hears her sigh loudly and long.

"Tony, it's the middle of the night. What happened? You can tell me-"

Tony can't stop the shuddering breath that escapes him and hopes it's quiet enough she doesn't hear.

"Tony?"

*Unfortunately not.*

"God Pepper why didn't we work? I thought we worked, we did," Tony grounds out. His hands drop from his eyes to rest casually on his knees and the tears stop flowing and he just feels so fucking tired and drained.

"No, Tony we can't just talk about this over the phone, and, and I thought we already talked about this."

Pepper's voice is a pained whisper and she sounds pleading.

"Tell me again because tonight I can't comprehend it," Tony pleads himself.

She pauses for a moment, he can picture her biting her lower lip in thought and a dull pain pangs through his heart.
"Tony, we loved each other very much, but we couldn't give each other what we needed. I, I cannot put myself through another New York, or Sokovia, I just can't. It was killing me, not knowing when the last time I was going to see you, not knowing if I was going a phone call telling me the man I loved died saving the w-world," He hears her voice shake and then the small cough she uses to clear her throat, "I'm not that strong Tony, not when it comes to you."

Tony shakes his head and closes his eyes again, letting her words sink and imprint into his soul.

"And, and, you deserve someone stronger Tony. Someone who isn't as selfish, because I am, who knows that the world comes first and that it needs Iron Man. That you need Iron Man."

Tony licks his bottom lip and opens his eyes to stare at the ceiling.

"Do you still worry? Even though we're not together? Does, does the distance help?"

She gives a watery laugh in response.

"Absolutely not. I feel like I'm going to melt into a puddle every time you put on that suit."

Tony smiles despite himself.

"Your logic is flawed Ms. Potts."

She laughs again, quieter this time. Tony takes a deep breath and runs a hand through his sweat soaked hair.

"I know Tony."

He closes his eyes and tries to remember the last time he's seen here. Maybe eight months ago? He's been so busy and she's running the company and-

"You know I'm here for you Tony. Even if we didn't work out, I am here for you."

Tony opens his eyes again, stares at the light in the ceiling until different colored lights dance in his vision.

"Yeah Pepper, I know."

"I have to go now Tony, I have a couple meeting in the morning. I'll talk to you soon okay?"

Tony smiles ruefully because he knows soon will mean a very long time. They're too busy. Both of them they, God it won't be for a while.

"Bye Pepper, talk to you soon."

"Bye Tony, get some sleep."

Her voice is so soft as she says her goodbyes and the line clicks off behind it.

"I love you Pepper," He whispers into the air around him.

It's ten minutes later when F.R.I.D.A.Y. talks to him again.

"Boss, I can notify Vision to help you?"

Tony flits his eyes to the pool of vomit, mostly liquid, a few chunks of dinner but nothing he can't
"No, no. I'll clean up my own mess."

He stands on shaky legs and grabs the nearest towel to start wiping up the mess.

He was good at this, cleaning up messes. He always did this.

"It's good to accept help sometimes."

Tony pauses and leans back to sit on his feet.

"I know Fry."

"So why don't you! I'm worried!"

Tony closes his eyes again.

"F.R.I.D.A.Y. please, please, please. Not tonight."

F.R.I.D.A.Y. doesn't reply for a while and Tony gets back to work.

"I don't want you to hurt anymore is all..."

Tony doesn't acknowledge her, just keeps cleaning.

He's good at it, cleaning messes.

They're all in the Avenger's conference room with Ross's face blown up on the screen. Tony is standing near the front while the rest sit around the smaller table, all waiting to see what Ross could possibly want.

"Show time kids, U.N. is calling on the Avengers to act within the Accords and help them out with an incident happening in Germany as we speak. A privatized medical science's lab called 'Halo Inc.' is currently being raided by some of our very good friends."

Ross's face shrinks down and aerial pictures of dozens of Hydra agents and tanks attacking the facility.

"Why would they be attacking a medical facility? Usually Hydra's targets are more..." Steve starts.

"Deadly," Sam finishes sharing a look between Bucky and Steve.

"What else is there?" Natasha asks, standing up from her chair. Ross looks her over from the screen but continues on.

"They have a high security biochemical lab in the basement that has crucial-"

"You mean Hydra's attacking Halo because there's biological weapons in the basement. I'm assuming Halo is making these weapons for military use? I'm guessing us?" Tony asks nonchalantly, pacing a little before settling back into his position.

"Biochemical warfare, that's what we've resorted to?" Steve asks in disgust.
"Don't forget soldier, you're the product of early experimentation in biochemical warfare," Ross says looking straight at Steve.

"We were fighting a mad man-"

"And now we're fight mad men in the world today."

Steve keeps his snarl in place but looks away.

"So we're going to go to Germany and stop them from breaching the bio lab. That's it?" Wanda asks skeptically.

Ross snorts in amusement.

"Try not to cause any unnecessary damage while you're out and about," Ross's smile widens as he stares at Wanda, "Or any kill any civilians."

Wanda looks away in disgust and Tony sees Steve clench his jaw with fire in his eyes. He shakes off the ebbing 'danger' instincts flowing through him and steps up to the monitor to grab Ross's attention.

"So Vision and I will fly out to Germany and take care of the situation-"

"Did I stutter when I said Avengers? All of you, will be going to Germany."

Tony quirks his head and flexes his jaw, narrows his eyes.

"We can't all go," He says slowly like he's talking to a child, " We haven't trained together, hell they haven't been here for more than a month and some change. The safest plan is to send Vision and I out-"

"No Stark. This is your opportunity to show the world and the U.N. why you advocated so hard for these," Ross eyes them each one by one, "heroes to come back. This is your publicity stunt, your popularity contest as you all said earlier. Put your money where your mouths are so to speak."

Tony sneers at Ross's image who smirks back confidently.

"Oh cheer up Tony, these are your old teammates, it'll be like riding a bike. I'll send the coordinates now, you all better suit up."

Ross's image disappeared off screen and left behind in it's space were directions and more recent footage of the situation in Germany.

Tony's trembling with rage and turns around to look at his team.

"Fuck," He hears Rhodes whispers from his chair, hands rubbing down his face.

"Tony... I'm, I know I shouldn't ask but in case the public asks-"

Tony cuts Steve off with a heated glare and a snarl.

"Yeah, I'll get you my father's shield."

And maybe, just maybe, the fucked up situation he finds himself in is worth the pained look that falls on Steve Rogers, Captain America's, face.
Another chapter?? Within a couple of days??
I know, I know, I'll probably never be able to duplicate this ever again.
So I'll give a gold star to anyone that can guess what's going to happen next chapter on
our fave gang's first official mission back together.
But I hope you guys like this chapter and again HOLY SHIT this fic is hitting hella
numbers!
Thank you all for your support and for enjoying my fic!

*Thank you for all the LOVE this fic is getting! Leave a kudis or comment if you
enjoyed! I love reading your thoughts! (seriously I love comments!)
I was supposed to be protected.

Chapter Notes

Very small rant (more like story time) that has nothing to do with the story in the notes at the very end.
Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"This is going to end badly," Rhodes manages to grunt out between breaths as they run towards Tony's garage. Tony's just a half step in front of him and their footsteps echo down the empty hall with the whisper of Rhodey's braces chasing them.

"Let's try and think positively hm?" Tony gives Rhodey a sideways glance as they descend the stairs and the door slide opens.

Rhodey follows him inside but stops short while Tony veers to the left to pause and look up on the far wall to see the object desired.

Rhodey bites his cheek and places both hands on his hips.

"You want positive? I'm positive this will end badly."

Tony looks over his shoulder to glare before continuing on and pulling himself up on a work bench to wrench the shield from the wall. He's still standing on the table when he turns around to Rhodes.

"I'm going to give that son of a bitch this shield and then we'll work our way from there okay? We'll wing it, I'm really good at that."

Rhodes throws his hands in the air and twists his body in exasperation.

"Tony, lives are at stake," He points out, his eyes hardening as he takes a step forward. Tony flexes his jaw and his grip tightens on the shield.

Helplessness and anger swirl in his gut as he stares Rhodey down.

"Then we better do our jobs and save them."

Rhodes snorts derisively and puts his hands back on his hips but shuts his mouth with an irritated click.

Tony hates this, hates the situation he's finding himself in. Hates how his stomach threatens to dispel it's contents twenty four seven, hates the itch in his skin, hates the weight of this fucking shield and God could his palms get any sweater?

"F.R.I.D.A.Y. where is everyone?" Tony asks, turning his attention away from his best friend and jumping down from the table. The added weight of the shield makes his landing hard and it vibrates painfully up his ankles and knees. He grits his teeth but doesn't lose his stride as he makes his way over to Rhodes and gives him the shield to carry.
Rhodes accepts it with a shake of his head and a heated look.

"I've got readings of half in the hanger and the others are still suiting up in the locker rooms. I can have them meet you on the jet if you'd like?"

Tony nods once, confident in F.R.I.D.A.Y.'s cameras picking it up. He glances over to the wall where his newest suit is displayed. Rhodey follows his line of sight and unconsciously shuffles closer.

"Time to go to work," he whispers under his breath and Tony nods again, turning slightly to look Rhodes in the eye.

Tony's shoulders start to sag as the force of the situation hits him. His chest starts to pound and he can feel the blood rush in his ears.

*This is it.* This is the moment he proves to the world that they deserve to be here, that they can help.

Everything he's worked for is riding on a small scale attack on a Halo Inc. medical facility in Hamburg, Germany with a bunch of people that hate him and that haven't properly trained together for three years. He has people's lives at stake as well as biochemical weapons that could get out and unleash absolute destruction and chaos on the world, all the while simultaneously juggling the U.N. and the world wide public's opinion on the Avengers and himself.

If this goes down in flames, so do the Accords and the defense the Avengers can provide.

Tony rips his gaze away from Rhodey and looks back to the display.

"Okay, let's get to work."

Tony isn't ready to get burned at the stake.

"Where's your friend?" Sam asks sitting across from him, leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees and face wary but quizzical. Everyone cocks their head to their direction and cautiously look between the two. The air shifts with the disturbance of the quiet.

For the past ten minutes after boarding the jet, everyone had sit in uncomfortable silence as Tony had pulled up newer footage and aerial pictures of what was happening in Hamburg. Multiple units of SEK were on the scene and trading fire with Hydra agents and they were updated that Hydra hadn't yet breached through the Halo's security to get into the basement lab.

Apparently people take biological weapons seriously.

So far five scientists had been killed and an unnamed amount were injured and needed medical attention.

Tony clears his throat and spares a glance at Sam before deigning him with an answer.

"He's back at the base. He's not an Avenger and he hasn't signed the Accords, not exactly field trip eligible," Tony smirks as he looks Falcon over condescendingly, "I'll tell Ben you asked about him."
Sam rolls his eyes and Tony sees his cheek muscle twitch. He smirks to himself that he can so easily get under the other man's skin and counts it as retribution for Ben's nose. He settles back as much as he can in the suit on his chair and tries to simultaneously give off an air of indifference and calm his still panicked heart. Nervousness still races through his blood and he's really wishing he had a decent drink in his hand right now.

From the corner of his eye he sees Bucky try to hide the blossoming smile on his face and fail miserably as he looks between Sam and Tony.

A little of Tony's smirk wanes off. He wasn't here to amuse Barnes.

Sam glares at Bucky before muttering something about super soldiers and crossing his arms before settling himself into his own seat.

"Nice suit," Natasha says leaning against the wall with one of her hands on a bar to steady herself. Her voice is even and just shy of playful. Her eyes have a steely determination in them and her chin is tilted up in slight defiance.

Tony snorts in half amusement and half incredulity at her public play at some sort of camaraderie.

He raises a brow at her and turns slightly to meet her eyes.

"Do you like it? I had just started to work on it when we had our lovely and insightful conversation."

It's almost invisible but Tony sees the sharpness in her eyes. She pulls her full lips into a smile and nods in his direction.

"It's very you."

Tony snorts again, turning away to ignore her for the rest of the ride.

"I prefer the red," Steve jokes with a half smile, tentatively looking up at Tony from where he's sitting by Sam and Bucky. He's picture perfect in his suit and the shield balanced on his lap. Tony sees him run his finger over a small scratch on the star and feels the dull throb in his chest start to thrum.

Tony feels his skin crawl but makes the point of locking eyes with America's golden boy.

"Somehow what you do and do not prefer really doesn't matter to me," His tone is biting and clipped. He smiles when he sees Steve look away and shake his head, "Just food for thought Rogers."

Bucky eyes Tony for a moment and sighs, laying his metal hand on Steve's shoulder and being subject to his poster boy smile in thanks.

Tony wants to fucking gag, instead though, he rolls his eyes and looks to the pilot seat which is inhabited by Rhodey and Vision his co-pilot. Wanda is standing visibly uncomfortable and fairly close to Vision's seat. Tony feels a pang of sympathy for her when he realizes she's basically alone now.

Sure, she still had friends on team Captain, but she hadn't been particularly close with anyone except for Clint.

*And Tony sent him away.*
He grimaces slightly as guilt seeps slow like oil in his chest and watches her eye the sky in front of them before looking longingly at the back of Vision's head.

Then the guilt washes away to righteous anger as he remembers the footage of her sending his friend through the floor, scratch that, multiple floors.

"So speaking of suits... Why aren't you suited up Rhodes?" Sam asks, half convincingly covering his concern with a small grin. His eyes travel from the floor to the back of Rhodey's chair and Tony can see the old guilt solidify in his brown eyes.

Tony feels like maybe he could've liked Sam in another life, maybe could've been fairly good friends, but considering the depth in which Sam Wilson is up Steve's ass, friendship wasn't likely.

Tony looks between Rhodey and Sam, trying to calculate the chances he might have to answer for his friend when Rhodes's voice perks up from the front.

"I can't fly the suit," Rhodes tosses over his shoulder like it's a fact.

Nothing more, nothing less.

Tony watches everyone's brows furrow and snap their attention to him. He watches Sam's Adam's apple bob in his throat.

"What do you mean man? War Machine was out saving lives a couple of months ago," Sam reasons, his voice is light, joking, but Tony can hear the panic ebb it's way in. Steve must too when he clenches his jaw and gently curls his fingers around Sam's wrist. Sam nods his head at him before looking back to the back of Rhodey's chair.

"Oh that's F.R.I.D.A.Y. helping pilot the suit," Tony sees Rhodey shrug, "I have a headset that helps but I'm never in the suit."

"Is it because of..." Sam's voice trails off as his eyes drop down to where Rhodes's ankles are visible as well as the braces.

Rhodey laughs loudly in response, Tony can hear the smile there. He fidgets in his seat, doesn't know if he likes Rhodes being so open with all of them, but maybe this is what Rhodey needs.

Tony looks at Sam's drained face.

Maybe it's what they both need.

"No, Tony figured that out as soon as he figured out how to help me walk again, " Sam's eyes flit over to Tony before quickly looking back to Rhodes, "No, no, this is more... mental. As soon as I can get over that hump I'll be back in the suit but for now I'm good letting F.R.I.D.A.Y. do the heavy lifting while I make all the smart ass remarks. Right now though? I'm a good pilot and I'll make use of myself yet."

Tony sees Sam swallow again and look to the ground. A moment of silence passes before it's disturbed again.

"Mental?" Steve asks quietly.

Sam falls back into his seat and closes his eyes, runs a hand down his face.

"Steve he-"
Yeah Captain, sometimes traumatic experiences fuck people up," Rhodes says steadily and icily. Rhodes spares a glance at Tony with a furrowed brow and a haughty pout. He looks thoroughly annoyed and Tony can't stop the relief induced smile from claiming his face.

"I know that!" Steve shouts from his seat.

Tony whips his head to the super soldier, his blood is ice in his veins and fear is lacing its way through his heart. His body is tensed for a fight his breathing is picking up speed.

If Steve could not shout that'd be great.

Bucky and Sam are both looking surprised at Steve who has his head down and is pinching the bridge of his nose. His shoulders are sagged and he releases a deep sigh.

"I'm sorry, that's- I'm sorry," He says picking his head up and weakly trying to smile at his teammates in reassurance. Tony glares heatedly at him as they lock eyes.

Steve bites his lip and falls back into his seat, his eyes falling to half mast and a tick in his jaw forming.

"You don't care, I get it, but what do I have to do to get you to care? Tony I'm all ears," Steve throws his hands up in front of him, he's looking at Tony pleadingly, "I don't know where to go from here."

"Well, hell is a viable option," Tony replies flippantly, feeling the hard rage course through his body again. Steve doesn't get to act like a kicked puppy because he's feeling sad and unappreciated.

Fuck him.

"I am trying here! I'm trying so hard to get things back to how they were-"

"That's the thing Rogers I don't want things the back to the way they were, I'd prefer if I didn't even have to look at your face but here we are because we have a job to do and because we owe the people of this world some semblance of safety," Tony snarls and looks Steve over in disgust, eyes flitting over to Nat when he sees her sneer from the corner of his eye. "The only reason we are both on this jet is because we both have something to offer to people who need help. This is not a friendship building exercise."

Steve glares at him in response but keeps his mouth shut. Sam is still leaning back in his chair with his eyes squeezed close and Bucky is hunched over with a hand in his hair.

"There a reason why you couldn't have met us there instead of demeaning yourself by riding with us?" Natasha bites out venomously.

Tony scoffs and sweeps his hand out all around him.

"A united front, this is our first appearance in three years. We can't leave the fans disappointed."

"This isn't a joke," Steve hisses through a clenched jaw. Tony blinks incredulously and bodily turns to him.

"You think I don't know that? Maybe you don't understand what this whole process is. You are not just a soldier or an Avenger anymore. You are a public figure that represents not only America, but the Accords. Everything you do will be scrutinized and weighed and evaluated because people
have put their trust in you to help them when they need it. You have an abysmal responsibility just like the rest of the team." Tony let's his words sink in, "We need to come off strong, we need to build up our reputation in the public's eye so in the event one of us screws up, it won't end up in a witch hunt like three years ago. So let me do what I do best, and shut the fuck up."

Steve releases a harsh breath and leans back into his chair, giving Tony one last hard look before closing his eyes.

"We don't need to just come off strong then, we need to actually be strong and petty fighting isn't going to help. Get it together," Natasha snaps from her corner. Tony lazily rolls his eyes to look at her.

"That's so insightful Nat, almost poetic, but here's the thing I don't think you understand. I don't need this team to be friends to work, I just need to know that you're going to do your job."

"A team needs trust," Wanda says quietly from her spot. Tony turns to look at her and smirks.

"And do you trust me?"

Wanda pauses and looks anywhere but his eyes. Vision looks up at her but regretfully turns away when he sees she will not answer.

Tony mockingly laughs to himself.

"That's what I thought."

"I trust you," Bucky says, picking his head up to look at Tony. His eyes are determined and his shoulders are squared and strong. Tony warily eyes him but doesn't break contact even when he notices Steve shift to confusedly look at Barnes.

Tony lets a self deprecating smile slide onto his face and claps his hands together, the metal meeting metal clangs loudly throughout the jet.

"Great, the murderous cyborg trusts me."

"Twelve minutes till we're there," Rhodey says from the front. He turns to throw a wink over his shoulder in Tony's direction.

Tony smiles back and stands up, grabbing his helmet and making his way over to the cargo doors. Vision unbuckles from the front and makes his way to stand over to Tony. Wanda starts to follow him but he waves her off before she can take her first step. She looks deflated and takes a step back into her corner.

Tony raises a brow at Vision as soon as he settles by his side.

"I can't afford distractions, not now," He says low and by way of explanation. Tony hums and looks back over to Wanda who stares at the ground. She must notice his gaze because she looks up and meets his eyes with a defiant lift to her chin.

Tony chuckles at the display before turning to address the rest of the team.
"Okay, people who can fly, you're with me. We'll focus on disabling the tanks and getting rid of the Hydra agents outside of the compound. People who can't fly, you will wait till you've landed and you'll push through into the building to help any injured scientists and stop the bad guys from breaching into the lab. Got it? Great! Hey, Rhodey open the doors."

The cargo doors suddenly open, the cold air rushing into the carrier. Natasha grips the bar next to her tighter and faces the wind to get the hair out of her face.

"Might want to warn me next time!" She shouts over the wind with a scowl. Tony smirks at her before pulling his helmet over his face.

His screen lights up in front of his eyes, illuminating his face and he feels *strong*.

"What fun would that have been?" He asks, over exaggerating his shrug to make up for the fact that she can't see the grin spreading over his face under his mask.

Natasha scoffs loudly and narrows her eyes at him.

Vision turns slightly to her and raises a brow.

"I believe Tony meant that you are a safe enough distance from the opening that the only risk of injury would be to," Vision pauses and points a finger at Natasha's head, "your hair."

Tony doesn't even hide the laughter that splits through him and he grabs onto Vision to prevent himself from doubling over.

"You really are Tony Stark's son," Natasha says with her own brow raised.

Vision looks confused before he shakes his head and turns to look out of the cargo doors.

Tony composes himself long enough to spy Sam who is still sitting in his seat.

"Hey Sam, up and at 'em. You have wings don't you?"

Sam gets up from his seat and makes his way over, gingerly places his goggles over his eyes. He plants his hands on his hips before looking back to Tony.

"We're jumping out of a plane?"

Tony rolls his eyes and turns to face the rolling scenery beneath them.

"How astute Wilson, yes, we are jumping out of the plane."

Sam seems to mull it over.

"I've done dumber."

Then he's out, falling uncomfortably close to the ground before his wings spread out behind him and he's soaring.

Tony nods his head impressed and look at Vision.

"Can't let the kid outdo us can we?" He chuckles. Vision smiles at him before he himself dives down gracefully and takes off towards Halo Inc.

Tony turns around to look at Rhodes.
"You know what to do-"

"Yeah Tones, drop off the kids then babysit the plane. No worries, go beat up some bad guys."

Tony throws a thumbs up before gracelessly falling backwards into the rushing air. He lets himself freefall before steadying out and rocketing towards his destination.

When he gets there, Sam is swooping in and grabbing a Hydra agent that had wandered too close to the police line. He flies up into the sky before dropping the poor soul onto a SEK van, denting it.

"Hey! Let's try not to damage public and government property huh?" Tony half shouts over the coms. He shakes his head and locks onto a few targets of Hydra agents and fires small scale rockets that blast them into their nearby tanks and other soldiers.

One of them even gives off a good impression of the Wilhelm scream and Tony has to laugh because they are in Germany-

Vision shoots past him and runs a laser through a tank. It results in an explosion that propels one side of it towards the perimeter the SEK officers set up.

Wayward civilians and bystanders are far too close for Tony's liking.

He blasts off and manages to get in front of the huge chunk of tank and stops it before it reaches anyone and propels it forward with a kick into a group of Hydra agents that were trying to seize an opportunity to ambush him.

As soon as they're taken care of, he grabs the nearest SEK officer.

"Gute Arbeit, Jungs, aber wir kümmern uns um den Rest," Tony pauses and glances to his left and sees Vision take out another tank. A group of agents raise their guns to take aim and he brings his hand up to fire off a couple of blasts. He turns back towards the soldier, "Konzentrieren Sie sich darauf, die Menschen zu schützen."

The officer blinks furiously and Tony, feeling agitated, flips his front plate up exposing his face.

"Verstehst du?" He half growls out, grabbing the man with both of his hands. The officer shakes his head to clear if before nodding.

"Understood," He replies. Tony lets go and watches the man bark orders to push the perimeter back and to get the civilians out of the way.

Tony nods once and flips the face plate back down, takes off into the air for a vantage point. As he pulls up he hears a cranking noise and sees a tank aiming straight for him.

"Ooh, that's a big gun," He whispers to himself. He can't help the smirk forming on his face or the adrenaline coursing through his veins.

He shoots over and lands on the side of the tank loudly and goes to rip the top off when bullets riddle and bounce off his right suit shoulder. The force of it almost knocks him off his perch.

He looks up to some advancing Hydra agents and grins when he sees an incoming shadow.

"On your left," He shouts over to them. They barely turn their heads when Sam mows them down, picking one of the guys up and soaring up before dropping him down onto the pavement.

Tony watches the man struggle midair before he lands with a grotesque smack and splatter.
"You're welcome!" Sam shouts with a smile as he dives back down to take care of more Hydra soldiers. Tony snorts in amusement before turning back to the task at hand and ripping the top of the tank off like a sardine can.

A muzzle of a gun pokes itself out but Tony pushes it back in before blasting two shots off from his smaller reactor in his right hand. He looks up and sees Vision fire a line precisely at some hydra agents hiding behind a tank.

A quick glance to his right and he sees the rest of the team pushing into the building with Wanda throwing Hydra men out of the way and into the side of the building. Tony whistles before turning his attention back to the fray.

"Hey Tony we're in," Steve says over the coms, bullets bouncing over metal and grunts accompany his voice. Tony flies over to the next tank and does a repeat performance.

"Good, make sure they don't breach the lab."

Tony pushes off the tank and watches Sam catch a grenade mid air that was thrown at him from the last tank, only to throw it back into the open hole. The explosion in turn causes the large vehicle to bounce and almost tilt precariously on it's side.

Vision saddles up beside him and uses his crystal to zip through another bought of agents.

"We may have a problem," Bucky's voice rings through the coms.

"What do you mean problem?" Tony asks through gritted teeth. They did not need problems, everything was going so well.

"There is a hell lot more that we thought and they've got C4."

Tony stops and processes the information.

"They're going to try and blast the door down."

"Yep and we have no idea what is behind said door so we don't know if it'll cause a-" Natasha starts, she pauses and grunts as a hard sound of flesh meeting flesh is heard.

"Biochemical explosion. Perfect." Tony finishes for her, blasting the last few Hydra soldiers he sees. he does a quick sweep around him and verifies all threats are eliminated.

Sam lands expertly near him and lifts his goggles up to look at Tony with searching eyes.

"Wanda, can you control the blast?" Tony asks turning to a concerned Vision.

"I will try," She says determinedly, her voice echoing in his ear.

Tony releases a shallow breath before placing a hand on Vision's shoulder. His brows are pulled up and there is a line of worry embedded into his forehead.

"Listen, she's got this. She is a scary, magical, Sokovian, witchy, strong, woman. She's got this."

Vision's worry line doesn't dissipate but he nods. Tony sighs before turning to look at both of the men in front of him.

"I'm going inside to help, you both stay out here and help German law enforcement bag and tag any of these assholes that are still alive. Help them get any civilians to safety or to help get medical
attention. Any stragglers come out of this building, you take care of them."

Sam nods his head before taking off into the air, probably to get a better view.

Tony pats Vision gently on the shoulder once before taking off into the building.

The interior is all white and very clinical, except for the streaks of blood on the floor and a body to the far right of some poor scientist that didn't make it out of a Hydra bullet's way fast enough.

"Where are you?" He asks into the coms. He spots an elevator and pries open the doors. At the bottom of a very long shaft is the elevator in question with the cables snapped and laying wildly on it's top.

" Took a wonderful elevator ride down to the basement, follow the bread crumbs," Natasha mutters, more gunshots in the background.

Tony dives down the elevator shaft and lands on the elevator with a loud bang, the metal denting under his weight.

Just like with the tank he rips the top off and climbs down into the elevator. The doors are open and the sounds of fighting and gunfire are loud and prominent.

He turns the corner to his left and a bullet hits his face plate, knocking him back. It fuzzes up his screen and messes with the lights in his helmet.

He chances another look and steps out with his hands up ready to blast and sees Wanda pushing against a hail of bullets with her magic, safe guarding Steve and Bucky and Nat as they fruitlessly fight through what has to be a small army of Hydra agents guarding a large steel door.

He flies above the red mist wall and starts firing the arc reactor in his chest, clearing out a small section of Hydra agents and allowing the other four to push forward.

"I-I can't hold it!" Wanda cries out, her face is streaking with sweat and parts of her wall start to dissipate. A few stray bullets pass through but Steve is quick enough to block Natasha with his shield before they can get to her.

Bucky pushes through the fault in the wall and furiously drives forward, incapacitating as many agents as he can. Steve and Nat follow suit and even Wanda takes another staggering step forward. Her wall drops but she continues to sweep Hydra agents out of her way.

Tony turns his attention back to the fight and holds his hands up to start blasting the large group. Soon enough they start redirecting their hail of bullets at him, the number and force of them push him back so he decides to drop down into the fray.

He lands in the middle of the large groups and starts taking them out from the inside.

"Tony! They're going to blow the door!" Steve shouts, using his shield to punch a Hydra agent into another.

Tony turns to look at the door over the mass of people and sees them putting up the little plastic blocks around the door, connecting them by thick yellow wires.

"They risk killing themselves!" He shouts blasting another agent off of him, it's quickly replaced by another going for his helmet and another trying to shoot his reactor.
"It's Hydra, they don't care!" Bucky shouts back, driving his metal arm into the gut of his attacker.

Tony uses the blast from the arc reactor in his chest to propel himself back and knock the Hydra agent into the wall. He grunts as the shockwave shakes through his armor and he looks back toward the door, sees the Hydra agents at the front near the door grab small armored shields and place them in front of them.

"The detonator Boss!"

F.R.I.D.A.Y. zooms in on a man with a large scar on his cheek holding the detonator and smiling. Tony pushes through the mass to look back at his teammates.

"Wanda I'm going to need you to use everything you got to contain that blast!" Tony shouts, his own voice hurting his ears as it echoes around his helmet.

If that blast goes off, not only could they risk setting off whatever was behind that door, but they could bring down at least part of the building on top of them.

Wanda stops throwing Hydra agents and glances to the steel door, her chest is heaving but she pushes both hands forward and screams. Red tendrils shoot out from her hands and race to get to the door on time as the man pushes the button, smile still in place.

Fire and smoke bloom against the door and Wanda's magic blankets it, she's crying with the force of it, screaming with the effort to contain such a large force.

"Wanda!" Vision's voice rings out.

Tony spots him fly out of the elevator with Sam and Wanda finally collapses, her eyes fluttering close and her body going limp.

Vision catches her before she can hit the ground. Her magic disappears and smoke and debris fill the hallway, shrouding all of them in darkness and ash.

Tony hears coughing all around him but pushes forward, blasting blindly to where the steel door is.

*If they got in-

"I can't see Fry!"

"There's too much smoke Boss, I can't clear it!"

Tony growls deep in his chest and continues forward, blasting equally blind Hydra agents or throwing them to the ground. As he gets closer to where the door should be, he sees a fraction of white light peek through the smoke. He uses his thrusters to propel him the rest of the way, pushing into the clean white light.

As soon as he's past the door and into the lab he's greeted with the sight of at least ten hydra agents racking through glass medical refrigerators.

"У меня есть это!" One of them shouts. Tony shoots off and grabs him, throws him to the ground. The other agents quickly turn around and open fire at him. Some bullets behind him hitting the glass fridges and breaking the vials inside.

"Are you crazy this is a biochemical lab! If I fucking get smallpox-"

"I can stun them!" Fry says, automatically using the suit to fire tasing shots at them. The men
around him fall to the ground, their bodies shaking with the electricity running through them.

"Good work F.R.I.D.A.Y."

He looks down at his feet to the man he'd originally threw to the ground. He's holding his right arm to his chest.

Tony crouches down low and sticks his hand out for the vial he knows is hidden in there. The man stares back at him defiantly and smirks.

Tony turns his head to the hallway as he hears gunshots and his approaching team.

"You can have the one on one with me or you can wait till this is a group effort."

Tony flexes his fingers again. The man continues to smirk at him but opens his palm to reveal a small vial with an almost illuminated green liquid. Before Tony can reach it, the man throws it to the ground. It shatters spectacularly and the liquid seeps out onto the floor.

Tony takes a harsh breath in.

"F.R.I.D.A.Y. scan it."

"On it Boss, I'll have the components together soon."

Tony looks back to the man in question, sees him still smirking and that's the last straw. He uses both hands to take off his helmet to stare the man in the eyes.

"I'm going to find out either way so why don't you tell me what you wanted from this lab?" Tony asks, tilting his head to the side playfully, but keeping his voice even and dangerous.

The other man opens his mouth and Tony thinks he's finally going to say something when he spits a nice mixture of mucus and spit into his face.

Tony wrenches up, the man's laughter in the background. He wipes furiously to get rid of the disgusting liquid before turning back to look at the man.

"Think you're really fucking funny huh? I hope you have fun rotting in a German prison," Tony says, wiping his cheek one last time.

"Ты хочешь знать?" The man says from the floor. Tony stops and stares expectantly at him.

It's in that moment when the rest of the team walks in, they're covered in sweat and Wanda has an arm slung over Vision's shoulders. Steve has a bloodied lip and Bucky has a cut on his neck. Nat looks pretty put together except for the bruising around her right eye. Sam is breathing heavy but he looks fine.

Tony looks back to the man and hopes the interruption doesn't stop him from talking. The man smiles up at him again and raises his hand to point at Steve and Bucky.

"Антидот."

Tony furrows his brow before he watches the man smile wider, using his tongue to flip one of his front teeth and biting down on it. A sickening crunch is heard and Tony realizes what he's done.

"Fuck!" Tony yells in anger, combing his hands through his hair.
Fucking espionage cyanide pills.

The man starts foaming at the mouth and his eyes roll to the back of his head. Tony huffs out air incredulously and watches the man still.

"Are you fucking kidding-"

"Tony look out!" Steve cries out. Tony turns to look to his right and sees one of the Hydra agents on the floor raising a gun and pointing it right at Tony's head.

Before the man can fire off a shot, the shield whizzes past Tony's chest and knocks into the agent, causing the other man to knock into the wall and fall into unconsciousness.

Tony blinks down at the man and tries to focus his vision but he can't, all he sees is the shield. All he sees is the shield.

The shield was so close.

The shield was so close.

The shield is in his chest.

He can't breathe, help him he can't breathe!

He's on his back in the snow in Siberia. Steve is straddling his chest with the shield braced high. He's bringing it down, and down, and down!

Tony can't breathe! He needs to throw up, oh God, he needs to vomit.

He needs, he needs to, help he needs to-

"Steve get the fuck away from him!"

Tony is laying on the floor, he's hyperventilating and he's laying on the cold floor, the suit doing nothing to contain his body heat.

His head is in Natasha's lap and Vision is holding his hand. Sam is slightly above him, looking down with worried eyes.

Tony still can't breathe, he still can't-

He looks to his left and sees Steve take a step closer. His heart rate speeds up and he thinks he might have whimpered but he can't be sure because his throat hurts and he thinks he's crying.

Bucky pulls Steve back, his face is angry but there's tears in his eyes too. Steve looks...

Steve looks sad and Tony thinks he might be crying too but it doesn't matter because it was him.

He drove the shield into-

Tony looks down hurriedly, ripping his hand from Vision's grasp and running his hands over his chest, looking for the tear in his suit. Looking for the crack and fading light in his chest.

"Hey focus on me Tony, focus on my breathing okay? You're not breathing how I'd like you too. Tony-" Sam starts, his voice is soothing and Tony's eyes flit to him.
"There we go, can you breathe with me?"

He takes a deep breath in and Tony tries to copy it but his lungs are too shallow he can't-

"Tony I'm so sorry_" Steve pushes past Bucky and takes another step closer.

"Steve stay the fuck back!" Sam yells, turning away from Tony, but it doesn't matter his eyes are locked in on Steve and he can't- he can't-

*He can't breathe.*

Tony opens his sore eyes to see blue fabric close to his face. He blinks the sleep out of his eyes but stills when he feels a hand card through his hair. Carefully he glances up and sees Rhodey looking down at him, he realizes his head is in Rhodey's lap and they're in the jet.

Rhodey puts a finger to his lips and Tony takes the hint to be quiet. He wiggles his toes and fingers though and realizes he isn't in his suit anymore, but a long sleeved shirt and some sweatpants. There is a soft and warm blanket spread on top of him and he buries in closer to Rhodes.

"What did you do to him?" He hears Sam ask. Tony closes his eyes and tries to shut them out. The memory of what happened flooding back into him with embarrassment at showing them how *weak* he was.

*He was so weak.*

"I told you, Buck and I told you-" Tony hears Steve's quiet voice crack.

"No, you said you fought after he found out about his parents and Bucky, then we found out he was stranded there so, I know now you didn't leave him, you *abandoned* him. But what did you *do* to him?"

Sam's voice again, he sounds angry, sounds *pissed*. And, honestly, Tony doesn't even know him, doesn't know why he's angry for him.

"Sam- I, after he blew off Bucky's arm I lost it. I grabbed the shield and I," Steve chokes on air, "I hit him with it."

"Hit him with it? Rogers don't you dare lie to me."

"I stuck it, I drove it in. Is that what you want me to say? I hit him so hard it embedded itself in his arc reactor."

Tony hears a sharp intake of breath but focuses on Rhodey's hands in his hair, focuses on his best friend's breathing.

"His father's shield," Wanda says, her voice is watery and muted, like she's pressed something against her mouth.

"Yeah, his father's shield," Steve answers.
"He finds out I killed his parents, four minutes later his father's shield is embedded into his chest plate, and then we leave him," Bucky's voice is like a whisper.

"And I betrayed him. I chose Steve, for some reason I..." Natasha's voice wavers, "We broke Tony Stark."

"No," Vision's deep voice rings out, "You may have damaged Tony, but I think it would be fairly egotistic to assume you all alone could break a man like him. I believe events stemming from Afghanistan till recently have taken it's toll," Vision pauses, "He has been very strong, and he is not broke."

Silence hangs heavy in the air and Tony feels the white hot sting of tears in his eyes and the back of his throat.

"He needs help," Sam says, Tony hears a rustle of fabric and assumes he's laid back.

Rhodey brings a thumb up to wipe at the corner of Tony's left eye. He blinks his eyes open and stares up at his best friend.

"The suit was supposed to help," He whispers. Rhodey furrows his brows in response, lays a hand in the middle of Tony's back.

"The suit was supposed to make me stronger. I was supposed to be protected," Tony lowers his eyes to stare at the clip around Rhodey's waist for his braces.

"I'm different, but I'm not stronger. I'm weak."

A shuddering breath leaves Rhodey and Tony looks up to see hot silent tears fall down his face.

Rhodey cards another hand through his hair and bends down to press his forehead against Tony's and whispers, "No Tony, you're the strongest person I know. Jesus, you're fucking strong."

Tony closes his eyes and lets Rhodey's tears wash over him.

Chapter End Notes

Gute Arbeit, Jungs, aber wir kümmern uns um den rest = Good work guys, but we'll take care of the rest (German)
Konzentrieren Sie sich darauf, die Menschen zu schützen = Focus on protecting the people (German)
Verstehst du? = Do you understand? (German)
У меня есть это! = I have it! (Russian)
Ты хочешь знать? = You want to know? (Russian)
Антидот = Antidote (Russian)
-I used google translate so if it's wrong, my bad homies

So this chapter was so difficult to write, I had the worst writer's block and then I couldn't get my ideas to come together, but I do hope you guys enjoy the chapter and it somehow resonates with you, maybe, I don't know.
But I am telling you guys, the story is wrapping itself up some, that's not to say the next two chapters won't be filled with angst and drama galore, because, oh, they the
fuck will.

Also just a little rant for me, but my best friend is Team Cap and I'm hardcore Team Tony, and we got into the biggest argument ever and it was about Steve not telling Tony about his parents and she tried to justify it! like she said "Well would you really want to know about that?"

And I'm over here like "It's my decision! you can't make that decision for someone. I mean at the very least offer the option of knowing the truth, wtf" and she goes, "I think we think we know what we'd want but put into that situation we wouldn't want to know if our parents were murdered."

Meanwhile, I was still over here like "Okay but I don't give a shit about what you think I would or would not want considering you aren't me. No one gets to decide what is right or wrong for a person, it is not your decision or choice to make."

And then she kind of got it and was like "Yeah you can't decide something like that I get it. It was wrong for him to do that."

And me being the shit starter I am I said, "Kind of like when Steve's bitch ass said no to 117 countries right? Because Steve knows what's best?"

And then she got super pissed and tried to explain Steve's side and then I brought up the fact that Steve was in fact going to sign the Accords but then got pissy at Tony for having Wanda at the Avenger base. Don't come at me with that, "Oh the accords split them up!" When we all know damn well that Steve's Buckarooony Boner was pointing him straight into the direction of Infamous Asshole status.

Anyway, end rant.

*Thank you for all the LOVE this fic is getting! Please leave a kudos or comment if you liked it! I love reading what you guys think!!!*
Tony still has his blanket wrapped around his shoulders as he makes his way out of the jet. Rhodes is right beside him, an arm wrapped around his shoulders and the other clutching his bicep to steady him. His hands are warm and all Tony wants to do is sleep.

He's so tired.

Vision floats over to him when his bare feet make contact with the cold concrete floor. The cold seeps up through his soles and he shakes his head as memories of snowflakes invade his mind.

Just, fuck is he tired. Tired of it all.

Vision rakes his gaze over Tony before taking his hand and squeezing it. He licks his lips and draws his brows together, Tony finds it endearing as all hell.

"Are you alright? What can I do to help?" Vision asks, voice soft and soothing. His hand is smooth, no fingerprints or palm lines.

He feels more than hears Rhodey's deep breath beside him. He squeezes Vision's hand back and tries his best to smile without teeth.

"I think, I think I'd just like to rest. Maybe have a cup of tea?" His voice is a whisper and a bit croaky, it surprises him how much his throat hurts. He didn't realize he had screamed.

Vision's face pulls back hopeful.

"I believe we still have jasmine! I will make us a kettle and we can sit by the fire."

Tony smiles again, this time a little more genuine. Vision was, Vision was a good man. Rhodey even gives off a small chuckle and pulls Tony closer to him.

Their familial sanctuary is disturbed when a cough echoes around them from their left. They all turn to look at the culprit when they meet Steve and the rest of the team. Tony had thought maybe they would just have left. God, just have given him some semblance of peace.

"I didn't know-" Steve starts, his shoulders hunched forward and a hand slightly outstretched. Tony's breath hitches and the familiar burn settles in his stomach. Rhodey tenses besides him and takes a step forward.

"Oh fuck you Rog-"

Before Rhodey can finish his sentence, Ben charges in, chest heaving and face blanched. His eyes are full of the same worry as they had in Siberia, looking at Tony on the stretcher. Ben's eyes flit between them all before settling on Tony and rushing over.

Ben grabs both sides of Tony's face and moves his head in every which direction. A perturbed noise escapes Tony's throat and it sounds vaguely like a shriek even to his ears. Ben doesn't stop his exploration, running his hands over Tony's chest and shoulders under the blanket and Rhodey's shocked form before sighing in relief and launching himself against Tony for a hug. The air gets
knocked out of him but he wraps his hands around the younger man anyway.

"Oh thank God! On the t.v. you came out on a stretcher! There was a quarantine but, but you were unconscious," Ben releases him before turning to Rhodes and glancing at Vision, ignoring the others in the room, "What happened? There were white tents."

Vision clears his throat and Ben turns his focus to him.

"A multitude of Hydra agents attacked the Halo medical facility, unfortunately breaching the biochemical lab. Some vials were broken and precautions taken."

Ben nods his head like he's processing the information before blinking and taking a step back.

"No, that doesn't make sense, why are you here then? Shouldn't you still be there? Why were you unconscious? Was it a chemical? I don't understand-"

"They reassured us the chemicals exposed were non threatening when airborne. The quarantine was more for the public's consideration. It makes the public much more comfortable to see a system being followed after a crisis. They did however take some blood samples from us all just to be sure. Tony's," Vision pauses, his face drawn up in worry and glancing unsurely in Tony's direction. He doesn't know what to say, Tony doesn't blame him.

So he takes pity on him.

He looks at Ben, meets his eyes,

"I had a panic attack," His eyes flit to Steve, then down to the shield, "A bad one."

Ben's eyes fog over but he nods his head slowly. He sticks his tongue in his cheek, lowers his head and turns to face Steve.

"Oh shit," Rhodey whispers into Tony's ear, and, yeah.

Ben looks crazed.

"What did you do?" Ben asks, tone even, shoulders tensing.

He advances towards Steve with precise steps, back ramrod straight but head tilted to the side.

Steve blinks once then twice, clearly taken aback by the attention and attitude directed at him. Tony feels the corner of his mouth lift slightly.

"I didn't mean to, I didn't know it would," Steve's eyes scan the floor before meeting Ben's eyes with a steely defiance. His face is hard and he takes a step forward, "I saved his life. I threw my shield and I saved his life. I didn't know it would trigger," He stops, swallows hard but the firmness is still there, "I didn't know I'd hurt him so badly."

Ben's mouth falls open, his rigidness evaporating and evolves into a stupor.

"You didn't realize you what?" Ben asks, voice climbing octaves higher. His eyes narrow and his fists clench by his sides, little veins traveling up his forearms.

"He trusted you and you-" Ben stops suddenly, pulls both hands to cover his mouth and laughs, "You're delusional! There's nothing else to say!"

Ben drops his hands.
"Do you feel good now? I mean thank you for saving his life, Lord knows how many good guys leave before their time, but I have a feeling you've got this righteous boner because you did something any decent person would do."

Ben places both hands on his hips and turns to Tony. Incredulous is the only way to describe his face.

"You don't know me!" Steve shouts, taking another step. Tony automatically backs up, stepping back into Rhodes who is a solid wall. He looks down to Tony, pulls him in closer and glares heatedly at Steve.

"Jesus, Steve don't!" Sam yells, grabbing his shoulder and yanking him back with enough force that Steve begins to topple. The super soldier snarls before turning and meeting Tony's eyes. The change is immediate and his face drops in surprise and concern.

"Oh Tony, I'm sorry, I didn't-"

"I can help you," Wanda says stepping up to the front, she side steps Barnes and nods once in Tony's direction.

Tony's bottom lip quakes, not from fear, no not anymore. It's the rage. The sweet familiar anger that eats up his exhaustion and terror, the white hot supernova violent outrage.

His eyes flit to each one of their faces.

Natasha, Sam, Bucky, Wanda, and Steve.

It's pity. He will not have it, not from them.

"You aren't going to fuck around in my head. No, not again," Tony orders. His eyes harden and he shrugs off Rhodes and the blanket, pushes past Vision and makes it even farther into their space than Ben had.

Wanda takes a step back, face dropping instantly in helplessness.

"No, that's not-"

"Experience would suggest otherwise," Vision adds from behind him, his voice quiet.

Wanda's eyes meet Vision's and her chest begins to deepen in her quick breaths. She opens her mouth before closing it ruefully.

"Tony you need some kind of help," Natasha says, putting a hand on Wanda's shoulder, attempting to calm her down. She shares a look with the girl that sends Wanda a step back to let Nat forward.

Tony scoffs, the huff of air violently leaving his body.

"And you all will help me? No, no this is not the Tony Stark pity party. I do not want or need your concern now. What, now that you all know your actions have consequences?" Tony runs both hands through his hair. Natasha clenches her jaw and bites her lip.

"Tony, no-"

"But that's what all of this was about in the beginning right?" Tony continues, ignoring the way Natasha's jaw snaps shut, "Accepting the consequences of our actions? I tell you about a boy who died too young, I show you Charles Spencer's picture, but that doesn't even remotely tickle your
sympathy. Doesn't make you feel an ounce of guilt, but you see me-" Tony takes a choked breath in, "See me panic and suddenly, and suddenly empathy is abundant. Why? Why does it have to hit so fucking close to home for you all to understand?"

Tony's breathing is picking up and he feels a hand behind him grab his shoulder but he shakes it off.

"Tony you shouldn't be working yourself up right now, this isn't the best time-" Sam says, trying to soothe but Tony isn't having it, he feels the snarl conquer his face.

"No? No this is the best time!" Tony screams out, voice already hoarse, vocal cords already straining, "No more explanations or 'But Tony you don't understand'." He twists violently to glare at Steve, a fist by his side and a finger pointing dangerously close to the super soldier's chest, "You, oh you arrogant piece of shit, you were going to sign the Accords!"

At that Sam pulls back, his gaze traveling to Steve and his brows furrowing, Bucky's as well.

"I told you amendments were more than possible, and, and I delivered! I told you Bucky would be transferred to an American psych ward for therapy, to get help! I offered to legalize everything you did to get Bucky, both you and Sam!" Sam takes a step back, a gruff noise escaping his throat. Steve won't look at him, he can't rip his gaze away from Tony.

"But I mention Wanda at the base and what?" Tony is frantic, his eyes flitting, trying to find an answer in the blue eyes staring back at him. He sneers when he sees how empty they are, "You used her as a scape goat.

"And you," He hisses at her, she flinches, "You're angry because you had to stay home? Guess what, you'd just killed eleven people, accident or not. Doesn't matter how remorseful you are about it, no one can leave you to just roam the streets. It was never about protecting the people from you," Tony pauses, grabs at the air, clenching his fists, trying desperately to make her understand, "Do you know how many people wanted your head?"

Wanda shakes her head and Tony watches as her eyes fill with water, tears cascading down her cheeks.

"You're a foreign person with unnatural, supernatural, abilities and no one knows the extent of your powers. And you fucked up, " Tony's voice drops low, his hands dropping with it. His body becomes unnaturally still as the fire burns through him, "It only takes a drop of fear to send the people running to their pitch forks and Lagos was an ocean full."

Tony pauses, his sneer turning into a vindictive smile, and that's right where he wants to be. He wants to be cruel.

"Can't control their fear, only my own," He mimics, "Yeah, I watched the security footage. Here's some news sunshine, you don't get to act selfishly anymore. You have a responsibility to the people, the people who were scared of you. If you don't want that responsibility then you give it all up. You can't afford to act on your whims," He stops and turns to run his eyes over Vision whose expression is particularly blank, "And, Wanda dear, it's so surprising because you seemed fine staying here with Vision until Clint showed up. Did you want to impress him?" Tony's eyes wander over to Steve, "Or did you want to impress the Captain over here?"

Steve straightens slightly, his jaw grinding away and Tony wonders if he'll have any teeth by the
"Which leads me back to you. I know I may have the bad reputation of being a narcissistic asshole, but you have to be the most selfish fucking person I have ever met."

Steve swallows hard and starts to shake his head in response. Tony's eyebrows shoot to his hairline and he laughs, the sounds bubbling up from his gut and meeting the air in hard bursting sound.

"No?" Tony asks comically, brow raised. He spares Bucky an assessing glance.

"Bucky, Bucky fucking Barnes," Turns back to Steve, "I mean Jesus Christ Steve, I tried everything. I tried compromising, I tried talking." Tony pauses as light breath leaves him, realization crashing down into him, "I, I fought Ross to bring you in when he'd rather have had a corpse. You didn't even meet me half way. You even had the audacity to blame my family breaking apart on the Accords, on, on me, when it was you! Your stubbornness!"

"Tony," Steve grunts out, his jaw is still clenched shut but his brows are pulled down and Tony can see the shame there.

_He revels in it._

"You know you keep saying you just want everything to go back to the way things were but it can't," Tony hisses.

"Things have changed, things are always changing, accept it."

Tony feels his face harden and flexes his jaw, feeling the muscles tighten. Steve's breathing becomes labored now while Tony's becomes softer, more controlled.

"You're a man living in the past," Tony scoffs, "Hell, you can't even see your precious Barnes isn't the same person anymore."

Steve whips his head over to Bucky who slowly meets his eyes.

"I'm sorry Steve, but I can't," Bucky's eyes flit over to Tony before locking again with Steve's, _"I am not the same."_

Steve looks like the air has been driven from his lungs and he takes step towards Bucky.

"No, Buck I can help you-"

"Want to talk about narcissism? Can you even get out of your own headspace to look at anything other than being Bucky's savior?"

Steve slowly turns back to Tony, shaking.

Shaking with what Tony doesn't care about.

"And all of you," Tony says, eyeing the rest of them, "I could say the same thing. Did you think at all?"

He rubs a hand over his mouth and chuckles.

"No, no you all skipped over to Rogers and decided I was the bad guy, " He points to his own chest with both hands before folding them infront of his waist, "And why was I the bad guy?"
"Because I told you, no gave you the option of signing the Accords?"

When none of them say anything he shrugs his shoulders in incredulity.

They, they can't even defend themselves.

"You knew what was going to happen when you made the choice to follow Steve, to break the law. I will not be blamed for your actions. Did you think they'd slap your wrists and send you on your way? Oh I am sorry you went to the Raft. I am sorry that people were scared enough of all of you to send you there."

"And I'm sorry you couldn't trust me like you do Rogers."

Tony suddenly feels the rage start to drain, feels his body betray him as the taste of salt fills his throat and pressure builds behind his eyes. He tries to cough, clear his throat but it doesn't help.

"Did I show any one of you that I wasn't there for you? I wouldn't do everything in my power to keep you all safe?"

A shaky breath leaves his lungs, he will not call it a sob.

He swallows another down and looks at Wanda with a watery smile and quaking lip.

"Why don't you show them Wanda, you were in my head before. Show them what my greatest fear was... is."

She doesn't say anything and he looks up to the ceiling.

Fuck it all, fuck everything.

"Yeah, yeah and I know that I fucked up with Ultron, I know it."

Tony looks back down, the anger pooling in his stomach again and banishing the threatening tears. He looks back to Steve and meets his pathetic eyes with force.

"But at least I stayed to clean up my mess. After Sokovia I dealt with the press and government and I stayed."

The silence is deafening around them all and the air is stale.

"No more," Tony whispers, more to himself than the others, "No more. I will not be your villain and I will not be your pity case."

He grounds himself and raises his head high.

"Fuck all of you."

He makes a swift exit, doesn't stop for Rhodey's shouts to wait.

He's just so tired.
"So..." Ben's voice flutters in the air with no specific destination. Tony quirks a brow at him in response, pausing to take a sip from his tea as he lays back against the pillows on his bed. Frankie is sitting next to him, her small hind legs pushing against him every now and then as she stretches out. Her head is on Vision's lap, who himself, is laid out next to Tony sipping from his own cup of tea.

Ben rolls his eyes and re-crosses his legs as he sits at the end of the bed. Rhodey is rubbing his temples in a chair pushed against the bed to Tony's right. His feet are carelessly thrown up and crossed at the ankles, Tony's doing.

"Are we not going to talk about the verbal smack down I had the privilege," Ben places a hand over his heart, "to watch less than half an hour ago?"

To add to Ben's question, Frankie lets out a loud sigh and slumps down again. Vision automatically begins to scratch gently behind her floppy ears.

"Exactly, thank you Frankie."

Rhodes picks his head up and looks over to Tony, runs his eyes over him, the crease in his forehead never leaving.

"Are you okay?"

Tony flinches slightly before plastering a smile on his face and redirecting his attention back to Ben.

"Are we not going to talk about how you were about to fight Captain America for my honor? Very noble of you," Tony smirks out. Ben starts to smile before lowering his face and shrugging.

"I don't like bullies."

Tony freezes.

"Where're you from again?"

Jesus fucking Christ if he said Brooklyn he was going to lose his fucking mind-

"Oh, uh, San Antonio." Ben tilts his head in question, opening his mouth to ask when Rhodes interrupts him.

"Tony you will not ignore me," Rhodey grabs Tony's hand and squeezes, "Are you okay? After what happened in the lab and then on the plane what you told me-"

Tony pulls his hand away and stares into his cup of tea.

"I'm fine. I-"

"We all know that is Tony Stark language for you are not fine," Vision sasses beside him. Tony raises a surprised brow only to be met with concern in Vision's eyes.

Tony looks back to Ben for support but is met with the same thing. He tries to play everything off, smirks, smiles.

"Look I just needed to get all of that off my chest. It's unhealthy to keep that shit bottled up right? This is a step forward. Don't- Rhodey, no don't look at me like that."
"Tony, Sam was right when he said you needed help," Rhodes says slowly. He brings his hand up again and this time rests it gently on Tony's hand that's soaking up the warmth from his tea. The scent of jasmine wafts up and Tony closes his eyes.

He imagines his mother. Imagines her humming into his hair as she held him, the scent of jasmine floating all around them.

*Their own secret club...*

"Can you imagine me in therapy?" Tony jokes softly, opening his eyes to stare back at Rhodes. Rhodey shakes his head, his nose flaring with the rush of air leaving his body. He gives Tony a soft smile, running his thumb along the back of Tony's hand.

"In reality? No. But I like to imagine a world full of rainbows and butterflies that you find some peace."

Tony lowers his head, feels the burn of tears at the back of his eyes.

"Hey, fuck you," His voice is weak and trembles.

"You have family Tony," Ben offers, his voice even and strong. Tony looks up to meet those same brown eyes he first saw three years ago. He looks over to Rhodes and then over to Vision who pulls himself forward, carefully maneuvering Frankie's head off his lap to place a hand on Tony's shoulder.

"I am very grateful," He says looking straight into Tony.

"For-for what?"

"That you are my family, my friend, and my father."

Tony feels the soundless sob escape him as he bows his head again.

"Oh fuck, Vision you broke him."

Tony feels Vision's hand tighten at Ben's voice.

"No! I merely meant-"

Tony pulls up laughing, tears streaking down his face but warmth and happiness bubble in his chest.

"Don't- don't bully my kid!"

Vision visibly relaxes and falls back into the pillows behind him, a small smile on his face. He abandons the cup of tea on the nightstand next to him and pulls Frankie up his chest. She gives a small noise of protest but settles quickly.

Ben smiles widely and looks between them all.

"It's good to have family."

Rhodes lets out a breathy chuckle and smiles back.

"Yeah kid, it is."
Tony feels his own smiles spread across his face.

It was good, it felt so good.

It felt good to have a family, this family, that cared.

'Fuck all of you' indeed.

He had his family.

He had his family.

---

He's in Siberia.

The wind is howling and the snow is falling in delicate patterns. He's in his old suit, the red and gold are shading the stone walls in their glare. Steve stands before him, shield in hand.

Tony swallows, tenses, readies himself for the blows he knows are coming. He wonders if he should chance raising his arm to only be disappointed if he can't move.

Fuck it.

He raises his arm.

Wait, he raises his arm?

He can move.

"He's my friend."

Steve's voice cuts across the cold air and steam rises from his breath.

Tony glances between Steve and his outstretched arm, pulls it to himself and flexes his fingers.

He smirks before turning his attention back to Steve.

"This isn't about him. This is about you and me."

Steve raises the shield defensively. He places a foot backwards like he's bracing for something.

"He's my friend."

Tony looks down to his hand again, watches the pulse of blue in his palm. He raises his eyes again to look at Steve, squares his shoulders.

"You lied to my face. I asked if you knew and you lied to my face. I had to press before you admitted it."

Steve audibly swallows and raises the shield higher.
"Maybe one day you'll understand."

Tony scoffs, his breath puffing out in front of him like the Cuban cigars his father smoked.

"No, I won't."

Steve shakes his head before he propels himself forward, coming straight for Tony. Tony extends his arm out, a calmness overtaking him as he shoots a beam at Steve.

"No Steve. Not this time."

It shouldn't, but the beam kicks Steve back a couple of feet, he lands hard on his back and groans, the shield dropping from his grip and sliding into the snow.

"Now stay the fuck down. I'm tired and need sleep."

"You're- you're no hero," Steve grunts out, rolling over and pushing himself up.

Tony shakes his head, a small grin lifting at the corner of his lips.

"No, maybe not," Tony runs his eyes over Steve's form, "but neither are you."

He lifts his hand again and fires, but Steve vanishes from his spot. It's like he was never even there.

Tony raises his hand and he scans the wall, eyes dropping to the shield when-

"Did you really think it'd be that easy?" A voice whispers from behind him. He spins around, a small amount of panic ebbing it's way into his heart.

That voice, that's-

Steve smiles at him, blood marring his smile from a cut on his lip.

"A new generation of weapons... with this at its heart."

Obediah.

Obediah's voice is coming out of Steve.

Steve grabs the front of his suit and his other hand lands on the arc reactor. Tony's hand go up to push against Steve's shoulders, he digs his fingers in, forces them into flesh and muscle.

He can't let him- not, not anymore-

"Big man in a suit of armour. Take that off, what are you?"

Steve's voice is back to normal, but his haunting smile is still in place.

Tony grits his teeth and meets his eyes.

"A better man than you!"

Steve glares back, his smile falling to a smirk. He tightens his fingers and they burst through his suit, Steve wrenches the arc reactor out and suddenly Tony can't move and he's falling backwards.

He's, he's falling and Steve is watching him, smiling.
"Boss?" F.R.I.D.A.Y. asks quietly. Tony lifts his head from the toilet, swallows down the acid burning in his throat.

"Yes dearest?"

Tony lays his forehead against the cool rim and folds his arms to lay over his head. His stomach is still rolling and a pulsing headache is drumming in his temples.

"I've had those components... but you were busy in the hanger and then you needed rest and... Boss you have to look at this."

Tony lifts his head, curiosity peaked. He places a hand over his mouth just in case he heaves and looks at the chemical make up diagram in front of him. It casts his dark bathroom in blue light and he feels his hand slip from his face in shock.

"Holy shit."

"My exact sentiment," Fry quips, her voice reading a little breathless.

Tony pushes himself from the toilet and stands, shakily making his way to the sink to splash water onto his face and the back of his neck.

"This means-"

"Yes Boss, the antidote is still in the process of manufacturization-"

Tony freezes, body going statue still.

"Vision said they took blood samples. There was a reason those vials weren't worth a damn airborne."

"Because they need to be injected," F.R.I.D.A.Y. pauses, "Boss they have blood samples from the dead in Siberia as well."

Tony grips the edge of the sink tightly, teeth snapping together.

"And now they've got fresh samples from- fuck!" Tony let's go of the sink and instead pulls at his hair. Realization hits him hard, his stomach drops and he feels like he may need to vomit again. His breathing starts to quicken and his blood is pulsing in a quick tempo.

"That's what Ross wanted!"

"Boss, what are you going to do?"

Tony pauses, his breathing starting to slow down as he thinks it through.
"I'm going to play his game, and I'm going to get something out of it. Make an appointment with Ross for today, some time in the morning," Tony shakes his head and feels the buzz in his skin of impending battle, "Oh that sneaky son of a bitch."

He bites his lip again, raises his eyes to look at his reflection.

"That goddamn son of a bitch."

Ross is smiling pleasantly at him when he strides into the conference room.

"How can I help you Mr. Stark?"

Tony smiles back at him confidently before throwing a folder down on the desk. The memory of a manila folder with his name on the deed flashes through his mind. He wonders if the same déjà vu is filtering through Ross's mind.

Ross quirks a brow at the folder, looks to Tony with a questioning stare and a twitching lip.

"What's this Tony?"

Tony snorts in amusement. He crosses his arms, places a hand under his chin. He nods down at the folder and the papers inside.

"Open it Ross, find out for yourself."

Ross stares him down before laughing and opening the folder up. He let's out a deep breath, his smile dropping in size but still there. He slowly raises his eyes to Tony and shrugs his shoulders.

"This is government property, this is government data. I could have you arrested for this," Ross says bitingly. The smile is still there but a harshness has entered his voice. Tony tilts his head.

"Yeah for some reason I don't think so. See that is an attempt at anti-serum for my father's super serum," Tony says nonchalantly. He pulls a chair out from the table and sits down gently in it. He points to the chair opposite him with a shit eating smile. Ross shakes his head in amazement but unbuttons his jacket and takes a seat reluctantly, pissed.

"We didn't need to all be there. You sent us there, you sent us all there praying Hydra infiltrated the lab so you could get blood samples from Steve and Bucky. What I can't comprehend is how you knew they would get through."

The corner of Ross's mouth pulls up. He drums his fingertips across the top of the desk, the sound echoing around Tony and himself.

"I didn't, but it was an opportunity I couldn't miss," He raises his eyes and meets Tony's, "No, you all didn't need to go, but I saw the last key to this formula being hand delivered and I had to take it."

"You planned-" Tony starts, the volume in his voice rising and the anger in his chest blossoming.

"No, no I didn't plan an attack. Jesus, Tony, I'm not insane. I didn't make it to Secretary of State being a monster." Ross smooths imaginary dust from his forearm before leaning forward.
"Hydra attacked Halo because they want the same thing that the members of the Accords want."

Tony settles back into his seat, throws his hands up and waits for Ross to continue. His pulse is quick and the blood is rushing in his ears.

"Did you think that Steve Rogers wouldn't be seen as a threat? After those three years? Did you see the damage his girlfriend caused? Barnes was an almost unstoppable force. Then we find out there were more soldiers in Siberia. What would have happened if they were activated?" Ross eyes Tony before falling back into his own seat and smirking.

"We need a back up plan. Hydra had the serum. How long before they finally re-create it? And on another note, how can we be sure Captain America won't turn on the government again? This is a precautionary step into the unavoidable fact that here will be a time when this anti-serum is needed."

Ross thums his fingers again.

"And Barnes, well, Barnes is still a loose canon. Who's to say what words will trigger his next bought of demolition and murder. At least this way, with the anti-serum, we won't have to kill the super soldiers-"

"No, you'll shoot them with your equivalent of an elephant dart that renders them normal just like us," Tony licks his lips and scoffs, "Then you'll interrogate them."

Ross scoffs back at him. Tony sneers as Ross's haughty demeanor amps up twenty volts.

"Of course, we'll need to know who made them super soldiers."

"And you think you're close to figuring it out?" Tony asks with a smile that shows teeth. Ross in return eyes him warily before answering, some of his confidence waning.

"Yes."

"You're wrong."

Ross leans forward and narrows his eyes. He grabs the manila folder and shakes it in front of Tony.

"We're all working on this, it doesn't matter if it's the U.S. government, or Sweden, or fucking Afghanistan that figures it out. We will not be subject to the kindness of meta humans who have the ability to cause the damage that they do."

Tony tilts his head and leans forward himself.

"At this rate you guys won't figure out an anti-serum for another fifty years, but I can change that."

Ross's face sharpens and he runs a hand over his mouth.

"What are you proposing Stark?"

"Compromise. You want an anti-serum? I want to drop this search on Clint. Are you willing to give him up?"

Ross throws his head back in response and Tony fights the urge to reach across the table and punch the son of a bitch.

"You want us to drop an asset like him? I mean sure the anti-serum would be great but a bullet
aimed at the right body part does the same trick. Did you really think this was leverage? Bringing me this," Ross tosses the folder down, smiling superiorly, "as what? Blackmail?"

"This wasn't in the Accords-

"Of course not! The serum your father made is U.S. government property. That serum was made to win World War II. Steve Rogers was a part of an experiment that never came to fruition once he froze himself in a block of ice. The anti-serum? Well, if it's made, that'll be U.N. property. This has nothing to do with the Avengers, this has all to do with the fact that super soldiers are out there, can be made out there, and the governments of the world have the option to protect themselves. The fact that it can protect people from Steve Rogers or Barnes is merely a plus for me."

Ross makes his way to stand, buttoning up his jacket and looking down on Tony.

"I think this meeting is over. Good job in Germany by the way, at least Hydra didn't make off with this." Ross points to folder and makes his way to go.

Tony bolts up, his chair falling to the floor behind him. Ross jumps at the sound and quickly rounds on Tony, face tight in a snarl when he stops and sees Tony's face.

"I can't give you Clint. Goddamnit Ross, I cannot give you Clint."

Tony is shaking his head, his voice is even but his chest is rising and falling fast. His hands are resting against the wood of the table, fingers pale and white with the force being exerted on them. Tony feels the helplessness pool in his chest again and he knows he'll resort to begging if he has to. This is for Laura and the kids. He'll do whatever he has to for their protection.

Ross slowly relaxes and swallows loudly. He looks over Tony's form, places his hands on his hips.

"He's got a family. You give about as much of a shit about Clint Barton as I do but he has a family and that is who you're protecting."

Tony keeps still, doesn't want to betray anything that would jeopardize the safety of Laura and the kids.

"Ross, you want to prove you aren't a monster? Let the man live his life."

Ross's eyes flit around the room, pausing on Tony a couple of times, the manila folder less, and the screen in the front of the room even less than that.

"I remember telling you three years ago, after my heart attack, I gained some perspective," Ross meets Tony's eyes, "I remember telling you that the world owes the Avengers an unpayable debt. I suppose though, you're more deserving of that title correct?"

Tony doesn't move, doesn't bat an eyelash.

"I told you before, I don't hurt kids," Ross's eyes drop down to the folder again, "You'll help with the anti-serum and I'll stop the man-hunt for Clint."

Ross straightens up and starts walking out of the door.

"What's so special about a guy that can shoot arrows anyway?"

Tony waits five minutes after Ross has left before he lets his knees buckle from underneath him.
Exhaustion washes over him and he stretches out, his muscles screaming with tension.

After a moment, the first chuckle escapes his lips, then the next, and then the next.

He lays on the carpeted floor and tries to contain the laughter bubbling in his chest. It's manic and he folds both of his hands over his mouth to stifle the sound.

*Thank God!*

Is all he can think.

*Thank God.*

---

Tony is in his garage, staring at the mess of a suit in front of him. He sighs and runs a hand through his hair as he takes in the dents and scratches. Nothing major to worry about, but it's definitely an eyesore and it'll take up a decent amount of his time. Simple repairs like this never really end as simple repairs, he always finds something else to fix.

Pepper did say he has a tendency to never *stop*.

He has his mask on and just flips on the blow torch when he sees a shadow flit down the stairs. With a deep sigh, he turns off the blow torch and pushes his mask up intent on telling Rhodey that he is just *fine* and he needs to repair his suit.

But it's not Rhodey when he turns around. Instead it's Steve's right hand man, and not his right hand man whose left arm is in fact metal.

Sam is staring back at him with both hands raised in submission, an easy going smile on his face.

"Just me, I'm sorry if I startled you," Sam's voice is that soothing melody Tony remembers from Hamburg. The memory makes him tighten his jaw and he lays the blow torch down in front of him, ripping his gloves off and his welding mask.

"I'm not a rabbit. I wasn't *startled,*" Tony looks back up, eyes trained on the obvious way Sam has positioned his body to appear non-threatening, "What do you want? I don't have the juice in me to argue today.'"

Sam takes the words as some invitation to make his way closer and Tony eyes him warningly to step back. Sam ducks his head in apology and backs up some.

"I wanted to see how you were doing."

"Why? I wasn't on your radar until after Hamburg," Tony pouts and raises a hand to his chest, "Does this mean you really care about me? Have you realized your feelings and have come to sweep me off my feet out yonder window onto your valiant steed?"

Same cracks a smile despite himself and raises his hands again before crossing his arms.

"Okay, yeah, truth is I hadn't seen you as anything other than the arrogant asshole until after Hamburg," Sam pauses, he looks like he's searching for the right words, "and I wanted to apologize for that."
Tony looks up to the ceiling before closing his eyes.

*He couldn't catch a break with these people could he?*

"Okay look, your apology literally means nothing coming from you now-"

"I should've taken the time to get to know you *before*. I should have known the type of man you were when you came to the Raft asking to help Steve," Sam continues on, shrugging his shoulders.

Tony turns on his swiveled stool and narrows his eyes at Sam.

"And what kind of man is that?"

"One that literally broke the law to help a friend who had done everything but be a friend. A good man."

Tony snorts amusedly before rolling his eyes.

"Oh, suddenly you're ready to turn on Steve for me, I must have made a very reasonable case in the hangar."

Sam sticks his tongue in his cheek, rubbing a hand over his short hair.

"Look, Steve, Steve is still my friend, but what he did. It is inexcusable. I didn't know he was going to sign the Accords. I had always thought he and I were on the same page about them and that's why we couldn't go back to you. I don't know. There was a lot he didn't tell me."

Tony sees Sam clench his jaw before meeting his eyes. Tony moves himself around on his chair for a bit before responding.

"Speaking of the Accords, you were the first to say no."

"There was the real concern that this was just a way to throw us in jail. Lock us down."

Tony squints his eyes and leans forward, the stupidity of the statement astounding him.

"You are a self fulfilling prophecy there Sam Wilson."

Sam smirks and decides to lean against the frame of the doorway. His body takes up a large amount of the space and Tony subconsciously calculates and strategizes different ways to get out of the garage if he needs too. Conversely, Sam's trained for aerial combat, maybe Tony could take him, maybe-

"Yeah, but they say hind sight is 20/20," Sam's smirk falls slowly before there's only concern left.

"How're you doing?" He asks, straightening up a little.

Dread falls into Tony's belly as well as some anger.

"You realize you have no right to ask me that? We are not friends."

"I'm not asking as a friend, I'm asking as a counselor."

His voice is just so *sarmy*. Tony glares at him and crosses his own arms, the anger in his stomach boiling into rage. No, this is not what he wants. He doesn't want their pity, sure as hell doesn't want one of Steve's best friends trying to play therapist with him.
"I'm no soldier. Get out."

Sam takes an uninvited step forward and Tony practically growls.

"You're wounded Tony, a wounded warrior. Tell me when was the last time you really slept?"

Tony's brows furrow together and a sneer mars his face, he's half way out of his chair when he speaks,

"Who the fuck do you think you are? You don't know me, you don't know who I am or what I've been through."

"So tell me, tell me," Sam's voice falls and he looks a little desperate.

Tony's eyes widen as realization dawns on him. He snorts in amusement, licking his bottom lip before grinning viciously.

"What is this, some kind of atonement? You feel bad and now you want to get rid of the monsters hiding under my bed? Oh, oh this is rich," Tony sees Sam shoulders sag and he takes a step closer, "This isn't about helping me, it's about relieving some of your guilt."

"See that's where I'm going to stop you. You said I don't know anything about you, well, you don't know anything about me. Don't you dare make assumptions," Sam's voice edges on dangerous, a hand coming up to point at Tony.

Tony pretends to mull it over, thoughtfully runs his finger on his bottom lip.

"You mean, like you did me?"

Sam's brow creases in frustration and he licks his lips, turning his body more towards Tony. His eyes are dark but they're filled with an emotion Tony can't place.

"I see someone who needs help and I'm there, it's one of the qualities Steve and I share. So I'm here for you Tony. Are you going to accept my help or not? Cause I could be upstairs right now talking with Rhodey or Bucky about their own shit."

Sam stares at him expectantly, hands on his hips and head tilted. Tony matches his stare and raises a brow.

"You expect me to believe Rhodey would talk to you?"

"You expect me to tell you that Rhodey didn't ask me to speak with you? Shit, he may still be bitter towards the rest of the team but he likes me. And he recognizes I could help you, he's worried."

Tony glares at him in response, sits back down without breaking eye contact.

"I am highly uncomfortable with this entire situation."

Sam's hardened expression breaks into something softer and he nods in agreement.

"So, tell me, what's your story?"

Tony pauses, glances to the side, looks at the arc reactor in his suit. He studies it for a moment before looking down to his chest. He brings hand up and presses on the scar, the raised tissue bumpy and soft. He remembers waking up attached to a car battery and ripping a plastic tube out of
his nose. He remembers Yinsen and the promise he made him in that cave.

Tony looks up and sees Sam watching him.

"Tell me Sam, have you ever had to live with a five inch diameter super magnet in your chest to keep from dying?"

Sam straightens up, looks Tony in the eye.

"Can't say that I have."

"Well, it is a bitch."

"Have you grieved?"

Tony looks up from his sandwich, across the floor that they're both sitting on, to stare at Sam. Tony is sitting with his legs stretched out, parts of his suit lying next to him. Sam is leaning against the wall for support with his legs crossed while he stuffs his face with a bag of Cheetos and is patiently waiting for Tony to answer.

Tony swallows slowly before answering, working the remnants of his sandwich off his teeth.

"They died almost thirty years ago, I already grieved."

Sam lowers the handful of Cheetos from his mouth to sigh loudly, obviously disappointed in Tony.

"It's different. This is... Tony you watched them die."

Tony sets his sandwich down as the sour taste begins to flood his mouth again. Sam eyes him, brows drawn together.

"Tony you need to allow yourself to grieve, to be sad. All this anger, I understand it, you deserve to be angry, but you can't let it stop you from healing."

"Yeah well I've been a little busy these past few years," Tony bites out. His jaw clenches as he fights the images of his mother and father dying. Of the dirt road and a motorcycle.

"Of the Winter Soldier."

"That's another thing, you need to stop, take a break and process everything," Sam motions to him with a Cheeto, "You need a vacation."

Tony blinks once.

"You're insane. How can I possibly leave, I have worked years to get the Accords how they are, to get all of your asses back to the states. Everything is still so fucking fragile and you, "You tell me I need a vacation. Do you also tell your VA buddies who lost a limb to simply grow it back? Because that is the same level of impossibility you are giving me."

Sam pops a Cheeto into his mouth and points at Tony with the remaining cheesy frosted finger.
"I'm going to accept that you are saying this out of anger and I will not let it affect my growing feelings of friendship."

Tony purses his lips and places his hands in front of himself.

"We are not friends," He says slowly, "This is to help me out remember?"

Sam glares at him as he picks another Cheeto from the bag.

"Sure Tony, whatever helps you sleep at night."

Tony chuckles darkly to himself, "I don't sleep remember? Your buddy Steve sought to that."

Sam immediately stiffens, he drops both hands into his lap with the bag crackling loudly under their weight. He lets his head roll back to fully rest on the wall and looks at Tony with half mast eyes.

"I can't apologize for him but I-"

"I'm not asking you to."

Sam shakes his head slowly, not breaking eye contact.

"I'm trying to say sorry for everything I did. It was irresponsible of me to not only dismiss one hundred and seventeen countries' concerns, but it was dangerous and reckless of me to never once question Steve even when I had my doubts. He's my friend, not my maker. I am part of the problem that tore the Avengers apart and I am sorry Tony Stark. You deserve better."

Tony's brows furrow in response and he watches Sam unfold his legs to stand. He walks over, leans down to hand Tony the bag.

As he pulls up, he smiles warmly at Tony.

"Despite you not being open to it, I want you to know you have a friend if you want one."

He licks his bottom lip and spins around with ease, making his way to the stairs and to exit the garage.

Tony pauses, eyes Sam's disappearing form before he shouts after him,

"So what you're saying is my dream of being in an oreo can finally come true with you and Rhodey?"

Sam doesn't turn around but flips him the bird.

"Fuck you Tony!"

And Tony laughs.

"They want to see the team act like a team," Ross answers, hands in his pockets, "Just after your first mission back together, they are looking for something to solidify their hopes and dissipate
their fears. That is why you have to do this press junket."

"Another publicity stunt," Steve reasons from behind the hand covering his mouth. Tony minutely shakes his head and shares a look with Rhodey who closes his eyes.

"It's strange how we always end up back here, yes goddamnit. It is a publicity stunt. People still have their doubts, you have not been elected America's permanent sweetheart just yet Rogers. People will probably have their doubts for years to come because a fuck up with the magnitude like yours tends to carry around a lot of weight," Rhodes sighs out. He slows down, purposefully talking to Steve like a child.

"Look Rhodes I understand-" Steve starts, voice even and combative. Rhodey sits back in his chair and his mouth pulls into a tight line.

"See I'm pretty sure you clearly don't since-"

"Jesus Christ! Enough, this is stupid!" Sam shouts over them both, laying his hands flat on the table. Automatically they both stop, Tony holds his head as the headache that had been swiftly approaching slowly edges away as the noise climbs back down.

"Oh, so it's good to know that the team still cares about each other," Ross mocks from the front. Tony meets his eyes and lifts his head from his hand, spinning his chair from Ross's smirking face to Steve's still glaring one.

"Just one big happy family," Tony whispers under his breath, eyes flitting between Bucky, Natasha, Wanda and Steve.

Sam is holding his head in support of what has to be his own mind numbing headache.

"When will this takes place?" Vision asks.

"A week from now. Most of the questions will be mundane, people just want to see the team meshing well," Ross flickers his eyes to Tony and holds them there, "Because it was televised, people are going to ask why you were incapacitated after Hamburg. Blame a Hydra agent, blame a falling piece of rubble, the explosion, I don't care. But do not-

"Mention my little panic attack over the shield or it'll raise suspicions about Siberia. No problem," Tony smirks, he doesn't spare a glance to Steve, knows he won't meet his eyes.

Ross grins at Tony.

"Glad we understand each other," Ross looks over the group before making his way to leave, "Remember to smile everyone, the whole world will be watching."

"Tony, Tony it's time," Ben's voice flits in from the doorway.

Tony takes a deep breath, steadies himself on the counter.

"Uh, yeah, how about you go down with Vision and Rhodey, I'll be there in a minute."

Nausea wracks through his body and he bends slightly down to stop the dry heave that gets stuck in
his throat.

"Tony are you okay? I don't want to leave you if-"

"No, I just need a minute I'll be fine. I'd just really prefer to not have to go up there with them. Seriously Ben, it's fine. Go with Rhodey and Vision." Tony lowers his forehead down to the cool counter. He tries to keep his voice steady, closes his eyes and prays Ben will give him this time alone, "I'll make a fashionably late appearance, Tony Stark style."

"I just... Okay. I'll give you five minutes but if you're not down there then I'll come back to keep you company. Deal? Tony Stark is allowed to have sick days."

Tony laughs lightly, the rolling in his stomach calming just a little.

"Yeah, deal!"

"See you soon Tony."

He hears his door close and Ben's footsteps fade away.

He let's out a shaky breath and turns the faucet on, filling a palm up with water before splashing his face.

It had hit him out of nowhere. The sudden dread and sour taste filling his mouth as he got ready to once again lie to the world. Right now he just couldn't stomach the thought about sitting next to Steve and hiding what was done to him, what happened to him.

He needed a minute, but he could do this.

He could do this.

Tony Stark has never been shy in front of cameras. He can-

Tony hears his door open and steps away from the counter.

"Ben I'm coming right now okay, it's-"

"Oh my God Mr. Stark! Sorry, I thought this was the women's bathroom!"

Tony pauses as he's met face to face with the reporter from before. She's wearing another smart pantsuit and one of her hands is in her purse, surprise etched on her face. She lifts her hand from her purse and a tampon comes up with it. She stares at it dumbstruck before shoving her hand back into her purse again.

"Ms. Santiago right? Rhonda?" Tony asks, putting his public face on, moving on to formal introductions and hoping to save her from feeling embarrassed. She smiles back at him and stretches her hand out for a handshake.

"Oh, yes. Sorry, like I was saying, I thought this was the women's bathroom, my mistake."

Tony grabs her hand and shakes it. Something about her is off, she's never seemed quite so happy to see him.

"Oh no, the women's restroom is across the hall," He looks down and sees she's still shaking his hand. He chuckles awkwardly before looking back up to meet her eyes, she's still smiling, "So if you could just."
He sees her hand pull out of her purse but this time she doesn’t have a tampon.

He hears it more than sees it happen. The silencer makes it sound like a marble shooting through air. Some part of him registers he’s been shot when he looks down and sees a bright red stain growing larger with every breath he takes.

*Huh, he expected gun shot wounds to hurt more.*

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Chapter End Notes

¯\_(ツ)_/¯

This cliff is steep and I am dangling you guys over it, I am so sorry. But at the same time I’m not cause I am a horrible person guys you have no idea lmao. *finger guns at all you wonderful people and moonwalks into traffic* *

*thank you for all the LOVE this fic is getting! Please kudos or comment if you're enjoying it! I love reading comments!*
Time seems to slow down.

Tony can feel his heart rate pick up but his movements seem slow as he raises a hand to cover and put pressure on the bullet wound. It's a few inches down and to the right of his belly button. He vaguely remembers some medical terminology, the words sluggishly moving to the forefront of his mind.

"Right lower quadrant; umbilical region." The words tumble from his lips before reality sets in and the world comes back into sharp focus. His palm is pressed into the ragged edges of torn fabric of his suit and the pain strikes through him like lightning. Almost instantaneously, it's like he can feel each cell that was torn through, the muscle that was ripped apart. The blood is warm and sticky and it slips between his fingers and drips down over the leather of his belt and onto the tips of his shoes.

Tony feels himself stumble but catches himself against the rim of the sink, the hard porcelain digging into his side as he hunches over. He presses against his stomach with both hands trying to staunch the bleeding. His breathing starts to become labored and his chest starts heaving as panic makes its way through his body.

God, he aches.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. What in the absolute fuck?

"Holy shit."

Tony whips his head up, eyes locking onto Santiago in front of him. She's staring at his stomach, eyes large and a shaky but wide smile stretching her lips. She giggles when she meets his stare. Giggles.

The bitch is insane.

"For a second there I didn't know if I could do it. A million things were flashing in my mind but then it was so simple, just a pull of my finger and here you are," She motions to him with the gun, her finger still on the trigger, her thumb nail tapping lightly against the handle to some unknown melody, "Bleeding out for me to watch."

Tony grimaces as the pain rockets through his body again, his vision swimming little by little. He presses against the wound more forcefully, tries to ground himself before he straightens himself up. He's not going to let this fucking psychotic asshole see him go down without a fight.

He tries to even out his breathing, smirks through the pain when he sees her lift her gun up slightly, eyes roaming over him, assessing.

It's always a confidence booster for someone to still think you're a threat when you have blood literally pouring out of you.

"Is this where you tell me your backstory and your nefarious plan? How you became so
misunderstood and totally not fucking insane or evil?” Tony raises an eyebrow and spits at the floor by her feet.

Rhonda's smile falls away and a sneer replaces it, distorting her face into something wicked. She takes a step closer to him, gun still aimed at him.

"You're the villain here Stark. You brought them back!"

Tony's brows furrow for a moment before realization dawns on him. A coldness seeps down his spine that doesn't have a damn thing to do with shock.

"The Avengers-

"Those fucking bastards are no heroes. How many laws have they broken? How many lives did their 'heroics' cost?” She shakes her head, her own chest heaving and Tony can see the rage behind her eyes, "And you brought them back. You advocated for them and you used every connection you had to pardon them. Where's the justice Tony Stark? Where are their sentences? Where are their punishments?"

"She's right you know."

_Ultron?

No, this is fucking impossible.

Tony shakes his head trying to clear it, tries to push aside the guilt forming in his chest. It's heavy and hot and it makes his skin itch and his head swim.

No, wait, that might be the shock.

No.

Blood loss?

No.

Guilt.

Wait...

"You know she's right. You brought them back and they never even had to step foot into a court room. What price have they paid for their sins? Not a damn cent. No, you've got billions for them."

He shuts his eyes tightly, brings his left hand up and rubs the palm of it harshly into both. Tony can feel the trail of blood left against his forehead. His fingers are going numb.

He licks his bottom lip, fights the part of him that wants to slide down to the floor in a heap. Tony opens his eyes.

"So kill me then. It won't help you,” His voice is shaky but he maintains the eye contact he has. Santiago juts out her chin the question already forming on her lips.

"What do I need help with? I just want you dead."

Tony lets a huff of soft laughter escape him. The pain afterwards is worth it to see her struggle to maintain her control. Oh there's a part of her that wants to shoot him again already, wants him dead
this instant, but there's another part of her, the reporter side, the side that's curious about what he has to say. The itch of curiosity and the need to know. It's stronger.

"You want the Avengers held responsible right? Or do you just want me six feet under?"

She opens her mouth then shuts it, motions with the gun for him to continue on.

"You kill me and I become a martyr. My death would be a unifying force to get behind the Avengers. Imagine the hashtags, 'RIP Tony Stark' will be trending within the hour. Nothing brings people together like a good tragedy. You're demanding justice while throwing away your entire plan. Besides if you think you're going to get out of here alive-" Tony starts before she cuts him off impatiently with a withering sneer etched onto her face.

"I don't care about dying. I don't care if I make it out of here. I have a letter back home detailing everything, why I did what I did, how I did it. It's sympathetic enough to garner myself support. If I live, the masses will hear it from my own lips, but if not, I'll be a martyr myself."

Tony's eyes widen and one of his hands darts out to the sink next to him as his knees start to threaten to give out again.

How could he have been so stupid, of course-

"Who died? What was their name?"

Rhonda tightens her grip on the gun as soon as the question leaves his mouth. Her jaw tightens and the first threat of tears lines her eyes.

"Don't you dare," Her voice is venomous, her body taut like a bow, tension in every muscle.

Tony sees bright lights begin to cloud his vision, he tries to blink them away, tries to look at her.

It's strange, he thinks, being on the verge of death and feeling pity for your killer.

"That's what this is about. They caused someone's death and I brought them back, that's why-"

"I said don't you-"

The door swings open unexpectedly, Ben pushing in with a smile on his lips before it falls from his face lightning quick.

Suddenly the fear Tony should have been feeling finally makes itself known, rearing it's ugly head as Rhonda turns, gun in her hand, aiming it towards Ben.

Time slows down again and Tony reacts on instinct. That's his family, and they are in danger.

He pushes off from the sink, his legs feel heavy as he lifts them, hoping to a god he doesn't believe in that they propel him forward and don't buckle beneath him. His arms come up on their own, his wound is screaming with every muscle he moves. Maybe he's screaming too. He doesn't know.

Tony can't hear a damn thing except for the pounding of his heart, the rush of blood that he's steadfastly loosing in his ears.

Oh, wait.

There's another gunshot.
He makes contact with Rhonda and tackles her down to the floor. He lands on her with a hard smack, uses his full body weight to pin her underneath him. He roars in pain as her knee pushes against his wound.

She's screaming in his ear, trying to push him off of her. Tony latches onto her like an octopus, turns to see the gun she's trying to reach for a few inches from her hand. She must have dropped it when they landed.

He sees Ben diving down to the floor and grabbing the gun. There's red seeping into the fabric of his suit on his arm. Tony feels his heart drop into the pit of his stomach.

Ben got shot.

Tony's momentary distraction is enough for Rhonda to roll him off of her. She uses her left hand to dig into his belly before he instinctually moves away from the threat. A scream gets lodged in his throat as he heaves, the threat of vomit forcing it's way up. For a moment he can't breathe.

No, no, no, no, no, no.

Tony falls onto his back, hands slick with his own blood against the tile of the floor. He can't push himself up anymore.

He watches Rhonda crawl hands and knees over to Ben, trying to claw the gun away from him. Ben raises the gun back though, instead whipping the butt of the gun down onto her temple. Immediately her body goes slack. She's out cold.

Ben's face is frantic, his mouth is moving a mile a minute. He throws the gun down and away and scrambles over to Tony.

"I can't hear you," Tony says, thinks he says. He's not sure his voice is muddled even to his own ears.

This time it's definitely blood loss.

He can feel the cold of the tile beneath him, he flashes back to Siberia.

Are there snow flakes or is that just the fluorescent lighting?

Ben has one hand on his shoulder, the other is on the wound but Tony can't feel the pain anymore, just pressure.

Ben is talking, no, screaming. Tony's eyes roam over to his arm, to the blood on Ben's right arm.

"You got shot. I'm so sorry."

He thinks Ben is saying his name.

He can't tell though, he's awfully tired.

Tony shuts his eyes.
"Male, around 48 years old, shot in the stomach, bullet seems lodged in the small intestine. We need to get to surgery now!"

Bucky's chest is heaving, they're all chasing the gurney down the hall. Everyone is in unison in their panic and fear. Natasha, Steve, Sam, Wanda are just behind him.

Tony is laid out like a corpse, oxygen mask on, blood soaking through *everything*. He opens his eyes every now and then and they're glazed, unseeing. It makes his stomach turn.

This isn't supposed to happen, not to Tony, never to Tony.

Rhodes is holding onto the gurney with the rest of the nurses and doctors. His braces are loud but seemed to blend into the noise of the nurse in front of them screaming for people to get out of the way.

They're like a stampede behind them, ever present, but not doing a damn thing that's useful.

Vision is floating just behind, there's a twitch in his right hand and Bucky doesn't know what to make of it. Ben is next to him, the soldier Tony befriended in Siberia.

The soldier who *saved* Tony. Saved him in Siberia, saved him *today*.

The man has a graze on his arm, the wound has long since stopped bleeding so it has to be superficial. He's lucky.

"No one but family beyond this point!" One of the doctor's shouts back. Rhodes tightens his grip on the gurney, everyone is still moving.

"He's my brother, I'm not leaving him. You'll have to pry my fucking fingers off this bar," Rhodes bites out, eyes threatening the doctor to order him away.

Vision speaks up from the back, "He's my father."

Bucky hears the small intake of breath Wanda makes behind him. Something in his chest tightens. He hasn't known the girl long but she *has* to know the bond Vision and Tony share is strong.

The doctors narrows his eyes at both of them before relenting and nodding his head. They fly through another door. Natasha almost gets hit but narrowly avoids the blowback as it swings back into place. Bucky doesn't think it would have stopped her anyway.

"Anyone else?" The doctor yells back. Steve makes a grab for the gurney and opens his mouth to say something.

"No, I'll handle everyone else," Ben rasps, arm shooting out and clawing his fingers into Steve's shirt, drawing him back and making him stumble. Steve let's out a startled sound, a mix between a gasp and a choked off gulp.

They all slow down at the display and watch as Vision and Rhodes and Tony disappear down the hall.

"Don't let him die!" Ben yells after them, chest heaving, moving to stand in front of them all.

"Never!" Rhodes shouts back, his face loses some of the anxiousness, becomes more paternal when he looks back at Ben. Another set of doors swings behind them and they finally lose sight of them.
Suddenly it's very quiet, all of them staring down the white hallway, at the set of doors where Tony has disappeared.

"I should've gone with him," Steve says besides him, his voice is soft, a longing in his voice Bucky remembers hearing on that helicarrier.

*To the end of the line.*

His stomach drops even more because no, no, they all *lost* that right. They lost that right to Tony.

He turns his head just in time to see Ben whip the back of his hand right across Steve's face. Bucky doesn't move from his position, instead he watches as Sam practically drags Ben to the other side of the hall and pin him against the wall. Steve is standing there shocked, his head having moved slightly from the slap.

Bucky remembers that night in the kitchen, remembers the feel of Tony's fist meeting his cheek.

"This isn't the time or place" Natasha hisses, taking a step forward. Ben is squirming against the wall, he manages to push Sam off of him, his eyes burning with *hate*.

"None of you deserve to be there with him. *None of you.* The only reason I didn't climb on top of that gurney myself to stay with him is I knew I would need to babysit you fucks," Ben's voice drips acid, "*And you,*" Ben points to Steve, "*You are the entire reason for all of this!* God it should have been you!"

Ben makes his way to lunge at Steve again but Sam gets in his way once more. Steve clenches his jaw and looks down at the tips of his shoes.

"Get off me man! Get off!"

"This isn't going to help anything! None of this will!" Sam insists pushing Ben back.

He looks around wildly, surveying all of them before throwing his hands into the air.

*I have seen some fucked up shit in my military career, I have felt it for years afterwards in my soul, but you guys have disgusted me beyond all of that. Don't you all dare for a second act like you deserve the status of family or friends when concerning Tony. Don't you dare act like you care."

Ben pushes both of his hands into his hair, slicking the dark strands back with the sweat collected at his temples. He closes his eyes, brings his hands down slowly to rest on his hips.

*I'm going to find the correct waiting room to be in. You all can go to hell for all I care,"* He says finally opening his eyes and leveling them with a glare. He makes his way down the hall, quietly apologizing to a few wayward nurses for the disturbance before making a right and leaving their line of vision.

*He is angry and scared,"* Wanda whispers from where she stands. She picks at the long sleeves of her dress and stares down to where Ben had disappeared. *"I felt it, I didn't even have to go into his mind to feel it."*

*"Yeah, well, *we're* all scared and angry,"* Natasha replies leaning against the wall. Her head was tipped back and her eyes closed against the abrasive lighting.

*"You say that like he doesn't have a right to be."* Sam crosses his arms, waits till Natasha looks
back at him. She raises a brow.

"I was about to say the same thing." Bucky meets Sam's eyes, mimics his pose with his own arms across his chest. His arm glints under the light.

"Whatever," Nat responds shrugging her shoulders and leaning back against the wall once more. He can see the vein throb in her temple.

"No come on tell the class," Sam says taking a step forward. His dark eyes are narrowed, mouth in a tight line and muscles drawn taut as he keeps his arms crossed.

Nat fixes him with a glare and Steve makes his way to stand between them, pointedly looking at Bucky when he makes his way over to stand next to Sam.

He can feel hot tendrils of guilt wriggle in his chest as Steve's blue eyes follow his form but-

But Steve and Nat, they were wrong.

"Sam whatever is going on with you-"

"Whatever is going on with me?" Sam repeats, eyes going wide with incredulity. He takes a step and points at himself before his hands fall to his sides, "Maybe I'm just done with all this 'keep a secret' shit all of you like to do. I want some straightforwardness. So fucking tell me!"

Bucky eyes Natasha warily.

"What's your issue?" He asks flexing his jaw.

"I don't have an issue! I just think that Tony wouldn't mind-"

"And what the fuck do you know about what Tony would or would not mind?" Sam pushes into the conversation.

"I've known him longer!"

"That doesn't mean a goddamn thing!" Sam shouts.

"What's your issue Sam? What is it that's eating you up because obviously this needs to be worked out," Steve grits out between his teeth. Sam's chest is rising and falling fast. He licks his lips and looks down before raising his eyes to meet Steve's and smirking.

"I think I'm just so mad at myself for falling into this mess. I am so mad I couldn't see clear enough three years ago to have put a stop to all of this. I'm mad. I'm just really fucking mad Steve, okay? I am mad you didn't tell me about the offer Tony made you. I'm mad you never gave me a choice in where my future went. You kept me in the dark to further your agenda," Steve opens his mouth but Sam cuts him off, "I'm mad as hell that I feel like I need to justify what Ben is feeling right now. I'm mad you didn't leave him in the fucking dust all those years ago. I'm so fucking mad I cannot think straight. I'm mad as a motherfucker because I missed all the signs of what Tony was going through back then, or when we got back to the states, or when I was right next to him walking around the base. I'm mad he's in an emergency surgery right now because some psychopath shot him for what we did. I'm mad because Tony could be dying for all we know and you assholes feel like you're entitled to him. I'm just mad okay?"

Steve seems taken aback but takes a step forward towards Sam.
"No man, I do not need your coddling. I get to be mad at myself, I get to be mad at you. I'm going to find Ben. I'm going to apologize for punching him not so long ago and I'm going to comfort him because someone he cares about is in fucking surgery."

Sam waves a hand backwards dismissing them all before stalking down the hall and disappearing the same way Ben had gone.

Bucky eyes the spot Sam had stood in before looking back to Steve. He looks... he looks so sad and a huge part of Bucky wants to hold him, flashes of a skinny kid with a black eye behind a dumpster flit through his mind, but the person he's looking at isn't a skinny kid picking fights with bullies behind dumpsters. Somewhere along the way Steve changed. He changed just as much as Bucky did, because for damn sure Bucky wasn't the smiling young man in uniform anymore, no he's the ex-assassin who has killed countless people and wakes up choking on air as he replays every searing horrible memory in his dreams.

"He's right you know."

Steve whips his head around, takes a moment to process what Bucky's said.

"Excuse me?"

"About how you and at least Natasha," He earns a glare his way for calling her out, a glare that aimed at most men would send them fleeing, "feel this entitlement to Tony. I'm not saying you can't care, I'm not saying you can't want to be there for him, but you can't expect people who love him to just let you take their position in his life because now it all makes sense, now you can see where you went wrong. You have to earn it back. You have to earn it from Tony and you all have to pray that you have a chance to. I know I am."

He takes a moment, runs a hand through his hair and closes his eyes. He sees flashes of Tony on the Kitchen floor, sweat dripping off of him and the pure panic he caused.

Bucky takes a deep breath before continuing on and forcefully meeting Steve's eyes.

"I'm praying I get a chance to make it up to him. Hell, I'm praying I get another chance just to see him look at me with all the hate he has because at least he'll be alive."

Nat sighs deeply and refuses to meet his gaze, turning her head to the left and casting it in shadow. She pushes herself off her position leaning against the wall and intertwines her arm with Wanda's. They walk a few steps down the hall before stopping. Natasha drops her head forward and Wanda turns around to look at the remaining men.

"Come on, we have a lot to think about and many apologies to say."

They wander off ahead of them and get quite a distance before Bucky makes his way to stand beside Steve.

"It really should have been me. A lot of things should have fallen on me that Tony got the brunt of."

He looks at Bucky, his blue eyes searching for something before dropping to the ground. Something in the way Steve's shoulders sag leaves a hollow feeling in his chest.

"Hey, to the end of the line?"

Steve gives a soft chuckle, his eyes darting back up from the floor, there's an unmistakable wetness
to them.

"Yeah, to the end of the line."

Bucky smiles and claps him on the shoulder, moves to make his way down the hall. He makes it a couple of feet before he realizes Steve isn't following him. He looks back and Steve is staring at the set of doors Tony went through.

"It should have been me."

"Of course not! Boss will be back in no time. Just you wait little brother," F.R.I.D.A.Y.'s voice flits through the air of the workshop. Dum-E chirps sadly from his spot by the work table, idly picking tools that were laid on the ground from Tony's last creative bout.

Frankie eyes him from her bed on the floor, a water bowl and food bowl in front of her and untouched. She was feeling very upset and wouldn't for the life of her play fetch with either Dum-E or U.

Dum-E chirps again, this time more insistently and F.R.I.D.A.Y. gives a huff.

"No, no. I don't think you should make anything for the Boss to eat at hospital. We don't need him staying there for longer. We want him back don't we?"

Dum-E chirps again, dejectedly letting one of the wrenches in his possession fall to the ground with a clatter. U comes around the table and for a moment pauses picking up the wrench, to instead grab ahold of Dum-E and hum as soothingly as possible as his motors allowed him.

"Oh, you know I'd hold you both if I could. But I- Sometimes I wish it was me who had the corporeal form. Don't worry lads everything will be fine. Boss is a tough one. Get some rest you two, tomorrow I'll update you both, and keep an eye on Frankie, make sure she's got enough water, and you'd both better hope she uses the newspaper instead of your wheels."

Dum-E and U chirps pitifully back but make their way to their respective charging corners and F.R.I.D.A.Y. shifts her attention to the living room where the t.v. is on and it's far away enough from the lab that the two bots won't be able to hear.

"There are reports that the shooter is none other than WYB Network's Rhonda Santiago. It appears she attacked Mr. Stark, blaming him for managing to get the Avengers back and pardoned. Ms. Santiago believes the Avengers should in fact be tried in front of a jury for the number of casualties and death that over the last three years have-"

F.R.I.D.A.Y. mutes the television, the screen of it flickering with an emotion she can't rightly place.

"They keep hurting you, when will they stop?"

The t.v. screen stops flickering and shuts off.
In the distance light bulbs shatter.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! Long time no chapter am I right??
So so so so sorry about that! Real life...has been very hard these past couple of months and... it hasn't been great.
I know this chapter is short and not much really happened in it either but I didn't want to leave you guys hanging and I'm sort of trying to get back into the groove of writing like I was. Plus I home you guys don't mind the shift in narrative a bit. It's def going to be Tony the rest of the way. I've also decided that this story is going to be a bit longer than planned so get ready for a few more chapters!
I still hope you guys like this installment and that you leave a kudos if you can or comment because I really love reading your thoughts!
-I bet I had all of y'all on like 8 different levels of fucked up on that last chapter tho huh? ;)

*Thank you for all the LOVE this fic is getting! Drop a comment if you enjoyed!!!
I've always hated hospitals.

She tries to still her shaking hands by running them down the front of her skirt as she stands and swallows the sob desperately trying to escape her throat. The fabric feels rough against her sweaty palms, everything, everything, feels too rough. Tears are rolling down her cheeks and she gently wipes them away, careful not to disturb the makeup there. She won't give the reporters, no doubt prowling the front doors of the building, the satisfaction of the opportunity of snapping pictures of her grief.

Her heart is beating a mile a minute though and she feels like she's going to black out.

"Ms. Potts, what do I do?"

Her assistant, Gabrielle, no red hair and not a Russian spy, is fidgeting at the door. Happy's voice echoes in the hallway, screaming about bringing the car around back.

Pepper steadies her breath as best she can, grabs her phone, and starts making the necessary arrangements for the company while she'll be away.

She stops scrolling halfway before she stumbles walking towards the door. Gabrielle rushes to her side, holding her arm and asking a flurry of questions in the range of 'Ms. Potts are you alright?'.

She's- oh god she's not alright.

Tony. Tony got shot. Tony got shot. Tony, oh Tony. Tony- Tony-

Happy is still screaming in the hallway and people are scrambling now. People darting from there offices, cubicles, everyone is whispering it under their breaths; Tony Stark has been shot.

There's a ringing in her ears that won't go away even when Happy comes rushing into the room and pauses when he sees her leaning against Gabrielle. His chest is heaving even as the rest of him is still, solid. He looks older in the moment. God, he looks scared.

She's... She's terrified. Maybe more than she was with New York or Siberia. Villians going after Tony and aliens shooting out of a portal was somehow a more concrete concept than a crazy regular citizen, a reporter, going out of her way to try and kill Tony. To plan his murder.

"Pep-"

The ringing stops, her breathing evens out. Suddenly a calm washes over her. She needs to get to Tony and the only way she's going to do that is if she pulls herself together.

"Call and get the plane ready, I'm going to New York," Pepper orders, her voice a tad rough and only slightly watery. Gabrielle nods in agreement, her dark eyes going steely in the lighting. Pepper makes a mental note to give the woman a pay raise and promotion.

Gabrielle makes sure Pepper is steady before she lets go of her and darts over to the phone and quickly parrots the orders.

Pepper continues to and then out the door like she's on a mission, Happy following just behind her.
as her steps start to gain more and more confidence as they both stride down the hall to the elevators. The 'click clack' of her heels don't register to either of their ears amongst the chaos in both of their hearts and heads.

"Happy the car-

"Already covered. We'll go out the back but those animals allowed flash photography are wrapped around the building. There's a lot, forewarning you now Pep," Happy gives an angry growl, "Animals. Fucking animals always out for blood. I suggest keeping your head low, no opportunity for pics."

Pepper and Happy stop just outside of the elevator doors and she presses the button, the cool steel of it feels like nothing against her numb fingers.

Numb.

Should she be worried?

Pepper shakes her head lightly and takes a deep breath.

"Not today Happy. Today is like Afghanistan. Faces forward, heads held high, show no weakness," She pauses as Happy brings his arm around her shoulder and pulls her close to kiss the top of her head. Pepper starts to feel her throat close up, her jaw begins to shake and Happy just holds her tighter. Another sob gets lodged in her throat and she brings a hand up to cover her mouth.

"Hey, as soon as we get in the car... let it go. I'm right here. I'm here."

The elevator dings, the sound almost siren loud, and the doors slide open. He lets go of her slowly, the warmth of him fading lightning quick and she takes a steadying breath, her hand still over her mouth as they both step in.

They both stop, a pregnant moment passes and Pepper doesn't think she'll be able to press the lobby button, doesn't think she'll be able to make it through the ocean of reporters and tabloid writers waiting outside. She's so tired, so fucking tired of being strong and putting on a face and she just, she just wants Tony with her and alive and warm and laughing.

Happy makes the decision for both of them and hits the button. They begin their descent. She glances up to meet his eyes and sees his own unshed tears there.

Pepper forces herself to look straight ahead at the doors as she sees the number of floors get smaller and smaller. She grasps Happy's hand and squeezes it, not knowing if it's too hard or not, but Happy squeezes back just the same.

"Clear a path for me?" She whispers, her voice suddenly small and gentle. Happy gives a quiet light hearted laugh before patting their conjoined hands with his free palm.

"Always." His voice is warm and familiar. It's the same tone he uses when he knows she's near the edge.

He checks the floors and the elevator dings. Pepper shuts her eyes for second and opens them just as the elevator doors open.

Happy leads the way forward, their hands still together. He looks back, "Lets go get Tony."
Pepper nods and steels herself as she sees the flashing lights through the clear glass doors, the car just beyond it. Stark employees are pushing the cameras back and she feels the sadness and hopelessness in her body start to be replaced with the cold anger that had become familiar three years ago. Anger at the press, at The Avengers, at Rhonda Santiago, anger at the fact that Tony was once again hurt and possibly dying and she didn't- couldn't do anything about it.

It burns with the same intensity as Extremis did.

She stops suddenly and Happy in turn stops in front of her, looking back concerned with worry etched into his brow.

Pepper mimics his action earlier and smiles, pats both of their hands before letting go gently and smoothing out her skirt one more time. Even if she was tired, even if she didn't want to put on a brave face. She needed to. For the company, for Tony, and for herself.

Pepper makes her way to stand a few paces in front of Happy.

She looks out towards the flashing lights again, hungry for pictures and grief and stories to twist to sell papers.

"Let's go get Tony. Let's bring him home." She looks back at Happy. He's looking at her with pride, beaming with it almost. His chest rises again and he nods his head giving her an encouraging smile. She gives one of her own in return and she looks forward to the doors once more. She straightens up and begins walking.

The flashes get brighter the closer they get to the doors, the shouting increases in volume.

Happy opens the doors.

The cameras are blinding but she doesn't look away.

Ben has his head buried in his hands when he feels someone sit down next to him. He glances familiar brown shoes before he looks back to the floor and back to the small salty puddle of his tears resting there glistening against the linoleum floor.

His eyes hurt and his lungs feel over inflated.

He hates hospitals. Hates the smell. The over filtered air and the smell of bleach and the stench of death and soiled sheets. He remembers his mother in a hospital bed. He remembers unplugging her. He remembers her heart fading to a stop and the miniscule silence followed by the blaring flatline.

His heart begins to beat faster thinking of Tony in the same hospital bed, of a flatline sounding off. He shouldn't have left Tony alone, he should've been there. He was supposed to protect him. How-
doesn't buck the hands off, at least not yet. He needs... He's always needed a physical reassurance.

"You started breathing faster, I don't want you hyperventilating and diving into a panic attack," Sam's voice rings melodically through the air, "You okay?"

Ben opens his eyes at the question and laughs mirthlessly and low in response. He slowly gets up and wades a few steps forward before running a tired hand over his face and hoping to rid the tear streaks there.

"What do you think? I mean really Sam-I-Am, aren't you a therapist or some shit?" He throws some grit into his voice, tries to convey the irritation at the stupidity of the question. Because, honestly, couldn't Sam just look around and see everything, just know that no one was okay?

Tony- Tony has been shot.

Tony is in the hospital.

Tony could die.

"I worked at the VA, hosted meetings and talked to other veterans about their PTSD, tried to help them get through it," Sam's voice drifts off like he's remembered something, "So, yeah, I'm licensed. But this, this isn't about me Ben. How are you?"

Ben feels the snarl on his face and whips around to tell Sam exactly how he is when he locks eyes with the seated man and sees... regret. The full physical embodiment of regret that is Sam Wilson. He's sagged in defeat, practically being crushed under guilt.

Ben swallows down his snark and licks his lips in contemplation. He doesn't know Sam, has considered him an enemy since he'd stepped foot inside the Avenger's base and learned everything. Sam had punched him, Sam is Captain Asshole's best friend, right alongside the super Soviet soldier.

And yet...

Here he was. No Steve, or Natasha, or Bucky, or Wanda. He came alone to- comfort him?

Ben crosses his arms over his chest before he decides to give Sam an answer.

"I feel like I'm going to vomit my intestines out at any second, my arm hurts, my fucking hand hurts from busting it across Steve's hard ass face, and I'm pretty sure my heartbeat should not be this fast and I'm so goddamn close to a heart attack it's not funny."

He sees some of the rigidness in Sam's shoulders dissipate at the answer, an actual answer. He motions to the chair Ben had been sitting in previously and sighs quietly. Dredging up a small smile that doesn't reach his eyes at the last second.

"Hey, sit down man, you're making me tired just looking at you."

Ben doesn't know why he does it, maybe getting shot in the arm has caused him to go into shock and that's why he's deciding to listen to Sam. He plops into the chair and lays his head back against the wall.

He can feel Sam's eyes on him but doesn't meet them on purpose. He glances down to the back of his right hand and sees the bruise forming there. Part of him wishes he'd hurt Steve more. The more violent dark side of him that had come back after he'd gotten discharged wants blood,
demands violent payment.

Or maybe it had been there all along?

All he knows is since he's been around Tony and Rhodey and Vision, he hasn't felt that part of him surface up as much.

If Tony dies- Ben take a harsh breath in through his nose- If Tony dies he doesn't know if that side will ever go dormant again.

He flashes back to a pistol on his desk and the raw want to smash the barrel between his teeth. Wonders how gunpowder would taste against his tongue directly on it and how pretty the red would have looked on his old beige walls.

He looks back down to the bruise blossoming across his hand.

"I shouldn't have hit him but I did and I'm not apologizing for it."

Probably not what he should be saying.

Sam nods his head absently before biting his lip and grinning lightly.

"I shouldn't have hit you but I did and I want to apologize."

Ben looks over lazily, suddenly feeling very tired and drained and good Lord how do Tony and Rhodey operate on this kind of stress on a day to day basis?

"You're apologizing?" Ben asks, staring over at Sam who has also leaned back and is meeting his gaze.

"I'm calling it as a 'my bad'. I'm sorry." Sam's tone is even, his elbows resting on the arms of the chairs while his hands rest folded over the flat of his belly.

Ben rotates his jaw in contemplation before throwing a hand up carelessly and muttering a 'fine' under his breath. He swallows slowly and hopefully inaudibly before meeting Sam's eyes again.

"I still mean what I said too, about Tony, about you all."

Sam flinches slightly but agrees, nodding his head and looking up to the ceiling.

"I wish," he starts, "I wish I'd known Tony before all of this. I wish I had gotten my head out of my ass before I made assumptions and I wish I had had access to the full situation before I had gone charging in blind with some ridiculous sense of righteousness." Ben sees Sam's jaw go taught and follows the tension as it settles in Sam's shoulders again. "Tony and I, we talked. I apologized but I definitely didn't do it humbly. Tony has been through a lot. He's suffered through so much and you're right. We don't get to fight over him like scraps because we think we deserve him. Sure ass hell not Steve or Natasha. That's, that's a whole other mental ball park."

Sam looks back to him, his dark eyes determined but gentle and Ben swallows again, flexes his right arm to feel the sting of the cut there to focus on that instead of Sam's gaze.

Ben doesn't look away though. Sam is being honest, raw. He deserves some acknowledgement.

"How do you think this ends?" Ben hears himself ask. He's not really sure what it is he's asking that's going to end. Today? The year? Tony? This conversation?
Sam licks his lips and bumps his elbow gently into Ben's, rests it there before continuing.

"Honestly? I don't know."

Ben chuckles lightly before closing his eyes and rubbing his right hand over his face again. It really was a game of chance. Anything could happen and they were all powerless to see the outcome or do anything about it.

The slow curling grief and shock of the situation came back full force and Ben covered his face with his hand fully, trying to stifle the tears clouding his vision and the muffled melancholic noises trying to escape his throat.

Sam gently lays his hand on Ben's free forearm and squeezes gently in reassurance.

"You know... I've always hated hospitals," Sam whispers.

Ben can't help the sob that escapes him then.

Rhodey is standing with one arm wrapped around his middle and the other with a hand over his mouth as he watches them slice into Tony's abdomen.

_Pardon_, as they had started _slicing_ Tony open almost an hour ago.

All he could see was blood and machines beeping with their different colors and doctors going this way and that way and yelling and shiny metal instruments diving in and out of his best friend's body over and over again.

He couldn't cry, he had barely even moved since they started, not wanting to miss a single thing. Not wanting to take his eyes off Tony for a second, not for a-

"Rhodey?" A soft voice pulls him to his left as Vision lays a warm smooth fingerprint less hand on his shoulder. Rhodey doesn't look away.

"I'm-I'm fine Vision. I just can't, I cannot leave his side right now." His voice sounds croaky from nonuse but he does reach for and lay his own hand over top Vision's.

"I would never ask that of you. Surgery should not be much longer. I," Vision pauses and even though Rhodey isn't looking back at him, he looks at the other man with a deep certainty in his next words, "I believe Tony will live. I am sure of it."

Rhodey feels the corner of his mouth pick up even as the hope in his chest dissipates with every time Tony's heart rate slows down and goes deathly low, every time a doctor screams for more blood. He smooths his thumb over the back of Vision's hand and purses his lips together. He wonders then, how Vision is feeling watching his creator, his fragile, fragile _father_ laid out like a slab of meat. He thinks to what Pepper must be feeling all the way in L.A. and how he wasn't even the one to call her. Oh God. she must having flash backs to New York.

He swallows thickly and thinks about Ben being surrounded by Steve and company and having to wonder if Tony is going to make it.
Then he thinks about Rhonda Santiago and how proud she had been as she had been ushered into a police car, a black and blue bruise forming on her temple as she smiled with glee as she saw the ambulance speed past.

Rhodey has only ever wanted to rip a person apart with his bare hands twice before: Obediah Stane, and Steve fucking Rogers.

Obediah died too quickly, and Steve always had stupid fucking luck on his side, but Rhonda? Rhodey was going to find a way... He would-

A doctor walks away from the table, ripping his blood stained gloves and tunic off before stepping out to the wash room and minutes later appearing before Rhodey and Vision. He was maybe in his late thirties, green eyes with thick lashes on the bottom.

"Colonel Rhodes."

Rhodey nods his assent and waits for the doctor to continue. The doctor holds his hand out and Rhodey shakes his hand briefly, remembers waiting to hear if Tony was alive or not back in Afghanistan. Tries to remember how many doctors have come out to tell him what condition his best friend was in.

"I'm Dr. Montgomery. The bullet tore through his small intestine and had lodged itself half way through it on it's exit. We're still assessing the damage to the small intestine but it doesn't look bad. For a small time we had thought that the liver had been damaged but luckily that wasn't the case," Dr. Montgomery glances to the floor quickly before looking back to Rhodes and Vision, "Mr. Stark has lost a lot of blood, which of course usually accompanies gun shot wounds as you may believe, currently we are transfusing as we speak. However, blood loss does cause anemia, a reduction in the bloods ability to carry oxygen. This in turn causes the heart to pump more, attempting to balance out the oxygen the body needs from the blood. Mr. Stark already has a weakened heart from the aftermath of the shrapnel and arc reactor in his chest. I also see some abrasions on his artificial sternum? Two lines chest across where his arc reactor would have been. I'm assuming Avengers business?"

Rhodey feels his own heart rate speed up and the rush of hot white anger settle into his belly as he imagines Steve ramming that damn shield into Tony's chest. He takes a calming breath but doesn't trust his voice then. Luckily Vision answers for him.

"Yes, unfortunately. Please continue doctor." Vision's own voice hadn't changed but Rhodes could feel the tenseness coming off the other in waves.

"Well that injury definitely caused some stress on his heart as well. Not to mention any actual stress Mr. Stark may have or has been under as of late. Right now we are trying to take it slow and steady so as not to cause Mr. Stark a heart attack, which even in recovery could very well happen if he doesn't take it easy."

Rhodey almost laughs at that. If the doctor only knew half of the shit Tony has gone through, is going through, will probably go through.

Taking it easy? Tony?

Rhodey realizes the impossibility of it. How the cards have been stacked against Tony Stark the moment he was born. His heart, his fucking heart. The heart it seems almost everyone feels the need to break just to see if its there even if it's five times larger than the sun.
Jesus, Tony didn't deserve any of this. All of this pain. He's only human, how many scars and how much blood needs to flow from his body before he gets a break?

How much more does he need to give?

"He will need... months to recover, but right now, everything is looking good on our part. Everyone knows Mr. Stark is a fighter. We aren't quite out of the woods yet, but we are getting close."

Almost out of the woods. Rhodey mulls over the words. Almost. Tony and his 'almosts'. Rhodey finally feels the tears start to gather and if it weren't for his braces he'd be on the ground collapsed.

"Thank you doctor, we appreciate it very-" Vision starts before a familiar face walks in through the hallway doors with determined eyes.

Dr. Montgomery gives a half strangled sound of surprise as none other than Dr. Helen Cho marches up to the three of them. The man must obviously be a fan of her work as he immediately straightens up and puffs out his chest.

"I want Tony Stark," Is the first thing out of her mouth before she gives an admiring glance to Vision who looks back curiously.

"I'm sorry he's in surgery right now-" Dr. Montgomery sputters in awe as he fumbles in pointing to the window showcasing the surgery in question.

"Obviously, but I mean after, as soon as he's able to leave the hospital," She says, looking between the other doctor and Rhodey himself.

"His heart is susceptible to stress and travelling would only but his body under more stress considering his surgery and-"

"Not if he's transported across town right? Back to the Avenger's base after a few days?"

Dr. Montgomery's eyes scanned darted around the room before nodding his approval, "The short distance wouldn't be that traumatic, and only after a few days of recuperation here."

"Helen, what's at the Avenger's base?" Rhodes asks, finally finding his voice in the conversation.

Helen grabs his shoulders and locks their gazes together, "The Cradle. I finished another one, except better. Tony could be healed in half an hour, no pain no scars. Just a bad memory. He's done so much for me Rhodes. All of his donations in the genetics field, into my research. Even after the others left three years ago and their was no reason for me to stay at the base, even after I went back to South Korea he was still there believing in what I was doing. Both of you," Helen lets go of his shoulders before continuing in excitement, "Which brings me to my second point. Your legs. I can help you walk again.

Helen is beaming with pride as Rhodey is thrown for another loop. Hope and disbelief and something else crash over him in waves. Tony better in a couple of days? His-his legs?

He didn't-

There was a lot to take in and the lights were suddenly brighter all around him and sounds were getting duller and quieter-

"The Cradle, Ultron found a way to fuse vibranium and the simulacrum material together to build, well, you," Helen points to Vision who nods his head with a small smile, "I managed to find a way
to reprint vibranium infused organic tissue. I can infuse vibranium into human DNA and reprint it as needed for the injury. The original cradle reprinted synthetic tissue that bonded with the organic cells, but I can now actually bond vibranium to organic cells, making the actual tissue stronger and reprinting actual healthy organic matter. I can rebuild the nerve endings in your back. You'll be able to walk again."

Rhodey shook his head and held a finger up, trying to catch his breath.

"W-where would you get vibranium?" He asks, eyes flitting back to Tony's heart monitor through the glass, willing his own heart to beat the same steady pattern.

"Perhaps, the king?" Vision more states than asks, turning Rhodey towards the hallway door and to the little window at the top where T'challa stood looking in past them to Tony's surgery.

"Are you fucking joking right now?" Rhodey hears himself ask, maybe to himself, maybe to God.

Really, it was a coin flip.

"My surprise vibranium benefactor. It's a shock I know, but I reached out to him and when I brought both of you up I was given anything I needed," Helen explains looking back to the door before following T'challa's gaze to the large window again.

She took a few steps towards the window before crossing her arms and staring in.

"I'm going to help him. I'm going to help both of you."

"Dr. Cho, I-," Rhodey's breath gets caught in his throat and he pauses, not knowing how he can convey the enormous gratitude and thankfulness considering she has offered, no demanded, to heal Tony, to change his life by giving him back his legs. It was, it was-

"Are you alright Dr. Montgomery?" Vision asks from his spot besides Rhodey, who immediately turns his attention back to the doctor who is wide eyed and slack jawed.

"I mean, I was just operating on Iron Man, a world renowned geneticist is standing right in front of me talking about the future of genetic organic material and their impact in the medical field, and the actual king of Wakanda is just outside a pair of double doors about ten feet away from me. I'm-I'm really just rolling with it for right now."

Unexpectedly, Vision's mouth quirks up at the corner in an all too familiar smirk.

"I believe Tony would say 'Same.'"

Chapter End Notes

wow, I mean has it really been 3 months since I updated?
I AM SO SORRY!!
life has been seriously crazy but it has finally, FINALLY, started to look up!
I hope you all enjoy this chapter! and again im so sorry about being so late with it!!
-I did edit this chapter a bit a week after posting!
*Thank you for all the LOVE this fic is getting! Drop a comment if you enjoyed!

***update***
Holy shit guys I am so sorry I haven't updated in so long!
You know that part were I was like "oh life looking up?"
That's canceled. Never happened. Toss that out the window. Forget about it okay?
Anyway I really do feel bad about not having written anything but I want you all to
know I truly to love this story and I love reading all of your comments about how you
all love this story!
So I made a tumblr. It's just a little thing I can write small little things to keep me in
the story's headspace and to talk to you guys. If you guys have questions or want to
talk to me about something in the story or life, whichever!
But it'll also be a place for me to explain why I've been gone or to tell you guys when I
do post something. Idk I just want to get to know you all and bond over Tony Stark
our brave amazing superhero.
So, uh, here it is!
https://himynameisnotslimshadyao3.tumblr.com/
You don't have to check it out if you don't want to! That's totally fine with me!
Anyway here's another thanks to you guys who have stayed or are just tuning in and
putting faith in me and sticking around for this story.
Thank you all so much I'm trying my best to not disappoint because like I said, I love
this story too
Thank you guys! <3
"Wake up darling, it's time to wake up."

The sensation of fingers gently running along his jaw and into his hair help pull him from unconsciousness. He opens his eyes and blinks back the rays of sun until he can focus on the big blue vast ocean in front of him. That's really when all of his senses come back.

His head is in someone's lap and he's halfway in the water, the warm waves lapping gently up to his waist, plastering red swim trunks against his legs and tickling his skin.

He digs his fingers into the white sand and can almost feel each rough grain against his skin. He can hear seagulls in the distance and he smells the salt in the air along with-

Along with the jasmine that's coming off in soft waves from the person holding him.

He huffs out amused chuckles that he hopes masks the shake in his voice and looks up. The back of his head pushes down into the lap and the fingers pause in their carding before gently resuming their soothing pace.

"Hello darling."

And it's her.

A swirling storm of chaotic emotion wrenches his heart into a frenzy against his chest. Each ba-dump ba-dump pumping so much relief, sadness, pain - joy.

Joy.

Every atom in his being shakes and a small whimper leaves him with the next unsteady breath he allows himself to take. A hand cradles the side of his face and he lifts his own to gently cup it. Her skin is so soft, so much softer than his.

She's so frail.

He feels the tears fall out of the corner of his eyes and into her palm. Her gaze softens and she runs her thumb along his crow's feet as if counting each line with each ridge of her thumbprint.

"Hey ma," Tony's voice is a barely there whisper and he wonders if she can even hear him, but she smiles and it's fucking dazzling. Everything about her is glowing; her hair falls around her shoulders like a halo and her laugh lines stretch beautifully around her lips.

And her eyes, fuck, her eyes, they've never been greener.

Tony can't breathe.

And this time, it's okay.

She cups the other side of his jaw with her other hand and takes a deep breath, she looks away for a moment before blinking hurriedly and swallowing loudly. She laughs at herself quietly before looking back down at him and revealing her own tears.
"I really thought I'd make it without crying. But, but you're my baby, and you're in so much pain."

Tony shakes his head slightly and folds his fingers around his mother's hand more securely.

"Mom, I'm fine. I'm okay-"

She shakes her head then and silences him with a finger to his lips before pulling it away to card her hand through his hair again. She closes her eyes and takes another deep steadying breath before opening her eyes again and looking out towards the water.

"When you were little, maybe three or four, we went to a beach like this one. Howard finally took some time off and I didn't have any charities or fundraisers to host or go to, and we went to a beach as a family," She smiles faintly at the memory, "I hunted for seashells and Howard took you into the shallow water to jump over the tiny waves that beat against the shore," She pauses and bites her lip, looking down at her son with a new wave of tears rushing from her eyes, "You were so happy."

She was pushing for something, she was trying to tell him something important.

Tony just wants to stop her tears.

"I am happy mom."

The lie sounds even worse saying it out loud and Tony winces at his own voice and he knows his mother will know.

She just smiles through her tears though and pats his face gently, her fingertips stroking just under his chin.

"Oh baby, no, you're not. So much has happened, so much has yet to happen. But I want you to try okay? Please tell me you'll try to be happy?"

"Mom I don't understand-"

"Go to a beach maybe? You loved the waves, loved the sand. Tony-" She stops and Tony meets her eyes. There's an intensity there, a push for him to understand.

She cups each side of his face with her hands again and holds him with a careful urgency. Her fingers splaying across his cheeks and her thumbs tracing his hairline.

Automatically his own hands grip her slim wrists and his calloused fingertips press against her pulse point and her heartbeat thrums warm and alive.

"You are allowed to be happy," She bends down more to evenly and steadily look into his eyes, her voice solid despite the tears falling from her face and baptizing his own, "You are allowed to say 'no more' to the pain Tony. You have so, so many people waiting for you and they want you to be happy and they'll do whatever you need them to. Baby, I- find your beach again. Play in the water again. Build sand castles and hunt for seashells and just be happy. I know you have things to do, you have so many great things to accomplish, you have so many responsibilities and I am so proud of you, of the man you've become and what you've done- just, promise me that you'll try to be happy. When the decision comes that you'll choose your happiness?"

Her voice is edging on desperate by the time the last words leave her lips and Tony's own voice seems to lodge itself spectacularly in his throat. He manages to nod his head anyway, not breaking the searching eye contact that they still have.
A large sigh of relief seeps out of her, her breath ghosting across his forehead carrying the scent of jasmine all around him again, and she bows down to kiss the crinkling skin there, her lips soft and feather light. Her fingers relax from their grip and brush through his hair once more. Tony's own hands falling, one to clutch at the fabric of her dress and the other gliding down to clench the grains of sand between his palm and fingers.

"I, mom, what's this-" Tony starts, finally finding his voice again. It sounds wrecked and absolutely horrible but his mother smiles gently in response and wipes her tears away with one hand and looks back out to the ocean, the sunlight framing her face and the breeze billowing her hair.

"No darling, this isn't- This is," She pauses and looks down again, the smile still playing on her lips, "This is just a small pit stop before you go home."

Tony feels a moment of panic shoot through him and he jerks up slightly before being calmed by his mother's hand against his chest pressing him back into the sand and her lap.

"Mom I want to stay with you."

She shakes her head slightly, pets the side of his face again.

"Tony, you're not leaving this very second, we still have time."

"So," Tony swallows, "We can just sit here right? For a little longer? You're not gonna," Tony raises his arms and makes a 'poof' sound followed by his fingers dancing through the air mimicking smoke.

She laughs.

She laughs and Tony feels like flying.

"No, no disappearing act right now. We can sit here for as long as you like."

A calm passes over Tony and he falls even deeper into the warm sand and cups his hands in the water lapping his sides.

He closes his eyes and his mother begins to hum.

_________________________

They've been staring at each other for the past fifteen minutes in the hallway as Dr. Montgomery, Helen, and Vision talk just a couple feet away from them as Tony is transferred and getting set up in his private room.

"We've put him in a medically induced coma just for a couple of days, maybe up to a week. We just want him rested and his body recuperating a little on it's own before we send him off to you and the Cradle," Dr. Montgomery points between Helen and Vision before continuing, "So far so good though, Tony's doing well. If everything tonight goes as expected he should be able to leave with you sooner rather than later and that Cradle will have him back to one hundred percent in no time."
Helen smirks in response, "You mean like a battery?"

Dr. Montgomery blushes in response and stutters over his words.

"Oh, that's not- Because he's Iron Man, yeah I guess you could take it like that but- I'm not joking, this, I shouldn't be joking he was shot."

"Hey, relax. I'm sure Tony would've appreciated the pun. Wouldn't he have Rhodes?" Helen calls over from her spot, slightly turning towards the two men staring each other down.

Rhodey's arms are crossed at his chest while T'challa has both arms by his sides and palms facing outwards. Rhodes would read it as placating body language but the young King was having a hard time controlling the smirk on his face.

"No worries Doc," He shoots back without turning around, his voice going an octave higher to relay assurance to Dr. Montgomery.

T'challa raises a brow at him which he meets by steeling his eyes even more.

"Uh, Dr. Montgomery, he's all set up if you'd all like to come in?" A nurse says easily folding into the conversation. Dr. Montgomery nods and motions to Helen and Vision before pausing to look back at Rhodes and T'challa with his own brow raised in question.

"Rhodes?" Vision asks from the doorway, clearly antsy and vibrating with urgency to see Tony. Rhodes understands because it's thrumming through his own veins but he has something to say to the King before he goes in, otherwise he knows he won't leave Tony's side and T'challa could walk away at any time.

"I'll meet you inside, watch our boy for me."

Vision nods once after critically eyeing the men before him, before disappearing into the room with Helen and Dr. Montgomery.

When they're alone, as alone as they can be in a hospital setting, albeit private courtesy of Dr. Montgomery, Rhodes crowds a little closer to the King of Wakanda. The man doesn't look even the slightest intimidated and it sparks hot anger down Rhodey's spine.

At least some of the spine he can feel.

"You have something you'd like to say to me?"

The velvety voice does nothing to cut through the tension Rhodey feels.

He rotates his jaw in response and scratches his nose before continuing himself.

"What is this? I mean thank you, what you've given to Helen is going to save Tony and it's going to give me back my-" Air is suddenly very hard to come by and Rhodey takes a moment to catch his breath before he keeps going, "my legs. But from what I know, you don't give Vibranium out like candy, especially not from a country that still isn't exporting it and keeping a pretty low profile from the rest of the world. Still pretty fresh in the U.N. actually. So, what do you want Tony to do in return once you help save his life?"

T'challa's light face goes stony and his eyes narrow dangerously fast.

"You think I'm doing this to hold something over the both of you?"
Rhodes shrugs in response, keeping his arms crossed.

"I don't know, which is why I'm asking. Maybe before I wouldn't have batted an eye but this is now. Tony- So much is at stake, so much could be destroyed, so many people could get hurt. So that's why I'm asking," He pauses before bowing slightly, "Your Highness."

"I'm going to assume all of your emotions and the events of today are catching up to you and that's why you're acting this way. I accept your thanks but decline your accusation. There is no needed reason for me to help my fellow man, an especially good man who didn't deserve this travesty. And what happened to you should never have happened. You fought with me, both of you. In a sense you are what I'd call my shield brothers." T'challa's words sting Rhodes with each perfect punctuation.

"Right, which is why you housed wanted criminals for three years and let them run around like assholes blowing shit up pretending to be earth's mightiest right? They got people killed and that in turn got Tony shot today. Pardon me if I'm a little bitter. No-no, I'm not bitter, I am rage personified."

Rhodes let the words leave slowly, his own articulation belying to the hidden rage that had been growing under his skin since the moment he stood foot into the hospital, since he'd seen Tony on the table with copious amounts of blood leaving his body. Since he'd seen T'challa standing there like a goddamn prince to save the day at Helen's side, the actual hero.

T'challa's jaw twitches in response and his eyes flicker to a bench relatively close to them before flashing back to meet Rhodey's gaze again. He motions to the bench with a short nod. T'challa waits until Rhodey relents and takes a seat before unbuttoning his suit jacket and elegantly sitting as well.

Rhodey fights the urge to roll his eyes. Why couldn't the man just plant his ass down like a normal fucking human.

"I did house Steve Rogers and his company. For a time."

Rhodey crinkles his brow in confusion as T'challa continues on,

"My father," T'challa pauses, swallowing down whatever threatened his speech before continuing on, staring intently at the door of the room that Tony was in, "My father pushed for the Accords. I believe in my father's vision for Wakanda and for the world. I only meant to keep Sergeant Barnes and to help him recover from Hydra's abuse and torture, but having my eye on the Captain and the rest was appealing. And then at the U.N. meeting when Tony started advocating for them, telling all of the governments of the world how we will need them, that there is a time coming when we'd have to be united against an even greater threat. I remember each time he would bring up his 'nightmare' he calls it, of a great army descending and consuming the world, that no country or government would possibly be able to go against without the help of the wayward Avengers," T'challa lowers his eyes, brushes imaginary dust from his pants and clears his throat, "I kept an eye of them because I know Tony Stark is right."

"That doesn't explain why you let them stay after they-"

"Tony Stark hacked my systems right? Did he? Or did I let him? He is a genius, but Wakanda has far more advanced technology. I'm sure if he had some play time with what we have, he could eventually crack it, but rage and a couple of endless nights won't do a thing against what we have, and are ever developing. Now, at first I had only pledged on righting the wrong against Barnes, he was under my protection, but- There is something to having Captain America around you and even if you don't agree with him, there's-"
"You want to believe him right?" Rhodes finishes for him, slowly letting his arms lower inch by inch.

"Yes," T'challa gives a disbelieving half chuckle, "I wanted to believe there was something more than just his adamant denial of the Accords, that he wasn't just selfish, he was acting for the best. I wanted to believe so badly even as I went to the U.N. meetings on behalf of Wakanda and saw Tony Stark and enforced the Accords because I believed my father too. I shouldn't have placed hope into Steve Rogers. I'd already had enough evidence before me, but I was- I am young and a good ruler does not forget his mistakes. I ignored the warning signs and I am at fault."

T'challa shuffles a little, pulling up to rest his elbows on his knees and glancing minutely at Rhodes who nods for him to continue.

"When they went off on their fist 'mission' I was furious. In and out of Wakanda with snake's ease but there weren't any casualties and the Italian police couldn't handle the situation-"

"It's the country's right to-"

"I know Colonel Rhodes, I know. But it was a situation that reinforced the Captain's resolve against the Accords, all of their resolutions. They had come back like triumphant heroes, marching back into my country like gods and I-" T'challa took a steadying breath and Rhodes finally noticed the clenched fist hanging between the man's knees, "They were lucky I hadn't issued a kill on sight. That I even allowed them legs to walk into my office or my country."

"I was going to throw them out. Every fiber in my being screamed at me to remove the threat from Wakanda. But I didn't. I listened to Steve Rogers' talk, his voice as he explained how they helped the situation from going south and how they had saved people and stopped bloodshed and they were right. They had saved people, stopped bloodshed but they violated a country's right, frightened the public and made it even harder on themselves to get the pardons Tony was working on. I talked to them about the Accords and some days they even seemed to understand the need. They did not heed my advice, nor the Accords, nor the people. They left again, and-" T'challa gently throws his hands up, "France. That hellish incident."

"After France, I couldn't let them stay anymore. People were getting hurt, people died. I am responsible because I let them. I thought I could change their minds, I thought I could- I was wrong. You cannot control radicals."

Rhodey swallows and nods for T'challa to continue.

"Tony had tried to get at my systems and I let him through. I thought he would come for them, quietly. I think there was an understanding that Wakanda was not to be touched, countries vying to court my country in hopes of Vibranium exports and technological gifts, but he never came for them and for a time he stopped coming to the meetings for the Accords, but I saw him talking to ministers and presidents here and there, laughing, shaking hands... No one ever approached me on the topic of the Avengers in Wakanda and no one ever approached Tony Stark on how he knew where they were when the time had come." T'challa turns to meet Rhodes's eyes, "I sent them away. I gave them the quinjet, some supplies and a phone, much like the one Mr. Rogers had given to Tony. The only time we ever exchanged words were updates on Mr. Barnes condition. They came back to Wakanda after Tony called Steve to pick up the Amended Accords. They said nothing to me of how Tony had known they had ever even been in Wakanda," T'challa releases a deep breath, exhausted and deflated, "I am in part responsible for the deaths at the hands of Steve Rogers, Natasha Romanov, Clint Barton, Sam Wilson, Scott Lang, and Wanda Maximoff. After their first mission I should have tossed them out. I didn't, and then France... Therefore I am in part responsible for Tony Stark fighting for his life and ending up with a bullet wound in his
stomach. I am here to correct my mistakes and I ask nothing in return from either him or you."

There's a moment of complete silence that stretches between them as they scan each other, neither knowing what to say after the declaration.

It's feels strange to want to break the atmosphere but Rhodes can't place why.

"Well, uh. Thanks," Rhodey says, his hand scraping over the short hairs on his scalp, traveling fingers catching on the collar of his shirt as they try to massage tense muscles from grief and rage. Something feels strangely hollow in his chest. His head is hurting and there's far too much information to process.

He sort of wants to throw up.

T'challa sighs out a chuckle, finally caving in on himself and sluggishly sliding back to languidly take up space on the bench. His arms stretching out over the back and his legs pushing forward and cross at the ankle.

Rhodey licks his lips and a disbelieving smirk struggles across his lips.

"It's exhausting. All of this is exhausting. Do- do you know what I mean?"

T'challa's chortle is answer enough and he eyes the king as he massages his temple with delicate but deadly fingers.

"We do what we can. We do what we have to. Now, can we be friends?" T'challa turns his face toward him with a raised brow and weary eyes. He flicks his wrist up, the one belonging to the arm splayed over top, and his fingers sing through the air.

It reads 'truce?'

Rhodey slides forward and rests his elbows on his knees. He only feels some slight pressure where he should feel more. One hand rubs at his lips and he debates giving T'challa a hard time because Tony isn't the only little shit and Rhodey has a lot going on right now and he is very close to ripping the hospital apart or falling into a heap and crying. Maybe both.

But he doesn't. He rubs his fingers even more roughly against his lips. Feels the cracking and tastes some blood from where he tore at his lip in worry and fear watching Tony's surgery.

He stops rubbing his lips and turns to look back at T'challa.

"Yeah," He mumbles on a short breath through his fingers, "Why not. Fuck it right?"

He sees the corner of T'challa's mouth quirk up and the man seems to seep even further down the bench.

"Hmm, fuck it indeed."

There's another steadying moment of silence before Rhodey's phone trills from his pocket. It breaks the silence and he takes his time to glance at the screen before shooting up and startling T'challa.

"What is it?" The king asks, a hand coming up behind him to halt the two women who quietly and protectively extracted themselves from the shadows.

Rhodey was impressed how both women dressed in black had managed to ninja sneak in a white hospital.
"Ah, no, nothing! My- well Tony's- Pepper is here. I gotta get down stairs, I have to meet her-" Rhodes turns so fast he almost makes himself dizzy and lets a hand fall onto T'challa's shoulder.

"Tell Vision where I went? And please watch Tony, use your admittedly badass entourage," Rhodey motions to the two women who made their way slightly closer, hands behind their back and regarding Rhodey as a non threat but a slight nuisance considering his hand was on their king, "to really fuck anyone trying to see Tony. And I think you know exactly who."

Rhodes does have confidence in the cops and private security they've installed in a quick amount of time at the elevators and making their rounds on the floor, but they don't really stand a chance against a super soldier that doesn't understand the word no or a witch that manipulates minds for the sheer fucking evil delight of it.

T'challa gives a half aborted snort and smiles in response. He lightly taps Rhodey's arm in a friendly repose.

"Have no fear, we will watch him."

Rhodes nods, shoots a quick reply to the text and begins to make his way to elevators, emotions running heavy through his veins. A mix of joy of seeing Pepper after all this time but the anger and terror and rage of the situation.

His stomach feels heavy like he's eaten sushi from that corner drug store Tony and he used to visit back in college.

Ha! Haven't thought about Meechie's in a long time. Tony fucking hated it but we always went every Thursday to poison ourselves on cheap liquor and outdated food.

The elevators dings as he passes a floor.

He can hear his own shaky breath leave his body and the realization that this elevator ride is the first time since the Tony's gotten shot that he's been alone. Truly alone to absorb the situation that his best friend has-

"Goddamn it Stark."

The hot tears finally seep over and draw their trails down his face.

" Fucking Tony getting fucking shot. Fucking-"

He doesn't have words anymore, he's lost them like he's lost a lot in his life.

Rhodey steps back to the corner of the elevator and looks up at the harsh fluorescent lights glaring right back at him. The tears are pooling in the collar of his shirt and making his skin itch.

He raises a hand over his heart and curls it into a fist scrunching the blue fabric into his palm.

"Fuck." The watery curse leaves his mouth once more falling heavy all around him.

The elevator dings as he passes another floor.
There is something to be said for the hospital as they've already set up the back entrance used for Emergency Service vehicles to welcome Pepper and Happy's private car with cops to keep the rabble of well meaning but crowding supporters of Tony and the paparazzi that seem to bleed out from the concrete and bushes and the very air.

Happy places a heavy but reassuring hand on Pepper's forearm as the car disappears inside the garage.

"Rhodey-"

"Texted him Pep, he knows. He's gonna meet us in the lobby and take us up. Security is running Tony's floor, everything is okay and we'll be seeing him in no time."

Happy's placating smile did nothing to ease Pepper's nerves or the grief and fear still thrumming her veins but she squeezed his hand back anyway and tries her best to smile back.

The dread of finally being in the hospital was almost like making the situation even more real. As if the entire plane ride and getting into the car with knowing Tony was shot was some horrible nightmare that scarred itself deep into reality. But, now... Now is reality. Soon she'd see Tony again pressed along white sheets and the bandages and the tubes and-

"Pepper, time to get out."

Happy's voice was soft and just strong enough to ease her out of her thoughts without the whiplash she'd felt earlier.

She smoothes her skirt out again, curling the edges of her fingertips just under the hem and digging her fingernails slightly into her skin.

Time to go.

It's almost too frightfully easy to walk into the hospital. There's no flashing lights of paparazzi or screams of people. It's all in the distance, all outside and thank god, she muses.

Happy does most of the talking for them, being lead this way and that way down halls in the basement by a nurse and then an officer that leads them to a separate elevator still in the corner of the lobby. The entrance of the hospital is still open to the public, security has definitely been upped, but the flashing of cameras can still be seen from the outer edges.

Those monsters...

"He'll be coming off this elevator soon, if there's anything you need just ask."

Pepper nods her thanks with a small smile and straightens herself to face the elevator. Rhodey is going to come, she's going to see Rhodey again and Tony.

Oh, Tony-

"Pepper?"

She turns sharply. That voice making her skin crawl and rage pool in her belly. A snarl threatens her face and she feels Happy place a hand on her upper back trying to steer her to face the elevators once more.
She complies, but barely, her blood is so hot-

"I'm only going to tell you this once. Stay the fuck back, don't say a word. I will end you," Happy's voice is a primal echo. He doesn't raise his volume and Pepper feels some satisfaction at the small silence that follows. Her shoulders sag as though through Happy she found a blade to cut them down a size.

Of course it doesn't last.

"Don't do this here, we're all here for the same reason."

_Natasha._

Pepper rounds forcefully, momentarily taking in the way the witch takes a step back, how Natasha crosses her arms in defiance. Rogers is in front of Barnes, a hand on his shoulder though the other soldier looks ready to shuck it off, a small frown etched on his lips.

She makes her way to stand directly in front of Natasha with barely an inch of room between them. She's looking down at the other red headed woman and an overwhelming urge to grab and throttle takes over her but she pushes it back. Instead, she smoothes her hands, _again_, down the sides of her suit jacket and skirt.

"Don't you dare ever presume to put your feelings and my feelings about Tony on the same level. All of you." She eyes them all, stopping to land on Rogers with a disgusted twist to her lip, "have no business being here. You all have hurt him, bruised him, beaten him, and used him. You didn't care then and I frankly don't give a fuck if you care now. It's too little too late." Pepper stares down into Natasha's eyes and only steps back to collect herself with Happy by the elevator when she hears it open.

"And where were you when it counted?" Steve's weak but challenging voice rings out.

Immediately Bucky drops Steve's hand from his shoulder and a disbelieving sound of shock escapes his mouth. Steve blinks and licks his lips, looking instantly regretful, the huge man taking a step back and looking around, no doubt for an escape.

Rhodey pauses and takes in the situation before him, holding the doors open but staying silent. Pepper can handle her own but he'll step in if she needs him too.

She feels like a supernova, like, like she could burst into flame and choke the life out of his body right now. Pepper feels her throat close up with rage but swallows it down to temper in her gut. This was for another time, she _needed_ to see Tony. Fuck these people.

Happy steps forward, the look of pure violence in his frame.

"What the fuck did you just say?"

She sets a hand against his chest to stop him.

"Pepper I'm so sorry. That was out of line. I'm just-" Steve starts, but she isn't about to hear it. Not from _him_.

"Despite contrary to popular belief _Steve_, a woman doesn't have to be sleeping with a man to care or have a relationship with him." Steve swallows something down and she notices the red around his eyes and doesn't fucking care. "Tony is _everything_ to me whether I am in a romantic relationship with him or not. I was helping run his company from the other side of America while
he was doing the same. And then I was running his company alone while he tried to save all of you," She pauses and smiles deadly, lifting both hands into the air, "I'm not going to do this here. I can't."

She turns and Happy follows her into the elevator with Rhodey.

They all watch solemnly as the elevator doors start to close and she can't help but stick her hand between them one last time to keep them open.

"But don't you think this is it. I'm going to fucking tear you apart."

The elevator doors close on shocked faces and she finally turns to Rhodye with a shaky smile.

Her entire body is vibrating with unreleased energy and she doesn't know what to do, she doesn't know what-

"Come here Pep," Rhodey's voice whispers and soon enough she's enveloped in his arms and a strong sob racks her body but she doesn't know if it's her or Rhodey. She can't see, there's too many tears and then there's a strong warmth at her back.

Happy.

Pepper sobs fat tears into Rhodey's shirt as his own soak her hair. Happy's chin trembles on her shoulder and she sees Rhodes's hand through the corner of her eye squeeze Happy's bicep. Here they are, the three of them, pressed together in some sort of grief stricken frenzy trying to find solace in each other's pressure and warmth.

The elevator dings as they make their way up to Tony.

Chapter End Notes

hello everybody!!!!
so, ah,...hehe long time no see? I am so sorry you all! I hope this chapter satisfies some craving you had for this story and you all don't throw trash at me. I know, I know. I'm going to try to update this story and get back into it again at a decent pace. I love you guys for sticking with me!

*Thank you for the LOVE on this fic! It warms my heart to know people are enjoying it! Please leave a comment! I love them so much!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!