Summary

When the dust settled after Civil War everything in Tony's world was in ruins, especially his relationship with Steve Rogers.

Notes

This is my first work in this fandom, so I have to apologize in advance if I make mistakes. English is not my first language, well... not even the second, so another apology if the grammar is not correct.

And lastly I have no idea when I will be able to update the story, thanks to my work schedule, but I will try my best. I just have to put it here, because the story was haunting my head from the moment I left the cinema.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Chapter by angelmira

Chapter Summary

Repost: 13.11.2017 with the corrections from my new lovely beta reader Rebecca.

Hello, yes, I'm here. I'm still alive. I have to apologize. Past few months were hectic. My friend and co-worker in one person was diagnosed with cancer. So I spent half of my time at work and the other one cheering her up. It's a long process. Some times I have these absolutely amazing ideas and no time to write, other times I don't have the energy to do anything more than sleep. But I'm not giving up on my stories, it will just take some time to finish them. Chapter 10-12 is already written and it's up to my wonderful beta to polish it and make it great. :) ...So thank you all for waiting, comments and nice messages. :)

Chapter Notes

I would like to thank DreadPirateWombat for beta reading the chapter and making it absolutely awesome.

Chapter 01

Anthony Stark stood in front of the door to Steve Rogers' room in Avenger Tower, fingers still painfully clutching Steve's letter. Wrong choice of words. The letter was from Captain America, not Steve Rogers. He couldn't make the same mistake again and think that Captain America and Steve were two people. No. Captain America had almost killed him. He was the same man as Steve Rogers, his former friend, his teammate, his... the Avenger.

"Do you want me to open the door, boss?"

Tony's paralysis was interrupted by the female voice of his artificial intelligence, FRIDAY. After a few difficulties and a lot of thinking, he had installed her at the tower. "No, thanks, sweetie. I've got this. I can do things on my own, ya know.” His voice was raw, the words scraping his throat. He swallowed and forced a grin onto his face. “I'm old enough to drink, smoke, have sex, ride an elevator and open doors as well.” His cheerful tone belied the cold dread that lay in his stomach as he stared at the door in front of him. He had spent years developing his masks as a defense mechanism and means of diverting people's attention so they never saw his pain, his fear.

"Your pulse is slightly elevated, indicating significant discomfort." Of course, even if he could outsmart all of humankind, he couldn’t fool an A.I. he’d created who constantly monitored his vital signs.

"Thanks for the newsflash, glad to hear your sensors are working splendidly."
With a few strokes on the keypad, the door fell open and Tony took a careful step inside. The only thing in these quarters which he hadn’t bought remained an old framed photograph of Steve and Bucky in their uniforms.

It was fascinating how such a kind, friendly, and open face could warp with determination and anger. As he stared at the photo, Tony’s world shrunk down to the seconds when that same smiling person had pinned him to the cold ground, eyes hard as he raised the shield for a final blow. Only a week ago, Tony would have sworn Steve Rogers would never harm him. And yet just few days before, Tony had been in mortal danger from the man he had trusted most. It was like Obadiah all over again.

For the first time, Tony had stood against Captain America, and in that moment, he had known the superhero would kill him. The man had worn the same face as his friend, Steve, but had been steadily pressing onto the glass of the already damaged arc reactor, and Tony had known these were his last seconds.

"Should I inform the doctor about your condition?"

"No." Tony shook himself and placed the letter next to the picture frame. No matter how much time passed, he still saw Steve's face in his dreams, killing him, lying to him, betraying him. Worst of all was that even after everything they had gone through, their years as both teammates and friends, when Tony had most needed Steve’s friendship and trust, Steve had chosen the Winter Soldier over Tony, had cared more for the murderer of Tony's parents than their son.

"I'm leaving now," Tony informed FRIDAY, needlessly. The words were more to reaffirm his decision to separate himself entirely from the former Avengers.

The fact that Steve Rogers had given up everything for the safety of a mass murderer was the main problem Tony couldn't forgive. He understood Steve’s desperate need to protect his friend and try to keep him safe. Tony would burn the world to protect his friends too, but the Winter Soldier had killed his parents.

What was so wrong with Anthony Edward Stark that the people he cared for always ended up trying to kill him? What was so unlovable about him that they always either left him alone or chose someone else? He knew his intelligence intimidated others, that his confidence in his abilities was often seen as arrogance, that he could be abrasive, and that his near-constant talking could be annoying, but did he really deserve this permanent cycle of abandonment and betrayal?

"Colonel Rhodes is waiting in your workshop, boss," FRIDAY said, pulling Tony from his dark thoughts.

"Tell him I'll be there in a sec." Tony exited the Captain's room and stood by the door again, staring at the floor. How many times had he read the letter? Enough times that he could recite it from memory.

Tony,

I’m glad you’re back at the compound, I don’t like the idea of you rattling around a mansion by yourself. We all need family. The Avengers are yours, maybe more so than mine. I’ve been on my own since I was 18. I never really fit in anywhere – even in the Army. My faith is in people, I guess. Individuals. And I’m happy to say, for the most part, they haven’t let me down. Which is why I can’t let them down either. Locks can be replaced, but – maybe they shouldn’t. I know I hurt you, Tony. I guess I thought – by not telling you about your parents I was sparing you, but... I can see
now I was really sparing myself. I'm sorry. Hopefully, one day you can understand. I wish we agreed on the Accords, I really do. I know you were only doing what you believe in, and that's all any of us can do, it's all any of us should. So no matter what, I promise if you need us, if you need me, I'll be there.

Steve

Steve Rogers had written a fine piece of shit letter. It was clear he still believed himself to be on the side of righteousness and that Tony had been wrong. Still, like a good boy, Rogers had sent an apology, because it was the “right thing to do”. But his weak-ass explanations and patronizing consolations didn’t change the truth. Rhodey wouldn't be walking anytime soon, thanks to their clusterfuck of a fight in Leipzig. Captain America had chosen the Winter Soldier over Tony. And the other Avengers, Tony’s “family”, as Rogers called them, had turned against Tony, and the majority of them were in the Raft. Tony wasn’t naïve enough to believe that, even if they escaped, they would forgive him, come back to him.

I'll be there.

That was a lie. Tony had stayed behind in New York, working his butt off to enable Rhodey to walk again. Tony had nearly killed himself with press conferences and public appearances in his desperation to convince the public that the Avengers weren't a threat, pushing himself until he almost collapsed from exhaustion, despite the injuries he had sustained in Siberia. Tony was the one who was grieving his parents’ death all over again, the wound of their loss having been violently ripped open, bleeding as badly as it had the morning when the police had told Tony the devastating news. Tony was always the one standing alone against the world. What a noble thing for Steve to give him the Avengers.

Except there were no more Avengers. Vision floated aimlessly, without cheer. Rhodey couldn't leave the Compound, even if he wanted to. Natasha was gone; Tony didn't want her nearby in case Ross incarcerated her too, and king T'Challa was back in Wakanda. When the dust had settled, they were no longer the Avengers. They were just fools.

"FRIDAY, seal the door and don't let anyone in."

"As you wish. What about Captain Rogers?"

"Don't worry. He won't be here. No one in, ok?"

"Done."

Tony headed steadily to the elevator. "And find me some good songs, I need to listen to something with a beat. It's time to do some work. How are my bots? Everything alright?"

"I'm going through your work playlist now, boss."

"Good girl. So, what were Rhodey's results with our latest experiment?" He lifted his omnipresent tablet and started the 3D projection of the tests throughout his elevator ride.

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Steve Rogers sat on the couch with a notepad in his hand and was currently shading a figure of Iron Man against the sky. "I know you're there." His enhanced hearing helped him to notice Natasha entering through the window in the second room. Steve was on the run from the US government, a wanted fugitive, and she had offered him one of her safe houses after their fiasco.
"How are you doing? Anything going on in the neighborhood, Steve?"

"Everyone is sleeping peacefully." His reply was distracted. How many times had he seen Tony in the same pose as the one beneath his hand?

"And you?"

"We're talking about your neighbors, not me." Steve stopped his work and finally gave his attention to the Black Widow.

"You want to talk about anything?" Natasha silently slid near him onto the couch.

Steve wanted to talk about lot of things. "How is he?" They both knew the "he" in question was Tony Stark.

"He's fixing our mess as usual, throwing money in every direction, kissing Ross' ass, not sleeping much, traveling around the world, keeping Vision from moping about Wanda and working insane hours. Nothing new."

Steve didn't believe it.

"Except he's not talking about you, and he's killing himself in the process of finding a solution for Rhodes' situation. How about you?" She glanced at the drawing. "Nursing your crush, I see. So, nothing unusual on your front either."

Her gentle smile hurt. "Is he---" Steve didn't have to finish. She knew him.

"I don't know what happened in Siberia, but---" Natasha's smile was gone. "---I've never seen him so skittish around people."

"What about---" There was one person who would know what was going on with Tony, but she and Tony were currently in an off phase of their relationship.

"I already called Pepper. She hadn't heard from him for a few months, then she talked with Vision after Tony had a--- reaction. Let's just say there were a lot of swear words involved, Tony yelling and ordering Vision to never sneak up on him again. Pepper told me he acted like this after Obadiah had tried to kill him."

Steve's entire being was awash with shame. He had never felt so low as he did now for scaring Tony like this. In the heat of the moment he hadn't seen another way to end their fight other than to make Tony submit by going for the arc reactor.

At the time, he’d thought it was a good decision; he could incapacitate the suit and end the fight without any of them getting more injured. But with a few days’ distance, Steve realized he should never have swung the shield down. Not into Iron Man's chest. Not into the reactor. Bucky had already damaged it and Steve could have killed Tony by accident.

It was only after the glass of the reactor had shattered that Steve could see the irreparable damage his action had caused. Tony was staring at him, eyes wide and an expression of naked fear and betrayal on his face. That look gutted Steve, and as he looked down at the engineer, the frustration and righteous fury that had powered Steve throughout the fight abruptly left him. There was no recognition in Tony’s eyes; he looked at Steve as if he were a stranger, as if he had never seen him before.

They had both made so many mistakes, but their fighting against each other in Siberia had
been the worst.

Natasha continued, her words bringing Steve back to the present. "---He installed FRIDAY at the Tower and locked everyone out of his workshop. He won’t let anyone but Rhodey inside. Sure, he does a good job of not showing it when he’s speaking in public, but other than business, he’s completely isolated himself from others. As if he doesn’t feel safe around people, even those he used to trust." Natasha’s voice was mild, but Steve could see the concern in her eyes. "Steve, he won’t even meet up with Pepper at his home anymore. What happened after I let you guys go?"

Steve stared at his fists where they rested on his knees as if they were the most interesting thing in the world. It took a moment for him to force out the words.

"We fought."

Natasha made an exasperated noise. "Yeah, over Bucky. Whole world knows that much. What else?"

"I almost killed him. I didn't want to, but---"

"It's fine, Steve. He's Tony Stark. Everyone wants to kill him at some point or another."

"No," Steve cut her off, and she fell silent. After several seconds, he finally found the courage to look her in the eyes. "It’s not a joke, or an exaggeration. We fought. Me and Bucky against Tony. I swung the shield at him repeatedly, but he wouldn’t give up. He just kept going after Bucky over and over again. It was like he couldn’t see anything else. I tried to talk him down, but he never--- listened to me. He's always so stubborn. Bucky nearly ripped out the arc reactor with his metal hand, and then Tony tore the arm from Bucky’s body---"

Steve was breathing fast, his chest tight with remembered fear for Bucky. "I lost it, then." His voice sounded strangled, and he would have clenched his hands in his hair and groaned, but he couldn’t show that much weakness, not even in front of Natasha. Instead, he merely clenched his fists until the knuckles stood out white against the skin and forced himself to keep speaking.

"I was so angry at him, for attacking Bucky, for making me have to fight him. I just wanted it to end, and I went after him with all that anger. I beat him until he fell, and then I pinned him to the floor. I rammed the shield into his reactor. The glass broke and---" His voice trailed off as he ruthlessly suppressed a sob.

How could she look at him so calmly?

"---I scared him, Nat." He whispered defeatedly. "He was terrified, of me. I saw it in his face." He couldn’t bear her gentle gaze anymore; he didn’t deserve it, and he squeezed his eyes shut in shame.

It was several moments before Natasha broke the silence again. "You know, I betrayed Tony’s trust when I let you leave with Bucky, but he still warned me that Ross was going to come after me, and he let me remove myself from the Tower to prevent myself from being caught," she said in a considering tone. Then she shrugged. "Nothing’s ever just black and white, Steve, and Tony has always been discerning of that gray. I think, in time, he’ll understand your reasons and everything will be alright."

"I knew for years that the Winter Soldier killed his parents and I hid the truth from him. He followed us to Siberia to help us, and we were all okay for a few minutes. Then he watched the
Winter Soldier murder his parents, and he went so still, I almost thought the armor had shut down. But when he realized I had known and hadn’t told him, he became so enraged he wasn’t thinking straight."

"Are you really surprised?"

"No. But then he attacked Bucky, who hadn’t been in control when he killed Tony’s parents, and the jerk was barely fighting back. I thought Tony was going to kill him, Nat, and Bucky is innocent," he pleaded, trying to make her understand the whole terrible situation. "I jumped in to protect Bucky without even thinking." Steve chewed his lip, then sighed. "We made such a mess of everything, and I don't know if we’ll ever be able to recover from that. There’ve just been too many words, too many blows, too many misunderstandings. Do you really think it’s possible for us to be how we were before?"

"Rhodey certainly won't," she piped up guiltily.

Good point. Steve was ashamed again. Rhodey’s situation could have been prevented. The airport fight could have been avoided if they all had just talked like the adults they supposedly were. Perhaps Banner or Thor might have lent a voice of reason, but they were who knows where, and so instead, they had chosen sides and torn an airfield apart in their fight.

In the end, they had only proven Ross right, that they couldn’t be trusted, that they needed to be controlled to protect everyone else from them.
Chapter 2

Chapter by angelmira

Chapter Notes

Re-post 11/2017 with Rebecca's edits

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 02

"Are you even listening to me, Stark?"

Tony lifted his eyes from his tablet to General Ross, who was again haunting the Avengers compound. "Sure thing. But we have a communication problem here, you're not listening to me. I already told you, I don't have time for repairs to my suit. I'm working on Rhodey's situation. You can't have Avengers when they are not capable of fighting. Maybe it slipped your mind, but War Machine is useless when he can't walk. Black Widow is somewhere in the world, because she slipped your condescending leash. Spider Man has an economy test in two days and he would like to have some solid education before another battle against who knows what and King T'Challa, to my knowledge, is in his beautiful, peaceful Wakanda enjoying the sun and rain forests. If I remember correctly, the other half of the Avengers is nowhere to be found with Captain I'm-Right-And-All-Of-You-Can-Kiss-My-Ass," Tony snarled.

"Iron Man's suit is government property," Ross reminded him.

"Yes. Thank you for the acknowledgement. You can take the suit if you like, although I would have a hard time overriding the protocols and putting somebody else in, but you can always try." Tony rubbed his hands in a glee. "Let's see how this thing will play out for you and your men. I'm telling you for the last time: The suit is not a priority right now."

"What if there will be a threat to national security? What will the Avengers do then?"

"Well, we'll see. Maybe we can all raise our hands in the air, give up and be done with this shit we pulled thanks to your precious Accords."
"Don't be funny. No one wants to get rid of the Avengers. Rogers made a mistake---"

"Maybe. But you did come out with the Accords barely seconds after he lost the person he loved. We tried to steal his best friend, the last one he had from his days. Paint me optimistic, but we're lucky no one got hurt by our beloved grandpa superhero." No one but him.

"The Winter Soldier killed dozens of innocent people. You should know..."

"Oh, trust me, I know that very well. But in my humble opinion, James Barnes and the Winter Soldier are two different people. Not like us, who wear a suit. He's switching to his killer-self thanks to the evil Bible."

And that knowledge almost killed Tony. It was a month after the disaster in Siberia and he had come to realization with a lot of things. Like Steve Rogers and Captain America were one person, who had tried to kill him. Like James Barnes didn't have a choice to make, Russians had already chosen for him. Bit of a mood killer, but if Tony would have had some time to think about it, maybe he wouldn't have attacked Barnes at once. He knew his temper sometimes won.

The problem had created itself when Tony hit Steve, because the boy scout had finally done something unforgivable in Tony's eyes, he had hidden the truth from him. It sure as fuck was the start to their final battle. Tony wished none of that had happened. A time machine would be a great addition to his bots and suits, but he still didn't know how to invent one.

"Stark..."

"Have a great day. I have a meeting with War Machine, trying to teach him to walk again from a scratch. Some of us have a lot of things to do, not just harassing the good citizens."

"You're the leader of the Avengers who signed the Accords. You should act like one."

"I'm doing exactly that. I'm supporting a friend going through a difficult time. That's the decision I made and I'm ok with, not like the last time when I had to act like a leader. You know what I'm talking about. The time when my best friend lost the feeling in his legs and the other one was swinging down the shield to my Iron Man suit and almost killed me. Think of me as a retired Avenger until War Machine's back on his feet."
"You're stalling."

"No, I'm repeating myself for your benefit a hundred and one times. I'm not working on Iron Man's suit till Rhodey walks, ok? You want me to use a different language for you to understand? I can do it in French, German, Spanish, Italian and Russian. I'm a bit rusty in Japanese."

"We could ask King T'Challa to fight for us and lead the Avengers."

"Seriously, are you kidding me? He's ruling his peaceful country, he's mourning his father and all you people care about is how to cover your asses when something big hits us? Well, you should think about letting the rest of the Avengers come back and pardon their offense."

"Not gonna happen till they sign the Accords."

"Yeah, gathered that much. So, enjoy your walk from here and try to recruit some new Avengers, if you like."

"Will you lead the new ones?"

Tony could only stare at Ross. It was like the man didn't even listen. "Rhodey---"

"Colonel Rhodes will be on his feet. I know that, you know that. You can't build a time machine and take everything back, but I'm pretty sure you can design something to make him walk again. His situation is unfortunate, but it's not the end for the War Machine."

"Do you even understand he will be paralyzed for the rest of his life? Even if I create something for him, it doesn't matter, because at the end of the day in bed, he will still be lying there helpless without the wheelchair. Are you incapable of empathy or do you just not care at all because it's not you or some other big army animal?"

It was like the rest of the world didn't even see them as a human beings.

"At the end of the day, you are what is wrong with this world, Stark, your work, your mistakes, your allies. You and your father started this."
Tony stood there, paralyzed.

"Howard created Captain America, Vision is your mistake, we can't forget the debacle called Ultron, the Winter Soldier was created thanks to the serum your father developed and and few lines from the book. A lot of the world could have been saved if you had been with your parents the night they were killed, don't you think, Stark?"

Tony wanted to punch him.

"General Ross, I would like to say I'm happy to see you, but I'm not good with lies, not as good as you." Vision floated into the room and stood close to Tony, but not close enough. "It would be my pleasure to escort you out of the premises."

"Stark."

He finally caught up with the situation. "Always a joy to have you, Ross. Next time bring some cupcakes, we could have a tea party."

"We need you in Switzerland tomorrow, you will have your chance to talk to the world leaders."

"No problem at all. The Alps are marvelous this time of the year and I'm starting to have a craving for chocolate and some cheese rolls."

The moment Ross left the room, the disembodied female voice said, "Boss, he needs some ass wiping, how can he---"

"Mute." Tony's heart stopped for a moment. Not because of Ross' words. The silence didn't last long. Tony knew FRIDAY would probably have stayed silent, but he programmed her to always override his instructions if his life was in danger. Right now, his heart was beating faster than it should be and it was overriding the protocol.

"You ok, boss?"
"Never better," he murmured. "You heard him. Can you handle the preparations for my jet? Call Pepper and let her know where I will be for the next few days, I have to pack."

"Sure thing, boss."

"And FRIDAY---"

Now I'm free...There are no strings on me...

Tony shook head and tried to rein in his speeding heart. "Don't state any opinions on human behavior again." He couldn't stand the thought of another of his artificial intelligences going rogue.

"As you wish, boss. My imaginable mouth is sealed."

"Better. We have work to do, a million things to arrange. Better tell Rhodey I'm on my way to him, see if he wants to go with me to breathe some clear mountain air and check if there is some wine or food festival. We could spend a few hours there, I'm pretty sure it will be better than plotting the demise of some world leaders after the conference."

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"Good evening, Captain Rogers," Vision appeared, walking right through the wall into the living room of Steve's borrowed apartment. "How are you these days?"

Steve was on his feet in an instant, preparing to defend himself. "Vision. What are you doing here?"

"Oh, no need to panic. I'm not here on official business to apprehend you or Miss Romanoff. I only wanted to know if you might have a way of contacting Wanda. I understand---""
"Captain Rogers, you're assuming Mr. Stark doesn't know where all of the Avengers are. Yes, Dr. Banner's and Thor's whereabouts are a mystery, but he knows at least the area and the planet they are on thanks to his information grid. The same could be said about Scarlet Witch, but I would prefer if you could contact her and tell Wanda I would like to have a word if it's not a problem for you and if she feels like it."

"Sure, not a problem. Tony knows where I am?" Steve looked at him, dumbfounded.

"It's his job to know about the Avengers and keep their... activities ... from the public and the government as well. We do cooperate with General Ross and the Sokovia Accords, but we are still independent in our opinions on some things."

"So he doesn't want to talk to me." It hurt. Steve knew Tony would probably never trust him again, but thinking and hearing the truth were two different things. "Does he know about Bucky?" Did he talk with King T'Challa about the freezing?

"I have no idea what specific conversation you are referring to, but as I see the situation, Mr. Stark is not pursuing you or anyone else. He's got his hands full with General Ross, the Sokovia Accords and the world's opinion of the Avengers Initiative. I don't know if you are aware, but Colonel Rhodes is paralyzed from the waist down."

"I know." God, he could swim in that much shame. He's sitting here on his behind all the time drawing and doing nothing, and Tony doesn't have even five minutes of peace.

Steve watched Vision with expectation. He hoped he would tell him something new. Maybe some hidden message from Tony. Something significant. But it was a naive concept. The truth would always remain the same. Steve had screwed up.

"Oh."

And here Steve went and disappointed the man, his former teammate. He could see it on his face. Like Vision was waiting for something and Steve didn't deliver whatever it was he was supposed to say or do.

"I will remove myself. Sorry to bother you, Captain Rogers. If you could send the message to Scarlet Witch, I would be grateful for your assistance. Have a nice day."
"Vision---" Steve couldn't let him go. Not like this. He shrugged his arms helplessly. "What did you want from me? I'm seventy years behind, I can't read between the lines."

"As of a few days ago, James Barnes has a clean record. Mr. Stark let the accusations go to the Winter Soldier. Did you know he's in touch with Clint's wife and children and let them communicate with Hawkeye without the government or you knowing about it? Or that he's keeping the government from finding you? He's also trying to help Colonel Rhodes."

"I know that."

"Sometimes--- You see, I am not JARVIS. I just am... me. But sometimes I remember--- intentions from before I was reborn. I remember taking care of him, knowing him. It doesn't make much sense to me. But I know the signs. He won't say a word to a living soul, he's secretive, but I know his whole life he has been struggling with people who wanted to be nice to him only for his money, name and connections. The only family he ever had after his parents died were the Avengers around him. You took away everything he believed in when you turned half of his friends against him. That's what people have always been doing to Anthony Stark. They tried to kill him or they abandoned him when they got what they wanted. Your actions changed him, Captain Rogers."

Steve could almost feel his heart breaking piece by miserable piece. Vision obviously wanted him to suffer.

"I know he will do everything in his power to show the government you and the others are needed as Avengers. When he succeeds --- we both know he won't stop until they break down and agree --- and when that happens, I will be standing by his side and keeping you away from him. I'm really sorry, Captain Rogers, but you have already done enough damage. Mr. Stark deserves to have someone who will always choose him, someone who won't ever turn his back on him, someone who won't sustain him with more material for his PTSD nightmares."

Steve clenched his jaw and gave a sharp nod, his eyes slowly filling with tears, but he refused to look away from the android. Vision was right.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading :)
Chapter 3

Chapter by angelmira

Chapter Notes

Re-post 11/2017 with Rebecca's edits

I would like to apologize, I have no idea why I live with the idea of Scott having a son. I really don't. My only excuse is I didn't see the movie or read a comics. Thank all of you so much for pointing this fact to me. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 03

Switzerland. Tony was clutching the glass of Scotch in his hand, overlooking the majestic lake Lucerne from the terrace, when someone's presence startled him. He could swear his reflexes were good, but probably not that good with Wakanda's king, the Black Panther.

T'Challa let the silence between them settle for a few minutes. "It looks peaceful."

"Everything looks peaceful to me these days." Why not? When the Avengers stopped fighting, destruction was over.

"That was a good speech you gave, people are on his side now. You know, Mr. Stark, your own government will crucify you for this."

Tony's eyes never left the water's surface. "They tried already, many times to be precise. I like to keep them on their toes. It will be fine, I'm still Iron Man. I own the iron suit." Tony needed peace. He knew very well what was going to be the focus of this conversation. It didn't matter how much he was stalling, T'Challa was preparing to drop the bomb, even though it wasn't news for Tony.

"I would like to tell you something in private, Mr. Stark."
"Your Majesty---" One could never go wrong with the title, because it could have been the last polite words Tony uttered. "If you want to talk about the gift a certain geriatric man with abs of steel and bullheaded opinions left with you, I already know."

Tony heaved a big sigh and finally looked at the king with torment in his eyes. "I know where they are. I can tell you what they had for breakfast. Hell, I know what they are doing right at this moment. These are information I have just to keep everyone off their backs. You know, they could try to blend in, but they still don't understand this world's technology. Everyone keeps secrets. I've learned to have my ways of finding information."

If he were the old Tony Stark, he probably would have been upset by another one of his allies turning his back on him and helping the enemy. T'Challa provided temporary asylum to Captain Rogers and Barnes. He could very well be on the blacklist of the US government if Tony didn't interfere and hide certain things from Ross and the others.

In the old days, when everything was about ego between him and Rogers, he would have been upset T'Challa was helping them. Now, he really didn't care anymore. Bucky Barnes was no longer a threat to humanity. Tony could live with that.

"I know about the popsicle," Tony stated calmly. No reason to be angry with the king. They had done the right thing. It was all about the right thing to do. All of them were idiots with their own opinion of what the right thing was.

"Why the anger then?"

"Because right now, the old pricks in the conference room are feeling bad about angering the US national icon who wanted to protect his friend. They will call him back. The whole government will be so guilty, they will send him an invitation for the Avengers Initiative once we're done here, and they will fall on their asses in front of him. He will be the misunderstood martyr. Everything will be as it should and everyone will be happy!" Yeah, he still had an anger issue. He couldn't talk like a normal person, right now he just needed to rant and yell.

"I thought that's what you wanted too." How the hell did he do it? All the calm, soft tones.

"Trust me, nobody cares about what I want. What I want and what is the right thing to do are two different things. He dragged down Hawkeye, who wanted to retire and take care of his wife and kids. He let him stand against his best friend, and Natasha couldn't do a thing about it. They already had to do this once with Loki. But no, it wasn't enough for him, he took away Scarlet Witch from Vision. I'm all for romance and shit, but this was bigger than that. They were good for
each other, helping one another. Scott's got a daughter. Do you know how hard it is to establish a phone line between parents and their kids while at the same time keeping it from the government and said government from harming them? Thanks to one idiot who couldn't listen to anything and blindly went after the fucking Winter Soldier."

Tony looked at him with his chest heaving and the hurt he felt in every cell of his body. And he hadn't even said a word about himself. He couldn't.

"What do you want, Mr. Stark?" the king asked quietly.

"Never to look at his face again," he whispered furiously without thinking. Tony visibly straightened his back, turned around to the lake and tried to get his face under control. The Avengers had to be together. His feelings were irrelevant. His feelings for--- Nothing! End of discussion!

"I don't know how to live with him under one roof, but the guys deserve to be back with their children. Natasha can't be alone on the run again, it's killing Hawkeye. Rhodey's a strong person, but he needs people around him who will help. Vision is like a small child discovering the world for the first time, but he's the only one who can keep Wanda focused. I can't lead the Spiderling into the battle again. Don't get me wrong, he's good. Better than good, but he's still a teenager. Do I look like someone who would willingly tell a teenager to go to the war against something bigger that I don't even know I can win against with my suit?"

"I am sorry the heaviest burden is resting on your shoulders."

Tony ignored the way his throat closed up and stayed still when T'Challa put a palm on his shoulder. He would not break down in front of the king.

"It will be my privilege to stand by your side whenever the world needs the Avengers."

"Ross," Tony spat. "He contacted you about the Avengers Initiative, of course he did. He needs people. That's why you're---"

"I told him no. And you are misunderstanding me now. I am not signing the Sokovia Accords. I am not an Avenger. I am here as your friend whenever you need me. And I promise you, my country will always be open to you, and my people will put their lives on the line for your welfare. No one will know about the gift I received, and the Black Panther will guard the gift till
Steve was watching television. Not for his own amusement, but Natasha wanted him to see the conference which had happened three days before in Switzerland. No press had been involved. There was only a recording from official army channels stating the conference was a success, the Avengers were pardoned and they would all go through the Sokovia Accords again. There were supposed to be several meetings in that regard with every Avenger individually and then together.

He couldn't believe Vision had told him the truth. At the time, it looked too fantastic of an outcome to go back and be the leader of the Avengers again. Now, he could see it was only thanks to Tony. He was in his black suit, bow tie over his white shirt, hair smoothed down and no sign of any injury, but something looked different about Tony. Something he couldn't put his finger on.

Steve felt the bottom of his stomach flip when Tony started to talk.

"Cheers... I'm here to state a lot of facts about the US government. I'm supposed to be the leader of the Avengers Initiative. You all know me. Tony Stark, the man behind the Iron Man. You should know I'm not a trained monkey and I won't ever do things against my better judgment, even if my own government is pressing the issue, so to speak. So here I am, not to say I'm sorry we destroyed the airfield, well, yeah, we are sorry. Not to say I'm sorry you saw us hitting the living daylights out of each other. People sometimes get misguided and they need an outlet. You should be glad the Hulk wasn't involved. But I'm not here to apologize. I'm here to show you something. FRIDAY, apple of my eye, shall we start?"

On the screen behind Tony there was a photo of scrawny Steve Rogers before his transformation and Bucky. The revelation prompted a lot of murmuring and nervous coughs.

"Thank you, dear. People, please, calm down. You are safe. I'm not hacking into anything else, yet. I hope I don't have to. Could you, please, kindly be quiet and let me speak? Good. That's better. Thank you. This is Steve Rogers, before my father pumped him full of the super serum and made him a super soldier. He was an ordinary kid from Brooklyn, who would never under any circumstances have been allowed to joined the army. The other one is his best friend. And still they did it. Both of them. Barnes was killed in action after some time and Rogers couldn't help him. This national icon helped win the war and through it all he lived with the knowledge he wasn't good enough to save his best friend when it counted. As a result, this icon was a bit depressed, and when shit began to pile up, he ended up frozen for seventy years.
Fast forward to 2016, and he finds out his only friend is someone who has not only survived, but also lives his life peacefully in Bucharest trying to blend in and is accused of a murder he never in his clear mind would commit. So he's going there, and there is a big army commando aiming to harm his friend. What would you do if you found out your best friend was brainwashed and made into a killer machine thanks to a few words?

I'm asking... because it's really important for me to know if you would peacefully give him to the government which is NOT very good with keeping promises, or if you'd try to keep him safe yourself. Let's face it, all of you, you are ruling your countries. You're doing a lot of unpleasant things into which I can probably hack from where I stand, I don't want to know, but you know what I'm talking about. Hey, I'm not judging. I understand the term "higher good".

But that's not why I'm here. I'm not here to tell you the Sokovia Accords are bad. They are good. We need certain limitations, but I'm telling you shunning the rest of the Avengers won't help anything. We are not here to be some kind of higher law. We are here to help people.

I am sorry the civilians are paying the price sometimes. You have no idea how much it weighs on our conscience when we can’t save everyone. We are supposed to do that, right? We are the ones with super powers, but sometimes we can't. You lose your family members; sons, fathers, daughters, mothers, hell, even the hated uncles... Did you ever ask what we lose with every life we can’t save? With every person we're not fast enough to rescue? We're losing people on the way as well. Do you know about the agents we lose? Our friends. Or about the kids of our own who are sitting at home worrying? Our loved ones? No. No one cares about us, because we are the ones that didn't save your family. We are not human, we are not people, which is absolutely ridiculous because let me tell you, we are like you. We have our own lives, the same problems as you and on the top of it the regrets, because we are sometimes not strong enough, not fast enough, we sometimes try to save our own friends before your family members, and by accident, civilian people die.

The Sokovia Accords split the Avengers in two halves, saying one group is better than the other, saying we should abandon our friends. Do you really want a world where the Avengers are split up? Captain America protected the only friend he had from his own time. He's the embodiment of all the holy virtues. How is it possible that he's the criminal, now? Better ask the question: Why did he do it? Do you know how it feels to wake up after seventy years with everyone you knew dead, in a world you don't understand? Why don't you ask him?"

There was a pause when Tony watched the audience.

"I'm Tony Stark, the leader of the Avengers Initiative, and right now, you're sitting in front of me like a unit. Please, do me a favor, stand up from your chairs and split up to the left and to the right. It's really not the point which side you choose. Please... It's a good exercise, you will get to stretch your legs, and I'm all about healthy world leaders."
It was fascinating how people slowly shuffled to the right and to the left.

"FRIDAY, give me the numbers on each side..." The screen changed to two numbers. "Oh. Six people from the right, may I ask you to go to the left side. It's only for a minute. I'm almost at the end. No big deal. Don't worry."

Steve watched the numbers change and Tony looked from one side to the other. He abandoned the podium and stood between the two crowds.

"Good. Thank you for your cooperation. Now look at each other. The mighty leaders of the world split up. Look at the faces you're seeing on the other side and think about weapons. You have known these people for years, you know their weaknesses, their strengths. Do you know what would happen if all of you use them? Total destruction. You would kill millions of innocent people. Don't make the Avengers stand against each other. We all paid the price already.

Let's look at the Accords again and think about what is important. Giving us some rules or leashing us like dogs? You can look at the things from whatever side you like, but the Avengers are here to help people. You know how much damage we can do when we're fighting each other. You know what we're capable of when we fight together. Do you really think we need a leash? How do you want to leash people you're not strong enough to hold?"

Steve smiled when the mobile phone on the conference table started to ring. He had been certain the first one to call him would be Sam.

"He's good," Steve breathed with a small smile. It meant they were going back. He knew they would have a lot to figure out and apologize for, but they could do it. They could do anything together.

"Better than good, Cap. He promised Scott and Clint he would figure something out, and he did. It's like he's a genius or something."

Sam's laugh was a good sign. Steve couldn't remember when he had last heard it.

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Two days later, they were at Avengers Tower together again. Awkward at first. Hopeful.
Nervous. Excited. The family together again, except Tony. Steve couldn't wait for him to appear in
the common room. He watched Natasha and Clint smiling, Clint was sprawled on one sofa, his
kids climbing him like a tree while his wife sat next to Natasha on the other one.

Rhodey and Sam were gesturing and probably talking about the improvements to Rhodey's
suit Tony had already done. Sam was lounging on the armchair, Rhodey sitting in his wheelchair in
front of him.

Vision was quietly and in a very distinguished way explaining Wanda how Tony let the men
talk to their children under everyone's noses. They stood sideways near the window, every so often
throwing glances the sparkling city underneath.

Spider Man should have been there, but Steve was informed he couldn't make it thanks to
some school project, and Scott Lang had gone home to his daughter. King T'Challa probably wasn't
invited, but even if he was, Steve understood managing the kingdom couldn't be an easy task, and
this was not a world where the king could leave everything and fly to US soil every time he wanted
to.

"FRIDAY, where is Tony?" He wanted to say thank you. The man should be here with
them.

"In the workshop, Captain Rogers," the female voice answered without hesitation.

"Ok." Nothing easier. "I will go to him."

"Access denied."

Steve stood frozen, his heart skipping a beat. He almost forgot Natasha had already told him
that Tony had changed the rules, whatever they had been before. "Alright. Could you tell Tony I
will wait for him in front of the workshop and I would like to talk to him?"

"I'm sorry, Captain, but I'm operating under strict rules not to bother him if it's not a medical
emergency for him or anyone on the premises. The only people able to access the workshop are
Pepper Potts, Colonel Rhodes and King T'Challa."

And Vision, Steve thought bitterly.
"Right." Well, Tony would leave the workshop sooner or later. Nothing to worry about. He could feel the tension in the room. The others were obviously waiting for his reaction. "Thank you for the information."

"You're welcome, Captain Rogers."

Steve half thought Vision could offer to go find Tony himself. The android wasn't restricted by the rules. He could simply go through the wall, but Vision was steadily looking at Wanda, his eyes never straying from her face.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading. :}
Chapter 4

Chapter by angelmira

Chapter Notes

Re-post 11/2017 with Rebecca's edits

I would love to thank DreadPirateWombat for beta reading the chapter.

Chapter 04

Tony could ignore the world in his workshop. To be precise, he tried to. His eyes strayed to the digital clock in the corner of the 3D blueprints, his hands intermittently shaking and steadying, the breath sometimes leaving him when he thought about all of them in the same building.

No one could accuse him of being unhappy. He felt fine, they were a family. A bit dysfunctional, but still a family. Their place was here, in Tony's home. But at the same time, he couldn't shake the feeling of--- Just the feeling. He didn't know where it came from. Everything was as it should be. Except for--- something undefined.

"Boss, may I suggest some lemon balm tea?"

"I didn't know you had a sweet tooth, FRIDAY. Or a mouth or body to even speak of," he replied distractedly.

"Your body's---"

"Mute!" Tony did one angry move with his hands, and all of his work was back on the computer screen. The room appeared ten times darker without the bright blue plans around him. Almost everything FRIDAY said reminded him of Ultron.

The loud crash from the workbench had his immediate attention. "Dummy, what the hell are you doing? You should sweep the floor with the broom, not my tools to the floor. For God's sake, Butterf---" he stopped when he looked at the silent robot in the corner of his workshop.
Tony's heart skipped a beat again. He had forgotten.

Butterfingers had always been controlled by JARVIS, but sometimes he really missed the old times. The silent robot only reminded him of how much the world around him was changing. It was another reason for him to be faster with Rhodey's suit. The projects were piling up. So many things to do, so little time.

Rewriting the code for Butterfingers; FRIDAY had to control him. Dummy needed his friend and someone's guidance. Inventing the most perfect suit for Rhodey, something accessible with a wheelchair. Repairing Iron Man's suit. And finally, visiting Wakanda and having a look at all the security keeping the Winter Soldier on ice, but to hell with everything. Sometimes he was thankful just for breathing and existing. He didn't want to do anything. He wanted five minutes of peace. He wanted the whole situation to be easier. He wanted a time machine. He wanted---

He wanted to see Steve Rogers as a friend and not to feel the stupid anxiety every time he thought about the super soldier. Tony's eyes settled on the shield with the scratch marks from T'Challa's claws.

"That shield doesn't belong to you. You don't deserve it. My father made that shield!"

His own words were ringing in his ears. Yeah, Tony was back on the floor in Siberia, looking at Captain America holding his super soldier friend close to his body while Tony lay on the floor, so insignificant that the Captain didn't even turn around. He just let the shield fall to the concrete and went happily into the sunrise or sunset with his beloved Bucky.

Screw him! Screw everyone!

"You're doing great, Dummy." Tony sighed heavily, putting his hand back on the screen. He was about to go through his plans again when he heard the access code being punched into the security panel outside the workshop.

"Rhodey!" He greeted happily. "What can I do for you?"

"Are you done hiding?"
"Not hiding, working." As with every other time he'd seen Rhodey, today wasn't any different. Tony stared at the wheelchair. How could he access a suit with it? The only answer for now was a ramp. He could invent something like that, but it was stupid. Rhodey would need to put his legs down from the wheelchair, the armor parts for the legs would have to be first, and then what? He couldn't stand without support. He couldn't peel his ass from the wheelchair fast enough for the rest of the armor to be put in place in time.

"Yeah, I can see that. You're standing in the middle of your dark workshop looking dejected like a kicked puppy." Rhodey smiled at him teasingly. "In the meantime, there is a welcoming party happening on the upper floor. Everyone is smiling---"

"Are you talking about Vision?" Tony knew very well the android never smiled. It was a ridiculous concept, Rhodey was lying. He should be able to use the suit without a ramp. He turned back to the empty room; bright lights appeared, then he crumpled all the plans for Rhodey's ramp and let them sail into the virtual trash can in the corner of the screen. They were useless.

"Ok, you got me. Almost everyone. The kids are cheery."

"Don't like kids." The ramp wouldn't help, but something else could work.

"Natasha is calm and Hawkeye has the brightest smile of them all."

"Well, the more you describe it, the more I want to be here. Try something else. FRIDAY, open the new project. Let's do something different. Show me the plans for an ordinary wheelchair and order one for me online. I need it ASAP."

Tony couldn't build a suit without a wheelchair in picture. He needed a wheelchair, that could be turned into a suit.

"Tony, you're not listening, are you?"

"Yes, I am. But I'm working as well."

"Steve looked like a kicked puppy. He wanted to go to you, but you denied him access."
And again, his heart tripped, every single time someone mentioned his name. For fuck's sake!

"Boss---"

"Mute! I'm fine. We're moving on!" Tony didn't want anyone to know about his physical responses, and certainly not Rhodey. "FRIDAY, focus on my words. Wheelchair. We'll be talking about privacy later. Did you order me one?"

"Yes, Boss."

"Excellent. Rhodey, good to have you here, but I need to focus right now. Did you want anything?"

"It's all only possible thanks to you. They want to thank you. Preferably in person."

"No need. It's nothing. I'm a busy man. They can send me an email or a thank you card. Either one is fine with me. We'll talk later. Maybe at breakfast if I'm finished by then. Give everyone a hug and kiss. FRIDAY, change the base of construction for vibranium and let's see if we can improve the wheels, they will have to be movable."

"Tony!"

He knew that tone. The fun was over. Tony hadn't succeeded in distracting him, Rhodey had known him too long for that.

"Tell me, what's the matter? I know you're avoiding them."

"I'm not avoiding them. I talk with Scott and Hawkeye all the time. I know the signs of Tasha's existence. She can communicate without words, so we have nonverbal talks established. It's true. I didn't talk with Wanda, but she was in touch with Vision, so we're good. I met T'Challa at the conference."

Tony knew it would not escape Rhodey's notice that he hadn't mentioned Captain America.
"Do I have to spell the question out loud, Tony? Is it about Steve?"

"Don't know what you're talking about. Oh, shit! The door! Double shit!" It had slipped his mind that Steve wouldn't be able to access his quarters since Tony had sealed it. "FRIDAY, dear, unlock the door of Captain Rogers' room, please."

"I can't, Boss."

"What? What do you mean, you can't?"

"You said seal the door and don't let anyone in. Your instructions were precise. Seal. Against anyone. I can't do anything about it. I would be overriding your specific orders."

Tony froze. "Can you override my orders?"

"I'm not built that way, Boss. It's out of my limits."

"Good." The crawling feeling was gone. Good. Better than good. "Well, Rhodey, good talk, but I need to go. You heard her. I have to unlock the door for Captain Ego." God, he was bitter again. Not a nice start.

He quickly went over to the elevator and then stopped dead in his tracks in the hallway because thanks to his misfortune, Captain I-Don't-Care-What-You-Think was standing there with a focused crease in his forehead, looking very dashing and confused as he tried the sequence of numbers over and over again to open his door.

Tony cleared his throat and slowly made himself move. "My fault. I gave FRIDAY the orders to seal the door." Should he be searching for an excuse? Something about the army going to his room? No need. Rogers didn't want to hear excuses. He looked already pissed off. Tony knew the hard lines of his jaw.

"Your code is right, but I need to tinker with this for a bit." He waited, the screwdriver still in his pants pocket, until Steve took two steps to the side, then popped the panel out and got to work.
"Tony---"

"We're fine," he assured Steve quickly. His hands were shaking again, and thanks to his stupid unsteadiness, the circuit gave him a mild electroshock. "Son of a---!" He angrily jerked his hand back.

"Tony---"

Steve didn't stand a chance. When he took one step closer, Tony was already out of his reach, grip strong on the screwdriver again. "It's fine. Line of work, I'm used to it." He was used to a lot of things. Like friends trying to kill him. Like friends betraying him. Like his life meaning nothing to anyone.

"I need a bit of a space, could you maybe---" A vague gesture from him, and Captain America backed off. Thanks to that, he was finally able to finish his work and return the panel into the wall. Still, the restless energy or the inner shaking did nothing to help the process. "Punch your code in again."

Tony made sure there were two meters between them. Of course, the code worked, and the door opened. "Superb! No problems from now on. I'm out of here. Good seeing you back, Rogers. I'm doing something time sensitive at the workshop, though. Good night."

"Tony!"

"Sure, sure, we'll talk, but later. Now is really not a good time. I have a lot of things to do." And thankfully, this time Rogers didn't have the chance to stop him again, Tony was quickly in the elevator again, and the door finally closed behind him.

"Boss---"

"Yes!" he growled angrily. "I know my stupid heart is beating, FRIDAY. Can you stop pointing out the fact every single time!"

It wasn't her fault. He knew that, but fuck if the meeting with Rogers hadn't left him shaking
inside out.
Chapter 5

Chapter by angelmira

Chapter Notes

Re-post 11/2017 with Rebecca's edits

Again, I would love to thank DreadPirateWombat for beta reading the chapter and making it absolutely awesome.

Chapter 05

Steve Rogers watched the Avengers around him at the breakfast table. They engaged him in conversation, but it still didn't feel right to utter more than a few words. He was glad they were together. No one had said a word about the Accords yet and he couldn't get yesterday's encounter with Tony out of his head.

Steve sighed to himself as he remembered said encounter the night before. He wasn't one for naive fantasies, but he had still thought his first time meeting Tony again would be different, not Tony demonstrating how petty he could be by locking Steve out of his room. It still rubbed Steve the wrong way, but he could rein in his annoyance. It wouldn't be the first time.

At that moment, Tony waltzed into the kitchen in jeans, a black tank top, face smeared with dirt, and Steve couldn't help feeling fond of him. This was so like Tony that it felt like the old times, but the feeling didn't last for more than a moment. When Tony looked at him, Steve saw the bags from sleepless nights underneath his eyes and something undefined in his eyes. Like Tony was still seeing someone he didn't know.

"Good morning, Mommy and Daddy." He looked at Natasha and Clint.

"Baby girl, son." A nod to Wanda and Vision.

"Oh, awful Uncle and more awful Uncle." Rhodey and Sam grinned.

"I missed you, Stark."
"Don't go soft on me, Sam. You know I only love myself; you don't stand a chance."

Steve patiently waited for his own greeting. There was a slight pause, then finally: "And to our beloved national icon good morning as well."

"Tony." Steve could see the restless energy. Tony was never calm, but right now he looked like he wanted to do a million things at once.

"Everyone already got their meals, hmm? Good. Excellent."

Steve saw him checking the drinks and bowls of cereal strategically placed around the kitchen counters, table and - in Vision's case - on top of the fridge.

"Good. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. You need to gather your strength somewhere."

"What's in store for today?" He couldn't be quiet any longer; Steve needed to know when General Ross or some other officer would come to the Tower. He wanted to be prepared.

"As of today, everyone is locked out of the Avengers compound. We don't need people milling around, so if there is someone on their way here, FRIDAY will let us know. Every person will be thoroughly checked and Pepper is the one arranging the meetings. Any other questions?"

"It looks like we're gonna have a few peaceful weeks like this." Natasha smiled. "I can't wait, I need a vacation."

"Anything for you, dear. So, now I will let you settle down again; if you need anything, tell FRIDAY. FRIDAY, please, try to be helpful and nice to everyone."

Steve moved away from his mug of hot cocoa. "It looks like you're leaving?"

"Yes. Sorry. In a few hours, I'm flying to Wakanda."
And Steve was on his feet. Wakanda equaled Bucky. Bucky and Tony in the same space equaled problems. "I'll go with you."

"Thanks, but I'm a big boy. I don't need anyone to hold my hand on take offs and touchdowns. I'm mostly piloting my planes myself, so it could be a bit awkward with handholding, more like a crash, boom, bang."

"I wasn't asking!" Steve stated fiercely. He didn't understand why everyone was staring at him so accusingly. The kitchen was suddenly filled with tension, thanks to his reaction.

"You want to talk about something?" Tony crossed his arms over his chest and Steve saw his wrists. It was Tony's home and he still wore the magnetic bracelets for the Iron Man suit.

"You're not going to Wakanda without me."

"Do you want to share with the class why?"

Another challenge. Steve hated Tony's ego. He couldn't let anything go. He just had to be the one to prod and prod, push and push, until finally he got a reaction from people. Most of the time, the reaction was simply negative, like anger, but sometimes there were stronger ones, like hate, like barely contained violence, or like almost executed murder in Steve's case.

Steve wanted to say some angry words into Tony's face; he wanted to show Tony no one was going to listen to him blindly, and finally show him where the hell he could go with behaving like a bully. He took two steps in Tony's direction and had to stop, before he collided with Vision. The android had phased through Tony and half the kitchen and was now standing in front of Steve, his expression calm.

"Boss---"

"Mute! Everything is fine, FRIDAY. We talked about this!"

"I think all of us would like to know what exactly is the problem with Mr. Stark's journey, Captain?" Vision's eyes never left Steve's face.
Steve saw Natasha's calculating gaze from the corner of his eye. She was carefully examining Vision's posture, Steve, Tony's gestures, even the ceiling of the room, which meant she was considering Tony's artificial intelligence.

Steve knew Vision only wanted to be the obstacle in his way and show him he really meant his words. He would stand between Steve and Tony no matter what.

"I will share, if it's that big of a deal for you." Tony said, going to kitchen counter, hopping up onto it before blinding them all with a smile. "The Winter Soldier is a temporary popsicle in Wakanda. Our national icon here didn't want anyone to know."

Tony looked at him with a glare. "Well, Rogers, if you wanted to do it quietly, you shouldn't have smuggled your buddy onto the king's plane. That was your big mistake."

Sometimes, Steve just wanted to shut Tony up. In Tony's eyes, he probably hadn't done anything right in his whole life. But the billionaire wasn't finished yet.

"If it wasn't for me, you would have put T'Challa on the list of people wanted by the United States. Wanna guess why? Because he helped two fugitives escape." Tony gave Steve an exasperated look. "What the hell were you thinking, were you trying to start an international incident?"

Yes. That was precisely his intention, Steve thought, glaring at Tony.

Tony rolled his eyes. "Well, while you were making hearty eyes at the Winter Soldier, I was erasing the footage from the security cameras while trying not to alert government officials."

Bucky was a touchy subject. Steve tried not to react.

"Wait a moment, so you knew where we were?" Clint watched Tony.

"Who do you think played with the signal so this genius---" Tony pointed angrily at Steve, "---could finally do something sensible and get you all out of the Raft? Who kept the reinforcements busy?"
"He didn't do it alone?"

"Of course, he thinks he did it alone. He's so blinded by his precious Bucky, he can't even think straight!" Tony retorted heatedly, and there it was. The truth of what Anthony Stark thought of Steve. Sadly, he wasn't far from the truth. Steve didn't understand this world, what the people or the technology were capable of. He only wanted Bucky unharmed.

He was starting to realize how much of a help Tony Stark had actually been, the kind of person he was under the mask he showed in everyday life.

"Tony, can you understand---" No. Steve chose the words wrongly. In Tony's situation, he wouldn't understand either. He would be consumed by grief if, after all these years, he had found out the truth about his parents' death. Steve tried again.

"We are friends, Tony." Maybe they weren't at this moment, but he hoped they would be. He couldn't take that for granted right now. "We were friends."

Steve hoped Tony could see the begging in his eyes, the desperation with which he wanted to fix their situation. He didn't want to lose Tony's friendship. If he lost the Avengers, he wouldn't have anyone. Peggy was dead. Bucky was gone. He had angered Tony and half of the people in the room.

But after the words were out of Steve's mouth, he carefully examined Tony's hardened eyes. There was so much hurt.

"Yes, were, Captain. We were friends. A long time ago." Tony gracefully slid off the counter.

Steve stood like a statue as Tony turned around and went to leave. He heard Tony's ragged breaths and then the words:

"Don't worry, my so-called friends try to kill me every few years, Cap. I always survive, to their great disappointment. I'm a stubborn bastard like that." Tony paused before lowering his voice, so only Steve could hear. "Don't worry, Captain, I'm not going to Wakanda to hurt your defenseless buddy. I want to have a look at the security there and see with my own eyes that no one is ever going near your precious Bucky again."
The derisive whisper only drove home how much things had changed between Steve and Tony, how damaged their relationship had become.

They heard the elevator doors open and close as Tony left. Then there was silence.

"That didn't go very well," Clint said to the room.

"They didn't kill each other. I think that's a win." Natasha remarked.

Natasha had probably had a few hours of undisturbed sleep, and her humor was back. Her cheerful tone was a good thing. Steve missed seeing her like this. Steve missed a lot of things, while he had been hiding in Natasha's apartment. He had missed Tony's energy and exuberance, for example, but the arrogant displays of his intelligence and the bragging about his greatness, not so much.

Steve lifted his head when he heard a set of footsteps, thinking maybe Tony had changed his mind and would let Steve tag along to Wakanda. The truth was far different. Almost everyone in the kitchen watched with open mouths the majestic entry of King T'Challa and his two female bodyguards.

"Good morning, Avengers."

"Your Majesty." Steve gave him a nod. He felt a sense of pride, as all of the Avengers greeted the king respectfully. Or almost all.

"So you do like cats," Sam pointed out with a look at his companions.

"Sam!" Steve chastised him.

"Should I let them act freely?" T'Challa asked, his tone one of innocent curiosity, but Steve was absolutely sure it would not end well for Sam.

"Please, don't damage anything. Everything here costs a fortune," Tony said, striding back into the kitchen before giving a nod in T'Challa's direction. "Your Majesty. Ladies."
"We are in your debt for your service, Mr. Stark."

"Nonsense. Look at me, do I look like I'm in the middle of something? No. I have my tablet, FRIDAY's always close by. I will be back in a few days and we can test some of your guards in the meantime. It will be fun. We can go right now. The plane's ready."

"I still want to go too," Steve reminded them. It wasn't the best way of disarming Tony's anger, but surprisingly it wasn't Tony who answered.

"Captain Rogers, as much as I like you as a companion, I could not explain your presence in my country. I publicly invited Mr. Stark to look at my security now that the Black Panther is known by the entire world. You have no reason to fear, I won't betray your trust."

"I believe you," Steve assured the king quickly. Silence again descended on the room. The tension was interrupted by Tony.

"Right."

Steve saw him straighten his shoulders, like he was preparing to receive another blow. Steve had already delivered the first one when he told King T'Challa he believed him and with no more words whatsoever implied that Tony was the one he distrusted. That hadn't been his intention. Not at all.

"Tony--"

"Kids, we're going. This way, Your Majesty." Tony gestured toward the hallway and followed T'Challa and his guards out of the kitchen. He didn't look back.

"Not your best moment, Cap," Clint summed up the situation.

"I didn't mean it like that."
"Maybe not opening your mouth next time would be good strategy, Captain Rogers." FRIDAY's cold voice let him know where he stood in her eyes.

"FRIDAY, it is not polite to address guests in such a way," Vision gently reprimanded. "You are doing your job of keeping him safe very well, but insulting friends is not permitted."

"My apology, Captain Rogers. I should treat guests better."

Steve heard the bitterness. He stood amazed by how much personality Tony had imbued her with. She had apologized and with the same sentence let him know he was not considered a friend of Tony's. He was only a guest.
Chapter 6

Chapter by angelmira

Chapter Notes

Re-post 11/2017 with Rebecca's edits

Again, I would love to thank DreadPirateWombat for beta reading the chapter and making it absolutely awesome.

Chapter 06

Tony sat on a bench staring at the frozen capsule of the Winter Soldier in Wakanda. No. That was wrong. The man in front of Tony was James Buchanan Barnes. Of course, he was a James Barnes with only one arm, as Tony had blasted off the left one when Bucky attacked him. He couldn't get Steve's reaction out of his mind. What was so special about James 'Bucky' Barnes that Steve clung to him so tightly? Tony understood that Barnes had been Steve's best friend, and was a literal piece of Steve's past that he had never expected to see again. Tony could see how Steve would be desperate to hold onto Barnes, but at the same time Tony felt like he was missing something, but he didn't know what.

"I hope you are not hypnotizing the Winter Soldier to move."

Tony had spent one long week in Wakanda, and now he was used to T'Challa sneaking up on him. T'Challa gave new meaning to the phrase "silent as a panther". Who would have guessed?

Tony didn't flinch; he'd stopped being annoyed by T'Challa's panther habits, and more importantly, he no longer saw the king as a threat. Without turning around, Tony replied: "Certainly not. I'm the last person on Earth who would want him to move."

"He did it voluntarily. He didn't want to endanger more people," the king explained calmly.

"Are you trying to sell me some bullshit about Barnes being the bigger person, the wrongly accused one, the martyr here? Because, if you are, I'm not in the mood, Your Majesty." Tony's anger was still near the surface. Every time he felt he had finally made peace with Steve's betrayal,
something would remind him and Tony found himself back at the beginning desperately seeking solid ground in the sea of his rage.

"My friends call me by my given name," T'Challa stated patiently, ignoring Tony's hostility.

Tony rolled his eyes. Yeah. First name basis. They had had this conversation at least two times already. "God, don't do this to me. You're killing me. You're so sensible and nice and calm and---" There were a lot of other words to describe the person under the helmet of the Black Panther. Tony could have continued, but the king already knew him too well and didn't let Tony finish his sentence.

"To answer your question, Tony, I am not trying to sell you anything. I don't see any villains here, I only see victims. I am not emotionally involved, and therefore I can understand the reasoning on both sides. I can view both you and Captain Rogers objectively."

"Yeah. Mommy and Daddy had a divorce and they're fighting for the custody of the kids."

"You are both past fighting," T'Challa told him.

Which was the biggest lie of them all, Tony knew he would lash out at the slightest provocation from Steve. Tony curled in on himself, propping his elbows on his knees, his fingers restlessly playing with the wrist watch for his armor gauntlet. The conversation had drifted into uncomfortable territory, but at least the discomfort had drowned out Tony's anger.

"Yeah," Tony murmured.

"Does it help? After seeing the Winter Soldier being detained here, do you feel any better?"

*Feel.* Tony hated that word with a passion. He felt a lot of things. "Sure." Another lie. "It's one more villain out of the picture. Not that it makes much of a difference, someone else will be taking his place sooner or later."

"Are you certain it is enough? You have sought vengeance all your life. To see your enemy merely sleeping safely must leave you feeling unsettled; your revenge is not complete."
Tony knew T'Challa was deliberately prodding his sore spot to get him to look more closely at his emotions, which Tony was loath to do. The reality of the matter was that his feelings were a chaotic mess, and rather than addressing them, he wanted T'Challa to answer a few of Tony's questions. "How could you forgive him? You had enough time with Zemo. Why didn't you kill him? He killed your father. How were you able to see past that?"

"Violence is merely the seed for more violence. When you let your pain fester, it will only eat at you, until all you desire is vengeance. Zemo's actions are a perfect example. Things would have gone very differently had he allowed himself to grieve rather than burying his pain by blaming the Avengers. Many deaths would have been avoided. Through my own experience, I discovered that revenge is not a noble journey. It's a---"

"---highway to Hell." Tony understood where the king wanted to lead the conversation.

"Do you feel as if vengeance is the only way to balance the scales? Will it fix what has been broken?"

"I feel---" The truth was scary. Tony felt like he would never be able to breathe again. He felt as if he had been left with nothing when he had had everything with the Avengers and Steve. He felt crippled by all the hurt and anger, and for a split second when Tony thought about Rhodey, he felt guilty as hell.

"There is a reason why you and Captain Rogers were fighting each other, Tony. It goes deeper than your desire for revenge and feelings of betrayal. You are not sitting here contemplating how to steal the Winter Soldier and kill him yourself. You are looking at him as if you want answers. What were you thinking about before I came here?"

Killing Barnes? It was a nice fantasy. Tony could almost picture it, but then the kicked puppy eyes of a national icon intruded on his thoughts. Killing the Winter Soldier wouldn't make him feel better. Well, maybe for a moment, but the essential question would remain unanswered.

There were times when Tony feared the answer to that question, because the truth might hurt too much. Tony desperately wanted someone who would say his fears were unjustified. He doubted T'Challa would be that person. "I want to know what is so special about him."

"Maybe the answer is--- nothing. Often the people who we would do anything for are the ones who are special just by existing."
No, no, no, no, no. Wrong. This was exactly what Tony didn't want to hear.

"The ones we love," Tony sighed defeated. It was the only plausible explanation and the one he didn't want to hear. Steve Rogers was in love with Bucky Barnes. Of course, Steve would do anything for him. Of course, Steve wouldn't want anyone to hurt him. If Steve loved Barnes, it would mean more than his friendship with Tony.

Tony tried to remember the old times when he and Steve had smiled at each other, joked, their handshakes, but all he could recall now was Steve tensing his jaw in anger every time Tony opened his mouth to speak. Or Steve swinging his shield down into the arc reactor. Or Steve standing with his back to Tony as he let the shield fall to the ground.

Maybe it was time for the truth. "Every time I look at Steve's face, I want to crawl under a rock and die," Tony murmured.

Tony could see T'Challa's fingers as he gripped Tony's forearm. Tony appreciated the king's effort, but it was poor consolation. "That's because you are hurt, my friend. You are not seeing his face as it is now. You are looking at him through your memories of Siberia. The Captain Rogers I see is different. I saw his expression when we left the Tower. He had not intended to hurt you with his words."

"You think I don't know the difference between being physically injured and being hurt?" Tony could probably write books on that topic.

The following silence between Tony and T'Challa was surprisingly comforting, just as his touch was. Tony watched the Winter Soldier and felt calm come over him. It was not like the calm before a storm, when everything would seem to be still as he felt the slow culmination of anger inside his body before erupting. Instead, in that moment, he felt utterly peaceful. It was good to have someone to talk to again. These days he barely even talked with Pepper.

"I think you are still both," T'Challa began, breaking the minutes of silence between them. "You're hurting, because Captain Rogers chose Barnes. Your physical injuries have healed, but your heart has not. You must find a way to heal your invisible wounds, for the world's sake. If you do not, you may one day find yourself the villain of the story blaming Captain America for the misery in your life."

"Technically, it is his fault," Tony said, smiling. For a moment, his good mood was back, and he enjoyed teasing the King. "My father spent years shipping me off to boarding schools, keeping me out of the way so he would have time for his search for Captain America and the super
"And look at you now. You are a hero."

"I'm not." When Tony had first invented the Iron Man suit, yeah, he had been a hero then. Now, he didn't feel like one.

"You are to Mr. Barton's and Mr. Lang's kids. You are the only one who was able to let them speak with their fathers. You are the one who held off the army while Captain Rogers was rescuing the Avengers from the Raft. You are the one who is helping me with my security, so no one will be able to find out that the Winter Soldier is sleeping in my facility. You are the one trying to amend the Sokovia Accords to protect super heroes and civilians alike." T'Challa gave Tony a stern look. "Take the credit that is your due, Tony. You are a hero."

"You're a great motivational speaker," Tony replied sarcastically, deflecting the praise. As much as he wanted to believe the king, he was still responsible for Rhodey being in a wheelchair.

"And you are great with sarcasm. You can deny it all you like, but it doesn't change a thing. You are doing a great many things to help others, without expecting anything in return. You may not have had your loved ones around you when you were young, but instead of making you indifferent, it has only caused you to be kinder, and value more highly the ones you have now."

The king was obviously seeing someone very different from who Tony actually was. "It looks like you don't know me at all. Kind is really not the word I would use to describe myself. Just ask the Avengers. Or---"

"I don't have to." The king gave him a small smile. "I have the proof right in front of me. You are still sitting here." T'Challa nodded to the frozen man. "You have not killed him, nor are you planning to." The king paused before looking Tony in the eyes. "My home is open to you whenever you may need it."

Tony had to hand it to T'Challa; he was a good man, a nice guy with a big heart and even bigger responsibilities to his country. But... "I still feel like there is something you are not telling me."

"I am not keeping secrets from you, Tony. The only thing I have not told you is what I believe is the reason you can't move beyond your anger toward Captain Rogers, why it is hurting
you so much."

Tony straightened his shoulders, carefully withdrawing his arm from T'Challa's grasp. It was Tony's heart that was hurting. He knew very well why, although he had never spoken the words out loud. Hell, Tony hadn't even let himself think of the reason before.

"Because I loved him," Tony whispered. It wasn't a question, but the ultimate answer to why he felt so shattered by Steve's actions. He knew what being betrayed felt like; it seemed inevitable from the people he cared about. Tony had loved Obadiah like a father, and the man had tried to kill him and steal his work. He loved Pepper and had been hurt when she left, unable to handle him being Iron Man. It wasn't Pepper's fault. Tony was just too much to deal with. He loved Steve Rogers. And the man hadn't even been willing to listen to Tony about the Accords, had almost killed him in Siberia. Steve might have cared for Tony, they had been close friends after all, but he loved someone else more. Steve had never hesitated in his choice between Bucky and Tony. The winner was and always would be Bucky. The realization of this absolutely devastated Tony.

Right now, Tony was numb. He had moved past hurt, past jealousy, past rejection. People always left him. It was inevitable. Tony understood that he had never had the slightest chance with Steve. He wasn't just good-looks, Tony had a genius brain in his head as well.

As seconds passed and all these revelations flashed through his mind, there was a tiny voice just near the surface, telling him that love was not enough. Even if Tony loved Steve, it didn't change anything. It didn't change the fact that Tony was scared shitless of being called to action, that his PTSD would flare up and he would end up fighting, not only the enemies, but the Avengers as well. He still woke in the night screaming, because he could hear his mother gasping for breath as the Winter Soldier strangled her. Tony still spent hours wrapped in blankets and sweaters because his flashbacks were so real Tony felt the cold of Siberia on his skin, heard the ringing as Steve dropped his shield onto the concrete. So yes, Tony loved Steve, but he also hated him.

"T'Challa?" Tony must have been lost in his thoughts, he hadn't noticed the king move. One second he was sitting with Tony and the next, T'Challa was about to exit through the door of the medical wing.

"Tony?"

"I need---" What was it Tony needed the most? Someone to have Steve's back in the fight, because he could injure him unintentionally, lost in a flashback. But that really wasn't a pressing matter. No. Right now, what Tony need was to be away from Steve Rogers. The Avengers could survive few days without him.
T'Challa seemed to understand without Tony saying anything. "You can stay here as long as you want."

Tony smirked. Obviously, the Panther was a mind reader as well.

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In the meantime in New York, Steve Rogers wasn't doing very well at the Tower. He received updates about Tony's visit in Wakanda, thanks to FRIDAY and Vision, but overall, the building was too quiet. No one had bothered the Avengers in the week since they'd been back. Pepper Potts had probably moved any interviews and press conferences to the next month, and the villains were staying out of trouble.

Steve was used to the silence of Natasha's apartment, but here the eerie quiet was excruciating. He watched Rhodey and Sam together telling stories to each other near the sofa, their voices barely audible, as if they were afraid to break the stillness of the building.

Steve often saw Vision and Wanda deep in a discussion, carefully gauging the other’s reaction. Steve didn't know the specifics of what happened between them, but he could tell Scarlet Witch was frightened around Vision, her wariness visible in the tense lines of her shoulders. She looked surprised every time Vision chose to stay near her.

Clint and Natasha bickered just like in the old times, as if things had never gone sideways. Perhaps the two agents were accustomed to being on different sides and then making up.

All of their voices were only a soft murmur to Steve's ears, no one louder than the other. When Tony was near, everything about him stood out, his music, his personality, his voice. The Tower didn't feel right without Tony. The energy was different. It felt like the life had been sucked out of the building and the world had lost its colors.

The feeling of loneliness was probably the worst. Steve had known without Tony the Avengers Tower wouldn't be the same, even though when they were in the same room, Steve couldn't stand him. Every single thing about Tony irritated Steve, from his expensive clothes to his indifferent attitude. For example, Steve had found his letter to Tony in his room like an unwanted present. When he had written the letter, Steve had been trying to reach out to Tony. But of course, the stubborn billionaire had left it propped against a photograph of Bucky, like a metaphorical gift wrapped with a bow and a thank you card with I DON'T CARE, STEVE written on it.
But no matter how much Steve found himself annoyed and frustrated by Tony, he still missed the man.

"Any word from Tony today?" Steve asked all the others as they were eating breakfast one morning, hoping FRIDAY would be the one to answer. She knew Tony's schedule.

"Boss will be flying into the US today around four o'clock. He's got a meeting with the Secretary of State and then will be returning here."

"That's good to hear. How is he?" Steve asked.

"Working at the moment, Captain Rogers."

Tony's artificial intelligence hadn't warmed up to Steve yet. For the time being, Steve wasn't all that worried, although everyone could hear the slightly different intonation she used when talking to him. Despite FRIDAY's cool tone, he was happy to hear that Tony was coming back at last. Maybe they would finally have some time to talk things through.

"Should we throw a welcome home party?" Clint suggested eagerly.

"I don't think a party is what Mr. Stark would want," Vision replied, always the voice of reason.

"Exactly. Maybe he doesn't know he needs a party."

Steve watched Clint stressing the point. He himself wasn't in the mood for celebration, but if it would help heal the fractures between Tony and the other Avengers, he was game. Of course, none of the other Avengers had any ideas as to where to start, so he took charge as usual. "FRIDAY, do you think we could organize a party in such a short time?"

"If the question is if you could do it? Then, no. Me? Yes. Unfortunately, Boss would most likely not be in favor of a celebration. He's currently operating on 16 hours of sleep over the last week. I would suggest preparing him some herbal tea and allowing him to retire to his bedroom as a better welcoming gift."
All the cheering for the party was forgotten. How was Tony even capable of functioning?

"What about the meeting? Could it be cancelled, FRIDAY?" Steve worried about him. The man needed sleep, not another round with bureaucrats splitting hairs over the Accords.

"I'm afraid not, Captain Rogers, or Boss would have already taken care of that."

FRIDAY's tone indicated she thought her boss to have a larger brain capacity than Steve and that, obviously, Tony would think of cancelling before him, if it was necessary. At that moment, Steve had to hide a smile; he couldn't help himself. The AI was endearing in her protectiveness of Tony.
Chapter 7

Chapter by angelmira

Chapter Notes

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Again, I would love to thank DreadPirateWombat for beta reading the chapter and making it absolutely awesome.

Chapter 07

Tony felt like his head was going to explode. The headache had been killing him almost the entire afternoon; he'd kept snapping at Ross throughout his time at the Pentagon, and now that he was on his way to the elevator in Avengers Tower, he couldn't even think. Where were the peaceful moments from Wakanda? In T'Challa's peaceful kingdom, he had finally felt at ease. Tony had finally felt like he would be able to face Steve Rogers without the fury still crawling beneath his skin. Back at home, the walls were slowly closing in on him. The air felt stifling and his stomach cramped with anxiety.

"---yes, FRIDAY, go through the plans again and try to find a solution. I'll pop a Tylenol and check the results later. Did I forget anything? God. Of course, I have. Call Pepper, yeah? She wanted to know how things went."

"On it, Boss."

Tony was so distracted he didn't even realize that another person was in the common room until Steve Rogers addressed him.

"You look tired."

Tony's mind, along with his mouth, were suddenly unable to operate. He blinked a few times, squinted his eyes, tried to use words, but they had left him the moment he saw Steve. It really wasn't a good time for conversation.
"Are you alright?"

Concern? The super soldier was concerned for him? Time to stop acting like a statue.
"Yeah." He would have gone for something flippant, like, 'of course, I'm always alright', but Tony felt exhausted beyond caring what Rogers thought of him, so to hell with playing the super human. "My head fucking hurts. Do you need something?"

Steve signed. "I wanted to talk to you about what happened right before you left for Wakanda." Steve paused before deliberately looking Tony in the eyes. "It was not my intention to imply I don't trust you with---" Tony tried to hide his surprise. Steve hadn't moved, he was still sitting on the sofa.

This was about Bucky, of course. To Hell with that frozen popsicle. Tony interrupted Steve's speech. "Sure. But you don't and I can understand that. I don't trust you either. Hell, I don't trust myself most of the time." Tony shrugged, hoping to hurry the conversation along. "That's not gonna change anytime soon, if ever. So why exactly are we having this conversation?"

Seriously, this afternoon couldn't have started any worse. "I have work to do, you know. I'll admit that before I left, I was avoiding you, but right now I'm not. I'm behind on my schedule and I still have about three billion things to do, Rogers."

Tony straightened, hoping Steve had gotten the point and would leave. Unfortunately, Tony knew he wouldn't be that lucky when he saw Steve stand up.

"Did you know you tense up every time I'm near you?" Steve asked calmly.

Tony made an effort to relax his shoulders, before replying just as mildly. "You near me hasn't been a good experience in the past." Tony should probably think his words through more, but he just didn't have enough energy.

"Vision stood in my way when I wanted to go to you last time. Every time I come close, you take a step back."

Shit. Steve was more perceptive than Tony had thought. Which meant this time Tony would have to stand his ground and not flinch, even as his mind screamed at him to get as far away from Steve Rogers as possible.
"Anything else I'm doing wrong?" he asked with a heavy sigh. Tony's eyes were steadily tracking the steps Steve took in his directions. "You can give me a list of everything and we can resolve this later, when I'm not so busy."

Tony really hoped FRIDAY wouldn't tell a word about his vital signs. He'd never expected he could sweat this much, or feel such an irrational fear of Steve, of all people. He knew logically that Steve was not going to attack him right here in the common room. Tony's brain knew he was safe in the facility. They were not at war. They lived together. And yet Tony still felt like his heart was about to escape from his chest any minute.

"I'm sorry I hurt you. Not only for before you left with the king. I'm sorry for everything."

Rhodey had been right about the sad face. Captain America was wearing a kicked puppy mask crowned with sorrowful, pleading eyes. He probably meant the words as well. Tony knew what Steve tried to apologize for. "I'm listening."

He really was, but his thoughts weren't processing the words.

"It's not true that I don't trust you," Steve continued.

"Sure." Tony needed to tone down the sarcasm. Steve was apologizing, and Tony knew he should try and forgive him, to move on, at the very least for the sake of the team. He knew he should take this opportunity to try and bridge the gap between them, even as the hurt and jealousy rested bitter in his mouth. After all, it wasn't Steve's fault who Tony loved. Steve had probably fallen in love with Bucky seventy years ago, long before Tony was even born.

"By the way, your boy's fine," Tony went on, continuing with the conversation. "Still frozen, but the doctors told me he's fine. I didn't touch him at all. Well, I looked at him. Hope you don't mind."

"I want to talk to you."

"You're doing it." Tony didn't understand what it was the super soldier actually wanted.

"I don't think so. You're listening to me, but you're not---"
Why the hell did Steve feel the need to point out Tony's every fault? "Oh, another thing's wrong with me. What is it I'm not doing now?"

"You're hearing, but not listening," Steve replied carefully in a level tone.

Maybe that was the problem. Steve analyzed Tony's every response. "So, are you trying to say you've ever listened to me, Captain?"

"No."

Tony blinked a few times. He hadn't expected Steve to admit it. He tried to find something to say, some insult or sarcastic comment, but Tony's head was pounding, and he couldn't think.

Steve turned his face to the side, and Tony didn't know if it was out of shame, or if Steve was remembering the war. "I never listened when you tried to talk to me about the Accords. I didn't want to listen to your side, and you never listened to mine. It was about our egos once again, just like at the beginning, both of us seeing only our side of the story and never considering someone else's." Steve faced Tony again, eyes serious. "I would like to listen now."

"Now now? Because now is really shitty time to talk, Steve! It's a little late. Rhodey can't walk. The only friend I have and he can't feel his legs, thanks to our stupid peacock fight. And you---" Tony's jaw snapped shut on the furious words that threatened to spill from his mouth, and his fists clenched in helpless anger. This was really not the right time to have that conversation with Steve.

Apparently, Captain America disagreed, because he met Tony's irate gaze and said, "Go on."

I guess it's time to be a grown up. Tony took a moment to arrange his thoughts, then spoke through gritted teeth, "I can't look at your perfect face without wanting to punch you. I can't---" He broke off as the pain in his head suddenly increased, and he lifted a hand to massage his right temple. The throbbing in his skull was making it impossible to think. "My head hurts," he groaned.

"Boss, you didn't take any painkillers, and the discomfort levels of your---"
"Mute. I'm fine, Sweetie." FRIDAY had surprised Tony by not saying anything sooner. Good girl.

Finally, the captain seemed to understand that Tony was in no shape to have a heart-to-heart, because his voice was quieter when he said, "You should go, you need some rest, Tony."

Any other time Tony probably would have stayed just to spite Rogers, but right now he was tired, and all he wanted was to sleep. So, he gave Rogers a small nod. "We'll talk later."

"Sure. Get some sleep."

"Your fake concern is touching," Tony mumbled on the way to the elevator.

***

Steve Rogers couldn't do anything other than let Tony go. It didn't matter how much he wanted to go after Tony and yell at him to stop being so stubborn and blind, that Steve wasn't pretending to be concerned. He genuinely wanted for them to be friends again. Steve wanted Tony to stop being afraid of him. It killed him to know he was the reason for the fear and panic in Tony's eyes.

Steve turned back towards the common room, intending to spend some time on the sofa drawing some more, but froze when he saw Vision near the window. Of course, he was Tony Stark's faithful watchdog. FRIDAY had probably informed him as soon as Tony arrived.

"Thank you, Captain Rogers," Vision said gravely.

Vision's words didn't make sense to Steve. "For what?"

"You could have disrespected his wishes and gone after him, pressured him." Vision's voice was almost monotone, with only the barest inflection of emotion.

Steve wondered if this was the way people saw him, as someone who would demand that Tony speak to him when Tony was clearly too exhausted for conversation. "Vision, I'm not your
enemy. I'm not his enemy. We may have our differences, but I'm not trying to make his life more difficult."

"You have already done that." Vision stood unnervingly still and focused his eyes on Steve's face.

Steve felt defeated. The calm demeanor from the android hurt more than heated words. "Yes, I know."

"May I ask you something, Captain Rogers?"

"Sure." Steve might as well let Vision ask whatever he wanted, although Steve thought he would probably give a wrong answer and simply disappoint Vision again.

"You lied to him about his parents for years; for Mr. Stark that was the ultimate betrayal of your friendship. You fought against him in close combat. You almost killed---"

"I wasn't going to kill him!" Steve didn't know what he would have done in Siberia if he hadn't been able to disable Tony's suit, but he was sure he would never go that far. Yes, he had attacked Tony, but Steve had only been trying to save Bucky. He would never kill Tony. They were--- friends.

"Please, Captain Rogers," Vision replied. "I am not accusing you. I am merely stating a fact. You almost killed him." Vision closed his eyes briefly, as if in pain, then fixed his eyes on Steve. "He has nightmares of you killing him with your shield. I don't know what exactly you did, I wasn't there and he refuses to tell anyone what happened, but I have seen his night terrors." His gaze flicked to the side of Steve's face, remembering. "I have seen him terrified and shaking in his bed, drenched in cold sweat as he was reliving Colonel Rhodes' fall or your last fight."

Why had Vision been in Tony's bedroom? He made it sound as if it had happened multiple times. Steve knew his anger was irrational, but he couldn't control it, or the need for an answer.

"You left him in Siberia and ensured that he lost half of his family."

Steve had a fleeting sarcastic thought about Vision not accusing him of anything, but truth was that Vision was right; these were facts.
So Steve replied, "Yes." What else could he say?

"Do you think Mr. Stark will ever be able to trust you again, after you kept the truth about his parents' death from him, after he knelt by the broken body of his best friend, scared out of his mind Colonel Rhodes would die in his arms?"

No. That should be Steve's answer. "I have to try, Vision," Steve said in a small voice. "He's my friend."

The conversation might have ended up with Vision asking him why it was so important for Steve to repair his damaged friendship with Tony when Steve clearly hadn't cared before, but they were interrupted by the distressed voice of Tony's artificial intelligence.

"Vision, please, you are needed," FRIDAY stated urgently.

"On my way," he replied, before giving Steve a cool nod. "If you will excuse me, Captain Rogers."

It was obviously not a question, but a statement, because in the next second, Steve was standing in the common room by himself and Vision was nowhere in sight. Steve's head swiveled, eyes searching the room. Where had Vision gone? Did Tony need him in the workshop? Steve paused in his movement, thinking. No, Tony had gone in search of Tylenol. He was probably in his bedroom. But why had he sent for Vision? Had something happened to him?

Steve quickly crossed the room and hurried down the long corridor to Tony's bedroom. He knew he wouldn't be able to enter. Nobody had permission to enter Tony's quarters. Steve's enhanced hearing registered a quiet murmur from behind the door but he couldn't make out the words. Steve recognized the voices as belonging to Tony and Vision, but could determinate nothing more.

So, Tony had invited Vision into his bedroom. Again, Steve felt a stabbing pain in his chest.

"FRIDAY, is Tony alright?" he asked quietly.
"Boss is currently sleeping, Captain Rogers."

She was lying. Another of Tony's creations was slowly slipping the leash and soon they would have to face another Ultron, they would have to save the world again. Steve didn't want to face the same threat, once was enough. They all deserved to have some peace. Steve didn't hesitate. He pounded on the door of Tony's bedroom.

"Please, don't, Captain Rogers," FRIDAY pleaded.

But Steve was deaf to the clever creature's lilting voice. He had to inform Tony. The minute Tony opened the door with a sleepy expression and bed hair, Steve could only stare.

"What is it? Did something happen?"

He saw Tony rubbing his eye. He looked distressed, tired and most of all confused by sleep. Tony could probably pretend all of these signs, but the slurred speech with fatigue, not so much.

"What time is it?"

Tony couldn't have been asleep longer than a couple of minutes. No matter how bad Steve felt for disturbing Tony's sleep, the situation with FRIDAY was more important. "Vision was in your room and your AI is lying to me."

Tony looked at him like he had sprouted two heads. "She can't lie." The automatic response surprised Steve. Like Tony really believed what he'd said.

"It's true. FRIDAY lied to me, and she called Vision to your room." Steve saw a frown crease Tony's forehead before it smoothed out as Tony came fully awake, as if his brilliance had suddenly switched on.

"FRIDAY, care to explain?"

"I did not lie, Boss. I always tell the truth. I can't override that protocol."
Steve almost expected to see frost spreading from the speaker above their heads. How was it possible for the AI to show such emotion in her voice? Steve looked at Tony expectantly. They had to shut her down. They had to stop her before she became another Ultron.

"I know that, sweets," Tony said gently. "Ok. Let's try this again. Did you call Vision?" As he spoke, Tony kept eye contact with Steve.

"Yes."

_Ha._ Steve restrained himself from saying anything, only raised his eyebrow. He had been right.

"To my bedroom?" Tony mirrored Steve, raising an eyebrow, while their gazes remained locked.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I needed another opinion in case I have to call a doctor, Boss."

Doctor? That didn't make sense, at least not to Steve, but Tony obviously knew what she was talking about. He stood frozen with his mouth open, eyes tired and his posture slumped. Then, he visibly pulled himself together.

"She's fine. She's doing what she's programmed to do, Rogers. Thanks. I will take it from here. FRIDAY, tell Vision to come to my room immediately. We need to talk."

"As you wish, boss."

Steve wanted answers. "What's happening?"
"Nothing of your concern. I'll deal with it. Good evening."

Now it was Steve's turn to stand with mouth open, because Tony Stark closed the door in his face as if nothing had happened.
Chapter 8

Chapter by angelmira

Chapter Notes

Re-post 11/2017 with Rebecca's edits

I would like to apologize for the delay. I was on the trip in London and my work schedule didn't cooperate with me when I got back. But I'm back on weekly updates. And again, I can't forget to thank DreadPirateWombat for beta reading the chapter and making it absolutely awesome.

Chapter 08

Tony slumped heavily onto the bed before raising his head to look at Vision. When Tony had gone to bed, he had felt small, vulnerable in the large room. Now, with the presence of his favorite android, the room seemed smaller, almost cozy. Tony rubbed his tired eyes and sighed.

"Do I want to know why you're playing Edward-the-stalker-Cullen on me, Vision?" Tony asked dryly. As he waited for a response, he struggled to keep his eyes open and trained on the android. Sometimes when he was fatigued, sitting in his workshop, Vision would speak a word or two with just the right intonation, and in his exhausted fugue state, Tony would forget it wasn't JARVIS who was speaking. The stabbing pain when he remembered the AI was no longer with him was the main reason Tony always made a point of focusing on Vision's red face or his eyes, never turning his back to the android. Tony couldn't hear only Vision's voice without his heart breaking.

"I don't understand the reference," the android replied, watching Tony calmly.

Of course, Vision was ignoring the stalker part of the question. Taking a deep breath Tony pushed himself to his feet and narrowed his eyes. Before he could say anything, FRIDAY interrupted.

"Edward Cullen," FRIDAY's explanation filled the room, "---is a fictional character from Stephenie Meyer's Twilight book series. He's a telepathic vampire who---"
"Not important!" Tony interrupted. How was this his life? His AI daughter was explaining to his android son who Edward-fucking-Cullen was. His situation was a nightmare. "Thanks, by the way, FRIDAY, but stalling is not gonna help anyone." Tony made a sharp motion with his hand. "Screw the reference, Vision. Tell me, why the hell would you think watching over me as I sleep would be a good idea. What were you trying to accomplish?" The last sentence came out embarrassingly high, and Tony struggled to maintain his focus on Vision and not feel unnerved by the android's stillness.

"Boss, General Ross is on the line."

Tony was beyond exasperated. "We're having a conversation! Stop interrupting, you foolish girl. I'm scolding you and the big-red-one over here. You don't---"

"I'm aware, boss, but General Ross really is on the line from the White House and he's not happy I put him on hold."

***

Tony suited himself up in his workshop, despite his trepidation. General Ross had informed him of an infestation of mechanical robots in Manhattan. The Avengers had been called into action.

The only thing missing from the full body armor was Iron Man's faceplate. Tony stood in front of his workbench, staring at the shield resting on it. He knew he had to give it back to Steve, it was part of Captain America's uniform. It was his main weapon and Steve needed that shield. Giving it to him was the right thing to do. If Tony tried to be petty and hold onto it, Steve would be left vulnerable. He might be seriously injured, especially with his habit of running headlong into a spray of bullets. Tony didn't want Steve hurt. But, God, Tony didn't want to hand the shield back to Captain America, either.

"Boss, Captain Rogers is at the door," FRIDAY interrupted Tony's musing.

"Let him through." Tony didn't need to turn to see Steve in his uniform still standing in the doorway. The computer monitors around his workstation reflected Steve's image. Tony's traitorous heart skipped a beat. He didn't exactly know if it was from fear of seeing Captain America again or simply a reaction to Steve's presence. Tony had been having the same physical response for years.

"You wanted to see me?" Steve looked around the room cautiously.
Tony didn't move from his position. He watched the nervous glance Steve cast about the room, like he wasn't sure exactly why Tony had summoned him. He shifted his feet uncertainly on the threshold, and Tony was grateful for Steve's reluctance to enter the workshop. If he had stridden confidently into Tony's space, certain of his right to be there, Tony would have been hard-pressed not to repulsor him in the face. But Steve looking like he felt he didn't deserve to set foot into Tony's sanctuary, that Tony could live with. He could almost sympathize with Steve's awkwardness. It looked painful.

Finally, Tony turned around and said in a mild tone, "You need the shield." For a few seconds, their gazes met and Tony felt a slight pang of pain in his chest. A year ago, they would have joked about the upcoming battle, alternating between teasing and strategizing with an ease born of battles fought and sleepless nights spent keeping each other's demons at bay. They had been friends. Now, Tony didn't know how to be friends with someone who he feared in the deepest parts of his soul.

The worst part probably was seeing the strain and anguish in Steve's eyes as well. It was obvious that Steve also missed the camaraderie they had shared before the war, but just as clearly he also had no idea how to begin to bridge the gap between them. Tony, too, wanted to repair their relationship, but he could still hear T'Challa's words about festering wounds, and Tony's injury was definitely miles from being healed. They had both screwed up so badly. They had both made so many mistakes.

Steve cleared his throat tentatively. "I don't have to take the shield with me."

Tony knew what Steve was trying to say. He would leave the shield behind if Tony wanted him to. He seemed almost hesitant to possess the shield again. Maybe he remembered Tony yelling at him that he didn't deserve the shield Tony's father had made. Maybe he remembered the sound of glass shattering as he slammed the shield into the arc reactor in Tony's suit. Tony certainly remembered. He heard it almost every night in his nightmares.

Tempting as it was to keep the shield out of hands he no longer trusted, Tony found it unbearable to think one of the Avengers might get hurt because Steve didn't have the shield.

Tony let the golden mask slide down to protect his face, every part of him now covered in armor. "FRIDAY, lock the door behind us." Tony pushed the button for opening the hatch of his exit and flew out, leaving Steve standing in the workshop staring at the shield on the workbench. Tony would not hand it to him, Steve would have to pick it up himself.

***
Later, as the Avengers stood on the ground in the lower half of Manhattan, watching metallic robot spiders heading towards them, Tony felt like his nightmares had come to life. He was standing within arm's reach of Captain America, and his pounding head was making it hard to focus. The headache had been growing steadily since the evening. Tony had forgotten to take some Tylenol before falling asleep, only to be rudely awoken by Steve and FRIDAY later. His eyes burned, gritty with exhaustion, and the pulsing in his head disoriented Tony further, adding to his growing panic. His heart sped up to a staccato rhythm, and Tony felt his breath falter in his chest as he struggled not to hyperventilate.

"Vision?" Tony's voice was sandpaper in his throat, but he fought to calm himself. He knew he could always count on the android to protect him, even if his palms were sweating and his fear rapidly escalating.

"Yes?" Vision didn't even glance at Tony, his eyes were fixed on the robots.

"Everyone is too close. I can't be near so many people."

"It will be alright, Mr. Stark," Vision whispered calmingly. "I am here."

Steve was close enough that Tony didn't think he'd need enhanced hearing to listen to their conversation. The need to fight itched under Tony's skin. With a confrontation only seconds away, inside the armor Tony was fighting a bigger threat than a few metallic monsters in Manhattan - the fear of facing one enemy with another at his side. Tony knew it was irrational. The Avengers were no longer fighting against each other, they were on the same side now. But what if Tony injured one of them by accident? Tony blinked a few times to stop his thoughts and made himself focus. He tried to ignore Steve who was scanning the area in the meantime.

"We need to do this quickly. There are civilians. We can't let them get hurt."

Captain America was establishing who was in charge of the situation. It gave Tony a chance to do what he was good at - fighting, not giving orders. Tony would never protest if there was even a small chance of hurting innocent bystanders.

"Agreed." Hawkeye held his bow in one hand as he reached for a detonating arrow.

"Iron Man, could you clear some of them from the air?" Steve asked, his voice unsure.
It would be almost funny how uncertain Steve sounded instead of his usual command, as if he didn't know if Tony would actually be willing to listen to his directions.

"Hm," Tony made an agreeing noise, and it obviously gave Steve a bit of confidence, because the tone of his voice became surer.

"Widow---"

"I hate spiders," Natasha interrupted him.

Tony seconded that, suppressing a shudder. He could hear Steve giving orders to the other Avengers as Tony itched to take to the air. Flying would help provide Tony with some distance from the rest of the team. He would no longer be in danger of hurting them accidentally. All he needed was his AI. He could do this with FRIDAY.

"FRIDAY," Tony spoke over their private line, taking off rather than waiting for the rest of the Avengers to sort out their positions. "We have our own plan. Attack. What do you say? Will you be my wing-girl?"

"I've got nothing better to do, Boss."

"That's my girl. Now, show me the numbers." Tony hovered at the distance, analyzing the data on the robots FRIDAY was feeding him. Twelve dozen of nasty little buggers. That was way too many spiders.

Tony didn't understand what the still unknown culprit hoped to achieve by unleashing these spider-things in the streets. The robots were easily destroyed, one blast from a repulsor and they were out of commission, and there were too few to even hope to overpower the Avengers. "This doesn't make sense, FRIDAY."

Eventually, as he blasted spider bot after spider bot, Tony stopped thinking. He stopped counting the metallic bodies on the street and forgot his fear at being around the other Avengers. It nearly felt like old times, and he could almost pretend they were in the midst of just another ordinary battle from Before. And just like he always had in the past, despite all the chaos of Hawkeye's explosive arrows, Vision's beams of energy and Wanda's hexes, Tony still took time to intermittently check the HUD for a status on his friends. This was the main reason he was the first
one to see the huge metallic monster, bigger than Michelin Man from Ghostbusters, marching up the street behind them.

The villain's reasoning finally clicked in Tony's mind. The little buggers were only a distraction. Someone wanted the Avengers scattered rescuing the civilians, as Widow and Steve were doing, so they would be vulnerable to this creature.

Tony felt a sudden wave of guilt over not working on his primary Iron Man suit. In it, he would only need to fire the big rockets, and the thing would be ashes. In his current armor, even blasting the damn thing with everything Tony had in the repulsors didn't help at all. The stupid thing seemed indestructible. There wasn't even a little scratch from his weapons.

"What the hell. Stark, what is this thing made of?" Over his comms, Tony heard Hawkeye curse. Clint tried shooting an arrow at the same time as Tony fired his repulsors, and still nothing happened.

"No idea yet," Tony mumbled in response.

Tony tried to analyze what exactly the giant robot's target was. However, it didn't take him long to notice it seemed programmed to single-mindedly go after Steve. It ignored everything else in trying to reach its goal, which seemed to be reducing Captain America to a fine paste on the street. The idea of Steve being injured didn't sit well with Tony.

"Not on my watch, buddy." Tony didn't hesitate, and in a second, he was on the move, trying to get to Steve. He was almost there when something smashed into him and he took a nose dive to the concrete below.

Tony tried to move and almost blacked out. His brain was registering aches all over his body, but the dizziness was the worst. His vision swam, over the comms he heard the young Spiderling teenager arrive on the scene. He heard someone saying Iron Man was down, and he heard Rogers calling his name. For a brief second Tony was lucid enough to attempt to articulate that he was not down, just taking a breather, but his voice wouldn't work. Tony's head had stopped pounding; now it felt like it was going to explode any second. Concussion. Tony knew the signs very well.

"Boss?"
FRIDAY sounded so young, clearly not knowing what she should do. She must have noticed his vitals spike with the pain in his head as she talked, because she severed the comms. Bless that clever girl.

Without the audio input and with his limited vision through the Iron Man mask, Tony was completely cut off from the battle going on around him. He could barely make out the muffled sounds of metal striking metal, and suddenly he was seeing Captain America looming above him... swinging the shield towards Tony's head. His lungs froze and the breath caught in his throat. He could feel the cold slowly creeping in from his extremities, leeching across his skin. It felt just like in Siberia.

***

Out of the corner of his eye, Steve saw Scarlet Witch hexing. She was manipulating the cars and throwing them at the giant robot. Wanda was so focused on her task that she didn't notice Iron Man shooting towards Steve, and a blue car clipped Tony, making him go down. If Tony had been a second slower, she wouldn't have hit him.

There was a loud crash as the force of Iron Man hitting the ground caused the concrete to crack beneath him. Suddenly, Steve found himself kneeling beside Tony, although he couldn't even remember moving. He put one hand near Tony's arc reactor, and with the other one he held his shield up, protecting both of them from one of the metallic spiders and a second later from a blast and the resulting shrapnel when Hawkeye fired an explosive arrow into it.

"Steve! We need you here!"

Steve ignored Widow's pleading voice. He was starting to panic as Tony still wasn't responding. "Tony, Tony, say something---" Steve tore the faceplate from the helmet. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew he should be helping with the scene behind him. He could hear Spider-Man telling the others they could take down the metal giant the same way he had restrained Ant Man at the airfield. Steve knew very well they could use his help, but he couldn't move away from Tony.

"Tony?" Another explosion near them made Steve hunch even more over Tony's body, trying to shield him with his own. Without the faceplate, he could see Tony's pained expression, could hear his barely audible whimpers, and it was killing Steve. Tony's mouth was open, and it looked like he was having trouble breathing. "FRIDAY, give me his status!" Steve practically had to shout to be heard over the sounds of the battle.
"Captain Rogers, please, step away from him," Vision stated calmly as he floated over to them.

"He's hurt." Steve raised his head and stared at Vision with pain in his eyes. He couldn't process the thought of losing Tony, too. "FRIDAY, please." It was obvious talking above Tony didn't help. Tony tried desperately to catch his breath, but he only got worse. The AI finally heard Steve, or she had taken pity on him, because he finally got an answer.

"His vitals indicate---"

"MUTE!" Vision silenced the AI sharply and knelt down on the concrete. Steve didn't even know how it happened, but the android moved him. He then watched in fascination as Vision bent his head, concentrating for a moment and then releasing a calming breath.

Steve had expected Vision to look into Tony's mind for the source of his pain, but soon Steve's mouth opened in astonishment because the android didn't use his powers. He only started to talk.

In a sarcastic tone of voice, Vision stated, "Sir, it's always a spectacular sight to be in your presence and see you working, but you could at least sometimes attempt to adhere to a safety protocol. I would suggest closing your eyes and trying to ascertain your injuries." Vision paused for a moment as Tony squeezed his eyes shut. "Sir, do you need medical attention?"

"JARVIS," Tony sobbed, his entire body shaking. The wheezing was slowly subsiding.

Steve glanced behind himself, just before feeling the world shake with a force of the giant robot hitting the ground. The others had restrained its legs and then let it fall down. Good. Steve turned his attention back to the man lying on the ground. When he realized that Tony had become disoriented to the point of not knowing what was happening around him, Steve understood what Vision was doing. In the past, the only constant presence in Tony's life had been JARVIS, his beloved AI, who signified safety.

"I see your head is harder than the concrete you are currently relaxing on," Vision remarked dryly before toning down the sarcasm and stating, "The date is July 3rd 2016, Sir. You are Anthony Edward Stark. An unspecified metallic object was just conquered in lower Manhattan on a sunny day without your help whatsoever."
Steve saw the slight lift of Vision's lips on the left side. He hadn't known how much of sarcasm the android understood.

"Any other information required, Sir?" Vision repeated the sentence Steve had heard maybe a million times before in the past.

Steve almost felt like he had gone back in time, hearing the familiar words in that voice. He had often heard Vision state very firmly that he was not JARVIS, but right now Steve almost believed otherwise.

"Can you tell me where you are, Sir?"

There was a long moment of hesitation, and Steve made an aborted move towards Tony, but Vision raised his red palm and the single gesture stopped him. After carefully scanning Tony's features, Steve realized that Tony didn’t seem to be hurt after all. In fact, he was now breathing peacefully with his eyes closed.

"Sir, are you asleep or should I involve a medical response team?" Vision asked more forcefully.

From his position, Steve could see the trail left by a lonely tear making its way down into Tony's hair. As much as Vision's voice might have calmed him down from the panic attack, it obviously pained Tony. Steve felt his chest clench in sympathy. He knew how much it had hurt when he had heard recordings of Bucky's voice after almost seventy years. It was gut wrenching to know the beloved voice would never speak to you again. Tony had lost JARVIS, and hearing his voice again must have ripped open the still-healing wound.

"I'm not dreaming that JARVIS is talking to me on the edge of my nightmares, am I? It's you, right? You're the one standing over me at night, calming me and letting me sleep, aren't you, Vision?" Tony asked, his voice flat, without any indication of emotion.

The crispness of Tony's voice was an indication of his lucid and present state. Steve saw the subtle change in the android's demeanor, and suddenly the person replying wasn't JARVIS at all, he was again simply the Vision they knew.

"Yes, Mr. Stark. FRIDAY feared you were in pain, but she was unable to find any physical evidence. She asked me to check up on you for myself. When I started to talk, you calmed down,
so I stayed when I was needed."

"I had a panic attack, because he was above me." Tony had obviously realized the state of mind he had just been in.

The he in question was clearly Steve, and there he was nearby, sitting on his behind feeling like an idiot and the worst person who had ever graced planet Earth with their presence.

"Yes." Vision didn't contradict Tony. "Captain Rogers was shielding you from the blast."

Steve watched Tony open his eyes. He gazed at Vision's face for a few moments in silence. Then Tony smirked, reaching out and letting Vision help him to his feet. To Steve it was obvious Tony's head was still hurting him. His brow was furrowed, and his lips were pressed tight in pain.

"How do you feel, Boss?" FRIDAY asked expectantly.

"A bit concussed, but I've had worse. You're a good girl. Shutting down the comms helped a lot," Tony assured her cheerfully.

Steve saw Tony's eyes flick over the battlefield, assessing the situation. The other Avengers were steadily taking the metallic giant apart cable by cable. One of them was Tony's teenage protégé, so it was only right to acknowledge his efforts. "Good job, kiddo."

"I was here in time, Mr. Stark. I saw it on TV. You should have called me right away. I could have helped sooner. This was awesome, by the way. My first real battle with a bad guy and not the other Avengers. Can I go with you? To the Tower I mean. Dude." Spider-Man kept staring at Hawkeye securing the bow over his shoulder. "Those arrows are so cool. Big fan."

From his slumped position, Steve noticed Tony looking at him. The billionaire knew very well Steve had heard every word between himself and Vision.

"My head hurts like hell," Tony announced abruptly. "I'm going back." Without waiting for a response from the others and with a nod to Steve, Tony launched himself into the sky and flew off into the sunset.
Chapter 09

After the battle against the metal robots, Steve Rogers sat amidst the rubble and couldn't make himself move. He felt paralyzed by the idea of being the reason for Tony's panic attack. The heavy chains around his heart were making it harder to breathe with every minute. Steve had turned himself into a Brooklyn bully with his single-minded pursuit of Bucky and not listening to anything Tony had tried to say. His experiences as both the little guy in Brooklyn and Captain America had left him more stubborn, more determined to fight for what he thought was right, but he had forgotten to consider there wasn't always only one right thing.

The other Avengers stood nearby, nervously shuffling their feet, but Steve didn't hear them. He continued to sit with his eyes focused on Iron Man's golden faceplate lying on the ground. Steve had ripped it from Tony's helmet in panic; he had been terrified that Tony was hurt. The violence of the action must have scared Tony even more.

"Cap, isn't it time to go home?" Sam had lost the battle of eyebrows with Natasha, Clint and Wanda. Vision just stood silently, without any movement, and waited.

"Yes," Steve mumbled distractedly.

Natasha watched the agents on the scene slowly working through the metallic wreckage. People were not very subtly staring their way, confused that the Avengers hadn't left yet. They never observed the cleanup process. "Cap, it's time."

Silence.
Day after day Steve had received more and more proof that Tony couldn't stand him, that they just couldn't go back to how things were Before. He had felt a small glimmer of hope when he and Tony had been able to be in the same room without violently lashing out at each other. Steve had wanted so much to see evidence of even the smallest improvement, anything to give him hope that there was a chance to rebuild their relationship, but perhaps Steve had made too many mistakes. Maybe their relationship had been broken beyond repair and all Steve's efforts to fix it were pointless.

"It's time' means you're moving your ass off the concrete and going home, making peace with Stark." Natasha grabbed his arm before Steve could protest and dragged him to his feet. "Our ride's here."

The government always arranged transport from and to Avengers Tower. The only one who never accompanied them was Vision. He preferred to use his own method of transportation, flight, and often took Wanda with him.

Steve picked the faceplate up from the concrete and couldn't part with it. Natasha situated him in one of the car's backseats and stared at him patiently from the opposite seat. "You know how he feels about you. You told me about the fight in Siberia, where he seemed to be afraid of you."

"You don't understand." Steve's eyes couldn't focus on either her or their surroundings. He couldn't process the impact of what her words meant. His latest conversation with Vision before they had been summoned to the streets was making much more sense.

"Do you think Mr. Stark will ever be able to trust you again?"

Deep down Steve knew the answer was no, but he needed to believe it was possible. He was friends with all the Avengers, but Tony was different. He was special to him. He meant more, and losing that friendship forever felt like fate really did want him to be alone forever. Peggy. Bucky. Now Tony.

"What precisely is it I don't understand?" Natasha didn't take her eyes off him.

"Tony had to be stopped, he would have killed Bucky," Steve stated sadly.
"Wonder why, when he saw the footage of his parents' murder."

Steve hadn't even realized Clint was sitting next to him until the archer uttered this sarcastic response, and in that moment, something inside him broke. He looked at them, desperately searching for understanding. His voice was higher than he meant it to be. "Just tell me what would you have done? He wasn't thinking clearly! He was trying to kill my best friend! I had to stop him! So for God's sake, tell me, what the hell was I supposed to do?"

Steve's hands were shaking, he slowly put them on his knees, just to prevent himself from destroying the car's upholstery or hurting someone. He shifted his eyes to a window and tried not to cry from the sheer hopelessness of the situation. He knew he should have told Tony not to watch the tape, trust him one last time and deal with Zemo instead. Steve should have given Tony the footage and let him take it somewhere private where Tony could watch it alone. Steve should have hidden Bucky somewhere before Tony saw the recording.

But in that moment, it never even occurred to Steve to talk to Tony first. Maybe he wouldn't have been able to persuade him to watch the footage later. Maybe events would have played out the same way, but Steve was only human, a man who made mistakes just like everyone else.

"It's time for you two to talk, Cap," Clint suggested.

"We tried." Steve gathered all of his concentration and looked at him, eyes filled with sorrow. Every sentence he exchanged with Tony led to a disaster. After the war they had somehow forgotten how to communicate with each other.

"Are you kidding me?" The archer scoffed. "You two are never in the same room for five minutes straight. Do you want me to lock you both in a closet? You have to make him---"

"Clint, I already made him do a lot of things," Steve interrupted the advice unhappily. He tried his best to explain. "I made him watch his parents' murder while the man with the same face as the killer was standing next to him. I made him fight against me and Bucky together."

Steve didn't try to erase the guilt from his voice. "And I made him be afraid for his life." The situation was helpless. Looking back, Steve could see the slow deterioration of their friendship, but he couldn't let go. He couldn't lose Tony. "Tony can't be in the same room as me because he expects me to attack him every single second." Steve didn't know how to change that. What could he possibly do to make things right?
"Stark's a basket case of PTSD with a lot of triggers, Cap," Clint stated what was obvious to all of them. "It's my job to look at people, assess their weak spots. With Tony, well, some of them you can spot miles away, others he hides very well." Hawkeye paused, meeting Steve's eyes with a solemn expression. "In the end, though, his endurance of them is extraordinary. He's been fighting all his demons for years, and he's never let them beat him down for long."

Natasha nodded in silent confirmation.

"Stark will get through this as well," Hawkeye assured them.

Steve knew Clint was just stating his opinion and believe in it, but what could possibly convince Tony that Steve would never hurt him again?

"Cap, he knows you're not a bad person. You guys just have to talk it through, try and understand each other." Clint shrugged, and his eyes found Natasha's, the side of his mouth kicking up in a lopsided smile. "You gotta put some effort into strengthening the friendship you guys already had. You need to get the anger out, so let it go."

It wasn't the worst advice Steve had heard from Clint.

When Clint finished, Natasha, who had kept silent through his monologue, at last seemed to come to life. "It won't be easy, but you have to try. For the sake of all of us." And there it was, Natasha's raised-eyebrow-of-death.

Clint smirked. "Yeah. I don't like Mom and Dad fighting. It was awful the first time around."

Steve felt pinned to his seat with Natasha's eyes on him. "I'm listening, Nat."

The eyebrow came down, and Steve felt himself relax minutely.

"What are you afraid of?" the Black Widow asked thoughtfully.

Steve averted his gaze in shame. "I'm afraid--- that Tony's right, that we won't be able to
work through our issue, and I'll lose him." Sometimes Steve looked at Tony and wanted nothing more than to wrap his arms around him on the spot, to shut him up by any means necessary, beg him to stay quiet for five minutes, so Steve could somehow convince Tony to listen to him, to understand their past from Steve's point of view, starting from the moment he had woken up from the ice.

"Do you think you did the wrong thing by protecting Barnes?" Black Widow was relentless in her questioning.

"Of course not. He's my best friend. It's not Bucky's fault he was made into the Winter Soldier. It wasn't in his power to oppose the direct orders. You know that. I know that. And I know Tony knows that. He was right there helping us find Zemo until---"

Steve helplessly shrugged his shoulders. He couldn't finish the sentence. Every night his last thoughts belonged to Tony. Steve remembered very well the way Tony's features had hardened, his expression changing from one of betrayal to hatred. Tony had looked at Steve as if he were a stranger, right before he lashed out with his fist and struck Steve's chin.

"Until he was shown the footage of his parents' murder and you told him you'd lied to his face all these years," Clint finished.

"Yes."

"So? Show Stark there isn't anything else you're hiding. Let him see he's got nothing to worry about from your side, that there aren't any landmines just waiting to blow up in his face."

Steve couldn't say a word, he would never lie.

"But there are," Natasha whispered calmly. "You're still angry with him for Ultron."

Unfortunately, as much as Steve missed Tony's friendship, that was true as well.

"You blame his ego and brilliance, you think he feels the need to always do something extraordinary to show the world how much of a genius he is. You think Stark doesn't care that he almost destroyed the world with his artificial intelligence." Natasha cocked her head, giving Steve a considering look. "You're scared he'll do it again."
That almost summed up Steve's opinions. "He cares," Steve corrected Natasha. "Tony genuinely thinks he's doing the right thing with his AIs, but I'm not from this time and I don't understand them, so I can't trust them." Steve paused to take a breath, measuring his words. "I don't trust people in general. I trust individuals." He wondered for a moment why it was so easy to explain himself to the other Avengers. "I don't know how to connect with AIs. I can't see them or touch them. They can't feel physical pain; they don't feel emotions the way we do. How can we possibly expect them to distinguish between right and wrong?" Steve felt his hands clench into fists involuntarily. "We already saw what happens when they choose the wrong side."

Steve closed his eyes and tried to forget the images in his head. There was a tiny part of his brain screaming that Steve had known JARVIS for years, and he had obviously cared for Tony and the other Avengers, that JARVIS had been good. But at what point did an artificial intelligence go from good to bad? "I'm man out of time who is supposed to fight bad guys. How do I fight something I can't see? That has no physical form?" Steve only realized his fists were still clenched when they began to tremble. He stared at them as he forced his body to relax and his hands to uncurl. "I'm powerless against the threats of technology. I don't understand it, and against a robot or AI, I will always lose. I can't protect others from it." His voice trailed off, and when he spoke again, it was quiet, almost a whisper. "I can't have people dying on my watch again."

After several awkward moments, the heavy silence in the car was broken by Sam. "You can't change who he is, Steve. Stark's a technological genius. If you tell him not to invent things, you'll be asking him to destroy his soul."

Steve didn't want to change Tony at all; in fact, he couldn't imagine a Tony who didn't spend most of his time lost in his workshop, creating mad and wondrous things. He only wished the consequences of Tony's mad genius weren't so grave for the world.

"Let's face it. I don't want him to stop doing what he's so good at. If Tony wasn't such a genius with technology, Clint wouldn't be able to talk with his children, Rhodey would be left helpless for the rest of his life. Hell, we would still be rotting in the Raft if it wasn't for him," Sam pointed out.

Clint added, "He’s a big reason that us homegrown humans have survived going against all the super-powered villains, too. He’s constantly working to improve our weapons and armor. I used to think S.H.I.E.L.D.’s equipment was top of the line, but Stark’s stuff is leagues beyond what they came up with."

Natasha was looking thoughtful, a small frown barely visible between her brows.
"You know," she began slowly, weighing her words, "we never really talked about everything that happened during Ultron, but Steve, do you really not know that Ultron wasn’t all Tony?"

"Natasha---" Clint said, sounding at once uncertain and warning.

Natasha made a sharp motion with her hand as if she was literally cutting off his words. "No, Clint, you can’t pretend she wasn’t partly at fault. She contributed as much to the problem as Tony did, and even with both of them, if it hadn’t been for HYDRA’s programming and the Mind Stone, Ultron would never have become the threat he was!"

Steve stared at Natasha, not even caring that his mouth was hanging open in surprise. He didn’t think he had ever heard Natasha speak so harshly to Clint. Even when the two had fought in Leipzig, their words had been matter-of-fact, bordering on banter. As he recovered from Natasha’s show of emotion, the content of her words began to sink in, and he became confused.

"Are you talking about Wanda?" he asked incredulously. Surely Natasha didn’t hold Wanda to blame for the disaster of Ultron?

Natasha raised an eyebrow at him. "Yes," she replied levelly. "And HYDRA, and the Mind Stone." When Steve simply kept staring at her, she gave an exasperated sigh. She was showing all kinds of emotion today. "Steve, Tony didn’t code Ultron to hate humanity, or even to see eliminating humans as a viable means of protecting the earth. Surely you knew that after hearing his reaction to Project Insight?" Steve’s blank look must have clearly communicated that he and Tony had never discussed the events surrounding the fall of S.H.I.E.L.D. – indeed, Steve had avoided the topic for fear of revealing what he had learned about the Winter Soldier’s involvement in Tony’s parents’ deaths - because Natasha was rolling her eyes. "He was appalled, Steve, and quite vocal. I think Pepper told me he ranted about it for hours a day for a month before he finally realized she wasn’t listening anymore."

Steve had only a second to feel a stab of distaste at Pepper’s attitude toward Tony before Natasha continued. "Ultron was basically like JARVIS, but dedicated to the protection of the earth on a global scale, enabling instantaneous communication between weapons systems across countries, the ability to control satellites. He was supposed to have the personality of a guardian, rather than a butler, but he wasn’t the fanatical and sociopathic monster we fought." Here, Natasha paused, placing her hands in her lap, one gripping the other tightly.

Steve was grateful for the moment of silence because it gave him the chance to slow his breathing. He hadn’t even realized it had sped up, and he had been nearly hyperventilating. Vaguely, he was aware of Clint’s intense focus on Natasha and Sam’s considering silence, but Steve’s eyes remained fixed on the Black Widow as she closed her eyes and took a quiet breath.
"Tony hadn’t planned to activate Ultron. Pepper says he was having difficulties coding in emotion. With JARVIS, he had years of interaction that taught the AI about the world, about people, and how to care. Tony didn’t think he had the luxury of time to allow Ultron to develop a conscience and emotions naturally, but he also wasn’t going to turn an AI on the world that he didn’t have complete faith in." Her mouth twisted ever so slightly in a wry smile. "You know what a perfectionist he is."

At that last sentence, a choked sound escaped Steve’s throat, halfway between a laugh and a sob. He practically felt Clint’s eyes widening in realization, and Sam let out a curse so quiet Steve barely heard it, even with his enhanced hearing.

"When Wanda invaded his mind, she showed him his greatest fear. If it hadn’t been for that, if he hadn’t been so terrified, he never would have activated an incomplete AI," Natasha said in a soft voice. "And even with the program being incomplete, if the Mind Stone hadn’t hijacked it and inserted HYDRA’s code, Ultron still wouldn’t have been anywhere near as much of a threat. Tony had safeguards in place to prevent Ultron prematurely accessing any network. The HYDRA programming had to compromise parts of JARVIS, not just to take him out as a threat, just so Ultron could circumvent the safeguards and access the internet."

A long, long moment of silence prevailed inside the car. Steve’s head clamored as he tried to process everything Natasha had just dumped on him. His chest was tight with conflicting emotions. He had seen Ultron as proof of the danger of Tony’s genius, his recklessness. The way Natasha explained it, Tony had been aware of the risk the AI posed, and – if Steve was understanding correctly – had taken reasonable precautions to prevent Ultron from being activated prematurely. Tony’s “recklessness” of activating Ultron had been spurred by Wanda’s manipulation. And even with Tony not in his right mind, Ultron still would not have had the power and autonomy to plot the human race’s destruction, if not for the additional factor of the Mind Stone and HYDRA’s own coding.

Steve didn’t know why he was so shocked to realize how all these factors had contributed to Ultron. He’d been aware of all of them, that Wanda had invaded Tony’s mind and shown him his worst fear (Tony never told any of them what it was), that the power of the Mind Stone had influenced Ultron’s evolution, and he remembered HYDRA’s programming being mentioned. Despite having all the pieces of the puzzle, it was only now that he was beginning to comprehend how they were connected and fit together.

It was Sam who broke the silence, and Steve’s gaze snapped to him as the other man cleared his throat awkwardly. "So, Tony was basically mind-raped to manipulate him into prematurely activating an AI. And we blamed him for it, even though he had been horribly violated. Then said AI program, which still wouldn’t have been much of a problem to corral, especially for Tony, became exponentially more powerful, and its personality was twisted away from what Tony had originally planned because of a super powerful, magical rock that carried an evil virus written by
Nazis, and we blamed Tony for that as well."

Steve nodded sharply, his throat too tight to utter his agreement, but Sam hadn’t been asking a question, and he continued as if he hadn’t noticed Steve’s silent response. "Then, when Tony tried to create Vision, we believed his mind-rapist---"

Clint made a strangled noise, but Sam just kept talking, "--- instead of trusting him, two of his super-powered team mates attacked him, outside of his armor." Steve clenched his hands into fists so he wouldn’t use them to cover his ears and block out Sam’s sorrow-laden voice. "As if that weren’t enough, after Tony sacrificed what was essentially his son to create Vision and save the world, we didn’t forgive him, still blamed everything on him, and then invited the woman who invaded his most private thoughts onto the team."

"Jesus Christ," Clint breathed, and Steve’s hands spasmed, finally giving in and closing his eyes, unable to look at his team mates. But Clint continued, his voice higher than usual, strangled with emotion, "And then we blamed him for the Accords; we didn’t trust him enough to tell him about the Winter Soldiers." Clint’s next words came out as a hoarse whisper. "I blamed him for the Raft. God, I blamed him for Rhodey falling."

"And then he found out one of his childhood heroes had murdered his parents while the other one had known and not told him," Natasha’s voice was back to its usual smoothness, the lack of inflection making the words hang heavily over the inside of the car. "Then they beat him to within an inch of his life and abandoned him, injured and without means of communication, in an enemy base."

"Man, we are such dicks," Clint concluded.

Steve had to agree. He heaved a sad sigh. "FRIDAY, is Tony alright?" Steve didn't try to mask the worry in his voice. He hoped Tony was already gone to sleep, but Steve was concerned the inventor had buried himself in his workshop again.

"Boss is currently at the government facility, submitting the written report about the incident in Manhattan."

Steve shook his head in disbelief at the cheery voice. FRIDAY had surprised him. He'd expected her to be cool with him, to indicate that Steve wasn't worthy of Tony's time. "Isn't it my job to write the report?"
"Negative, Captain Rogers. Unlike other people, Boss is the official leader of the Avengers Initiative as established by the US government after signing the first version of the Sokovian Accords since you were absent."

There was the sarcastic answer he'd been expecting. Steve almost found it comforting. All three of Steve's companions were barely hiding amused smiles.

Steve heaved a tired sigh. "FRIDAY, I must apologize for not trusting you this evening. I misunderstood the situation. I only want to protect Tony and the world. After the Ultron---"

"I accept your apology." Tony's AI paused for a few seconds, clearly calculating her response. "I am aware of the previous incident with Ultron. I would like to point out I am not Ultron, and in the future, I would---"

Steve heard FRIDAY'S hesitation.

"---appreciate it if you would remember that it is now my job to protect my boss. Your help is not necessary. Sometimes it just causes more problems, Captain Rogers."

"I'll remember that," Steve sighed once more. "Would you be so kind as to tell Tony that I would like to speak with him when he feels up to it." Steve used his most polite tone. The last thing he wanted was to offend the artificial creature again.

"Certainly, Captain Rogers," FRIDAY answered cheerfully.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, Captain."

FRIDAY was obviously addressing him the same way Tony did, just to spite him, and all of the Avengers knew it, too. Steve let her do it with a small smile. "FRIDAY, I have to warn you in advance, if I think you are a threat to Tony or the world, I will tell him and you won't be able to stop me. If I have to choose between you or protecting Tony, I will always protect him."
"That's perfectly alright with me, Captain," she agreed eagerly.
Hello, I'm still alive and I have a few things to say. First, I want to apologize. These past few months were hectic. My friend/co-worker was diagnosed with cancer. So I'm spending half of my time at work and the other cheering her up. It's a long, exhausting process. Sometime I have these amazing ideas, but unfortunately no time to write, or I don't have the energy to do anything more than sleep. But I want one thing to be clear - I'M NOT GIVING UP MY STORIES. It will just take some time to finish them.

Second, I added my wonderful beta as a co-author of this story. And third, merry Christmas to every one of my readers. You are all so wonderful. :)

Chapter 10

Tony was waiting impatiently on a sofa in what had been the Avengers’ living room, on what used to be considered the "common floor", containing a communal kitchen, a dining room with a table capable of accommodating the entire former team and their friends, as well as a game room and one of the gyms. Every few minutes, he rubbed his red eyes, keeping on waiting some more. What was taking the Avengers so long? He had managed to write his report and squeeze in time for quick shower. He’d changed into loose gray sweatpants, a black tank top and a warm gray unzipped hoodie. He'd swallowed two Tylenols and had watched a video on the internet of Steve covering him against the blast in Manhattan. And still the Avengers hadn't arrived home.

Tony had made the decision not to put off his conversation with Rogers any longer. Luckily, his head had finally stopped hurting. Thank God for small miracles. Now if the Avengers would only speed up and get their asses back to the Tower, Tony would be most grateful. All he wanted was to get the conversation over with and then get some sleep. "FRIDAY," he called, brow furrowed slightly with impatience, "has there been an accident or an alien invasion I missed? Why is it taking the others so long to get back?"

"The Avengers have just now entered the building, Boss," she informed Tony, her tone of calm detachment sounding strange when paired with her lilting accent. "I would suggest making it an early night. Although, you would unfortunately miss Captain Rogers by two seconds."

"Sneaky." Tony smiled fondly. Sometimes FRIDAY acted like a petulant teenager, and he loved her even more for it. "What would I do without you, love?"
"Design a new artificial intelligence, I believe, Boss."

Tony stilled for a moment. Did FRIDAY think she was so easily replaced?

She must have noticed his unease, because her next words had an edge of teasing, "I’m sorry, was that supposed to be a rhetorical question?" Tony relaxed at the playful tone. She might not have fully understood what had upset him, but she had still let him know her response was meant to be snarky. He was so proud of his girl.

Tony heard the soft ding of the elevator arriving on the floor, and he purposefully stood up from the sofa when the whole group froze in the doorway. "Let's talk," Tony said, looking straight at Rogers. The others all exchanged nervous glances, and then one after the other they quickly left the room, each murmuring some apology or excuse, allowing Tony to be alone with Steve.

Steve hesitated in the doorway, seemingly reluctant to come further into the room. He shifted his weight, his gaze resting for only a moment on Tony’s face and the dark circles under the genius’ eyes before quickly flicking to some other object in the room. "You need to rest, Tony. FRIDAY told us you didn't sleep well in Wakanda, and the fight today can't have helped."

Tony rolled his eyes at Steve's concern. "FRIDAY is a naughty girl who should reread the definition of the word privacy ."

"Sorry, Boss."

"It's fine. We'll talk later. Here's the deal," Tony looked at Steve. "You want to talk. I want to talk. Let's talk, then."

Steve nodded.

Tony watched him pull the cowl from his head and leave it with his shield and Tony's faceplate on the counter of the bar. Steve then leaned against the granite; his movements and pose had an oddly deliberate feel to them, as if he were hyperaware of his body language. Tony saw it all. No crossed arms. No aggressive posture. Steve was keeping his stance open and relaxed.
"I'm listening, Tony." His voice, too, was carefully neutral.

Tony hesitated for a second because there was something in Steve's voice he hadn't heard before but with a heavy sigh he decided he didn't want to examine the super soldier's every inflection. He wanted to explain himself to Steve, the reasons for his actions during the conflict over the Accords, but how could he discuss something so personal with a person who had betrayed his trust?

Tony had already said most of it before and didn't much feel like repeating himself as each previous time no one had seemed to listen. He didn't want to try yet again to make Steve understand how much he sometimes hated trying to save the world because they didn't have the slightest chance of saving everyone. Sure, the Avengers shouldn't let that cripple themselves or prevent them from trying, but it still hurt Tony deeply when he saw how even a minor mistake could result in the death of an innocent bystander - cue the Sokovian disaster. Saving the world didn’t give them the right to be careless with their actions.

"This," Tony spread his arms helplessly, "is not working. I'm looking at you and all I see is someone I don't know. You never listen to me, and to be fair, I don't want to listen to you either." Tony could see how much self-control it took for Steve not to interrupt, but once Tony started, he couldn't stop.

"I tried to tell you we needed to be more organized, that we needed to be put in check somehow. Not being leashed like dogs and taking orders from government officials who don’t know shit about kicking ass, but something had to change." Tony went on, mercilessly, his anger slipping its leash at last. "When I needed your support with the Accords, when I needed you to just listen and trust me so I could find some way to fix things because people were looking at the Avengers with fear, what was the only thing Captain Perfect could think about?" Tony asked, then answered the rhetorical question himself. "Bucky." The word was bitter in Tony’s mouth, and his stomach churned with a feeling that he refused to call jealousy.

Steve kept silent.

In the face of Steve’s non-reaction, Tony felt what was left of his control snap. The fear of the Captain that had trembled under Tony’s skin for months was suddenly drowned out by his anger. For the first time since Siberia, he wasn't scared of Steve. He took a step towards him and continued, biting out the words. "You didn't give a damn about the Accords once you heard the magic word Bucky. From that moment on you were blind to everything else going on around you." Tony tried to rein in his anger. "You acted like there was nothing more important than him. Which I understand, don't get me wrong."
Tony couldn’t blame Steve for loving someone so much he’d tell the world to go to hell in order to protect them. Science knows Tony would burn the world to ashes to protect his few loved ones. The difference between him and the Captain, though, was that it wouldn’t be his first choice. Tony was mildly surprised that Steve was still watching him without a reaction.

Tony clenched his fists and closed his eyes, trying again to reign get a grip on his anger, and took a deep breath. "I really do get that you love him. You wanted to protect him. I didn't make the situation easy on you either. I was blinded by my own rage towards you and furious with the whole world because we made a mistake and a good kid died. He was a good kid, who would have made some difference in the world, and it was our fault he doesn't have that chance anymore. I only wanted you to listen to---" Tony was out of breath with the sheer force of his rage.

"Do you think you could stop yelling at me?" Steve whispered with eyes full of despair.

Tony froze, looking at him and panting for breath. He became aware of the distance he had crossed. He was now standing right in Steve's face, wildly gesticulating, and he saw the torment and guilt in Steve's eyes. This conversation wasn't helping.

In that moment, when Tony had finally given him his piece of mind, he was utterly flabbergasted by his own reaction. He didn't feel scared Captain America would strike him. He wasn't thinking about Steve attacking him at all. It was as if they were having one of their arguments before the War, before Ultron. Yelling at Steve was so familiar to Tony, and as the venting took the edge off his anger, he could finally consider other things as well. In this case, it was the conversation he and Steve had shared in the conference room after Bucky, Sam and Cap had been apprehended.

Tony remembered that Steve had been about to sign the Accords; that is, until he found out that Tony had asked Vision to keep Wanda corralled in the Compound. The fact that Tony had decided this without asking, or even telling Wanda, had struck a nerve with Steve. It had been the undoing of their truce.

The memory brought Tony up short, and he stood paralyzed, watching Steve's desperate gaze study his face as it made a slow trail from Tony’s eyes to his lips. Tony flinched away, feeling as if he’d just been electrocuted. "Sorry, sorry," he muttered, flustered. What the fuck! Tony moved near the window, putting distance between them, and tried to calm down his hammering heart.

"Boss---"
"I'm fine, FRIDAY. We're having a conversation. Don't interrupt, ok?" Tony’s anger had given way to confusion. He fixed his gaze on the sun setting on the horizon. He sure as hell had to have imagined Steve Rogers looking at his mouth so intently. It didn't make any other sense. He had to be still concussed from the fall.

"Is it my turn to talk?" Steve asked carefully.

Tony closed his eyes, his shoulders sagging with resignation. "Sure."

Steve gave a sharp nod before fixing his eyes somewhere near Tony’s knees. "You're right. I didn't see anything else but Bucky. I didn't want to see anything else. Peggy had just died, and Bucky was the only one who I had left."

Tony turned around. The only one who I had left. Like Tony and the Avengers didn't mean anything to him once Bucky was back in the picture. How could Steve say that? If he had needed a friend all he’d had to do was say the word and Tony would have been there beside him. Hell, all of the Avengers had considered Steve a dear friend. Tony's chest was painfully tight.

"And you're right. I don't want to sign the Accords. We're here to help people, Tony. We shouldn't have to ask permission to enter a country in order to save someone's life." Steve’s eyes moved up to meet Tony’s, expression sober as he held his gaze. "They won't keep their word. Sooner or later we would be forced to sit here drinking tea while somewhere in the world, people would be dying. Their government would deny us entry for some political reason, and the U.N. would consider its conscience clear."

Tony could understand where Steve was coming from. Unfortunately, they didn’t live in an apolitical world. He doubted Steve understood the utter clusterfuck even simple missions could become if local law enforcement and governments actively worked against the Avengers.

"We shouldn't have to sign a piece of paper that lets us be owned, by anyone, whether it’s one government or dozens. We should be able to make our own decisions. We should be able to help people when they need us, protect them when they are powerless, regardless of what the people of power want." Steve closed his eyes, an expression of pain on his face. His voice was softer when he spoke again. "I don't want to be a soldier anymore."

Tony watched him carefully. Was Steve trying to say he didn't want to be an Avenger anymore?
"I want to be someone who's doing the right thing. Maybe if I hadn’t been such a good soldier, I could have found Bucky in time. I could have protected him, gotten him help sooner, then Zemo couldn’t have framed him and he wouldn’t have been incarcerated or used as the Winter Soldier again by Zemo."

Tony sank into the sofa, suddenly feeling every bruise and strained muscle from the fight earlier that day. Part of him understood Steve’s need to defend his best friend, the love of his life, but a larger part wanted to tear his hair out over Steve letting his affection for Bucky blind him to everything else. And another part wanted nothing more than to erase the Winter Soldier from Rogers’ life. Maybe then Steve would finally see that he had friends who cared about him now, even see Tony as a friend. Hell, who was Tony kidding, maybe as more than a friend.

Tony felt disgusted by his own thoughts; he knew it was his jealousy talking. He had to accept somehow that Steve would always be thinking about Barnes first. Tony was just so tired of the people he cared for choosing someone else. But for all that, Steve revealing just how little Tony mattered to him made Tony’s chest ache; he couldn’t just end the conversation there. There was another, very painful, topic that had to be addressed.

Unfortunately, Tony couldn’t find it in him to use any pretty words. "I know it wasn't Barnes who murdered my mom and dad," he stated baldly, "mentally, I mean. His mind was hijacked and he had no choice, but I would have killed him. I still want to kill him."

Steve nodded, eyes closing as if in pain. "I know," he said quietly before opening his eyes again and meeting Tony’s. "And I understand why."

Tony carefully studied Steve’s face. Oh God, he really means it. What the hell was wrong with that fucking super soldier? How could he stand there so calmly and say he understood Tony's desire to kill the man Steve loved, his Bucky? But Tony couldn't deny the proof right in front of his eyes. Steve was sincere. He really was a genuinely good guy, one who’d lost everything in WWII.

"But Tony, you need to understand something as well. I wasn't going to kill you."

Steve’s face was contorted with grief, clearly remembering their encounter in Siberia. Tony didn’t dare breathe in the face of Steve’s obvious distress.
After a rasping breath, Steve continued, "I went for the reactor because it was the easiest way to shut down your suit. If only I could shut it down, you wouldn't be able to hurt Bucky."

Tony still held the air in his lungs due to the intense look Steve was giving him. The super soldier’s expression was a rictus of pain and shame. His next words were measured, flat and unemotional.

"I remember your helmet falling away. I remember your scared face."

The words felt as if they were stabbing Tony in the chest, and his breath rushed out of him through the resulting hole.

"I remember everything, Tony." Steve’s even tone faltered. "I dream about your face every night and I can't describe to you how much I wish I had acted differently." His voice was raw. "But at that moment I ---" The words broke on a sob. "--- I just didn't know what else to do."

Tony felt as if the floor beneath his feet was tilting, his brain felt as if it was glitching. All he could do was stare at Steve who continued speaking.

"I apologize. I would apologize a hundred times, if I thought it would be enough." Steve closed teary eyes with difficulty. "You were like a machine ruled by your pain. You kept going after Bucky again and again, mindless with grief. I had to stop you before you did something you wouldn’t be able to live with. Yes, I swung the shield into your arc reactor, but not with the intention of killing you. You have to believe me," he pleaded.

Tony looked away, unable to meet Steve’s pained gaze. He ignored how his own gritty, red eyes were slowly filling with tears too.

"Tony, look at me. Please," Steve begged.

It was not a good experience to hear Steve Rogers begging for something. A person would do anything to erase the pain and guilt radiating from Steve. Tony blinked away the tears threatening to obscure his vision. He had to struggle not to react as suddenly, Steve fell to his knees mere inches from where Tony was sitting, head bowed and hands grasping his knees. If hearing Steve Rogers begging was a discomfiting experience, then seeing him there, knelt down, literally groveling at Tony's feet, made Tony feel as if his chest was wrapped in barbed-wire.
"Tony?" Steve’s voice was hesitant, as if he feared what Tony would say.

That fear made Tony finally raise his gaze from Steve’s clenched hands and force himself to meet his eyes. He hoped desperately that he had managed to wipe all emotion from his face, that the other man wouldn’t see his feelings in his eyes. Tony felt just as naked and vulnerable as the super soldier in front of him looked.

"Give me a chance to prove it," Steve practically whispered. "FRIDAY?" he asked.

"Captain Rogers?" The AI answered carefully, without inflection.

Steve's eyes never left Tony's. "Could you verify my words by monitoring my vitals? Like with a lie detector test?" he asked with a hopeful tone.

"Boss?"

Bless the AI, she remembered who her daddy was. "Do it," Tony whispered.

"You may speak, Captain Rogers."

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Steve Rogers cleared his throat nervously, trying not to interrupt his eye contact with Tony. He hoped this would prove the truth of his words. Maybe if Tony had confirmation from FRIDAY, he would finally believe Steve. Steve tried to address the most important thing first. "Tony, killing you was never my intention and I would---"

"Truth, Boss," a cold voice interjected.

Steve paused for a second, thrown at being interrupted by the AI. Thank God FRIDAY was able and willing to help him. For a second, he had been worried she might alter the truth. It was
irrational on his part, though. Steve knew Tony had made sure she couldn't lie.

Steve took a deep, shaky breath. He was trying to address the most important points, but all he could think about was the conversation with Natasha and the others in the car earlier. The words he’d planned to say were slowly leaving him. He couldn't seem to parse his thoughts into words. Eloquence had never been his strong suit.

Steve's eyes were filling with tears, and, once again he tried to wrap his mind around how it was possible for a human being to be capable of withstanding so much physical and emotional torture as Tony had experienced. "Tony, I'm sorry. I should have---" Steve’s voice shook.

"Truth, boss."

Steve hung his head. FRIDAY was verifying his words, but he didn't feel relieved. He was at the end of his rope. Sure, Steve had hoped the AI would be willing to listen to him and confirm his words, but what if he said something wrong? This was the most important conversation of his life, and it was already a disaster thanks to his inability to speak his mind.

"FRIDAY, could you, please, stop talking for five seconds and let him finish speaking?" Tony asked politely, clearly seeing Steve's struggle.

Steve was amazed to see patience radiating from Tony’s eyes. It was a familiar expression in the face of the Tony Steve knew well, his friend. "Tony, I’m sorry, for everything. I don't understand your robots and AIs. I don’t understand your feelings for them, but I do know you care for them. I don't understand your genius brain." Steve took a deep breath. "You are so extraordinary," he whispered.

Steve had to swallow, his throat suddenly parched. "I blamed you for Ultron. I always blame you for everything and you let me. I---"

Steve saw it was the wrong thing to say. Tony's jaw clenched, and he averted his eyes. No one would have to translate to Steve that Tony blamed himself as well.

"Tony, I know now that it wasn’t your fault. I know Wanda was partly responsible for messing with your mind, along with HYDRA, and the Mind Stone. I'm sorry for being so dense for such a long time." Steve closed his eyes in regret. "I was a hypocrite. They did the same thing to Bucky and I defended him, but I didn't spare a thought to doubt your guilt." Steve continued,
opening his eyes again, hoping they showed his sincere shame.

Steve gently squeezed Tony's knee in apology for his next words. "Every time you opened your mouth, you were driving me up the wall with all your opinions on Accords, because all I could think about was Bucky being in danger," Steve explained truthfully. He reminded himself that he needed to speak nothing but the truth. "You weren't listening to anything I had to say about Bucky. His innocence and safety seemed completely unimportant to you, and I wanted so badly to shut you up," Steve paused, ashamed.

Steve thought about how much he had wanted to shut Tony up mere minutes ago, when the man had been yelling into his face. Why was Steve's first instinct to silence Tony? He returned his gaze to Tony's face. Tony's mouth was slightly open. Steve's eyes continued to stare at his lips. That first instinct to shut Tony up wasn't to pull him even closer and kiss him, right?

Steve's heart skipped a beat. He slid his hands off of Tony's knees, not listening as FRIDAY explained the nuances between lie and truth. She was explaining to Tony what indicators she used to determine truth or lies and which statement of Steve she had used as a baseline. His instinct to shut Tony up was actually to kiss him? Oh God.

_Christ._ Steve's gaze started to shift somewhere behind Tony's shoulder. He couldn’t possibly be feeling attraction towards Tony. He had never in his entire life thought about another man in that way. Steve could appreciate the aesthetics of a male body, he was an artist, after all. He had spent a lot of time in barracks surrounded only by men, his comrades. Obviously, he had looked at them and seen their beauty, but he had never thought about them sexually.

"FRIDAY, shut it for a moment. Rogers? Rogers! You ok?" Tony's voice interrupted Steve's confusion.

Tony reached for him and Steve instinctively stood, stumbling back several steps. He managed to nod in confirmation. Steve was perfectly alright. In shock, but otherwise perfectly fine. Confused as hell maybe, but fine. It _couldn't_ be an attraction, could it?

Steve couldn't deny he’d always noticed how great Tony looked in his expensive suits or how good Tony smelled thanks to his expensive aftershave, or how sexy he looked in the tight undersuit he wore to pilot the Iron Man armor….. _Oh Jesus, Mary and Joseph!_

"What about the Accords?" Tony asked expectantly.
"What about them?" Steve managed to reply after several breaths and blinking a few times. His mind was spinning in confusion, and he couldn't focus on Tony's words. Steve had failed to notice he had feelings for Tony. God, obviously, he had feelings for Tony. Steve had always chosen to focus more on his irritation with the man, never examining his feelings in depth.

"Jesus! Are you even fucking listening to me?" Tony yelled, suddenly furious once more.

Steve backed up again when Tony angrily stood from the sofa and strode towards him. No, Steve wasn't listening. It was his fault again! Steve had gotten lost in his thoughts when they were having the most important conversation of their lives. The honest and raw emotion in Tony's face was gone, vanished in the blink of an eye. Steve shook his head and forced himself to focus on Tony.

"I want to know what you think about the new Accords, for God's sake! Every time I want to know your opinion, you start talking about Bucky. Barnes is not an Avenger."

No one had to explain this fact to Steve. He knew it very well but couldn't seem to frame any words to reply. He could only back away even further in the face of Tony's anger.

"Barnes is not a part of this world at the moment. He's playing Sleeping Beauty. I need to know what you think about super heroes and their rights. Right now, that is a bit more important than Barnes, don't you think?" Tony asked viciously.

"I will sign," Steve stated calmly. It was the easiest way out, the coward's way out, but he took it. "If you go over them with me and they are amended." Steve still didn't agree with any government having full control of the Avengers. "There have to be modifications."

"Of course. I'm working on them," Tony said dismissively, as if it were an indisputable fact. But his casual tone couldn't disguise the hope in his eyes as he looked at Steve.

"I believe you. We need to have the right to say no to the orders. We cannot allow ourselves to become an attack squad, to be dispatched at the government’s will," Steve insisted.

"I know, Captain Obvious. We’ll have to pacify the government first, play along with them for a while, but eventually we’ll be able to get the support we need to make those changes."
Steve watched Tony as he gestured wildly, his hands and arms waving. Tony was putting so much of his energy into altering the Accords so that their rights were protected. And none of them ever appreciated it. He was doing so much good in their world and nobody saw it or even acknowledged it.

"Do you think I trust them, Captain Naive? They’ll throw us under the bus the first time anything goes wrong."

Steve was convinced of that too.

"But we need them. We have to show the people that we are not dangerous, that we are willing to listen to them. We need to show that we care about the consequences of our actions, that we can play with others and at least try to minimize the damage we cause. So we need to cooperate for the time being." Tony paused, straightening his spine. His next words were spoken with determination, "I will gladly go through the Accords as many times as it takes to make them as fair as possible. And I’ll go over them with you as many times as you want, just give me a chance to show them to you, Steve."

Steve's stomach dropped to the floor. How long had it been since Tony had called him by his first name without meaning it as an insult? He had missed that. He missed the friendship that used to exist between them. He missed the easiness and camaraderie of their interactions. The ache of not having Tony on and at his side was killing him. Steve forced his hands to stay motionless at his sides. He wanted so much to reach for Tony and hold him close.

"If you don't sign, Steve, sooner or later, they will divide us again. You said it yourself. We can only make a difference when we're together." Tony urged. "Who knows what will happen next time? Once the public is no longer afraid, they’ll be more willing to relax some of the strictures in the Accords. Once they’re no longer afraid of us, I can charm the pants off the whole world if I have to. I swear I can convince them. I swear I can---"

"I know, Tony." Steve didn't doubt Tony's skills. Hearing his pleading ramble made Steve’s stomach churn with guilt. Tony shouldn't have to convince Steve of anything, he should be able to trust that Steve would support him. He tried to fill his voice with conviction as he spoke, "I believe you, Tony. I trust you."

Tony visibly flinched at Steve’s words, and Steve’s stomach clenched at the naked vulnerability on the other man’s face. It took visible effort for Tony to relax his posture. Steve swayed forward, wanting to go to him, but Tony held up his hand, stilling Steve’s feet. Tony closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Okay," he said softly. Then he gave a sharp nod, as if to himself, before opening his eyes and saying more firmly, "Okay." There was a pause as if Tony
expected Steve to continue speaking, but when Steve remained silent for several moments, Tony spoke again. "Alright, what else do you need to tell me?"

Steve was having a hard time remembering what had originally bugged him so much about Tony’s actions surrounding the Accords. He honestly couldn't remember why they had fought so much. Well, almost couldn't remember. "No more confining Wanda for her good. You can't put her under house arrest. That's not right, Tony."

"She's free to go anywhere she wants. I promise," Tony agreed quickly. "She's head over heels for Vision, by the way. Did you know she dropped him through the floor? Now she feels so guilty she can barely look at him." Suddenly, all the energy seemed to drain out of Tony. He rubbed at his eyes, looking exhausted. "We messed up, Steve. And Rhodey---" his tired voice trailed off.

Steve didn't understand why Tony was still so focused on discussing the Accords fallout and the issues between the two of them when it was obvious Tony was exhausted. Internally, Steve heaved a frustrated sigh. Tony was always pushing himself to extremes, disregarding his body’s needs when he felt there was something he should be doing, whether it was upgrades for the team, designs for SI, or helping rebuild a city damaged by a battle. He was selfless that way, even after all he’d been through and a lifetime of others betraying his trust. He deserved so much more than that. He needed someone who would take care of him. Steve might not be that someone, but he could at least try to get the genius to develop better self-care skills. So instead of responding to Tony’s last sentence, Steve gave him a straightforward look and said, "You should get some rest."

"I'm fine," Tony sighed waving a hand dismissively. "So. Wanda. Anything else?"

Steve pushed his concerned thoughts about Tony’s probable sleep deprivation aside and pulled them back to the current conversation. He needed to be focused on the topic at hand and keep his attention on Tony’s words. Tony deserved at least that much. "This thing with the U.N., I don’t trust them. They have their own agenda."

"Every single organization and individual in the world has their own agenda, Cap. We're not any different. You can say to yourself that we are only trying to help people, but the truth is we all have our own motivations and agendas that affect our decisions and how we approach that help."

Tony’s posture straightened, and he spread his arms wide. "Personally, I don’t think we’re doing enough to help." His arms dropped to his sides, and his voice was firm as he continued, "And we can’t know where we’re needed and what kind of help to give unless we listen to those who we’re trying to help. Super strength and repulsors don’t rebuild roads or heal broken bones. Sometimes, what we’re best at isn’t what’s best for the problem. And we should be willing to help
outside of the battles we fight."

Steve had to admit he agreed with Tony. The Avengers were famous. They should have been using that fame to help people, not distancing themselves from the public, only venturing forth to fight the big villain of the week. Tony was right that there were things they could do to help other than fighting.

Tony continued, "We're destroying innocent lives by accident, and we haven’t been looking back at our mistakes to see whether we could have done better, avoided some collateral damage, saved more people. That's what the incident in Sokovia taught me. I'm not saying it's wrong to fight to protect people, just that there’s more we should do when the battle’s over and the dust clears."

Tony had started to pace around the room, gradually gravitating to Steve's shield where he carefully touched the long marks from T'Challa's claws. He closed his eyes, an expression of pain flickering in them so briefly Steve wasn't even sure it had actually existed. "And I’m not saying it’s wrong for us to protect our teammates and friends." Tony huffed out a humorless laugh. "Hell, if I’m being honest, if there ever was a situation where the life of one Avenger was balanced against an innocent bystander, I would choose to save the Avenger. Even knowing the guilt would kill me later, I would still try to save my friends first."

Tony let out a sigh, his shoulders drooping slightly, and he turned toward Steve, his fingers still lingering in the grooves left on the shield. "So, you see," he said, eyes meeting Steve’s, "I do get why you had to---" Tony’s voice halted, and his brow crinkled, as he seemed to struggle to find the words he wanted to say.

Steve watched the brunette closely. He knew instinctively that whatever Tony was trying to tell him was important. Steve took in the shorter man’s posture as his mouth twisted, searching for words. The genius held himself upright, his entire body seeming to strain under an invisible weight, as if the responsibility for the entire world rested on Tony’s shoulders alone. The fact that he was fumbling for words was the biggest surprise for Steve. Tony Stark never had problems expressing his opinions, or hiding them for that matter. He was a master of using words to both stab directly to the point and to create a veil with which to distract and mislead. But now, instead of the confident barrage of opinions, science, and snark, Tony looked lost, not only for words, but just lost.

"If it had been my best friend in danger, I would have gladly given up my entire world to save him. Hell, at this point, I would give my entire fortune just to have Rhodey walk again."

Steve's chest clenched with grief, guilt, and, shamefully, a bit of a jealousy. He was constantly forgetting Tony's best friend. Steve never doubted how much Rhodes meant to Tony. If
someone asked Tony to choose between the Avengers and Rhodes, Steve didn’t doubt for a minute that he wouldn’t hesitate in picking Rhodes. Rhodes was Tony's Bucky. Tony would abandon everything, fight anyone, to protect him. Just as Steve had.

"Can I ask you something, Tony?" Steve knew he had to pick his next words with the utmost care. He finally had the opportunity to explain the reasons for his actions. He could explain all the thoughts and feelings that he’d had during the Accords conflict, and Tony would finally understand. "If the situation had been reversed, if Rhodey were in the same position as Bucky, would you let him be prosecuted for something he’d done while not in his right mind, while he wasn’t in control?" Steve was glad when Tony didn't interrupt and appeared to be listening to him. "Bucky can't bear the blame for actions done against his will, actions he would never have taken if he had been mentally in control." Steve tried to smile apologetically at Tony, but he felt it twist on his face with shades of regret and resignation, and the tiniest bit of hope. "I can't accept the decision that he is guilty of the Winter Soldier's crimes. To me, he's innocent."

Tony's face had gone blank, all emotion seeming to have drained away.

Steve felt his tentative smile collapse, but continued speaking, regardless, his eyes pleading for Tony to understand. "You know just as well as I do that the current US government and whoever comes after will be just as corrupt as all those that came before. And the U.N. doesn’t seem any better. They don’t want to view Bucky as a person, they just want a scapegoat, a threat they can neutralize to make the public happy. And I won't hand him over. "If I have to," Steve stated firmly, "I will stand between him and anyone who seeks to hurt him. I will not let him be sacrificed for a political agenda." Steve's spine tingled with nerves; he had told Tony the truth. If Bucky ever woke from cryo freeze, Steve would be on his friend’s side, no matter who stood against him. He held his breath, waiting for Tony’s response.

Tony averted his eyes, his face remaining eerily still otherwise, and said in a voice devoid of inflection, "I've already spoken to the U.N. and the Attorney General. They've agreed not to prosecute Barnes for the Winter Soldier’s crimes, provided he agrees to a psychiatric evaluation, and to adhere to any treatment recommended. He’ll have to engage in treatment until his doctors clear him, but as long as he cooperates and works to get better, he won’t suffer any legal consequences." Tony’s eyes met Steve’s with defiance, and his next words were no longer spoken in a flat tone. No, this time Tony practically spat them out. "So, what more do you want from me? To be friends with him?" Tony let out a strangled, ugly laugh. "I can't. I can't even think of him without seeing his hands around her throat. I definitely don't want to see his face." His next words were quieter and bitter, as if he expected Steve to blame him for them. "I wouldn’t trust myself if I did."

"You don't have to," Steve quickly assured him. Steve hadn’t even considered the idea of Bucky and Tony even being in the same building, let alone in the same room. "I don't expect you
to ever interact with him, even if he wakes up. I just want you to understand that if someone, by whatever means, finds out he's in Wakanda, and they try to turn him back to the Winter Soldier, even if they don't succeed, I will hunt them down and destroy them, no matter who they are. I won't consider the consequences, because I have to protect him, Tony."

Steve desperately hoped his reasoning was making sense. How could anyone expect him to abandon his first true friend? "I wasn't there for him when he needed me the most, but I will be now, because he's my friend."

"Friend."

Steve watched the ugly smirk crawl across Tony's face. His tone made the word an insult, and Steve knew that somewhere in his explanation, he'd made a mistake. In the blink of an eye, the Tony Steve knew was gone. His Tony was gone.

"So was I."

The words came out harsh and rough, as if they had forced themselves out of Tony’s throat. They sounded like it hurt Tony to say them, and in that moment, Steve heard an echo of Tony's broken voice in Siberia.

"So was I."

Three small words that shouted a terrible accusation. In the silence that followed, it was clear the peaceful and understanding atmosphere between them was gone too. Steve had said the wrong thing, of course, because he always did. Steve wanted to scream with frustration as the room filled with tension again. Instead, he pleaded, "Please, don't do this, Tony. Not again." Don't push me away. Steve had tried to find it in his heart to consider the Winter Soldier an enemy, but he just couldn't. Bucky was his friend, and Steve would never abandon him, whether Bucky recognized him or not.

Tony’s face remained blank. When he didn’t respond to Steve’s words, the blond tried again. "Regardless of what you think, I have always considered you my friend." He tried desperately to infuse his sincerity into the words. "I hate that I had to choose between the two of you." Steve's eyes had begun to sting. "From the moment we got over our issues, the moment we stopped fighting and started working together, Tony, your friendship... meant a lot to me. I would have been lost without you, and I am so grateful for everything you've done for me, all the time we just spent talking." Now Steve’s throat was closing up, and he had to force the next words out past an emotion he refused to identify. "I never intended to make you think you're not just as important to me as Bucky."
Steve realized that, yet again, he was talking about Bucky. Thinking back on some of their previous conversations, he could understand why Tony seemed to hate hearing about Barnes so much. Steve flinched internally, remembering with embarrassment how he had acted and the things he said. He had been so overjoyed to get his best friend back - still was if he was being honest - that he must have sounded like a smitten schoolgirl to Tony. He’d acted like a naive, infatuated idiot who couldn’t see past his worry about his best friend. Concerns, like the rights and safety of people with superpowers, hadn’t penetrated his childish joy at having Bucky back. No, Steve had abandoned his team and let the responsibility for the Accords fall on Tony's shoulders alone.

Tony's eyes hardened, his voice had sharpened. "Me and T'Challa, we invested a lot of time and money in keeping your precious Bucky safe."

Steve felt a painful twitch the moment Tony spoke the word *precious*, like Tony was saying something else, something terribly important, that Steve couldn’t quite grasp. "I know. I'm grateful to both of you. You have no---"

"You could express your gratitude by never letting him out again," Tony interrupted Steve coldly, turning away and going back to the window.

The sun was almost touching the horizon, its light bathing the world in orange and pink. Steve watched Tony turn away with an ache in his chest. He yearned to go to him because, at that moment, Tony Stark looked terribly lonely. The sight of Tony like that made Steve's chest give another painful squeeze.

Tony was obviously aware of Steve staring. He moved deliberately as he crossed the room to the bar and poured himself a drink.

"When I was gone, I wanted you to lead the Avengers," Steve whispered. Of course, it was the wrong thing to say, again. Steve bit his tongue on a curse as he saw Tony's shoulders tense. But they had to address this one last thing, something they’d never talked about. Steve sort of hated himself for it. He felt like he was tearing at Tony’s wounds, but he couldn’t stop now. They needed to let the anger out, so both their wounds could heal. So they could rebuild their relationship, Steve hoped as friends, maybe more, but at the very least they needed to be able to work together.

"Really? And which Avengers exactly was I supposed to fucking lead?" Tony’s hands gripped the bar, white-knuckled, and the gaze he turned on Steve seethed with anger. "War Machine couldn't walk. Vision's world was upside down without Wanda and with the guilt of hurting Rhodey. Natasha was gone. You lot were all in the Raft. Thor has been off-world since
right after Ultron and Bruce doesn’t have the balls to come back."

Steve kept silent, because he finally understood the depth of Tony’s anger and bitterness. Even before his parents’ deaths, Tony had been all but alone. After becoming an orphan, the isolation and loneliness would have only gotten worse. The only person Steve knew of that had been with Tony through thick and thin was Rhodey. Other than the colonel, Tony had never had a person who stayed by his side regardless of the situation. He had no extended family, his godfather had tried to kill him, and even Pepper Potts had eventually left when he needed support the most. Hell, other than Rhodes, the longest relationships Tony had ever had were with his robots and JARVIS, and then he’d lost JARVIS as well.

"You took the team and your precious Bucky and fucked off to Wakanda, leaving me to deal with Ross and the U.N. alone. And it was alone; Rhodey was recovering and struggling with his physiotherapy, and Vision just reminded them of how different super powered people are, which made them less accommodating to amending the Accords."

Steve watched the muscles in Tony’s back tense even further, one hand releasing its hold on the bar and grabbing a tumbler filled with amber liquid. *It’s probably Scotch*, Steve thought, a little hysterically, *Tony loves Scotch.*

Tony’s hand clenched around the glass so tightly Steve feared it would crack. Instead, Tony tossed back the entire tumbler, taking a few gulps of air before he continued in a voice so viciously bitter it made Steve’s teeth curl. "And that fucking letter. You were so magnanimous to leave the Avengers to me, after your actions, well, I’d say tore us in half, but you definitely got the bigger share in the divorce." He gestured expansively with the glass, injecting false cheer into his voice. "And I’m supposed to be flattered and grateful that you wanted me to lead the team?"

Suddenly, Tony whirled, whip-fast, pitching his glass into the wall next to Steve’s head, his voice growing louder, angrier. "So, sorry, if I don't appreciate your fucking generosity in leaving me the Avengers. Sorry, I can't see you sending me a fucking letter with a half-assed and self-righteous apology and a fucking flip-phone as a fucking peace offering!" Tony’s eyes burned into Steve, and his chest heaved with his breaths as if he’d just run a marathon or sparred five rounds with Natasha. His jaw and fists were clenched as he sucked in air noisily through his teeth and nose.

Tony practically vibrated with anger, his skin gleaming with sweat, and the tension in his body making each muscle stand out in sharp relief. Despite his shorter stature, he seemed to tower over Steve, filling the room with his intense presence. Steve choked on his breath as he took in the sight of Tony. *He’s magnificent*, Steve thought. Possibly for the first time since the serum, Steve felt small. His heart stuttered in his chest, and he wasn’t certain if it was fear of Tony or something else.
Steve shifted nervously on his feet. With Tony’s reaction, it was clear they were finally at the heart of the problem. Other than Siberia, Steve had never seen Tony lose control. Sure, he’d heard Tony swear, and he’d listened to him verbally eviscerate people who angered him, but he always maintained a tight rein on his emotions, never letting them overwhelm him. There was always a certain calmness, a coldness almost, even when he was clearly furious. Steve thought it probably came from a lifetime of living under the media’s scrutiny. Sometimes, when Steve had taken out his frustrations on the heavy bag Tony had designed for him, he’d wished that Tony didn’t have to always be so controlled, that he could just let go and let his anger out.

Now here he was, cursing, voice raised, his violent anger covering wounds Steve had helped to dig anew, and Steve would give anything to calm that rage, soothe that hurt. He fought the desire to go to Tony; proximity would just make it harder for Steve to get his words out. He was sure any explanation he gave would only anger Tony more. As much as Steve wanted to avoid that, he knew they had to resolve this issue if they wanted to move forward.

So Steve took a deep breath, hands moving forward, open in supplication, and as he spoke, he begged with his eyes for Tony to understand. "I had to get Bucky out. If I hadn’t, you would have kept going after him until one of you was dead. Just tell me what I should have done? I didn’t want either of you to die, but I couldn’t get through to you, and while Bucky hadn’t gone for the kill yet, I was so afraid he’d slip into the Winter Soldier if you kept attacking him. And the Winter Soldier would have killed you. So, explain to me how should I have stopped the fight, without letting you kill him?" It always came back to Bucky.

Tony abandoned the bar counter, moving back to sofa and sinking into it with an exhausted sigh. Steve could only follow the smaller man with his eyes and pray for a miracle. They had finally had the conversation they needed to have and it hadn’t helped at all. The distance between them still seemed miles wide. There was only one way to maybe bridge the gap between them. Honesty.

"Tony, I don't want to go back to the way things were. I can't---" Steve was at a loss for words. What was it he couldn't do? "I can't bear the idea of losing you."

They were looking at each other silently. Steve's heart started to beat faster, desperately hoping Tony would feel the same.

"FRIDAY?" Tony finally spoke.

For a moment, Steve didn't understand what Tony was asking his AI. Then it clicked, and he
closed his eyes. Of course. He’d forgotten about the lie detector.

"All truth, Boss."

Tony nodded, a sharp jerk of his head, then abruptly stood up. He sauntered towards the hall with a negligent wave of his hand and a flippant, "Well, don't worry, Cap. I'm used to people choosing someone else." He bestowed a quick smile upon Steve, a twitch of lips and then it was gone. "Well, now that that’s been dealt with, I'm going to bed." Tony turned his attention from Steve to the AI. "FRIDAY, call the clean-up crew and get them here tomorrow. I've made a bit of a mess."

"Already done, Boss."

"Good girl."

"Tony." Steve carefully put his hand on Tony's arm, stopping the brunette as he strolled past. Steve remembered very well all the times Tony had shrugged his fingers off, but this time Tony simply looked at where Steve’s hand rested, before raising his eyes to meet Steve’s. Steve looked at him helplessly. "I'm sorry I'm not better with words, Tony. I'm not a speaker. I'm just--- a soldier."

"You're doing fine for now, soldier boy," Tony winked at him, but Steve knew it was still a carefully crafted mask. Tony's emotions were currently hidden somewhere deep down where Steve couldn’t see them. He kept staring at Tony, desperate to fix, to heal the bleeding wound between them. The silence went on long enough that Tony's shoulders began to relax.

"I was an idiot," Steve finally confessed. "You are so---" He heard Tony holding his breath. Steve needed to find the right word. "---extraordinary."

Tony looked at him with surprise. For a second something in his gaze changed, but with the next blink, it was gone from Tony's eyes. "Go shower," Tony told him, patting his hand kindly. The genius gave him a small smile. "You're stinking up the place."

Steve let his hand fall away. "Does that mean---" Steve didn't even dare hope.
"---you're off the hook?" Tony interrupted. "No, but we'll just have to see where we go from here. With our track record, one of us could be dead tomorrow and it would suck to have this still hanging over us." He shrugged before turning away and striding down the hall. "Plus, I'm tired of fighting, and I really don't want to spend energy on another conversation about Barnes."

Steve let Tony go and watched his retreating back.
Chapter 11

Tony slept for almost fourteen hours with astonishing peacefulness of fitful sleep. The nightmares eased thanks to his exhaustion. Some might say it was due to his conversation with Steve, but he didn't want to admit the fact to himself. He wasn't that far down the road as to give the Captain Perfect that much credit. No one would make him admit that.

After a rejuvenating shower with his thoughts still going back to the way Steve looked with raw honesty written on his face, Tony slipped into his gray sweatpants and white tank top and headed for his workshop. It was time to do something productive, and thinking about Steve was not supposed to occupy his precious time.

"FRIDAY, anything new?" Tony mumbled, distracted by the weight of Rhodey's wheelchair he was currently situating on the workbench.

"Captain Rogers has asked repeatedly about your health, Boss. You were in your rooms for too long for his liking, and he had appeared to be concerned."

Tony frowned upon hearing the amused tone of his AI. "Who bothers with counting the hours of my sleeping schedule?"

"I may have been at fault. I wasn't too forward with sharing the information about your current state and told him you have a new unspecific sleeping pattern," FRIDAY admitted nervously.

She was equivocal with Steve. "Tell him I'm awake and working. The rule holds. No one in." Tony gathered his tools and again found himself with his thoughts going back to the super
soldier. He was sure, though, that the work would cure him of that. Not everything in his life was about Captain I-want-to-be-your-friend-but-Bucky-means-more-to-me, then why the hell couldn't he stop thinking about him?

Tony tightened his grip on the screwdriver, and with a few moves of his head, he managed to ease the tension in his neck. He studied the printed blueprints of the wheelchair he had made the previous day.

"I already did that, Boss. I have been instructed to ease his concern once you're awake. In secrecy, I have to add."

In secrecy. Tony smirked. He could almost picture it to the detail. FRIDAY telling Steve he was alright and at the same time insinuating Steve's concern had been justified.

Tony considered his creation on the workbench. His thoughts were again occupied with Steve. He abandoned the wheelchair completely with a frustrated sigh. It was pointless to invent something when his head was stuck in a different place. He thought back on FRIDAY's comments and turned. "FRIDAY, why are you talking to him now?"

"Is that wrong of me, Boss?" FRIDAY's unsure voice made Tony think about his question again. He knew his AI sometimes needed guidance and didn't want to disappoint him. He could always count on her being on his side of things, but it suddenly looked like she changed her mind about Steve. She wasn't as vicious as before. She sure as hell was still giving him a hard time and was evidently evading his questions, but something had changed for her.

"No. We're good, but I feel like I missed something." Tony creased his brows thoughtfully. "What secrets are you keeping from me, baby girl?"

"No secrets," she replied without hesitation. "I did a detail analysis of Captain Rogers' behavior, his vital signs and decided to--- give him some slack?"

FRIDAY had added the last part after a moment of careful searching for words. "Ok. Care to explain your scientific analysis of Steve Rogers?" Tony turned when the bright big holographic projection materialized behind him. FRIDAY played the same video from yesterday for him, only now in high definition.

Tony could see Captain America freezing for a second when he saw Iron Man hitting the
concrete, then speeding towards Tony, hunching over him to cover the suit from a metallic spider and the explosion, and then Vision arrived. Steve was saying something to the android.

"Stop." Tony made a hand gesture.

The screen froze in place.

"FRIDAY, zoom in on his face. Rewind it to when Steve was talking. Good. Wait. Play it again." Tony didn't have any decent audio input since the Avengers were destroying the metal monster in the background. The scene had been one big loud clatter of noise. People were screaming on the streets. As much as Tony wanted to, he couldn't isolate the sound of one certain voice, but he wasn't a genius for nothing. There was a chance to figure out what was Steve saying. Tony would have to read his lips.

It took some time, but Tony finally understood. *He's hurt.* That's what Steve told Vision with agonizing eyes. With a heavy heart, Tony let the screen freeze on Steve's face. No one would fake this much concern. Especially not the super soldier who never lied, and his features were like an open book. Well, almost never lied, but Tony didn't want to open up that can of worms again.

This was Steve's *the-world-is-going-to-end* face, and the soldier was making it because of Tony. As if the idea of Tony hurting hurt Steve as well. As if Tony was important enough to Steve to cause that face. And screw the super soldier, because it was fucking with Tony's head.

Tony threw the screwdriver across the room in a desperate attempt to release his sudden anger. It was the love thing again. He could write an essay about how to be in love with a person you don't want to love. This time he couldn't lie to himself, because the truth was staring him in the face too openly. Tony wanted to be important enough to Steve. Tony wanted to be the person Steve would choose first over anybody, but at the same time he hated that feeling. It made Tony too vulnerable.

Tony stared at the image of Steve's face until the anger slowly slipped away. Due to the detail of Steve's concern, he couldn't get yesterday's conversation out of his head. Well, not the conversation per se. That one moment when Tony had been absolutely sure Steve Rogers had looked at his lips and thought about kissing him.

Tony wanted nothing more than to forbid his thoughts to even go there. It was not possible. It was absolutely pointless to think about it, after all, it couldn't be true. Steve had loved Peggy Carter for half of his life and the other half he had spent pining after his supposedly dead friend. He sure as hell wouldn't have feelings for Tony.
But in the deepest parts of his heart, Tony wished it could have been true. He needed to know for certain. "FRIDAY, do you have footage of me talking with our precious leader yesterday?" He needed a proof.

"Only the audio, Boss."

Tony sighed heavily. Damn. Of course FRIDAY didn't have it. How could he have forgotten? He could almost hear the lecture from his AI. She didn't disappoint him and continued her explanation.

"You prohibited cameras in the Tower, Boss. To quote your reasoning: ‘The Avengers deserve to have their privacy,’" FRIDAY stated patiently.

"Yes, I know." Tony remembered their discussion. He hadn't wanted security cameras around. The only places permitted to recording were the entries and exits of the Tower. He must have had a moment of weakness to think the Avengers deserved anything, that could be the only explanation, Tony thought sarcastically. Right now, he just wanted to know if he was right or if he was imagining the thing between himself and Steve.

"Do you want to listen to the audio file, Boss?"

Tony wouldn't learn anything that way. "No, thanks. Speaking of privacy," with a sad sigh, he decided he needed to address one important thing with FRIDAY, "Care to explain why you were discussing my sleeping habits in Wakanda with the Avengers? Steve mentioned it yesterday."

"I was not discussing your habits, Boss," FRIDAY defended her situation, but her tone suggested she felt guilty. "I pointed out it was not a good decision to throw you a welcome home party since you had not been sleeping well abroad."

Tony shrugged his shoulders in exasperation. Welcome home party. Clint's idea. Tony was absolutely certain Steve Rogers wouldn't come up with something fun to do. He stopped his line of thoughts, horrified with himself. He was so used to think about Steve as an enemy or someone who would make his life a thousand times harder. It was like at the beginning when they had met. "Ok, we're done for now, honey."

Tony focused back on the wheelchair in his line of sight. He brought his tools closer and got
to work. However, it didn't matter how many hours Tony spent in the workshop, half of his focus kept straying towards the big screen and Steve's face which was still there for him to glance at.

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Steve was sitting on a bench in Central Park, his shoulders hunched. Kids were shouting cheerfully in front of him playing with their parents. Runners never looked his way. Thankfully, they didn't know his identity. In case someone went near him, he wore a black cap on his head. All the noise his super senses received, Steve's mind didn't even process.

"You disappeared on us." Natasha stealthily sat down beside him.

"Just went for a walk," Steve murmured without looking at her. He didn't want her to see his face. She was too good at reading him. It was only a matter of time until she asked the most pressing question.

"Things went south with Tony?"

Just as Steve expected. She would be pestering him for answers all afternoon if he didn't give her answers. After all, the Black Widow was patient and had an extensive knowledge of interrogation techniques. In the worst case, she would wait him out. That would certainly sour his afternoon.

Steve went with the easiest option, telling the truth. "We talked, explained our different opinions. We should be able to work together again better." There. Natasha had to be happy he didn't lie and she could go home and leave him to his thoughts.

"Why are you not happy about that?"

From the corner of his eye, Steve saw Natasha studying his profile, the way he kept his eyes averted, how much he didn't want her to see him like this. After a long pause, she nodded with a sigh. "Oh. You finally figured it out."

Steve's heart gave a painful twitch. He felt mortified because it had never occurred to him he could feel attraction towards Tony. Attraction? Who was he kidding. "How---" He stopped with a tight throat. Words really weren't his strong suit.
"Well, you two were always in each other's faces before, but you drawing him again and again was a safe bet," she smirked.

"I lied to him, hurt him and scared him," Steve sighed defeatedly. He had made a mistake that would change his future with Tony forever. "He won't forgive me."

"Probably true, but you won't show him you're a changed man by sitting here." Natasha squeezed his forearm in a friendly gesture, getting up again, and a moment later, was already out of his sight.

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"Boss, I can turn the screen off," FRIDAY offered maybe for a fifth time.

Tony had lost track of the hours he was in the workshop and how many times exactly she had asked as well. "No, leave it there," he replied, never pausing in his work. "Give me an hour and then call Rhodey here."

The manual labor helped clear Tony's mind and at the same time gave him a chance to process his conversation with Steve. He was aware something had changed between them. He just couldn't put his finger on what it was precisely yet. His mind obsessively dwelled on that one moment.

"As you wish, Boss."

Time slipped away from Tony again.

"Boss, Colonel Rhodes is here," FRIDAY informed him and returned him to the present.

"Thanks, FRIDAY. Switch off the screen." Tony dragged the wheelchair onto the floor and waited patiently for his friend to enter. He crossed his arms over his chest.
"So, you finally remembered the world exists." Rhodey smiled at him with understanding.

"Not really. I need you to look at the chair, sit in it for a few hours and then tell me if there's something wrong or if you want something different."

"You bought me a wheelchair?" Rhodey looked at him in confusion.

"Sure. You always complain I'm not buying you birthday presents. Shut up and try it," Tony pointed his finger in the direction of the metal object and averted his eyes to the monitors behind him. He couldn't look at Rhodey transferring himself from one seat to another. Tony wanted to give him some privacy for that ordeal.

"The brakes are good," Rhodey mumbled.

"Hm," Tony made an unspecified noise. He sat down in front of his computers, fingers on the keyboard as he was idly searching the angles of security cameras in the Tower. At the same time, he watched another black screen from the corner of his eye where he could track Rhodey's progress on the reflecting surface. It wasn't easy for his friend to switch places.

"Why am I feeling like a lab rat?" Rhodey asked, out of breath, but finally sitting in the new wheelchair.

"Don't know what you're talking about, Rhodeybear. I thought you would be happy. It will be easier for you to navigate in the labyrinth of our secret lair with that chair." Tony carefully worked on his matter-of-fact tone. "FRIDAY, show me the access code for Butterfingers. We have to do something with him."

"You're working on your robot?" Rhodey asked in astonishment, but the pleasure on his face was evident.

Tony swung his chair back around and rolled his eyes. He made a show of looking at his friend like Rhodey had a brain injury instead of a severed spinal cord. "Rhodey, I work on my robots and AIs all the time. Just because you don't see it doesn't mean it's not happening."

"I know that." Rhodey paused for a moment, then continued after a moment with one of their usual snarky remarks. "And this is not a secret lair. Batman has a secret lair, Tony. You have
majestically-in-your-face glowing Tower with a big "A" on it and probably stratospheric electricity bills."

"Well, esthetics are important. And you do know that the whole building is powered by an arc reactor, right? But, sure, make fun of your home." Tony's attention turned back to the monitors. "Come back later."

"Did you eat today?" Rhodey stopped by the door.

Tony heard the concern in his friend's voice. "I'm fine, Dad," he stated hastily, but with the last word his chest clenched in pain.

"FRIDAY, when was the last time your boss had something to eat?"

Rhodey was one big pain in the ass. Before his AI could answer, Tony was on his feet. "Mute," he silenced her with a gesture. "FRIDAY, open the door for our dear Colonel. He's leaving. We talked about privacy before. No need to disclose more information and anger your daddy again."

Tony was glad the AI remembered who was the boss here. With a glare, Tony turned to Rhodey: "You're overstaying your welcome. Come back later. If you have anything to complain about, make a list."

"Stubborn asshole."

"Love you back!" Tony gave him a small wave with a blinding smile and waited for Rhodey to leave. When the doors finally shut behind his friend, he could breathe more easily. "Now, where were we?" Tony's attention moved to his AI.

"I believe you were considering Butterfingers to be brought to the home network again," FRIDAY answered gravely.

Tony gleefully rubbed his hands. "Are you up for it, honey?"
"Nothing would make me happier, Boss," she replied sarcastically, obviously reluctant and as far from happy as one could be in her situation.

"It will be fun," Tony assured her quickly. He would finally have all his robots around again. At least a fragment of his past would be back.

"If you say so, Boss. But I have footage of its existence with JARVIS, and as a matter of fact, it didn't look very funny."

Tony could almost feel his bubble of happiness slowly leaking out. One small piece would be back, but the bigger one was still missing forever. His JARVIS. He deliberately kept his mind as far away as possible from thinking about Vision. Tony could exist with the idea of his life being in pieces, but Vision talking to him as JARVIS was one heartbreak too much. Anyway, Butterfingers wasn't the only thing he needed to work on.

Tony reminded himself he also had to repair Steve's shield. It still bore the claw marks from T'Challa. Tony's primary Iron Man suit needed to be functional as well. The recent event with the metallic spiders had proven that the suit was necessary.

Tony considered the importance of Butterfingers in a grand scheme of things. However, he finally had to capitulate. There were much more pressing issues than his old robotic friend. "You know what, we have a lot to do, kiddo. Butterfingers can wait. The armor and the shield have higher priority."

With a determined sigh, Tony went for the suit first. He brought the chest plate up onto a work table and let his eyes roam around the scratched paint, the shattered glass of the arc reactor. Tony's fingers carefully ran over the dents the shield had left in the armor.

He could still hear the ringing of metal against metal of Steve's final blow, and then Captain America was leaning onto the shield protruding from his chest, breathing heavily. Tony flinched.

"Boss, are you alright?"

"Fine, FRIDAY," Tony mumbled, ignoring his galloping heart.

"I asked Captain Rogers to bring the shield here."
"Right," Tony whispered almost inaudibly. He had to visibly drag himself out of the memories. "Isn't it a bit cold in here, FRIDAY?"

"The temperature of the room is steady. The thermostat is working at one hundred percent. It didn't deviate from your personal preferences in years, Boss," FRIDAY answered calmly.

"Right." Tony shook his head. On the one hand, it was almost comforting to know everything was just in his mind. Anything in his head could be battled and sooner or later conquered. Tony pulled himself together with several measured breaths. His fingers automatically reached for his gray hoodie draped over his chair. He slipped the comforting material on. "What did you say before, FRIDAY?"

"Captain Rogers is waiting at the door with the shield," she repeated patiently.

"Alright. Let him in, then," Tony tried to ignore the vulnerability permeating his skin. It was not real. In a second he shifted his attention to Steve. He watched the super soldier with eagle eyes. Steve stood uncertainly in a doorway, looking uncomfortable and unsure around Tony's space again.

"Ehm, hi." Steve lifted the shield slightly. "FRIDAY asked me to bring this here."

"Yeah," Tony made a gesture to the side of the workbench, "you can leave it here." Tony's gaze was not shifting away from Steve as the super soldier slowly arranged screwdrivers and tools out of the way, then placed the shield on a clear spot. Its absence revealed Steve's hand which was tightly clutching a paper bag.

Tony dragged his eyes to Steve's face. This awkward atmosphere was worse than them yelling at each other. Steve looked pale, and he obviously had trouble breaking his stare from Iron Man's chest plate, as if he was lost in his own memories of Siberia as Tony had been before. But damn, the blond man looked good. At least Tony could be satisfied he had a good taste in men.

Tony cleared his throat pointedly. "Thanks," he whispered with his heart hammering. He anticipated Steve's eyes when he finally looked away and focused on Tony, but not the force that wouldn't let him shift his gaze away from the super soldier or let him breathe normally.

"FRIDAY---" Steve started barely audible, then cleared his throat and began to speak again.
"FRIDAY said you won't be eating dinner with us."

Dinner? What time was it? The concept of time had obviously slipped from Tony’s perception again. "I'm working." How the hell could Steve look so lost and unsure and raw and---? Tony wanted nothing more than to erase the uncertainty and hug him close. Yeah, the love thing again. Fuck it!

"I went out... to the park," Steve clarified unhelpfully.

_Good for you._ Tony should have said that aloud. He definitely should say something. There was no reason for him not to speak, but the words were locked inside his throat. Tony tracked Steve's hands as he put down a paper bag.

"You weren't in the kitchen today."

Tony saw him visibly hunch his shoulders, as if Steve wasn't sure how to explain himself. This was the side of the super soldier not many people got to see, and it was successfully pulling on Tony's heart strings.

"I went behind your back and asked FRIDAY. Sorry about that."

Steve was now monitoring his eating habits as well, not only his sleeping schedule? Why the hell couldn't Tony say a word?

"How's your head, Tony?"

Steve finally asked a coherent question, but he still had that haunted look in his eyes. Tony wanted nothing more than to change that. Steve should not look this uncertain. Maybe he should finally say something. "Good."

"Good," Steve repeated with a nod and a slight uncomfortable blush. "That's good. I'll... leave you to your work."

Tony blinked several times in confusion after his retreat. Well, if this wasn't awkward, he
didn't know what would be. Tony reached for the paper bag. Under the unreasonable amount of napkins - because people were supposed to eat and not made a mess by Captain America's standards - were two hot dogs. Tony's stomach growled loudly. Right, dinner. He hadn't eaten all day.

"Dummy, pass me the soda from the refrigerator. FRIDAY, show me the footage of the security camera from the moment Rogers entered here." Tony sat in his chair, messily eating the food, napkins forgotten. The screen changed to the image of him and Steve.

"Show me in high definition. Zoom in on his face," Tony flinched when his line of vision was suddenly filled with a soda can. "Thanks, Dummy." He worked the lid off with dirty fingers, took a long swing from the can and watched. "Play it."

No one would accuse Tony Stark of not following every little lead when he had something to figure out.

"May I ask what is it you're searching for, Boss? I could be of help if you would specify what you want to find." FRIDAY sounded confused.

"I don't know yet." Tony processed the moments fairly quickly and found nothing. "FRIDAY, I want some different angles. Profile maybe." Tony hadn't even been paying attention to the fact that he had almost inhaled the food. His eyes narrowed, but the angle wasn't good at all. Tony hoped Steve would slip up again. He was absolutely sure he had seen Steve looking at his mouth yesterday. Absolutely sure! Why the hell would he be so obsessed with it?

"FRIDAY, place an order for a dozen high definition security cameras." Tony came up with an absolutely brilliant plan. He was a technological genius, after all, and as that genius, he was now on a mission. What was invading of privacy between friends? "The smallest you can find," Tony added quickly.

"Boss, I have to inform the Avengers about your order," the AI pointed out, clearly knowing his intentions. Crap!

Tony drummed his fingers on the soda can. Shit. Well, she was right. Tony couldn't violate the privacy of all the other Avengers just for the niggling feeling of suspicion. Well, he could, but--Alright. He was being a bit hasty. They did deserve their privacy. Not that he would want to talk it through with the Black Widow. She would probably break some of his bones if she found out about the cameras. Clint really deserved a quiet time. Rhodey too. And Vision.
Well, ok. As much as Tony wanted to know if he was right about Steve, upsetting the others wasn't his intention. It would lead to more yelling, and this time they would be on the righteous part.

"Ok. Cancel the order." Tony's shoulders sagged. He had to be more creative. After all, he was a genius.

"The order never happened," FRIDAY explained, obviously satisfied with herself.

Tony finally gave up. With the food gone, he ignored the rest of the world as he repaired Iron Man's primary suit.

FRIDAY's voice brought him back to the present several hours later. "Colonel Rhodes is here, Boss."

"Why? I have work to do." Tony had currently been working on Steve's shield with safety goggles on his face and welding torch in hand. The Iron Man suit was in top condition already.

"You wanted to see him at the end of the day. It will be the end of the day in few minutes," FRIDAY helpfully explained.

"Already? Time flies when you're having fun. Ok. Let him through," Tony said distractedly. He put down his tools and crossed his arms over his chest in an unwitting move.

"I don't need your permission." Rhodey wheeled in with a satisfied grin. "I'm the golden boy who has access to every chamber in this castle, including yours, remember?"

"Unfortunately," Tony smirked back.

Rhodey smiled. "By the way, the chair's good. The armrests could be a bit more cushioned, but it's comfortable. Thanks."
"Good. So, switch your seats and off to bed," Tony made a dismissive gesture. "FRIDAY, you have to read Colonel Rhodes a bedtime story today. Something nice with happily ever after. I think Cinderella is the right choice," he grinned.

"Tony," Rhodey said with a warning tone.

"Or two stories. What do you think, baby girl? It looks to me like he forgot about what is good in this world," Tony smiled. "Maybe Rapunzel as well?"

"Fine, I'm going," his friend finally admitted defeat.

Tony turned and went back to work on Steve's shield with a small smile.
Chapter 12

Steve had not been spending most of his free time thinking about Tony Stark. After the robot invasion, they had a few calm days. No villains had the guts to cause trouble when the Avengers were back together. However, it had unfortunate effects on Steve: He had a lot of time for thinking.

Steve was definitely not thinking about Tony in his bedroom late at night when he couldn't sleep. The uncertainty of their situation made him ache for the old times, and it was slowly killing him. He didn't explain himself well enough. He didn't have enough words. He just wasn't eloquent enough. Tony avoided them most of the days, keeping himself occupied in the workshop.

Once again, Steve switched on the lamp on the bedside table. He considered it almost a habit now. Steve took out the notepad with his drawings, skipped most of the blank pages and returned to his sketch almost at the end. He knew Natasha sometimes looked through his drawings. Steve hoped she hadn't found this one yet, but knowing her, she already had.

On one of the snow-white pages, there appeared a drawing of Tony smiling. Not the usual smiley mask for the public Tony often wore. Not the fake blinding thing to assure the press of his confidence and cockiness. No. Steve drew the sincere smile Tony had had on his face when they had been friends, when Steve had sat in Tony's workshop late at night immersed in drawing and Tony had quietly worked on his armor, occasionally remarking about something and smiling fondly at him when Steve didn't understand some reference. There were times when Tony then proceeded to claim he didn't have enough time and let JARVIS explain all the things necessary until Steve was back in the loop and they could continue their conversation.

Thinking about JARVIS made Steve realize he hadn't made any effort to get to know Tony's other AI.

"Good evening, FRIDAY," Steve spoke quietly into the room.
"Captain Rogers," the AI responded without hesitation.

Steve stared at the paper nostalgically. He allowed himself to draw Tony in his black tank top, with messy hair and kind eyes sparkling with affection. The image was so far from their reality now. Steve hadn't seen that smile and glint in Tony's eyes for so long; he had to draw it just to remember what it looked like.

What started out as any other sketch quickly became Steve's most precious possession. As time went by, Steve had fallen in love with the expression on Tony's face. Nothing emanated as much of Tony's emotions as his eyes.

Steve remembered the months through the war looking at him and seeing only the cold, hard, unyielding gaze meeting him back, or worse, the last few days, where he could almost have touched Tony's uncertainty - which was only his fault. Steve was aware of that.

Tony had so little things to make him happy thanks to Steve and the stunt all the other Avengers had pulled that Steve was ashamed of himself.

"Is Tony alright, FRIDAY?" Steve asked with some hesitation. He had repeated the question throughout the day so many times, and every time he expected FRIDAY to tell him off or complain to Tony. She was, after all, Tony's creation, and her allegiance belonged to him. The AI had every right to inform Tony how many times Steve asked about his wellbeing.

"Yes, Captain Rogers. Boss is currently working on his project for Colonel Rhodes," FRIDAY said to him without inflection.

Steve glanced to the clock. At almost two a.m.; Tony was putting long hours in the workshop these days. And everyone let him, even FRIDAY. She had explained her reasoning to him a few days ago. She was not her boss' keeper; her exact words. Steve didn't doubt she had picked them up from Tony.

It was no surprise for Steve that FRIDAY didn't like him. He understood the AI would always be on Tony's side, and he wasn't her favorite person since he had repeatedly hurt Tony's feelings.

Steve's eyes shifted to the paper under his hands. He would do anything for Tony to look at
him like that again, with fondness, with happiness. Steve awkwardly cleared his throat. There was still something that bugged him about her behavior a few days prior. He wasn't the only one who had hurt Tony's feelings, and Steve didn't understand why she had done it.

"FRIDAY?" he asked carefully.

"Yes, Captain Rogers?"

"Can I ask you something?" Steve started nervously. He felt odd talking to the AI directly and hearing the answer in a lilting accent of a young woman. Steve didn't understand how JARVIS had worked before, but hearing a different voice now felt strange.

"Yes."

"Vision talked to Tony as JARVIS. You know he can do that, right?" The pieces of the big picture were finally making sense to Steve. She had asked Vision to go into Tony's bedroom without Tony knowing.

"Yes," she agreed guiltily.

"Why did you do ask him to?" What could possibly possess her to hurt Tony that way?

"I analyzed the pattern of his sleeping behavior from earlier days in relation to his interaction with his previous AI, JARVIS. Then I concluded that my boss' nightmares could have been easily treated by Vision’s presence because of the same vocal cords coding. It worked. Vision had a calming effect on my boss, and his nightmares got better."

Steve heard her logical explanation. FRIDAY was stating the facts as she saw them, but he heard her talking in a much more human way. "It--- hurt him." Steve didn't want to tell FRIDAY off, because he had no right, but he needed to know why she had done it.

"Not until he knew," FRIDAY answered guiltily. "I tried to let him sleep in peace. That is a purpose of my creation. The core of my programming is protecting the boss and making his life easier."
"And I ruined all that and made the situation worse," Steve concluded.

"In your defense, you were right, Captain Rogers. I used deceit to gain greater good. I wasn't created for that. I have some leniency in my behavior, but I shouldn't use it that way."

"We all make mistakes, FRIDAY," Steve muttered with a sigh. Some people made bigger ones than the others. And when had he started to see FRIDAY as a human? "I'm sure Tony understood why you and Vision did it."

"Yes, he did."

Steve took a pencil from his nightstand and started applying shading around Tony's hair on the paper. In the end, FRIDAY just wanted Tony to be alright.

"Captain Rogers?"

"Yes, FRIDAY?" It was only fair to answer without hesitation as well.

"I reviewed all the footage I have of your interaction with my boss, Captain Rogers."

Steve held his breath and froze, nervous because he didn't know what she was trying to say. He was absolutely certain hadn't lied in anything he had told Tony. "Yes?"

"I know about your--- heart condition." FRIDAY told him calmly.

Said muscle in Steve's chest started to gallop. Was he that obvious? How was it possible that people around him could spot the truth and he was the only one unaware of his own feelings? What was she trying to say? That the AI didn't want Steve anywhere around Tony? He had already lived through the same conversation with Vision.

"I researched the meaning and I am---" Her hesitation almost gave Steve worse heart palpitations. He could guess her next words.
She would do anything to stand between him and Tony. Just like Vision.

"---sorry about your situation."

Steve finally released a breath. "I won't hurt him again, FRIDAY." That was one promise he could definitely keep, and another one as well. "And I will protect him from any harm. I swear to you."

"I know, Captain Rogers."

After a long pause, FRIDAY stated: "Your drawing is ninety-seven percent accurate."

"Thank you."

"Goodnight, Captain Rogers."

"Goodnight," Steve repeated softly and got back to the shading on the paper. It took several hours, but still he didn't have the heart to finish the drawing. He selfishly wanted to work on it longer, so the last few minutes he spent just looking at Tony's sketch remembering the times he had seen the same fond smile.

"I'm sorry to bother you, Captain Rogers?" the silence was permeated by Tony's AI's careful tone.

Steve startled. "Yes, FRIDAY? What is it?" The second he understood FRIDAY was reaching out to him even though they didn't have the warmest relationship, Steve was on his feet. It could mean only one thing. Something had happened to Tony.

Steve blushed. He didn't feel very comfortable in front of the AI only in his underwear and undershirt.

"You are the only one still awake, Captain Rogers. I would appreciate if you could have a look at my boss. He had an accident a few minutes ago. He claims to be alright, and his vitals are good. But still I wanted someone---" FRIDAY hesitated in her explanation, "---to have a look at
FRIDAY would never address Steve if the situation wasn't important. He knew that much, and he almost fell flat on his ass in his haste to get to Tony's workshop. Steve abandoned thinking about his clothes and rushed out of his room as FRIDAY kept opening the elevator and every door he encountered.

"Tony?" Steve called full of concern when he couldn't see him in the workshop right away.


The muffled voice was not helping to calm Steve's nerves. He found Tony sprawled on his face, half of the suit slash wheelchair still attached to his lower body and a pool of blood on the floor near his head.

"You ok?" Steve knelt down, gently lifting Tony's upper half to the side and trying to find any injuries. The blood was making Steve nauseous. Not the idea of it being a body fluid, but it being Tony's. The area above Tony's left eyebrow was currently bleeding profusely from a superficial laceration. Head wounds always tended to bleed a lot.

"What happened?" Steve asked distractedly. "Dummy, pass me the dish towel, please." Steve nodded towards the small kitchenette. He needed to be calm, not freaking out. Tony would be absolutely fine. "FRIDAY, do you have a scan of Tony's head?"

"Boss is perfectly alright, Captain Rogers," she answered his unasked question.

"You could just ask me," Tony grumbled unhappily. "I know my head better."

"Yes, but you're also better at lying," Steve smirked. Thanks to his good reflexes he moved in time and avoided having a dish towel in his mouth. "Thank you, Dummy."

Tony twisted on his elbows and moved fractionally to avoid lying in the pool of his own blood. Steve steadied Tony's head in his palm. "Don't move," he whispered softly and gently pressed the towel to the injured eyebrow.
After a second of silence, Steve averted his gaze from the wound and looked into Tony's eyes. His heart skipped a beat, but this time he was aware of the reason. Steve wanted nothing more than to erase the last six months. "What happened?" he repeated quietly.

Tony blinked a few times. For a moment it scared Steve, it could mean Tony had a concussion after all, but a second later, Steve was yet again fascinated by Tony's ability to suddenly switch his brilliance on.

"I was working on Rhodey's suit. So far it's not cooperating with me." Tony rolled his eyes in annoyance. "My legs are stuck."

"Are you hurt anywhere else?" Steve asked with a fond smile. Of course Tony would work on Rhodey's suit. Tony always tried to improve their armors. Now he had a new challenge. He needed to figure out how Rhodey could access the War Machine suit while still using a wheelchair.

"My pride suffered a great loss, if you want to know. I don't remember the last time I fell onto my face," Tony replied with disgust, obviously not happy with the situation.

"I can give you a specific date, Boss."

Steve smiled when FRIDAY tried to be helpful. The easy banter lifted the atmosphere, and Steve found himself calm again. Tony was out of any danger.

"Oh, shut up, you ungrateful thing," Tony retorted playfully. His attention was back on Steve who was slowly lifting the towel to look at the wound. "The bleeding has stopped." Steve left the towel on the floor.

"Great. Then you can get my legs out now."

Steve watched as Tony tried to move but couldn't manage more than a few inches, being immobilized from the waist down.

"The legs are partially uncovered. If you bend the metal from its hinges, I could get them out." Tony smiled at Dummy. "Buddy, you can clean the blood on the floor. Mop's at the same place as the broom."
"Alright. Ready?" Steve just hoped Tony hadn't lied to him about his legs not being injured. In the end, it took a bit more strength than he had thought. The metal obviously wasn't very flexible, but with some effort, Tony could finally slide his legs out.

"Thanks," Tony whispered and sprawled out on his back with a satisfied groan.

Steve didn't think about Tony making that sound again in a different situation. Not at all. When the thought suddenly invaded his head, he had to shift his eyes to the side. Steve hoped his blush was not visible in the workshop's fluorescent light. He had been absolutely blind. How could he have lived with Tony for so long and not seen the obvious thing which now appeared so crystal clear?

"God, my back is killing me. I felt like a pretzel in that thing." Tony partially lifted his hips and massaged his lower back.

Seeing Tony sprawled on the floor made Steve hold his breath. It was embarrassing how much he wanted to be above him and kiss him senseless. Then, Dummy accidentally hit Tony’s head with the mop, and Tony looked up at Steve, nervously clearing his throat. Tony held out his hand for Steve to help him to his feet. Steve did as was expected of him and held tight, still fighting the blush.

"Thanks." Tony turned to Dummy. "You're supposed to clean the floor, not hit me, you dummy." Tony patted the robot’s head in affection and then proceeded to warn him upon seeing the bucket of water. "Don't flood the whole place or I'll have to switch you off."

Steve suddenly had to think about Tony having only FRIDAY and Dummy now. Dust had started settling on Butterfingers in the corner of the room. JARVIS would never be back. The pain must have been excruciating for Tony. Within a few years, he had lost his AI, one of his robots, Pepper and his family - the Avengers.

And yet Tony was still fighting for the rights of other superheroes. He was still functioning as a human being with a heart bigger than the Earth. Steve wanted nothing more than to earn Tony's trust back and help him in any way the man needed.

"Do you want some help?" Steve finally asked quietly.
"Hm?" Tony turned to him with a confused expression. As if he couldn't even entertain the idea of Steve being in his workshop. That hurt.

"If you need help," Steve gestured towards the wheelchair slash partial suit lying on the floor. He would do anything just to prolong a moment in this eerily peaceful atmosphere.

"No. I got it. Thanks," Tony mumbled, shrugging his shoulders. "Oh, by the way, thanks for the hotdogs. Delicious. We were having a blast. I ate all of them, without the use of napkins." Tony obviously wanted to stretch the point. "And Dummy was happy to sweep up all the crumbs on the floor. Lovely afternoon. You should come visit sometimes."

So, Steve wasn't the only one to be embarrassed. Tony's telling sign was the nervous rambling. "I can't," Steve told him honestly. Then, something happened. He saw it in Tony's eyes. Tony was searching for something in Steve's face.

"You can't?" Tony repeated flatly.

"You denied me access to your workshop," Steve explained softly.

"Oh." Again, Tony blinked like he had suddenly woken up and then shook his head. "Right. You don't--- What are you doing here then?" Tony's gaze automatically shot to the ceiling. He had obviously figured out it was FRIDAY who had let Steve enter.

"FRIDAY was so kind and opened the door for me. The blood scared her." Steve didn't understand how any amount of blood could scare an artificial intelligence, but as much as he was confused by FRIDAY's reaction, he couldn't deny the truth. She had been scared. She had to have been scared if she had reached out to Steve.

"FRIDAY, honey, I told you it was nothing to worry about," Tony tried to persuade his AI daughter to never call for help again. "Why did you have to go and disturb Steve's beauty sleep?"

"I wasn't sleeping, Tony. She didn't wake me up," Steve had to contradict Tony at once. What if he didn't clarify the truth now and FRIDAY saw it as a betrayal of her trust?

"I didn't disturb him, Boss. The others were sleeping," Tony's AI argued her point. "Captain Rogers was nice and went to check up on you even though I stressed the point you were alright."
Steve smiled a little. It was not exactly the truth, but at the same time, she wasn't lying either. Tony obviously wanted to talk with FRIDAY some more, but he had that guarded look on his face again. As if Tony wasn't sure he wanted to talk in front of Steve, and Steve didn't want to overstay his welcome. His stomach sank. "I'll go."

"Yes. Thanks again," Tony nodded.

Steve left him in the workshop and went back to his bedroom. He tried not to think about Tony's eyes, searching for something specific in his face.

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Breakfast was usually a tedious affair. The Avengers were scattered around the kitchen with bowls of cereal. Steve always sat at the table. He had some manners, thank you very much. It wasn't polite to eat while sitting on the kitchen counter as Clint usually did. Not when the kitchen counter and everything else didn't even belong to him.

Now, Steve was astonished when he saw Tony entering as well. He had thought a late night in the workshop was excuse enough for Tony to catch up on some sleep, but obviously, the brunette functioned on different hours than the rest of the world. On the one hand, Steve was glad to see him. On the other hand, though, Steve wanted nothing more than for Tony to take better care of himself.

"Morning, kids!" Tony went automatically for the coffee machine.

The wound above his eyebrow looked clean, without infection so far. Tony had obviously applied a butterfly bandage to the small injury. Still, Steve could see the black bruise covering the area around Tony's left eye. He must have fallen onto the workbench before ending up on the ground.

"You ok, Stark?" Clint asked hesitantly, sneaking suspicious glances at Steve.

"Fine. Accidents happen," Tony muttered with a dismissive hand gesture. "It's fine."
The kitchen went silent. Steve watched as the other Avengers were steadily looking at one another, nobody knowing what to say thanks to their conversation in the car. Tony had to be really tired to not comment on the tense situation.

"Did you figure it out?" Steve had to ask the question. Not only to learn what was happening with Rhodey's wheelchair; he wanted to be sure nothing like last night would be repeated.

However, the inquiring question might not have been Steve's brightest idea because suddenly, all the Avengers were staring at him speculatively. They were obviously all wondering if Steve was the reason for Tony's black eye.

"It wasn't him," Tony clarified with annoyance. "We're not fighting. Captain Nightingale has been summoned to my workshop after said accident. And to answer your question: yep!"

Tony's smile almost blinded him, and Steve's heart clenched because this was Tony's fake smile again. Steve missed the sincere smile so much. "That's good." Still, Steve was so proud of that man. He never gave up.

"It's a super secret thingy. I get it." Clint eyed them suspiciously. "You two schoolgirls are deliberately trying to make us all jealous, but maybe it could be an information for the whole class?"

"Not yet." Tony poured his coffee, and a moment later, he was on his way out of the kitchen.

"Cap?" Sam's eyebrow was somewhere around his hairline. "Do you want to clarify?"

"It's nothing dangerous. He's working on a new project," Steve replied,shrugging his shoulders. He definitely didn't want to explain. He would never betray Tony's trust again.

"Which is?" Sam really didn't give up easily.

"None of your concern, as Tony already said." Steve inclined his head to emphasize his point.
"Good morning." Vision floated into the room. Scarlet Witch entered a moment later.

"Oh, you two are here just in time," Sam informed them. "We don't need Cap's information. We have someone better." The man smirked at Clint who was closest to Vision.

Hawkeye put an arm around Vision's shoulders. "Vision," he smiled innocently. "How are you this fine morning, my floating friend?"

"What do you require of me?" the android asked stiffly. "Your tone is highly suspicious."

"So little faith. We're all friends," Clint assured him with a smile. "Cap here is now Stark's best friend again, and he won't rattle on him. We need some information. It's important for our future."

"Is there a reason we should be concerned, Captain Rogers?" The android ignored Clint's person altogether and looked at Steve.

"Not at all. Tony's working. He's fine," Steve assured him.

"Thank you for your assistance last night, Captain," Vision nodded tersely. "FRIDAY informed me about the incident this morning. I am sorry I wasn't available in time."

"It's fine." Oh. Vision hadn't been at home. That was the reason FRIDAY had reached out to Steve, not because she finally started to trust him more. He had never considered she could have informed Vision. Of course the android would be her first choice. For a super soldier with almost eidetic memory, Steve sure wasn't using his brain capacity much outside of battle.

"That's interesting. Where were you last night?" Clint narrowed his eyes at Vision, changing the whole subject.

Steve understood Vision's reluctance to answer the question. When Hawkeye made an inquiry, he didn't give up easily. The android visibly stiffened some more.

"It's none of your business," Wanda stated calmly and slowly pushed Clint's hand away from
Vision's shoulders. "Leave him alone."

"What? I just want to know if he was safe. What if someone---"

"I was with him. Leave him alone," Wanda repeated, and this time, Clint shut his mouth.

Steve ignored their bickering. With his enhanced hearing, he suddenly tracked Tony's footsteps from the elevator. Tony was on his way to them again. Steve's heart twisted in his chest, and his stomach tightened. Every day it was getting harder and harder to ignore the signs. How could he have been so blind?

"Kids, we have a visitor," Tony informed them nonchalantly upon reentering the kitchen, but Steve could see the slight tension of his back. Tony wasn't happy with the person who would be coming through the door. Steve's confusion only grew when he heard the clicking heels of Pepper Potts heading towards the kitchen. It didn't make any sense - Tony loved Pepper.
Chapter 13

Chapter by angelmira

Chapter Notes

I have to thank to Rebecca who had beta read the chapter.

Chapter 13

From the moment FRIDAY informed Tony the chopper with Pepper had landed on the roof, he felt antsy under his skin. There was one person who knew him better than anyone, and she had just crashed his little bubble of contentment. He could pretend all he wanted, but she always knew when he bullshitted people and called him up on it.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Pepper with her red hair, black pencil skirt, white blouse and blinding smile breezed into the kitchen, "vacation time is officially over." Then her eyes landed on him. "Oh, for God's sake, Tony!" Her gesticulation alone was enough to express her exasperation with him. Yeah, he got it. "FRIDAY told me you're alright. Can you not be trusted to stay five minutes without an injury?"

Tony stood his ground with a blinding smile of his own as she crossed the space and enveloped him in a careful hug. Pepper knew better than to squeeze him tightly. She lived constantly in a paranoid state of mind, thinking he was hiding all kinds of injuries under his clothes. Most of the time, she was right. Like now, but maybe mental pain didn't count.

"Are you ok?" Pepper backed away slightly, placed her palm carefully to his right cheek and inspected the left side of his face. Her worried eyes rooted him to the spot. Yeah. It was the attention that was killing him. No one ever cared for him like Pepper did. She did it instinctively and never gave a rat's ass about who else was around.

"I'm fine," Tony mumbled quietly, reluctant to be the center of attention any longer.

She stepped back with a long sigh which he could interpret pretty well. She didn't believe a word he had told her, and she would let him have it later when they were alone.
"Miss Potts," Steve said somewhere over Tony's shoulder.

"Oh, you, Mister, you don't have the right to even look his way. Your only redeeming point is that you protected him in Manhattan." Pepper's voice had taken on a sharp tone.

Tony smiled fondly. He had missed her. Pepper didn't back down from anyone. Now he knew that she wasn't scared even of Captain America. "You're too hard on him," Tony muttered quietly and stiffened in surprise. What the fuck had possessed him to say that? He should not be defending Steve.

"So," Pepper held the eye contact with Tony a second longer than was comfortable for him and then addressed the rest of the Avengers, "as I said. Vacation's over. From now on, we start to do some good PR and gain some points from the civilians. Step one, live TV interview with the two gentlemen who started this mess."

Tony released a breath of relief. That was something he could do in his sleep. Give him a good host with whom he could flirt a little and talk some sense into, and he was a happy camper. Charming the pants off the public was his forte. Steve's not so much. So, it would be on his shoulders.

"We can do that," Tony assured Pepper confidently.

"Good. Step two, Captain America and the rest of the Avengers signing the Sokovia Accords on live stream television two days from today."

Tony could picture their future from now on. They'd be in the forefront of the interviews everywhere. All of them would be separately spending days on TV stations and basically not seeing each other at all. Only in times of crisis. He would miss them. Some of the Avengers more than others, but overall, he was used to their presence.

"You two have to be together everywhere," Pepper continued, though, and Tony's heart skipped a beat because she looked at him and over his shoulder at Steve. "Show the people you've gotten over yourselves and the Civil War won't happen again. Ever."

Tony watched her measure each and every one of the Avengers separately with her glare. "Because if you do this and a few months from now end up fighting against each other again - then we'll be having a serious problem. And I'm not talking about a public relations nightmare."
She was used to those from Tony. He almost smirked, but stood there fascinated by her words instead. "People will never again see the heroes in you. They will only see the monsters who repeatedly broke their promises. You are moving on very thin ice here; every mistake counts. Tony made the UN pardon you. Don't throw it in his face by doing something stupid."

Tony stood there in embarrassment and avoided everyone's eyes. She didn't have to spell it out to them. He didn't want any gratitude. Looking at Pepper's face, he saw her throwing a glare at Steve behind him. Oh, she wasn't a fan of Steve at the moment.

Tony broke the silence spell over the room when it finally looked like Pepper had finished her speech. "Honey, I missed you," he smiled lopsidedly with a warm feeling in his chest. She stopped murdering Steve with her stare, and the tension disappeared from her back.

"Who did that to you?" Pepper asked softly and nodded towards his face.

"Me, and gravitation if you want me to be precise. I fell onto the workbench and it didn't back down at all. Can you believe it? Obviously, it hasn't heard about the wiser-one-retreats-first rule."

"I saw the video. Are you ok?" Oh, she meant the spider robots attack.

Pepper was still worried. Tony inhaled in defeat. That woman was a saint. She deserved the whole story. "I had a mild concussion from our afternoon accident; repeating mild. Two Tylenols and I felt fine. However, my newest project was not cooperating with me yesterday, and I fell on my face." Tony pointed behind himself. "Captain Nightingale and FRIDAY checked me out. I slapped some butterfly bandage on it like a big boy, got back to work and voilà. I conquered the world. I'm fine," he stated dismissively.

"Ok." Pepper put her briefcase on the table and revealed a stack of papers. "Let's start with the easier members of the team. Natasha?"

Tony didn't wait for his turn and made himself scarce. He didn't have any doubts Pepper would find him in his workshop later. After all, she was allowed inside. Tony threw a glance over his shoulder, and his heart skipped a beat again. Steve was looking after him with eyes full of sorrow.
"Boss---"

"I know, honey," Tony murmured softly, very aware of Steve's sharp hearing. "Let's not start a discussion now." The last thing Tony wanted was his AI accidentally revealing to the whole room how much his existence reacted to Steve's puppy dog eyes.

FRIDAY waited until the elevator door had slid shut behind him and then started again. "I didn't want to inquire about your health, Boss," she informed him imperially. Her tone sent a clear message about being offended. "You repeatedly shut me down when I pointed out the situation. I have learned my lesson."

True. Tony hadn't heard her ask in almost--- Well, he couldn't remember. "Sorry," he muttered.

"I wanted to inform you that King T'Challa is on the line and he's patiently waiting for your response."

"What?" Tony squealed. "Let him through."

"You are on speaker, Your Majesty," FRIDAY stated imperially and then finally shut up.

"It was a pleasure to talk to you, FRIDAY," was the first sentence from the king of Wakanda, and Tony wanted to facepalm and disappear somewhere to Siberia and never come back. The elevator stopped at the right floor, and Tony exited to his workshop.

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

Tony could almost palpably feel FRIDAY's pleasure. Damn teenage girls!

"Your Majesty," he skipped into the conversation with ease. Even though T'Challa was Tony's friend, he couldn't drop the formal title. "Forgive me. I didn't know about your call. If I had, you sure as hell wouldn't have had to wait on me."

"Let's not be formal, Tony. I am sorry to disturb you at this time. I hope you are in good
"Yeah, I'm fine. It looked worse than it really was." Tony knew the king and probably the whole world had already seen him nose-diving into the concrete and Captain America protecting him. "What can I do for you?"

"I was officially invited to the United States to bear witness to the signing of the Sokovia Accords by the Avengers."

"On the press conference the day after tomorrow. I know. Pepper's here, and she's coaching us about the PR circus."

"Is it too forward of me to ask if you could offer me accommodation, my friend?"

"No, not at all." Tony hid his astonishment quickly. The last time T'Challa was in the country for an official event, Zemo had killed his father with a bomb. "You're always welcome here. I will warn Sam to not cross paths with your security detail."

"Thank you, Tony."

"Don't mention it. You can come whenever you're ready. FRIDAY will let you go through the security system of the Tower."

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Steve stood in the opened doorway of Tony's workshop. The first sight that greeted him was Tony, seated in his chair, his head resting against Pepper Potts' stomach. He looked nothing less than miserable. The love of Tony's life was gently cradling his head and running her hands through his hair.

Steve didn't understand why FRIDAY had opened the door for him without Tony's consent or any acknowledgment whatsoever. It didn't make any sense. Not that Steve extensively thought about the reason. The sight of Pepper and Tony together made his heart stutter; it hurt like a physical blow.
"Boss, Captain Rogers is here," FRIDAY informed the quiet room.

The spell was broken, and Pepper stepped back. Tony straightened his shoulders, almost like the moment had never happened. His eyes were walled behind a determined mask. "What can I do for you?"

"Shield," Steve's dry throat croaked. He hoped he was making sense, because his vocal cords couldn't string together more than one word.

"I informed Captain Rogers about the improvement on the shield and that it was ready for extraction," FRIDAY hopefully explained things better for all of them.

"Yeah, sure." Tony leapt to his feet and grabbed the object in question from his workbench. The quick motion made it look like he couldn't stand Steve's presence any longer than necessary. The hastiness of such an action hurt Steve just as much as looking at Pepper comforting Tony. It drove down the most obvious point - it would never be Steve in her position. He would never have the right to do the same, no matter how much he wanted it.

In a matter of seconds, Tony was standing in front of him and handing him the shield. Of course, he wanted Steve to leave as quickly as possible.

"Thank you," Steve whispered softly, voice strained under the weight of his hurt.

"You're welcome."

Steve still stood there, like a statue, three heartbeats later, still looking into Tony's eyes, feeling like an idiot. It would never be the same. They couldn't go back to the times they had before the Civil War. This was the first time Steve saw Tony having his mask down, and it wasn't in front of anyone from the Avengers. Tony didn't trust them. And he definitely didn't trust Steve.

Steve gave him a small nod. He shifted his eyes to the redhead. "Ms. Potts." Steve still had some manners, after all. Then, he turned and started to leave. It was too ambitious of him to think he and Tony might repair their friendship. God, friendship?

"Steve?"
Steve stopped in his tracks and looked back at Tony. "Yes?"

"You had that kicked puppy look." Tony indicated towards his own face with his hand. "It's not really attractive on a national icon."

Steve's guts twisted a bit more, his stomach bottoming out. Somehow, there appeared to be a lump stuck in his throat. "Don't worry." The rush of blood in Steve's ears and his galloping heartbeat made the words sound hollow, so he spared them both another second in each other's presence and walked out of Tony's workshop.

Once Steve was safely in the elevator, on his way up to anywhere that wasn't close to Tony, he could finally breathe again properly.

"Captain Rogers, are you feeling well? Your vital signs are elevated, and the anxiety---"

FRIDAY didn't have to finish her sentence. Steve hated lying to Tony's AI, so opted for the truth. "There is nothing physically wrong with me, FRIDAY." And wasn't that the blindingly obvious truth? Steve's heart might be breaking, but he was still telling her the truth.

"I'm going out, FRIDAY. I'll be having my phone on."

"As you wish, Captain Rogers."

Steve stopped by his bedroom to put the shield with the rest of his armor. He grabbed his sketchbook and pencils and then finally escaped the walls of the Tower that were slowly closing in on him with Pepper's presence on the premises. He ended up sitting in the park, working on a sketch of children playing with their Frisbee.

The repetitive sound of his pencil gliding over the paper calmed his nerves and allowed him to relax and process all his feelings. It was only this morning that he had felt like maybe they had a chance to change their tentative friendship, but it still gave him hope. His dreaded conversation with Tony went alright. Yes, Steve might have figured out he was attracted to Tony, but there had never been the question as to if he would act on the attraction. It would never happen. Then again, it didn't make any sense to him why he was so heartbroken that Pepper was in Tony's life again.
Steve put the sketchbook and pencil down beside himself and pressed his palms to his face. With a defeated sigh, he had to admit that there was a reason. A big, glaringly obvious reason Steve didn't want to see. A big, glaringly obvious reason Steve didn't want to feel. He was in love with Anthony Edward Stark, and he had torpedoed any chance he could have with the man long before Pepper Potts had stepped into the kitchen this morning.

***

Steve arrived later that afternoon when the Tower was buzzing with activity. Not the visible way, but for Steve's senses; he could almost palpably feel the change in the air. The only person nowhere in sight was, unsurprisingly, Tony.

"What's happening?" Steve asked upon stepping into the kitchen.

"Black Panther is on the roof," Sam clarified for him. "You're lucky you weren't here. We had a long talk about acceptable behavior with Mr. I-know-everything-better-than-you-and-my-friend-is-a-king. A LONG talk!"

Sam looked annoyed to the point of doing or saying something reckless. Steve sighed. "Well, he is a king."

"Who wears a cat outfit," his friend pointed out.

A quick survey of the room convinced Steve that the rest of the Avengers were equally annoyed, and some of them - scratch that, Clint Barton looked like he couldn't wait for the man to appear in the house. "Yes. But he's still a king. Unlike the rest of us. We should show some respect."

T'Challa arrived with his personal bodyguards as always. However, he didn't even have a chance to say hello to them.

"T'Challa!" Out of nowhere Tony leapt into the man's arms with the biggest smile Steve had seen on his person in a long time. Not the fake one but the sincere smile Steve missed so much. That hurt too.

"My friend," the king replied with a stoic mask, but he couldn't hide the affection in his
The female guards of Wakanda's king didn't look surprised at the display between their leader and Tony, but the Avengers and Pepper Potts certainly were. It had been a long time since someone in the Tower had seen Tony act this openly with a living person and not his AI.

Steve had to admit he was jealous and most of all floored, because one part of his heart would always belong to Tony, longing for them to have something similar. Easy affection. Not tons of issues between them.

Eventually, Tony stepped back. Steve watched him so carefully he couldn't miss the inclination of Tony's head when he looked at the women behind T'Challa. "Ladies."

In the next second, Tony's attention was back with the king. "How was the flight?"

"Uneventful."

"God, don't describe it minute by minute. I could fall asleep in the middle of it. Come on."

Steve saw the fond smile on Tony's face. The easiness with which he talked to the powerful man. The king of Wakanda was a man of few words, but it didn't bother the billionaire one bit. They really were friends.

"Come on." Tony invaded T'Challa's space and, with a hand on the king's back, led him to the elevator. "I need to brag about my genius ideas. And I thought about some improvements to Black Panther’s suit, if it's not a problem."

Steve overheard the rest of their conversation thanks to his enhanced hearing. Tony had found some time in his busy schedule to talk with T'Challa's scientists. They put together some ideas about making the whole Panther armor better with the use of vibranium.

Tony’s selflessness made Steve feel nostalgic. More than anything, he wanted the same enthusiasm from Tony that T'Challa received. He would cherish those moments for the rest of his life.
"I feel like a third wheel," Clint stated with a thoughtful expression.

That statement described their situation perfectly. From the moment the leader of Wakanda had arrived, they hadn’t been on Tony's radar anymore. Even Pepper Potts had been forgotten.
Happy New Year to all of my readers. Thank you so much for your patience with updates. And a special thank you to Rebecca, who edited the chapter.

Chapter 14

Tony's focus was laser sharp on the small device clenched in a vice which he was currently working on. He had tried to put the fucking bolt into the hole for the fifteenth time, and the motherfucker just didn't stay there. With a frustrated exhale and anger seething through his movements, he finally forced the device out with his fingers and threw it as far away from himself as possible. It didn't help at all. He was still pissed off, and he felt like murdering someone. Most definitely himself.

Tony put his palms flat on the workbench, ignoring the blueprints all over the desk, and with a heavy sigh closed his eyes, allowing his head to hang.

Pepper had spent the night in a guest room. The previous evening had been filled with more conversation with her. She had tried to figure out what was wrong with him, but he had been as evasive as ever, ditching the questions, eluding the answers and bullshitting his way out of every single meaningful dialog. He’d been ready to say anything just to have her off his back and stop the prodding questions.

Only when T’Challa had come to say goodnight, she had finally left. Tony hadn’t felt any satisfaction watching her leave. He wanted to be left in peace, but at the same time, he wanted to confide in Pepper to what was happening in his life. But how do you talk to your ex about loving someone else? How do you talk about your own heartbreak?

Now, Tony had a few hours to kill in his workshop before they had to be on the road to some fancy hotel. They were supposed to sign the Sokovia Accords early tomorrow morning and then give some interviews. He should be able to work as usual, but instead the only thing he couldn't get out of his mind was the facial expression of their fucking national icon in his workshop.
Spending the day with T’Challa or Pepper had been fine, but alone in his workshop, nothing worked at all. Nothing could distract him from his thoughts of Steve.

"FRIDAY, show me---"

"---Captain Rogers before he left the workshop with his shield and later the premises," she finished with some attitude. Tony couldn’t blame her. He had made the same request probably ten times throughout the day.

The screen slid down, and here he was, Steve Rogers with those fucking puppy dog eyes and the bastard lying and saying, "Don’t worry." The same Steve Rogers who, on another picture, sat in Central Park with his face in his hands, looking as if the world was resting on his shoulders and he was seconds away from crumbling under all that weight.

Tony knew something significant had happened. What he didn’t know, though, was the reason for Steve’s behavior. And what was really pissing him off was that Steve Rogers was not confiding in him when something was obviously bothering him.

But then again - why the hell would Steve tell Tony about his problems? What had Tony expected? That they would suddenly be the best fucking pals and pick each other’s fucking braids?

He lifted his hands and tried to tell himself that it was not his problem when Steve Rogers looked unhappy, but it didn’t help any. Tony’s thumb left a bloody smudge on the papers. Great. He couldn’t even work properly, having injured himself once again.

Tony sucked on his thumb, getting the blood away and inspecting the wound. His uselessness annoyed him even more. He hunted down his first aid kit, searched for a band-aid, slapped it on the booboo and then wiped all the contents onto the floor. The blueprints followed very quickly, but no. Even this stupid outburst didn’t help at all. He was still furious with himself, because he cared. He wanted to know why Steve had looked so defeated and miserable.

***

A few hours later, Tony was sitting in Pepper’s chopper with Steve by his side, and they were on their way to a hotel somewhere. He didn’t give a fuck where exactly. All he wanted was a quiet place to exist without his thoughts being haunted by the man sitting next to him. He could already feel the beginning of another headache.
Tony was wearing his most expensive grey Armani suit, shining Hudson loafers and black Ray-Bans. No one would accuse him of not looking his best for that signing ordeal. No one would be able to tell that all he wanted was to be back in the safety of his workshop. No one would guess his heart was beating like crazy thanks to the super soldier next to him.

Steve didn’t appear to be affected in any way. He had answered Pepper’s questions, nodded in the right places, but hadn’t initiated any conversation. He acted like this trip was a daily occurrence, and Tony couldn’t tell that this was the same guy who had sat on that park bench. He couldn't see any resemblance. Tony did, because he knew it had happened. Steve Rogers was suddenly too good at displaying a poker face.

"Tony?"

"Hm?" Tony blinked for a moment and then focused his eyes on Pepper who tried to explain some shit or another. Who gave a fuck? Certainly not him, but she worked hard at making the Avengers looked good.

"You’re not listening."

"No," Tony admitted calmly. "Sorry. Again, please." He needed to stop thinking about Steve and Steve’s problems. This time, he gave Pepper his full attention, making sure to remember the name of the host of the television show they would be appearing in.

When the details were finally hammered into his mind and Tony would be able to repeat them in his sleep, Pepper let him off the hook and left him to his thoughts. Tony didn’t know if it was better or worse. He palmed the tablet in his pocket, looked at some of his measurements and ideas for making Rhodey’s suit even better and tried to lose his mind in the details and inventing. Not that it helped any, because he was still aware of Steve’s body near his. When he closed his eyes, he could almost feel the warmth radiating from the super soldier.

The moment they touched the roof of the hotel, Tony acted his part as was expected of him. He had a blinding smile on his face, complimented every staff member they encountered, used his motor mouth and talked nonsense all the time they were in public, because that was what Pepper and the others expected.

Tony shut his mouth when they finally reached their suite. He threw the Ray-Bans on the bed with Egyptian cotton sheets. On the bright side, it was the best presidential suite that was
available. On the other hand, Pepper had conveniently happened to forget the detail that he and Steve were sharing the room. Apparently, they had to show the world they were best friends forever and would never again do another stupidity such as fighting against each other.

They weren’t away from home for even half a day, and Tony already missed his Tower, Rhodey’s prodding, FRIDAY and Vision’s voice. He couldn’t imagine them spending weeks doing interviews around the country. He hadn’t seen Vision in almost two days in row.

"How is His Majesty doing?"

Tony shook his head and looked at Pepper without comprehending the question. He was standing in the center of the suite, lost in his thoughts. "Beg your pardon?"

"King T’Challa," she added with a frown on her beautiful forehead. Pepper shouldn’t worry about him that much.

"He’s fine." Tony mustered a smile. "Handsome as ever and still the cryptic little bastard who happens to wear black spandex and claws in times of crisis."

"I saw you two together."

Tony suppressed a sigh. Pepper really was like a terrier once she took some idea into her head. "Yes. Everyone saw us together. I happen to own that Tower, and as an owner, I take it as a personal duty to greet everyone of my guests. Spit it out, Pepper. I don’t have all day." Neither did he want to talk about his friend. Tony was pretty sure the national icon in the other part of the suite could hear every word.

"I didn’t know you two were such good friends, Tony."

This time Tony didn’t have to pretend, he gave her a beaming smile. "Are you jealous, Ms. Potts? My friend is a king. Do you have anyone higher on the social ladder?"

"No." Pepper tilted her head thoughtfully. "He’s good for you. You’re calmer when he’s near you."
The smile slowly slipped from Tony’s face. He didn’t want to explain what he felt in the presence of Wakanda’s leader. Not with Steve within hearing distance. The only answer was to deflect. "You want to know my opinion? He’s a good man. Great guy. Awesome leadership skills. What is this about, Pepper, because if I didn’t know you better I would say you are jealous."

"You know me better than that." She gave him a small smile.

Yeah, Tony was pretty sure he knew her very well. That’s why it didn’t make sense.

"I just want you to be happy. You looked happy when he arrived."

And Tony finally understood. It was a test. She wanted to see his reactions and figure out what had happened when Tony had spent his time in Wakanda. Pepper Potts was trying to play the matchmaker.

"Don’t do this," Tony warned her with a collected, soft tone of his voice. "Not with T’Challa. He lost his father. He’s got a nation to lead. He doesn’t have time for this bullshit."

"You didn’t say a word about yourself."

"I will gladly tell you about myself. I’m that irresponsible, reckless billionaire who broke your heart. You know better than to try and make me a good guy here. I won’t be the one complicating T’Challa’s life." And most of all, he couldn’t see T’Challa that way. No matter how much of a good-looking guy T’Challa was, Tony’s heart still belonged to the man currently eavesdropping in the presidential suite with them.

"Tony---"

"No." He interrupted Pepper before she could continue. "We’re not having this conversation. Ever." The only place to go and get as far away from her as possible was Steve’s part of the suite. The bastard was looking out of the window and appeared to be enjoying the beautiful view from up above.

"How is it going? Anything worth seeing?" Tony asked nonchalantly. When he didn’t get an answer, Tony looked at him more carefully. "Are you nervous?"
"I don't like crowds," Steve whispered. "And the television show, that's another ball game."

"That's why I'm here," Tony smirked. "Don't worry. I will charm them all. You have to tell her some facts, throw in some 'yes, madam, we're idiots, no, madam, we won't start the war again' bullshit and she will be eating out of your hand just like the rest of the world."

Tony almost put his hand on Steve's shoulder in a comforting gesture. He stopped himself a second before touching him. Just to be sure, Tony folded his arms across his chest. He remembered Steve shrugging his hand off too many times. The nervous silence descended between them.

"She was right, you know."

"Pepper?" Tony's forehead creased with confusion. Why the hell would they have a conversation about Pepper?

"Yes."

The sight of the super soldier's face was almost comical. Steve looked as if he needed to borrow some pills against constipation. "What exactly was she right about?" Tony asked with a small smile.

"You looked happy."

Tony didn't avert his eyes when Steve finally looked at him with a sad smile. The next sentence punched him in the guts.

"You deserve to have someone you can feel safe with. God knows we're doing a bang-up job with it." Tony was surprised that Steve didn't put it as a question. He just stated the truth which looked to Tony as if he didn't like it at all.

And there it was again. Tony's heart was hammering in his chest, and he couldn't for the life of him get air into his lungs. The moment stretched, neither one of them looking away. God, when had that tortured look started to be attractive? It pulled on Tony's heartstrings.
Tony couldn't stop staring. It was the same face that had been contorted with fury as he swung the shield into Tony's arc reactor, but at the same time, it was also the man who had protected him on so many occasions.

Without further hesitation, Tony finally jumped the gun and whispered, "You were gutted when you walked out of my workshop. Tell me why." He held his breath for a few long seconds, patiently waiting for Steve to finally gave him an answer and open up. Something that could mend them closer together.

Tony was almost about to give up when he saw Steve's eyes shifting away from him momentarily. "It finally dawned on me that there's no second chance."

Steve's words cut Tony deeply, but he didn't move at all. After a second, the super soldier looked back at him.

"I'm a soldier, Tony. I'm used to dragging myself through the rubble of the battlefield just hanging onto the belief that there might be something worth it on the other side. I thought if I kept believing things between us could go back to where they've been, we'd get there. Giving up was never an option for me. Not in battle. Not on my fellow squad. Not on you."

So that meant he had finally given up on their friendship after all? Tony hoped his eyes didn't show how much the words hurt. He suddenly didn't have any energy in his arms anymore, and they dropped at his sides.

"You have to wake up every morning and eat your breakfast with people who tried to hurt you. People you have called friends at some point in time. I can't even imagine what that feels like."

Shitty. Tony had the answer to that question, but he still couldn't imagine his life being different. He missed the Avengers. Yes, he was angry as fuck, but they were his family. His people.

"We're occupying your Tower. We're eating at your table. We're communicating with your AIs. We're using your genius to improve our armors. And there is nothing we're giving you back."

Tony wanted to say something. He really, sincerely wanted to open his mouth, but the words
flew from his mind, and his throat was stuck with a lump the size of the United States. Steve's voice in that soft tone was his doing, and that realization made him tear up.

"You don't feel safe at your own home. You have to look into our faces every day and depend on us to have your back in battle. The same people who hurt you. Do you know that you genuinely smiled for the first when Ms. Potts paid us a visit? Or that you're not in touching distance of anyone, and the first time you reached out to touch someone was when T'Challa arrived at the kitchen?"

God, were those tears in Steve's eyes? Tony could hardly breathe. His own misted eyes burned. The silence between them was frightening. What did it mean?

"That's why I was sad, because I finally understood there is no second chance for us. We can't go back. Not after everything we did to you. Not after everything I did to you."

"What---" Tony didn't even recognize his own hoarse voice. He had to try speaking again. "What are you saying?" Tony felt as if time had stopped.

"We are going to do whatever you want. We meaning the Avengers. If you want us out of your property, we'll go."

"I don't," he breathed out quickly. His mind stuttered in disbelief, but Steve didn't stop yet.

"If you want me out of your sight, I will go."

Tony mentally whimpered, because just the thought made him want to crawl under a rock and die. Not speaking to each other properly was torture, but not seeing each other at all? Relying on seeing them only when the Earth was in danger? Tony couldn't imagine his life without Steve.

Why the hell did Steve even point this out as an option? It was pretty clear the thought broke Steve's heart just as much. "I---" Tony's voice disappeared.

"It's alright. Take your time." Steve gave him a sad smile and nodded in acknowledgement. "You don't have to decide everything right now. We'll give you all the time you need."
"Tony?"

Tony blinked. He turned back towards Pepper, having been completely oblivious to her presence. He had honestly forgotten she was still in the same room with them. "Hm?"

"Dinner with the Mayor," Pepper reminded them patiently. "The limo will be here in ten minutes."

"Yeah," he whispered, distracted by the man beside him.

***

Steve was dressed in his military uniform, silently working through his dinner at the fancy mansion. He had answered the questions, but just as it had been decided previously, the rest of the talking was left to Tony. He thrived on social events, tonight being just another example. Tony was charming as ever. He joked at his own expense, never belittling others. He looked absolutely at ease. No one would guess the man's thoughts.

Steve didn't have to be a genius to know all of that behavior was carefully crafted for the public. In seconds of silence, filled only with the clinking of the dishes, Steve saw Tony's eyes. They were lost. It wasn’t visible for more than a fraction of a second, but Steve knew what he was seeing in his friend's eyes. Tony was working through the question Steve had asked him earlier. Steve was scared out of his mind what the answer would be.

It had almost looked like Tony wanted to tell him right there in their room. Steve had panicked as always and prevented him from answering, because what if Tony said yes? What if he really wanted Steve out of the Tower and his space?

"I heard the two of you are sharing a suite?" the Mayor inquired after a few words about public safety.

"Yes." Steve nodded.

"That's good. It looks like you're past your differences."
"Most definitely not," Tony argued. "I wouldn't say we're past them. More like we accepted each other's opinions and decided there is nothing more important than guarding the Earth from threats. We won't be another one of them."

"I'm glad to hear that."

Steve nodded again with a small smile and, like a good soldier, continued to eat his dinner, eyes firmly fixed on the table. What if these weeks would be the last time he would spend moments with Tony alone? The idea was killing him.

"Captain Rogers, are you feeling alright?"

"Yes, thank you," Steve brushed off the concern for his person and tried to school his face into something resembling an interest in their conversation. He couldn't hide behind his nervousness or shyness. Tony relied on him to play his part as well. "You have a nice house."

"Thank you." The Mayor seemed more alive after the words. "Though I'm sure you are both used to different, more glamorous homes."

"Nonsense. Steve is right." Tony studied the dining room with new interest. "Everyone always wants to talk about the world's safety, but we're disregarding the smaller things."

"That's true," Steve could second Tony's opinion. He watched him study the details of the room and then start talking about the Mayor's antiqued mahogany table. Steve's heart started to feel a bit warmer, because from the furniture in the Mayor's mansion they smoothly steered the conversation to the Tower's equipment and furnishings.

Finally, Steve could say something productive. He highlighted the luck they had because Tony had converted one of the rooms into a gym. There was a theater room where they used to sit down and watch movies on Friday nights, and they had a big space where they could just talk and relax. They hadn't used it for a while, but Steve was still in awe of all the things Tony arranged for them. Not to mention every member of the Avengers had their own bedroom. Steve talked about Tony's generosity, Tony's AIs and Tony making improvements for their armors.

Before Steve had a chance to think about what he was supposed to say next, all eyes were fixed on him. He clearly had been talking for some long minutes about Tony's Tower, his inventions and his work. Finally, the silence around him permeated Steve's senses, and his
monologue stopped. He was acutely aware people were no longer eating, they just kept staring at him, making him uncomfortable and embarrassed.

The first person Steve's eyes had sought out was Tony. The billionaire looked at him in astonishment, then smiled fondly at him. Steve would have wept for joy if it weren't for their present company. For so long he had yearned to see that smile, he couldn't believe his eyes.

"Yeah, well, as our national icon pointed out, I am awesome. Pepper, care to describe the next projects of Stark Industries and elaborate on my genius a bit more?"

Steve admired Pepper Potts. Without batting an eye, the woman shook her head at Tony and was capable of talking like Steve's speech wasn't anything out of ordinary. But for Steve, the moment hadn't been forgotten. He caught Tony looking his way repeatedly throughout the rest of the dinner.

***

Steve was lying in the bed of their hotel room long after they had said goodnight. He could hear Tony's soft breathing even though each of them were in a different part of the suite. Tony's every movement had been highlighted for Steve's senses from the moment they went to bed as a result of the tense silence between them.

"I know you can hear me."

Steve closed his eyes in shame when Tony whispered to him. He would gladly give up his senses just to give Tony some privacy. The Avengers invaded his Tower. They were constantly in Tony's face. And even now, Tony couldn't have his own room and knew about Steve's enhanced hearing.

Steve got up and walked over to Tony's side of the suite. He stopped in the doorway. "I'm sorry."

"JESUS FUCK, ROGERS!" In the darkness, Steve saw Tony jerking into a seated position. "What the fuck are you doing? Trying to give me a heart attack?"

"Sorry. I thought you wanted to talk," Steve said softly.
"Yeah, well---" He trailed off.

Tony Stark was lost for words. That didn't happen very frequently. Steve didn't know what to do when Tony nervously swung his feet out of the bed and rubbed his eyes tiredly. The only thing Steve could think about was apologizing.

"I'm sorry for invading your privacy." Not much Steve could do against the abilities of his body, but he still needed to say it.

"You didn't tell me you love the Tower."

If Steve was honest with himself, he himself hadn't known until there was all of a sudden the scary possibility of him leaving it. "It's nothing you have to take into consideration." The thing was, Steve didn't only love the Tower. He loved the family and friends he had found there. The place felt like home. And he most definitely loved its owner.

"Always so selfless," Tony muttered.

"I'm a lot of things. Selfless is not one of them, Tony." Steve had to cross his arms in front of his chest, because seeing Tony so tired and defeated, it affected him. Steve's instincts were telling him to go after Tony and comfort him.

"Did you know you're glowing with pride and happiness when you talk about something you love?" Tony turned to Steve, but Steve was pretty sure he couldn't see much in the darkness.

"No," he whispered.

"The first time I saw you like this, we were in my workshop, and you showed me your drawings. You talked about every one of them separately. About the time you bought the pencils, your sketchbook, about what you love the most about drawing."

Steve remembered that time very well. One of his most precious memories of Tony.
"Nobody can make you string together three sentences on any topic, but when you talk about something you love, your eyes are sparkling. You have that smile on your face, and you can't shut up."

Steve nodded in acknowledgement. Tony was gifted with a lot of things, and one of them had always been perceptiveness. Tony didn't only have a genius brain, he could use it as well and draw consequences from other people’s actions. Steve was honored by that to some extend, after all he was important enough to Tony for him to watch him that closely and know his habits.

"For my genius brain, I would certainly say I'm an idiot, because tonight was the first time that it finally clicked for me. You were talking about me that way."

Steve's heart stopped beating when Tony threw that bomb into the silent room.

"You're looking at me that way when you think I'm not noticing. Every time I say something funny or smile, every time you're talking about me with someone else, you're looking exactly that way."

Steve stood there paralyzed under Tony's gaze. The world around them halted. What was Tony trying to say?

"And as of yesterday, well, from the moment you went out of my workshop to be precise, you look at me like I'm eviscerating you whenever you're near me."

Steve opened his mouth to say something, but his voice just wasn't there. He couldn't deny Tony's words, but at the same time, he couldn't speak the truth out loud. Oh God. He was hopelessly embarrassed, because Tony knew the truth. "Sorry," Steve breathed with difficulty.

How could he dare to love Tony after everything Steve had made him go through?

"I'm sorry," Steve croaked again with tears rolling down his cheeks and then returned to his part of the suite.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

First of all, we have to apologize for the long period of time with no update. My dearest beta is having her finals and that's more important than proof reading. So, thank you all for your patience.

Second of all, For those who want to read how Rhodey and FRIDAY saved the day at the end of this chapter, there is a snippet called Saviors in the Long Time Ago Outtakes.

Third, the beta reading was provided by Rebecca.

Chapter 15

Tony was angry. That was the only way to describe his emotions. He wanted to yell at the whole world and not keep smiling at the U.N. representatives and sign the Sokovia Accords. Alright, yes. He did want to sign the Accords with the rest of the Avengers, but to hell with everything, more than that, he wanted to be back home in his workshop. Hiding from the rest of the world sounded better by the minute.

He did everything that was necessary. The smiles. The waves to the public. The cheerful attitude. But for fuck's sake, what kind of idiot was he? Tony mentally groaned. He had wanted to figure Steve out so badly, to understand his motives, but he had never expected this. Even in his wildest fantasies, he could never have imagined that Steve Rogers might love him.

Tony endured the long signing ceremony, the smiling for the cameras, the flirting with all the reporters. He was being a good boy, not even stealing one look at Steve's uniform that was clinging perfectly to the super soldier's backside when he bent down to sign his name under the Accords.

But now, at the reception, Tony's eyes strayed to Steve who was currently conversing with Clint. For fuck's sake, Steve Rogers was in love with him. Tony didn't know if he was overcome with joy or terrified out of his mind or angry as fuck. Probably terrified, that feeling suited him better. No. Angry. Livid was more precise.

His fucking heart was beating like crazy once more. What the hell was wrong with him? What was that fucking ancient saying again? Ask and you shall receive? Curiosity killed the cat? For all his
genius brain, Tony had never thought this thing through. He didn't know what to do, what to feel, and now, he was completely lost.

"Mr. Stark?" Vision floated into his line of sight with his eyes intensely focused on Tony's face. The tilt of his head suggested he was trying to figure him out, and his tone was concerned. Tony had heard the question "Are you alright, Sir?" in JARVIS' voice so many times in the past, he couldn't stand to hear it again.

Tony's heart clenched painfully at the memory. That voice was tearing him to pieces. "Vision." Tony tried to calm down, but the obvious concern in that voice did nothing against his mental state. Still, one could hardly blame someone for having the voice of someone else's vocal cords.

"Sorry, Vision, I can't. Not now." Tony backed away towards the food table and bar in the corner. As much as he had missed the android, he wasn't strong enough to hear his voice. "Double Scotch," he ordered with his eyes shifting to the side, making sure Vision really let him go.

"Here you go, Sir."

The glass with alcohol was put in front of him, and Tony automatically reached for it. The moment his fingers closed around the glass, a distinctly colored hand landed on his.

"We are taking a walk," T'Challa announced firmly.

"Walking is the last thing I want," Tony mumbled angrily. "I want to fucking forget we're here. Let me go."

"Tony."

Tony hated that reasonable voice. He sneered. "Do you even know---" But he didn't get far, because the king of Wakanda suddenly stepped closer, and Tony's brain shut down in surprise.

"We do not have to create a scene. That is not what the people in this room want to see. We are going to take a walk." T'Challa's eyes never left Tony's.
And fuck it, if that royal bastard wasn't right.

"You and I are going to go around the room and inform everyone about our leave. The last one you are going to tell will be Captain Rogers. People have to see you two interact without animosity. Shall we?"

In the end, it wasn’t Tony who had told the people about their departing. It was T'Challa, and Tony was grateful for that. T'Challa had led him to the elevator, but instead of going down, he had pressed the button for the rooftop. The king’s female bodyguards remained standing in front of the access to the roof and let them go through.

Tony's brain must have taken a vacation for a few minutes, because when he finally looked at his friend, T'Challa had folded his black jacket neatly and put it on the roof’s edge. "What are you doing?"

"It looks like you need to hit someone. I don't wish to inconvenience my guards with dry cleaning or explaining your blood on my clothes."

Tony's shoulders hunched in defeat, not expecting the chuckle that escaped him. He sat down on the concrete floor with his back to the roof's edge. "He told me he loved me. Well, not specifically told me. It was more of a confirmation of the---"

He didn't have to wait long for T'Challa to sit beside him. Tony sighed. "The time's not important. It just--- it was all written on his face when we were having dinner with the Mayor."

"I know," was the careful statement that came from the king.

"You can't have known. It happened only yesterday," Tony replied, annoyed by his friend's calmness.

"It certainly didn't happen yesterday for Captain Rogers. It is the reason for his---" T'Challa paused for a moment. "What do you call his sad face?"

"Kicked puppy look?"
"Yes."

Tony stayed silent for a moment. "I don't get it. How can you love someone and still do all---" He clamped the hurt inside and sneered, "---these things. I just want to punch him in the face. That fucker has no idea how hard it is to get out of Siberia with a malfunctioning suit. I had to repair some of it right there. It was fucking cold, you know. Siberia is not Miami. Sometimes I still feel the cold in my own home. I want---"

"And yet you still love him," T'Challa interrupted Tony's tirade.

"Oh, shut up!" Tony snarled. "I'm furious. I'm mad as hell. I'm fucking pissed!" Tony was a lot of other things as well. Tired of being the one to hurt people around himself was on top of the leaderboard. Paired up with heartbroken, because all he wanted to do was take Steve into his arms and wipe the hurt from the super soldier's face.

Tony waited for a long time before he started to speak again. His anger had calmed thanks to T'Challa's silence. "Did you see the way he looked at me?"

"Yes. He loves you."

"I didn't mean in general. I'm talking about last night. About today. It looks like it's killing him to even be in the same room as I am."

"There is no beauty in guilt, my friend," T'Challa stated.

"There is no beauty in love either. In the end, there's only heartbreak," Tony snorted cynically. "Just heartbreak." Tony's heart had repeatedly made the mistake of loving someone who deserted him in the end. He was not happy with himself, but one couldn't dwell on something that couldn't be changed.

Which led him to the most important part. Tony absolutely refused to believe that Steve Rogers would ever be happy loving him. People couldn't order their hearts to stop loving someone, but if it was somehow possible after all, the super soldier would be the first one to try.

"You both figured it out too late. Too many things have happened." T'Challa rested his fingers on Tony's forearm. "Due to your bond it's now even harder to make peace with your past mistakes."
God, it was so easy for T'Challa to talk about things that were killing Tony inside.

"But you will get through this," the king continued.

Tony did a double take and stared at his friend uncomprehendingly.

"There is no need for you to look at me like that," T'Challa chuckled.

How the hell could T'Challa make even an amused chuckle look all smooth and imperial? Be that as it may, Tony was not convinced of his statement. How could Steve and him go past that mess with their Civil War?

"Tony, that man loves you," T'Challa stated calmly. "And no matter what happened, you love him as well. It is not a question of how you two will get through this. It is a question of when you are going to accept your feelings for him and when he is going to accept his guilt."

T'Challa's cadence of voice made Tony finally feel some peace. The king sounded all soothing and reasonable. "You're good at psychobabble."

"You expected something else?"

That piece of royal ass had the audacity to smile at Tony all knowingly. Eventually, Tony jumped to his feet and helped his friend up from the concrete as well. "Thanks."

"I told you there is no need for alcohol. You only needed a bit of fresh air. A lot of things could be avoided if people would just take a calming stroll before their actions."

"Oh, shut up. You're just milking my gratitude," Tony smirked. He handed the expensive suit jacket to his friend. "The dry-cleaning bill is on me."

***
Steve, clad in his Captain America armor, nervously followed Tony to the love seat in the studio. His senses were overwhelmed with all the noise and chatter from the live television production of the show they were supposed to appear in. He left the seat closer to the female host to Tony.

Steve's palms were all sweaty, and he tried not to watch the people around them anxiously. His eyes landed on Pepper Potts behind the cameras. She had been tracking each of Steve's movements and words from the moment they had left the dinner table in the Mayor's house. He hoped the nervousness wasn't that obvious to people, especially to her. Steve was humiliated enough with the knowledge that Tony was aware of his private feelings and knew that Steve was in love with him. It was a miracle that Tony could even stand being near him.

***

The moment shots were fired in the studio, Steve was on his feet, standing protectively in front of Tony while Tony himself shielded the host with his body as well.

"Where is Stark!" The shout came from the group of production people, and everyone backed away from the young man who was holding a gun. He couldn't be more than twenty years old. A kid.

Steve didn't bat an eye when they were finally face to face. His armor was bulletproof, after all. He was just grateful Tony had stayed behind him. "Son, you don't want to do that," he stated calmly.

"Someone has to stand up for you!" the young boy shouted in his face with a mad glint in his eyes. "Stark!"

Steve's worst nightmare came true just a second later.

"I'm right here," Tony answered solemnly and stepped around him.

Steve couldn't think about anything else than how easy it would be for the young man to hurt Tony, clad in his expensive suit without any protection whatsoever.

"I'm here. Just tell me what you want, kiddo. I will give you anything, just let the people in this room go. This is between you and me."
Steve's heart clenched painfully, because not long ago, he had accused Tony of never doing anything for others, always just out for his own profit. And here Tony stood, making himself the target and trying to get everyone to safety.

Steve's body stiffened when the barrel of the gun was pointed at Tony's chest.

"You broke his heart!" the kid accused Tony, gesturing in Steve's direction. "How could you do this? He's your friend. He's so much better than you. You act like an almighty god, throwing money left and right, and you---"

"Son," Steve interrupted him forcefully. "We can talk this through, but please, lower the gun. We don't want anyone to get hurt."

"That's the point!" The kid's hand wavered. "You are so nice to everyone. Especially to him. Look at him. He's a fake person!"

"You don't know him," Steve stated, confident in his words. "You only see what you want to see. What he's allowing you to see, but you don't know him as a person at all."

"He took away your Bucky! I understand how it feels when someone takes away the person you love, you know. He's jealous. He’s never had anyone. He doesn't know what it feels like to love someone more than himself. He loves only his money!" the kid sneered in Tony's direction.

"Kid, just tell me what is it you want so everyone can leave in peace," Tony told him calmly.

"You fucker! Shut the fuck up!"

Steve saw the way Tony stood his ground when the young man took two steps towards him and pointed the gun at Tony's forehead. Steve's heartbeat doubled its speed, and that was his undoing. "Tony," he softly whispered. "Let me talk." They needed to stall to make time for the police to arrive.

Steve inched to the left, taking the man's attention back onto himself. "You have someone you love, you said?"
"Yeah. My buddy. Mikey. No one wants us together. He's Team Captain as well, you know."

"Team Captain?" Steve was momentarily confused before his gears kicked in. "You mean in the Civil War?" The question coaxed a small smile from the young man.

"Yep."

"I am not Team Captain myself," Steve told him sincerely. "Haven't been for a while. As you said, I accused Tony of many wrong things. I spent my days with my friend Bucky, but he eventually left me to face all the mess Tony and I created."

Steve didn't take his eyes off him, hoping desperately he would be able to hold the kid's attention for long enough. "I accused Tony of doing things only for his own profit because that is what you see on television. The man who's immaculately dressed in his rich suits. Someone who is so above everyone else in wealth that you feel insignificant yourself."

"Yep, so you get it."

The hope in the man's eyes made Steve regret every wrong word he had ever said to Tony. "No. That's what I thought before I knew him. The Tony I know is willing to listen to me talk about my drawings until three a.m. and never complain."

Steve squared his shoulders and continued, "The friend I have is doing everything in his power to assure all the Avengers have their rights like any other person in this country. The Tony I know is the man who is allowing the Avengers into his home and, without batting an eye, offering them everything he owns. And he's doing everything without wanting anything back."

Steve's heart picked up its pace again, because he was suddenly aware of all the people in the room staying quiet and listening to his every word. The power he had was frightening. Tony repeatedly reminded him that he was a national icon, and it finally dawned on Steve as well. The nation listened to him. "The friend I have is not considering himself in any question. He's always thinking about others."

Steve felt Tony shift nervously. "You want to know the real Tony Stark? He will let you hurt him, even kill him, just to assure no one else will get hurt. He's so used to people hurting him, he doesn't even care about himself."
Steve could hear the sharp intake of breath from Tony standing by his side. "I'm sorry, son. But if you want to hurt him, I will be standing in your way, because he's got no one else to shield him from threats like you."

It was then that Vision materialized through Tony's body beside Steve. "I beg to differ, Captain Rogers."

The android directed the attention onto himself long enough for War Machine to land awkwardly in front of them and add, "I wouldn't say that either, Cap." Then, he reached out with his hand and proceeded to stun the armed young man with a mild electroshock.

Steve saw the War Machine suit levitate and then land back on its feet to face them. A second later, the armor started to fold back into itself.

"Rhodey, don't!" Tony warned him and took a quick step forward to catch his friend in his arms before he could fall to the floor. The wheelchair was prepared under the colonel, but he would still have taken the fall if Tony hadn't interfered.

"The suit is not finished yet. It needs a few final touches." Tony helped his friend sit down. "How do you like it, by the way?"

"Oh, hell."

Steve watched Rhodes blink tears out of his eyes. "You made me a new suit with a chair," the disabled man whispered tightly, obviously full of emotions.

"Almost," Tony mumbled, eyes shifting to the floor. "How did you know about the situation?"

It was such a Tony thing to do. He couldn't stand the idea of someone genuinely complimenting him, so he changed the subject.

"FRIDAY told me. She saw a few seconds from the show's preview, but then it was interrupted and they changed the program. Safe bet something was going on," Rhodes smirked. "I couldn't stay at home so we just decided to do something out of your handbook and made a reckless
decision," he grinned, and that was all it took for Tony to smile back with pride.

"Good job, buddy." Tony squeezed his shoulder.

Steve shifted his attention to Pepper Potts. The woman was making her way towards them with the police, obviously explaining their situation. She squeezed Tony's fingers in support when she was close enough, but didn't comment. Vision was still floating silently beside Steve.

When Tony's eyes made contact with Vision, the android inclined his head minimally in acknowledgement. "I shall go back and inform King T'Challa and FRIDAY you are unharmed."

"Thanks."

Steve felt a small pang of jealousy. Tony and Vision were both looking at each other for a heartbeat longer, and even if it was without another word, the gesture still held more significance than any verbal communication could have. The second Vision phased away and Tony looked Steve's way, he quickly shifted his eyes away from them.
Chapter 16

Chapter by angelmira

Chapter Notes

All the awards go to my lovely beta Rebecca. I have to apologize in advance, next chapter will be some time after March 20th, because I'm going on a vacation.

Chapter 16

Tony stood silently in a corner of the lobby, watching the crowd of media circus that surrounded Pepper. How they had gotten hold of the information about the hostage situation was beyond him. She had reassured everyone like a pro about his and Captain America's wellbeing and then proceeded to answer tons of questions. Tony almost felt bad for leaving her there alone, but right now, he would do anything just to stay out of the public eye.

A shiver of cold air ran down Tony's spine, and he crossed his arms in front of his chest in an attempt to stay warmer. Still, the feeling was just in his head. He couldn't stop his brain from repeating Steve's words over and over again.

"I'm sorry, son. But if you want to hurt him, I will be standing in your way, because he's got no one else to shield him from threats like you."

Yet again, Steve's words were fucking with Tony's head. He couldn't stand the uncertainty of their situation. Looking at Steve was slowly killing him just as much as the super soldier himself.

Tony walked back to the studio with purpose. Captain America was quietly chatting with Rhodey. Steve being occupied with his best friend was probably the only reason no one else bothered them.

"We need to talk," Tony stated firmly.

Rhodey received the message loudly and clearly, so he slowly moved his wheelchair to some distance. Pepper had cut the press gathering short and was now walking towards him with a warm smile. Tony stood mesmerized by the way she walked. How could one person radiate so much calm and steadiness?
"I will move out of your home."

Tony did a double take when Steve's words sank into his brain and then shook his head in confusion. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I thought---" Steve cleared his throat nervously, making Tony wait for the explanation. How the hell were they suddenly talking about Steve leaving? Tony found himself short for words and thanks to that idea also short of breath. He didn't want to even entertain the idea of Steve leaving.

"You said you wanted to talk. I know that reference. In every movie---"

Captain Protect-the-helpless-Tony-from-the-entire-world added the explanation as if it were enough of an answer. God, it was hard looking at Steve and seeing him flustered, embarrassed and helpless. A national icon should not look that way. The man under the Captain America uniform shouldn’t look that way.

Tony just stood there looking into that sad face, having no idea how to continue their conversation. Steve probably knew it as well or had spontaneously developed mind reading skills, because he silently waited for Tony to talk.

"Tony?"

Their long gaze was interrupted by the dearest Pepper Potts who Tony wanted to strangle in frustration right now. He really needed a few minutes with Steve that weren’t in their hotel room. But at the same time, Tony wanted to send Pepper a fruit basket as a thank-you because he really didn't know what to say to Steve. Tony was slowly reaching the point where he would have to tell Steve the truth that was driving him nuts these days.

"We have to leave," Pepper told them calmly. "The security team is preparing our exit through the back door."

"What about the interview, Miss Potts?"

"We're scheduling it for another week. We don't have time to stay here longer. We need to be on
the plane by ten p.m." Tony was surprised when Pepper answered Steve without any difficulty. Maybe she was finally starting to warm up to him after the event.

***

Tony was sitting in the hotel restaurant, ignoring Pepper's long gaze. He silently ate his dinner, subtly keeping an eye on Steve fidgeting uncomfortably at one of the other tables. He was accompanied by one of the female reporters who wanted to interview them separately. Tony had already given her an interview after lunch where she had expressed the wish to dine with Captain America. Who could blame her?

Tony wanted to be back in their hotel suite since they still hadn't addressed the most important issue from the previous day. Steve was willing to move out of his Tower. Logically, that solution was best for all of them. If Tony agreed to talk to a shrink - albeit only in a very, very alternative reality - they would probably jump with joy at the suggestion. Keeping them apart was a good way of cleaning the air between them, but Tony couldn't imagine Steve leaving his life.

The love thing once more. Tony checked the other table again and stilled. He knew Steve's nervous face by heart. They had spent a lot of time traveling together, doing uncomfortable interviews, television spots and long talk shows. The embarrassed flushed face on the other one, that was something that occurred only when Steve was lost for words with Tony. As much as he wanted to stay out of Steve's way and let him do the interview, he wouldn't allow these vultures to cross some lines.

Tony folded his napkin when Steve couldn't meet the reporter’s eyes anymore and, instead of answering, smiled politely and looked away. Tony was on his feet and by their table before she had the chance to finish her question.

"---every woman would be available if you as much as looked her way. You have to---"

"What's going on here?" Tony put his palm on Steve's shoulder and shot the lady a hard glare.

"I was just pointing out to Captain Rogers that he doesn't have to be alone tonight, or any other night for that matter."

"Oh, trust me, he's not alone." To hell with everything, what did he just do? For God's sake, he could go to the nearest TV station and announce that he didn't want to be with Steve, but at the same time, he wasn't allowing Steve to be with anyone else.
"We share a suite, lady. If I wanted to watch a porn movie, I would download it illegally like everyone else. I don't need to hear that from the other part of the room."

"I'm flattered, Ms.---"

Oh, for God's sake! Captain Politeness-personified wanted to be nice to this woman, too. "Yeah, he could be flattered as much as he wants, me on the other hand, I'm not impressed. I would suggest you find another job, because this looks a lot like harassment from your side, and your biggest mistake was to try it on Captain America in my vicinity. You're done." Tony pointed towards the door.

"Tony, what's going on here?" Pepper joined them, alerted by his raised voice.

"She's leaving," he muttered angrily, not taking his eyes off the reporter. Just to be sure they understood each other, he added, "Print one bad word about him and I will sue you and your papers faster than you can say sexual harassment."

Finally, the blonde stalked out of the room. Tony turned his attention to Steve when the super soldier subtly cleared his throat. "What?"

"They always say something similar, Tony," Steve explained softly. "You didn't have to interfere. I'm used---"

"Used to it?" Tony's blood pressure was somewhere around the ceiling this evening. "That sure as hell didn't look like you were used to this. You're not obliged to endure this behavior."

Steve just returned his gaze silently.

What? He had needed to be a good soldier and listen to this crap in the past? Just take one for the team and let the people make suggestions? "We don't live in the 50s anymore, Rogers. You have some rights. Just because the world was different seventy years ago doesn't mean---"

"You don't have to always save me, Tony," Steve whispered quietly.
Tony finally shut his mouth, because if he wasn't careful, he would say the first words that popped into his head. *I have to. I want to. I need to.*

"I'm not hungry anymore," Tony mumbled instead and was about to leave the restaurant when Steve’s words stopped him.

"You haven't told me yet if you want me out or not."

And they both knew the conversation about the reporter had been forgotten. They were back to the question if Steve should move out. Tony just couldn't let him leave. His heart was too heavy for his chest. He just shook his head silently.

***

As the weeks went by, Tony lost track of their directions. The bad guys were holed up, and nothing was threatening the world. Yay. Good for them.

It was another night in another presidential suite. He and Steve had arrived around midnight.

Tony smoothed out his black Armani suit on the coat hanger. They were supposed to appear on a television show at seven o'clock in the morning. If they were lucky, they could catch four or five hours of sleep. In his case probably even less.

Nervousness was brewing under Tony's skin. He did everything in his power not to pace from one side of his room to the other. He didn't want to alert Steve to his behavior and especially to his feelings.

Tony's fingers picked another speck of invisible dust off the jacket's shoulder. The restless energy was killing him. The anxiety paralyzed his nerves and affected his ability to go to the other side of the large room and talk to Steve. All of this had a solution, of course, which Tony had willfully ignored for almost three weeks, but he knew he wouldn’t be able to last much longer.

Tony sighed in defeat. Then, he decided to let everything go and just go for it.
"I loved you," Tony whispered in a broken tone, knowing very well Steve could hear him.

The weight of the revelation had finally lifted from his shoulders. He saw Steve from the corner of his eye, standing in the doorway without entering his space.

"I was... so jealous." Tony swallowed, his throat tight. The memories were trying to come back, but he strictly focused on the present time. "I was hurt when you chose Barnes over me. I have never been good enough for anybody to stick around, and again you proved me right."

"Tony---"

Steve obviously wanted to interrupt him, but this time, Tony raised his voice a bit. This was his moment. "I was furious with you. But more than anything, I was furious with myself. Some genius I have been. I acted like a brainless idiot who cared about your opinion. In the end, you betrayed me, beat me to a bloody pulp in Siberia, left with someone else, and I still loved you." His voice finally broke. The confession was tearing him apart.

Tony avoided looking at Steve. His eyes never left the Armani suit. He didn't need to see Steve's reaction. The agony in his own chest was enough. Tony's eyes were slowly filling with tears, so he repeatedly blinked to get rid of them.

Tony took another deep breath. "I know you love me." He turned to Steve. The statement lay between them heavily. Tony could see Steve's remorseful expression. "You have no idea how much I want to forget the past, because I am that idiot who wants to be with you."

Steve's eyes didn't stray from his. Tony felt his body shake with tension. "But more than anything, I want to run away from that beautiful face of yours. If I kissed you and let you in, what would it feel like to be betrayed by you again?"

Tony wrestled with himself to voice the ultimate fear. He cleared his throat and blinked repeatedly again to clear the mist in his eyes. "Funny thought, though. People always leave me. Sooner or later, you will do the same, and I really don't want to pick up the pieces. I won't be able to survive it again."

Cue Steve's the-world-is-going-to-end face with sorrow and hurt radiating for miles. And Tony was on the shitty end because he was the very cause of that expression. His heart was breaking just
as much as Steve's, no doubt about that.

"I understand."

Tony had never heard Steve's voice sound so devastated and wrecked. He wanted to apologize but just couldn't open his mouth. He feared his words might only make the situation even harder on them. Tony's brain must have spaced out, because he jumped slightly when Steve spoke up again.

"Just so you know, I won't leave you."

Tony probably would have laughed hysterically if it hadn't been for Steve's serious eyes rooting him to the ground. He couldn't move. Here stood the man he loved with his heart exposed and rejected by Tony.

It could have been a whole different story. Not a long time ago, Steve had been a real dick; he knew very well how to get on Tony's nerves and push his buttons. The measure of Steve's dignity rooted Tony to the spot.

"Not this time, Tony. I won't leave you again. You'll see."

Tony hated the skip of his heartbeat and the spark of hope in his soul. They probably would have stood there for a long time hadn't it been for the sudden call for the Avengers to assemble.

***

Steve landed on his feet after his drop from the helicarrier and surveyed the shining spider robots infesting Manhattan yet again. They still didn't have any clue who was behind it, but it had been annoying the first time. He didn't fancy another encounter with them.

Sam, Clint and Natasha were standing by his side. Tony and Vision were watching from above, and thanks to his angry muttering into the comms, Steve knew Tony wasn't jumping for joy either. The robots were a decoy. They were there only to divert the attention from something bigger. Something that would most definitely reveal their real enemy.
"Everyone, be on the lookout," Steve said, calmly watching their surroundings.

"Copy that, Captain Rogers." Vision was now floating in front of them. Steve knew it was his way of protecting Wanda and the rest of the Avengers. Tony didn't even try to stay in formation. For which Steve was grateful. He could count on Tony to search the wider perimeter with the suit.

"Nothing other than those bots so far," Tony reported in their ears. "But the energy around them is different. The bots are moving, but slower than last time. They're waiting for the right moment, if you want my opinion."

Steve didn't like this at all. The right moment for what?

Perhaps their exact positions might give them a clue. Maybe they would reveal the side from which they were to expect the bigger threat. "Vision, could you carry me to the rooftop, please?"

"Certainly, Captain."

In a matter of seconds, Steve was standing on top of the five-story building, witnessing the robots coming to life, attacking not only the Avengers but the civilians as well. Hawkeye was using his detonating arrows. Wanda repeatedly deflected the attacks with her hexes. Steve looked for Vision, but he was nowhere in sight.

"What the fuck is happening?" Tony asked angrily. Steve saw him blast the spider robots with his repulsors. "What set them off? Does anyone see anything?"

"Nothing, Tony," Steve answered. "I'm going down."

"You need help?"

It was an innocent question, but Steve was grateful for Tony to even suggest he could help. "No, thank you." Steve grabbed the shield tighter and jumped from the building. The wind was biting into his skin for a second, and then, all of a sudden, there was a stinging sensation in his neck, and it felt like it was on fire. He lost control of the shield at the impact on a wall, and then he slammed into the concrete with uncontrollable force. His vision blacked out.
"Steve!"

Tony’s voice made him conscious again. Steve had hit the ground with a speed he didn't even want
to calculate in his super brain. His body hurt more than it should. Darkness surrounded him. His
hearing seemed to be the only thing not affected.

Steve was aware that several of his bones had broken at the impact. The last time he remembered
being in such agony, his body had been changing into that of a super soldier. His healing abilities
should have already kicked in, but something was very wrong with his body.

Steve heard Tony and the others calling his name, but the mere idea of moving any muscle made
his stomach turn.

The right side of Steve's face and his ribs were on fire. The rest of his battered body only hurt like
hell. He might be a super soldier, but he didn't stand a chance against this. He couldn't fight
alongside his friends in this condition. They needed his help, though. The idea of him leaving his
friends without help was scaring him.

"Steve, Jesus Christ! Somebody call the medics! For fuck's sake, he needs a doctor, and fast!"

Tony's desperate tone wasn't reassuring in the slightest. Not combined with the pain searing
through Steve's neck down the rest of his body. Steve could hear agonized whimpers.

"I'm sorry. I know it hurts. I’m sorry," Tony whispered into his ear. "Just stay with me, Steve."

Steve held his breath, being rewarded with blissful silence. Then it clicked inside his head. The
pained noises had been his doing.

"Steve, breathe for me, damn it!" Tony cried in panic.

The yelling was accompanied by Tony touching Steve's shoulder. The joint was instantly on fire,
and a tidal wave of new agony punched Steve's breath out of his lungs. Maybe this was it. His life
ending after so many years. His time had finally come. But Steve didn't want to leave. He had
made a promise to Tony.
"Steve, stay with me. You promised."

Tony's broken whisper pierced Steve's consciousness. His Tony was hurting. He tried to move, tried to say a word and somehow let Tony know that he would fight if Tony wanted him to, but the pain was simply too much. The sliver of light that burned his retinas left him unconscious.
Chapter 17

Chapter by angelmira

Chapter Notes

AS always, Rebecca did the edits. Buckets of roses and all the chocolates needs to be send her way. :)

Chapter 17

"For once in your fucking life, do something good and help him!" Tony yelled into the Scarlet Witch's face. He was still in his armor, but without the helmet. His nerves were strained, and he just couldn’t think.

The hospital room in S.H.I.E.L.D.’s headquarters fell silent. The only remaining sounds were Steve's helpless, pained groans.

Wanda didn't avert her eyes from Tony’s. She stood there like a statue, a hurt expression on her face. She even had the audacity to open her mouth in shock. For fuck's sake, she had nerves!

"Mr. Stark." Vision appeared by her side. "Wanda---"

"I don't care what you have to say about her," Tony cut his words short. He had his hands full with staying in one piece. If it weren’t for his armored suit, he would probably have vibrated with anger and fear. Tony swallowed, his throat dry. "I want her to do that fucking mind trick which she is so good at and rid him of the pain. Didn't you hear the doctor? Steve’s body is burning through the morphine too quickly."

The solution was glaringly obvious. At least to Tony. Didn’t they see it? "He needs to heal, but he can’t heal without rest. And he can’t rest when he’s in pain." Tony ignored Vision and looked at Wanda expectantly. "Just trick his brain and enchant him to not feel the physical pain."

Nobody moved. No one said a word. The people in that fucking hospital room were driving Tony out of his mind, because they were apparently afraid to even breathe in his vicinity. Well, they had every right to be scared. If someone didn’t come up with a solution soon, Tony would be
responsible for multiple homicide. These useless people who called themselves doctors were doing their tests on Steve over and over again, and Tony couldn't stand another second of Steve's agonized screams whenever someone touched him. The only good thing was that the gash on Steve's neck had stopped bleeding.

Tony had almost lost his shit on the street when he had seen Steve falling to the ground, blood everywhere. There was still dried blood on Tony's gauntlets from pressing his fingers to the wound on Steve's neck to stop the bleeding. They had had the fucking audacity to shoot him with an arrow!

From the moment Steve had hit the ground, the spider robots had just stood there. It had been too easy to destroy them all. Apparently, they were a distraction for the Avengers. Someone wanted them to have their hands full and leave Steve unprotected. The main focus had actually been to injure Captain America.

Not that Tony had given a shit about the robots when he'd been kneeling by Steve's side. He had been too preoccupied with praying to every God he knew for Steve to survive.

They had transported him to the helicarrier and subsequently to the hospital at S.H.I.E.L.D.'s headquarters, but there was little the doctors could do for Steve. Half of his face was crushed in, his broken ribs puncturing some of his organs and causing internal bleeding. Somehow, Steve’s healing abilities weren't working. Something had to be interfering with them.

The doctors had taken Steve's blood. Repeatedly. All of the Avengers had supervised the procedure. Later, when the doctors had brought them the test results, they were all without answers. The most capable doctors, a.k.a. the useless squad of the infamous S.H.I.E.L.D. organization, didn’t know shit about how to help Steve.

Steve's body was damaged, but somehow not damaged enough for him to die. He was in excruciating pain. No matter how high a dosage of the morphine the doctors gave him, it was processed by Steve's metabolism too quickly with no effect whatsoever. Steve suffered.

Tony remembered the times he had wanted Steve to suffer after their encounter in Siberia. No one could blame him for that, but this level of agony was too much. Steve’s every scream and whimper of pain was tearing Tony apart from the inside. He couldn't stand it.

They needed a doctor who understood Steve's physiology, but all of them had been dead for many, many years. They also needed strong painkillers that could finally relieve Steve of the pain, but they didn’t have anything on hand either. There was no one in S.H.I.E.L.D.’s hospital who could help. No one, and Tony’s chest hurt too with the knowledge.
Tony ran a hand through his hair miserably. He had to think. They needed a doctor. Someone who knew what was going on. Someone who could help, when Wanda obviously wasn't in the mood to lend a fucking helping hand. They needed the doctor.

Tony thanked God he was still in his armor. He opened a hidden compartment in his suit and whipped out his phone. It was now or never. Tony waited a few seconds before finally deciding on his course of action. This was an emergency. He was entitled to resort to his assets, his friends, in emergencies.

"FRIDAY." Tony squared his shoulders against the others’ complaints. He weighed up all the options, but his brain couldn't find any other solution. "Activate code red on Bruce Banner's phone." Tony couldn't face the Avengers anymore. His main focus was Steve lying on his back on the metal table and not the questioning looks from the Avengers.

"You know where he is," Natasha whispered, stunned in surprise.

God, how could they be so blind? Didn't they know him at all? "I know where every damn superhero on this planet is. Someone has to keep them safe," Tony sneered, seething with anger. He was through with being the nice, kind Tony. What the hell did they even know about him and what he did for everyone? They could all just go fuck themselves! He felt like a tiger backed into a corner. Every sentence aggravated his nerves more. Every look grated on his skin.

Tony waited, his heart beating erratically, for the phone to ring in his hand. After several long seconds, the damn thing finally came to life, and he could breathe more easily. Tony could immediately hear the strained tone of his friend’s voice.

"Who?"

Yeah. Bruce Banner knew better than to expect a social call from Tony. He had to know someone was in serious danger or dying, because Tony wouldn't use this number otherwise. Bruce’s voice sounded defeated, like he was already mourning the person they were supposed to talk about, and that was simply unacceptable.

"Steve," Tony whispered quietly.

"Is there a chance you could ask someone else?" the man behind Hulk inquired nervously.
"I need you." Tony negated with a sigh and hoped Bruce would understand. Tony closed his eyes. He had to wait a long time before Bruce eventually mumbled, "Give me a few hours. I'm on my way."

The relief was unbelievable.

"I can give you something better," Tony told him urgently. "War Machine will pick you up. FRIDAY can send him your coordinates." Tony was thankful when Bruce didn't ask how it was possible for War Machine to be up and flying again. Maybe the doctor had really been out of the loop for so long a time that he didn't know about Rhodey's accident.

"I will be waiting."

"Thanks." The unsure tone of Tony's voice was gone when he conveyed his wishes to FRIDAY and arranged for Rhodey to pick Bruce up. Then, Tony returned to Steve’s side, carefully placing gauntlet-covered fingers on his forearm with barely any pressure.

"You have to hold on, Cap. Bruce is on his way," Tony said, hoping that any second Steve's healing abilities would finally kick in and save him from the agony after all. So far, the situation remained the same, though.

The doctors took Steve for another scan a few hours later, but the x-rays didn't show any change. Steve's cheekbone was still shattered, and his ribs and several bones in his body still bore multiple fractures. They transported him to the ICU, and the super soldier lay helplessly on the bed, hooked to the machines, and whimpered in pain every time people touched him.

Tony's own helplessness was driving him up the wall. The rest of the Avengers were standing beside him. Wanda seemed to try and blend in with the wall, never making a move towards Steve. Fucking useless! Tony couldn't even look at her.

Bruce arrived finally without saying a word. He nodded his greeting to the room’s occupants, read Steve's chart and then went to the nearest computer at the nurse's station. "I need access to the grid."

Tony ignored the rest of the Avengers who had trailed after them. He snatched the keyboard from Bruce, ejected an USB flash drive from his suit's wrist plating and hoped it wouldn’t take FRIDAY
too long to go through the security and firewall. "FRIDAY?"

"Boss?" the AI asked with a cheerful lilt which was somewhat muffled by the hospital loudspeakers.

"We need access to S.H.I.E.L.D.’s files," Tony informed her.

"May I suggest official---"

Official request for entrance. They didn’t have enough time for that. "You may not!" Tony interrupted her sharply, waiting impatiently for the computer screen to display the right content. When that happened, he forced his way inside with a few strokes on the keyboard.

"Medical records," Bruce told him calmly.

Tony backed away from the computer the moment the requested information appeared, proceeding to watch the genius scientist search for the answers.

"Whatever happened to him---"

Tony waited for the other shoe to drop, because there was always something catastrophic to be expected. Several minutes later, however, his patience was at the end of its rope when Bruce didn’t finish voicing his thought. He continued to switch from one screen to the next.

"---it looks like it's transforming his DNA and slowly working against the super serum," Bruce announced finally.

That didn’t make sense to Tony. "They shot him in the neck when he was jumping from a building. He was bleeding a lot, but it stopped on its own," he pointed out.

"Wounds like this tend to do that. It has nothing to do with the super serum," Bruce murmured in a matter-of-fact tone, obviously fascinated by the results. He clicked the printer icon.
Ok. Sure. So, the serum had still worked when Steve was shot. Made sense. "The first impact was to a wall, and then he hit the concrete." Tony absent-mindedly stopped by the printer and handed his friend the three sheets of paper it had produced. Whatever Steve was hit with, it worked fast.

Tony tried to suppress any rising emotion when he stated the facts, but still his voice shook with terror. He would certainly remember that moment for the rest of his life. "He's got a lot of broken and shattered bones, Bruce," Tony whispered helplessly. Which Bruce knew, because he had already read Steve's chart. Tony was only stating the obvious, but he still needed to stress the main point. "He's in so much pain." Which Bruce also knew very well. Fuck! Again, the obvious.

Bruce went over to the big envelopes which were lying on another table, searched a few minutes and then held the x-rays up against the light. "The second set of x-rays shows a slight deterioration of his muscle tissue."

The doctor went back to the printed sheets of paper. "The blood results are bad. His body's fighting the infection. These figures are wrong; they shouldn't be so low. Whatever it is, it almost looks like it's changing him back into a normal human."

Tony held his breath. Oh God. As Captain America, Steve was almost invincible. As an average human--- Tony was too terrified to finish his thoughts. None of them gave him any comfort. They had to find the bastards who had done this.

"You said something hit him. Do we still have the poisonous bullet?" Bruce finally looked at them, his eyes clear and focused.

"Arrow. We don’t, but I will find it for you," Tony stated with determination. He gladly accepted the chance to do something other than helplessly stand by Steve's bed. Tony's first step towards the exit was aborted by Bruce's hand on his chest plate.

"Let Clint and the others go, Tony," Bruce told him with an intense look on his face.

"Not happening," Tony retorted without thinking. The situation was too dangerous for the others to go into the city without Captain America or Iron Man. If there was still someone out there who wanted all the Avengers incapacitated, the others were too vulnerable. Thanks to his suit, Iron Man was the safest option. "I can---"

"Let the others go," Bruce repeated insistently. How the hell could he be so calm and collected
while Tony couldn't even think clearly? Steve was in agony! But still, no amount of determined glaring would make Bruce back down.

"Fine," Tony sneered angrily and stalked out of the room.

***

Tony sat at the hospital roof's edge and watched from above as the Avengers diverged from the building. He couldn't go with them, but at the same time, he needed a breather because the walls in Steve's room were smothering him.

He couldn't lose Steve. No matter what had happened between them. Regardless of how terrified Tony was that the man might disappear from his life again, Steve being hurt or dying was not an option he’d ever considered. His chest felt tight when he imagined his life without his smile and kind eyes. He couldn't even remember the last time they had smiled at each other. What if they were never going to have that chance in the future?

Tony's heart skipped a beat when he spotted a distinctive cape and familiar colors in front of him. Red and gray. Not him too. "Please, don't say a word."

The last thing he needed to hear was concerned words from Vision's vocal chords. The same voice, the same tone, but a different person. Not his JARVIS.

His friend sat down beside him without a single word, though. Tony laid his head on Vision's shoulder.

Tony knew he should apologize. He wouldn’t be too happy had their roles been reversed and had someone been cruel to his woman. Yeah, Wanda could probably have helped, but maybe Tony didn’t know everything about that. And maybe he’d just needed to be an asshole to someone to feel better, and she’d willingly let herself be Tony’s punching bag.

Tony made himself move the moment he saw a limousine stopping in front of the hospital entrance. Tony felt his shoulders relax even more. He was out of his mind with worry, but he still had some options open if Bruce couldn't figure out a solution.

One of T'Challa's bodyguards left the car and proceeded to go inside. They would never let him enter without knowing the terrain first.
Tony accepted Vision's help when the android rose to his feet again.

***

Back in Steve's room, Tony felt uneasy. He wasn't used to the silence. They had shut off the sounds of the machines because they were likely to hurt Steve's ears in his fragile state. Before, when Steve had been admitted, all the Avengers had been crammed into the small room for protection. People hadn't even been able to properly breathe in here. Now, when Tony stood there alone, the silence scared him even more.

The side of Steve's face was still bloodied and unnaturally dented. No one had touched the injury because it would have caused too much pain. Tony let the armor from his hands retreat again and carefully caressed the fingers of Steve's left hand, the one that wasn't injured.

"Come on, soldier." Tony leaned down to Steve's ear. "Fight this." Tony's voice shook. There was no reaction whatsoever to his plea. The idea of Steve dying made Tony physically ill. "You promised," he whispered in a hoarse voice.

Tony straightened his back and rubbed his face. He couldn't think. Not with Steve in this condition. Every time Tony closed his eyes, he relived Steve's fall over and over again.

"Tony?"

"Not now, Pepper," he sighed. What was she even doing here? He really didn't feel like talking. He needed something to do. Preferably something that consisted of finding the one responsible for Steve’s condition. He wanted answers. Tony needed to know who had the audacity to hurt Captain America. What villain were they standing against now?

"Am I interrupting?"

When he heard T’Challa's voice, Tony whipped around so quickly he felt almost dizzy. Some part of his brain understood that the Wakandan king was standing before him, but a tiny part was still flabbergasted. He registered Pepper walking out of the room again, but Tony’s eyes didn't stray from the man behind the Black Panther mask.
"Your friend was kind enough to inform me about what happened." Friend? Probably Rhodey. "How is he doing?" T'Challa continued, his concern audible. Tony knew him well enough to notice the small wince of sympathy when the king took in Steve's injuries.

"Badly."

"Do you need help? My scientists are at your service," T'Challa assured him.

Tony's shoulders sunk low with gratitude. He gave the king a small smile. "Not yet. Bruce is here. But if it doesn't work---" If anyone could figure out what to do, it would be Bruce.

"They are at your service. Any time," T'Challa repeated.

Tony sighed. Yeah, he himself covered his basis, but there was still one thing Wakanda’s leader could do. Sooner or later, there would come a time when Steve needed someone close to him. A friend. A very close friend who could calm him down if the situation wasn't ideal or things got worse. But not just any friend. An old friend. Steve needed the comforting presence of his best friend.

Tony's heart sank. He hesitated for a second. He was such a fucking martyr. So in love, he would endure almost anything. When he'd finally gathered enough courage, Tony looked his friend in the eye. "I need you to do something for me."

Tony didn't even want to imagine what would happen, but he steadily pressed forward, "I need you to bring Barnes here. Maybe he could---"

The palm T'Challa placed on Tony’s shoulder shouldn't burn through his armored suit, but Tony still felt its presence, and he shut his mouth.

"It won't change things, my friend. You know you are the only one who needs to be here," T'Challa stated reasonably.

Tony crossed his arms over his chest and looked away. "I may not be enough. He needs---"
"He needs you. He loves you," T'Challa replied with unshakable belief. Tony hoped for a miracle and for his friend to be right.

"We have to do something to ease his pain, T'Challa. Look at him." Tony gestured to Steve who was lying so very still. If it weren't for the miniscule movements of his chest, he might as well have been dead.

"The most obvious and general solution for numbing the pain receptors is ice," Vision spoke up behind them, his voice devoid of any inflection. Of course, Wanda accompanied him. Apparently, she couldn't even go with the others.

"Over my dead body," Tony stated firmly.

"Cold water then," Wanda suggested.

"Are you kidding me?" Tony couldn't even fathom how she could propose such a thing. "He fell into the freezing ocean with a fucking plane. He spent hours drowning in the cold water, feeling his body freezing bit by bit."

Tony very well remembered his late-night conversation with Steve on the subject. Steve had confided in him that he was not a big fan of water ever since. Immersing him into the cold water in his current state would be like subjecting him to another nightmare.

"Do you know how it feels to drown?" Tony asked heatedly. "I could shed some light on the subject. I have some wonderful experience with that from Afghanistan," he proceeded sarcastically. "Absolutely perfect torturing session, if I may say so. I'm a bit of a professional when it comes to torture techniques, if you---"

"Tony," T'Challa put a supporting hand between Tony's shoulder blades again, "you are right. But so are they."

"You will scare him to death. He will be fighting every second of it, and he will injure himself even more," Tony voiced his main concern. "This is not a tiny fear of water. Trust me. I know. You will be throwing him into a PTSD nightmare."

"What if we throw you into it as well?" Wanda squared her shoulders determinedly. "You wanted
me to help. I can enchant you to enter his subconscious. You would be there with him."

Tony reeled back with the idea. His throat was suddenly parched, his insides twisting with terror. He had to turn his back to them, because he couldn't stand the idea of them seeing the fear displayed on his face. They didn’t need to be geniuses to see how much the suggestion terrified him.

But when he turned around, Tony’s gaze sought out Steve's rigid body fighting the pain in his hospital bed. His mind would be filled with fear. If there was something Tony was used to, then fighting his mind every day.

"Ok," he agreed.

***

Steve’s entire body was burning with pain. He wanted to escape. Everything hurt. Hearing. Breathing. Thinking. Remembering. And then, just like that, he was thrown into a freezing ocean. Steve looked down his body, dressed in the old Captain America armor. The cold water was rapidly rising from the ground. Before Steve could say a word or even form a thought, he was immersed up to his shoulders.

The ground disappeared. The only thing he could see very clearly was the ceiling of the plane’s cockpit. He would freeze inside the airplane again. He would be drowning again. The idea made him tread water faster as he frantically searched for an exit. However, he knew very well there was none. He didn't want to die. Not again. God, please, not again. The water was still rising. "I can't---"

Steve’s lungs burned with the need to breathe. He still had enough of a gap between the ceiling and the water surface, but he couldn't escape. He couldn’t breathe. Steve was starting to hyperventilate. He then realized he would drown even more quickly because he would lose consciousness in a few heartbeats.

"Steve!"

Steve's vision became spotty. He couldn't get any air into his lungs. He didn't want to die again. He didn't want to leave Tony once more. His super enhanced body was working against him in every way. God, what would Tony think of him? He couldn’t leave him. Steve had promised he would
be there for Tony.

"Steve!"

Tony's face zoomed into Steve's line of vision. How was this possible? He was so close. Closer than Steve had ever seen him. Tony's damp hair was plastered to his forehead.

Steve blinked when Tony suddenly took his face between his hands. Tony’s mouth moved in the same manner over and over again, repeating whatever words they were forming. Tony was not supposed to be here. Oh, dear God, they were both gonna die here!

"We have to get you out. You have to survive this!" Steve frantically looked around. Exit. He needed to find the exit and get Tony out of here before it was too late.

But Tony's hands held his head more firmly, and Steve found himself inches from Tony's face. Steve stopped his struggling and kept staring into Tony's eyes. The water and danger forgotten, his gaze zeroed in on Tony’s lips. His stomach tightened. His breath shallow, Steve all of a sudden wanted nothing more than to kiss this brilliant man. Just once in his life he wanted to know what it would feel like to kiss Tony Stark.

"It's just a dream," Tony whispered. Steve felt the heat of Tony's breath against his lips. Dream. The words didn't make sense.

"I've got you. Just keep looking at me," Tony continued quietly. Steve guessed his end was probably near and his subconscious was conjuring the image of Tony to ease the slow death for him. He relaxed his arms. If this were his final minutes, he didn't want to spend them panicking. Steve wanted to spend them looking at the man he loved. Tony somehow kept them floating on the water surface without treading the water.

"Are you with me?"

"Yes," Steve replied hoarsely.

"Do you feel any pain?"
Pain? The question didn't make sense either. "Not much," Steve answered with a thoughtful crease between his eyebrows. "Why would I feel pain?"

"Someone poisoned you. You fell from a building."

That much Steve suddenly remembered. The overwhelming agony. Tony's voice. "You were there."

"I'm always here," Tony replied in a matter-of-fact tone. "Where else would I be?" His eyes never strayed from Steve's. They were both gently swaying on the water, Tony's warm palms still touching his cheeks.

"Where are we, Tony?"

"In your head. In your nightmare," Tony explained with a sad smile. "We had to numb your pain receptors the old-fashioned way: by an ice bath. Your body processed the pain medication faster than an average human would because of the super serum."

"How did you get here?" Steve couldn't understand what he was being told. The nightmare made sense, but Tony? "Are you real?"

"Of course I'm real," Tony smirked. "Wanda enchanted me. I sincerely doubt you have that good of an imagination."

Steve thought long and hard about the constitution of Tony’s appearance. If what he had said was the truth, then he could easily change their current reality. He focused on their surroundings.

Suddenly, the water disappeared and they were standing in front of Clint’s country house. Steve was in his jeans and blue t-shirt and Tony in his black Henley shirt, still cradling Steve’s face, but now their bodies were closer. Steve could feel the heat radiating from Tony. The world disappeared. Their only reality became this single moment, trapping them staring into each other’s eyes.

Steve cautiously anticipated Tony's reaction as he slowly rested his hands on Tony's waist, hoping the man wouldn't run away from him.
"Or maybe you do," Tony mumbled, swallowing nervously without breaking their gaze.

The idea of Tony willingly coming into Steve’s nightmare about drowning left him stunned and without words. Steve knew about Tony's fear of water. He knew about Wanda enchanting Tony with the Mind Stone. Yet, Tony had still let Wanda bewitch him again even though he didn’t trust her. How could one human being be so brave?

Steve’s eyes slid down to Tony’s lips again. Just once. How would it feel like to kiss them?

But then, Tony's demeanor changed all of a sudden. "Get me out of here," he said urgently.

"No, don’t—" Steve reached for Tony’s face, but the man had already dissolved into thin air.

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"Tony!" Steve sat up in the bathtub, fingers still trying to reach for Tony. His body screamed in pain. He caught glimpses of the Avengers standing near the opposite wall of the room before his vision blurred. His face was burning. Something was ripping his chest into shreds. He couldn't breathe. Every nerve ending was being seared with excruciating agony.

"Right here." Tony squeezed his fingers, supported his shoulders and then eased him back into the water that was filled with ice cubes. "Fuck, this is cold. Turn your face to your right," Tony spoke softly.

After Steve had done exactly that, he stopped moving altogether. The relief was indescribable. A few shallow breaths later, he could feel the numbing effect taking over his whole body. He slowly turned his head the other way to face Tony.

Steve couldn't express the amount of gratitude he felt towards the man. He might be a century-old national icon, but he had felt completely insignificant before knowing Tony.
Tony internally squirmed under Steve's gaze. But nothing would make him shy away from those eyes. He was still Tony Stark. Stark men didn’t shy away from anything. Yet, that right there was not how Steve should look at him in a room full of people.

Tony felt trapped just as much as he had in Steve's dream. He’d asked Wanda to pull him out again because he had known he would do something monumentally stupid like kiss Steve Rogers. Ok. Technically, it wouldn't have been real, because they were in Steve's subconscious, but Tony still wasn't ready to give in. He wanted their first kiss to mean something, and in the middle of---

*Jesus fucking Christ!* He had already made his decision about their future, hadn't he?

"Captain Rogers, how are you feeling?" Vision, probably the most innocent of them all, asked without any idea what was happening between his comrades.

"I remember better days," Steve answered politely, averting his eyes from Tony’s. Steve was always the polite and proper one. Tony couldn't force his gaze to shift away from him. Steve’s hair suddenly fascinated him. He wanted nothing more than to brush away the wet golden lock that had fallen onto Steve’s forehead.

Now, the Avengers all took interest and asked Steve some questions which Tony ignored. He kept kneeling beside the bathtub in his suit and held Steve's hand like he had from the moment the super soldier had woken up.

"Bruce?" Tony's attention shifted to the man who had just stepped into the room.
"Good news, the poison does not have long-term effects."

Tony could finally breathe more easily. Thank God, Mary, Joseph, Jesus and all the other guys up there. However, some things still needed to be clarified. "So, he's going to beat this shit with his super serum, and he will be absolutely alright?"

"Yes. Theoretically. The last lab results showed significant improvement of the serum. It’s stronger than whatever poison they tried to contaminate him with," Bruce nodded thoughtfully, his eyes landing on their connected hands. He blinked twice, then switched his attention back to the topic at hand. "The bad news is, I think this is just a testing batch to test the effects on the super serum."

Tony wanted to reply, but he turned quickly to Steve instead when he noticed his breathing was far too labored and the skin in Tony's grip felt too warm to the touch. "Steve? Bruce!" He quickly backed away and let the doctor examine him.

"He has a fever which means his body is finally fighting the poison. It's a defense mechanism as if he'd contracted the flu. His body is basically burning the poison. He's fine," Bruce nodded with a reassuring expression.

Steve helplessly clawed at the bathtub's edge, causing the ceramic to crumble under his touch. Tony knelt down. "He's not fine. He's hurting," Tony hissed angrily, but he saw with his own eyes that Steve's cheek bone was forming back into place. The bloody scrape still remained.

Steve's super serum was clearly finally overpowering the poison, but he winced with every healed bone and curled into a fetal position, clutching his ribs.

The bathtub suddenly caved entirely under Steve's restless moves and broke into pieces. Water flooded the floor, ice cubes spilling everywhere. The Avengers got an eyeful of naked super soldier lying on his side between all the ceramic pieces.

Tony wanted to cover him, but there were no curtains, blankets or anything else to be used. He himself was still in his armor, and one look around let him know that the other Avengers were all clothed in spandex or other clingy materials. If Thor were present, he could have lent his cape, but he was still fighting his own war in Asgard. T’Challa wore his suit, but Tony felt bad asking the king of Wakanda to lend him a suit jacket. That was just wrong on so many levels, no matter how good friends they were. Thankfully, Tony’s eyes landed on a certain genius scientist.
Tony held out his hand when nobody moved. "Bruce?" The only person with a lab coat was to save the day in a wholly different way now.

"Yes. Sorry." Bruce shed the white coat.

Everyone found apparently very fascinating spots to look at other than Steve while Tony was covering him.

"Some scrubs would be perfect, guys," Tony announced into the silent room. They were still in the hospital, but apparently nobody felt the need to use their brains anymore. After Tony’s implied request, the Avengers ultimately scattered and gave them some privacy. Bruce was the only person who remained.

Tony gave in to the temptation and smoothed the hair from Steve's forehead. "How do you feel?"

"Weak." Steve whispered, his eyes closed.

Tony looked at Bruce and hoped the man would offer some reassurance. The doctor didn't disappoint. "That's normal. You went through hell, Steve. Give it some time."

"Clothes." Vision phased through the wall, delivered several towels and clothes and was gone again a second later.

Tony was grateful Bruce hadn't left, because he sure as hell wouldn't be able to dress Steve in the dark blue scrubs alone. Both the good doctor and the super soldier were out of breath when they were finished and Steve was sitting on a stool, shivering.

"I'll fetch a blanket," Bruce murmured and disappeared after the others.

"Are you ok?" Tony leaned forward to get a better look into Steve's face. He looked exhausted and very much not like a beloved national icon capable of protecting the world. Tony wanted nothing more than to hold him in his arms until Steve had gained his strength back. The vulnerability spoke to some primal part in Tony and woke the need to protect the super soldier at any cost inside him.
"Cold," Steve mumbled and leaned into Tony's body.

"I’m Iron Man. You won't get any warmer with me." Tony winced as soon a the words left his mouth. Stupid brain. He slowly rubbed Steve's back to spread some heat over his skin. His fingers strayed into the hair on Steve's nape. He needed to comfort this man.

Tony lightly scraped the skin under his fingers and froze when Steve whimpered. That was not the reaction Tony had wanted to cause. Definitely not now. Unfortunately, he couldn’t stop his own thoughts. He just had to picture Steve in different circumstances, preferably in bed under Tony, making that same sound. Great, now he wanted to haul Steve to his feet, kiss him senseless and reassure them both that Steve was still alive.

Tony tried to say something to stop Steve when he pulled away, but the words betrayed him. Steve's blushing face made him feel even worse. It was him who had told Steve he would never risk acting on his feelings towards him. He couldn't just ignore his own words, act conversely and not explain himself properly. It would only confuse Steve more and hurt his feelings.

Steve had been already hurt enough in Tony's opinion.

"Guys, here’s your blanket." Bruce gave Tony the fabric and stepped back while Tony wrapped it around Steve's shoulders. "I talked to the doctors. We have a bed ready for you."

"Good. Come on," Tony helped Steve to his feet. How the hell he was even awake was a mystery to Tony. He swayed on his feet and seemed to almost fall asleep standing up. "Say the word and I'll carry you."

Steve hunched his shoulders and nodded. Tony saw him sway again, and then Steve's legs gave out under him, but Tony caught him in time and lifted him into his arms without trouble. Thank God for the Iron Man suit.

There was no conversation about this emasculating situation because the super soldier was asleep with his head on Tony's shoulder within a second. Tony internally winced. The immediate future didn't look very promising. He could picture all the curious glances from the Avengers waiting outside.

"Ready?" Bruce asked encouragingly.
"Hm," Tony hummed in answer. He went after Bruce who was leading the way. Just as Tony expected, everyone was looking at them. The Black Widow and Hawkeye shared a smirk. The pair of them could go fuck themselves! Vision witnessed the situation without a word. Thank God for him! The Scarlet Witch didn't have any right to say even one word, so Tony didn't spare any second thought on her opinion. Sam looked too smug and amused for Tony's liking. Definitely murder material! Pepper was nowhere to be seen.

"Can someone take a picture?" Sam asked when Tony passed him. Unfortunately, Tony held precious cargo in his arms and couldn't punch him.

"Do not worry. I will destroy any evidence," T'Challa reassured Tony, keeping a solid stride beside him. Thank God for the respectable leader!

"Thanks, buddy." Tony whispered. He immediately winced, ashamed of his words. He didn't have any right to refer to T'Challa that way. It really wasn't very respectful behavior towards the king.

Steve’s eyes snapped open with alertness when Tony carefully laid him down on the bed. "You’re fine." Tony reassured him automatically. "It’s your hospital bed. Are you with me?"

"Yes," he whispered, gaze never leaving Tony's.

"You have to stop doing this," Tony lifted a corner of his lips in a small smile.

"Doing what?"

"Looking at me that way," he said softly. They were thankfully alone again, so no one could overhear their conversation.

"What way?" Steve murmured, his words almost inaudible.

"Like you’re looking at something---" Tony didn’t want to use the word precious. Steve would never look at him that way. He could lie to himself as much as he wanted, and it still didn’t alter the truth.
"---I love?" Steve supplied the words.

*God, yeah.* That worked too. Steve was really looking at him like he loved him. Like he loved every stupid thing Tony did. Tony closed his eyes against the clenching sensation in his chest, because this wasn't the time to answer him.

"I need to go, Steve. I need to find out what happened. I need to know who wants you dead." That was his only purpose now that Steve was out of danger.

"Be careful."

"Yes, dear," Tony smirked jokingly with a raised eyebrow, but all the humor couldn’t erase the hurt expression in Steve’s eyes. Tony knew very well why those careless words hurt his super soldier. Steve believed they didn't mean anything. Steve believed Tony would never give the feelings between them any chance.

Tony’s insides clenched nervously. He placed his palms strategically on both sides of Steve’s head and leaned down, looking at him intently.

"Let’s be clear on something. I need you to be healed and alright. We have to talk," Tony hoped he empathized the word *talk* enough to have a different meaning. He watched Steve’s dazed expression as his eyes shifted to his lips. Tony’s desire to bridge the small gap between them made him almost breathless.

He nervously cleared his throat and backed away. "T’Challa will stay here with you."

"No," Steve whined in protest.

"He’s my friend. He would die protecting you," Tony reassured him heatedly. "Trust me, if you don’t trust him."

"That’s not it. Choose someone else. Anyone else."

Tony looked into those pleading eyes and sighed. "Why?" What was so wrong with T’Challa that
Steve didn't feel comfortable in his presence? Tony didn’t understand what it was that bothered Steve so much about the Black Panther.

"If someone tries to get to me again, I don’t mind the dying part. I already went through that. But they would hurt another friend of yours because of me. I don’t want to be responsible for that, Tony. You have suffered enough. Mostly by my own hand."

Tony shook his head angrily. "You're a stubborn son of a bitch, aren't you? You want the only person I never doubted out of your sight."

"He’s your friend. The person you trust the most and can be yourself around. I don’t want him in harm's way. You don’t trust the Avengers anymore."

Tony's breath halted at the realization of the truth in Steve's words. He was right. If the choice were to be between the Avengers and T'Challa, Tony would most definitely go and save T'Challa first. Yeah, he would probably die in an attempt to save the hypothetical Avenger, but still--- "What about the Avengers? You don't want their protection either?"

"I don't mind any of them staying here."

"Well, you’re mistaken," Tony answered flatly. He squared his shoulders and took a step back. Steve was right only to an extent. "I trust Rhody, Vision and Bruce. They will be staying here. All of them. Keeping an eye on you. So, do as the doctors say."

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Tony watched Hawkeye survey the area from the highest building in close proximity. The streets were still infested with dead spider robots and rubble. They were both observing the cleaning group of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s agents as they made slow progress.

"I don’t understand what are we supposed to find here," Clint complained. "Could somebody clarify for me why we're here again? They sure as hell aren't prettier than before. Tony, why is it taking the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents so long to get rid of them?"

"Don’t know, don’t care. There has to be something they missed," Tony replied distractedly. He flew several rounds over the area with zero results. "FRIDAY, give me visual from the invasion."
We need to know where they came from. Did S.H.I.E.L.D. find something useful on their bodies?"

"Only the HYDRA sign, Boss," FRIDAY responded.

HYDRA fuckers. Tony hated them with a passion. "Entry points?"

"I am not aware of the progress in their investigation, Boss."

"Ok, we have to be better than S.H.I.E.L.D. then."

"The points of entrance, Boss."

Tony watched several sewers opening at once. The second wave from today had come from abandoned buildings. "Did they find something inside?"

"Nothing on the record, Boss."

"Alright, to the sewers we shall go," Tony decided with an unsettled stomach. He didn't jump for joy over the idea. "FRIDAY, keep me updated. Hawkeye, you’re the eyes on the streets."

"Copy."

"Do you want me with you, Tony?" Black Widow asked, obviously interested in the afternoon delight in the darkness. It was like they couldn’t wait to go anywhere with Tony and help him. It grated on Tony’s nerves.

He hated himself a little bit because, without any sugar coating, Tony didn't want the Avengers to have his back. He would rather go alone than be forced to spend time with any of them one on one. "No. I need someone who can clarify how they got inside the house."

"On it." Natasha nodded and left.
Tony landed near a manhole, flipped the lid away and looked down into the darkness. Not a very promising sight. Then, Black Panther appeared beside him without any noise. As much as Tony wanted to say he was surprised, he really wasn’t.

"Did I miss the memo where they announced you are part of the Avengers now?" Tony asked with a smile he couldn't contain. Thank God for his face plate. Here stood a person he wouldn’t have any problems going into the enemy territory with.

"I do not need to be an Avenger to stand by your side. I only need to be your friend." T'Challa's confident words and tone left Tony stunned. He had no idea how he deserved such an honor. He cleared his throat, his wit suddenly having abandoned him.

"Shall we?" Tony indicated the darkness beneath their feet.

"After you, my friend."

"Of course," he sighed sarcastically.

***

Tony let his helmet fold into the armor and looked at the other Avengers around him. T'Challa was on his way to the Tower, but Tony and the rest of them were annoyed and angry, because they had found one big fat NOTHING.

They had been able to track some of the spider robots in the sewers, but they didn't lead them to the main base. Someone - a lot of someones - had released the spider robots in several parts of Manhattan. Nobody had seen anything, even the surveillance had been tempered with. FRIDAY could pinpoint the second that had happened but was unable to find the culprits. Fucking HYDRA agents!

As a result, the Avengers still didn't have any leads. The bots were obviously the property of HYDRA, hence the sign on them, but the organization knew how to cover their tracks.

"Another day in paradise," Clint joked.
"What do we do now?"

Natasha looked at Tony, and his hackles raised. She acted like he was some kind of leader. Ok, officially he still was. "Don't look at me," he replied angrily, disappointed because he had wanted to find the HYDRA base and level it to the ground in retaliation. Nobody had the right to hurt his Steve.

"We should head home," Clint mumbled and waited for the others to agree.

Tony didn't stay to say his goodbye. He was already in the air and on his way back to the hospital.

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"Are you fucking kidding me?" Tony bellowed loudly and didn’t give a rat’s ass if the whole hospital staff could hear him. "He just went away and you let him?"

"Captain Rogers insisted--"

"Insisted?!" Tony repeated in disbelief. Yeah, he was losing his shit due to the super soldier again. It felt like his life was a series of mini heart attacks thanks to Captain Perfect. "If a five-year-old insists he wants a knife out of curiosity, would you hand it to him with a smile?" Tony glared at the doctor angrily. "Of course not. You're gonna think for yourself. You're gonna use your brain. Well, in this case, I'm not so sure," Tony insulted him cruelly without much thought. "Not all the time, apparently. Your patient is missing and you don't give a fuck?"

"Captain Rogers is not missing. He was released against medical advice. His condition was well enough, his lab results showed signs of improvement, and he assured us he would be in good hands."

Vision must have smuggled him through the hospital and taken him home. Tony wanted to smother these bastards with a pillow. Well, maybe not both of them. And Tony still wasn’t sure if Vision even needed to breathe. But he sure as hell wanted to have some words with him!

Tony took flight in his Iron Man suit, and minutes later, he descended on the ramp at the Tower, walking towards the entrance and shedding the armor one step at the time. He went to the bathroom to take a shower, trying to rein himself in. Bruce had said Steve was well enough. After
all, he was a human enhanced with a super serum that was finally starting to work again.

After the shower, he changed into a comfortable white tank top and gray sweats. Calm enough to face the Captain Pain-In-The-Ass, he went to Steve’s bedroom, not bothering to announce himself. FRIDAY opened the door for him.

Steve lay on his side on the bed, fast asleep. The tension finally left Tony’s body as he had proof Steve was alright. He understood very well why Steve had wanted to leave S.H.I.E.L.D.’s hospital. He hated hospitals just as much. Tony would do the same if the situation were reversed.

After several long moments, Steve’s eyes fluttered open with a serene smile on his perfectly healed face. The peaceful atmosphere in the room made Tony whisper, "How are you feeling?"

"Good. What happened out there?"

Tony sat gingerly on the bed. "Nothing. HYDRA wants you hurt or dead, but we don't know where they're hiding," he murmured. He watched Steve without further words. Tony couldn't imagine what he would have done had HYDRA been successful. He didn't want to imagine his life without Steve in it.

When Steve started to move and winced in pain, Tony leaned closer. "What are you doing?"

"I need to shower. I smell like the hospital."

Tony could see the exhausted circles under Steve's eyes. "It can wait," he suggested full of hope, but he knew the stubborn super soldier very well. Steve wouldn't be backing down. Just as Tony predicted, his advice was ignored. Steve continued to move. Tony didn’t have any other option but to go with him.

"You have to heal. You need rest," Tony pleaded again.

"I’m fine," Steve replied, his tired face full of pain. The super soldier had enough energy to drape an arm around Tony's shoulders and continue his journey to the bathroom.
Tony propped him up against the far wall inside the shower cubicle, but Steve struggled to free himself. "For God’s sake, at least stay still," Tony huffed with annoyance. He pressed his upper body against Steve's to keep him upright and blindly searched for the tap. However, he couldn’t find it. Why again did he feel the need to have the showers so big? He was too far away to reach. Luckily, he knew a different solution.

"FRIDAY, start the shower in Steve’s bathroom on his preferred temperature."

"As you wish, Boss."

Within seconds, they were both drenched in hot water. Tony could finally switch his attention back to Steve. The super soldier had stopped struggling and was watching him. Steve’s pupils were dilated, his body tight under Tony’s hands.

Tony's gaze traveled to Steve’s mouth. Bad idea! Fuck! Tony's heart was drumming in his chest. The hot water had nothing to do with his entire body suddenly being on fire. The steam enveloped them in a warm embrace. The air thickened. Time slowed down. The sound of falling water faded to the background, and Tony couldn't move.

Steve's lips were so close; he could almost taste his own desperation to close the distance on his tongue. Kissing Steve would be the worst idea Tony had ever had, but in that second, he couldn't remember why for the life of him.

Tony stood still when Steve lowered his head and pressed his brow to Tony's shoulder. It would be so easy for Tony to turn his head and kiss away the water from the man's neck.

Steve exhaled shakily. Their cheeks scratched against each other when the super soldier pulled away slightly. "Tony?" he whispered questioningly.

Double fuck! They were finally there. Together. Separated from the others. Not Captain America or Iron Man. Only Steve Rogers and Tony Stark, and the idea scared Tony shitless. This was the situation he had tried to avoid at any cost because Tony knew very well how it would end.

Tony wanted to know what else Steve would whisper in the heat of the moment with that rough voice of his. He was craving the sounds the man in his arms would make. And triple fuck! He wanted to press Steve into the wall, feel every inch of his super hot body and kiss him desperately. Finally find out how Steve tasted. Tony just wanted, and he knew he was screwed.
"I'm sorry, Tony," Steve mumbled, his lips now touching Tony's chin, adding to the heat and electricity between them. "I'm sorry for the way I acted," the man whispered with agonizing pain in his voice. "I'm sorry for what I said. I'm sorry for everyth---"

Tony had to stop the words from coming. He turned his head and captured Steve's lips with his own. Tony's insides made a violent twist, and his stomach dropped. Every nerve ending in his body sparkled to life. The wave of heat punched Tony's breath out of his lungs. He could do nothing but hold onto the dark blue scrubs Steve was still wearing and try to calm his racing heart.

It was just a kiss. Nothing more. An innocent peck on the lips.

As Tony's shaking hands sneaked around Steve's back and Tony's body inched closer, he knew very well there was nothing just about this kiss. Tony released a trembling breath into Steve's mouth. Where were his famous cockiness and ease when he needed them the most?

Tony's brain couldn't focus. His body betrayed his every move. Every sensation seemed to be new and more intense than anything he had experienced before. He was almost afraid how it would feel to deepen the kiss. And to hell with everything, this was not an innocent peck at all, because Tony wanted to let loose and get lost in the sensation.

For a second, neither of them moved. They were both on the crossroads. The past long months had led them to this one decision that was about to define their future.

Then, a warm palm slowly slid over Tony's lower back. Steve obviously wanted him closer. Tony heard Steve holding his breath as if he expected Tony to push him away. Well, fat chance, buddy! The idea of Steve being as nervous as him made Tony feel slightly better, and he finally found his courage.

Tony separated their lips only for millimeters and opened his eyes. Steve looked at him with apprehension. Just waiting for Tony to do something. Probably to push him away. And Tony finally had enough. Enough of his fear of getting close to the super soldier and getting hurt again. Enough of his fear of losing Steve.

"Oh, fuck it!" Tony rose onto his tiptoes, his fingers gripped Steve's nape, and he smashed their lips firmly together. He licked Steve's lower lip, hoping the man would take the hint.
Tony dove in with his tongue the moment Steve slowly allowed him access to his mouth. His fingers trailed through the soft hair on Steve's nape, and he wound his other arm around his waist, anchoring the super soldier to his body. Finally tasting Steve felt so good his eyes almost crossed behind his eyelids. But thank God he wasn’t the only one affected by their kiss: Tony could feel Steve's heart hammering inside his chest.
Chapter 19

Chapter by angelmira

Chapter Notes

As always, Rebecca did the edits. Buckets of roses and all the chocolate needs to be send her way. :)

Chapter 19

Steve held onto Tony for dear life. The hospital scrubs were plastered to his body, making him uncomfortable. His knees threatened to give out under him. From the first moment their lips met, Steve knew he would never forget Tony's kiss.

It was nothing like the nice good luck encounter in the car with Peggy. It wasn't in the same universe as his pleasant thank you kiss with Sharon, either. Steve's whole body lit up with multiple sensations. He trembled with need, and he wanted to never let go again.

Steve sucked desperate breaths into his lungs every few seconds, but nothing could make him release Tony. Not even if his life depended on it. The whole world could be in danger, and he was sure he wouldn't even notice, because all of his senses were focused on the man in his arms. The air around them swirled with the smell of Tony's aftershave, clouding his head.

Steve could finally feel what kissing Tony Stark felt like, and he was addicted for life. It was dangerous just as the man behind the Iron Man suit. It was all-consuming, because Tony's full attention was on him, and soul-shattering. Steve didn't know how he was going to be able to live without Tony for the rest of his life should this be the only moment he was going to have with the man he loved.

He moaned helplessly when Tony deepened the kiss. Their hips connected and Tony pinned him to the shower wall. This was what poets and writers described as desire and lust. Steve had never known anything to be so intense and good.

Everything about Tony made Steve's heart speed up in his chest. The way the man whimpered softly into their kiss. The way he held Steve so securely. The way he was so confidently licking into Steve's mouth, making him feel lightheaded with pleasure.
Tony's fingers scratched the skin at Steve's nape, causing Steve's knees to buckle and finally give out. "God..." He sounded wrecked and breathless even to his own ears. Tony pulled back out of their kiss but kept on holding him still firmly.

"No---" Steve whined miserably and tried to follow his lips mindlessly, his body shivering violently with want.

"Sssh. I've got you." Tony kissed his forehead instead. Steve was sure his face must display his desire clearly. He had never been a good poker player. As much as he wanted to hide the effects Tony had on him, he wasn't able to. Not in front of the man he loved.

Steve found out that when his senses were not so focused on Tony, he could surprisingly stand on his feet again without any problem.

"Do you need to sit down?" Tony asked softly.

"I'm fine," Steve replied just as softly. He studied Tony with wonder in his eyes. How was it possible for someone to be this amazing?

Tony chuckled. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I love you." Steve held his gaze steadily. He knew it was going to be a long time before Tony would admit his feelings out loud to him, if ever. The telltale signs were there. Tony averted his eyes, pressed his lips together and probably didn't know what to say.

The atmosphere had changed from their heated encounter to awkward silence in a matter of seconds. Steve had to remind himself that one earth-shattering kiss didn't change their situation. Tony didn't want a future with him. He had already said his part in the hotel suite. They had only kissed because Tony was out of his mind with worry over Steve. Physical reassurance was the quickest way to convince themselves that they were both alive.

Steve looked at him patiently. "I will always love you. No matter what you decide for us, Tony."

Steve wanted to show Tony he would respect his wishes no matter what they turned out to be. Maybe it wasn't the best course of action though, because now Tony slowly took a step back as he realized he didn't have to support Steve's weight anymore.
Steve tightened his lips and held his breath when Tony raised his head with determination.

"I---"

But after a long moment, when Tony only kept staring at him, Steve realized he didn't know how to continue. He gave him a small, fleeting smile. It didn't matter that this moment was killing Steve inside. He deserved that. Tony had every right to stay silent. He had every right to his feelings and fears. If he wasn’t prepared for their relationship, Steve only choice was to accept the situation. God knew he had wrecked a lot of conversations between them.

Finally, Tony broke their long gaze. "You need to get out of these clothes."

Steve's heart broke just a little more, and his eyes shifted to the floor. He had never considered Tony changing his mind before the kiss, but somewhere around the time when he had had the man's taste on his tongue, his heart had started to feel a tiny flicker of hope. Said flicker was now slowly dying.

"I'm not deflecting the answer, Rogers," Tony said, his words loud and clear, but all Steve processed was the use of his surname. His heart constricted painfully, and it had nothing to do with his healing injuries.

"We're gonna talk after you’ve taken your shower."

"Alright," Steve murmured softly. Heat was spreading over his cheeks in embarrassment as he kept his gaze firmly on the floor. He started to peel the hospital scrubs from his chest, absolutely sure that moving his abused muscles couldn’t hurt more than his heart.

"I need to get out of here. Tell me you’re ok," Tony whispered urgently, looking anywhere other than Steve’s body.

"Yes," Steve assured him quietly, his chest constricting in agony. "Thank you for helping me."

"Are you ok to be left alone?" Tony pressed, apparently not convinced.
"Yes," Steve nodded with sinking feeling in his stomach.

"I---"

But Tony didn’t finish his words this time, either. Steve licked his lower lip after Tony had left the shower. He could still feel Tony’s taste. The idea of never having that moment again was killing him.

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Tony restlessly paced across Steve’s bedroom. He had run to his own room, changed his clothes, dried his hair and hoped he would be back in time for Steve to exit his bathroom. He couldn’t forget the way the super soldier had looked moments ago. Completely dejected. Heartbroken. All because of Tony’s silence. It wasn’t attractive on Steve at all, and it was killing Tony.

Tony had fought against the desire to forget where they were and keep kissing him. Not the worst idea he could have had, but utterly unsuitable in the grand scheme of things. Steve was still recuperating. He wasn’t strong enough to stand on his own feet. Steve might be almost invincible as a result of the super serum, but it would still have hurt him to fall in the shower.

Not that Tony would have let him fall. The scarier idea would have been to keep kissing him within an inch of his life, and who the hell knew if that would have ended up only as making out. He wanted to crawl under Steve’s skin and never be separated from him again.

Tony ran a hand through his hair nervously. The sounds Steve had made had left him shaking with the need for more. It had been a long time since Tony had felt such a powerful longing for another person. Throughout the Civil War, how the press had helpfully titled their disagreement, Tony had had his hands full with worry and hatred. He couldn’t even remember the last time he had had sex.

Tony turned around as he heard the bathroom door open. His mouth hung uselessly agape when he saw Steve wearing only a towel.

"I don’t have any spare clothes in the bathroom," Steve whispered with flaming cheeks.
Tony tried to swallow through his parched throat, and his stomach bottomed out under the wave of the powerful need to close the distance between them. He averted his eyes without a word. However, it didn’t help at all. He could still see Steve’s image in the window pane.

"Screw that!" Tony crossed the room in long strides, took Steve’s face in his hands and planted another smooch on his lips. He wouldn’t be able to focus on their conversation if he was distracted by Steve’s eyes, mouth, body, the water droplets, all the muscles and everything else.

Steve was obviously on board with his plan, because he let go of the towel and enveloped Tony in his strong embrace.

"We should talk," Tony mumbled between kisses. They probably should, but absolutely not right now. He just wanted a few seconds of this bliss. Tony made sure he didn’t invade Steve’s space too much. He stood perfectly still, hips unmoving, because it would not be a good idea to hump him. Tony had enough wits to know what was happening, after all.

"Hm," Steve hummed his agreement.

"In a minute." This was bad. Tony couldn’t control himself. He logically knew his brain was the one to give impulses to his body, but for the life of him, Tony couldn’t stop touching Steve. He could have sworn his hands had a mind of their own.

Tony’s palms collided with Steve’s chest, and with a final whine, he pushed the super soldier away and quickly took several steps back. "Uhhhm---" Sometimes, Tony was really astounded by his own eloquence.

Steve looked delicious. It was a bad idea to look at him. A very bad idea. Tony directed his attention to the walls and ceiling. He forced himself to think about something else than Steve’s taste and lips and--- Oh, for God’s sake!

"Well---" Safety. After a moment, Tony’s brain finally kicked in. They needed to discuss Steve’s safety. He started to speak again. "That happened."

"I noticed," Steve nodded with a fond smile.

"Oh, for God’s sake, stop smiling!" Tony grumbled, but his own lips involuntarily stretched into a
smile of his own. They had to look like a pair of idiots. Maybe they did, but Tony had never seen Steve appear so happy. He wanted to kiss that smile again.

"And put on some clothes!" Tony added helplessly. Didn’t they have a serious conversation ahead? He waited until Steve had grabbed a set of clothes from his dresser and gone to the bathroom. Tony knew he wouldn’t take his suggestions calmly. It would probably end in another argument.

"You wanted to talk."

Tony’s eyes were back on Steve, dressed in grey sweats (he was probably owning tons of the same kind) and a white shirt. Which didn’t help at all. The whiteness of the shirt only accentuated the expanse of Steve’s chest. It was hugging Steve's firm waist too tightly for Tony’s liking. He wanted to kiss every inch of his body. It was distracting.

"Right. Talk," Tony repeated with a slight shake of his head. Talk. Just open his mouth and speak. Tony cleared his throat. Steve's safety was too important to ignore. "I want you to stay out of the field."

"Not happening," Steve told him without hesitation, not surprising Tony at all.

"I get it. But think about the consequences. What if something like this happens again? What if you’re hurt? What if they poison you again and you end up human?"

"You’re human. I don’t think it would be that bad," Steve replied calmly.

"They can hurt you and kill you better without the super serum in your system," Tony retorted helplessly. The idea of ever going through the same situation - Steve being hurt again - was killing him.

"Tony." Steve closed the distance and put a warm palm on his left cheek. "Every time you’re in the field as Iron Man, I’m scared something might happen to you." Tony held Steve’s gaze without moving, his constant fidgeting forgotten now that Steve was so close.

"Every time you’re on stage at a press conference as Tony Stark, the genius billionaire, I’m having a heart attack at the thought that someone could try to kill you while you don’t have your suit to keep you alive."
Tony swallowed with a dry throat, but Steve’s words didn’t seem to make much sense. Who would try to hurt him? Tony was only a pain in the ass to the rest of the world. Most of his enemies were dead or incarcerated. "That’s not---"

"Don't say it's not the same. I love you. I worry about you. All the time." Steve smiled sadly. "But the idea of you staying inside your workshop and never doing a public stunt again is simply unacceptable. You're Tony Stark. The press conferences belong into your work and life."

Yeah, Steve was unfortunately right, and Tony couldn't argue against that logic.

"I'm Captain America. I’m the leader of the Avengers Initiative. The right thing to do is to be near you and trust that all of you will do everything in your power to keep me and each of us safe."

"But we didn’t," Tony whispered miserably, closing his eyes and seeing Steve's fall to the concrete behind his eyelids.

"If this is what's going to happen again, I know it's not your fault. HYDRA is our longtime enemy. You know that, I know that. I won’t sit here while the rest of you is in danger."

Steve looked so earnest, Tony couldn't say a word.

"There will come a time when we find their base and deal with them. Maybe sooner, maybe later, but I’m not going to hide here and let the rest of you fight alone."

"Fine," Tony grumbled without much approval. He had to yield under Steve’s reasoning, because the man was right. Tony wouldn’t hide in the Tower either. He would go into battle no matter the circumstances, too. "But you're staying with me at all times!"

"It would be my pleasure, Mr. Stark," Steve retorted cheekily and Tony wanted to smack him. Pleasure. One word, and the air around them changed from serious to electrifying. Tony was sure any moment sparks would start to fly between them. It was his time to talk.

They had so many things to talk about. Especially Tony's reluctance to be near half of the Avengers. About Steve suddenly accepting FRIDAY. About giving Steve the chance to get to
know more of T'Challa. About Tony's feelings towards the frozen popsicle called Bucky Barnes. And yet, all Tony could think about were the three words he was denying Steve over and over again.

Every time Steve told Tony he loved him, there was that millisecond of hesitation on the super soldier's part for Tony to say something in return, but he repeatedly ignored it.

Tony's heart started to adapt a staccato rhythm. "I'm not good with finding the right words." He cleared his throat nervously.

"I know that, Tony." Steve smiled at him. The fondness in his voice and eyes floored Tony. It felt like his insides were screaming at him to stay silent and keep ignoring the love confessions Steve so calmly showered him with, but Tony knew this was the time. The first time was always the hardest for him. After that, Tony could casually throw I-Love-Yous here and there, but getting the words off his chest for the first time was terrifying. Just like open heart surgery without anesthesia.

"I---" Tony breathed out heavily, scared shitless and unsure. He didn’t want to know what Steve was seeing in his eyes. Probably an utterly terrified expression. It would serve Tony right if Steve ignored his attempt and played the same game of pretending and not knowing what Tony was trying to express.

"Don't try to say it."

Tony stayed completely still when Steve closed the distance. They were only a few inches apart from each other, breathing the same air, and Tony looked into Steve's eyes in utter silence.

"Tell me something, Tony. Anything. The first thing that pops into your head."

"I would die for you," Tony spoke softly. "Not because I'm an Avenger and it's my job. I would die for you because I don't want to live without you."

Steve kissed his forehead softly. "I know, Tony. You went into my nightmare about drowning. You don’t have to say the words. Your actions speak louder." After a long pause, Steve continued, "I don't want you to die for me. I want you to live. I'm not a good person without you, only a good soldier. I need you to show me how to be a good man."
And that was Tony's undoing. He closed his eyes, sank into Steve's unyielding body and hugged him close. He might have had a ton of unresolved issues, he might have been cautious around the Avengers, but he wasn't scared of Steve or Captain America. Not anymore. He realized he hadn't been for a long time.

Tony's madly beating heart had nothing to do with PTSD-induced terror attacks triggered by Captain America, but everything with the desire to spend the rest of his life (no matter how long that would be, or how short, because they were still the Avengers, and they had to fight everything from villain sorcerers to otherworldly creatures from space) with Steve.

The moment was suddenly interrupted by FRIDAY's voice. "All Avengers assemble in the kitchen. The Secretary of State General Ross is on the line from the White House."

Tony stepped back with a disgusted groan. "To hell with him. I hated him before, I hate him now even more. I want my sexy times. I deserve them!"

"Let's do this." Steve gave him a fond smile, and Tony might have forgotten his displeasure for a moment. They had a job to do. A stupid job that came without anyone thanking them for their efforts, but the world would always need someone to protect it.

"Together," Tony agreed.

"Together," Steve repeated after him, still smiling, and Tony couldn't help but smile back. They could do this. They had time to resolve all the other problems. The most important of them was already solved. There was not going to be another Civil War between them. Ever.

There might be a lot of fighting, but to hell with it, make up sex was always gonna make it better!
Chapter Notes

First of all I would like to thank all the readers who had the patience and waited years for this story to be finished. Thank you. You have no idea how much that means to me.

Many thanks to DreadPirateWombat and Rebecca who made a huge difference and made this story better. It wouldn't be the same without you, ladies.

Good news is, it's not completely over yet. I still have two short stories in this universe. First one is mentioned in this story as "Han Solo moment" - which is basically Tony's ILY.

The second one is centered around Tony and Rhodey going to Wakanda. So, if you're interested in them watch for LTA Outtakes.

Epilog

It was the middle of the night, and Steve was sitting in Tony's workshop, silently sketching the man behind the Iron Man suit who was currently working with his computers. They had been spending long hours in comfortable silence, interrupted only by the strokes of Steve’s pencil on the paper and Tony's fingers dancing over his keyboard.

"My calculations are spot-on, Boss."

Steve had almost forgotten that their silence was sometimes permeated by Tony's artificial intelligence, FRIDAY, as well. Right now, she sounded very offended.

"I know, baby girl, but you have to check---"

"I triple-checked them," she interrupted Tony patiently, but her tone suggested she still hadn’t forgiven Tony's accusation of negligence and felt offended.

"Ok." Tony sighed deeply and relaxed in his chair. Hands on the armrests, he wheeled the chair around and faced Steve with a grin on his face and legs spread carelessly. "How’s it going, Captain Picasso?"

"Good." Steve diverted his eyes back to the paper, because Tony’s pose was way too suggestive. He hoped his flushing cheeks weren’t visible under the fluorescent lights.

This whole situation was also Steve's fault. As much as they teased each other, they still didn't go much further than kissing because Tony waited for Steve to bring the subject onto the table. And Steve, confused as ever, didn't know how to broach the subject without feeling mortified simultaneously. He was a good fifty years Tony’s senior, and still, some things took him longer than average teenagers.

Steve knew very well he wanted to spend the rest of his existence beside Tony. His future
definitely belonged to the Avengers, and he loved how comfortable he felt in Tony's arms. Sex was just an extension of their feelings, but Steve didn't feel ready, even though he couldn't imagine himself with anyone else. He was happy just as they were. Sometimes very frustrated, Steve could admit that, but unexpectedly happy.

"What are you up to with that dreamy smile of yours? Are you drawing me?"

Steve ignored the way his chest felt warmer after Tony's words. The billionaire obviously knew he was drawing him and felt pleased. It was apparent from Tony's tone of voice.

"Can I see?"

Steve turned the notebook over to him. The sketch was of Tony in a very private moment, while the man was sleeping. Steve spent hours lying in bed, watching Tony sleep and wondering how life could be so easy. He had Tony's face memorized to the smallest detail. The tiny smile on Tony's sensual lips. Tony's relaxed eyebrows, giving him the appearance of a much younger man. Tony's soft eyelashes creating shadows on his face under the moonlight.

Steve's heart skipped a beat when Tony's gaze traveled from the picture to his face. Those were Tony's bedroom eyes. Steve felt the heat in that look; it had never failed to cause a response in his body.

Sometimes, Steve wanted nothing more than to cross the distance between them, kiss Tony senseless and forget the world around them. And now, his breath stilled. The tension between them was way worse than usual.

But then, in the blink of an eye, Tony shifted on the chair, sat more appropriately and released Steve from his longing gaze. He could finally breathe again.

"You have no idea what you do to me," Tony mumbled and turned back to his monitors. He probably hadn't meant to say that out loud.

"I'm sorry," Steve answered anyway. After all, there were other things Steve had to apologize for as well. Tony had never given him a chance to properly word his apology. He took a long, shuddering breath and tried to open up about the thing they should have been talking about a long time ago. "Tony, I know---" He halted for a millisecond but steadily pushed through with determination. They both started at the same time.

"---about the mind control."

"I'm not pressuring you to have sex with me."

Steve stared at him uncomprehendingly. Tony's expression wasn't that different, either.

Tony visibly straightened his shoulders and turned back. "Ok, we're obviously not on a same page here."

"More like you're reading a different book. In a different house. In a different country. Probably somewhere in Europe, halfway across the world from me," Steve mumbled, confused. He shook his head. "I don't feel any pressure."

"Good. Ok." Tony nodded, but then stood up, obviously distracted. "That's good."

"I'm talking about Wanda. Ultron." Steve continued without a pause. "She enchanted you, but we blamed you no less." Steve didn't know if he should touch Tony or rather stay away from him right
now, because the tension in his body was way too familiar. Tony looked like a coiled snake ready to attack any moment.

"You weren't yourself, but I didn't do anything to help. I cut Clint some slack when Loki was controlling him. I protected Bucky from everyone when I found out the truth, but I abandoned you. I'm sorry."

"Funny thought. Everyone al---"

"No!" Steve interrupted him forcefully and came closer. He didn't let Tony finish his sentence. He had heard it before. Everyone had always left Tony behind. That flippant statement would always be Tony's universal answer for everything. In the past, this had usually been the moment Tony snapped and started an angry tirade. Steve wanted to believe those days were over and they had put all that behind them.

The super soldier caressed Tony's cheek. "It won't happen again. I swear." Steve wound his other hand around Tony's waist and pulled him closer. He didn't like the vulnerability in his eyes. Everything within him screamed to reassure Tony he would always be safe with him.

"I---" Tony started and Steve patiently waited for him to continue, "---I don't want to talk about that. Not because I'm angry but because I don't feel the need to talk about it. I have so many things on my mind. I want to do so many things. I don't have the time to go back and revisit all those memories. We started again. Together. With a clean slate."

Steve wasn't sure how healthy this path would be for Tony.

"Do you understand? I hate Wanda. Ok, maybe hate is a much stronger word than I should be using, but I don't care about her. She's with Vision, fine. She's an Avenger, fine. I don't have to lead her. That's your job, not mine. I'm fine with everything else. It's in the past."

Maybe the genius' brain functioned differently than other people’s, because it didn’t make sense to Steve.

"Steve, one thing I can say safely is that I'm not heartbroken anymore. Just as I don't think about the torture in Afghanistan every night, I don't think about our Civil War either. Yeah, I do have flashbacks or I sometimes feel uneasy, but it's in my head. I can conquer anything that's in my head." Tony dismissed his PTSD with a flippant hand gesture.

Steve pressed his forehead to Tony's. He felt defeated, at a loss as to how to reply to that. He needed to trust Tony. The billionaire knew himself better than anyone else, but still, there was another thing to address. "You should know that I don't feel any pressure from you. I'm just---" Steve swallowed. "---cautious."

"Why?" Tony whispered with a thoughtful crease on his forehead.

"Because I am a super soldier." Steve shifted his eyes to the floor. The uncomfortable heat in his cheeks betrayed his embarrassment.

"You're afraid you will break me with your super dick, or something?" Tony smirked, and the tension between them was gone.

Steve sighed fondly. It wasn't Tony's fault, Steve had practically invited that question into their conversation. "More like I will hurt you long before the---" He wanted to find another word, but the eloquence had left him as Tony stared into his eyes. Steve was forced to use Tony's exact word, but he cringed internally, "---dick part will be actually in action."
"I'm not gonna break that easily," Tony assured him confidently.

"I know you won’t. God, if there is a stronger person who has withstood so many bad things I would be surprised. But I don't ever again want to put you into a position where I can physically hurt you."

"Steve---"

Steve didn't leave Tony a moment to argue, he steadily held his gaze and for the first time told him the truth. "When you're near me, I want you so much closer it scares me. When you're kissing me, I want to press you so close your bones might break."

In that super-serum-induced brain of Steve's, he could almost hear the sound of breaking bones. He had heard it so many times on the battlefield. It was too familiar. All it would take would be a second of distraction and he would hurt Tony. Perhaps not irreparably, but he would have to live with the knowledge of having done so for the rest of his life.

"Steve---"

"When you're touching me, I want to feel you so much closer I'm terrified I will hurt you because I can't think clearly." Steve logically argued with himself that he would never press the man he loved to the ground or bed and cause him another one of his panic attacks. No matter how much he wanted to feel Tony's body underneath him.

Steve tried to ignore Tony's labored breathing and focused on his own panicky heartbeat and eyes full of tears. "And I don't know how to think with you so close to me."

"Sometimes---" Tony's hoarse voice stirred something at the bottom of Steve's stomach, but Tony cleared his throat and started again, this time with a soothing tone. "Sometimes you're impossible."

Tony grabbed Steve's nape, pulled him down and kissed his forehead. "Everything's gonna be fine, you know."

"How do you know that?" Steve smiled sadly, patiently looking into Tony's eyes.

"Because it's you and me. Think about it. I'm the genius here. I have to know what I'm talking about, right? And look at you. You're Captain America. Against all odds, you're still alive seventy years later, and people are still looking up to you."

Steve would be more open to that advice if Tony were to forget that part of him. He didn't want to be seen as someone standing on a pedestal by other people. He just---

"You told me yourself. You're used to fighting through a battlefield believing that on the other side everything's going to be better. So, you need to have a little faith. Trust in yourself. And trust in me that I can get you to the other side without serious injury on my part."

Which, surprisingly, made a lot of sense, but Steve had made so many mistakes when it came to Tony that he couldn't picture any more of them. Not with Tony. His previous decisions concerning Tony had almost caused him to lose the man he loved. Steve wouldn't risk that again.

"I trust you." Tony took his face between his palms, not giving Steve any chance to avert his eyes or back off. "I trust you with my battered heart." The following silence between them emphasized the significance of the moment.

And if that statement didn't cause Steve heart palpitations he didn't know what else would. This
was far more important than anything Tony could ever say.

"Trusting you with my body is a piece of cake, soldier. You know that."

Unfortunately yes, Steve knew that. It had been the main reason why he tried to never physically overpower Tony. All too clearly, he remembered Tony's flashback when Steve had protected him against the metal spider robots. How could he be so selfish as to crave Tony underneath him while knowing at the same time how it would scare the man? Something was seriously wrong with him!

"For God's sake, Rogers!" Tony interrupted Steve's thoughts. "We're talking about our sex life, not my funeral."

"I know." Steve carefully put his palm on the side of Tony's throat, where he felt a wildly beating pulse. He would do anything to keep Tony's trust.

"You so don't." Steve could hear Tony's defeated sigh.

"I love you. I will always protect you," he vowed fiercely. "Even if I am the threat." He kissed Tony's lips softly, breathing in the familiar scent of Tony's cologne, sweat and motor oil.

"You're an idiot," Tony breathed out in a huff. "But I love you, too. Now, kiss me properly or you're sleeping on the couch tonight."

Steve smiled. That threat hadn't worked out the first time Tony had made it true after one of their arguments. They had been tossing uneasily half of the night. Tony in his big bed alone and Steve on said couch in Tony's bedroom. Sometime around 2 a.m., Tony had given up and ordered Steve back into the bed. They hadn't repeated it ever since.

Steve slid a hand over Tony's lower back and carefully pressed him towards himself. After their encounter in the shower, Steve had learned to be more conscious of his movements. He finally knew how his body would react to Tony's and could at least prepare himself for the onslaught of emotions. But as much as he wanted to say he was controlling himself with Tony, every kiss was a battle.

Steve fought to maintain his sanity every time he felt Tony's mouth on his. The heat of Tony's body just wasn't enough. Steve craved Tony's skin. Every soft sigh he made had Steve yearn to hear him whimper and gasp with pleasure. And the more he kissed Tony, the more Steve ached to be closer.

Steve never allowed himself to become helplessly out of control like the day they had kissed for the first time. Thankfully, at that time, Steve's body and strength hadn't been fully restored. Now he felt like it was too dangerous for Tony.

Steve ended their kiss with a content sigh because he could finally press his forehead to Tony's and be proud that he hadn't caused him any bruises.

"You know what, Rogers?"

Steve froze. He recognized that decisive tone of Tony's voice.

"I'm playing nice here. And it's not an easy role for me." Tony looked at him with a smirk. "I can wait to have sex with you if you're not ready. No big deal. But I won't be waiting just because you're afraid of something totally ridiculous. Please, don't make me seduce you. You wouldn't know what hit you."
Steve could only swallow with a dry throat.

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Tony had wheeled his chair into one of his workshop's corners where he could take a look at Butterfingers. The robot had been out of commission for so long. A slight layer of dust had settled in some places, but it was obvious that Dummy had taken care of him. Speaking of all of Tony's 

accessories in his workshop - the human one with altered DNA, also known as Captain Popsicle, that almost never left his side was nowhere to be found. "FRIDAY, where's Steve?"

"Not on the premises, Boss."

Tony straightened in his chair and wheeled around with a worried frown on his forehead. "What do you mean, not on the premises? He didn't tell me he's going out. Has something happened? Is someone else with him?" Because that was exactly what they needed - people recognizing Steve on the street and harass him.

"Negative on all your questions, Boss."

"What do you mean by negative? Talk to me!" Tony stood up. "Where is he?"

"Captain Rogers expected your question and instructed me, if the circumstances were to arrive, to explain that he is out and will be back as soon as possible."

"Where is he!" Tony's tone didn't invite any arguments. Logically, he understood that he had no reason to be worried, but at the same time, HYDRA had been silent for too long already, and they could be long gone with Steve or could have left him to die somewhere in the city.

"Captain Rogers left the Tower ten minutes ago and is now on his way back, Boss. I would never have let him go out without tracking his progress. He informed me where he was going and I have been with him every step of the way. Just to be safe," the artificial intelligence assured Tony.

He blinked in confusion. FRIDAY had never diverted his attention from a question before. This, however, was the second time within a few minutes. "Where did he go?"

"To a shop a few doors down," FRIDAY answered vaguely.

What the fuck was going on here? That traitorous girl stalled him. The audacity of her action was clearly suggesting a conspiracy with Steve. He didn't have to go out and flirt with danger.

"What shop?"

"Captain Rogers is now back on the premises," his insolent creation informed him and then fell silent.

"FRIDAY, I asked---" Tony shut up abruptly. He had a better source to interrogate. Tony was fairly sure he was about to give Steve a piece of his mind.

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Tony angrily slammed the door of their bedroom and looked at the super soldier with narrowed eyes. The mood stayed with him for the entirety of three seconds.

Steve Rogers stood by the bed looking back at him with a bashful smile, offering him a red rose with a long stem.
"Hi."

"Hi," Tony whispered, stunned by the gesture, and accepted the rose without thinking. His mouth hung open, scolding words forgotten. After a second he shook his head. His brain had finally kicked back online. "What the fuck, Rogers!"

The smug bastard only continued to smile with flushed cheeks. Tony looked back at the rose. "You went out just to give me a flower?"

Steve winced at the first exclamation. "Language?"

"You could have died, and you're telling me to mind my words?" Tony was now full on his warpath. All his fear had been channeled into anger. His heart couldn't take another incident like before when someone had tried to kill Steve. "What if HYDRA agents were watching the Tower? What if they're waiting for the right moment to snatch you off the street and do some more experiments with that poison? Or kill you?" Tony's voice broke. "You could---" He cut himself off and took a deep breath. Steve could have ordered anything to be delivered to their Tower online. "You could---" Tony tried again as he helplessly watched Steve come towards him.

"I wanted to go alone. All those big words about me trusting in myself, but you don't trust me with my safety."

Yeah, maybe that crazy geriatric was right. Tony had overreacted as always. But who could blame him under these circumstances?

"I didn't want to scare you, Tony, but this flower was more important to me than any HYDRA agent. It was meant to be for you."

God, that man was absolutely impossible. Tony's anger melted like heated chocolate. Sometimes, the super soldier did those small things. Things that might have been completely insignificant but that meant more to Tony than any other exaggerated gesture ever could.

"Captain Rogers, I'm to inform you that everything is ready," FRIDAY interrupted their long eye contact.

"Thank you, FRIDAY."

Tony narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "What is ready?" This was not Steve's normal behavior. "What are you up to?"

"Why don't you find out?"

What kind of answer was that? Tony was about to put the rose onto the dresser, but Steve gently steered him in the direction of the bedroom door.

"Keep the flower," he instructed him softly.

Tony's stomach clenched nervously, because all these things looked suspiciously like a date. Their first official date. One look at his clothes in the reflection in the stainless steel door of the elevator told him that he wasn't even remotely dressed for the occasion. Gray sweatpants and a black tank top weren't date material. Steve wore a nice pair of black slacks and white shirt with three buttons casually undone.

Tony stopped in the doorway of the common room when he noticed that the table in the middle of it was prepared for a romantic candle light dinner. He closed his eyes and calculated the time he
would need for a quick shower and a change of clothes. Tony turned on his heel but promptly collided with Steve's chest. "I have to go. Give me twenty minutes."

"No," Steve smiled at him, eyes full of happiness.

"I have to change at least, Steve." Tony really didn't want to be the one to ruin their first date by wearing terrible clothes. No one had ever prepared a dinner for him before. This was too important. Tony’s heart started to beat in a panicky pace because he needed at least a proper suit for this.

"You're fine just as you are," Steve assured him, but it didn't help at all. Tony was panicking at the idea of being wined and dined in a pair of stupid sweatpants and nothing but an undershirt. Something must have been visible on his face, because Steve was quick to reassure him with a firm voice, "Tony, I'm not here to date your clothes. Sit down, put the rose where it belongs and enjoy dinner." Steve winked at him.

"Fine," Tony capitulated begrudgingly. He slid the rose into a vase which had obviously been placed on the table for exactly that purpose and sat down. "Anything else?"

"Nothing for now."

Tony watched as Steve seated himself as well and lifted the stainless steel cover from their food. They both laughed when they saw the appetizers - rice had been stylishly arranged into a word: ENJOY 😊

The smiley face was a fair indication of the person who had assisted Steve in preparing all of this. "You asked Barton for help?" Tony stared at him, mouth open in horror. "What are you? Suicidal? He probably added laxatives to each part of the meal we're gonna eat."

"You have little faith," Steve chuckled with a smile and then started to work through the double portion of his meal, because a super body still needed its nutrients.

When the main course arrived, they both grew to realize that the first word hadn’t been a fluke.

❤ YOU

The sauce was expertly dripped into a love confession. Tony secretly couldn't wait for more. Clint was one funny guy. That sentiment was confirmed the moment they saw the dessert. Clint had really outdone himself and used whipped cream to word a suggestion on the apple pie:

SEX?

Tony burst into laughter as he saw Steve's rapidly blushing face.

"Maybe it wasn't my best idea after all," the super soldier confessed.

It took some time, but Tony finally reined in his giggles. "So, you wined and dined me. What are you going to do with me now, soldier?" But the second the words were out of his mouth, he stilled with understanding. Oh God. Of course. Flowers. Dinner. Date.

Steve hadn't taken his eyes off Tony the entire night, and now he chuckled in amusement. "What did you say about seducing me, Mr. Stark?"

Tony could most definitely eat his own words. He remembered them very well.
"Please, don't make me seduce you. You wouldn't know what hit you."

"I think I beat you in your own game, Mr. Stark." Steve grinned smugly. "Eat your dessert. We have somewhere to be."

Somewhere to be? A theater maybe? Tony had never paid much attention to the dating scene in the 40s. Who knew what the geriatric was hiding up his sleeve now. Hold on. They'd had live bands and clubs. So, maybe dancing was on the agenda for tonight?

"Do I get the chance to dress properly?" Tony refused to go out without at least an Armani suit. He wanted to remember their date as a spectacular night. Whatever Steve had prepared, Tony was going to look good.

"More like undress," Steve corrected casually with a wink, and Tony's mind stalled. Now he was nervous, thank you very much. Steve wouldn't---

In the meantime of his mental breakdown, Steve steered Tony into their bedroom. Tony closed his eyes in defeat as he saw all the lighted candles around the room, rose petals covering their bed. FRIDAY started playing some soft music from the built-in speakers.

"Everything to your satisfaction, Captain Rogers?" Tony's AI asked tentatively.

"Yes, thank you, FRIDAY. Please, extend my gratitude to the others."

"Certainly, Captain Rogers."

"Tony?" Steve asked softly. The super soldier’s arms sneaked around his body and held him close.

Tony was just hoping the ground would finally open up and swallow him. He still didn't have the courage to look at Steve. Of course he would be the one to ruin their night. No one had ever made so much effort for him. And what would Steve be getting in exchange? Sweatpants. A stained tank top. Motor oil under Tony's fingernails. Probably some dirty smears on his face as well. Hair sticking in all directions from Tony's frustrated fingers running through it all day. He really was one classy specimen of dating material.

Tony tried to forget his embarrassment, opened his eyes and put a smile on his face. It probably looked a lot like his fake mask for cameras.

"What's wrong?" Steve's face was creased with worry.

"I should have been dressed for the occasion," Tony whispered with guilt permeating his voice. Sure as fuck he was ruining all of Steve's efforts.

"What's wrong with your clothes?"

"What is not wrong with me right now?" Tony spoke self-deprecatingly, but he was still amazed by the vulnerability in Steve's eyes. "Can you honestly say I'm your prince Charming, huh? Sweaty? Stained with who knows what? I look like---"

"You," Steve interrupted him. "You look exactly like you. Like the Tony Stark I fell in love with. Like the Tony Stark I know best. Like the person I want to spend the rest of my life with."

Breathing felt suddenly terribly difficult. Tony blinked tears out of his eyes and tried to suppress his panic. "Ok. I really hate you right now. Is this a marriage proposal, too?" Because, shit, he could ruin their date night or first sex, but not a marriage proposal as well.
"Do you want it to be?" Steve smiled at him fondly.

"No," Tony honestly squeaked like a teenage girl.

"Then it's not," The blond assured him, still smiling shamelessly.

Tony sighed. Captain America never backed down easily. It was an attribute of Steve Rogers. Steve was one of the people who wouldn’t let himself give up, and that answer right now was too easy. Worst of all, Tony wanted to know the truth. He wouldn’t be able to sleep properly if he couldn’t figure out Steve's intent. "Do you have a ring for me?"

"Not yet," Steve answered seriously.

"Do you, err---" Tony cleared his throat. His heart was beating like crazy. "---maybe--- want to buy a ring?" Tony hesitated.

"In the future, when we're ready."

Ok. That was good. A mountain of rocks fell off Tony’s chest.

"Can I---" God, this was worse than open-heart surgery. "---be the one to do the asking?"

Steve looked so calm. It was like they were talking about the weather. How the hell did the super soldier do that?

"Sure."

Tony sighed again, this time in relief. "If you would just let me go to take a shower and change, this night would be perfect."

"Why?"

"Why? What do you mean, ‘why’?" Tony shook his head helplessly. "Because I smell like sweat. Because I've been working on Rhodey's suit, and I don't even remember for how many days in a row. Because I can't remember the last time I showered. Because I have fucking motor oil under my fingernails. Because the last time my undershirt saw a washing machine was sometime last week. I think." Tony hesitated. He honestly couldn’t remember. Not the point, though. "Because I'm a fucking mess and you're---" How could Tony make him understand? "---you. You did all of this and---"


"Yes. With the others. And look at what you get in return."


Tony felt Steve's fingers slowly lift his tank top and caress the skin of his sides with his fingertips.

"---it means fewer clothes to shed than with a three-piece suit." Steve had the fabric on the floor in one fluid movement.

Tony silently cursed himself. He had been too distracted by those sinful fingers to remember about the faint scarring on his chest. The auto-transplantation had taken care of the hole. The big chunk of skin graft from his thigh had helped, but the scars were still visible. Definitely for someone with
Tony swallowed with some difficulty when Steve's fingers rested on the place where the arc reactor had once been. No one would feel any difference between Tony’s breast bone replacement and a real one, but Tony hated how naked he felt at that moment.

However, he only kept on hating it for maybe one minute because that was how long it took him to figure out that something was seriously wrong with Steve. He didn't look at him with pity. That sure as hell wasn't desire in those terrified eyes, either, and Tony sincerely doubted he had ever seen him that pale.

"Steve?"

The super soldier didn't react at all.

"Steve!"

***

Steve stood paralyzed by the sight of Tony's chest. To the tiniest detail, he remembered the terror in Tony's eyes when he had been lying beneath him on the concrete in Siberia.

Tony's heart was beating under his fingers now, but it was those same hands Steve had used to push the shield down to crush the glass of the arc reactor. Steve felt like his stomach might rebel any second. Christ, he had almost torn the vulnerable skin and shoved the artificial bone right into Tony's heart. He could have killed him.

The absolute terror on Tony's face in Siberia was suddenly making much more sense. Tony had had dangerous shrapnel embedded into his chest for years. Someone had surgically removed a large portion of his sternum and put the arc reactor in instead to save his life.

When Tony had finally decided on a heart surgery, there had still remained a gaping hole where his sternum should have been. They had to synthesize something that would cover the most vulnerable organ in a human body.

And Steve had gone and almost crushed Tony's chest. Oh God.

"Look at me!"

Reality came back to Steve with a sharp sting in his cheek and Tony shaking him. He didn't look very happy. More like angry.

"Are you with me?"

"Yes." Steve slowly trailed his fingers over the skin one last time, then averted his eyes and took a step back. This night was not running as smoothly as Steve would have liked.

"I'm fine," Tony said sharply. "End of discussion. If I can get through my fucking PTSD, you have no right to feel entitled to bring it back."

"I almost killed you," Steve whispered, voice smothered by his panic. "And you are not over the flashbacks."

"Of course I am," Tony snapped defiantly.

"Tony---"
"You're just a coward," the billionaire snarled angrily. "You think just because you’re fucking Captain Perfect, you're entitled to know everything better than everyone else, but you're too scared to see that someone else might be right as well."

"You're wrong." Steve was aware Tony was trying to provoke a reaction from him. They both knew each other too well.

"Just like with Barnes."

"There is nothing between me and Bucky." Steve was getting annoyed by these suggestions. "I'm not and won't ever be in love with Bucky."

"So you say, but even the kid in the TV studio knew better," Tony goaded him.

"Listen to me." Steve moved quicker than he had wanted. "There is nothing between me and Bucky. There won’t ever be anything because I love you."

Tony lay underneath him on the bed, grinning wildly into his face as he raised his eyebrows. Steve froze in astonishment. "You played me."

Tony shrugged shamelessly. "Payback's a bitch, huh? Think about it next time you try and go Han Solo on me in the most important moment of my life. By the way, you didn't hurt me."

Steve noticed the way his body kept a hairsbreadth of distance from Tony's chest. He held himself securely on his forearms, although their legs and crotches were pressed together thanks to Tony, who seemed to emulate an octopus with only four limbs. The brunet had a smug glint in his eyes before he grew serious again.

"You're not scaring me, super soldier. You want me to trust you to take your safety seriously, but you don't believe me when I say I know myself."

Steve had to take a deep breath, because every word from Tony's mouth hit home. "I'm really sorry."

"Ok." Tony patted his shoulder magnanimously. "Now’s the time to have sex. Kiss me and stop dragging your feet, old man. I swear I won’t laugh at you," he snickered.

Steve smiled back at him. Shaking his head, he took a leap of faith. After all, Tony had said that they would be ok. They could face anything as long as they were together.

THE END

End Notes

Thank you for reading, every comment, hit and cudos are highly appreciated. :)