And The Body Count Keeps Growing

by haemodye

Summary

"What do you want me to say, Steve?"

"I want you to tell me the truth."
Tony stares down at the workbench, fingers drumming on the metal surface as he thinks. The lines of his shoulders are tight beneath his singlet, skin stained with black viscosity and sweat. Steve licks his lips and waits.

"Loki kissed me."

The bottom drops out of Steve's stomach. "Ah."

First, Loki saves Tony from a nasty collision. Then Loki kisses him (on the cheek.) From there, Tony’s life begins to spiral: he and Cap are fighting, the US Government is desperate to control the team, and the world is becoming less and less amenable to The Avengers’s so-called "collateral damage." Tony blames the God of Chaos.

Wherein Loki tries to maybe turn over a new leaf, Tony tries to play both sides, and Steve tries to Be Okay. ("Tries" might be the operative word.) Mostly movie compliant up to Thor: The Dark World, with some elements of Civil War Fix-It.

Notes

My notes contain a lot of author commentary/meta. The fic is spoiler heavy on everything up to and including Infinity War, but not entirely MCU canon-compliant: a marriage of comics and MCU, if you will.
It starts like this; brunches on Sundays, first, before the church crowd gets out and mobs the cafés, just to help provide some routine. They talk about the team, how the last battle went, strategy, SHIELD interference. They make a quiet kind of peace. Then it was sparring, and then late nights, movies on Thursdays, Steve sketching in the workshop when he has some rare down time and completing mission reports when he doesn’t. Slowly, Steve becomes habit. Steve brings him pizza. Steve laughs. Steve brings him fruit for smoothies, expensive coffee, a dozen cronuts.

Tony and Steve. Steve and Tony. They become partners. In battle. As friends. Somewhere, through all the bickering and the drag out fights and the alcohol and coffee and the laughter, they meld together to form something new.

One day, Steve looks across a metal worktop at Tony, sleepy and barefoot and shirtless and covered in machine oil, the outline of an Allen key imprinted on his cheek, and Steve says, "Oh." Then he fills one of Tony's enormous black mugs with black coffee, and hands it over with a smile, because that's life for Steve these days; always changing, always new, always painful.

Tony is the hero for the new America, sharp and beautiful and devastating. The people love him with roaring, thunderous applause, with no privacy and a million photos of him from every angle. Tony loves them back with slick grins and repulsor blasts, with fast technology and clean energy. It's no wonder, then, that Steve would fall in love with them both. He will make these new pieces, too, fit inside of him, jagged edges and glinting gold. He will hold them close to his heart until they cut him open.

Loki shifts like a tectonic plate; slow, at first, causing earthquakes and havoc, until eventually he clicks into a new place. He goes from menacing to tricks, poking holes in their defences when they can't admit they're bored and something needs shoring up, like some deranged magical white hat.

Tony's a futurist. He sees things, marks chess pieces, and so it's not that surprising when somehow he's saved from impact when an EMP shockwave from Doom shorts his suit just as he's hurtling towards a skyscraper. It takes ten seconds for a reboot, he won't have enough time, and in the silence of his dead suit he can imagine Clint screaming on the coms, Cap's face draining of blood at the crash and the crunch. He hopes he doesn't hit steel rebar.

He hurtles into Doom instead. They go down in a rousing clatter, all metal on metal and cape, and in his ear Tony hears an all too familiar snicker as he tries to untangle himself from the mess. Doom's unconscious, and his comm is still offline.

"Thanks, babe!" Tony calls out, reckless and high on adrenaline. He flinches violently at the feel of cool lips pressed to his cheek, inside the helmet, fuck.

"You are most welcome, darling." Loki's voice is saccharine and cloying and dry.
"Creepy stalker much?"

"Can you argue with results?"

Tony can't, so he doesn't say anything. Later, when Tony reveals Loki's assist and Clint expresses his shock, Tony and Thor share the strangest of looks. Thor looks fragile, nakedly grateful in a way that Tony hasn't been in public since he was a child. He looks tired, worn to the bone. Tony wonders what it is to be a thousand years old, what it is to wait for half to become whole after such a breaking as to tear the bridges between worlds asunder. Thor smiles weakly at him, then looks away.

"Next time we see Loki, we bring him in," Cap decides, and well. Tony rolls his eyes and anticipates a long and gruelling odyssey. That's worked so well for their other half-mad adoptive brother of a blonde teammate so far, hasn't it? They even have matching hair.

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The next time Tony sees Loki, he's sitting in their kitchen, illuminated only by the soft yellows of the stovetop light and the radiant glow of midtown's neon signage and streetlamps below. He's serene and smiling, arms folded on the island, and Tony stops short in the doorway and stares.

"Evening, Stark. Or should I say morning?"

Tony continues towards the coffee maker. He's not awake enough for this shit. Loki's loose haired and languid, wearing something black and cotton in lieu of his usual leathers. It's laced with green at the throat, but seeing the pale, vulnerable lines of Loki's collarbones makes something in Tony stutter and spark. It looks soft. He looks soft.

"JARVIS can't see you," he observes, starting the machine.

"I'm not really here."

"Astral projection?"

"Something like that."

Tony turns around, the coffee maker rumbling pleasantly. Then he leans over the counter and pokes Loki in the nose, his hand passing right through him. "Huh." Definitely not awake enough.

Loki wrinkles his nose in distaste. It's...disorienting. "That was unpleasant."

"Testing a theory." Tony yawns a little and picks an apple out of the fruit bowl, taking a bite out of it. "What can I do for you, your incorporealness?"

"I want to negotiate the terms of my surrender."

"Information and occasional combat assistance in exchange for your relative freedom."

Loki smiles, sharp-edged. "Something like that."

"Why me?" Tony asks, and Loki's mouth twists into something complicated.

"Don't ask stupid questions now, Stark. You were doing so well."

"Was I?"
Loki laughs, a mean little thing. Tony takes another bite of his apple.

"Talk to your team," Loki says. Tony smiles as he begins to fade away.

"Save Clint," he tells him. Loki's image flickers for a moment. "He's gonna be the one you have to convince."

Loki disappears, and Tony blinks at the dark living room beyond the kitchen island before shaking his head a little. "Right." He fills his coffee mug and sticks the apple in his mouth, then heads down to the workshop in the dark.

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Loki saves Natasha.

"Well played," Tony mutters, smirking as one moment Natasha is standing in front of a SHIELD agent with a terrified trigger finger, between a furious Hulk and a wall of men who should be evacuating Madison Square Park, and then there's nothing but green and gold light. The bullet lodges itself harmlessly in a tree, and then Natasha is behind him. The agent is out cold. She takes the gun apart and drops the pieces on the floor in front of the rest of his unit, who quickly find themselves somewhere else to be.

Tony loves to watch her work.

"Thank you," Loki says, smug bastard. He sounds like he's standing right behind him, even though Tony's forty feet in the air. Tony takes down a Hydra agent aiming for Cap, then blows up their evac vehicle. Then he takes down the five men fleeing the burning truck, just because.

"Did Loki just save Widow?" Clint says, sounding stunned but also furious. "And what the fuck are those agents doing?"

"Turning in for two months retraining," Coulson says sweetly. Natasha snorts.

"This is what happens when you break your knee and can't be on the scene," Tony says cheerfully. "They can't wipe their asses without you."

"I woke up this morning suddenly healed and cast free, with a little card next to my bed addressed to you that said 'How's this for saving?' in dark, shiny green ink. No prints, just residual magic radiation. I don't suppose you'd know anything about that, Stark."

Tony laughs as he takes out another group of Hydra agents attempting to flee the scene. "Oh, that bastard." And then, "You opened my mail? That's a federal crime."

"If it came through the United States Postal Service, sure, it would be. But seeing as it was magically placed on my bedside table, I'm not overly worried." He pauses, uncharacteristically reticent. "SHIELD has been scanning me and running tests all morning. I'm perfectly healthy, and have somehow regrown my tonsils."

"What is that crazy motherfucker up to?" Clint says, sounding winded. Tony catches sight of him riding a rappelling line down to a shorter roof with a water tower, tumbling to a stop and raising a bow to take out something going down a side street. There's an explosion, and then a plume of smoke.

"Shit. The courthouse didn't need whatever they took back, do they?"
"Hawkeye," Cap says warningly.

"What? They were getting away!"

"It's a supreme court, Cap. I'm sure they have their files backed up."

"Do we know that all they took was files?" Natasha asks.

"Yes," Loki says in his ear.

"Loki says yes."

"You're talking to Loki?" Cap says, startled. He almost misses catching his shield.

"He's talking to me. It's like he's inside my suit and I feel like I need a shower."

"My apologies," Loki says. It sounds like he's laughing, the asshole. "They didn't get what they came for."


"You all heard him?"

"Yes," Cap and Loki say at the same time. "We're almost done here. Loki, why don't you show yourself and we can talk?"

"I'm willing to help, Captain, not an idiot," Loki scoffs. The prickling feeling disappears, now that he's looking for it. Tony grunts and lands next to Cap.

"He's gone."

"How can you tell?" Cap asks, turning to face him. He's breathing heavily, a burn mark scraped across one purpling cheekbone. Tony pops his faceplate and touches it, lightly. Cap leans into the metal a little, and Tony smiles. "I'm alright. The cold feels nice, though."

"I figured." He shrugs. "I can feel him. It's like static electricity, and now it's gone."

"Are you alright?" Steve asks, a small crease between his brows. Tony's smile widens.

"Not a scratch."

"I hate to break up the love fest, but can we talk about the Loki thing?" Clint says, impatient. "Also, I'm out of rappelling arrows and I could use a lift."

Steve pulls away, embarrassed. Tony grins at him. "Debrief later. First we help with clean-up. You know the drill."

"Killjoy," Clint mutters.

"Cockblock," Tony sing-songs. It's worth it for Steve's bright blush; Clint's stuttering response is just the cherry on top. "Can you hear him, JARVIS?"

"I cannot." He sounds upset about it. "I don't have the ability to scan for magical energy inside the suit, sir."

"It's okay, J. Tell me if he pops up anywhere else."
"Of course, sir."

"Get ready for pickup, bird brain."

Clean up goes smoothly, and they turn over twenty-six Hydra agents to SHIELD for interrogation. Tony dreads the debrief, but this time he isn't injured enough to get out of it. He knows Coulson won't let him get off that easy.

"So, Thor's doing some sort of Asgardian political song and dance, and his brother wants, what? Amnesty? Why now?"

"He wants to negotiate the terms of his surrender," Tony says. The whole room turns to stare at him. "He came to visit me. I was eating an apple. We had some words."

"He was in the tower?" Steve says, looking horrified. "Tony, you could have been killed!"

"No, it was...I touched him and my hand went right through his face. He wasn't there. He just wanted to talk."

"You touched him," Bruce says, expression somewhere between amused and sceptical.

"Yeah, I poked him in the nose."

"Tony!"

"He told me he was an astral projection," Tony says with a shrug, unconcerned. "I was curious."

Cap looks like he's gonna burst a vein.

"What did he say?" Coulson interjects, and Tony gestures vaguely.

"Exactly that. He wants to negotiate the terms of his surrender. Probably trading information on baddies and helping out in fights in exchange for probation and community service sort of deal."

"No fucking way!" Clint says, slamming his hand down on the table. Bruce turns to look at him, and he shrinks back into his chair. "Sorry."

"It could be a trap, but Loki hasn't done anything really evil in over a year," Tony points out. "He's mostly just been annoying, more like a bored kid than a conquering dictator. That's a long game, even for him. Now he's saved both me and Nat, once from our own people."

"We're handling that," Coulson says. Natasha smiles, tiny and terrifying. "Stark, he seems to have taken a liking to you. Do you think you can turn him?"

"I think he's turning himself just fine," Tony says. "He's not gonna come in without Thor. He knows his brother's goodwill is nothing but an asset. He's not stupid, and he'll want that protection."

"When's Thor due back?"

"He didn't say, but a few weeks tops. He misses Jane when he's gone for too long."

Coulson nods. "Alright. Keep me updated."

"What, that's it? He tried to kill you!" Clint turns to glare at Tony. "You, too! He threw you out a window! On the 90th floor!"
"Most of us have done terrible things," Nat says mildly. She's looking at Steve, and Tony knows he's thinking of a certain soldier buddy of theirs. Steve stares back at her for a long moment before he exhales, nodding. He trains that infamous piercing gaze on Tony.

"I trust you," he says, which, wow. Tony was not expecting that. "If you think we can trust him, then I'm willing to follow your lead." His face hardens. "For now."

"What? Et tu, Brute?" Clint looks at Bruce, who shrugs.

"I'm with Tony. You know that."

Clint drops his head to the table. "Unbelievable."

Natasha rests a hand on the nape of his neck. "Come on," she says, and takes him out of the room. Tony notices Clint doesn't protest half as much as he thought he would. There's no hardness to him, none of the quiet anger that filled the first year after New York.

"He played us like a harp," Bruce says. He offers Tony a wan smile, all teeth. "Again."

"He's over a thousand years old. I don't take it too personally." He pauses. "Then again, Thor's supposed to be the big bad brother. I can see why Loki would get fussy about playing second fiddle, there. God, imagine Thor as president."

Steve frowns at him, but Bruce just laughs.

Steve takes the elevator straight to the workshop level after his run. He isn't above a little flirtation, after all, and he knows how to play to his strengths. When he punches his code in, Tony is bent over something hulking and grease-stained, piping and plating bathed in that familiar pale blue light. JARVIS keys down the music to protect Steve's more sensitive ears, and Steve walks to the other side of the workbench and crosses his arms, waiting for Tony to look up at him. The way Tony's eyes drag over the lines of his chest, lingering on his arms, the sweat dripping from his forehead and down his nose is satisfying, if not frustrating. Steve offers him a knowing smile.

"Morning," Steve says politely. _No, sir. Butter wouldn't melt in my mouth, sir._

"Hey hot stuff, rockin' the wet t-shirt contest as usual I see." Steve carefully does not react. Dummy rolls by, clutching briefly at Steve’s shirt in greeting. Steve pats him in return as he passes. "How was the run? Save any old ladies from trees, help kittens cross the street..."

"No, but I did help a little boy catch his puppy."

Tony squints at him. Steve smiles beatifically.

"Nope, can't tell. JARVIS?"

"Biometrics would indicate a joke at your expense, sir."

"Cheating," Steve says mildly, walking around the table. Tony pushes away from the workbench to stare up at him, and Steve rests one hip against the worktop and breathes in the scent of hot metal and oil and sweat. "Why didn't you tell anyone about Loki?"
Tony's face crumples into a vicious smile. Steve braces himself. "Jealous, Captain? I'm not allowed to make new friends?"

"Yes," Steve says, ignoring Tony's appraisal as he tries to determine what he's agreeing to, "if that friend is a super villain who has personally tried to kill half of this team, including you. You aren't usually that stupid, and when you are, you usually tell Bruce or Natasha about it beforehand, call Colonel Rhodes in for desperate help when it blows up in your face, and then explain it to me and Pepper after it's all over and you're half dead. So what happened this time?"

Tony looks incredulous, and even more bizarrely, somewhat proud. He smacks a spanner against his palm with a dull thwack, once, twice, before spinning on his stool to return to the mess of metal and machine oil on the workbench.

"You thought Tash was out because of Clint," Steve decides. "And Bruce...he's our main defence against him. Loki's wary of him, and you didn't want him compromised if the Hulk was needed. Which implies you're compromised."

"Steve," Tony says tiredly. "It was the magic equivalent of a video chat. Don't overanalyse it."

"Rhodes is neutral in this. You could have told him."

"We don't talk when he's on base and you know it."

"You do when he calls you. Maybe you should call him more often."

Tony drops the spanner with a startling clang. "What do you want me to say, Steve?"

"I want you to tell me the truth," Steve says evenly.

Tony stares down at the workbench, fingers drumming on the metal surface as he thinks. The lines of his shoulders are tight beneath his singlet, skin stained with black viscosity and sweat. Steve licks his lips and waits.

"He kissed me."

The bottom drops out of Steve's stomach. "Ah."

"Just a peck on the cheek, in the suit. I felt it. I flirt, it's nothing, I didn't think-" He exhales, pushing away from the worktop and spinning towards the back wall. He pushes off the stool and wipes his hands on a rag. "When he appeared here, I didn't know what to think. When I asked him why me, he said not to ask stupid questions. So I told him he'd have to convince Clint, not me."

Steve rubs two knuckles against his lips, thinking. Tony still won't look at him. He's running the hot water in the work sink, testing it. Steve watches him as he moves, methodically scrubbing the grease from his hands, pushing under the nail bed, pressing against the creased skin of his knuckles.

"That's what you meant, when you said 'Well played.'" Steve snorts, despite himself. "He's always been too smart."

"You think there’s a max on intelligence, why does that not surprise me,” Tony sneers, and Steve studies him.

"You like him."
“He’s smart, crazier than a bag of cats with a generous helping of daddy issues, and a mass murderer with a significant personal body count but, more importantly, an astronomical amount of kill assists.” Tony flashes a bitter smile. "I understand him. I was..."

Tony stops, turns the water off. Steve studies the tight lines of his back.

"You didn't build them their weapons, Tony. You're not like him"

Tony whirs on him, eyes flashing. "I am, Steve. He had nothing to keep him from giving in, and I had everything. I had people who loved me, a global empire to return to as a conquering hero." His bitter smile is full of shrapnel. Steve aches with it. "He discovered his great betrayal before the fall, not after. I remember--...it doesn't matter."

Steve walks up to him, ignoring the hard lines of Tony's face. He takes Tony's dripping fingers in his. "You're a good man, Tony Stark."

Tony stares at him, searching. He's on the knife edge of lashing out and giving in, and Steve has learned nothing if not how to wait. If the blow comes, it will wreck him, but he's learned his lesson after fighting with Tony for years now. It hurts less to take the one hit than return volleys.

"What would you know about it, Marty McFly? You've never been anything but the righteous little orphan Annie fighting bullies, come to save America from the big bad Nazi. You have a death count higher than the Chrysler and yet you still maintain your moral high horse because everybody knows eugenics are evil. Tell me, Captain, what's it like to be the living proof of this country's hypocrisy? We took a disabled orphan and let a German scientist turn him into the Übermensch, then let him loose on Hitler. Does your superhearing let you in on the dog whistle effect of the words 'perfect soldier', or has your blonde hair and blue eyes been called All-American too often for you to see that you're made of everything you were ever taught to hate about The Reich?"

Steve closes his eyes.

He will never be ready for the way Tony always knows how to twist the knife. He waits for the words to gut him, waits for the slack face of his mother and Doctor Erskine's corpses to flash, waits for the anger to build, and crest, and break. This will flay him, he knows, because Tony always wounds with truth. This will leave a scar long after this moment.

When he opens his eyes, his hands are holding Tony tighter than he meant to. The vicious satisfaction on his face almost pushes Steve over again, but he can see the tremble of pain underneath it. He looses his grip, takes a breath. Then another.

"You're gonna regret that later," he says, and is rewarded with a flash of something vulnerable in Tony's eyes before it disappears behind a mask of vehemence. "I won't say you didn't mean it, but you'll regret it. When that happens, come find me, and we can spar it out."

He squeezes Tony's fingers gently before letting go and taking a step back. Tony looks lost, his resolve cracking, and yet still ready to fight. It takes an elephantine amount of strength to turn away, but Steve does it. He walks towards the door in silence.

"We do love you," he calls over his shoulder, because sometimes Steve Rogers is a coward. "I just wish you wouldn't make it so hard."

He waits until the workshop door slides shut behind him to swear, softly. Then he takes off towards the kitchen.

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Tony casts his gaze over the airfield, watching the bustle of planes taxiing along their careful trajectories. He’d always liked planes, even before the strippers and the private jet. There was something pure about them, mathematics and engineering all that kept a crowd from splattering to flesh soup on the pavement. Flight was the human miracle. Everything had to be perfect, precise, and yet still human error became the fault at the heart of it. And Tony just keeps making mistakes, rolling after each other and growing like the proverbial snowball and hill. The weight of it sits in his chest, mass growing exponentially, cold ice.

When he was little, and his father was a particular flavour of merry-tipsy, he would tell him stories about the war; Captain America, his greatest creation. Of course, now Tony knows what a crock of shit that was. If anyone created Captain America, it was Erskine, but more importantly, Steve created himself. The existence of The Hulk and The Red Skull would suggest that Steve was the magic sauce, the catalyst that crafted the man. Still, he thinks he understands Loki, a little; the prodigal son, the desire to prove his worth, the violence and the rage. Tony remembers what it was like to blast out of his cage, to reign destruction upon the worthy. He remembers what it felt like to blow up the enemy with the biggest and best bomb on the market. A Stark, of all men, knows what it is to love destruction. It is what they cut their teeth on: blood and metal.

He taps the arc reactor in time to his footsteps, fine leather and metal, keratin and crystal. He's ticking down to something, he can feel it building sharp and static, but he doesn't know what it is. All he knows is that the fallout will be magnificent.

The door opens.

"Miss Potts, you look ravishing, if I do say so myself."

Pepper smiles at him in surprise and takes his hand as she steps off the plane and onto the metal staircase. Her hair whips around in the wind, long strands curling around her neck, and Tony beams back at her. She's sporting a few new freckles, and he can see the hint of a sunburn under the sheer sleeves of her white blouse. She pauses on the lower steps as he walks her down.

"Why thank you, Mr. Stark." She glances down at him, eyebrows raised. "I saw you on the news yesterday."

"Yeah?"

"And you didn't even get blown up," Pepper says, stepping onto the tarmac. "So to what do I owe this honour?"

Tony tilts his head to look at her over his sunglasses. "It was just the minions. What kind of superhero would I be if I couldn't take out minions with minimal damage?"

Pepper rolls her eyes, motioning to the baggage assistant to put her luggage in the trunk of Tony's car. "What happened to my driver?"

"A company car is still here to take your merry band away. I just haven't seen you in a while, so I thought-"

"What did you do?" Pepper says, sighing. She pinches her brow with a free hand.

"I can't just want to see you?" Tony simpers, opening one side of the Aston for her. "I'm hurt."

Pepper slides in and fixes him with a look as he crosses around the front of the convertible. "You picked me up from the airport, personally."
Tony hops into his seat and starts the car, fingers drumming on the wheel. Aerosmith is blasting from the stereo, and Pepper rolls her eyes at the volume level and turns it down a notch. Or six.

"Am I hard to love?"

Pepper freezes, her hand on the knob. "What?"

"We both know I am, who am I kidding?" He puts the car in drive and pulls away from the jet, heading towards the road. He carefully doesn't look at her. "Loki wants to come in, and he's picked me as negotiator. He keeps popping up, but he's playing nice, so I thought you should know in case, you know. He pops up. Don't shoot him unless he gives you a reason, etcetera."

He chances a glance at her, where Pepper is staring hard enough to burn a hole in his head.

"We were doing okay," Pepper says. "I thought we were doing okay."

"We are! We're friends. We're still friends, right?"

Pepper blinks at him. "So what's this, then? You know I can't do this, Tony. We agreed this was the last time-"

"Oh Pep." Tony shakes his head, changing lanes to head for Manhattan. "No I wasn't suggesting we try again."

"Well I just thought, with the compliments and the picking me up-" Pepper narrows her eyes at him. "Who said that to you?"

Tony flinches. "Nobody. So, about Loki-"

"Tony," Pepper says, threatening, and he can feel a painful smile bubbling up. "It's not true. You know I will always love you."

Tony swallows. "Yeah?"

"You're a reckless asshole, and I need control, and what's why we didn't work out. But it wasn't just you. We've been over this." Pepper touches his hand on the gear stick for a moment, until he looks at her.

"Tony Stark yes, Iron Man no." Tony smiles wryly. "Loki kissed me."

Pepper gapes at him.

"On the cheek." He pulls onto Grand Central, revving the engine a little for kicks as he merges smoothly into traffic. "Tell me flirting with a literal vengeful god who threw me out of the window of my own tower is a bad fucking plan."

"Oh my god," Pepper says.

"Yeah."

They drive in silence for a while as Pepper processes this. Tony doesn't mind. If he is grateful for anything in his life, it is the fact that his relationship with Pepper has maintained this comfort, that he can sit with her without the stifling instinct to babble. He enjoys driving. When he looks over after a mile or so, she has a thoughtful expression on her face.

"What?"
"Actually," she says.

"No," he says, disbelieving.

"If it helps bring him in," she says.

"You're supposed to be discouraging my bad life decisions!" Pepper favours him with a wry look. "My parole officer already reamed me out bright and early this morning. Guess it was high on the to do list."

Her expression sharpens. "Steve said that to you."

Tony groans and switches lanes to pass a truck. "Pepper. Pepper-pot. Light of my life. Focus."

"Captain Rogers is not getting a birthday present," she says, twisting her lips into something angry. "The nerve of him."

"I yelled at him," Tony admits.

"And he should know better." Tony sneers. "If Loki is contacting you because he's interested, and you can have some guarantee of safety..." Pepper tilts her head to the side, considering. "He's less likely to attack the Avengers if he's attached to you."

"He already saved Natasha and fixed Agent's knee." Tony paused. "And me."

"So he's already halfway to affection."

"Pepper!" Tony says, scandalised. Pepper smirks at him.

"You have never been above using sex to get what you want."

"What I want is usually sex."

"So then what's the problem?" Tony snorts incredulously. "You should seduce him. Turn him to the light side."

"Tesla save us," Tony says. Pepper laughs at him and tosses her head to get some of the hair out of her face.

"So since you've kidnapped me," Pepper says, "sushi, and you can look over the new contracts?"

"Tokyo went well."

"Of course," Pepper says, smile sharp and glinting. Tony grins at her.

"That's my CEO."

"And don't you forget it."

Tony loves so much it aches.

They go to Yasuda. Tony hasn't been since the eponymous master chef returned to Tokyo, but apparently Pepper wants to see what Tamura has done with the place. Tony wouldn't want sushi after a week in Japan, but he's never pretended to understand Pepper's tastes. Tony just likes good food.
"You staying at the tower?"

Pepper thanks the chef in Japanese as she closes her purse, then takes a last sip of water. "If Loki is wandering around, I'm probably going to stay at the mansion."

"Ah." Tony stands, then gestures for her to leave first. "He's fine for me to have sex with but not for you to sleep in the same building as, huh?"

Pepper shrugs as they step out into the afternoon sun.

"I'm not an Avenger," she says. "I can take a cab, don't worry."

"Like I'm gonna make you take a cab," Tony scoffs, walking with her towards the car.

"I know you haven't-"

"I'll drop you off outside, okay? Someone can meet us at the door to grab your luggage. I'll be fine."

Pepper raises an eyebrow at him, but doesn't say anything else about it.

"How's the project going, anyway?"

"Good," she says, hesitantly. "But there's a few things of your father's, that, well."

"Burn the shrine, for all I care." It's all dead ghosts and bad memories, anyway.

"Okay," Pepper says, softly.

Tony unlocks the car. Gets in. Breathes.

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Loki's waiting for him when he gets out of the elevator. He's in his battle armour this time, but unarmed, and thankfully lacking a helmet. His hands are folded behind his back. Tony considers him, standing patiently in the middle of his penthouse, then glances up at the nearest camera.

"Nothing, J?"

"Mr. Odinson the younger again, sir?"

Loki's face does something complicated.

"I don't think he likes that name, JARVIS."

"Perhaps if he had properly introduced himself instead of sneaking about like a petty thief, I might be better informed."

Loki smiles, sharp and delighted. "Oh, he is his father's son, I see." His image shimmers for a moment, and then he bows. "I have been called Silvertongue, and Lie-Smith, and Trick-Skin, and even mistaken for Satan. But I suppose Laufeyson would be most correct, as it seems that would be the most important factor in your considerations, Master Jarvis."

"It would seem Mr. Laufeyson is a bit more corporeal now, sir. I silenced the intruder alert, unless he is unwelcome?"
"No, you know what to do."

"Yes, sir."

Tony examines his options, then heads for the bar, intentionally turning his back on the god standing in his living room. He loosens his tie, and drapes his suit jacket over a bar stool. He can feel Loki tracking him as he rolls up his sleeves.

"Can I offer you a drink?"

Loki looks down at the floor, grinning a bit. He looks up and meets Tony's eye from beneath his lashes. "We've been here before."

"Don't throw me out the window and we're peachy keen, darling."

Loki considers him for a moment before nodding once. A smile still sits on his lips.

"Scotch on the rocks?"

"I trust your judgement."

Tony raises his eyebrows and scoops some ice out of the bar fridge into two tumblers. "You're not the first to say that to me recently." He takes the stopper out of the decanter and pours two fingers each. "Captain America seems to think that he should take my word for it if I say we should give you a plea deal."

"Oh?" Loki says, suddenly very close. Tony raises his head to meet the mage's eye across the bar. "And do you?"

Tony places the tumbler in his hand, heart in his throat. "You know you're going to have to do more than stop a few injuries to convince the public."

"You might have died," Loki points out crossly. And then, "Of course."

"And I know you're going to wait until Thor's back from Asgard. You timed it so you'll have the team on your side, which will convince your brother immediately because we both know he still loves you, in maybe a creepy and terrifying way. And you'll have plenty of time to convince him of your transformation before he has to return home again and break the news to your—" He pauses at Loki's raised eyebrow. "Well, to Odin. There won't be any doubts left in his mind."

Loki takes a sip of his scotch, waiting.

"Which means you're here for me," Tony says, taking a sip himself. Loki's green eyes are bright with enjoyment. "Widow was out because of Clint, and the Hulk scares you shitless. Captain America isn't a grey area kind of guy, and none of us would trust Thor's judgement. That leaves me. And you like me. Why?"

Loki sips his scotch, smiles wickedly. "I think you know the answer to that, as well."

"Do I?" Tony asks. "Sorry, Saruman, but I don't trust you at all, pretty as you might be batting your eyelashes at me. I'm too old to fall for the honey trap, honey, you got me?"

Loki laughs, light and pattering, like hail on a tin roof. His teeth flash blindingly white. "Is that so?" he says. He takes a deep draught of his scotch, long fingers tightening on the glass.

Tony smirks at the small tic.
"Fine," Loki says, and drains it, swallowing the ice whole. "Thank you for the drink." He sets the tumbler down on the bar and turns away.

"Thor tells me you can't break a vow. Some sort of gods' thing, especially true for mages." Loki stills, and turns back to look at him. Tony rests his elbows on the bar. "We both want to manipulate each other. So let's put a little insurance in, shall we?"

Loki tilts his head, catlike. "What such assurances would I have from you?"

Tony smiles, all teeth. "Well, you could kill me pretty easy without my armour."

Loki blinks at that, then nods his assent.

"Are you trying to screw us over?"

Loki says nothing, but emanates a clear air of displeasure. His shoulders are tight, body perfectly poised. Tony takes another sip and comes around the bar, stopping just short of touching range. He searches Loki's face, pulling his lip between his teeth.

"I can't figure you out," he mutters, furrowing his brow a little. "You're lonely as fuck on the villain track, that much is clear. And you want someone to match wits with, which is why you're always hitting me up for banter. I just can't get what it is you want from all this."

Loki smiles bitterly. "You're not half so clever as you think."

"Aren't I?" Tony gestures around the room. "I kept you talking in here long enough to get a new suit after your little stunt on the helicarrier smashed the one I was wearing to sparks and scrap." He turns back to face Loki, his mouth set in a broad smile. "You picked me because you think I'm clever, didn't you?"

"Maybe I found..." Loki pauses, looking him over brazenly. "Other things of interest."

"So, the arc reactor," Tony muses. Loki's nostrils flare slightly. "It's a beauty, I know, I'm flattered, really."

Loki stares at him, eyes intrigued despite the moue on his face. Tony smiles back.

"Are you here to harm anyone on my team?"

"Your team?" Loki inquires, raising one eyebrow.

"My people, any of them, Avengers or Stark Industries or even SHIELD. You come after them, I'll make what the Hulk did to you look like a love tap."

Loki narrows his eyes, head tilting as he examines him. "I believe you," he says solemnly. Tony bares his teeth. "That is not my aim, no."

"So we could get hurt, in whatever plot you're hatching."

Loki glances towards the windows. "You are self-designated heroes. Risk exists for you at every turn."

"And you're not trying to fuck with us?"

Loki laughs, low and predatory. "Stark, they call me The God of Mischief. All I do is fuck with people."
Tony swallows thickly. The curse sounds strange in Loki's mouth, formal and dirty all at once. He looks like he knows it, too.

"But no, I swear I do not intend to cause harm to you or your people, as you say, nor am I plotting your demise." Loki’s mouth twists into something like regret. It throws Tony off, leaves him unstable. “You have my word.”

“Then what do you want?” Tony asks, mouth running ahead of him. Always, every damn time.

Loki’s laugh is rasping and low, his head tilted downwards. “What a question.” He flashes a grin, green eyes bright. “What is it you want, Tony Stark?”

Tony opens his mouth. Closes it. “I’m hot, I’m a genius, I’m a billionaire. I have everything I could ever want.”

Loki raises his eyebrows and laughs, dry and mocking. It cuts Tony like a seashell, warm sand soft under bare feet until suddenly, the flash of danger. He’s acutely aware of his fine Martin Greenfield suit, of the leather shoes and lack of metal to protect his vulnerable heart. The metal cuffs to call the armour are skin warm against his wrists.

“Perhaps,” Loki says, stilling, “I chose you because we are both liars, Tony Stark.”

There’s no electric dissipation to herald his disappearance this time, no flash of golden light. Tony wonders how much of what he’s tracked so far can be attributed to what Loki wished for him to see, the way Natasha sometimes makes noise in the dark to let Tony know she’s approaching. He stares for a moment longer before looking out the windows, remembering the shatter of glass and the inspissating air roaring around him as he fell.

“What am I doing, J?”

“I could not begin to guess, but I suppose human courtship is beyond my parameters.”

“Hey,” Tony says, heading towards his room to change. “He’s not human.”

“You asked what you were doing, not Mr. Laufeyson.”

“Brat. Upload any readings you’ve gotten to the project folder, see if we can’t get you to be able to see him all the time.”

“Already done, sir. I suspect that no one can see him when he doesn’t wish to be seen.”

“What do we do, baby?”

“The improbable, sir.”

Tony quirks a smile. “That’s my boy.”

Tony loves, so deeply it hurts. It seems like the done thing, these days. It’s his fault, really, for keeping such astounding specimens around all the time. He’s just encouraging them to break his tinman heart.

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Tony never shows up for movie night.

Steve hasn’t seen him since the fight, which isn’t all that unusual; Tony blows cold, sometimes,
disappearing for days on end while he pokes at some project or another. He thinks about Tony slaving over their equipment, burning his fingers and sweating from the heat, pushing himself after a battle to make sure the team has the tech they need to stay alive. In the beginning he’d seen nothing but the callousness, the way Tony brushed off anything resembling camaraderie, his mouth twisted into quiet disdain. It was only after watching him with Bruce, the way the other man lit up for him, that he began to watch more closely. He saw the way that people shrank from Bruce, the way Tony homed in on him and touched him, the way Bruce leaned into that touch like a man starved. He saw the way Natasha would sometimes soften a little at the sound of his voice, mouth shifting ever so slightly. He saw the way Tony always spared her from his barbs. He caught them once, late at night, sitting in the dark and drinking together. The mission had gone particularly south, a little girl had been hit by a getaway vehicle gunning it down Second, and Tony had flown her personally to NYU Langone only to watch her flatline. They weren’t speaking, just curled together on the couch, the city lights illuminating their silhouettes in the faintest of yellows. Eventually, Steve had left, feeling guilty and voyeuristic for a reason he couldn’t explain.

Tony had been the one to extend the olive branch. Steve wasn’t sure he deserved it after he’d been proven wrong in such a nuclear fashion, but Tony had used that branch to build a safety nest of routine and casual intimacy so fast that Steve didn’t even notice he’d been falling before he was caught, held safe and warm in Tony’s regard. He’d been floundering in the new world, and Tony had seen him and pulled him up. He’d given Thor a drinking buddy to have the kind of raucous remembrance of home that he so missed. He’d given Clint open access to the roof and someone to trade vicious barbs with, someone who wouldn’t shrink from his anger or treat him like he was spun from glass. Tony broke people down and played them like he did his machines, testing their sounds and their abilities, then quietly providing them with everything they needed to function at peak capacity. Steve would have bristled at it, if he wasn’t so ashamed.

“When he was dying, he gave Pepper his company and Rhodes his suit. I took it for recklessness,” Natasha said to him. He’d been pinned to the mat, panting, sweat beading his brow after a long sparring session. She was breathing hard, but wore her triumph like an old and well-loved coat. “I was wrong. I don’t make mistakes.”

Then she got up and wiped her face down with a towel, draping it around her neck. Steve lay there on the mat as she drank from her water bottle, her head tossed back as she drained the whole thing.

“You’re being an idiot,” she added. Then she walked out, leaving him lying on the floor.

*I’m compromised*, Steve remembers thinking, his chest tight in a way it hadn’t been since before the serum, asthma sitting harsh and heavy on his chest.

*I’m compromised*, Steve thinks, standing outside of Tony’s bedroom in the penthouse. He isn’t here, Steve knows. He’s being a coward again. He sighs, drags a hand over his face.

“Where is he?” he asks, staring at the crack under the door. There’s no light peeking out, just the dark seam between wood and wood.

“I’m sorry, Captain, I’m not at liberty to say,” JARVIS says. He sounds cold, and Steve frowns.

“You’re mad at me, too, huh?” He laughs shortly.

“Anger was not writ into my coding, Captain.”

“You’ve progressed beyond your original coding,” Steve starts, then shakes his head. “Look, whatever you’re both mad at me about, I can’t fix it if he won’t see me.”
“I’m afraid I can’t help you,’ JARVIS says primly. Steve lets out a breath, jaw tightening. “Miss Potts would have a word with you, when you have a chance.”

“Oh well, since I’m suddenly free,” Steve mutters. “Patch her through for me?’”

“She’s presently occupied. Perhaps tomorrow morning.”

“Right.”

Steve stares at the door for another minute, hands tightening. He turns on his heel and heads for the elevator, then punches in the number for the garage. His reflection stares back at him in the polished metal walls, face distorted, repeated back and back out into infinity. When the doors slide open, the sight of the Softtail sits in his chest like a lead weight. He remembers Tony helping him fix it up after an unexpected firefight left some cosmetic damage, oil staining his hands, a bright grin on his face. He’d been introducing Steve to The Dirty Mac, explaining the concept of a supergroup. It was a good memory.

Steve walks right by his bike and out onto the street.

He’s not dressed for running. It’s brisk outside, the threat of winter still not quite gone from the city, and he’s standing outside in slacks and chucks, a button down shirt over a cotton tee because he was going to ask Tony if they could actually go out tonight and see a movie in theatres. They haven’t done that in a while. He closes his eyes and listens to the horns and chatter of midtown at night, the humid air on his face, the smell of salt and wet. He starts walking south.

He loves New York in the summer. The city is always alive, humming with energy, but there’s something intensely satisfying about the palatable joy of the first weeks of warmth, the way the collective populace seems to get up and stretch off the cold and the dark. Flowering trees bloom on every street, tulips rioting down the street dividers. The sidewalks are flooded with buskers playing music, free concerts and movie showings filling the parks with the raucous sounds of laughter and life. It took a while for him to learn her newness, the different form she’d taken, but the city now is everything he’s always loved and more, new sights and sounds and smells. She’s still beautiful, after all these years, still too much and everything at once. Steve closes his eyes, waiting for a walk sign, and drowns in it.

He walks all the way down Fifth, the familiar feet of the Empire State Building a welcome sight, and then the Flatiron rising up to meet him. He walks through the arch at Washington Square park, moving through the clouds of smoke and carousing co-eds, drugs and laughter around the fountain, walks all the way to Canal Street and through the neon lights of Chinatown as the restaurants close up shop. He walks right up to the entrance to the Brooklyn Bridge, then stops, those wooden planks stacked in a line as far as he can see, the familiar cables stretching up into the starless sky. It’s midnight. A couple walks towards him, hands linked, shoulders touching. A Korean tourist heads off towards the centre of the bridge with a telephoto.

Steve stands there for an hour, watching the minimal foot traffic on a Thursday night as it wanders to and fro. No one bothers him, leaning on the railing, feet crossed in front of him. The moon crosses the sky, hides behind one hulking tower. A taxi honks behind him. Eventually, he turns around and walks home.
I think this is me working up to an elegy. I’ve been a Cap/Iron-Man shipper for a long time. It’s an old ship, sturdy and still going strong, but lately I’ve been wondering if it’s time for me to step off of it. I’ve always had some serious issues with Cap, which let me tell you, has always required a lot of doublethink. I always wanted to shake Tony and tell him that he was worthy, and Cap could be a real asshole too, and his golden hero was far from perfect. In the comics, I was actually more on Cap's side from a moral standpoint, even if I thought Tony had a lot of good points considering House of M/the political climate. Having watched Captain America: Civil War however, I came out with nothing but incandescent hatred for Movie!Cap. With the changes made for the film, I found his position surprisingly un-American, rather imperialistic, and ultimately indefensible without extreme and dangerous arrogance. He seemed so OOC to me. Tony makes his mistakes, but he always owns up to them. His unhealthy self-deprecation ensures that. Steve’s moral superiority won’t let him acknowledge any fault at all.

Steve and Tony have always been something of an odd couple. In all the half-finished snippets of Cap/Iron-Man I have floating around, unposted and abandoned, they have fought as viciously as they loved one another. They’re too different in their glories and too similar in their sins, and that’s what’s always led them to being the powder keg that they are in the comics. The movies, having stripped away the ten years of love and friendship between them before Civil War, leaves only the conflict. Steve’s betrayal is even more inexcusable left bare as it is. This is a combination of movies and some comics lore, and it’s mostly me trying to pick apart my growing reservations about a ship that is old, strong, and near and dear to my heart. (Edit post-Ch 11: So far, I think it's helping?)

Anyway, that’s my author meta. Hope you enjoy it. This is my first ever foray into FrostIron, so bear with me. (And don’t get me started on the Hydra reveal.)
Tony wakes to the smell of coffee, his mouth cotton dry and tasting like smoke. He’s greasy, singlet so stained with various oils and solvents that the fabric is dry and scratchy on his skin. He doesn’t move for a while, just breathing and listening to the sound of the coffee machine. When he hears a familiar clink and the sound of someone pouring, he scrubs the sand out of his eyes and stares up at the ceiling. A mug appears in his line of sight.

“You look like shit,” Bruce observes. Tony snorts and sits up, taking the cup from him.

“And a good morning to you, too, Dr. Banner.”

“What’d Steve do?”

Tony’s mouth twists. He takes a long sip of coffee, scorching and black as he likes it. Bruce waits, sitting on a stool and sipping his tea. Dummy is hovering, and Bruce has one hand on his strut, thumb brushing back and forth ineffectually in a strange affectionate approximation of petting. He looks comfortable. Tony knows better than to try to wait him out.

“We had a fight.”

“I figured that out,” Bruce says. “What did he do that made you so upset you missed movie night?”

Tony rolls his eyes and takes another gulp of coffee.

“Just so I know what he’s on our shitlist for,” Bruce adds, and Tony looks at him. His face is still placid, and Tony blinks as affection overwhelms him, processing it, letting it pass.

“He just said some uncomfortable truths. Nothing I don’t know,” Tony says, swinging his legs around to sit properly on the couch like a human being. Bruce’s face slips into a cousin of disgust.

“So he twisted the knife in your insecurities.” Bruce’s voice is dark, and Tony shivers. “You must’ve said something nasty.”

“I pointed out the more…hypocritical elements of his inception.”

Bruce’s mouth twists in scathing amusement. “Ah.”

“So, I pissed him off,” Tony says, sipping his coffee and watching Bruce. He raises his eyebrows as Bruce reaches behind him and offers Tony a plate of buttered toast.

“He should know better.”

Tony rolls hies eyes, a smile escaping him despite himself. “Pepper said the same thing.” He takes a slice of toast and bites into it, sweet butter and warm bread like ambrosia. He scarfs it down with animalistic swiftness, reaching for another almost immediately.
“So, Pepper knows what he said,” Bruce says, and Tony pauses, gesturing at him with what’s left of his slice.

“Leave it, Bruce.”

“Would JARVIS tell me?”

“No-”

“The Captain suggested-”

“Mute!”

Bruce raises an eyebrow at him.

“HAL, you turncoat,” Tony growls, shaking his toast at the nearest security camera. Bruce is still staring, and Tony drains his coffee mug for something to do. “I thought you weren’t that kind of doctor.”

Bruce stares, says nothing.


“Thank you, sir,” JARVIS deadpans. “Sir is upset because Captain Rogers told him that he was hard to love.”

Bruce’s expression darkens. Tony inhales, takes a bite of toast, chews forcefully as he waits for Bruce to look less terrifying. When this doesn’t happen, he swallows with an audible click. Bruce mutters something in Punjabi. Tony eats his toast. Then he licks his fingers, for good measure.

“Clint and I could-”

“No,” Tony says, shuddering. “The last time you and Clint ganged up on Thor, we had to open every window in the tower and a hazmat unit was deployed to his suite.”

Bruce considers him, then waves the plate of toast in his face. Tony takes another slice and munches obediently.

“You know he’s jealous.”

Tony laughs, spraying crumbs everywhere. It’s not classy, but he’s surprised and he hasn’t showered in two days. “What?”

“Of whatever this thing you’re doing with Loki is,” Bruce clarifies, fixing him with a knowing look. Tony must look guilty, because Bruce furrows his brows. “Oh. He has something to be jealous of.”

“Okay, that’s enough sharing time,” Tony says, gesturing with his now empty cup. Bruce takes it away and walks over to the coffee maker for a refill. “Er, thanks.”

“Do you know what you’re doing?” Bruce asks, not looking up from where he’s pouring Tony another cup of coffee.

“Well,” Tony tries, “it’s not actually my plan this time, so I’m more reacting than doing.”

“So, no.” Bruce hands him his cup. “This is going to get messy.”
“There’s nothing to get messy! Loki’s…flirting, and Pepper even said I should encourage him so he’ll be seduced to the dark side. Or, the not-dark side. The rebellion? And Steve’s…just imprinted like the little lost duckling he is. I’ll talk to him.”

“No,” Bruce says, sipping his tea, “you won’t.”

Tony huffs and takes a long drag of his coffee, draining half the liquid in one go. “You don’t trust me?”

Bruce leans forward and braces his elbows on his knees, his eyes serious. “Tony, I want you to listen to me. No deflecting, no laughing it off. Ready?” Tony meets his eyes, pulse skipping. “Steve Rogers is in love with you, and it scares you to shit. I think you two could make something of it, if you would both stop skirting the issue like a pair of middle schoolers. I know you’re both emotionally stunted American men, but one of you is going to ruin this in a bad way if something doesn’t change, and it’s the resentment of that broken chance that’s going to fuck up the team, not you acting on it. You’re a powder keg.”

Tony’s pulse is thundering in his ears. He can’t seem to get his bearings. Bruce takes a sip of his tea, then pushes his glasses up into his hair and pinches his nose. His eyes are pained and somewhat embarrassed when he meets Tony’s wide gaze. “Steve is a lot of things, but emotionally perceptive isn’t one of them, so you’re going to have to be the one to do something. If not, he’ll just keep wallowing until he falls for someone else. When that happens, you’ll be a wreck, and I’ll have to say I told you so. So don’t wait that long. For me.”

He stands up, putting the plate with its one measly slice of toast on the vacant stool. “I know you have an R&D meeting today, so I’ll let you prep. Steve can be a real asshole, but so can you, Tony.” He pauses. “But he’s still on the shitlist.”

He smiles tremulously at Tony, then heads towards the door.

“Hey,” Tony says. Bruce pauses, turns.

“Yeah?” He pulls his glasses off his head, cleaning them in his shirt before replacing them. Tony quirks a smile at him.

“You’re my favourite,” he tells him. It’s an old mantra, but Bruce grins anyway. They look at each other for a moment until Bruce turns, rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment and heading out the door. “Thanks for the breakfast!”

Bruce waves a hand over his shoulder as the panel slides shut behind him. Tony understands; he used up his quota of emotional bullshit for the week on Monday alone, what with Steve and Pepper and Loki. He can hardly blame Bruce for rankling at having to play meddling therapist.

He takes a very long shower, letting the steam open his pores for a proper cleaning as the hot water beats down on his tense shoulders. He has JARVIS put on ZZ Top and swings with it, running the bar over his arms as the shrill guitar wails over him, through him. A shadow moves in the corner of his eye, but when he swipes the heat film from the glass it’s just him and his blurry reflection, alone in the bathroom. The skin under his eyes is bruised and sagging.

“So what’s next, genius?”

His reflection doesn’t answer him. Tony snorts.

“Talking to myself again. Great.”
“I thought I was created for plausible deniability,” JARVIS says. Tony starts, then laughs at himself.

“You were created to be the first and best of your kind,” Tony tells him, shutting off the water. “You’re the best thing I’ve made in my life.”

“Thank you, sir,” JARVIS says warmly. Tony clears his throat, reaching for the towel. “You should leave in twenty minutes to get to your meeting on time.”

Tony nods and faces the sink, swiping a hand over the mirror to clear it. He stares at his face, then reaches for his toothbrush. “Just another day in this old bag of bones.”

The alarm sounds.

“Sir,” JARVIS says, perturbed. “An unidentified woman has just appeared outside demanding Mr. Odinson come and face her. She seems to be wielding magic similar to Mr. Laufeyson’s.”

Tony wishes he’d never gotten out of bed on Monday. “Tell her Thor is in Asgard,” he says snapping on his homing bracelets. He stumbles into his room to pull on a pair of boxers, then out into the hall. “Deploy.”

“She does not seem to take me at my word.”

“Of course not,” Tony mutters, standing spread eagle so the suit can attach itself as it speeds down the hall towards him. He walks towards the windows as the last pieces continue to arrive, holding still for the faceplate.

“Dr. Banner is waiting to see if his presence is required,” JARVIS puts in.

“Gotcha. Thanks, J.” Tony strides towards the door to the landing platform, waving it open and walking out with his hands spread wide. “I wasn’t expecting visitors, or I would have put together a spread. You’re ruining my epic host rep.”

“Where is Thor?” the woman snarls. Thick, blonde hair falls to her waist in soft waves, framing a beautiful, angular face and high cheekbones. She’s draped in lush greens and golds, a horned headdress framing her face, and Tony taps a metal finger on his chin. Behind him, he can hear footsteps, and he relaxes a bit knowing he’s no longer alone on the roof with a magic wielder. Again.

“Let me guess, a student of Loki’s?” he asks. She looks startled, and Tony laughs. “Nail on the head.”

“Thor isn’t here,” Steve says firmly from behind him.

“What else can we do you for?” Tony adds. Steve moves to stand abreast with him, eyes slanting towards him with something cautious. He’s only wearing the top half of his battle armour, his bottom half decked in sweatpants. He looks oddly vulnerable, caught between Steve Rogers and Captain America, soft and dangerous all at once. At least he has the shield.

“He left for Asgard, to help with a political matter. He won’t be back for weeks,” Steve elaborates, when the woman doesn’t seem inclined to believe them.

The woman looks discomfited, waffling between furious and hesitant. “You are allied with Loki?” she asks. “And yet I can sense remnants of mjölnir’s magic all along your parapet.”
“Not-"

“Yeah, what of it?” Tony cuts in, speaking right over Cap. He can see where this is going, and he doesn’t anticipate any sentence that might come out of his mouth as particularly useful to avoiding a firefight. Cap stiffens, and Tony turns his head slightly to see Natasha behind him, likely restraining him in some subtle way. Good ol’ Nat.

“Are Loki and Thor…aligned, again?”

“Not quite,” Tony says, “but I’m neutral ground, so to speak.”

The woman looks even more confused, and Tony extends a hand. “Iron-Man, aka Tony Stark: genius, billionaire, superhero, king of the castle. And you are?”

“I am Amora, sometimes called The Enchantress,” she says haughtily. “On Midgard, I have been known as Frige. You have not heard of me?”

Tony tilts his head. “Sorry, not ringing any bells,” he says brightly, taking note of the way Amora’s mouth opens, clearly affronted. “So, uh. Wanna come back later? Or…?”

“Thor is truly gone from Midgard?” Amora asks, looking disappointed. “And his fortress and shieldbrother are protected by Loki.”

*Oh, I am, am I?* Tony thinks wryly. “Actually, it’s my fortress. Thor’s the guest.”

“And yet,” she says, her eyes narrowing, “your companions are not.”

“Cap, inside, now,” Tony says into the comm, not projecting his voice externally. He watches as Cap steels himself, then his body language shifts. Steve Rogers shakes his head stubbornly. “Cap, you stubborn ass, you and Natasha and go inside.”

“I’m serving as a diplomatic liaison between Loki and Midgard,” Tony improvises audibly. It’s the closest thing to the truth he can think to tell her. “Thor, as our shieldbrother, is included as part of Midgard.”

Amora’s smiles fetchingly. “So, your soldiers are shieldbrethren of Thor, and not allies of Loki.”

“The Avengers have a truce with Loki,” Natasha offers, “in the interest of diplomacy.”

Amora considers this. She looks extremely put out, and Tony expects it has something to do with the fact that she’s decided it will be entirely too much trouble to kill anyone on the roof with her. “I see.”

“Do we have a problem?” Cap asks, and Tony curses through the comm.

“Cap, shut up,” he grunts between his teeth. Steve, predictably, ignores him.

Amora looks at him speculatively for a moment, her eyes flashing with gold light. “No, I don’t believe we do,” she says sweetly, and Tony swallows as something in Cap shifts towards her, body going loose and pliant.

“Any magic performed on my colleagues will be taken as an act of aggression,” Tony says mildly, stepping between them. Amora’s sneers, raising a hand, then flinches at whatever she encounters.

“Loki, what are you up to?” she says, touching her chest briefly. Then she disappears in a gaudy flash of pale green light.
“Right,” Tony says. “J, tell Daddy you got excellent readings on that.”

“Her signature is much more easily traced than Mr. Laufeyson,” JARVIS says, and Tony grins wickedly.

“I suspected as much,” he says, clapping his hands together. Then he whirls, rounding on Cap and pushing into his space. “What the fuck was that?”

Steve startles, stumbling back a little. His face is poleaxed and defensive in equal measure, and Tony crowds him back towards the doorway, abusing the height advantage of the armour with extreme prejudice. Natasha slips inside without prompting, and Tony does a brief camera check to confirm Clint scrambling down from the top of the tower, where he must have been watching with his bow the whole time.

“I have never seen you make such stupid tactical decisions in all the time I’ve known you,” Tony says, “and I’ve watched all existing footage of every campaign you’ve ever run, so that’s saying something.”

Steve opens his mouth, face flushing with anger, only for Natasha to clock him hard in the head with a roundhouse kick, followed by the butt of her .45. Tony gapes at her as Steve stumbles sideways, face slack with shock and the pain as he nearly goes down. Tony catches him under the arms.

“What the hell, woman?”

“Cognitive recalibration?” Clint asks, and Tony stills as a lightbulb goes off in his head.

“I was protected, apparently, but why didn’t it hit you?” Tony asks, letting Steve stand up. He watches as he shakes his head side to the side for a moment, brows furrowed.

“My best guess? I’m a woman,” Natasha says. Her mouth quirks slightly. “Also, I don’t process sexual attraction the way most people do.”

“Are you saying she bewitched Steve with her tits?” Clint snickers, stepping out of the elevator. “Also, since when is Loki protecting Tony’s shiny metal ass?”

“It’s a beautiful ass, you’re just jealous.”

“Dream on, Astroboy.”

“She reminded me of Peggy,” Steve says quietly, and all of them freeze and look at him. He looks at Natasha, face still flushed pink. “And also…my mother? And Bucky’s ma, and Clara the showgirl, and…you. It…” He shakes his head again, visibly rattled, and Natasha places a hand on his shoulder. She looks thoughtful.

“If she was telling the truth about her names,” she says slowly, “that would confirm my suspicion.”

Steve looks at her, expression one so naked it almost makes Tony uncomfortable to see. Natasha stares back solemnly. “What do you mean?”

“In many polytheistic myths, the goddess of love appears to men as the combined aspects of all the women he has ever loved,” Natasha explains, a small smile blooming on her face. “Your reaction would suggest that it’s not just romantic love or lust, but maternal and fraternal love as well.”

“I didn’t want to shoot her, but I was farther up,” Clint says, looking disgruntled. “And I don’t
think she knew I was there.”

“He’s also developed a resistance to controlling magics,” a familiar voice says, and Tony jumps and turns around. Nobody is there, of course. Bastard.

“Loki says you’ve developed a resistance to controlling magics,” Tony relays in a disgruntled tone. He pops the faceplate to reveal his moue. Clint looks like he’s caught between murderous impulses and pride. “Does that mean you’ve tried shite on us recently?”

“Define recently,” Loki says loftily. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

“You’re an ass,” Tony grumbles, and is rewarded with bright laughter. He waits, but there’s no other response.

When he clocks back in, everyone is staring at him. He rolls his eyes, disengaging the suit and sending it back to its wall case. He carefully avoids Steve’s gaze.

“Care to share with the class?” Natasha intones, careful. Tony hears: Are you compromised?

“He says ‘you’re welcome’, because he’s a flaming pile of horseshit and trouble but also actually pretty useful.” Tony shivers, then freezes, remembering in a rush that he’s only wearing a pair of fitted red boxers and everything that Bruce said to him upon their little morning chat all at once. “I…have an R&D meeting. That I am late to. So. I’m gonna go put on some pants, and do that.”

Steve makes some sort of muffled sound as he stalks out, ignoring Clint’s wolfwhistle. “You’re right, Stark, not bad!” he calls gleefully. Tony valiantly does not offer a rebuttal. If he puts a little saunter in his step, well, he’s a narcissist, isn’t he? He tries not to think about what he’s doing with his life, Bruce and Pepper’s advice, his sanity.

Loki hums thoughtfully in what sounds like agreement. The spluttering choking noise behind him implies Clint hears it, and Tony barely makes it into his quarters before breaking into hysterical laughter. He might also be crying, he isn’t sure.

“Oh my god, how bad was Steve’s face,” he whispers, and Jarvis helpfully pulls up the security footage on the windowpanes in order to provide Tony with a crystal clear, life-sized view. He looks…wrecked, actually. Tony turns around.

“Turn it off,” he mutters, walking into his closet. It’s been a long week, and he’s suddenly exhausted. “Thank fucking god it’s Friday.”

“Friday is named after the goddess Frige, just as Thursday is Thor’s day,” JARVIS replies drolly. Tony processes this, then rests his head on the cool wooden shelving of his closet, staring down at a line of lovely bespoke shoes. He stares at them as though they hold the secret of the universe.

“I’m fucking losing it,” he says, letting the cold seep into his skin. “I fucking hate Asgard. I hate magic, and gods, and my fucking insane life.”

JARVIS wisely stays silent. Eventually, Tony pulls himself up and puts on grease-stained jeans and a long sleeve cotton shirt, finishing with a pair of sneakers that have seen better days. Fuck the investors and their stuffy expectations, he decides, R&D loves him and they’re his people and he needs to blow some shit up. He tops it off with a Guns N’ Roses t-shirt, just because.

“Fight the man,” he says, jogging out towards the elevator. He refuses eye contact with Steve hovering by the control panel, expression fragile. “Thanks for the warning, J, really,” he says under his breath, then louder, “Sorry, gotta run, no time to chat.”
“I’ll ride down with you,” Steve says, and Tony inhales, glancing at the ceiling when the elevator doors open. He closes his eyes and lets the breath out, then turns and spears Steve with the kind of glare that makes lesser men cower. Steve only flinches a bit, but tips his head up stubbornly and follows Tony inside.

“You’re avoiding me.”

“Why, thank you, Captain Obvious. Is that all this little trip is going to be, because if so I would like to state my preference for silence or maybe my regret at not taking the stairs.”

“Tony,” Steve says, anguished and angry all at once, and Tony spares a scathing glance for the elevator camera in order to best convey his displeasure to his errant AI.

“Steve,” Tony parrots evenly. He taps his foot, then shuffles a little to the side. Steve stares at him. The elevator dings. “Well, this was fun, let’s never do this again, c’ya-”

Cap blocks the door, jaw set and stubborn, shield held in front of his heart like a bullseye. Tony tries not to read too much into it, and is instead bowled over by blinding fury, his vision swimming with it. He curls his lips into the cruellest sneer he knows how.


“No. Listen, Tony-”

“In case you forgot, this is my actual fucking day job, and it’s what funds our little jaunts out into the world to spar with alien sorcerers in ridiculous costumes. I know you’ve never really experienced money on the scale I operate at, but I promise you what I do is actually very important and my time, since you seem to think that I owe you any of it, costs more than you have ever made in your life by any measure, so get the fuck out of my way because you can’t afford me.”

Cap’s façade cracks to reveal Steve, looking like Tony has stabbed him in the gut. Good, Tony thinks viciously, and then, Fuck. He watches Cap stitch himself back together, haphazard as any battle medic. He’s prepping for the rallying blow, and oh how Tony wants it. He hasn’t had a good, cutting fight in ages, Steve always holding back out of pity, and he’s been saving this. It’s been boiling up inside him and he hadn’t even known it, vitriol and turpitude wrapped up in a fluffy pie crust of daddy issues and self-loathing.

“Why are you still standing there?” he sneers, intent on cutting him off at the knees before he can stand back up. “I know you’re a tin soldier with the head of a scarecrow, but I know you can obey basic commands.”

“You think you’re so smart,” Steve bites out, and Tony laughs in his face, congratulating himself when Steve steps back a little. “You’re nothing but a burnt out shell, lashing out at anyone who gets close to you. It’s no wonder Loki’s taken a shine to you. You’re both feral animals, biting at the hand that feeds.”

Tony cackles, pressing one finger into Steve’s steely chest. “Is that your ammo? Honey, I know my faults, unlike some people who’ve got their heads so far up their own arse they can’t see the truth when it stabs them in the back. Jealous, baby? All you had to do was ask. I’ve had a dozen men like you, I know you’ve seen the tabloids. Did you watch me, in all my grainy glory? Is that what you’re sore about? Or, not sore, I suppose, that’s the problem, isn’t it? Because if that’s all, you should remember that I’m the one who feeds and pays you, and Daddy knows how to scratch that-”
His head snaps back, twisting around as the other side cracks into the side of the elevator. Someone shouts, and there’s the sound of guns being drawn and people rushing towards them, the chatter of a crowd. When he stands up, six of Stark Industries’ finest are pointing guns at Steve from out of arm’s reach, flanked by a group of startled R&D employees. None of them even waver, brave motherfuckers. Steve looks horrified at himself, completely open, and Tony pulls himself up with the elevator rail in time to see Pepper clacking towards them, entire form blazing with righteous glory.

Steve drops the shield and raises his hands, eyes darting to Tony. They’re so blue, damp and frightened, and Tony spares him a grin because he knows that’s not for the guns pointed at his rippling pectorals. He can taste blood, and he watches with vicious satisfaction as all the colour drains from Steve’s face. He must make quite the sight.

“Tony,” he tries. “I didn’t mean-”

“Step out of the elevator, Captain Rogers,” Pepper says, voice sharper than carbon steel. Steve glances at Tony, then does as requested.

“I’m sorry,” he says, trying for polite Americana, “I lost my temper-”

“I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” Pepper interrupts smoothly, and Tony shakes his head a little and leans against the elevator doorway. Steve can’t see him, but Pepper spares him a searching glance. Her expression doesn’t change.

“No,” he says magnanimously, “it’s alright. No hard feelings, right Rogers?”

Steve flinches bodily at the surname. “Tony,” he says, but Tony doesn’t look at him, purposefully walking past him and the people with loaded guns, all ex-military or SHIELD or CIA, and all completely loyal. He props a hand on Dr. Lennox Chandrakar’s shoulder, leaning into him a little and grinning at Steve again. He can feel blood dripping down his chin, to great effect.

“Go on,” Tony says, making little shooing motions with his fingers. Steve looks as though he’s been cleaved in two, still in half a costume. His feet are bare. Tony didn’t notice that before. He remembers this morning, suddenly feeling so far removed that it’s numbed him, like another life or a dream.

One of you is going to ruin this in a bad way if something doesn’t change. Tony watches Steve, expressionless, watches him crumple. You’re gonna regret that later.

You’ll be a wreck, Tony hears as Steve backs into the elevator, picking up his shield. He keeps his gaze steady, keeps his mask on. Don’t wait that long.

I yelled at him, he thinks, as the elevator doors slide shut. I pissed him off.

“He should know better,” Pepper snarls, whirling to face him. She takes his chin in her hand, fury massing like a supercell when he flinches at her touch. “He could have cracked your skull open. I want him removed.”

Tony closes his eyes, letting her fuss over him. For a half second, Pepper loves him and Steve is disappointed that he isn’t Howard. Everything is simple. He does not yet care for the intricacies and politics of Norse gods. Steve tells him to put on the suit, and he wants nothing more than to break his perfect teeth. He wants to see that golden hair smeared with blood.

“Everything was simple,” he says, opening his eyes. “Until you know who came knocking on Monday.” Anger bubbles up in him. “God of Chaos, right?”
Pepper shakes her head, glancing at the gathered crowd, and Tony exhales. Right. He’s still leaning an elbow on Dr. Chandrakar. Awkward. He pulls away, swaying slightly, then stands up on his own. “You can’t kick Captain America out of The Avengers. It was an argument. Forget about it.”

Pepper’s mouth twitches infinitesimally. “Did you really imply that he was your blue-balled sugar baby?” she asks, and Tony stifles the bout of mad laughter that threatens to escape. If he starts, he may never stop.

“You missed the part where I derided him for being a destitute orphan and told him he couldn’t afford me. It was really classy, top notch stuff,” Tony says seriously. Pepper looks like she doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry. They stare at each other for a moment, wavering on the edge of something. Tony looks away first and claps his hands loudly to break the spell.

“So, sorry I’m late!” he says. “We had a little visit from Thor’s ex, who is apparently the love goddess that Friday is named after and is so magically beautiful that she makes men stupid for her. Literally. She stopped in for a chat, I couldn’t brush her off, you know how it is.” Dr. Chandrakar looks disbelieving but also wildly amused, which is really why Tony hired him to help run R&D in the first place. Stark Industries needs a little madness and creativity to run smoothly; he’d know better than most. “I’ve got readings for you, working on some high tech magic detection that we can sell a B-List version of to SHIELD, the usual. I’ll send you the specs when I’ve got the kinks worked out.”

“I look forward to it,” Dr. Chandrakar says, sounding beautifully genuine. Tony could kiss him. He restrains himself, barely. “Do you want a kerchief…?”

Tony blinks in confusion before remembering the blood dripping down his face. “A kerchief! You classy British fucker.” He grins wolfishly. “Nah, let the investors see it. They like knowing my tech keeps me safe despite all the supercharged baddies I face.” He winks at the assembled party. “Let’s just tell them it was a goddess and not Captain America that got me, alright?”

Dr. Chandrakar nods, a smile playing around his mouth. “Of course, sir. Now, if we might show you the progress we’ve made with the biotech body armour since its last iteration?”

Tony waves him on. “Lead the way! I want to blow something up. Can you make that happen?”

“I’ll see what I can do,” he says with a humouring expression. Tony catches sight of Pepper slicing a hand across her throat in the corner of his eye, and is inordinately pleased when Dr. Chandrakar ignores her. “I can understand an urge to do violence after violence has been done. Best to get it out in a controlled setting, yes?”

Pepper sighs audibly behind him, and Tony cracks a capricious smile. “Surprise me, then.”

He does, and oh is it spectacular. It’s the best moment of Tony’s week, yet.

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Sam looks like he doesn’t know what to do with Steve sitting on his doorstep in the middle of the night, elbows propped on his knees, hands in his hair, but he doesn’t look surprised either. He hefts his bag, then steps around him, unlocking the door and going inside without a word. Steve follows him like a dejected puppy, aware of the picture he makes and not caring. He locks the door behind him and follows Sam into the kitchen.

“You don’t look like you’re on the lam or been blown up,” Sam observes, sipping a tall glass of water as he assays him. Steve rubs the back of his neck. “And Natasha isn’t here. So I’m guessing
this is a personal issue that I don’t want to know about, and you just need a place to crash.”

Steve furrows his brow and looks up at Sam, wincing. “I punched Tony and Pepper asked me to leave the tower.” He rips it off like a Band-Aid, but it still stings. Sam looks unimpressed.

“ Seems like Stark deserves to get punched sometimes,” he says easily.

“He called me Rogers,” Steve says, and Sam raises his eyebrows. “He hasn’t done that in ages without it being a joke.”

“So. You drove four hours to my house on a Friday night to escape a scrap with your new best friend?” Sam looks at him. “What’s really going on?”

Steve smiles miserably, then shakes his head. After a moment, Sam puts the glass in the sink.

“Well, the guest bedroom’s still where it was,” he says. “You know, one day maybe you could visit a guy when you’re not in dire straits?”

Steve winces and glances away. “I’m sorry,” he mutters. “I’m a jerk.”

“Yeah, well,” Sam says, smirking a little. “That I knew already.”

Steve laughs, mostly at himself. “I brought a bag, this time. My own clothes and everything.”

“That monster outside yours, too?”

“Yeah,” Steve says. His face clouds, but Sam politely doesn’t comment on it.

“Nice ride.”

“Yeah, it is.” Steve glances at the floor, shaking himself a little. “I messed up, Sam.”

“Good,” Sam says putting the glass on the drying rack. “Captain America makes mistakes sometimes. Reminds everyone that you’re human, somewhere in there.” He turns off the kitchen light, then heads for the stairs, trusting Steve to follow.

“Some days I think I’m the one who needs reminding,” Steve admits. Sam snorts at him.

“I said everyone.”

Steve blinks up into the dark, but all he can see is Sam’s silhouette. “Thanks.”

“I’d say anytime, but maybe you’d take it too seriously. Call next me time.”

Steve laughs. “Okay.”

Steve doesn’t sleep well, but he knew he wouldn’t. Instead he tries to map out where to go from here, or maybe where he went wrong. He hadn’t been prepared for Tony to cut into his feelings, the tension strung between them like taffy, gooey and sweet. It kept shifting under his feet, churning like the gears of the pull, always leaving him unsure of the ground. He was positive he wouldn’t have lashed out at Tony like that if he hadn’t been so raw from Amora’s spell. That had been a tactical error on his part. He should have waited longer. He knew what Tony was like when he was cornered, but Tony had been so cold and he’d just wanted…he’d just wanted. That was probably Amora, too.

He turns his phone over and over in his palm, but doesn’t power it on. He’d brought it with him in
case the team needed him, for the tracking chip and Avengers’ beacon inside, but right now it was just another memory of Tony. The customised Stark phone had been handed off like it was nothing, the music library filled with albums organised by decade, by historical importance, by popularity. He remembers Tony teaching him to use it, fingers flying swiftly over the screen like he was playing an instrument. Tony was graceful, in his own economical way. It was all in the movement of his hands.

The cherry blossoms are barely blooming when Steve goes for his run in the morning, but he can see the potential for show-stopping awe there. He thinks about staying for the festival, coming back with bright pastels and his sketchbook, but he knows that’s just a pipe dream. Sam shouts at him good-naturedly as he passes, once, twice, and he grins a little at the old game. It’s peaceful, here, compared to the constant bustle of his city. He’d missed that, a little, in New York.

“So,” Sam pants up at him when he slows to a final stop, “what’s your game plan? Not that I don’t like getting my ass whooped, keeps me humble.”

Steve raises his eyebrows, a crease forming at the centre where Tony’s always telling him he’s gonna get premature wrinkles, ruin that pretty face. He sighs and rubs the spot briefly with his fingers. “Natasha texted you.”

“She called,” Sam says, fingers laced across his chest. “She says to tell you you’re being an idiot, and to go home and put out your damn fire before it’s too late and the choice is taken from you.” He squints at Steve. “You wanna tell me what’s going on? Should I be worried about this?”

Steve puts his hands on his hips and looks out at the water, letting his breath his out in a long, low whistle. The sunrise has mostly finished showing off, but there’s the barest bit of golden glow everywhere that makes the whole scene look somewhat surreal. It’s as good a time to say it out loud for the first time as any. “I finally took Natasha’s advice.”

Sam raises an eyebrow at him. “You went on a date?”

Steve meets his eyes, lips quirking a bit. “I did the fool thing and fell in love.”

Sam considers this. “There’s another offer on the table.”

“Looks that way.”

Sam fixes him with a reproving glare. “And you drove all the way out here? Get your ass home and sort out your life, Jesus.”

Steve set his jaw, looking away. “Pepper kicked me out.”

“Natasha told me not let you get away with bullshit.”

“I just needed a second!” Steve snaps, curling one hand in his hair. It echoes, eerie, and he exhales sharply, tries to bring himself down. “I just wanted to be somewhere without the archetype falling in on me, but there’s nowhere to go, I’m just…”

“So you’re telling me Steve Rogers drove to Washington on a Harley-Davidson to avoid the expectation of his archetype. Of all the fool things,” Sam says, snorting disbelievingly. Steve winces, then laughs ruefully at himself. “If anyone holds you to a certain standard it’s because you’ve shown them how it’s done. You self-censure.”

Steve huffs. “Not Pepper. She’s Tony’s, and no one else’s.”
“Stark is his own kind of archetype.”

Steve frowns, considering that. *The hero for the new age. The Merchant of Death.* He thinks, possibly, they’ve both been idiots.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” he says.

“Does anybody? This life doesn’t leave much room for romance.” Sam heaves himself up from the grass, dusting himself off a bit. “Come on, let’s get your sorry ass on the road so you can save the day and get the boy, or whatever it is you people do for fun.”

“Sparring, brunch, and movie nights,” Steve answers honestly. He rubs at his mouth, nerves fluttering. “Tony skipped out on movie night. I was pretty sore about it.”

Sam laughs. “You’ve got a weekly date night set and you still can’t manage to talk to each other or admit your feelings. Unbelievable.” He shakes his head. “If you ask me, Stark’s an asshole. I don’t understand it, but if you want something you’ve gotta work for it. That’s always how it is.”

“We’re both assholes.” Steve smiles unhappily. “That’s why we’re in this business.”

“Now there’s a truth if I ever heard one.”

Steve laughs, shakes his head, looks up at the sun. He thinks of Icarus, and wonders who’s the sun and who’s the fool.

“It seems I have caused some dissention in the ranks.”

Tony looks doesn’t bother to look away from the mirror, poking at his split lip with an antiseptic salve and hissing at the sting of it. In his peripheral vision, he can see Loki rise from his perch on the tub and walk towards him, reaching out.

“Don’t,” Tony says, turning, then regrets it at the flash of something wary in Loki’s face. He rallies, feeling uncharacteristically awkward. “No, I mean, thank you for offering, really, but I kind of want to milk it.” He winks at Loki, who looks surprised. A bark of laughter breaks his face wide open, some of the tension leaving him, and Tony snickers with him, pleased to have avoided… whatever that was.

Loki looks down and pulls away. “Rub your wounds in the face of the captain’s guilt, will you? That’s not very heroic, Stark.”

Tony shrugs, taking stock of the situation: him naked except for a pair of cotton sleep pants, Loki looking comfortable in some sort of raw silk tunic wrap, black trimmed in dark forest greens. He’s barefoot below leather trousers. Tony knows there’s a drive behind each action; soft and non-threatening when he surprises Tony in kitchens or private bathrooms, armoured and guarded in the room where they fought. He’s laying the groundwork for their interactions, trying to convince Tony of his trustworthiness. It would be more convincing if he didn’t know Loki’s leathers and weapons could appear out of thin air.

“Punching a teammate in an elevator isn’t really heroic either, and Cap’s the golden boy out of us.”
Loki chuckles, looking up at Tony from beneath his lashes again. His eyes find the bruise on Tony’s cheek where he hit the wall, purple ringing the left side of his occipital. “That looks malicious, it’s true. Very good ammunition.” He licks his lower lip, considering. “I could soothe the pain without erasing the damage.”

Tony smiles at him, leaning back against the counter and crossing his arms. He doesn’t have his bracelets, but he knows JARVIS is listening. “And why would you do that? I’m a big boy.”

Loki frowns, hurt flashing across his face, but this time it’s faked. Or at least, Tony thinks it is. He’s learning. “Your injury is my fault, is it not?”

“No,” Tony says with a wry twist of his lips, “it was my big mouth that did that. I said some unfair personal shit to him. He caught me off guard, cornered me—” Tony stops, realising too late that telling Loki he’s a little bit claustrophobic might not be the best idea. By the expression on Loki’s face, he’s already caught the slip, and Tony grimaces a little.

Loki smiles faintly. “As long as we are allied, I would not subject you to such tortures, Stark. You have my word.” His expression darkens, changing into a guise of remembered horror that Tony knows very well. Tony coughs a little, thinking about what he’d said to Steve about understanding. He tilts his head to the side, presenting the bruise as a peace offering. A quiet satisfaction washes over him at the surprise in Loki’s face, and he holds still as the mage moves closer to study it.

“Are we allied?” he asks, holding his breath. Loki’s fingers are cool and fine-boned, dragging over the bruised flesh with an aching pain that is swiftly followed by tingling, then numbness.

“I would not do this for an enemy,” Loki says softly. He tilts Tony’s head to see his split lip, and Tony watches with his heart in his throat as Loki’s pupils dilate, one thumb brushing his lower lip ever so slightly as he pushes the pain away, then a little rougher, dragging Tony’s mouth open. Tony can feel goose bumps break over his arms, his breath shallow. “And I would have you well.”

“Would you?” Tony rasps, one foot slipping out to hook around Loki’s ankle. Loki watches him, slim and predatory as a snake. “You might help an enemy if you wanted something.”

“Oh, I want something.” Loki rumbles, leaning in, and Tony can feel that voice all throughout his chest. His pulse is tripping fast, and he’s sure that Loki can feel it. He slides his tongue out to graze the pad of Loki’s thumb, tasting salt and ice, and Loki’s eyes flutter before he snaps, pressing his body into Tony’s and pinning him against the counter, mouth sucking at Tony’s abraded lower lip, tonguing at the bloody cut. A low sound rumbles out of him, and Tony shivers and swallows it, sliding one hand between trousers and tunic to slip his fingers along Loki’s spine, the other gripped on his hip. He lets Loki lick into his mouth hungrily, sucking on his tongue and making him squirm in Tony’s arms. The coppery taste of his own blood lingers, overlaid with cold and pine forest winters. Loki keeps one thumb on the sensitive corner of Tony’s mouth, pressing there, dragging his mouth open as he claims it. Tony leans in, kisses him deeper.

One of Loki’s hands slides down his chest, grazing the soft skin beneath his navel, and Tony pulls back enough to gasp a breath. Loki’s eyes are blown, green a thin ring around black pupil, and Tony hisses as he leans in and bites at the corner of his jaw, sucking a bruise beneath Tony’s left ear. His fingers trace maddening lines around the top of Tony’s waistband, and Tony squirms a little and cards his fingers through Loki’s hair, dragging his nails down Loki’s spine. Loki arches into him, their legs tangling, and Tony swallows and turns to suck on his earlobe.

“Are we really gonna do this?” he asks, and Loki looks up at him, raising his head from where he’d been mouthing at Tony’s collarbone.
“I gave my word I did not intend you harm,” Loki says, some of the desperation leaving him for wariness, and Tony turns his head to suck Loki’s thumb into his mouth. He’s rewarded with those sharp eyes lowering to half mast, and he licks at the pad of Loki’s thumb and drags his teeth against it. Loki surges up to kiss him again, brutal this time, and Tony bites at his lower lip in retaliation. He freezes when Loki lets out a low moan, then does it again.

“So what do you intend?” Tony says, sliding his hand across to drag his thumb against Loki’s nipple. Loki inhales sharply, and Tony offers him a wicked grin.

“I Intend to have you,” Loki hisses, arching into his hands. Tony grins and leans up to bite at that long neck, hard enough to leave marks on a human. Loki wraps his hand around the nape of Tony’s neck, holding him there, and Tony sucks a bruise right against his pulse point. “See if your reputation is well deserved.”

“Wow, my reputation proceeds me to other planets,” Tony says, delighted. He tugs on Loki’s shirt, stripping it off him and dropping it on the floor. Then he slides his mouth down the hollow lines of his neck, nipping at one collarbone, dragging over Loki’s chest to suck a nipple into his mouth. Loki hisses, twists his body into it, then curls his fingers in Tony’s hair. Tony bites, and Loki groans.

“Bed,” Loki orders, and then proceeds to deposit them there, Tony on his back and both completely naked. Tony blinks as Loki spreads him open and kneels between his legs, hands dragging down Tony’s chest to hips with possessive strength, pinning him. He lowers his head to Tony’s chest, looks up to meet his eyes, then presses his tongue to the place where the arc reactor joins flesh. Something warm seeps through him, and Tony stills, panic mixing with arousal into a dizzying cocktail.

Loki looks thoughtful, then apologetic, petting Tony’s sides and moving up to kiss the corner of his mouth. “I meant no harm,” he says, licking into Tony’s mouth. Tony lets him, tension stringing his body. “I only wished to see.”

“What did you see?” Tony asks, shivering when Loki drags one hand across the sensitive join of hip and thigh, fingers idling along the crease.

“Pain and metal,” Loki says softly, shifting to press an open-mouthed kiss approximately over Tony’s heart. “It is a fascinating device.”

Tony doesn’t know what to say to that, but he relaxes a little when Loki’s mouth drifts down further, tongue dipping into his navel and making him squirm ticklish. He can feel the smile against his hip before he bites, and Tony hisses, pushing up into it when Loki soothes the pain with his tongue. He drags his mouth down, licking the crease of Tony’s thigh and making him squirm, sucking hot kisses against his inner thigh. Tony digs his fingers into Loki’s hair.

“How do you wanna do this?” Tony asks, and Loki stills, glancing up at him from between his lashes. He grins wickedly, fingers still touching Tony everywhere and yet maddeningly avoiding the places Tony wishes to be touched most.

“I watched you,” Loki admits, and Tony swallows thickly.

“I know. You haven’t exactly been subtle.”

“You noticed me whilst you were in the shower yesterday. I saw you dancing, naked under the water as you sang.” Loki licks his lips, and Tony waffles, unsure if he’s aroused or annoyed by the knowledge. “I thought of joining you, running my tongue over your wet skin, pressing you against
Tony’s throat clicks, and Loki grins up at him. “You want me to prove my skills, but you want to run the show?” Tony teases, voice surprisingly steady. “Seems like there’s a conflict there.”

Loki smiles, then very purposefully presses his lips to the tip of Tony’s cock, slowly dragging his mouth over the head until he’s sucking it, his tongue flat and hot against the skin. Tony lets out a long moan, unabashed, and curls one foot against Loki’s ribs, pressing to get some skin contact between them. Loki looks smug as Tony’s ever seen him as he works, talented tongue and more years of experience than Tony’s been alive leaving him panting, rocking his hips up to get a bit of friction. He lets loose a broken noise when Loki lets his mouth go slack, encourages Tony to fuck into him a few times before swallowing him down to the root.

“Oh my fucking God.” Tony tightens his hand in Loki’s hair, whining as Loki rumbles laughter around him. He can feel the vibrations all the way to his hairline, and he whimpers a little when Loki pulls back.

“Yes,” Loki says, grinning wickedly, and Tony rolls his eyes at the pun.

“Come up here,” he tells him, but Loki ignores him, sucking a biting kiss to Tony’s thigh then bending Tony’s legs backwards. Tony lets him, waving a hand at the drawer.

“Lube and condoms,” he says. “I’ve been admiring those long fingers of yours.”

Loki crawls over him, then leans in for an absolutely filthy kiss. Tony presses up into it, then rolls them, pinning Loki on his back and straddling his waist. He grinds their hips together, grinning at Loki’s moan. He grips Tony’s hips tightly, and Tony leans over to grab the requisite items from the nightstand.

“I cannot contract human diseases,” Loki points out, and Tony considers this for a moment. “You have my word.”

Tony smirks at the oath, then leaves the condoms on the table. He sucks a hard kiss to Loki’s nipple as he fumbles to get the cap on the lube open, enjoying the way Loki bucks against him. He rolls the other between his fingers, flicks a nail against it, and Loki lets out a low keening noise, grabbing the bottle from Tony’s hands and pushing him up. He drizzles the gel over his fingers, eyes dark and wanting.

“I wished to see,” Loki says, and Tony considers this.

“I wanted to ride you.”

“Can we not do both?”

Tony blinks at him, rearranging some assumptions. “I can maybe come twice, but usually once. If the sex is really good, I’ve been able to have a dry orgasm even after I’ve maxed out, but you’d have to work for it. Also, I do have a cock ring,” Tony offers, and Loki’s brow furrows in confusion. “It helps keep me from coming.”

Loki’s eyes flash with something covetous at that, and Tony grins at him, rummaging around in the drawer to pull out one of the stretchy silicone ones. He holds it between two fingers.

“You can open me up and watch, and fuck me. I can’t wear it for too long, safety things, but…” He waves it in Loki’s face, frowning when Loki takes it and puts it on top of the table.
“I like a challenge,” he says, eyes glinting, and Tony’s mouth goes dry.

“My heart may give out, but oh what a way to go,” he says cheerfully, rolling to lie on his back. “Have at it, then.”

He spreads his legs wide, wrists crossed over his head, and a shiver runs through him at the low growl Loki releases, drinking in the sight of him. Tony tilts his hips invitingly, and Loki wraps one hand around his cock and bends him nearly in half with the other, casual strength pushing Tony’s thigh up so he can lick at the sensitive patch of skin behind Tony’s balls. Tony groans, startled, then gasps at the first cool touch of Loki’s fingers to his arse.

“I want you to scream,” Loki says in a low voice, slipping one finger inside him. Tony bears down a little at the stretch, breathes deep. “I want to take you apart.”

“Nobody’s stopping you,” Tony says, cheeky and grinning. He hisses when Loki curls his finger, just grazing his prostate. “Go for it. Go big or go home.”

Loki hums, eyes fixed on where his finger is disappearing into Tony’s body. He rocks with it, curling one calf around Loki’s shoulder. Loki presses a kiss to the inside of his knee, a small grin on his face. He adds another, fingers circling teasingly before they press inside, and Tony stretches his right leg out to the side and pushes into the stretch.

Loki hums with pleasure, nibbling at the thigh propped on his shoulder as he works his fingers inside of Tony, eyes crinkled with wicked delight at the way Tony bucks every time he grazes his prostate. Tony hasn’t had this in a while, the painpleasure and the sanguinity of being serviced; he feels languid, and maybe a little decadent. People usually expect him to do the work.

He closes his eyes when Loki adds a third finger, arching into it and dragging one hand over his neck and down his body, heading for his cock. He knows what kind of picture he makes, and he cracks his eyes open to gauge Loki’s reaction as he strokes himself slowly, body rocking into those long fingers, a small smile on his face. Loki looks ravenous, but also wry; he knows exactly what Tony is doing.

“Enjoying the view?” Tony inquires, just to push him a little. Loki’s mouth twists, and he presses another kiss to the inside of Tony’s thigh.

“Fishing for compliments?” Loki asks, twisting his fingers brutally to hit Tony’s prostate, and Tony gasps and bucks up. Loki laughs, low and possessive.

“Come on,” Tony says, and then whines as Loki adds a fourth finger. The stretch is good, and unnecessary, and entirely maddening. “Loki.”

Loki grins, then shifts so Tony’s other leg is hooked over his elbow. Tony shivers with anticipation, intentionally staying relaxed as Loki presses in. He moans a little, and Loki just keeps going, all the way to the hilt. When Tony opens his eyes, Loki is staring at him with an unreadable expression, patient as he adjusts to the stretch, and when he flexes the leg slung over his shoulder to spur him on Loki smiles and begins to move. His pace is slow, maddeningly so, and Tony groans in frustration and pleasure, reaching up one hand to brace against the headboard. Every thrust drags over his sweet spot in the position Loki’s shifted him into, and he squirms, trying to get more friction.

“I didn’t take you for a sweet and intense kinda guy,” Tony goads, and Loki smirks at him and moves even slower, how is that even possible, fuck.
“You thought I would be rough and demanding?” Loki asks, hitching Tony’s right leg around his hips and sliding a hand up his skin. He touches the injured side of Tony’s mouth, eyes glinting. “Did you take me for someone coarse?”

“I took you for someone who takes what he wants,” Tony says, but he can feel his orgasm building slowly. He knows what Loki’s game is, and right now he’s getting away with it.

Loki laughs, pressing two fingers into Tony’s mouth and sliding them against his tongue. “I am getting exactly what I want,” he says, fucking Tony’s mouth with his fingers. Tony sucks, working his tongue against them, tasting salt and that ever-present coolness that seems to lurk under Loki’s skin. He thinks about what Thor has said of Loki’s heritage and the Jotun, and wonders what it would be like to be fucked by cold ice. He’s done stranger things than temperature play. He’s sure he could handle it.

Loki snaps his hips sharply, making Tony cry out. It’s muffled by Loki’s fingers pressing against his tongue. “Have I lost your attention?”

Tony thinks about caution, throws it to the wind. He twists his head to be free of Loki’s fingers. “Thinking about you fucking me when you’re iced over,” he says, grinning at the shock flashing across Loki’s face. “I bet it would feel incredible.”

“I could kill you,” Loki says incredulously, hips stuttering. Tony smiles his filthiest smile.

“Don’t you think me being in bed with you implies a bit of an adrenaline addiction?”

Loki’s expression darkens, and Tony takes his temporary distraction as an opportunity to squirm out of Loki’s grasp, flipping them over and pinning Loki to the bed. Loki glares up at him, but Tony can see amusement lurking behind his ire.

“You’re right,” Tony says, lowering his hips down to take Loki in again. He throws his head back a little, enjoying himself. “We can do both.”

Loki’s moan when he begins to move is delicious. Tony slides his hands over his chest, playing with his nipples, squirming when Loki’s hands press into his hips, pull him down deep every single time. When Loki’s breath begins to grow unsteady, Tony bends down and takes his mouth, both of them moaning into the kiss at the change in angle. He shivers when Loki drags his fingers up Tony’s spine, pulling him close and rolling them again.

Tony laughs into his mouth, pleasure and delight wrapping around him as the muscle contractions make Loki curse, biting at Tony’s neck.

“A less violent power struggle than I expected,” Tony admits, panting as Loki bends him in half and begins to fuck him in earnest. His teeth are sharp on Tony’s neck, leaving blooming bruises along his collarbones, the long tendons framing his throat. When he licks behind Tony’s ear, Tony melts completely into him with the rush of pleasure, and Loki’s chuckles and grazes the spot with his teeth.

“Touch me,” Tony pants, groaning and rocking his hips when Loki does just that. When he begins to leave a bruise right over the sensitive patch he’s found, that’s it for Tony. He slips over the edge of a shuddering orgasm, body shaking with it, spine bowing. Loki groans at the muscle contraction and strokes him through it, following not long after.

Loki stays there for a moment, breathing hotly against Tony’s neck, Tony’s hand still tangled in his hair, the other gripping his bicep. He’s shivering with the aftershocks, lethargy flowing through
him, and he hisses when Loki eventually pulls out and rolls to the side, one hand on Tony’s chest. His fingers trace the arc reactor, follow his sternum to his navel.

“That’s the best way anyone’s stolen intel from me,” Tony observes, and Loki slits his eyes open to look at him. “You just wanted to know why your magic stick of destiny didn’t work on me, and this was the easiest way to do it.”

Loki pulls back, something complicated flitting over his face, and Tony rolls to kiss him. Loki hesitates before kissing back, deep and drugging.

“I wanted you,” Loki says simply, as though it is that easy. Tony traces his face, but Loki seems sincere enough. “I found the information was easily accessible once I had you beneath me, but it wasn’t my aim.”

Tony isn’t sure he believes him, but he lets it slide. “Your little shower fantasy can be arranged,” he offers, and Loki’s eyes light up. He grins back at him, trying and failing to not be charmed. Hello, trouble.

“A moment’s rest,” Loki says, and Tony can’t argue with that. He lets Loki touch him, exploring his body with gentle fingers. It feels nice enough. He closes his eyes. “You’re a singular creature, Tony Stark.”

“You’re trouble,” Tony replies, smiling a little. It turns into a grin when Loki leans in for another kiss.

Loki puts his mouth on every square inch of his body in the shower, or at least that’s what it feels like. They’re both panting for it, so Tony blows him in the shower while opening him up with his fingers, then has him over the sink where their blurry reflection slowly clears to reveal Loki’s face, flushed red and gasping. When he comes for the third time, Tony comes with him, and then they have a long bath in the jet tub, just because they can.

Tony hasn’t had marathon sex like this since he was with Pepper, but it’s a Saturday so he doesn’t bother worrying about the time commitment. He has JARVIS hold all his calls and lets Loki work him over with his mouth and his fingers, coaxing the dry orgasm from him that he’d promised. Tony’s too boneless to move at that point, mostly just subjected to Loki’s exploration, but he lets him do as he pleases. He isn’t as young as he was, but he’s certainly not complaining.

He knows what Loki’s doing; the slow and intense fucking imitates an intimacy that doesn’t exist yet, just as Tony’s claiming touch and desperation and desire to make Loki keen when he came was all about power and proving his prowess. Loki’s trying to make Tony trust him, and Tony’s trying to convince him that the sex is too good, to come back for more and develop something true.

They’re both, he decides, far too good at using intellect and emotion as a weapon. He cards his fingers through Loki’s damp hair, feeling the measured breath of a fucked out Æsir skating across his chest. He feels wrung out, but also intensely satisfied. It’s only ten. Maybe he’ll order in.

“Hungry, baby?” he tries, smiling helplessly when Loki snuffles and buries his face further into Tony’s chest. “What do you want to eat?”

Loki grumbles and wraps an arm around his waist. “Shut up, Stark.”

I think, Tony decides, I may have miscalculated.

If he wakes up alone at four in the morning, the room still smelling of sweat and sex and winter forests, then it’s nothing but a relief. It offers solid ground, concrete proof of a norm that seems to
keep shattering around him. He rolls over, ignores his growling stomach, and tries to go back to sleep.

When that doesn’t work, he sits up and rubs a hand over his face. “JARVIS, is Natasha awake?”

There’s a pause. “She is now.”

“J,” Tony groans, “I didn’t tell you to wake her up.”

“Sir, it is often difficult to discern when Agent Romanov is asleep or awake based on comportment. The best way to know was to ask.”

Tony grumbles, stretching his arms over his head in a stretch. “I always forget she can sleep with her eyes open.”

“She wishes to know where you would like her to meet you.”

Tony yawns, then swings his legs over the side of the bed. “Library,” he decides. “I don’t want to be overheard.”

“Agent Romanov would like to know if hot cocoa would be apt for this clandestine conversation, or if it would ruin the drama of the scene you’re setting.”

Tony laughs, scratching at his stomach and wandering over to his closet. “Yeah, hot cocoa away.”

He pulls on a pair of cotton sleep pants and an old Judas Priest shirt, then goes to the bathroom and checks to see the damage. Almost all of the marks Loki left can be covered with a collared shirt, and they’d washed up after the messier bits. He tries to fix his hair back with a wet comb and mostly fails.

“Sir, are you sure this is the best plan of action?” JARVIS says, sounding hesitant, and Tony cackles and splashes cold water on his face.

“Nope,” he replies, and walks out of the room towards the elevator. “But that’s never stopped me before.”

“No, it hasn’t,” JARVIS agrees ruefully, helpfully opening the doors for him before he even has to call for the car. Tony flashes a grin and steps inside.

Natasha is sitting in the dark library when he arrives, two steaming cups on the small table next to her. Tony takes the adjoining armchair and grabs one of the mugs, inhaling the sweet scent of chile and mescal and cocoa.

“Oh, this is the good stuff,” he hums, blowing across the top. “Made with milk?”

“What do you take me for,” Natasha says, scowling in mock offence. He can barely see her face in the soft light through the windows, but he knows her enough by now. Tony grins at her and takes a tiny sip. “You’re compromised.”

Tony nods sagely. “Yup, yes, you are correct.”

“And Loki?”

Tony considers this for a moment, blowing into his mug. He tips his head to the side. “I think he is, too.”
Natasha hums. “So, not a total loss, then.”

Tony raises a hand, rocking it back and forth in demonstration. “He’s given me his magical Asgardian oath that he isn’t intending to harm any of my people, or plotting our demise. He also promised not to use anything he knows about the Ten Rings and my PTSD against me while we’re allied, but hasn’t sworn to being my ally yet. It gives him a lot of wiggle room, but it’s better than nothing.” He licks his lips. “I fucked him without my cuffs. JARVIS was on alert the whole time, but. I spent most of yesterday with him without fearing for my life, unprotected. And Cap’s probably classifiable as compromised, too.”

“He left the state,” Natasha says, sounding disapproving. Tony shrugs. “You gonna tell him about this?”

Tony considers his options. “Do you think I should?”

“I think Steve’s smart enough to figure it out.”

“We’re not dating, and he’s a big boy,” Tony argues, knowing how petty he sounds. “Honestly, he won’t understand. Cap’s not the virginal boy scout we pretend he is for kicks, but he’s not the sleeping with the enemy for intel guy either.” Natasha doesn’t disagree with him, and Tony thinks it over in his head, nibbling his lip. “He’s too polite to ask who I’m fucking, even if he suspects it’s Loki, and especially after a blowout fight like that. Plausible deniability, for now.”

Natasha nurses her drink, considering him carefully. “You could abort the mission,” she deadpans, and Tony chuckles.

“I’ll still kill the fucker if I think it’s necessary.”

“Your definition of necessary has shrunk.”

Tony bares his teeth at her. “I called you up here, didn’t I?”

“So you want me to keep you in check.”

Tony looses an ambivalent noise, then takes another sip sip of hot chocolate. “I wanted you to know what’s going on because you’re the most likely to do it if I need to be taken out, or know when to knock me around the head if Loki tries something. I know he’s watching me, and right now we don’t have any way to counteract that. He could be listening in right now.” He grimaces. “I underestimated the strength of my relationships. In my defence, I’m not used to being a real boy with real friends. My bad, I know.”

Natasha snickers, and Tony enjoys the quiet pleasure of her company for a few minutes, sipping his cocoa. Sunlight begins to filter through the window, blue grey and faint.

Natasha doesn’t point out that she likes him, too. Tony’s grateful for it, because it would just hurt both of them. Still, after all this time, it’s he and Natasha who always have to make the hard decisions, to move through the moral grey so the rest of the team doesn’t have to.

Tony doesn’t tell Natasha he loves her for it, either. She’s never been interested in the obvious.
Tony’s sitting at the kitchen island on Sunday morning, sipping something green and soupy and wearing a black button up and slacks. He looks tired. The bruise around his eye is dark purple, angry red at the corners. His lip is scabbed and swollen, and Steve freezes in the doorway and hovers there, unsure of how to proceed.

“Brunch?” Tony asks, and Steve’s chest collapses, all the air rushing out of him at once. “Or not. Breathe, Rogers, Jesus.”

The surname is like a knife to the gut when he’s already down, but he clears his throat when Tony begins to look genuinely concerned, trying to compose himself. “Um,” he tries, throat catching. “God, I’m such a jerk.”

Tony waves him off the way he always does when Steve tries to reconcile after a fight, hand fluttering as though he’s shooing a fly. “Brunch or no brunch, Spangles, because if not I’ve got work to do.” Something like regret curls around Tony’s lips, wrenching a smile out from between his teeth that looks like it pains him. Steve swallows, nodding slowly.

“You’re dressed,” he says, waving a hand at Tony vaguely. “I’ll just have to. You know.” He hooks a thumb over his shoulder, feeling awkward when Tony’s expression doesn’t change. “See you in fifteen?”

Tony shrugs, and Steve books it, jogging to the elevator and hitting the button maybe a little harder than he needed to. He’s in his pyjamas, fingers blackened with charcoal from his sketches this morning. He takes a deep breath, tries to screw his head on straight.

He takes the quickest shower he’s had since his army days and dithers in the closet for too long before going with a simple t-shirt and his leather jacket. He knows Tony likes the jacket, the way white cotton stretches over his chest when he moves. He checks his watch, then heads back upstairs. When he gets there, he can hear voices in the kitchen, and he moves slowly, measuring his steps to avoid making too much noise.

“Yeah, this is exactly what I was worried about.”

Bruce, sounding exasperated and quietly furious. Steve tenses, but knows better than to question his teammate’s control.

“I invited him to brunch! What more do you want from me,” Tony says, and Steve doesn’t need his eyes to read the disbelieving quality of Bruce’s silence.

“This is going to end so badly,” Bruce says, and Steve makes some noise and moves into their line of sight, pushing his damp hair back nervously.

“Good morning, Bruce,” Steve tries, valiantly unflinching in the face of Bruce’s emanating disapproval. He looks pointedly at Tony’s face, then back at Steve.

“Yeah, just great,” he agrees flatly, picking up his mug. Steve smells the familiar sweetness of jasmine as he moves towards the door. “Don’t destroy too much property on your brunch date when it all goes to hell. It reflects poorly on the rest of us.” His smile is bitter with self-hatred and
directed malice, all teeth.

He disappears before Steve can dredge up a response to that. Tony has the decency to look sheepish, and Steve rubs at the back of his neck in the ensuing silence. Tony stands up, draining his glass and putting it in the dishwasher.

“So, brunch!” he says brightly. “Cosme? Mexican? You liked Cosme, we’ve been, let’s go.”

Tony moves towards the doorway, but when Steve moves to the side to let Tony pass he catches the fat bruise behind his ear, dark pink and clearly mouth shaped. Steve’s head spins, and he steps back instinctively. He opens his mouth, then closes it again, but Tony hasn’t noticed. He’s walking to the elevator, still babbling.

“I’ll have someone drop us off, parking in midtown is such a bitch,” he says, and Steve shakes himself and follows behind him.

*It’s none of your business*, he tells himself. *Leave it alone, Rogers.*

He doesn’t want to get into the elevator with Tony.

Tony is rocking on his feet as he waits for the elevator doors to open, fidgety as he always is when he’s nervous or exhausted, the way he never is in battle or when he’s focussed. Tony is pure energy, light and warmth and electric pain arcing out to sear flesh when prodded. He sparks bright, burns hot as stars, and Steve is drowning in his velleitie.

“Tony, please.”

Tony stills, laser focus finding its target. He does not turn around. “Wow, you really didn’t learn your lesson, huh? I know it’s hard to get anything through your thick, stubborn skull, but hot damn Gunslinger you’re really going for it this time.”

Steve’s organs are made of lead, painful and heavy poison within him. “I can be a mean sonuvabitch sometimes and I’m sorry.”

“Do you even know what you’re apologising for?” Tony asks, sounding genuinely curious. He spins around, face tight in the controlled mask that Steve hates more than any awful thing that’s ever come out of Tony’s mouth. His smile is about as real as Spam is meat. “Because, if I were apologising, which I’m not just yet, I know what I’d be sorry for and it definitely isn’t the bit where I pointed out the really rather obvious fact that physically speaking you’re Hitler’s wettest, blondest, bluest dream. Bad call, Cap.”

The elevator dings. Clint is inside it, looking like he’s never wanted to be anywhere else more in his life, and Steve glares at him unhappily. He holds up his hands in the universal sign of surrender.

“I’ll come back,” he offers. “Or, I won’t? I won’t come back, I’m never coming back.”

“You love the roof too much to never come back,” Tony snipes easily. He steps into the elevator. Steve crosses his arms and doesn’t move. Clint clears his throat, then glances up at the ceiling.

“Right,” he says, “I’ll take the stairs to the top.”

He slides past Tony with a pained expression, shooting Steve a disapproving look as he passes. “You hit him again, Bruce is gonna turn you into pâté,” he murmurs. Steve glances at him from between raised eyebrows.
“And you won’t stop him. I got it.”

“Hey,” Clint says, raising his hands, “can you make explosive acid arrows and fund our entire operation? Because if so, you’ve been holding out on me, man. Bro code red card.”

“Hey birdbrain, who’s gonna play GTA with you, huh?”

Clint waves a hand over his shoulder in response, disappearing around the corner towards the maintenance stair to the roof. Steve watches him go with what he expects is a mournful expression, because what he feels for Tony makes him want to run and hide, or on some days, level a building. Instead he turns around and puts a hand on the side of the doorway. He meets Tony’s unreadable expression with aplomb, straightens his shoulders.

“We need to talk about this if we want to fix it, Tony. I messed up, you lashed out, I should have known-”

“You know, nobody gives me any credit,” Tony says musingly, tilting his head to the side. “Am I not the genius in this equation? Or am I just so hard to deal with that expectations are really that low?”

Steve takes a moment to parse, shakes his head. “No. I mean, you are, sometimes, but-”

“Wow, this apology is really going well for you, isn’t it.”

“I’m not saying this right,” Steve huffs, frustrated. “It’s just, everything, it gets all twisted round, and it hurts sometimes like you wouldn’t believe-”

Tony sneers. "It's hard to love me, yeah, you said."

"What?" Steve gapes. "When did I say that?"

"Just, enough, Rogers. I changed my mind, reset on the morning, pretend I never said anything to you, okay?" Tony looks hunted and exhausted all at once, and Steve stares at him for a long moment, tracing the familiar shapes of his face, the well-worn laugh lines and the bluish skin beneath his eyes. He looks fragile, and all too human.

“Don’t shut me out,” Steve says, softer now. Tony swallows, glances away. “If I’m not saying the right things, explain it to me.” Tony’s mouth twists, and Steve cuts whatever cruelty is building there off at the knees. “I’m sorry I hit you, I should have never without the suit. It’s not an excuse, but Amora really rattled me up. It won’t happen again, and if it does I will gladly let Pepper kick me out.” Tony snorts. “Nobody can get me worked up like you can, Tony. Those things that you said…they hit something in me, from when I was a kid.”

“I triggered your latent childhood trauma,” Tony says, mouth curling into a self-deprecating smile. “Always knew someone who got beat up so much had to come out with a little more than a mean temper and a stubborn streak deeper than the Mariana.”

Steve ducks his head to hide a sheepish laugh. It’s not very effective. “Yeah, I know you. You’re gonna be bringing this up in fifty years when we’re old and grey and sitting in rocking chairs.”

Tony snorts. “I’ll be lucky if I’m alive in ten,” he retorts, and Steve startles and looks up at him through his lashes, brows furrowing.

“Don’t talk like that.”
“Says the man who punched me in a blind rage with his super strength.”

“Hey,” Steve says, laughing despite himself, and Tony spares him a scathing grin.

“Too soon?” Steve shakes his head at him, and Tony waves a hand at the elevator walls. “In or out, Cap. Them’s the breaks.”

Steve glances at the small metal box, swallows hard. “Can’t we just…make breakfast here? And we can talk?” But Tony is already shaking his head. “Why not?”

“Routine,” Tony says, spreading his hands. “Besides, I can’t cook for shit.” Steve sets his jaw, propping one hand on his hip as he considers Tony for a long moment. He’s forcefully relaxed, but Steve can see the way he’s holding himself, the tension in his hands. The flash of a locator cuff is like a knife to the ribs, and Steve swallows.

He knows exactly what Tony is doing, pushing them both back into the thick of things quick, before a problem can develop. He’s trying to prevent the exact reaction Steve is having right now from becoming an issue in the future. He’s playing him, swift and deft as always, and Steve wavers for a moment on the threshold before stepping into the elevator, hands clasped tightly behind his back in parade rest. Tony smiles, all teeth, and presses the button for the garage.

My, what big teeth you have. Steve swallows and stares at the floor counter, trying to keep his mind clear, his muscles lax, his pulse steady. It’s a harder task than he expects.

“Once more unto the breach,” Tony intones humourlessly, and Steve prays for patience. He’s never had much of it, and talking to God has never gotten him much in the way of the answer he wants, but it’s all he has to offer. He prays that whatever he has to give is enough to fix this thing that’s crackling between them, to be the glue that keeps his sanity intact.

“How was D.C.?”

“Quiet. Beautiful, this time of year.”

Tony nods once as the elevator dings, stepping out onto grey concrete. The floor echoes with the sound of Tony’s crisp Italian leather shoes, and Steve slants a sideways glance at him, studying his movements.

“Do you have a meeting today?”

Tony furrows his brow, glancing down at his clothes then back out into the garage. A wry smile crinkles the corners of his eyes as he glances out across the dark pillars and the coleopterate metal shapes. He taps the edge of one curdled bruise.

“If you look like shite up here, you’ve gotta look sharp elsewhere. Sharks in the water, you know how the game runs.” His expression sours, some remembered battle taking hold of him. Steve watches him shake it off with guilt burrowing pain into his gut. “Beth, babe, you here somewhere?”

Steve startles as the lights of a black car flick on directly in front of them, briefly blinding him. “You took your sweet time.” Bethany Cabe’s voice echoes menacingly, and Steve can feel his hackles go up. “Another catastrophe? Just couldn’t decide on what to wear?”

“Just having a chat with Captain America,” Tony says easily, sliding over so the limo can pull up in front of them. Cabe sits in the driver’s seat, the window rolled down. In the contrasting light, her hair looks the colour of spilt blood. “The personal touch means I’m in trouble, I take it?”
Cabe rolls her eyes, tossing her hair back over her shoulder. “A little birdie told me about a certain Norse god you might be fraternising with?”

Tony waves a hand and climbs into the back of the car, scooting over to make room for Steve. “Let me guess, Pepper spoke to Happy, and Happy and his big mouth?”

“You’re right,” Cabe says easily, making eye contact through the rear view mirror. “Ms. Potts told her head of security that there was a potential threat, and he reached out to me in an official capacity seeing as it’s our job to make sure you both stay safe. Tell me, boss, when were you planning on talking to me about the Loki situation?”

“JARVIS was handling it,” Tony protests, shrugging, and Cabe rolls her eyes and heads towards the garage exit.

“JARVIS doesn’t have a body to throw in front of a stray spell.”

“He has full access to the suits,” Tony counters, and Cabe fixes him with a stern look that Steve can definitely appreciate. “Look, we have no way to track him. He’s shorted every single tracker that us or SHIELD has placed on him just by teleporting. JARVIS can’t see him even when I can, and the other Avengers can’t hear him even when I’m in the same room with all of them unless he wants them to. I’m trying to get on top of it.”

“I’m sure you are,” Cabe says, insinuation dripping from a filthy purr, and Steve tries desperately to reign in the jealousy that flushes through him. Tony’s car salesman grin doesn’t help the situation, and Steve takes a breath and presses the button to close the privacy window.

“A second, if you don’t mind,” he says as the window rolls up. He keeps his eyes fixed on the black wall between them and the front of the car, then taps his hand on the door armrest once, twice. “Is there something you wanna tell me?”

“Nope,” Tony says, popping the p. Steve glances over at him, taking stock of his easy smile and wary eyes. His expression softens a little in the face of Steve’s scrutiny, and he waves a hand and turns to look out the window. “Nat and I are on it.”

Steve relaxes a bit, settling back into the seat. “You spoke to Bruce about it, too,” he hedges, and is rewarded with an agreeing shrug from Tony. “Alright. Just…God, Tony, please use your head.”

“As opposed to my other organs?” Tony says, wiggling his eyebrows at Steve through the glass reflection. Steve bites down on the inside of his lip. “You don’t like Beth.”

“She’s demonstrated that she won’t always put you or the job first.”

“You just don’t like that I hired an old fling,” Tony says, raising an eyebrow. “Beth and I go back. She’s good people, and I needed a new head of security after I gave all the job perks to Pepper. Along with, y’know, the job.”

Steve quirks his lips. “What is it with you and redheads?”

“I’ve got a weakness for rare and beautiful, what can I say,” Tony says, eyes dancing. “Why do you think I invited you assholes to live with me?”

“I’ll be sure to tell Natasha that.”

“Please, Nat knows.” Tony eyes him shrewdly, then a wicked smile takes him. He begins to hum a few bars of a song Steve faintly recognises from the radio. “You should put the screen back down,
or she’ll feel left out.”

“Right,” Steve says, hitting the button again. Tony keeps humming his song, tapping one finger on the base of the car window.

“Lover’s spat over?” Beth asks sweetly, and Steve grits his teeth.

“I doubt it,” he mutters, and tries to ignore her resounding laugh.

Tony is elbow deep in machine oil and grease when the tower alert for a bifrost deposit starts up. His last suit had gotten trashed in an AIM scuffle, more for numbers than any sort of skill on their part, but it still meant the same amount of repairs. Honestly, Tony was tempted to tell SHIELD they all needed a break and not to bother them with stupid shit, but he knows that Hulk and Cap both get restless with nothing to do. With Loki seemingly out of the fun and nuisance racket, they had to settle for the more boring calls.

“Next time, see if we can just unleash Hulk on them, kill two birds with one stone,” he tells JARVIS absently, fighting a little with the seam for one of the suit’s more important chest plates. “Tell Thor we’re presently stocked up on burgers and pineapples, and start a fresh pot o’ joe for him, yeah J?”

“Actually sir, he’s on his way to you. He seems unsettled.”

“Tony Stark!” A familiar roar echoes down the stairs, followed by the clump of several sets of feet. “I must speak with you!”

Tony looks up at the door to the workshop, waving a hand for JARVIS to let Thor in. Clint and Natasha are behind him, looking somewhat bewildered.

“Where is the good captain?” Thor asks, looking up at the ceiling.

“I’m afraid you’ve just missed him. I’m not sure where he went, or when he will return. I can call Doctor Banner from his lab, however.”

“Yes, please,” Thor says, turning back to Tony. His face is grim. “I would say this news only once.”

“What’s going on, buddy?” Tony asks, wiping his hands down with a rag. He moves over to the work sink to clean off the rest, but startles when a heavy hand clasps his shoulder. Thor leans down into his space, long hair tickling Tony’s neck while he approximates a whisper.

“I am sorry, Tony, for what I must say now. Perhaps it is best that our captain is not here.”

Tony blinks, hands freezing in the middle of scrubbing his nail beds. “What?”

But Thor is already moving, sitting down firmly on the couch against the wall. “As you know, I am kept apprised of what happens on Midgard while I am away, lest I am needed.” He fixes Tony with a wry look. “Heimdall sees all, and although I had renounced the throne, I am still a prince of Asgard. He must answer my questions as I pose them.”

Tony swallows, rubbing his hands together under the hot water. He knows exactly what Thor is
insinuating. A quick glance at Natasha’s expression reveals nothing but wariness in her pale green eyes, and she holds Tony’s gaze as she hoists herself up to sit on the worktop.

“You’ll get grease on you,” he warns, perhaps meaning something else entirely, but Natasha only smiles thinly.

“Black doesn’t show up on black.”

Clint crosses his arms and stares between the three of them. “Okay, what the hell is going on?”

Tony opens his mouth, then closes it again, before finally being saved by the appearance of Bruce in the doorway. He looks rumpled, as always, and has a bandage around one hand.

“What happened?” Tony asks, starting forward. Bruce waves him off.

“Slight acid burn, nothing to worry about.” He smiles sheepishly. “JARVIS startled me.”

“My apologies.”

Bruce flaps his uninjured hand in a clear dismissal. “So, what awful thing is happening today?”

Thor smiles and looks down at his hands. “You know that I thought Loki dead after he saved Jane on Svartálfaheimr, only for him to return and cause trouble again. Yet there seemed no plot in it, which was unlike him; only mischief, like that of when we were children.”

“You call that mischief? He completely decimated City Hall a few months ago!”

“He turned it into marshmallows,” Bruce says, gesturing with a pen. “It wasn’t exactly world domination and genocide.”

“And he undid the spell,” Natasha allows, looking wary. “I expect you figured out his big plan?”

“Not as such,” Thor says. He looks as though he does not know whether to laugh or cry. “My father had been…weak. He is quite old for an Æsir. I have spoken to you of the Odinsleep before, how he needed rest more often, and for longer. How my mother had feared he would not wake, before she passed, how part of Loki’s protest to my appointment as heir was that our father was not using his best judgement. Perhaps he was right, in that regard. I would make a foolish king.” He laughs, somewhat bitterly. “Loki set himself to prove it, first by tricks and then by warfare. Except it seems he has done a better job of it this time.

“Since the invasion of the dark elves upon Midgard, my father had been strengthening his alliances with the rest of the nine realms. He has encouraged increased trade, and travel between realms. He set up an exchange of scholars, that there might be shared information and increased learning among not only our people but that of our allies, which has allowed us to repair the bifrost with more speed than we might have without. Jane and Erik Selvig were a great part of that. He had become a diplomat, of sorts, which had always been my mother and Loki’s realm much more than his. I thought perhaps our mother’s death had changed him.”

“Oh, god.” Tony says as the penny drops, and Thor spares him a wry grin.

“Yes, I see you have the way of it.” Thor shakes his head. “There is a reason my brother has chosen you, although for what purpose I cannot ascertain.”

“What?” Clint says, scowling, and Tony rubs his hand over his face.
“Odin’s alive, or you would be a lot more upset,” Natasha observes, and Thor nods.

“He woke up, and Loki had bounced.” Tony begins to laugh, quiet and somewhat hysterical. “Oh my god, that bastard.”

“Yes. It was Loki, all this time, who had been ruling Asgard in Odin’s guise. I had declared my abdication, our father had never officially repudiated him, and our mother was dead. Legally, the throne was his.” He looks up to meet each of their eyes individually, from Natasha’s blank mask to Bruce’s furrowed brows. “He has caused a fair amount of embarrassment for the council and the royal family. We cannot accuse him publically without admitting to Odin’s weakness, and now that he has proven his point, Odin cannot rule without wariness from advisors that before had been content to agree to his every whim. He has proven his superiority to me as ruler of Asgard, as well. Ultimately, this turn of events changes nothing in that regard; I do not want the throne.”

“So what does this mean for Asgard?” Clint asks, and Thor strokes his chin in thought.

“In truth, I do not know. There are others in the bloodline, but none that have been raised to be king as Loki and I were. They are valiant warriors, but they have not been trained in diplomacy or history, and the leaders of the other realms would not know them, would not have seen their mettle. It would be the same as my father appointing me to the throne all those years ago; I know now that younger, spirited, bloodthirsty version of me would make a poor king indeed.” He lets out a laughing breath, eyes glistening with something complicated and wet and hopeful all at once. “My brother may get his throne yet.”

“Who knows about this?” Tony asks, tapping the arc reactor absently.

“Myself, my father, the council and his advisors. Now, all of you.” He coughs. “And Loki, of course.”

“Is there threat of a coup?” Natasha presses, and Thor tilts his head to the side, considering.

“Not from the court or the council; they are all loyal, but most are best suited to policy and law. None are fit to become the leader of armies as my father has been. But from the rest of our family…perhaps, should word get out.”

“But someone might tell, in order to maybe gain favour with a future ruler,” Bruce posits, and Thor nods, expression grim. “No offense, but why are you back here? Shouldn’t you be in Asgard, helping to smooth things over?”

Natasha narrows her eyes, mouth curving into a wicked smile. “Why would they look for alternative options when an easier path was in front of them?”

Thor nods. “I do not want the throne,” he says again, more firmly this time. He grins broadly. “My brother has lauded me to all the realms as the protector of Yggdrasil, champion of all. He has spun it so that my refusal to serve as Asgard’s king is the move of a noble man, a move that makes me a shared asset among a common people, united. It has helped greatly in my attempts to push back against a council that would rather just have me take Odin’s place.”

“I’m sure that was his intention,” Natasha murmurs, exchanging a speaking glance with Tony. “So what does he want?”

Thor shakes his head, then turns to meet Tony’s eyes. His expression is weighted, and unbearably sad. “I wish I could say that my brother simply is seeking companionship after many years spent in isolation with his hatred, but in truth I do not know. I thought perhaps he might have said
“He just-…” Tony stills, then shakes his head. “He never said. I said. I’m such a fucking idiot.”

“What?” Clint prods, looking somewhat alarmed.

“He never said what he wanted. I mean, he said he wanted to negotiate the terms of his surrender, but I was the one who suggested he wanted information exchange and his help in exchange for freedom. He never asked for anything, or said what he wanted, or why he wanted it.” Tony raises his eyebrows and closes his eyes, rubbing absently at his brow. “He swore he did not intend to cause harm, and wasn’t plotting our demise. It wasn’t much, but it was all I could drag out of him.”

“There are many ways that one might die without intent in Loki’s schemes,” Thor agrees, nodding seriously. Tony rolls his eyes heavenward. “You are not the first to be tricked by my brother’s sharp tongue, and you shall not be the last.”

“Oh!” Tony waves a finger at Thor. “And he protected me from your crazy ex-girlfriend.”

Thor looks at him with measurable confusion. “The Lady Sif was with me on Asgard; she could not have assailed you.” He scowls. “And I do not take kindly to your aspersions.”

“What? No, not Sif,” Tony says, waving a hand. “Wow, you and Sif, huh?”

“I have no other that might be considered a past love,” Thor protests, and Tony waves a hand at one of his displays.

“J, if you please?”

JARVIS obligingly brings up a still from the security feed. Amora stands at half size, shouting up into the skies on the edge of the tower landing, and Thor blinks at it for a moment before breaking into uproarious laughter.

“That wench?” Thor crows, voice incredulous. “I have no more love for Amora than you do for the woman who asked for you to sign her breast after our last fight in Times Square.”

Tony raises an eyebrow at him, but Thor is still laughing, body shaking with it as he holds his side. He exchanges a glance with Bruce, then Natasha.

“So…you’ve got a stalkery fan, then?” Clint says, squinting at him a little. “She seemed pretty dangerous, did a real number on Cap.”

Thor soberes a bit, wiping at his face. “Aye, Amora is well trained in magic, first by the norns and then later by Loki. And others.” Thor shakes his head a little, mouth twisting into something disgusted and cruel. “She panted after me and my brother like an animal in heat for some years, one of many who hoped Loki might become king before me. We both had our followers. I think she expected that she might fare better under Loki’s reign, being an enchantress as she deems herself.”

Tony claps his hands, dissipating the image. “Well, you should watch the footage of her visit and tell me what you think,” he says, “but I’m sure you’re starving.”

“She was alone?” Thor presses, and Tony frowns. Thor is always starving after a bifrost jump.

“Yeah,” Clint answers, and Thor braces his hands on his knees in clear discomfort.
“There is one who follows her, like a pet to its master. He more than desires her; he is dedicated to her, to his last breath. He cannot be killed even if you cut him apart, for his flesh will regrow faster than even our captain can imagine. He is called the Executioner, for to face him is to face a chance at death.”

There’s a moment of silence in the workshop as they all process this, the only sound Dummy whirring in the corner as he tries to tidy up. Bruce clears his throat.

“Right, so, avoid the scary boyfriend.” Clint glances up at the ceiling. “Why do we do this job, again? Somebody remind me, because I can’t seem to remember why I’m living in a tower that’s basically a giant target for the villains of the world and intentionally putting myself in a position to fight somebody who’s called the Executioner.”

“Somebody’s gotta do it,” Natasha says, sliding smoothly off the worktop. “Stark’s right, I’m starved. Who wants lunch?”

“More like Dinch. Oof, that’s bad, Linner?” Tony wrinkles his nose. “Why is there no good portmanteau for this meal?”

“If there’s a second breakfast, can there be a second lunch?” Clint tries, following Bruce out the door. Natasha spares Tony another speaking glance before heading up behind them, and Tony turns around resignedly to face his fate.

Thor is staring at his hands, feet planted flat on either side of where mjölnir lies on the ground before him. His posture speaks of defeat.

“I have spent all this time desperately wishing for my brother to come to me, to speak with me even for a moment. Yet he chose you.”

Tony shrugs and sits next to Thor, bumping their shoulders together. “Sometimes talking is easier between strangers than family. The two of you have a lot of baggage. Like, a metric shit tonne of baggage. Enough to fill a shipping container. Hell, enough to fill a barge.”

Thor spears him with a sideways glare, and Tony shuts up. “Part of me hopes for deception, because it would mean that I have not been repudiated. Yet the other wishes only peace and happiness upon him. I certainly would not wish you harm.”

Tony nods, weaving his fingers together, pulling them apart and repeating the process in different configurations. “I think he’s just interested in my tech, honestly.”

“And your mind,” Thor retorts, moving to stand. “I know I have never been a match for Loki. And all this…” He waves a hand around the workshop, helplessly. “Your science unnerves me, Tony Stark. This you know. It is so unlike that of home, and even if it were, magic has never been my art.”

“Don’t bring that science is magic malarkey into the Batcave,” Tony says with great affront, clutching at his chest. Thor simply smiles and offers a hand to him.

“It baffles me how one as clever as you could yet be so small minded and set in your ways.” Thor grins, eyes dancing brightly. “Perhaps you should ask my brother, when next you see him.”

“Party foul,” Tony says mildly, letting Thor step through the door first. “You know the drill, JARVIS.”

“Yes, sir.”
Tony steps out as the lights begin to dim, the familiar tables and machines of the workshop changing into strange, hulking shapes and low lights. He thinks about magic, and creation, and Pygmalion. Then he follows Thor up the stairs.

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The thing about being a superhero was that there was a lot of hurry up and wait.

With all of the new players appearing, there wasn’t always much to do for The Avengers. Petty crime was a little below their paygrade, and that wasn’t just Tony being a snob. The fallout from any Avengers battle was massive just due to sheer firepower, and it seemed like a little much to break out the big guns for a mugging or a gang problem. Besides, Tony has an eye on things. He can see the moving parts, the way that Hell’s Kitchen has suddenly become a mecca for hipster heroes, or Reed Richards suddenly being made of rubber, or even that punk dressed up like a spider in Queens. The landscape is changing, and the Avengers are just an admittedly big piece of a bigger puzzle.

Still, he thinks, swiping idly through another holoscreen full of Loki and Amora’s readings, he could really punch something right about now.

“What do you think about it, huh J?”

There’s a pause, the AI equivalent of JARVIS clearing his throat. “I’m not sure I understand your question, sir.”

“Loki being Odin, Loki wanting to…something, Loki hitting on me…” Tony hesitates, fingers strung between a biometrics and radiation side-by-side. “Cap, being all…Cap.”

“Sir…” JARVIS begins, reticent, “I understand the phrase ‘opposites attract’ from a linguistic and metaphoric standpoint, but in practise I’m not sure you and the captain are compatible. You have several significant ideological differences. And Mr. Laufeyson is certainly not ‘boyfriend material’, so I think perhaps my opinions on this matter leave something to be desired.”

Tony laughs, glancing at the nearest security camera. “Boyfriend material? JARVIS, what the hell have you been up to?”

“As ever, sir, I am your humble servant. I try to gather information that will allow me to serve you as best I’m able.”

“Did you absorb Cosmo?” Tony snorts, squinting at the nearest security camera. “Vanity Fair? Seventeen, maybe?”

“While I do…feel, in some ways, sir, I do not have hormonal changes. I cannot experience the reaction created by one being touching another. The gains you might receive from any romantic or physical relationship are unquantifiable to one such as myself. I can only measure your biometrics, and from that approximate some meagre objective measure of happiness by which to compare. Doctor Banner makes you happy, but you are not physically attracted to him. You are physically attracted to Agent Romanov, but she does not make you happy. Being with Captain Rogers makes you happy when you are not fighting, and you are physically attracted to him. The issue lies in how often you fight.”

Tony blinks, spinning around in his stool a few times. He scrubs his hands over his face, then presses his fingertips to his eyes. He breathes in.

“Sir?” JARVIS tries.
“Keeping an eye on me, buddy?” Tony’s voice is muffled behind his hands, his voice hoarse.

“Should I not have?”

JARVIS sounds alarmed, but also confused, and Tony takes a deep breath before lifting one hand to wave away his question, the other swiping over his face.

“No, no. You’re, uh. You really worry about me, huh?”

“I do, sir.” Tony clears his throat and swipes at his face again. “I’ve been given ample reason, over the years.”

“Don’t sass me,” Tony says drumming his fingers on the edge of the table. “Jesus, am I that much of a mess?”

“On the contrary, sir, I think you have performed admirably in the face of uncommon duress.”

“Right,” Tony says, staring blankly at the graphs in front of him. “Uncommon duress.” Tony blinks, then focusses. “Uncommon duress. JARVIS, map this like it was…say, a sound wave.”

Tony examines the resulting graphic for a moment, then stretches his hands to blow it up. “Okay, now take the measurements we’ve gotten from mjölnir and the bifrost drops, and feed it through as one big sustained signal.”

Tony watches, adjusting the intensity of the wave and the compression rate. “Oh, that’s messy. Inelegant.” Tony tilts his head to the side, considering. “But, it’s all we got. Do you think, maybe…if we were able to replicate this…?”

“We can approximate the energy output, sir, but magic has more immeasurable variables than we can truly appreciate without more information. I’m not sure if that would have the desired effect.”

Tony taps his fingers against his chin a few times. “Okay. Run it through simulations based on both Amora and Loki’s readings, poke at the variables, and I’ll see what I can get from Thor in the morning.”

“Yes, sir.

“Close ‘er up, then.”

“An excellent idea, sir. If I may, Agent Barton is in the communal kitchen and you haven’t eaten in hours.”

“Thanks, J.” Tony rocks back and forth on his feet for a moment, tapping on the arc reactor.

He remembers, suddenly, and with great remorse, the feel of Edwin Jarvis’ long, bony arms curled around his shoulders, the way his skin was always smooth and cool and smelled of old fashioned soap. He takes a look around the darkening workshop, then looks up at the ceiling and tries to get his bearings again.

“Thank you, JARVIS,” he says again.

“You’re welcome, sir.”

Tony shakes himself a little, then heads up the stairs.

The tower is always a little eerie at this hour of night, lit only by the radiant light of the city below.
Tony pads silently through the dark bluish living room and steps into the golden light spilling out from the kitchen. Clint is humming a little, clad only in a cotton tee and boxers, barefoot. He gestures with a spatula at an aluminium pan filled with an uncut sheet of brownies resting on the island.

“Three AM baking! I love three AM baking, you always go all out.”

“It’s too hot to cut,” Clint says. “Wash your hands, I don’t want machine oil in my pastry.” Tony nods and does as requested, then rests his elbows on the island, leaning over the cool marble to watch Clint’s shoulders as he moves.

It had been a surprise for everyone to find out that Clint was a pretty decent baker. Less so that Steve and Bruce could cook, or that Thor was excellent at a good meat roast if you gave him a fire to cook over, but Tony had expected something a little more bloody, from Clint. He’d expected something involving knives. In retrospect, the precision and fuss that baking required suited Clint in ways that Tony couldn’t really quantify. It spoke to his patience, his exacting nature. It also helped to calm him down when he was in a rough spot.

Tony watches him work, his hands mixing and adding and mixing again. There’s a tightness there that Tony knows well, and he glances at the nearest security camera meaningfully before moving to rummage in the cutlery drawer for a butter knife.

“So,” he says, cutting into the now warm brownies, “wanna talk about it?”

“No,” Clint says, flipping his dough over. It’s perfectly cream coloured, and perfectly flat. He brushes his hands together to displace some of the flour, then turns over his shoulder to fix him with a squinted eye. “You wanna talk about what’s happening with you and Cap?”

Tony shrugs, raising an eyebrow as he shoves a piece of pilfered brownie into his mouth. It’s still probably too hot for the average mortal, but Tony had killed off those nerves in his mouth long ago with buckets of scalding coffee. He watches Clint cut his dough and lay it into pie tins while he chews. The chocolate is warm and gooey in his mouth, with just the right about of chewy. When he swallows, warm chocolate sticks to the roof of his mouth like glue.

“Bruce says he’s in love with me. JARVIS says he’s no good for me. Pepper was ready to call SVU on him, and Cap says I’m hard to love.” His voice is affectedly casual, and Clint folds his arms and regards him with a squinted eye. He looks uncomfortable, and Tony grins wickedly.

“Ask, and ye shall receive.”

“It was a bluff, you asshole,” Clint mutters, pulling an apple out of the fruit bowl. He lays down the cutting board and pulls a knife out of the block. “I’ll cut, you lay.”

“Sir, yessir,” Tony says easily, saluting the air. Clint tosses a pinch of flour at him, and Tony ducks. “Hey!”

“You know he doesn’t even like apple pie? I told him it was un-American and he said they didn’t get enough fresh apples and sugar to waste on pies in ration time. Unbelievable.” Tony tries not to laugh as Clint tosses the apple peel in the trash. “Pie isn’t a waste.”

“I’m more of a brownie man, myself,” Tony admits, taking slices of apple as Clint lays them out and placing them in careful concentric circles. He knows better than to ruin Clint’s vision when he’s in this state. “But I do see how disappointing that is, Captain America not liking apple pie.”

“Too right,” Clint says, tossing a core and reaching for another apple. “When you get one layer
down, pour a little bit of that mix over it. Use the teaspoon.”

Tony does as asked, then dips a pinkie into the dark, viscous liquid and slips it into his mouth. “Mmmm, cinnamon?”

“Don’t contaminate my pie, Stark.”

“The germs burn off in the heat anyway.”

Clint shakes the knife at him, and Tony raises his hands in placation. He goes back to laying slices of apple down.

“How did you and Nat do it?” he finds himself asking, then stops. “Sorry, forget that—”

“We didn’t really,” Clint says with a shrug. Tony turns around to look at him, but he’s peeling his fourth apple with aplomb, seemingly unaware of Tony’s incredulity. “It was a chemistry thing, and then it was a holy shit we’re gonna die thing, and then it was a comfortable thing. When it ended, it was kind of easy. Expected, even. And then I got married to someone else for a little while.”

“Whoa, what? You were married? You and Natasha weren’t, I dunno, madly and terrifyingly in love?”

“Nah,” Clint says, and Tony drizzles a little more of Clint’s magic sauce over an apple layer before starting again. “Nat and I love each other, and I expect we always will. But she’s my best friend, you know?”

Tony thinks of Pepper, of the comfortable way they fit together now. “I think so,” he says, considering. He drizzles more syrup on top of the apple layers. “Almost full up.”

“I like my pies a little past the brim. Make a mound,” Clint says, and Tony shrugs. He can get behind that. “Look, forget about the team or what Steve might feel or not feel or whatever the hell else anyone is telling you. What do you, Tony Stark, want? Really want? That’s the question you gotta answer, man.”

Tony exhales slowly, laying the last of the apple slices down. Clint is watching him, and Tony slides over so he can get to the rest of the pie crust, which he begins to cut into inch wide ribbons. Tony licks the last of the sweetness from his fingers and turns to wash his hands.

“Happiness,” Tony says, slowly, thinking about JARVIS and human touch and data. “High bar, huh Locksley?”

“Well,” Clint says, laying out a lattice over the top of the pie, “nobody’s ever doubted your ambition.” Tony dries his hands in the dishcloth, the soft fabric clutched between his hands as he watches, mesmerised, while Clint pours an agonisingly slow drizzle of liquid over the top of the pie, working in a wide inward spiral until the whole top is covered, the rest of the liquid slipping down through the openings in the crust’s weaved pattern. “You usually can do it, too, which is why your ego so annoying.”

Tony laughs, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yeah, well,” he says, gesturing vaguely, “usually I have some sort of plan.”

Clint slides the pie into the oven and then shuts it with a clang that echoes loudly in the empty open space, dusting his hands off over the counter and shoving Tony over with one hip so he can get to the sink. “You’re the genius. Figure it out.”
Tony steals a bit of water so he can wipe the counter free of flour with a paper towel. Clint puts the dishes in the dishwasher, and the two of them stand awkwardly in the middle of the kitchen for a moment. Clint hooks a thumb at the dark flat screen.

“GTA?”

“Hell yeah,” Tony says gratefully, snagging the brownie tin. Clint hops over the back of the couch to get settled. “How long?”

“Fifteen, and then I gotta turn the temp down. Another thirty, forty minutes after that.”

“So, plenty of time to kick your ass then.”

“Bring it, Tinman.”

“Weak sauce, Foghorn Leghorn, weak sauce.”

“Oh, god, I hated that guy.”

“Right?”

This makes me happy, Tony thinks, glancing at the nearest security camera and offering JARVIS a nod. Well played.

He doesn’t go to bed, but that’s okay. Brownies beat sleep any day.

Chapter End Notes

so, I totally meant to update weekly but then a) some personal shite got in the way and b) i had a month long camping and road tripping thing with girlfriend and family with zero internet. sorry! but we should be back to our regularly scheduled programming now.

fyi i have no beta, so if you see a typo i’m sorry/feel free to leave a comment and i’ll get to it. as usual, thanks for reading/hope you enjoy!

P.S.
this is what tony was humming in the limo, if you're interested https://youtu.be/4m1EFMoRFvY?t=30
The mansion is one of the things that Steve had been sure to avoid with extreme prejudice in New York, along with his old neighbourhood and the entirety of south Brooklyn. New York was a chameleon; she was changing all the time, donning new faces, new landscapes, new people. It was easier, in some ways, to feel grounded here when it looked so little like the old city he’d once known, the cobbled streets and the red brick and the sludge.

It helped that Steve hadn’t had much time to explore as a child; being sick all the time and working whenever he was able didn’t leave much for exploration. He remembers the moment he went to the Met for the first time, alone and brimming with expectation. He’d already been in love with fine arts, but his first brush with the classics had left him a goner for anything else he might have dared to pursue. He can still feel the way his breath caught in his throat at the sight of smooth marble, of bone white fingers pressing into skin that dipped under pressure, supple as real flesh to the eye. He can remember his first encounter with Van Gogh, the bright colours and the tangled, whimsical lines crafted by a man wrecked by a world that did not want him, the beauty pulled from anguish like a magician’s unending colourful scarf. He’d walked until his feet ached, until a museum guard came and told him that it was time to leave, still standing open mouthed in front of Degas’ ephemeral ballerinas like he was seeing God for the very first time.

There is a Rembrandt in the foyer. Looking at it, he knows immediately that Pepper put it there, that neither of the Stark men had really had an eye for classical paintings. He wonders what will become of all this after Tony… well, after Tony. And then he curses himself, for even daring to think such a thing.

“Captain Rogers.”

Steve glances towards the grand staircase, where Pepper Potts is walking down with her usual poise, fiddling with a StarkPad. She’s wearing an alarmingly red suit and skirt combo, with gold jewellery and matching heels, and Steve knows a declaration of allegiance when he sees it. He dips his head in greeting.

“Morning, Pepper,” he says, putting on his best smile. Pepper doesn’t even spare him a glance.

“Let’s get this over with,” she says, clipping past him and into the dining hall. “I’m sure we’re both busy. I have everything laid out for you in the conference room.”

“The place looks great,” he tries, following, but she doesn’t respond. Her orange hair swings behind her in a long ponytail, sleek as a whip. “Tony mentioned you’ve been working-”

He cuts himself off as Pepper spins around abruptly in front of the rear doors of the dining hall. Her mouth is pressed into a thin line, and Steve stops short to avoid a collision and stutters to a halt. Her stare could cut glass.

“Let me make something very clear, Captain,” she says, folding the StarkPad into its case and tucking it under her arm. “You are here only by the grace, blood, and sweat of Stark Industries. Doctor Erskine’s original project succeeded because of Stark Industries technology, your legacy ballooned instead of fading into oblivion largely because of Stark Industries’ licensing and distribution of Captain America merchandise, and you were only found in the ice because Howard
Stark made sure that said licensing and distribution of Captain America patented materials funded the search for your remains into perpetuity. You have a home, and a job, and a shield because of Stark Industries. You are paid by Stark Industries, and any tech that you have on your person, the very uniform that you wear into battle, was personally designed by Tony. In short, Howard and Tony Stark are the only reason that you exist, as you are, right now. They are why you are alive.”

Steve stares, breath shallow and silent in his chest as Pepper examines him. He has always been a little bit afraid of smart, beautiful women, and Pepper Potts is no exception.

“Upon your miraculous resurrection, the rights, trademarks, and patents associated with the Captain America image, character, and name were passed back to you, which you know. What lies behind this door is the remains of Howard Stark’s personal collection of Captain America memorabilia, products, and other associated items. This exempts anything on loan to the Smithsonian.” Here she hesitates for a moment, looking conflicted, before she straightens up and puts her hand on the doorknob. She holds out the StarkPad. “I am a busy woman, Captain, but I wanted to be here for this. Everything in the room is yours, to do as you see fit. Everything has been assigned a barcode, which can be scanned in order to attach notes to its file. If there is anything you want shipped, or donated, or whatever it may be, you may mark it down. Do you have any questions?”

Steve takes the offered device, glancing between it and her. Pepper doesn’t wait for an answer, instead moving to throw open the double wide doors and step through into the conference room.

The first thing he notices is an enormous square canvas filled entirely edge to edge with prints of his shield gripped in his hand, each varying in its own garish colour. Another piece of equal size sits next to it, with his face in the mask printed large and monochrome. Colour fields of neon blues, reds, and a sickly yellow have been layered over the portrait, and Steve walks towards them as if in a trance.

“These are…is this what I think it is?”

“There’s a Lichtenstein, too.”

Steve can feel his vision swimming up before him, nausea roiling in his stomach, and he turns and walks out into the gallery and heads for the bathrooms by the kitchen, steps more from memory than anything else as he tries to hold himself together. He barely makes it to a toilet, bracing a hand on the wall and retching nothing but water and bile into the clean white porcelain. The acid tears at his throat as he coughs, and he tries not to flinch at the sound of steadily approaching heels, dabbing at his mouth with toilet paper and splashing his face in the sink.

By the time Pepper appears in the doorway, Steve is rinsing his mouth out with water, trying to wash the taste of vomit from it. Steve spits and wipes his mouth a third time, glancing up into the mirror to see Pepper’s grim face. She holds a glass of milk in one perfectly manicured hand, and Steve knows, this woman could end him. She would burn the world, just for Tony Stark.

“Do you understand?” Pepper asks, motionless and perfect as a statue, and Steve turns around and braces his arse against the sink. He holds out a hand for the glass, and Pepper gives it to him. “You are the bar by which Howard measured worth, and because you were a legend and not the flawed human man that you so clearly are, Tony was never, ever enough for him. Tony will forgive you anything, Steve Rogers, because you are his monolith. I, however, am not a Stark, and I will have no compunctions about making sure you lose everything that you owe to him and his family.” She pauses, holding his gaze as she very purposefully steps forward into his space, wiping the remnants of condensation from the glass onto the hand towel. Her gaze is steady, and when she speaks it is barely above a whisper. “Do not cross me.”
“I never meant to hurt him,” Steve says, but it sounds hollow even to his own ears. Pepper’s disappointed expression is both expected and stinging, and Steve isn’t surprised when she turns to leave.

“Take as long as you need. The door will lock behind you on your way out.”

Steve watches her go with cotton in his mouth, milk soothing the sting of acid and sitting in his stomach like stones. There is a part of him, a surprisingly large and vehement part of him, that wants to tell Pepper to burn the whole thing and walk away. As he’d run out, he’d seen more than just the paintings; a pack of cards that were probably used by the commandos in the trenches, one of the old show costumes, and even what he suspected was his helmet from basic. The artist in him is still in a dead faint at the idea that he now owns not one, but two Warhols in which he is the subject, let alone whatever else is in the room. Some of the pieces had looked like the old propaganda posters he’d done back in art school.

He can see it, now, with startling clarity, stretching back through the years; this huge empty house with no one in it but a tiny black-haired boy and servants moving through the space like ghosts, a loving butler trailing after him. In every room, the image of Captain America stared down from on high, biceps and shield and sharp jaw and blue eyes all chopped up into disparate pieces, the enormity of a hero that could not be contained in a single image. He imagines Howard, the absent and looming figure, shutting a curious boy desperate for affection out of every room he wanted to be in. Every sour interaction with Tony, every defensive and self-deprecating barb burning into Steve’s chest shifts under the shockwave, re-contextualised.

Steve wants to be sick all over again.

He doesn’t know how long he spends in the bathroom. Too long for comfort, he’s sure, and certainly longer than Pepper would have liked. Eventually, he walks back through the gallery and into the conference room, picking up the StarkPad he’d dropped in his haste.

The truth, despite whatever the tabloids and the propaganda had said about him over the years, was that Steve wasn’t fearless. It was just that Steve had spent so long being afraid – being weak and fevered and beat to limping, bloody flesh – that the alternative, of hiding and hoping that life would change, was no longer a tenable option. An adrenalin addiction had been the only way to cope. Becoming attracted to that fear was all he had, and when the war came for him it was these tricks and ways of coping that had bore him through, that had carried him into the fray. He unpacks the boxes with shaking hands, finding bayonets and old posters, hats and pins and flags. He unearths maquettes of statues he knows sit all over the country and the world, old sketchbooks, newspaper clippings, an autographed film still. He finds a photo of his mother that he’s never seen before, her eyes laughing and tired all at once, and for a moment he desperately hates Tony for this, for subjecting him to this, to reducing him to this. Then it occurs to him that Tony likely has no idea that he’s here, sorting through relics of the Starks’ shrine to Captain America; the very idea would rouse nothing but fury and terrified shame from him.

This was Pepper. All of this, every moment was Pepper, teaching him that it was not Tony’s benevolence that he should trust, but her retribution and that of his loved ones trailing behind Tony like a caravan of war, the flags streaming high and uncowed by the magnificence of Captain America. This was Pepper, showing him exactly where he belonged in the larger scheme of Tony’s world.

Steve has never been very good at being afraid, or being patient, or knowing when to quit. So he sits in the Stark mansion, and he catalogues and annotates every damn item in the conference room, each with its tiny white sticker barcode or tag. And then, he sends Pepper Potts a note about
charity auction procedure in the brand new world.

‘Even the Warhols?’ Pepper replies almost instantaneously, innocent as a blood-lipped lion. ‘It will be a pity to see them go; they were Tony’s favourite.’

‘Well he can keep them if he likes them.’ Steve writes back. Then he lets himself out, clutching the meagre bag of things he’d chosen to take with him as though it will save him from whatever typhoon is coming next.

It’s dark when he steps outside again, or at least as dark as Manhattan can ever be. The sweetness of Central Park in heat washes over him, approaching rain and fresh greenery, flowers and mown grass and clean dirt. The scent stays with him as he makes his slow way down Fifth Avenue, the susurrus of leaves and warm breezes slipping over his skin until he feels grounded again, held close in the presence of New York’s glittering night spires, the cool grey stone wall of the park trailing under his right hand, the uneven stones at his feet. Between the branches of her cultivated forest he can see snatches of moon, silvery light peeking in and out from behind waxy leaves and crooked black branches. The city feels ethereal, and fey, and in the distance midtown is lit like the fantastical spires of Oz, Stark tower a bright beacon among many jealous compatriots. Inexplicably, he feels a sudden stab of regret for calling it ugly all those years ago; it’s grown on him, familiar and dear.

Steve doesn’t know what he’s expecting when he gets back to the tower, but he doesn’t want to see anyone. He avoids the common areas and moves straight to his quarters, his shoulders only releasing their tension when he’s locked the door behind him. He presses his forehead to the cool wood and breathes. Fresh paint.

Steve turns, glancing over his shoulder at the shield propped up on the couch, shining and new as Tony always makes it look every time he takes it down to the workshop for “some love, come here you poor thing, what did the bad man do to you, tell me,” cooing and petting it like a mistreated child. He knows – as he knows most things these days, by repetition of scientist after expert telling him so – that the shield is relatively unbreakable. There is nothing that he could do to harm it, beyond ruining the fine coat of specially crafted, Stark-engineered paint.

“It’s just a design, Tony. You can leave off if you want,” he’d tried one night, and Tony had flipped up his welding mask and gave him a look that a lesser man would shrink from.

“It’s not your shield without the paint, Cap,” he’d said, looking incredulous. “You have to know that. It’s a symbol of hope and freedom and other patriotic bullshit. People see that shield emerging out of the smoke, and it tells them they’re gonna be okay.”

There’s a letter sitting on top of the freshly painted metal, “Cap” printed on the front in Tony’s blocky engineering print, neat and square and perfect. He picks it up between hesitant fingers like it’s fragile, holding it for a moment before sliding his finger beneath the flap. It pulls away clean with the slightest cracking noise, and the paper inside is fine, heavy, cotton based. There’s a sticky note attached to the front of it.

‘New York’s pretty beautiful this time of year, too,’ it says. ‘Enjoy.’

It’s an invitation for a private after-hours viewing at the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens for tomorrow night. Steve sits down on the couch next to the shield, holding the smooth paper between his hands and remembering the awkward small talk as they descended in the elevator, his throwaway comment about DC. But of course Tony was paying attention to that kind of thing; of course he was. Where Tony’s words were always designed to dazzle and amuse and confuse, Tony’s actions spoke for him. It was these small touches – the tech upgrades and the quiet hours spent playing
videogames and the Tovaritch! left in front of a door after a rough week – that conveyed the truth of Tony’s psychology, his affection for the team. What Tony cannot say with words, he says with his hands.

Steve thinks about telling Tony to come with him, but then he can imagine it; Tony’s eyes crinkled in laughter, the heavy boughs of the cherry trees laden with pink blossoms, and all around the sweet smell of burgeoning heat as they move through the grass together. There would be talk, from some employee who had bills to pay or mouths to feed, which Steve has long learned not to be angry for. There might even be a photo.

He can taste, for a moment, how badly he will want to kiss him under those bright blooms, the scent of spring and the happiness bubbling up under his chest. It’s the wrong time, he knows, so soon after his misstep in the elevator. They’re unsteady.

He’ll go alone, and he’ll bring pastels, like he wanted to in DC. Tony’s always appreciated his art as much as his musculature, anyway.

“When SHEILD said they needed my tech for prison safety, I didn’t think this was where it was going,” Tony says, tossing his copy of the folder they’ve all been given onto the conference table. In retrospect, he isn’t sure why he’s surprised, but he’s definitely pissed. “You double cross me, and then you wanna cry foul when you muck it up? That’s not how this works, boys.”

“Stark-”

“Oh, don’t worry Maria. I’ll be getting to you in a minute,” Tony says with a plastic smile, glancing around the room. A few government cronies, clearly out of their depth, the rocky remains of SHIELD leadership, and a few uncomfortably familiar faces stare back at him with varying levels of chagrin. Maria Hill is the only one who doesn’t look at all cowed, and Tony fixes her with a long stare, trying to read her expression. At least Coulson has the decency to look a little sorry.

“And you,” he says, pointing a finger at Erik Selvig, “wait until I tell Thor about this. You’ll be hearing about dishonour and betrayal for the rest of your mortal life.”

“I didn’t know that this was what my research was being used for,” Selvig grousers, rubbing at his mouth.

“Seems there’s a lot of that going around,” Rhodey says. His hand moves through the air like a scythe, as though he’s trying to cut away all the bullshit that’s been spewed this morning. “Did you people learn nothing from Project Insight?”

“Stark, what would you have had us do?” Coulson says, voice weary. There are bags under his eyes, blue and sunken. Tony idly wonders when was the last time someone gave him a hug.

“Pleasant Hill predates Project Insight. SHIELD is stretched thin as it is. We had no alternative facility to house them in.”

“You could have told me, for one, that my force field technology was being used in a brainwashing program,” Tony retorts, leaning his chair back to balance on the rear two legs.

One of the government rats clears his throat, and Tony spears the entire table with a flat glare, eyes narrowed as he searches for answers. He’s always hated these clandestine emergency meetings.
with defence higher-ups. They always end up being full of major fuckups that need fixing, and somehow he’s always the one they want to fix it. Today, it seems, is no different.

*The issue is probably that I keep actually fixing their problems instead of telling them to fuck off,* Tony admits to himself, sinking deep into his self-deprecation. Still, this is worse than he’d imagined.

He’d wanted Steve to be here for this; nobody quite got red-blooded American patriots stuttering apologies like a glaring Captain America, and Coulson was always easier to handle with him in the room. However, a brief exchange with JARVIS had revealed that Steve had never come home the night before, and Tony had only a few minutes to be worried about that before he had to fly out to DC. It was unlike Steve to stay out all night without telling anyone, and Sam hadn’t seen him either. Steve was definitely not a one night stand man, which left Tony worrying about things that he really didn’t need to be considering the circumstances.

“How do you think I feel?” Selvig demands, looking at Coulson with tangible fury. “Loki took my mind, my will from me, and you used my research on the tesseract and Loki’s sceptre to brainwash more people?”

“These aren’t just people, they’re super powered criminals,” Secretary Ross says, and Tony glances over at him. “There is no facility on earth at present that could safely house these things. We had to improvise.”

“By brainwashing everybody and sticking them in a fake suburban paradise? That’s literally the plot of a horror movie. They did that one, guys, it was called The Stepford Wives, and it’s pretty universally agreed that it was a shitty move. You’re literally horror movie villains. No wonder somebody broke them out, I’m almost rooting for the criminals here.” Tony covers his face for a moment, trying to hold in hysterical laughter. He should know better than this. “Oh, wait, this was probably entirely the idea of actual Nazis, our good friends Hydra and Co. And you just rolled with it. Captain America is gonna love this.” He turns and points a finger at the Secretary. “And by the way, ‘things’? Ross, your xenophobia is showing. Put that away, man, nobody wants to see that.”

Rhodey lets out a huff of controlled laughter that only Tony can hear, sitting next to him, and he bumps his knee against Rhodey’s under the table.

“Before I give you any information, you have to promise me you’ll shut this thing down,” Tony says, meeting Coulson’s eyes evenly.

“What? We have no alternative facility, I told you-”

“Then build one,” Tony says, not looking away from Coulson. “I’ll even help with designs. For my usual fee, of course.”

“Why, you opportunistic-”

“Shh, you don’t get to talk. You tried to weaponise the Hulk – my friend, by the way – and ended up breaking Harlem.”

Tony ignores Ross’ spluttering, waiting, until finally he gets the nod from Coulson that he was hoping for. “You’re the spook dearest to my heart, Agent. After Natasha, of course.”

“Let her hear you call her a spook and she’ll be near to your heart alright,” Rhodey mumbles behind his hand. Tony shoots him a grin, then slides the folder back across the table and opens it to a familiar face from a security still in Pleasant Hill.
“This pretty little lady right here is named Amora, but she goes by Enchantress. She’s an Asgardian, and apparently the goddess of love.” The Connecticut senator in the corner snickers, and Tony fixes him with a look. “You wanna laugh? Two minutes of exposure to her had Captain America acting like an adolescent ball of hormones. He attacked me, one of his supposed best friends, in an elevator during a common disagreement.” Tony flicks the footage of Cap punching him up onto the big screen for effect, but turns off the sound. A little lie to convey the seriousness of the situation never hurt anybody.

“Jesus,” Rhodey says, and Tony shuts it off.

“Any man who comes into contact with her is in danger of falling under her spell. She will remind you of your first time at the ol’ drive in, your lady friends, that one girl you had a crush on in kindergarten, and even your mother. You will not be able to hurt her because you won’t want to. I have seen her teleport, and I don’t know what other capabilities she has, but I do know she was a student of Loki’s.” There’s a few murmurs at that, and Tony nods, then shoots Coulson a look that he hopes efficiently communicates his desire for the man to say absolutely nothing in response to his next piece of information. “Now, we have a little magical backing of our own, an asset that Natasha Romanov and I are working to turn. Thanks to our asset, Clint Barton and I are protected from Amora’s magic, and as far as we can tell, it doesn’t work on women.” Tony pauses. “Actually, not sure about gay men or lesbians, there’s a thought. Or trans people. Or maybe Agent Romanov is special. We’ll find out.”

“Who is this asset?” Secretary Ross asks, and Tony rolls his eyes.

“I don’t kiss and tell, Mr. Secretary,” he says, tapping the side of his nose. “Now, here’s the real issue.” Tony flips to a blurry image of a hulking figure, silhouetted by a bright burst of light from what he had thought was a relatively impenetrable forcefield. The figure has an axe the size of a car door, and it’s slicing through his tech like butter. “This guy is so powerful even Thor seemed kind of scared of him when he gave me this intel. He’s called The Executioner, because he’s basically unbeatable. He has regenerative powers, and he is Amora’s unquestioning servant because he’s 100% head over tits in love with her. That makes him dangerous, because it means he can’t be turned or bought or persuaded. We’re not even sure if he can be killed.”

“Then how are we meant to fight him?” the Connecticut senator asks, looking alarmed.

“You aren’t, sweetheart, we will.”

“Stark,” Ross warns, and Tony rolls his eyes.

“What? What are you jokers gonna do, try to shoot them? You don’t even know where they went. Just sit back and let the Avengers handle this. You’ve got fifty odd supervillains traipsing around, doing god knows what. Focus on rounding up the ones you can handle, and we’ll take care of the rest.”

“Where do you expect us to put them in the meantime, if Pleasant Hill is to be terminated?” Secretary Ross asks, looking thunderous.

“I know you’ve got some secret bunker stashed away just for Bruce,” Tony says sweetly, smiling at him. His smile widens when Ross looks alarmed, entirely caught out. “Figure it out, Mr. Secretary.”

“Speaking of Loki,” a sharp looking blonde in the back begins, but Coulson shakes his head.

“We have intel that puts him elsewhere. He’s not involved.”
Oh, Tony knows he’s going to pay for that favour later. He stands up, ignoring the clamour that ignites, and fixes Coulson with a look. “Get your house in order, Agent.”

“It’s director,” he says mildly, but his expression is determined, and Tony nods at him. Then he turns to Maria.

“You might be fired. I haven’t decided yet,” he says flatly. “Either you work for The Avengers, or you work for SHIELD, but you can’t do both.”

Tony doesn’t wait for an answer, just slips silently out the door. He can hear Rhodey shadowing him, and he pauses in the hallway while Rhodey shuts the door on the hubbub. He heads down the hallway at a clip, putting a hand to his earpiece.

“JARVIS, notify the rest of the team immediately. Any word on Cap?”

“I’m afraid not, sir.”

“The BBG footage?”

“Clean, sir. He left of his own volition, and I cannot find anything remiss on the city’s security feeds.”

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” Tony mutters, increasing his pace. Rhodey jogs up alongside him.

“Tony, Ross is a pitbull. More importantly, he’s the Secretary of State. You shouldn’t be baiting him like that.”

“I know, he’s just…he was rubbing me the wrong way in there.”

“I’m just saying, you know what’s coming, Tones. They’re already talking oversight. We’ve gotta get in front of this thing, and you need Ross on your side.”

“I know!” Tony snaps, then stops abruptly when he catches a look at the expression on Rhodey’s face. “Look, nobody has seen or heard from Cap since yesterday. When Amora showed up at the tower, she seemed…fixated. On him, and me, but she knows she can’t have me. The point is, I think something big is about to go down and I need you with me, okay?”

“You think Amora has him?”

“I think I have a really bad feeling about the fact that JARVIS has been searching since I woke up this morning and still has no idea where he is, and apparently there was a prison break from a superprison that we didn’t even know about last night.” Tony points back down the hallway, agitated and fidgety with it. “Did you see the names on that list, Rhodey? I’ve put some of them away and I didn’t even know where I was sending them. And I hadn’t even heard of some of those guys. What were they locked away for? Did they even get a trial?”

“You think Amora has him?”

“I think I have a really bad feeling about the fact that JARVIS has been searching since I woke up this morning and still has no idea where he is, and apparently there was a prison break from a superprison that we didn’t even know about last night.” Tony points back down the hallway, agitated and fidgety with it. “Did you see the names on that list, Rhodey? I’ve put some of them away and I didn’t even know where I was sending them. And I hadn’t even heard of some of those guys. What were they locked away for? Did they even get a trial?”

“I know, man. I know,” Rhodey says, clapping a hand on his shoulder. “Look, I’ve got your back. You know that. Whatever’s coming, we’ll figure it out.”

Tony scrubs a hand over his face, then heads out into the central courtyard where they left the suits on sentry mode. Outside, a few cadets are posing for photos with the War Machine rig, but they startle when Rhodey claps his hands together.

“Alright, move it along boys and girls, nothing to see here.”
“Can we get a photo?” one of them asks, and Tony exchanges a glance with Rhodey, whose eyes are big and pleading. Tony rolls his eyes and waves a hand at him. He steps into the suit, and sighs with relief when the familiar metal closes around his body.

“God, I hate the Pentagon. At least SHIELD played it cool. All the beige is so depressing.”

“Perhaps you should inform Captain Rogers of your displeasure with his choice when you next see him,” JARVIS replies, clearly amused.

“And get reamed out for my lack of patriotism and my inappropriate humour? No thanks,” Tony grumbles. Then, projected out of the suit, “Rhodey, working on borrowed time here.”

“Coming,” Rhodey says, and Tony powers up and takes to the sky. “Hey!”

“Move your ass!” Tony calls back. He’s got work to do.

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Steve wakes to the smell of cold metal and damp, aching all over. He cannot move, and when he opens his eyes the only thing above his prone body is darkness, stretching up and onwards into black and black. At the corners of his eyes, he can register a glow of some kind, a quiet green, the hum of electronics and machinery. He is unafraid, and unthreatened, and unconcerned by this predicament. Distantly, he knows that this is very wrong. Everything within him is numb.

Flowers, he remembers, fat pink bursts of them, and then; the scent of familiar perfume.

“Sleep,” something whispers, and so he does. It takes him, and it feels like falling.

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Tony’s always loved flying. There was nothing quite like the adrenalin of that first drop, and the second, and the third, the wind roaring by as he speeds towards the ground at terminal velocity. He loves the weightlessness of his limbs in the cushioning air. He loves the way the world stretches out like a map beneath him, the shuttling carapaces of the cars and the roads disappearing into webwork, an intricate moving model of life stretching as far as the eye can see. That was one of the funny things about the East Coast; they’d run out of space so much that the spaces between settlements had been eaten up, one town indistinguishable from the next as you crossed the landscape.

“Sir, you have an incoming call from Agent Romanov.”

“Patch her through.” Tony waits for Natasha’s face to appear on screen. “Hey, Red.”

“Oh, you must be tired,” Natasha says, eyes narrowed.

“Widow,” he warns, and Natasha smiles at him.

“Clint and Thor went to the spot where JARVIS lost him, but came up empty. Thor suspects Amora, of course, but so do we. Not exactly a leap.”

“So we’ve got nothing.”

“Well,” Natasha hedges, but whatever she’s about to say is cut short by a dead-centre shot to the helmet. The display flickers, and Tony loses the connection.

“JARVIS?” Tony snaps, pulling up and aiming his repulsors at the ground. He can’t see anything;
his display is still on the fritz. “Rhodey?”

“I’ve got ‘em,” Rhodey says, sounding grim, “but we’re outmatched.”

“Call Widow for backup, we’re not that far out.”

“Copy,” Rhodey says. “Roll!”

Tony rolls to the right as something slices through the space he’d been occupying only seconds before. “What the fuck is that?”

“Widow, be advised we have unknown enhanced in the field, I repeat, unknown enhanced. Shots fired. Iron Man’s suit has already sustained damage from a single shot, requesting backup. Do you copy?”

“Copy, War Machine, Widow and Hulk mobilised. ETA twenty four minutes.”

“Make it snappy!” Tony calls. “My scanners are down. My display is basically snow right now.”

“Sir, should I reboot?”

Tony closes his eyes and tries to remember his position in the air, the distance to the ground, the angle of the shot. “Do it,” he says, and when JARVIS’ handling shuts off he lets himself drop.

He spreads his body to slow his fall, counting the seconds. Manual functions are all still in play, but he knows the benefit of surprising an enemy by playing dead. As he descends, the display flicks back on with basic functionality, albeit accompanied by static. He can see their adversaries come into focus, standing in a soybean field: Amora; a swarthy, bearded mountain of a man that Tony expects is The Executioner; another blonde woman that Tony does not recognise dressed in tight white and gold; and a very familiar brooding face in a black mask. They’re surrounded on all sides by a greenish force field, and it flares with every shot that Rhodey tries on it.

“Shit,” Tony says, rolling to the left as the woman in white takes another shot, a laser of bright white light that shears through the air. He rolls back over as coms come back online. “Avengers, I’ve got eyes on The Winter Soldier.”

“Are you sure?” Natasha asks, voice guarded, and Tony bites back a laugh, watching Barnes raise a gun and line up his shot. Tony powers up the unibeam.

“I’m sure!” he shouts, spinning into a barrel roll as the gun barks. It glances off the helmet anyway, twice, three times, and Tony curses. “Hundred percent sure. Legolas, you’re gonna have a new sniper buddy to play with if Cap ever gets his way.”

“We can share brainwashing notes,” Clint quips, and Tony barks a surprised laugh.

“JARVIS, fire on my command,” Tony says. “War Machine, double shot?”

“With the unibeam?” Rhodey demands, incredulous. Then he laughs. “You’re a lunatic.”

“Power up,” Tony tells him, pulling up with his repulsors at the last minute until he’s hovering a few feet above them. He sends the visual to the quinjet. “Amora, baby, I thought we had something.”

Amora smiles sweetly, her red mouth curving into a sickle blade. “I bet you did,” she says, and Tony hisses as he’s hit hard from behind, tumbling him head over heels into the dirt behind the
cadre. The impact shakes him to his bones, and he barely drags himself up onto one knee before another shot hits him between the shoulders.

*Stark,* Loki’s voice says, inside his brain, what the actual fuck, *whatever happens next, you must remember what I swore to you. Do you understand?*

Oh, Tony understands alright, but he doesn’t have to like it. This day is just getting worse and worse. “How hard do you want me to hit you?” Tony murmurs, dreading the next few minutes intensely, and is rewarded with Loki’s warm laughter.

*Very good,* Loki replies, approving. *Fight to win, of course.*

“Of course,” he hisses, and flips himself over and sits up. Loki is standing over him, hands ablaze with golden light. His eyes are lit bright and glittering green, entire body triumphant.

“Oh I did enjoy our little game, Stark. But I think I’ve tired of it.”

“You bastard,” he spits out, broadcasting loud enough for the gathered assembly to hear. He moves with intentional care, aping a more battered body than he has. Rhodey is snarling curses, engaged with Barnes while trying desperately to avoid The Executioner’s heavy swings. As he watches, that enormous metal axe takes off half of Rhodey’s guns, but Tony blocks him out for now. Rhodey can handle himself. “I vouched for you.”

“Oh, you poor, stupid mortal,” Amora says, leaning over Loki’s shoulder. The woman in white boxes him in on the other side. “Did you think Loki was truly your friend?”

“I thought we were allies, at least,” Tony says, watching the counter. He broadcasts his voice to Rhodey’s helmet. “But I’m not so stupid as to trust him. Now!”

Tony turns and angles his unibeam to Loki’s right, flashing right past him and hitting Rhodey’s matching force right in front of The Executioner. He closes his eyes.

The resulting concussive force throws him back several metres, and his head swims as he tries desperately to get his bearings. The suit is flashing warnings all over the place, and Tony pushes himself up to see The Executioner flat out, his chest caved in to what Tony expects would be some excellent white butterfly material. The Winter Soldier is down too, and Loki looks like hell, his clothes tattered all along the right side of his body. A gold shield shimmers around both him and Amora, and as Tony drags himself to his feet he can hear the stirring of the enhanced getting to her feet behind him. Two down, three to go.

He has two shoulder missiles hit the enhanced woman in the sternum, blasting her into the dirt without even turning around. Now that he’s seen her in action, he knows it won’t hold her down for long. He prefers enemies that he can go all out on.

“Remember that asshole is gonna heal and get right back up,” he warns, then winces when Rhodey stomps one foot straight into The Executioner’s skull, crushing it. Amora screeches.

“Not for a while,” Rhodey replies. He’s thrown back by the might of a blast from Amora, her eyes wild with fury. The Winter Soldier is back up, shooting at his faceplate. “I got this.”

Tony shoots Loki in the face, then in the gut for good measure, forestalling any cute jibes from him. Suddenly, he’s angry, about all of this. *Everything was fine before you showed up,* he thinks viciously, then stops in case Loki can hear him. Loki just drags himself up with a grin, wiping the blood from his mouth. Tough bastard.
“The Hulk’s coming,” Tony tells him sweetly, enjoying the flicker of uncertainty that appears on Loki’s face at the mention of him. “Just you wait.”

He can see the quinjet’s shrinking distance in the corner of his display as he speaks, shooting Loki’s hands as he tries to raise them. Loki hisses, then whispers something foul, and Tony lets out a shout as he begins to sink down into the ground. He shoots at Loki again, but Loki deflects it this time, so Tony shoots past him and hits Amora in the back of her pretty blonde head, knocking her into Barnes. Another shot hits him in the back from behind, rattling his teeth, and JARVIS flashes warnings about damage to the armour’s plating as he struggles to get up. The woman in white must have woken up.

“Rhodey, a little help,” he calls, and holds his hands up for Rhodey to pull him out of the mud in a flyover, but the woman in white shoots them down, and they tumble into a heap with a loud clatter. Amora glances around the battlefield, then off into the distance. Barnes pushes himself to his feet. The enhanced drags herself up from the ground, wiping dirt from her eyes.

“They have called reinforcements,” Amora says abruptly, sounding furious. “We must flee.”

“I will not run like some common coward,” Loki says, bracing himself, and suddenly Tony sees exactly where this is going.

_I want you to hit me with everything you have._

Tony grins. He’s always right. “Might kill you,” he murmurs into the silence of the helmet, and Loki smiles wickedly.

_I’m counting on it._ His expression is manic, and over his shoulder Tony can see the approaching quinjet, a black spot quickly becoming bigger. The Hulk drops out of it like a bowling ball, and Skurge begins to twitch. “Do you think you can defeat me, Tony Stark? I’ve been watching you. I could ruin you, easily and completely, send you tipping headfirst into madness without ever having to crush your damaged mortal form.”

“You’d know about madness,” Tony says, and Loki’s expression shifts sideways into unbridled fury. “You know, I’ve never asked Thor if you were this psycho before you found out daddy never loved you, or only after the whole torture in the void episode.”

“Tell me, Stark, if you love a woman as much as you claim to love Pepper Potts, why would you leave her pale mortal form so woefully unprotected?”

“JARVIS, fire all.”

As far as he can remember, Tony’s never actually done this with the combined firepower of the new suits. It’s overkill, and it leaves him defenceless if for some reason it doesn’t work. Still, seeing as the Hulk was smashing his way to them as they bickered, he isn’t worried.

The light comes first, and then the sound and the concussive wave, exploding outwards with enough force to throw Tony backwards for the second time. The entire field is bathed in smoke, billowing out from where Loki had been standing in thick black and grey clouds. Amora hasn’t stopped screaming, her voice high and awful in the ringing silence, the Hulk roaring onto the scene as The Winter Soldier opens fire. The Hulk brings a hand down towards him, and he tumbles sideways, loosing another round of shots. The other woman blasts The Hulk backwards. There’s blood on Amora’s face, thick and viscous. It isn’t hers, and Tony has a moment to be worried that he’s done the wrong thing before Amora vanishes in a flash of green, the rest of her allies disappearing with her.
“Tony,” Rhodey says, voice quiet and breathless, and Tony remembers, suddenly, that no one knows what he has just done. Loki was the only one.

“I…” Tony tries, then stops, not sure how to explain himself, or if he even should. He had no idea what Loki’s plan was, or if Amora could somehow hear him the same way Loki can. He didn’t understand the mechanics of the protections that Loki had wreathed around him. He’s flying blind.

“What did you do?” Rhodey says, walking over to the newly formed crater in the ground. He peers down into it, then turns away. Tony doesn’t bother to look closer.

“I don’t know.”

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The next time Steve wakes, it’s to screaming chaos. Everything is bright, and loud, a woman’s sobbing shrieks echoing through his skull. Pain and grief sweep through him like a sandstorm, razing every inch of his mind.

“I want him to suffer!” the voice skirls, but someone else is reasoning with her, voice low and accented, pleasant. The woman collapses into sobs.

“You can hurt him,” the man tells her, “but I need his body alive.”

When the pain comes, it feels like every punch that’s ever hit him, all at once. Then teeth, or maybe needles, a million pinpricks of light over every inch of his skin. Phantom creatures tear at his body, consuming him.

“Stark killed Loki,” the woman says, dragging a hand over his chest. Everywhere she touches burns like a brand. “So I will make sure that when he comes for you, there will be nothing of you left to find.”

Something cold slides into his skull like a knife, slipping smoothly through his thoughts and deeper down, into his fears, his dreams. It takes every image of Tony’s smile, every cherished moment with Bucky, and crushes them down into the spaces between his nightmares. His mother wheezes her last. Bucky falls from the train. Tony plummets to his death from the wormhole. Tony is announced dead on CNN, his Malibu mansion rubble in the Pacific. Bucky stares at him, flat, without recognition. Bucky drives a knife into his lungs, and he splutters, copper blood.

And all the while, pain is still ripping through his body, the white hot flare of fire flickering through every nerve ending, his entire body sweating with it. It rips him apart from the inside out.

Chapter End Notes

So, as some of you have noticed, I’ve decided to cut the twins out of the picture for now. Why have I done this thing? Well, firstly, I found the relationship between Steve and Tony had frankly soured too much after Ultron for me to conceivably work with it, because Bruce is right when he chastises Cap in Age of Ultron; Steve trusts an unknown “enhanced” human who has demonstrated mind control powers and then – and this is the important bit for me – enacts violence upon Tony’s person, and Bruce, ***with her help***, after she made Bruce kill a shitload of people. What? Was that not a red flag for anyone else? Secondly, it was just easier for plot manoeuvring, and
you will find out why soon enough. Thirdly – and this is less about plot and more about my personal feelings now – I’m really just 100% not on board with the decision to make two characters that are canonically half-Jewish/half-Romani join the Nazis. As someone who is mixed myself, and grew up in a heavily Jewish city with a large proportion of Jewish friends, I’m just not. I was pissed that they did so when the news first came out, and I’m still kind of pissed about it now. So whatever characterisation of the twins that might be appearing or not appearing, it won’t be with the “we joined Hydra” backstory. \_(ツ)_/¯ Sorry to any folks that liked angst and eyeliner Wanda. (Personally I like Ultimates’ mathematician Wanda better, but now I’m just being petty.) Feel free to disagree with my politics at great length and at your leisure, of course. All criticism welcomed.
The silence in the quinjet is deafening. Tony sits in the back, Bruce curled up at his feet in twitchy misery. He’s wrapped in a thick white blanket, and every so often he reaches a hand out and touches Tony’s shin, knuckles resting there a moment before he pulls away, anxious and unsure of his welcome. Tony puts a hand on Bruce’s head, just resting there as Bruce settles slowly. His body shifts into something a little less strung, a little more weary.

Natasha pilots the quinjet, focussed on her task. Rhody sits up front with her, and Tony can’t imagine what they’re saying right now. He knows Rhodey is probably giving her a debrief, explaining exactly what it is he saw. Tony has no idea what step to take here, so instead he just sits in silence, hoping that Loki makes contact soon, hoping that they get some intel on Steve from him. He can’t imagine that show was for any other purpose. He wonders if he was mad to trust Loki even the small amount that he did.

“We’re home, boys,” Natasha says, and Tony looks up at her, shaking his head a little to clear it. Bruce follows suit, stumbling to his feet, and Tony stands and wipes a hand over his face. Natasha meets Tony’s gaze with dead eyes, mouth a flat line. “What’s the game plan?”

Tony doesn’t know what to say to that, so he steps out of the quinjet and heads into the tower, ignoring Rhodey’s shout. It’s pouring rain, lightning crackling threateningly over the city in bright flashes. Thunder booms overhead, and Tony doesn’t even see the blow coming before he’s flat on his back, Thor standing over him wreathed in blind fury. A gust of wind slaps fat raindrops against the glass walls, howling all around them.

“Wait, Thor, it wasn’t-”

Thor kicks him into the wall, all of the breath punching out of him at once. Clint jumps on top of him and is thrown off almost immediately, Natasha running out of the jet, and Tony is bracing himself for another blow when Thor is literally frozen to the spot, ice blasting him and sending curls of white mist tumbling out into the room like he’s made of dry ice.

“Well, this seems to be a pattern,” a familiar voice says, and Tony closes his eyes and tilts his head back to rest against cold metal, huffing a breath. “Perhaps you should keep more civilised company.”

“Perhaps you should stop setting me up to get punched for you, asshole.”

“Yes, I suppose this is my fault,” Loki agrees, pressing cold lips to his cheek. Tony shoves at him roughly, aware of the eyes that must be watching, but immediately he can feel the familiar tingling warmth of Loki’s healing rushing through him, wiping away all of the damage that has been dealt to his tired body, down to the residual bruises from Steve’s elevator outburst. Tony opens his eyes, taking in Clint’s poleaxed expression and the slight widening of Natasha’s eyes. Thor is frozen mid-gesture, mouth open in a wordless snarl, and Loki squints at him from a few inches away, hands folded behind his back.

“I could snap off a piece, if you need to ice your wounds,” he offers, and Tony rolls his eyes and pushes himself to his feet.
“Let him go,” he says, weary.

“Just the cape?”

“Loki,” Tony warns, and Loki laughs, waving a lazy hand at him.

“Are you sure you want to be standing there when I do?”

Tony considers this, then slides to the side, moving back in the direction of the quinjet. Natasha’s expression could cut steel, and Tony makes sure to keep a wide berth, chuckling a little at Loki’s shit eating grin. Bastard.

“How long were you planning this?” Natasha asks, and Tony shrugs at her. The ice around Thor begins to crack, bright blue and white chips skittering across the floor in every direction, loud snapping noises echoing against glass and steel. Loki stands in front of Thor, a smug expression on his face, and Tony bites back a laugh as Thor roars to life, stomping one foot forward and then pulling himself up short, his entire body stumbling to a stop.

“Brother?” he says, wonderingly, and Loki’s expression sours into something jaded and petty. Thor rushes forward to embrace him, but his hands move right through, and Loki dissolves into golden light.

“Are you ever not going to fall for that?” Loki asks, lounging over Tony’s shoulders, and Tony rolls his eyes heavenward.

“Now you’re just bating him,” he accuses, and Loki snickers. “Asshole.”

“Brother!” Thor calls, and that’s an actual tear, holy shit, “you are alive!”

“Do you really think I would die so easily? Did you not learn your lesson?” Loki’s voice is scathing, and Tony reaches back to jab him in the ribs with an elbow.

“Be nice, he’s crying for godssakes.” He offers Thor an apologetic smile. “Sorry, buddy, I didn’t think you’d…well. He’s fine, obviously. I wouldn’t kill him unless I really had to.”

“Stark,” Thor says, expression twisted into something ugly Tony’s never seen from him before, but he pauses when the arm Loki has draped over Tony’s shoulder lights up with golden light.

“Stark was acting under my command,” Loki says, warning, and Thor crumples back into himself.

“Command?” Tony repeats, and Loki chuckles, the vibrations moving all through Tony’s torso. “I definitely wouldn’t say that.”

“You wanted to trick Amora into thinking you were dead so you could stop playing buddy buddy with her,” Clint guesses, eyes narrowed. “Stark, did you know about this?”

Tony shrugs, difficult to do with a super dense god draped over him. Something in him doesn’t want to shake him off, likely the part of him that shook at the sight of Loki’s blood splattered all over Amora in the wake of the explosion, his guts and burnt clothing lying in a soupy mess at the bottom of a charred pit.

*You like him*, he remembers Cap saying, full of accusation. He clears his throat, tilting his hand back and forth in the air.

“He spoke to me during the fight,” Tony says. “I made a call, and it paid off.”
“Why didn’t you say anything?” Rhodey asks, folding his arms across his chest. He and Bruce are standing on the quinjet ramp, flanking Natasha. Bruce is staring at him with narrowed eyes, the blanket wrapped around him like a cloak. He looks dangerous.

“You know, I didn’t see it before,” Bruce says, mouth quirking, “but you have the same grin.”

“You kept this secret in jest?” Thor demands, furious, and Tony holds up his hands in the universal sign of surrender.

“Hey, no, I just had no idea if Amora would know if I said anything. I figured if I could trust your brother with anything, it was his own life.”

“Did he not tell you how he first fell from the bifrost?” Thor asks, expression cruelly triumphant, and Tony swallows his tongue. “You thought wrong, Tony Stark.”

“After you destroyed the very ground I stood on?” Loki hisses, body stiffening against Tony’s back, and Tony wraps a hand around the forearm draped over him in warning. “You speak as though you were innocent in my fall, when it was your incompetence that created the circumstances requiring my action.”

“Okay,” Natasha says, holding up a hand. “You boys can bicker later. Loki, where is Steve?”

Tony can feel Loki shift behind him, restless and tense. “He’s being held in a compound in Lagos. They are trying to find the secret of the serum that runs in his veins, but he was unharmed and sedated when I left. However, our little performance may have made his stay much less comfortable. I know Amora. She is a vengeful creature, and she lacks finesse. She may yet harm him.”

“Let’s go,” Tony says, but Loki holds him in place, and he tilts his head to the side to attempt a glare. “What?”

“Stark, you and your allies are weak, your armour damaged. I have seen Moonstone cut through steel with a single bolt. You should take the time to rest and regroup, and strike before dawn while their soldiers sleep. Your captain is strong; he can endure a little pain while you ensure your victory.”

“We can sleep on the way,” Tony says stubbornly, pulling out of Loki’s grasp, but stops short when a fleck of gold appears before him, expanding outwards until it shows an aerial view of São Paulo, of all things.

“With me here,” Loki says, “there is no need to fly.”

Tony stops, then turns to stare at him. Loki’s face is placid, expression patient, but there’s something lurking behind his eyes that Tony can’t quite puzzle out. When he blinks, it’s been replaced by exasperation.

“This is your asset?” Rhodey asks.

“Are we trusting him?” Clint adds, and Tony stares at Loki, measuring the tiredness in him and knowing that it could easily be a ruse. He wonders what Steve would do, in his shoes, but he knows the answer; he’d try to get the best intel that he could, and he’d listen to his teammates. Tony wasn’t doing either particularly well right now.

“Give JARVIS the coordinates,” he says, finally. “Let him look it over, see what we can get off the satellite feeds. I want the names and aliases of everyone who’s been working together on this,
everything that you can give us. Rhodey and I will pry ourselves out of the armour, do some
repairs, and meet back here at 17:00. We can eat and make a plan.”

“Trust but verify?” Clint says, sounding somewhat less aggressive, and Tony nods at him. Clint
spares one last look for Loki before stalking out, and Natasha spares Tony a speaking look before
following, silent and terrifying as ever. He expects he’ll be hearing about this later; he’ll have to
pull out the good booze again.

Tony turns towards Bruce with an apologetic expression, but Bruce is already shaking his head,
expression one of wry, disbelieving amusement. “Why do I bother giving you advice?”

“Because you love me?” Tony says, trying for a grin.

Bruce looks at him with a flat expression. “I can’t fathom why.”

Tony quirks a grim smile at him, clapping him on the shoulder as a ruse to lean in and whisper a
file number in his ear, a.k.a. the project folder for Tony’s magical defence research. He flicks his
eyes over to Loki and Thor, arguing in hushed tones and a language Tony absolutely does not
know, before briefly touching his temple to Bruce’s.

“Thanks for the save,” he murmurs, and Bruce sighs, body slumping towards him. He’s hot, skin
fevered, fatigued. Tony tightens his fingers in Bruce’s blanket.

“Of course,” he huffs, then pulls away. “I guess I should put some clothes on and get down to the
lab.”

“Can I send Loki to bother you with his intel?” Tony asks, widening his eyes in what he’s been
told is a very fetching begging expression, and Bruce rubs at his mouth tiredly.

“You want to leave Loki where he can piss off the other guy?” Then he shakes his head. “No,
that’s the point. I’m the prison guard.”

“No, you’re the other brain on the team and Loki’s right; I’ve got some tech wrangling to do
before we ship out, even if it’s only to amp up one of the secondary suits a bit.”

Bruce scratches at his brow with the thumb that isn’t holding his blanket on, eyebrows raised.
“Yeah, okay.” He turns to the bickering brothers. “Loki, you’re with me. And Thor, you know the
rules about the lab.”

“Yes, your ‘fine equipment’ does not appreciate my power,” Thor grumbles, the words a filthy
curse in his mouth as he spits them out. He’s really not feeling the tech today, Tony can tell.

Tony leaves Loki to deal with him, turning purposefully towards the elevator and taking off before
anyone else can waylay him. He has the suit follow him, and he can hear Rhodey and the War
Machine armour heading up the rear, the clank and the reliable military clip. Tony braces himself
for the interrogation he knows is coming. Unlike Loki, Rhodey never promised not to use Tony’s
aversion to being boxed in against him. Instead, he waits patiently until they’re inside the closed
elevator to speak, eyes never leaving the closed doors of the elevator.

“Why am I suddenly sure that your ‘common disagreement’ with Steve wasn’t common at all?” He
sounds resigned, grudgingly amused, and Tony does not answer. He trains his eyes on the elevator
doors as well, neither daring to flinch first.

“You let him touch you.”
“Rhodey,” Tony begins, sighing, but Rhodey cuts him off with a hand. He turns his body turning to face Tony, loose and rolling with disbelief.

“Fucking hell, you’re literally sleeping with the enemy.”

Tony makes a face, thankful for the elevator ding. He waves a hand as he steps out and heads for the workshop stairs. “In my defence,” he says, “Pepper told me to. And anyway, ‘enemy’ is kind of harsh, don’t you think?”

“Do you know how many people he’s killed?” Rhodey says, waving an impassioned hand, and Tony rolls his eyes at him.

“Do you know how many we’ve killed?” he retorts, putting his hand on the palm scanner. “If death is how you measure heroism, then heroes we are not.”

“That’s not the same,” Rhodey protests, but Tony ignores him, clapping his hands and reaching out to pat an excited Dummy wheeling by and waving an arm.

“Daddy’s home,” he calls. “J, what’s the damage?”

“The combatant Mr. Laufeyson called Moonstone did significant damage to the armour, sir. It will take at least four hours to repair the shell and mechanics and replace all of the weapons’ capabilities you released, not even considering the damage to the wiring which has yet to be catalogued.”

“Can it be ready by midnight?”

“I believe so, sir. I would recommend you look at the helmet personally, however; I still cannot access the display. I cannot run diagnostics to see the extent of the damage.”

“And none of the other suits are comparable in field tests,” Tony grumbles, rubbing a hand over his face. He glances over at Rhodey, who is already poking at the sparking elbow joint of the War Machine armour. There’s a long black Gerber sticking out of it, and Tony whistles low.

“That Barnes is a piece of work,” he says, and Rhodey grunts as he yanks the knife out.

“You’re telling me.”

“I’d recommend just taking off the entire firing mechanism,” he says, pointing to Rhodey’s halved shoulder guns. “You’ll have to go without looking like a poorly dressed tank.”

“You’re just jealous,” Rhodey says, and Tony snorts.

“If the military knew what elegance in design was, we would have never needed Iron Man,” he retorts. He pulls the helmet off of the suit and lets JARVIS walk it over to the rig to do the heavy duty repair. A hissing breath escapes between his teeth when he sees the damage. “If this had taken any more hits, it would have gone through my actual occipital. I would be blind, maybe dead.”

“Loki said she can shoot through steel,” Rhodey says, shrugging as he fights with the gun rigging with a little muscle from Dummy. “Seriously, can we talk-”

“We can’t take her. She was holding back because she’s not in charge and Loki was grandstanding, but if Amora lets her loose she could do some real damage. We’ll have to put Thor or the Hulk on her.” Tony sits down on a stool and pushes off the workbench, wheeling over to the display controls. He pulls up the battle footage. “Send this to Bruce, show him the suit damage. He can
factor it in to whatever intel Loki gives him.”

“And the metadata?” JARVIS prompts. Good old JARVIS.

“Yeah, give him everything.”

“Done, sir.”

Tony wheels back over to the helmet. “This is trashed, J. It’s not just the shell; the wiring is fried to shit. The display’s riddled with dead pixels.” He taps his fingers against his chin, thinking. “Can we retrofit fit the helmet from the Mark 49?”

“We can, sir. The design won’t flow in the way you prefer, but I can adjust the paint colour accordingly at the very least.”

“You know me, baby, I can make anything work,” Tony says. He considers how long the retrofit will take, then shrugs; probably under an hour. He pushes off the workbench again, spinning around to survey the workshop. “Hold down the fort, boys. I’m gonna shower. Have the helmet ready for retrofit when I get back.” He glances down at himself, then scratches the back of his neck. His fingers come away flaked with dried blood, as expected. “Loki may have healed me, but he didn’t clean off the side effects.”

“You were bleeding and you didn’t tell anyone,” Rhoday says flatly, waving a screwdriver at him. “Why am I not surprised.”

“If you need help, JARVIS is almost as good as I am,” Tony says, winking at the nearest security cam. “You know your way around. I’ll be back in a few.”

“You’re an ass,” Rhody says, and Tony grins at him and steps out of the workshop, heading up the stairs and towards the penthouse suite. He measures out the battle as he goes, considering weaknesses and gaps in the fight, where to place who. They’re outpowered, he knows, but that’s never stopped them before. He’ll just have to play the board carefully.

He thinks, briefly, of the argument that he and Cap would likely be having if it were someone else who had been taken. He thinks of the way that Cap bites his lip when he erases something he doesn’t like, the mountainous planes of him hunched over acid free paper. He thinks of the way he gestures in battle, direct and two fingered, body strung with potential energy where Tony is kinetic, chaotic, tumbling. Rivers carve mountains, Tony knows. They cut into them, form valleys and cliffs.

A month ago, Steve and Tony had sat on the couch and eaten handfuls of popcorn while he’d introduced Steve to the wonders of Ghostbusters. Bruce and Thor had popped up halfway through and sat in, heavy shapes settling into the armchairs. Steve had been entranced, as he always is with every film. His blue eyes had been wide and enraptured, and at the big battle scene he’d clamped a hand on Tony’s knee without thinking about it, leaning forward in his seat towards the screen in the dark, the radiant light flickering across his high cheekbones, the long perfect line of his nose. Steve watched movies on movie nights, but Tony watched Steve. His reactions were always more interesting than reliving the classics.

Tony can remember the weight of that hand on him, warm and flexing in surprise at each unexpected blow. Steve was sunlight and warmth where Tony was night and metal, cold and precise and clear. They were reckless differently, in ways that chafed each other at the fetters, loved differently, fought differently. Steve was everything…he wasn’t.
Tony rubs a hand over his mouth and walks through the bedroom into the ensuite, shedding his clothes and tossing them into the laundry basket as he moves through the room. Loki is sitting on the marble slab of the sink counter, ankles crossed and swinging, and Tony takes a moment in the doorway to stare at him, the easy grace and the smile. He glances down at the floor, and Tony has a moment of déjà vu, mind flicking back to that first moment in the tower. Tony had stripped his suit as Loki watched, and he’d glanced away, almost demure. He’d been smiling then, too.

“Who’s Bruce talking to?” Tony asks, sighing. He moves to test the water, unabashedly naked, and ignores Loki’s half-lidded eyes on him. Mostly.

“Me,” Loki says, shrugging. “He will get the information he needs.”

“Not if he’s running scans,” Tony observes, watching for Loki’s flashing grin. He frowns when it doesn’t come.

“You don’t seem overly worried for your captain,” Loki says, and Tony stills, tension sinking into his shoulders like sand. “And you have been circling each other like feral animals. Yet I have seen your interactions, before, and there was affection and tenderness where now there is avoidance and tension.”

Tony licks his lips and steps into the shower, pulling the glass closed behind him as a clear barrier between them. The water is hot enough to redden his skin, dried blood swirling around the drain as he tips his head under the rush of the waterfall spout. He closes his eyes and lets the water run over them.

“I’m not sure I understand,” Loki tries again. “If you both-”

“What are you doing?” Tony says flatly, slicking his hair back. He opens his eyes and turns around, but Loki is a green and black blur behind the fogged glass. He reaches for the shampoo.

“I did not intend to overstep,” Loki says, slowly. He sounds wary, but Tony ignores this in favour of a quick scrub down, running the soap over his body with efficiency. He’d wanted a shower to calm himself down, to centre himself before heading out to battle again. Clearly the universe had no intention of letting that happen.

He puts himself through a rinse once he’s sure he’s rid himself of blood, running his hands over his skin to check for any remaining tackiness. Then he realises he’s stalling, trying to avoid getting out of the shower with Loki still sitting on the counter.

“Throw me a towel,” Tony says, suddenly uncomfortable with Loki in the room. Instead, the shower door opens, and Loki stands in it, head tilted slightly to the side. He holds a towel in one hand, eyes searching, and Tony shuts off the spray and takes it from him with more force than necessary.

“I’ve provoked you.”

“Yeah, real observant of you.” Loki flinches back, just the slightest shift away, and Tony closes his eyes, hating himself. “I just can’t get invested. Okay?”

“I am untrustworthy,” Loki says, sounding bitter, and Tony processes that leap. He files it away to examine later.

“No,” he says, shaking his head. He steps out of the shower, towel wrapped around him, and pads back out towards the bedroom. He grabs a small towel for his hair on the way out. “I mean, I don’t trust you, but no. I wasn’t talking about you.”
He glances back at Loki, leaning against the bathroom doorway. His arms are crossed across his chest, brow furrowed, and Tony wonders if human body language can really be applied to Loki, if he’s projecting an image for manipulation or his defensiveness is real. Cursing himself, Tony moves back towards him, slipping into his space and leaning in to meet his eyes.

“I can’t understand why you’re doing this,” Tony says quietly, and watches Loki open to him, body going lax and expression shifting. “I don’t know what you get out of it, what you want in return.”

Loki smiles wryly, eyes dropping to half-mast. He looks at Tony through his eyelashes. “Would you believe me if I said a kiss?”

Tony sneers and turns away, rubbing his hair dry. He rummages in the drawer for a pair of briefs, tossing them on the bed and then heading to the closet. Something comfortable, natural fibres in case of damage breaching the suit, he thinks. He has no idea how this mission will go, but he knows from experience that comfortable clothes make fighting easier in and out of the suit and that man-made fibres mean third degree burns if things happen to go south.

“Thor thinks you’re lonely,” he says conversationally, “but also that you have some big plot in the works. He didn’t seem too concerned about it, though, so good job on that one.” He pulls a cotton Henley off a hanger with his free hand, the other still tousling his hair with the towel. He also grabs a pair of blue jeans.

“But,” he says, stepping out of the closet, “I think it’s simpler than that.”

Loki watches him with a raised eyebrow, expression equal parts irritated and amused. “Oh?”

“You’re a grandstanding asshole and you like an audience. Bonus if that audience can actually track your crazy, see a method to the madness or call you out on your shit. Then the fun is trying to outwit them.”

Loki smiles and dips his head, and Tony takes his distraction as opportunity to pull on his briefs, trying hard for casual and probably missing the mark by a mile. When he glances over his shoulder, Loki isn’t even looking at him, and Tony rolls his eyes at himself and pulls on his jeans.

“When my mother passed,” Loki says, and Tony’s fingers come to a stop on the zipper, “I felt it. That’s not unusual; we were both magic wielders, and she had trained me. We were…close.”

Tony pulls his shirt on and tugs the hem over his stomach, silent as he waits for the rest of it. He puts on his watch, turns back for a pair of socks. Loki is looking at his hands, clearly somewhere far away from here, and Tony wishes desperately that he had Steve’s ability to look invested and sympathetic at the overemotional drop of a hat.

“In that moment, some part of her came to me. I could see what she saw; eternity, stretching out before me and in every direction. I understood, finally.” He laughs, a melancholy sort of thing, then glances up to meet Tony’s eyes. He smiles at whatever he sees there, and Tony stays frozen as Loki looks away again, out over the city. “I had resented her, for some time, for not warning me of my fate. For allowing it to happen, or perhaps even encouraging it; it was she who granted me the throne, in Thor’s exile. But in that moment, I understood. It was like…” He pauses, eyes narrowing as he considers Tony, halfway to the armoire and held in place, lest he might break the spell of whatever this is. “It is like asking someone why they did not warn you of a crescendo in one of your metal songs.”

Tony considers this, then takes the last few steps to the sock drawer. He pulls out the first pair he sees, then slides the drawer shut and walks up to Loki. His gaze is heavy, and Tony waits patiently
for him to finish speaking.

“I did not care for what I saw.”

“What,” Tony says, trying for levity, “the genocide or the loneliness?” Loki’s expression shifts through surprise, outrage, and amusement before finally settling on wry and chiding. Tony points past him, and Loki raises an eyebrow and tilts so that Tony can pass. Their noses are almost touching as Tony edges by him, and he fights the impulse to lean in, to let Loki push him back against the wall and take.

Tony opens the cabinet and pulls out his deodorant.

“I am meant to be the discordant note,” Loki says absently, watching Tony’s ministrations with some bemusement. He leans in to sniff Tony’s mousse, then wrinkles his nose. “A villain is a predictable role. I am the God of Chaos, of Mischief, of Fire. I am meant to be a bright bolt of colour in the dull weave.”

“The soloist,” Tony says, meeting Loki’s eyes in the mirror.

“Yes,” Loki says, that damn note of approval back in his voice again. It’s both patronising and seductive, which Tony is sure is intentional.

“So what,” Tony says, gesturing with the comb, “I’m a quick bang for shock value?”

“Wouldn’t it be more shocking if I was loyal, if I stayed true to you and only you?” Loki simpers, eyes crinkled with mirth. Tony rolls his eyes in the most exaggerated way possible.

“So, you became boring and predictable because it was unpredictable for you as the God of Chaos, and now you’re switching sides because you were getting…too predictable?”

Loki grins, following Tony back into the bedroom and watching him pull on his socks. He floats the towels back into the bathroom with a wave of his hand, and Tony tries not to think about how domestic this all is while he laces his sneakers.

“Or perhaps I was bored,” Loki says, and Tony levels him with an incredulous expression. “I’ve proven my point to Odin, Frigga was dead. What else did I have left to do?”

“You know,” Tony says conversationally, heading for the door, “I have no idea if you’re shitting me or not with any of these answers.”

“And you’ll never know.”

Tony pauses with his hand on the knob, eyes fixed on the small crack between the frame and the door. He takes a breath, measuring his next words. “You know, as a pretty good liar myself, I know any good lie has a grain of truth in it. I think your problem is that you’ve forgotten how to measure your own bullshite.”

“You lecture from an equal station. Or do you think I haven’t noticed the way you treat the others with patience, with kindness and familial grace, yet when it comes to the captain you shrink away as though he is a stranger? If you think suppression will protect you from your emotion, I can promise you that instead it will build until it becomes a deluge and swallows you whole. And then what will you do?”

“I have to do this!” Tony snaps, slapping his hand against the door. It knocks fully closed again with a heavy thump. The room begins to shrink in on him, blackness building as his breath picks
up, and he sways with it, trying to hold it together. “He’s gone, and I’m in charge, and I have to be enough. I have to get him back. It would ruin me. He could ruin me.”

“Sir,” JARVIS cuts in, “shall I have Mr. Laufeyson removed?”

Tony stiffens at the feeling of a hand between his shoulder blades, a tingling calm spreading out from it in a slow creep that makes his hair stand on end. He lashes out, batting Loki’s hand away and shoving at him until his wrists are caught, held fast within inhuman strength.

“Get off!” he wheezes, eyes swimming. JARVIS is telling him something, something important. He’s telling Loki to let go. “Don’t fucking magic me, you spineless piece of shit. Let go of me now.”

“I promised I would not use this against you,” Loki says calmly, but his fingers tighten around Tony’s wrists. He presses his forehead to Tony’s breathing deep. “With me, come now.”

Tony fights him, knees weakening, but Loki holds him easily. He lets Tony sink to the floor, then protects him with his body, breathing slow and holding Tony as he tries to match him. “What the hell do you want?” Tony snarls, struggling again, but Loki only shakes his head. He rolls his skull back and forth along Tony’s, skin cool and dry.

“I cannot tell you yet,” Loki says, sounding weary. His fingers tighten on Tony’s wrists again, reflexive and frustrated. It’s never enough to bruise. “I must convince you to trust me. Come now, Stark, breathe. That’s it, slower now. Let me help you.”

“No magic,” Tony bites out, and Loki sighs.

“I have not, Stark. Focus. Match my breath.”

“I know how to square breathe,” Tony gripes, but follows Loki’s breath anyway. His pulse is thundering in his ears, almost too loud to hear. He feels like he’s going to be sick. “Fuck. You did this on purpose.”

“I did not intend to trigger a panic response, no,” Loki says, sounding offended. “However, if you entered into battle tonight with such a conflicted mind, you would have lost. I need the logical, pragmatic genius. It was better to excise the wound now than to wait.”

“We’re outmatched,” Tony says, still panting a little, and Loki puts one of Tony’s hands on his throat. He can feel Loki’s pulse under his hands, slow and steady, and it grounds him within the room. “JARVIS, Mind Riot?”

“It is 3:47 PM on Thursday, April 7th in New York City. You are currently in Avengers Tower, accompanied by Loki Laufeyson. You are in the penthouse. I have notified Agent Romanov of the situation, and she is on standby in the living room should you require her assistance. Shall I begin the count?”

“No, Loki’s got it,” Tony says, using Loki’s pulse to slow his breathing. “Fuck. Tell Nat we’re good here for now, and thanks.”

“She says she would like to wait and look you over herself, as per your prior arrangement.”

“Right,” Tony mutters, body slumping against the door. “Great.”

“A fine choice,” Loki deadpans, and Tony laughs at the wry tone of his voice. “Shall I…”
Tony blinks and meets his gaze through clumped lashes, eyes still damp. His pulse jumps in his throat for entirely different reasons, and he slides his hand into the hair at Loki’s nape and holds him there, watching the way his pupils dilate, the way his fingers tighten on Tony’s wrist. When Tony tilts his head slightly to kiss him, soft and chaste, he keeps his eyes open to watch Loki melt into it, his eyes closing as he leans in. He tastes like mountain snow, cold and sweet on the tongue, and his brows furrow in confusion when Tony pulls away.

“What?” he says, voice barely above a whisper, and Tony smiles and presses a kiss to the corner of his mouth.

“Thank you.” He touches Loki’s cheek with his nose, breathing in the scent of leather and pine and earth. “You’re uniquely suited to understand my position, and we both know it.”

“Fair hair and brawn?” Loki says, sounding disgusted, and Tony laughs. “I will not advise you, as I am ill-suited for it. I would only ask that you maintain your clarity in the battle ahead.”

“Oh, baby,” Tony purrs, simpering, “you’re worried about me.”

“I have need of you still,” Loki parries, but his voice is soft. He presses a quick kiss to Tony’s lips, then moves to stand, pulling Tony up with him as though he’s made of paper. “Your assassin will become restless, and you have repairs to make.”

“That I do,” Tony agrees, wiping at his face. He strikes a pose, seductive and eye-batting and intentionally ridiculous. It spurs a mocking smile in Loki that he counts as a win. “How do I look?”

“Like a fool.”

Tony laughs and throws open the door, ready to face the scowling Natasha, the cadre of supervillains, an injured Steve.

I’m compromised, he thinks, but it isn’t anything to fuss over. He’s had enough anxiety for the day.

“Come on, we're going for a drive.”

Steve glances up from the Times, smiling reflexively at the sight of Tony leaning against the door jamb. His arms are folded across his chest, a crisp red shirt rolled up to the elbows. A black tie sits loose around his collar, the top buttons undone to reveal the soft V of his collarbones. He looks mischievous, and beautiful, and Steve takes a sip of his apple juice to forestall a flush at the brunt of Tony’s affection and attention beaming down on Steve from on high.

“Where are we going?” Steve asks, playing along, and Tony's wide smile turns into a wink.

"You'll see."

Steve knows from experience that Tony's plots usually end up being wondrous and strange, so he lets Tony drag him down to the garage without protest. Tony had taken him to Sleep No More last month, the two of them running around like mad creatures in the narrow halls, chasing after Shakespearian characters come to life. The month before that he'd driven Steve up to The Cloisters for a closed tour, then left him to sketch tapestries to his heart's content while Tony sat in the shade, sipping a lemonade and fiddling with his tablet. Steve isn't sure what to make of these adventures, only that they always make themselves known when he is feeling particularly sorry for himself and sleep begins to evade him again. He suspects JARVIS's hand in the plot.
"Mustang or Aston?" Tony asks, waving a hand. Steve grins at him and points at the '65 K-Code, and Tony obligingly unlocks the doors and gets in.

"You know, I never got my flying car," Steve says conversationally, folding down into the seat.

"It's like putting a giraffe into a box," Tony mutters, staring at him. Steve scoffs and shuts the car door. "Flying cars are overrated, baby. The new America is all about hover boards and AI."

"I don't have a hover board either," Steve teases, but he settles back into the seat and watches Tony fiddle with the controls, content to subject himself to his friend's whims.

"Sinatra?"

"No," Steve says, shaking his head. It's an old game, but they have yet to run out of new things for Steve to learn about. Tony looks at him with mock indignation.

"What kind of New Yorker are you?" he demands. He pushes play, and the swelling sounds of a big brass band envelop them, loud and triumphant.

"Leave me alone. I am a senior citizen."

Tony laughs and pulls out of the garage.

The traffic is surprisingly light for New York City, especially approaching rush hour. Tony takes them uptown along 1st to avoid the madness of midtown, then pulls onto the FDR. All the while, Steve stares out the window, watching the city slip by. The Upper East Side is one of those neighbourhoods that still looks the same in a lot of places; the old buildings and the women in bright floppy hats, men in suits and little delis on the corner. The rich live the same as they ever has, he supposes. It’s the rest of the world that has to change.

“What’re we going to the Bronx for?” Steve says, voice a little rough with his accent. It always comes out when he thinks about the old days, and he ducks his head to avoid Tony’s grin.

“You’ll see,” Tony says, happy crow's feet at the corners of his eyes, and Steve reaches a hand out without thinking, brushing a thumb against his cheekbone. Tony’s eyes widen, and Steve coughs and pulls his hand away.

“You had an eyelash,” he mutters, glancing back out the window. A figure stands ahead, off to the side, and Steve squints at the silhouette. It’s small, but growing larger as they speed towards it. The highway is empty, now, except for a few cars on the other side of the barrier. There’s nothing but oncoming traffic, and a man on the side of the road.

“Steve, I-”

“Tony,” Steve says, suddenly unsettled, “where are we going?”

“I told you,” Tony says, and the figure raises a long object with one arm, cylindrical. Steve sees the flash. “You’ll see-”

He throws himself over Tony just as the glass shatters, the car flipping over against the barrier and tumbling, hitting an oncoming SUV and spinning wildly on its back like a beetle before a second car hits it back into the concrete barrier, flipping it over again. He should have blacked out in the pinball, he knows, but instead he watches with numb horror as the car stops moving, Tony as lifeless as a ragdoll under his hands. There’s blood dripping from Tony’s temple where he cracked his head on the window, and Steve reaches for him, weakly, disoriented.
The figure stalks closer. A black mask covers his face, long, greasy strings of dark hair hanging over his eyes. He moves like a professional; unstoppable, efficient. He is coming to kill them, Steve knows. He can feel this in his chest, in his bones, heavy as lead. Panic bubbles up from his throat, accompanied by the copper tang of blood.

“Barnes?” Tony mutters, sounding confused, and Steve waves a weak hand towards Tony, trying desperately to move, to do something.

The man shoots Tony in the chest, and the bullet ricochets off the arc reactor and into Tony’s arm. He screams weakly, voice hoarse, already resigned to his fate.

“Tony,” Steve tries.

The man shoots Tony between the eyes. Blood splatters all up and down Steve’s neck and shoulder, blood and tissue speckled across his skin. He’s screaming Tony’s name, but he can’t move. He can’t feel anything.

The man shoots Steve in the chest, and pain blossoms out into a bright flower. It burns everything in its path, crackling out from the core of him until it consumes him from the inside out.


The man takes off his mask, and James Buchannan Barnes stares down at him, a familiar grin spread across his face. His eyes are empty, cold and clear as a fishbowl.

“Miss me, Stevie?” the man asks. Someone is laughing, high and hysterical.

He shoots Steve between the eyes, and darkness begins to bleed into the edges of his vision. It comes to him like an old friend, warm and welcome, and then it swallows him whole.

Chapter End Notes

A shorter chapter, mostly because I am a college student and classes are starting soon. My updates may, admittedly, become less prolific until December. I apologise in advance.

Loki came back, for those of you who’ve missed him. Now you can see that he was off plotting, of course; where or what else would he have been doing? And yes, re: some of the comments I got, I do kinda feel bad for Steve. I’m trying to make him be less of a dick and usually the way that happens in real life is that the universe makes someone appreciate how good they’ve got it by making everything terrible for them for a while. So, this is me, serving as the universe.

A cookie for anyone who noticed the chapter naming rules before this one, which I think is really obvious and sort of ruins the game. Did anyone notice it? I don’t think anyone’s noticed it yet. Thank you so much to everyone who has bookmarked or commented or kudos-ed this story! I really do love feedback, which is why I reply to all the comments I get. Fic is kind of a sandbox for me to train my writing muscles and also work out Big Questions I have about canon all at once, so it’s really delightful when other people vibe with what’s going on in my head. I like to hear what people
think about what I’m trying to do with the characters and the world, so please continue to share your thoughts with me. I appreciate it.

Also, a cookie for anyone who recognised the Cap quote: https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/564x/ca/9f/32/ca9f3231cb0fd4cd3bd0d5a6274580b5.jpg
War Pigs

Chapter Notes

Okay, so there's a lot going on in this chapter, but I want to warn for the following in particular:

PTSD galore
canon-typical violence
torture?
consent issues?
discussion of consent issues

I think that's it. Stay safe everybody.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The common kitchen is buzzing with talk and laughter when Tony and Rhodey step out of the elevator, hands aching and smudged with black grease. Tony expects Steve’s chiding voice telling him to wash his hands, knowing better, hating that no one says it and thankful that no one says it all at once. They’d bicker, about whether or not Tony had already washed them, or perhaps if he’d done a fine enough job. He stops in the living room, one hand on the back of a couch, watching the team bob and weave around each other as they unpack brown paper bags full of takeout. They’re a well-oiled machine, and the missing intercooler is conspicuous.

“Stark, come look at this,” Loki calls, and Tony goes, if only to prevent his mind from doubling back into another death spiral. He thinks of ants, and Pi, and significance. Then he shakes his head at himself.

“We’re in trouble,” Bruce says, looking grim. He’s sitting at the head of the table with Loki at his left, both of them bent over a StarkPad. “And SHIELD can’t help us overseas anymore. We’re on our own, here.”

“Give it to me,” Tony says, dropping down into the seat on Bruce’s right. Natasha puts a carton of food in front of him, a pair of chopsticks sticking out of it, and Tony stares at it in confusion for a half second before processing it as pad kra pao.

“Eat,” she says, sparing him a telling look, and Tony grins feebly while his stomach reminds him that he’s had nothing but coffee and a smoothie since last night. “There’s potstickers, too.”

“Love you, too,” Tony says, blowing her a kiss. Her indifference is loud and projected, and Tony grins at her retreating back. “We’re outpowered, I know. Did anybody call Coulson to check in?”

Clint raises a hand, a long-suffering expression on his face. “He says you’re a pain in his ass, and Loki can’t be seen by anyone, so he better use some magic mumbo jumbo or something if he’s gonna help us. Which I would like to file an objection to. Again.”

“Unfortunately,” Loki says, a grimace spreading across his face, “he will get his wish. I cannot be seen on the battlefield, and Amora knows my magic like no other.”
“You need to be dead,” Natasha says, sipping on a bowl of tom kha gai. Loki nods at her once.

“Why?”

Loki narrows one eye, a scrunched expression spreading across his face that seems ill fit to his usual elegance. He’s relaxed, Tony realises, surprised. “It is better to hold something in reserve when you are at a disadvantage.”

Natasha considers this. “Who are we up against, then?”

“This,” Bruce says, and spins the tablet down the table to Natasha. He points at Thor, who’s pouting at the end of the table, flecks of green curry in his beard. He has an entire collection of bamboo skewers in front of him, and is working his way through another batch of satay. “The Executioner is a power match for you. The other guy can take him out, but we’ve also got Moonstone to worry about, because as Tony showed me, the suits can’t handle her energy blasts. And then we’ve got Amora.”

“I fucking hate magic,” Tony grumbles, and is rewarded with an emphatic nod from Bruce. “Something tells me that isn’t all. We’ve already seen what Barnes can do.”

“I called Sam Wilson,” Natasha says, not looking up from her soup. “We need help.”

Tony raises an eyebrow at Loki. “And you’re gonna go get him?”

“I can,” Loki allows, looking thoughtful. “The soldier is easily defeated by your Hulk, or even Thor.”

“Not if we want him alive,” Clint says, then winces and glances over at Bruce. “Sorry.”

“No,” Bruce says, shaking his head. “You’re right. But we’ve seen him take out Widow, Falcon, and Cap. We need a way to take him down quickly and safely. Or, as safe as we can.”

“I can handle him,” Clint grumbles.

“No, you can’t,” Bruce counters, shaking his head. “If he can catch the shield, he can catch your arrows. You’d need a perfect opening, and with his enhanced capabilities we don’t know how much voltage is needed to take him down without killing him. And you’ll have another job.”

“Doombots,” Natasha says with a grimace, poking at the StarkPad with her smallest finger. “Can we call Richards and Storm in on this?”


“Glass houses,” Tony mutters. He rubs a hand over his face. “We’ve never actually worked with them in the field. Cap and I have been talking about building bridges. The hero community is getting bigger, and we’re not talking to each other. It makes for bad situations when real disasters happen. Going out into the field with an unknown entity for the first time ever will be a shitshow, and we all know it. We don’t always play well together, let alone with others.”

“Let’s table Barnes for now,” Rhodey says, leaning forward. “What aren’t you telling us?”

Loki waves a hand and the tablet slides towards Tony, displacing his half-eaten carton of food. He glances over the image; it’s one of the escaped inmates from Pleasant Hill, and the more Tony reads his file the more his hair stands on end. He slides the tablet over to Rhodey wordlessly.
“You cannot face him,” Loki says, grave. His eyes dart meaningfully to Tony’s chest, to the reactor, and Tony covers it with a hand without thinking. He taps his fingers against the crystal casing. “You must destroy his machine, and perhaps even his mind. To let him escape unscathed is to let him fight another day.”

“What the hell are we gonna do?” Rhodey demands, brow furrowed. He looks at Tony. “He’s right. One hit could kill you, Tones.”

“What manner of sorcery does this foe possess?” Thor cuts in, albeit begrudgingly. “I have seen Stark’s armour withstand much.”

“Meet Bruno Hasegawa, alias The Melter. Wow, why are supervillains so bad at naming themselves? Use a little imagination.” Tony offers Thor the StarkPad, who only eyes it distastefully. Natasha takes it from him, then snags a spring roll from under Clint’s nose.

“Apparently S.I. – which really, in my defence, was Pepper – pissed him off with this big deal we just did in Japan. We were both competing for a piece of the newly expanded Japanese defence budget, and we swiped some big cash from him when we secured the contract a few months ago. Pepper just came back from hammering out the fine print. So he built something specifically to destroy me, which is, uh. Pretty good job, there. J, can you send this to Pepper? And put Happy on full alert. Oh, God, she’s gonna hate me for that, but this guy has a huge rage boner and she’s gotta be high on his shitlist.”

“Already done, sir.”

“He can melt any kind of metal?” Natasha says, brow furrowed. “Only metal? How does that not melt the flesh off, too?”

“Uh.” Bruce scratches at his brown with a thumb, then glances at Tony. “I’m not really sure. It looks like SHIELD wasn’t sure what to make of his tech, but they didn’t ask for help because… well, because they’re idiots.”

“Surely this machine will not work against mjölnir,” Thor protests.

Loki sneers at him. “Do you wish to test your boast and lose?”

“We can ask him how his tech works when we take him down,” Clint says, waving a pot sticker. “How do we take him down without him killing Tony, exactly?”

“I have something.” Tony says, slowly. The very thought of it chills him, makes him want to retch up all of the rice noodles and shrimp and vegetables he’s just consumed, but he maintains a steady hand as he pulls out his phone. “I had all the prototypes destroyed except for one, but I can get to it. Pepper can get to it.” He grimaces. “We can use it on Barnes, too.”

“Stark,” Natasha says, expression grim, and Tony spreads his hands. Of course she would know immediately what he was talking about.

“It’d be yours, so it’s up to you,” Tony says. “It makes sense.”

Natasha narrows her eyes at him, measuring his resolve before nodding, once. Tony swallows, then punches in Pepper’s number.

“Excuse me,” he says, pushing away from the table. He heads down the hall to the bathroom and shuts himself in.

“What?” Pepper answers, sounding harried. “I hope you know that Happy is making my life a
“living hell, I hope you’re pleased—”

“I need the thing.”

“What thing?” she snaps, and Tony closes his eyes and tries to get it together. “I’m trying to get to a very important meeting with the EPA, Tony—”

“The thing Obie—...the thing I told you to put somewhere no one would ever find it, okay?”

The rustle and clack of Pepper moving somewhere at full speed with her entourage stops immediately. “Tony, what’s going on?”

“I told JARVIS to send you the files,” Tony grumbles. “Look, it’s bad. They have Cap, and Loki is supposed to be dead, and we’re outmatched, okay? Between Hasegawa and Barnes and fucking magic and Asgardian assholes with superhealing, we need something that can quickly take people out, without...”

“Without taking them out,” Pepper finishes. Her voice shakes a bit, but she doesn’t hesitate, and Tony remembers all over again why he loved her, why he loves her, and deeply. “When do you need it?”

“We’re leaving around midnight.”

“I’ll come up before I leave for the day.”

“Thank you,” Tony breathes, sitting down on the toilet lid. He rubs at his forehead with his free hand.

“Tony,” Pepper says, very seriously now, “do you know what you’re doing?”

“No,” he whispers.

“No,” he says again. “I just...Steve’s probably being tortured right now. And I’m just sitting here.”

Pepper sighs, and Tony can hear her begin to move again, murmuring something to someone before putting the phone back to her ear. “He wouldn’t want you to go in guns blazing, and you know it. You’re not just sitting there. You’re strategizing.” She clears her throat a little, voice prim. “You know he hates when you just rush in.”

“You’re trying so hard not to smack talk right now,” Tony says, grinning a little.

“Steve Rogers is a coward and a bastard, and he doesn’t deserve you risking your life for him after everything he’s said and done,” Pepper says hotly, the dam bursting, and Tony laughs outright, and keeps on going. He laughs until his side aches and his cheeks ache, too.

“Sarah was a single mother,” he allows, and Pepper sniffs. “Honey, you know I have to.”

“I know nothing of the sort,” she says haughtily, and Tony smiles. “I’ll see you tonight. Should I order something?”

“We’re eating now,” Tony admits, “but I’ll probably be hungry again by the time you come up.” He clears his throat. “I’m giving it to Natasha.”

“Good,” Pepper says, sounding vicious, and Tony bares his teeth at the empty room. “Italian, from
that little place you like near Central Park West, and some cannoli’s.”

“I wouldn’t call Marea a little place,” Tony says, but Pepper steamrolls right over him, as always.

“You come home,” she says, and Tony swallows.

“Yes, dear.” He clears his throat. “I sense I’ll be strong-armed into a bit of rest, so I may be sleeping when you come by. Just wake me up, of course.”

“Of course.” She clears her throat as well, and Tony remembers this awkwardness. Neither of them were ever particularly good at emotions. “Will that be all, Mr. Stark?”

“That’ll be all, Miss Potts.”

“Goodbye, Tony.”

The line cuts out. Tony stares at the phone in his hands, breathes in. He can remember with uncomfortable clarity the anxiety in Pepper's voice every time he’d called her in the days before, terrified that some awful thing was happening to him and that he was making a last confession. The Battle of New York had changed things for both of them, mostly for the worse, and Tony can see now how much better their relationship is when Pepper only has to worry about her best friend and her boss dying, not her lover as well. It’s a distinction he might not have noticed a few years ago, but he’s learning. Pepper taught him a lot of things, in retrospect; patience, and how to listen, and honesty. He’s still working on that last one.

“Look at me, J, growing up.”

“Miracles happen every day, sir.”

“Rude.” Tony clears his throat and slides his phone back into his pocket, then goes ahead and uses the bathroom because might as well. When he gets back out, Sam Wilson is vomiting into the kitchen trash can, and Tony raises an eyebrow at Natasha, whose twitching mouth conveys the vaguest air of amusement. She hooks a thumb at Loki, who shrugs.

“It appears my methods of transportation did not agree with your comrade,” he explains, and Tony nods seriously.

“Yeah, laugh it up,” Wilson says, voice rough. Bruce hands him a glass of water, and Tony flops back down into his seat and polishes off the rest of his meal while Sam rinses his mouth out in the sink and gets himself settled. “We traded Cap for a genocidal psychopath?”

“Hold your tongue,” Thor warns, and Wilson looks at him, then at Natasha. Her insouciant shrug only seems to irritate him, which Tony can definitely understand.

“Sorry, did I walk into the twilight zone?” Wilson asks, glancing around.

Rhodey shrugs at him. “He’s helping us now, and we’ll shoot him later if we have to.”

“You will not!” Thor snarls, only to be stopped by the mysterious appearance of an uncomfortably familiar gag. He doesn’t even bother to fight with it, just glares murderously at an indifferent Loki.

“You’re gonna have to deal with that at some point,” Tony murmurs, knowing Loki will hear him. Loki ignores him, too. “Hypocrite. Let him go.”

Loki waves a hand, and the muzzle disappears. “I am not a maiden in need of defence.”
Thor throws up a hand and turns back to his food, brows perhaps permanently fused together given how hard he’s frowning. Tony makes a note to give him a wide berth.

“So where do you need me?” Wilson asks, and Natasha glances over at Tony for a moment before shrugging easily.

“You’re bait,” she says, in that flat, toneless way of hers. Wilson looks at her, eyebrows furrowed. “I need an opening to take down Hasegawa and Barnes. Your metal wings will be a shiny target for The Melter, but you’ll have to be annoying enough to keep his attention off of Tony.”

“He’ll die if he gets hit,” Bruce says, conveniently cleaning his glasses in his shirt so he doesn’t have to make eye contact with anyone, “so we’re keeping them as far apart as possible.”

“Okay,” Wilson says, slowly. He offers Tony a nod. “Lay it out for me, then.”

“Thor, I want you on Executioner. Hawkeye, it’s gonna be your job to take out as many doombots as possible while also keeping Amora too busy to hit. Stay out of range.”

“If we had more girls…” Natasha cuts in, and Tony sighs.

“I know.” He points at Bruce. “The other guy’s got Moonstone. She’s pretty hard to keep down, so we don’t have to worry so much about killing her. War Machine will be split between Barnes and doombot patrol. If you take down your target, join me in the compound. There’s a few human combatants inside, nothing I can’t handle, but we have no idea what state Cap is gonna be in when we get there. JARVIS has run scans and thinks he knows where they’re keeping him. The Iron Legion will be running assists wherever they’re needed and to whomever needs them. This is a rescue mission, first and foremost. No heroics, quick and dirty. We’re not working for arrests; SHIELD has no jurisdiction. We’re in, we find Cap, we’re out.”

“Amora will be more of a problem than you think,” Loki says, sounding irritated. Tony turns to smile sweetly at him.

“How long does it take for a spell you’ve cast to wear off after you die?”

Loki measures him, eyes narrowing. “Anywhere from immediate to a few days to never, depending on the complexity and the materials,” he allows. “I cannot make you impervious, Stark.”

“But you can make it so the rest of the team doesn’t want to worship at her feet, right?”

Loki’s mouth twists. “The colonel must remain unprotected. She has fought him, after my supposed demise. And she will be suspicious if your newest compatriot is also sporting protection, when she knows he does not work with you regularly. And I certainly cannot protect Thor.” He frowns, looking at his folded arms. “She will be suspicious regardless.”

“If Bruce is the only one, I’m cool with that,” Tony agrees. “If the Hulk gets twitterpattered, we’re gonna have a serious fucking problem.”

Bruce looks sick at the thought, and Loki looks at him. “She was in shock by the time you arrived, and did not engage you. It’s entirely possible for her to not have noticed a defensive spell. If you agree…?”

Bruce tilts his head to the side, considering. “You’d have to swear to its purpose.”

Loki furrows a brow, mouth twisting into a small smile as he examines Bruce. Something in Bruce’s face shifts ever so slightly, and Tony knows, somehow, that Loki has just said something
to him that no one else could hear. Then he dips his chin in acquiescence. “Later, once we’ve finished here. It is a complex spell.”

“Oh, really,” Natasha says, raising an eyebrow at Tony. Tony ignores her.

“You are forgetting someone.”

Tony blinks at Loki, then looks at Bruce. “Who?”

“Baron Wolfgang Von Strucker,” Bruce says, sparing Loki a glance. “Remember when Loki reappeared, he blew through a Hydra compound in Sokovia? We couldn’t figure out why. This is the guy who was running it.”

“He had my weapon,” Loki says primly. “I used magic and did not reveal myself, but I am unsure of what he suspects. If he knows, he knows what I can do to him, and so he has said nothing. I had thought he died when the building collapsed, so I was surprised to find he’d survived. He must have fled the battle like a coward.”

“What’s he do?” Wilson asks, propping one hip against the kitchen island.

Loki tilts his head to the side, easy. “He is a Hydra scientist, not a fighter. It is his creations and his men you must be wary of. His forces are weak now, but he has a few soldiers at his disposal. And he is no genius; nothing like Stark.” He flashes a bright grin at Tony, blindsiding him with the compliment. “His power, much like Victor in this particular instance, is mostly in number and the occasional surprise. Victor has not left Latveria, but his machines are there, as you know.”

“I can take care of Strucker, if he becomes a problem,” Tony says easily, waving a hand. “God, what a name. He sounds like a sandwich. He’s just a human scientist, right?”

“You are just a human scientist,” Loki says disapprovingly, and Tony winks at him.

“But you said I’m smarter than him.”

Loki looks nonplussed, and Bruce begins to laugh, quiet and shaking. Loki looks between them, a small crease between his brows. “What?”

“You’re gonna regret that comment when he’s still talking about it in a year,” Rhodey explains, resigned. “I’m regretting it already.”

“Oh, jealous, honey bear?” Tony says. He pushes up from the table, then claps his hands together. “Okay, we ship out at 23:00, prep however it is you wanna prep; nap a bit so you’re actually awake, inject some caffeine or something a little stronger, whatever floats your boat I don’t judge-”

“What about Hill?”

Tony pauses, turning to glance at Rhodey. “What about her?”

“We need someone on home base Tony.”

Tony licks his lips, swallows whatever else it is he wants to say. He glances at Natasha, her green eyes narrow as she tries to find the lay of the land, before pursing his lips. “Fine, I guess somebody call Hill. But I’m telling on her to Pepper.”

Rhodey snorts. “You’re a cruel, cruel man.”

“I know it.” He bats his eyelashes at Rhodey, then turns back to the table. “I’ve got some stuff to
take care of, you’ve all got stuff to take care of, everybody chop chop.”

He steps away from the table, noting Bruce following him but letting it slide in favour of walking towards the elevator. Bruce trails behind him in silence, but presses the button for the lab when they get in. He fiddles with his cuffs, making sure they’re rolled flat, then pushes a hand into his hair. Tony waits, used to Bruce’s habits by now; he’s always been a fidgeter.

“You want to look at what I’ve got on the anti-magic front.”

Tony shrugs. He hadn’t really been thinking about it, honestly, which is probably a bad sign. It means he trusts Loki to take care of him. The elevator doors open, and Tony follows Bruce into the lab, Bruce’s nervousness increasing as he walks up to one of the glass screens. He turns around and folds his arms across his chest.

“You have a problem.”

Tony tilts his head, furrowing his brows as he considers Bruce’s antsy shuffling. “What did he say to you?”

Bruce laughs, a nasty, bitter thing. It takes Tony aback a little; he forgets, sometimes, that Bruce is not nice. He is careful, because he is a loaded gun. He is polite and measured where Tony is rude and explosive, but that does not make him kind. It’s an easy mistake, and one he knows better than to make, but Bruce is so good at making himself disappear. He shrinks, until suddenly he can’t hide himself: supernova.

“Did you even think about the consequences if Loki gets attached to you?” Bruce asks, voice genuinely curious. He’s angry, Tony realises with a start. “One family spat turned into an intergalactic war, and Earth was the loser. People died, Tony.”

“You think I don’t know that—”

“He’s dangerous,” Bruce interrupts, “and now you’ve made his happiness contingent on you. Did you think about that? You could be all he has.”

Tony laughs incredulously, turning to poke at one of the energy output graphs on the glass displays. “Do you think everybody is in love with me?”

“Don’t act so naïve!” Bruce snaps. His heart rate monitor beeps, and Tony stills, puts his hands up, turns back. Bruce is visibly shaken, eyes more green than brown, and Tony swallows, waits. “You are a…a black hole, anyone too close to you just gets sucked in. And we don’t have to be in love with you for it to happen, it’s just an inevitability, like gravity.” Bruce’s voice is both incredulous and reverent, and Tony holds stock still and just takes it. He wonders if Bruce lectures him because he knows Tony has to take it, if he knows he is the only one with enough of Tony’s affection and respect to have him listen, enough bite to make the bark a real warning, to stop Tony from pushing too far. He’s always been clever, though, Tony knows. It’s what made Tony reach out to him in the first place.

“You make people feel special, and important, and worth something, and to find out that any of those things isn’t true, it’s a slap in the face.”

He’s breathing slowly, now, calming himself, and Tony waits to see if he’s done. He smiles, tries for glib.

“I have it on good authority I’m a narcissistic asshole with delusions of grandeur—”
“You are grand, Tony! You are everything you say you are, and so any scrap of attention is everything. You speak, and people really listen to you. They’re not just pretending because you’re famous, I mean they really listen. Do you have any idea how rare that is? Haven’t you ever wondered about that unshakeable loyalty you inspire, in everyone from old flames to paid employees? That’s not normal, Tony, that’s you.”

He’s shaking now, eyes bright and fevered, and Tony approaches him with open hands. “Okay, Brucie-Bear, come on. Breathe with me, okay?”

Bruce snarls, a little more Hulk than Bruce, but he lets Tony touch him, one hand on either side of his head. He breathes in slow, holds it, breathes out again. He waits for Bruce to calm himself. He waits for his own pulse to slow.

He doesn’t fear the Hulk, exactly. The Hulk knows him, loves him even. He’s part of Bruce, after all. He’s all the broken bits, the child abuse and the suppressed PTSD, the shaking anger left over from trauma that Bruce never talks about. Tony’s not even sure Bruce remembers half of the things that have happened to him, but he wouldn’t be surprised if he didn’t. The Hulk is a walking personification of C-PTSD, and both Bruce’s protector and his inner child love Tony. Perhaps, he thinks, Bruce has a point.

Still, that doesn’t mean he wants the Hulk to smash Bruce’s lab. Bruce would never really forgive him, for one. And Bruce’s version of payback was always a little too vindictive, a little too cruel to be a simple joke between friends.

“Natasha and I are on it,” he says. “If you don’t trust me, trust Nat. Okay?”

“I don’t trust her,” Bruce says, but he’s smiling as he says it.

“You something her, that’s for sure,” Tony mutters, which startles a laugh out of Bruce. It’s a calculated risk, but that’s all Tony is these days. “I’m being as careful as I can.”

“No, you aren’t,” Bruce retorts, but he straightens enough to pull out of Tony’s grasp. “This is going to end so badly.”

“You keep saying that,” Tony muses, “but I’m optimistic.”

“That’s always your problem,” Bruce replies, straightening his glasses. He moves over to a screen. “I think you should supplement your static and targeted anti-magic pulses with a kind of faraday cage.”

“Iron?” Tony says, looking over his shoulder and Bruce nods. “Oh, the irony. Iron Man in his Iron Tower-”

“Stop,” Bruce says, appalled, and Tony grins at him.

“It will take ages to retrofit the tower, ugh. And it’ll look ugly as sin if we do a temporary fix. Frankenstein’s giant cobbled iron cock.”

“Well,” Bruce says, “Pepper is already doing construction on the mansion. If you wanted a place to retreat to, should something happen…” He surveys Tony’s wince with an unsympathetic eye. “I know you have bad memories lodged there, but it’ll look different than you remember. And it might be time for us to expand a bit, if you’re thinking recruitment.”

“Why Doctor Banner, I don’t know what you’re implying,” Tony says, pressing a hand to his chest.
“You and Cap are plotting, thinking about expanding the team. I know you, Tony, and I know Steve.”

Tony sighs, runs a hand through his hair. “Fine, send Pepper the specs, and cc Doctor Chandrakar while you’re at it. Tell him this is in-house for now, but maybe he can think of a way to make it a little more elegant.”

Bruce nods, absently, already delving into the problem himself. Tony shakes his head, knowing that Bruce’s attention has been lost already. He’s even worse than Tony when it comes to the scientist haze.

“I’m sorry,” he tries, mostly because he’s a coward, and better now than later. “I’m trying.”

“I know,” Bruce says, but Tony doesn’t know if he really hears him. Eventually, he heads for the elevator and back up to the penthouse.

He kind of wants to take a shower again, but not because he needs one; mostly for the feeling of isolation, and the way the heat running over his skin puts him right to sleep. Instead he heads to the wet bar and pours himself three fingers of vintage single malt, two jet black whiskey stones, looks out over the city with an ache in his chest.

New York was never his, for all he grew up here. Not the way it was Steve’s, anyhow. He wanted something more, a place to fit in, but now he’d been to space and all he could think about was the cliché and the pale blue dot. He’d been patriotic, once; he might be still, somewhere deep down, but it was mostly a mask he put on to play pals with government officials, to offer morale to troops who saw him as a true American, a true patriot, a good man. He didn’t think about America much, or even the city as being his city. He was a New Yorker, by most definitions, he supposed. He was an American. He was of Earth.

Still, he can appreciate a good view no matter where he is. Why else build a skyscraper in midtown? He looks out over the glittering sky, the stunning reds and pinks of a spring sunset and the man-made light eclipsing the grace of the stars, and he tries to remember what weightlessness feels like without the crush of panic in his chest. In his mind’s eye he can see the swell of distant galaxies, the bright foreign cosmos, the empty space. He’d like to go to space on his own terms, he thinks. He’d already conquered the sky. Now he needs the cosmos.

When the whiskey has warmed his bones and left him languid, he makes his way to his bed. He lets the cool sheets swallow him up, lets the city glow lull him, lets the darkness come slow. If he dreams, he does not remember it.

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Steve crawls across an endless plane of white, the ice opaque beneath his hands, burning. His skin is cracking with cold at the joints, dry and swollen, small drops of red gathering at the edges of roughened skin. His nails are bloodied, some missing as he claws the ground. The cold air burns his throat. Numbness never comes, kept at bay by his enhanced metabolism and his healing factor. If he stops to rest, the ice cracks beneath him.

Steve drags himself across a desert he has never seen, only knowing it from SHIELD files and half-laughing comments, self-deprecating and often drunk. He is looking for Tony, and Steve will fail, because no one saved him in Afghanistan. Tony saved himself, cut open and aching with it, with bomb scraps and a battery attached to his chest. Still he walks, the sun scorching his skin, and the sunburn never ceasing. His throat burns with sand and dry heat, and he does not stop for the oasis. He knows by now that the water will be nothing but a heat mirage.
Steve shivers and coughs and watches his mother die in a hospital bed, in their tiny shared flat, in his arms, in the Barnes’ living room, in an alleyway. This, he has seen in his dreams too many times for it to cut him deeply. Eventually, his torturer learns, and he does not see his mother at all.

Bucky falls. And falls. And falls. And falls. Sometimes Tony falls, too, over skyscrapers, into pavement. He is always too slow to catch them both.

Little soldier, so brave and strong, the voice coos, and Steve is crying, curled and small, over Peggy’s dead body. She took the bullet for Erskine before the experiment could be completed, and he knows this wasn’t how it went, he knows, he knows Peggy is old and greying and still so beautiful-

Peggy dies, grey and beautiful and without knowing who he is, and Steve carries her coffin through wet London streets.

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Tony sits up in bed, asleep to awake in one smooth motion, always reactive in the face of alarm. He scans the room with sand-crusted eyes, then flops onto his back at the sight of a familiar figure standing in the doorway, long-limbed and silent.

“Jesus,” he breathes, and Pepper flicks on the light.

“Oh,” Pepper says.

He rubs his hands over his closed eyes. “What time is it?”

“10:20. I didn’t want to wake you too early, but the food couldn’t wait any later.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” Tony says, but he knows it’s futile. He sits up, swings his legs over the side of the bed. “Fuck. Give me a minute.”


Tony frowns, then glances over his shoulder at her. “What?”

Pepper raises a single eyebrow at him, and Tony turns further, blinking at the sight of Loki curled into the other side of the mattress, mostly covered in sheets except for a shock of black hair, green eyes. He blinks up at Tony, catlike, and Tony swallows.

“You didn’t notice him getting into bed?” Pepper asks archly, and Tony absolutely does not have enough of his bearing to process this situation.

“What are you doing?” Tony asks him.

“Should I have slept elsewhere?” Loki asks, voice rough, and Tony blinks at him, not sure he knows the answer to that question himself. “I assumed-…well.”

“No,” Tony says, then glances at Pepper. “Er. It’s fine.” He clears his throat. “Are you hungry?”

“No,” Loki says, and Tony nods at him.

“Right. Okay.” He gets up, rubs a hand through his hair. “Uh, I’ll meet you outside in a sec, Pep.”

Pepper’s mouth flattens in a failed attempt not to smile, her brows practically jumping into her
hairline. “Of course. Will that be all, Mr. Stark?”

“That’ll be all, Ms. Potts,” Tony says through his teeth.

Pepper turns out the light and shuts the door, just to be contrary. Tony mutters unsavoury things under his breath.

“Have I overstepped?” Loki asks, and Tony is learning to read wariness as the fear of rejection now. He’s learning how to read Loki’s masks of protection for what they are.

“It makes me uncomfortable that I didn’t notice you getting into bed, but that’s me being mad at myself,” Tony says, too close to sleep for anything but brutal honesty. He pads to the bathroom and turns on the tap, washes his face of sleep sand and the accumulated oil that somehow always appears on his skin after too long sedentary. Eventually, Loki pads into the bathroom, swathed in Tony’s Egyptian cotton, hair a tangled mess.

“I am a creature of shadow and illusion, Stark. It is no mark on your ability.” He yawns widely, combs long fingers through his hair. “I suppose I could eat.”

Tony watches him in the mirror, running his toothbrush through the tap. “Amora seemed upset, when you died.”

Loki tilts his head to the side, expression one of earnest confusion. He’s easier, so close to sleep, more open. “This surprises you.”

“Well,” Tony hedges, putting a dollop of toothpaste on the mangled white bristles. “Thor made it seem like she was just power hungry. Or maybe a groupie. Do you have groupies in Asgard?”

“As usual, Thor understands nothing.”

Tony pushes the button to start the brush cycle. “Tell me, then,” he says, gesturing with the toothbrush. “Tell me your side of the story.”

Loki looks sad, and Tony brushes his teeth, waiting. He’s tired himself, but he has to take advantage while he can. Loki shuffles over to the tub, taking a seat on the edge and spreading the sheets around him regally, like a cloak or a fine gown. Storytime, Tony thinks, then fights back a grin. He doesn’t think Loki would appreciate it.

“You see how Sif is treated, is revered. You have heard Thor’s stories, his legends of Lady Sif and the Warriors Three.” Tony nods, spits, continues brushing. Loki is gathering dignity to himself like a white dwarf, gaining mass and power before his eyes. His spine straightens as he speaks. “Amora had to fight to be taught. She was not one of the chosen. She went through much of the same struggles as Sif did, and yet she is seen as slutish and craven for trying to curry favour with men who might advance her skill. What did Sif do, that Amora did not? What is the difference between Sif’s devotion to Thor, her desire for him, and Amora’s? Yet because Amora is an enchantress, she is seen as lesser. It is a familiar tale.”

Tony spits, brushing his tongue a few times before taking the toothbrush out of his mouth. “She’s your friend,” he says, turning on the tap. He rinses away the toothpaste from the brush, his hands. Then he rinses his mouth out.

“I do not know that I would go that far,” Loki says, slowly. “But we have been allied. We understand one another.”

That sounds familiar enough. Tony nods, dries his face in a towel. He runs some mousse through
his hair, then sighs at his reflection. “I’m getting old,” he quips, grinning at Loki in the mirror. Then he heads out of the bedroom and into the common area.

Pepper is sitting in the sunken living room, bare feet tucked up beneath her on the couch. Her stilettos sit next to her on the floor. Tony pads out to meet her, glancing behind him to see if Loki’s following. He doesn’t make noise if he doesn’t want to, a trait that Tony is familiar with and dislikes in equal measure. He’s fully dressed now, wearing dark trousers of an indeterminate colour and a soft looking green shirt, and Tony idly wonders if he’s actually naked underneath glamour or if he can truly magic himself in and out of any garment as easy as breathing.

“My apologies, we have never been properly introduced,” Loki says, walking up to Pepper and manoeuvring deftly around Tony in a way that speaks to a thousand years of court dances and intricate battle training. He holds out a hand and does this little courtly bow, and Pepper raises an eyebrow at Tony but takes his hand, letting him kiss her knuckles. “I am Loki, once a crown prince of Asgard.” He pauses, considering. “Now, something else, I think. And you are the fair Ms. Potts, guardian of the Stark empire, whom I have heard so much about. What shall I call you?”

“Ms. Potts is fine,” Pepper says, not buying Loki’s act for a second but a little charmed all the same. Tony grins at her, and enjoys the resulting flush.

“Endearments are a privilege earned,” Loki agrees, inclining his head. “You are Stark’s general. I would expect no less.”

“General?” Pepper mouths silently at Tony, who shrugs and honeys in on the food.

“You reacted less unfavourably to my presence than I expected,” Loki admits, and Pepper raises an eyebrow at him.

“I was warned,” she says. She glances at Tony, a thoughtful expression on her face. “And I was the one who told him to do it.”

Loki pulls back, clearly startled by this, and Tony laughs, pulling a tray of oysters on ice towards himself and poking at the shells.

“The Kusshi was a little much for me, but you’ll probably love it,” Pepper says, pointing. Tony takes her at her word, closes his eyes, hums. “I thought so.”

“Did you bring it?” Tony asks, choosing another at random, and Pepper sighs. She pulls a little black box out of her purse and passes it to him, and Tony takes a moment to be grateful that she knew to conceal it from his vision in some small way. He restrains the surge of fear and nausea, pushes it down, puts the box at the far edge of the table.

“This weapon was used on you,” Loki observes, eyes narrowed. Tony swallows. “You fear it. And yet you chose to let your assassin take it into battle alongside you.”

Tony shrugs. “Oyster?”

Loki stares at the tray, expression perturbed. “It is uncooked?”

“Yup.”

“What organ is this? Of what manner of creature?”

“That’s the whole thing,” Tony says, trying not to laugh. “They’re called oysters, basically a stomach and not much else. It’s an Earth delicacy.”
“And what do they taste like?” Loki asks, choosing the smallest one and narrowing his eyes at it.

“Salt. Seafood. Sex.”

Pepper clears her throat, and Tony grins at her. Loki eyes them, then swallows the oyster with a hilarious expression, wide eyed and caught between disgust and something else.


“You’ve found Tony a new game,” Pepper says, amused. “You should see him torturing Steve with pop culture.” She looks at Tony, expression souring. “Do I want to know what you’re planning to do?”

“Not really,” Tony says, polishing off another oyster. “If I die you get everything, as usual. Love you, sorry. I think that covers the usual speech. We don’t usually get to say goodbye, do we? Thank god.”

“Tony!” Pepper snaps, and Tony sighs, pushes the tray towards Loki.

“Look, Pep, what do you want me to say? We’ve had this fight a hundred times, and the end result is always the same. I go, and you’re mad at me, and I come home, and you forgive me because I’m a mess. It’ll be just peachy.”

Pepper stares at him for a long moment, mouth pursed, eyes narrowing, before she finally sighs and pushes her hair over her shoulder. “Pass me the fusilli.” Tony does, locking eyes with a calculating Loki before turning his gaze back to Pepper. “I’ll take care of Maria, but you need to sort out this thing with SHIELD. They’re a mess, and the government is going to come down on us if we don’t get our house in order, Tony. We’ve gotten away with a lot because the court of public opinion loves you, but that may not always be the case. The D.O.D. is breathing down my neck again. We need to be united in the message we’re putting out.

“And you,” she says, pointing at Loki, “need to behave yourself if you’re serious about being on our side, now. The last thing we need is it getting out that we’re working with a wanted extraterrestrial terrorist. You need to do some major PR before you can be seen with any of the Avengers.”

“Should I save a burning nursery, perhaps?” Loki drawls, leaning across the table.

“Only if it’s already on fire. No causing trouble to save people from trouble. We humans are wise to that kind of thing.”

“I see,” Loki says, expression serious, and Tony restrains a smile. “Thank you for the…new experience. I have preparations to make.”

Pepper startles when Loki disappears, thankfully without the flashy golden light this time. She glances around the room, as though expecting him to reappear again.

“Yeah, he does that. Dark and mysterious, it’s kind of his jam. Or crutch, let’s go with crutch. No flash bang, though, he must have liked you. You okay?”

Pepper is staring at him, bright eyes searching in her freckled face. She’s gone from defensive and stinging to open without Loki in the room, and now Tony can remember when they’d shared this space, when late dinners from restaurants that only do carry away for Tony Stark were a norm for two brilliant people with busy schedules who can’t cook to save their lives. She looks scared,
which isn’t anything new to Tony either, and he reaches out and puts a hand on her knee, trying to
gauge her expression.

“Was it my fault?” she asks, voice angry and unwavering, and Tony stills.

“Come on, Pep,” he says, shaking his head, “guys like that are always already unhinged. Any little
thing is the catalyst for their crazy.”

“So, it’s my fault,” Pepper says, nodding. Her mouth trembles a bit, and Tony reaches to touch her
cheek before changing his mind.

“Pepper…”

“I was the catalyst. And now he’s coming after you.” Her façade of calm is beginning to crack
now, voice slipping into high panic, and Tony reaches out and catches her shaking hands.

“Pepper, no. Listen to me. There’s a whole squadron of these assholes, okay? He was just given an
invite to an already existing homicidal psychopath club. If it was just him, we could have taken
care of it.”

“I just thought I was done making things harder for you,” Pepper says, putting her face in her
hands. Tony rubs at her shoulders, not really sure what he’s doing here. “After Killian, I told
myself I would never be such a…such a damsel, God, that was so embarrassing, Tony, you have no
idea-”

“Bullshit,” Tony says flatly. Pepper is so startled by his outburst that she stops crying. “You killed
Obie. You took down Killian. You are Stark Industries, now. Where is this coming from? Do you
want a suit? I can make you a suit-”

“I don’t want a suit, Tony.”

“You keep saying that, but you won’t really know until you have a suit.”

“Tony…”

“Look, what do you want me to say, Pep? You’re always right, but this time you’re wrong. This
isn’t on you. It’s on him.” He clears his throat, taps the arc reactor, steals a piece of pasta. “And
you don’t make my life harder. I couldn’t tie my shoes without you, remember?”

“Well, now you have Loki to do that bit for you,” Pepper says, smiling a little, and Tony groans
and rubs at his brows with one hand. He offers Pepper a napkin. “Is Natasha coming?”

“Agent Romanov is on her way. She says to tell you that she comes bearing a black eye, ‘the good
stuff.’”

“I love that woman,” Tony says wistfully, turning expectantly towards the elevator. He eats
another oyster, saves the last one for Natasha.

The Black Widow steps out of the elevator, already suited up and ready for combat. Tony takes a
moment to admire the competence projected with every step, the predatory grace that accompanies
her in this form. He gestures to the oyster tray, which she ignores. Typical. He eats the last one
himself.

“Most of the team is prepped and ready to move,” she says, handing him his coffee. “Hawkeye is
putting some finishing touches on his arrows, something Banner gave him. I’m not sure I want to
“Questionable mystery tech is my arena,” Tony says. He glances into the cup, then shrugs, shotgunning it. The liquid is a little too close to scalding, but he’s mostly killed those nerves anyway. Nothing he hasn’t done before.

“Hello, Pepper.”

“Hello.” Tony glances to the side, where Widow is picking up the small black box. He swallows down the last dregs, shaking his head a little at the rush of it. “Take care of him, please.”

“We do our best,” Widow says, folding her hands behind her back. “Dinner Thursday?”

“Yes,” Pepper says, and Natasha smiles at her, just the barest lift of one corner of her mouth before the mask drops back down. “Tony, I may sleep here tonight.”

“This is your baby,” Tony says absently, déjà vu hitting him hard in the chest, leaving him breathless with it. “Um. I mean, Loki swore not to hurt any of my people, and you’re definitely my people.”

Pepper tilts her head to the side, one brow furrowing as she looks at him. “No, I don’t expect I’ll have much trouble from him,” she says, confusingly. Then she nods. “Go on, then.”

Tony stands, leaning down to kiss Pepper on the cheek and moving towards the outdoor rigging. He’s found that giving the two of them time to speak a bit without his interference is always a good idea. Instead, he steps onto the balcony and waits, glancing towards the lower platform where Barton is prepping the jet. The April air is humid and warm, and he spreads his hands on the rail and breathes in.

“This fight is a bad hand however it lands,” he says. “Is Loki ready?”

“I believe so, sir.”

“We can ship out, then.”

“Should I deploy?”

“If we’re ready.”

“Deploying.”

Tony waits with open arms for the suit to fly up to meet him. He can hear the hiss of the tower panel opening to JARVIS’ machining levels, the sound of the repulsors increasing in volume until the suit floats up towards him. Grinning, he vaults the rail and jumps out to meet it, metal closing around his arms, familiar and dear. The suit drops ten floors before he’s fully secured, tumbling in mid-air to get his feet under him. The long drop down to the pavement waits beneath, ants and beetles still shuttling through the lamplight at the arsecrack of Thursday and Friday.

“All right Evel Knievel, stop showing off and get your ass up here,” Clint says into the comms, and Tony powers up the thrusters accordingly, flying back up to the landing pad. He and Loki are standing shoulder to shoulder, arms crossed, and Tony takes a moment to appreciate how weird that is as he slows to a walking landing.

“You’re reckless,” Loki says, sounding somewhat astounded. Tony pops the faceplate and grins at him.
“Did you miss that?” he asks, and Loki scowls and looks away. “Where are you dropping us?”

“I will leave you just outside of the city, off the coast to the south,” Loki says, gesturing to a series of markings in a large circle around the landing pad. “The doorway will be high above the sea: to allow space between for you to gather your bearings, or should your craft react unfavourably to my magic.”

“Is that likely?” Clint asks, looking perturbed, but Loki shakes his head. Hawkeye straightens, slipping into serious, mission-report stance. “We’ll be entering in stealth mode, and I had JARVIS input the nearby flight paths for the next hour. We shouldn’t run into any issues if we do this right.”

“Great,” Tony says, shifting in place. He feels awkward, suddenly, unsure of himself in the face of a battle that’s bound to be bloody. “I had JARVIS put Dr. Cho on standby.” He glances at Loki. “Would you be able to open a return portal to Seoul instead, if J gives you the coordinates?”

Loki nods, and Tony licks his lips, tilting his head to better see The Black Widow stepping out of the building. Pepper stands behind her, expression caught between nervousness and determination.

“Let’s move,” Tony says, flipping the faceplate shut. The Avengers file into the quinjet, Thor taking a moment to say something quiet to Loki, Widow squeezing Pepper’s hand before following Hawkeye out of view. Tony offers Pepper a salute, then nods at Loki. He watches as Loki raises a hand, the sigils on the ground lighting up as Clint powers up the jet, leaving it floating above the landing pad. The sturdy floor of the tower’s landing disappears, replaced by the purplish wisps of a cloud in a pre-dawn sky.

“Do not die,” Loki says, simple, and Tony laughs. The jet lowers, slowly, passing through Loki’s portal without incident. War Machine follows it down.

“Worried, baby?” Tony says, turning around to face Loki as he walks backwards towards the gaping hole in the ground.

“I would hate to have chosen the wrong side.”

“A declaration! I’m touched,” Tony crows. He spreads his hands, takes that last step, lets himself fall backwards into the clouds. “Don’t wait up!”

“Flirt later,” Widow says via comms, and Tony grins, flipping himself over and flying above the quinjet.

“Stealth mode engaged, sir.”

“Good ol’ J. ETA?”

“Two minutes. Iron Legion deploying.”

“I shall close the portal after the last of your machines passes through,” Loki says, and wow, what a trip to hear his voice on the comms and not via magic. “I will not speak to you while you are engaged with Amora, but I shall hear what JARVIS relays.”

“Oh, did you make a new friend?” Tony asks, delighted.

“I am perfectly personable, unlike some,” JARVIS says primly, and Tony snickers. “The last of the legion is through.”
“Closing the portal now.”

Tony breaks from the cloud cover, dropping down to skim along the bottom of the cloud. He can see the early morning fishing vessels heading out, dark ships on black water, even the very edges of the horizon not even hinting at the sunrise due in an hour. The city of Lagos looms before them, bright spires and glittering reflections rippling along the vast expanse of black.

“The wine-dark sea,” he murmurs. “We lucked out on the cloud cover.”

“You sure that was luck?” Rhodey points out, and Tony considers it.

“Aye, this would be well within my brother’s magics.”

“Focus, boys,” Widow says, voice flat and toneless. “Dropping in thirty.”

“As promised, few active targets on the night shift. The compound reveals ten combatants in the upper floors, on patrol. Roughly fifty in the lower; some of the rooms are lined to prevent surveillance. Heat signatures are gathered in what I presume to be the commissary. The Captain is most likely locked in a sub-basement with The Enchantress; I cannot find either on external scans.”

“Just like we talked about; heavy hitters on frontal assault to draw them out, I slip in and pull Cap out while the wonder twins do their wetwork. Quick and dirty, lady and gentlemen. You know how I like it.”

“You just had to make it weird,” Rhodey says, and Tony cackles.

“Let’s take ‘em to church, Avengers. J, keep an eye out for civilian interference.”

“Of course, sir.”

Hawkeye pops the hatch and Bruce jumps out mid-air, bones cracking and green racing over his skin as he drops to the ground like a rock in front of the entrance to the building, crashing through the front door and tearing into the first few guards stationed there. Thor follows, lightning crackling above as storm clouds gather, lightning sparking through the grey of what had once been benign cumulus.

“Thor, there are civilian fishing vessels off the coast. An unexpected storm might harm locals that would have otherwise not taken to water this morning,” JARVIS says, and Thor growls a curse, bringing mjölnir down with a shattering explosion of lightning that arcs throughout the entire building.

“Fine,” he says, grim. “I shall be happy to deliver bloodshed with my hands alone.”

“Attaboy,” Tony says, grinning. He lands on the roof with a thump, blowing the doors open and stepping inside. In his display he can see Falcon has dropped Hawkeye off on a convenient roof, while Widow has completely disappeared. War Machine is taking shots at the doombots that have begun to swarm out of the building like an angry hornet’s nest, Hawkeye and Falcon picking off strays and soldiers as they move. They’re handling themselves fine and the heavy hitters aren’t even out yet, so Tony shuts off the feed and concentrates on scanning the available floors.

“J, what’s the best way to Cap?”

“I have taken the liberty of gaining access to their elevator controls. If you would follow me?”

Tony grins as a path lights up for him, directing him through the maze of hallways and towards
silver elevator doors where an empty elevator awaits him. He takes down two guards as he goes, the rest having fled to deal with the sudden Avengers incursion. The doors open with a ping, and Tony steps inside with a clank and a worrying creak from the interior. He checks the max weight, then winces.

“Iron-Man, Hasegawa is a no show,” Widow says, sounding winded. “Barnes is down and secured, should be long enough to finish up here. Entering the compound now.”

Tony stills, frozen in place as the elevator doors close. “J, run a full scan.”

“I cannot find his energy signature anywhere in the compound, sir.”

“So, he’s either in one of the shielded rooms, or…”

“He may be lying in wait where the captain is, yes.”

Tony nods, watching the numbers click down. “Widow, do a sweep of the interior. There’s anti-surveillance rooms on levels one through four. J, send a bot with her.”

“I’m a stealth operative, you can’t-” Widow tries, but Tony cuts her off.

“I can and I will. He’ll shadow you.”

“Negative, Iron-Man, you can’t look for Cap on your own when we don’t know where melty is,” Hawkeye pipes in, followed by agreement from the rest of the team. “Wait for War Machine, we’re on our last doombots here.”

“You need help on Amora,” Tony says, glancing at the display. Sure enough, a magical bolt crumbles the edge of the roof just where Clint had been leaning. The elevator doors open, and Tony shoots down four hydra scientists immediately. Strucker is nowhere to be seen. “Too late, I’m here already.”

“Stark!” Thor shouts, but Tony blocks them out. He tries to make sense of what he’s seeing.

It’s an empty parking garage, it looks like. The overhead lights are off, a few lamps bathing the desks and worktops gathered near the elevator in yellow. Orange power cables snake through the darkness like vines, crossing over each other and black cords, all leading towards a greenish light in the distance, a prone form spread out on some sort of cot. Large, hulking machines huddle behind him like stone guardians. The only sound in the place is the whir of the suit and a quick, erratic beeping.

“J, can we get some lighting in here?”

“They’re routing all the power in the lower levels to the machines. For what purpose, I cannot ascertain of yet.”

“Great.” Tony does a quick scan of the room, but turns up nothing. No heat signatures, no radiation, nothing aside from the cot in the middle of the room. “Any word on Melter?”

“No, sir.” JARVIS pauses, hesitant. “Sir, perhaps you might listen to the rest of the team-”

“Looks like there’s nobody home, so-”

Something hits him from behind, hard enough to force him to his knees. He rolls over in time to dodge a second bolt of pale green light, firing back only to hit a very familiar energy shield. Amora
is standing there, eyes wild and red, hair waving of its own accord with the strength of the power humming from her hands. Tony can feel it in his chest, like a strong bass beat, and he fires a few missiles at her to distract while he pulls himself up again. He keeps firing as he powers his way to the green light in the centre of the parking garage, dodging around thick pillars and using them as cover as Amora rallies.

“Murder!” she screams, and Tony winces. Loki’s never going to let this go.

“How is she able to hit me?” Tony asks, hissing as something digs into his upper ribs. The plating on his back is warped from the strength of her impact. “Is she just overpowering Loki’s protection spells?”

“She is not powerful enough on her own,” JARVIS says, and Tony takes the info for what it probably is; a message from Loki. “She may have gotten help from Doom. She’ll burn out quickly, at this rate. All you have to do is outlast her.”

“Easier said than done,” Tony snaps as another bolt takes down a pillar he’s just flown by. He’s close enough to see Cap, now. His blonde brows are knit in pain, skin sallow. He looks so vulnerable, secured to the metal bed in his civilian clothes. He’s wearing nothing but a white t-shirt and slacks. Tony dodges again as he scans the machines; life support is obvious, the rest less so. A supercomputer, cooling units, a DNA sequencer, some other things he can’t classify because Amora hits him in the shoulder, spinning him out and throwing him to the ground. The entire garage is bathed in green light, and Amora is shaking with it. “Shit, we’re sitting ducks in here. But maybe…”

Tony circles back around, peeking out from behind another pillar and firing two flares simultaneously at Amora, cementing it with a third missile. The impact rocks her back three feet, but more importantly, the resulting flare of light should be enough to blind her. Tony opens his eyes to a skirling screech, Amora swinging around aimlessly as she shakes her head back and forth. Tony broadcasts a high, wailing alarm specifically calculated to disorient, the sound bouncing back against the hard concrete until the entire place is an echo chamber, deafening and coming from every direction.

Amora’s mouth is open in a scream Tony can’t hear, hands clapped over her ears. Fire encircles her, spreads out from the edges of the bright shield. It catches electrical cords and the scientists’ papers, electricity sparking dangerously as the rubber melts and the cords fray. Smoke tinges green as it weaves through the cavernous space, and Tony hovers to avoid a tendril of fire snaking its way towards him. He hisses as one of the machines behind him begins to spark.

“This place is gonna go up. Can I safely pull Cap out of here?”

“Some of these machines are Strucker’s design alone. I cannot determine their purpose without more time.”

“Fuck,” Tony snarls, twisting out of the way as another tendril of flame arcs past him, narrowly missing his shoulder. He can feel the sear of heat even inside the suit. “I may melt after all.”

“Sir?”

“She’s gonna destroy those machines regardless. May as well pull him out.” He tips his head to the side, thinking. “But I don’t know what that magic shit around him is doing.”

“Stark!” Amora screams, suddenly audible everywhere at once, and Tony turns back to her just in time to be hit in the chest with an electrical bolt. Her eyes are a blazing white-green, hair floating
around her as though she’s underwater. She looks terrifying, energy crackling along her skin in bright waves, and Tony takes a split second to curse magic as he drags himself up. Amora hits him again, this time in the face, and Tony sees nothing but black for a second as the impact tumbles him back a few feet.

“Fuck! Avengers, Amora-”

“Oh, now he tunes back in,” War Machine snipes, sounding more relieved than irritated.

“Almost there, hold on,” Hawkeye says, voice toneless and slightly out of breath.

“No, negative, send-”

Amora lights him up, flame and lightning crackling around the suit, crashing back down on him in controlled waves like it’s trying to find a way in, a way past whatever protections Loki had afforded him. Tony screams, vision going dark as the heat sears into his shin, blindingly painful and spreading. He fires on instinct, hitting Amora in the stomach, and the pain cuts out for a brief, merciful second.

Something hits her in the back, and Amora screams and drops like a rock.

“Iron-Man!” Hawkeye shouts, running towards him at a full tilt, but Tony isn’t paying any attention to her. He’s watching Amora, veins crawling up her neck a sluggish black. She’s shaking with electricity, eyes rolled back into her head, a hybrid syringe and taser arrow sticking out of her spine.

“What the fuck is that?” Tony skirls, and then, “Oh my god, Bruce. What the hell did he do with my schematics? Why didn’t you use that earlier?”

“Because it was untested. He said to tell you biochem and radiation are his arena, and you’re an idiot for not asking for help earlier.” Hawkeye is grinning, and Tony turns to look at him. “Are you-”

An arc of lightning snakes out from Amora’s twitching left hand, lancing into Hawkeye’s side and sending him to one knee. Tony repulsors her in the face twice, then a third time, pushing her body back a good ten feet. She’s still convulsing, probably more automatic reflex than a real attack, but when he turns back Widow is running into the room, one hand on her comm as she barks a status update to the rest of the team. An Iron Legionnaire follows behind her. She’s leaning over Hawkeye in an instant, and Tony trusts her to take care of things there as he limps towards Strucker’s tech. Cap is hooked up to a dozen different machines, and he braces his hands on the edge of the cot and does another scan.

“Barton’s hit bad.”


“You can barely walk.”

“Who else is gonna figure this tech out?” Tony snarls, then hangs his head, staring at Cap’s prone form. “Now that Amora’s down, see if you can get him the medical attention he needs. JARVIS can carry him.”

“Iron-Man…”

“I don’t need to walk when I’ve got the suit. Go.”
There’s a moment of silence where he can feel Widow glaring at him, but she eventually does as requested. It’s the most logical tactical decision, after all.

“J, send a legionnaire down here to back me up.”


Tony turns down the comms again, then pauses, looking down at Cap’s slack face. He eases himself out of the armour with a hiss, stepping down from the metal to take Cap’s pulse. His leg is burning, wet blood trickling down his back from where the plating cut into him just below the left scapulae. He feels like one giant bruise, but Cap’s breathing. His pulse is slowing down as Amora’s magic fades.

Tony spares her a glance. She’s still on the floor, mostly motionless except for the occasional twitch. Tony limps around to get a better look at the machines.

“Bruce would be better suited to this,” he mutters. “The wet sciences aren’t really my specialty.”

Still, he knows Cap’s biology. Maybe better than Cap does, even, and certainly better than the average doctor. This was Howard’s great triumph, and he knows what Cap’s metabolism, stamina, vitals should be. He knows that Cap has been well taken care of, physically; all the better to get the secret of the serum out of him.

He disconnects Cap from the frankly alarming amount of tranquilisers they’ve doped him with, definitely magic augmented so they wouldn’t need to keep raising the dose as his immunity to the drug built. Then he has JARVIS poke at the supercomputer, careful of any booby traps Strucker might have left that could damage JARVIS’ integrity. They make the decision to upload the data to a quarantined server for later, destroy the DNA sequencer and all of the machines with Cap’s blood and tissue laid out in meticulous samples, letting the sparking metal erupt into flames. When Cap begins to come round, Tony pulls him off the heart monitor and all the secondary life support fail-safes. He thanks the science gods that Cap didn’t have his shield when he was abducted; the resulting pout at losing his baby would have been unbearable. He’s struggling against the restraints, muscles bulging, and Tony walks out from behind one of the machines with his hands raised, a camera-ready smile on his face.

“Hey, easy tiger. I left you in there so you wouldn’t bolt. Or sock me. Again.” Cap freezes, turning to stare at him with wide eyes, a fathomless blue with pinprick pupils. One of the machines behind Tony lets out a sparking shower of flames, and he ducks and glances back at it. Cap doesn’t even flinch. “We’re getting you out of here, okay buddy?”

“Tony,” Cap says, his voice like gravel, and Tony continues his slow approach.

“Yeah, that’s me baby. Is Amora out of your system? Can I untie you?” Tony winks at him. “I’ll understand if you’d like to stay tied up, but maybe another time, more private quarters-”

“Tony,” Cap says again, caught between bewildered and joyous, and Tony grins at him, still approaching like he’s dealing with a feral animal.

“Yup. Still me. I came to get you. We all came to get you. Are you good?” He rubs at the back of his neck, sheepish. “Maybe I should have kept Widow down here, she’s better at this bit than me. I do in a pinch, but I’m a shite commander.” Cap still looks lost, a little vacant and wary, and Tony reaches a hand out to touch his cheek. “We need you to be okay, Cap. Can you be Captain America for me right now? Up and at ‘em, Avenger.”
Cap blinks at him, turning his face into Tony’s hand, and Tony takes this as a sign to begin unbuckling him. He starts at the bottom, undoing Steve’s ankles and knees before releasing his wrist. He walks around the table to do the other, back to the suit. The requested legionnaire has joined them, weapons trained on Amora. Cap’s fingers dig into his shirt as he undoes the last chest buckle.

“Wonder what these are made of, that they held you. Kevlar titanium weave, maybe? They’re a little shiny. J, grab a sample, maybe we can steal–”

Cap is up as soon as the last piece comes undone, slamming into Tony hard enough to knock the air out of him. He’s got a hand on the side of Tony’s head, and Tony grabs his wrist, heart pounding in his chest.

“Cap! Steve? Honey, no, come on, I’m your friend, okay? You’re gonna be okay, it’s Tony–”

Cap backs him into the suit, the automatic defence systems confused by Cap’s questionable threat status and his designation as ally. The metal pushes into the gash in his back, and Tony opens his mouth in a wordless cry just as a mouth closes over his, chapped lips and sour sleep taste flooding his awareness as Tony freezes, eyes wide as he takes stock of the situation.

Steve kisses him, and Tony’s brain races, churning faster and faster until it sparks out entirely. His brain becomes white noise. Steve kisses him, and kisses him again; lush, drugging kisses that leave Tony breathless. He’s got a hand tangled tight in Steve’s collar, and Steve is sobbing into the kiss, and when he buries his face into the crook of Tony’s neck he’s shaking, his entire body feeling like it’s coming apart under Tony’s hands. Tony blinks into the dancing light of the flaming machinery, noting that his legs are around Steve’s waist. He releases his iron grip on Steve’s wrist to pat him on the back, confused and out of his depth.

“That bad, huh?” Tony quips, voice shaking a little. “And I come so highly recommended–”

Steve is saying something, muffled into his collarbones, and Tony tilts his head to hear him better.

“What’s that?”

Steve shakes his head, forehead rolling back and forth against Tony’s chest, and Tony strains to hear. Steve is apologising. Over and over, sobbing with it, his shoulders shaking. Tony’s stomach flips over in place.

“Steve, baby, we can do this later, okay? Right now we’ve gotta get you out of here–”

“You’re bleeding.”

Steve pulls the hand out from where he’d rucked up Tony’s shirt, splayed broad across his lower back, easily lifting him up. His expression is horrified, and Tony shushes him.

“No, look, it’s just a little scratch–”

“No,” Steve is saying, backing away, and Tony scrambles to get his feet under him. “No, this isn’t real, either.”

“Steve, I’m alright,” Tony says, turning around and pulling his shirt over his head. He glances over his shoulder. Steve’s face is sallow, all the blood gone. He’s staring between his bloody fingers and Tony’s spine like he can’t quite believe what he’s seeing. “Amora hit me, the plating pierced my shoulder. It hurts like a bitch but it’s nothing that can’t be fixed. Okay? But the faster you come with me, the faster we can get home and I can get all patched up. So let’s go home, okay?”
Steve looks lost, small suddenly, and Tony turns back and reaches a hand out to him.

“Steve, it’s okay. Come on.” He puts a hand up to his ear, switching the comms back online. “Guys, Cap’s…real fucked up. This is some Black Swan shit. Are we good to go?”

“We have suffered civilian casualties,” Thor says, regret lacing his voice, and Tony closes his eyes. “If you must leave with the captain, do so. The Hulk has returned to form, and is back on the quinjet. Falcon, War Machine, and I can handle the rest, here.”

“Are you sure?”


“I will,” Tony says, still locking eyes with Steve. “J, how’s our pickup looking?”

“If you can return to the roof, our ally can offer assistance.”

“Good,” Tony says, opening his hands. He holds out an earbud, which Steve picks out of his fingers warily. He pushes it into his ear with a furrowed brow. “If I get back in the suit it’s gonna make this worse, isn’t it?”

“Likely, yes,” JARVIS says.

“And yet I can’t go through a warzone without it,” he sighs. He steps back into the armour, hissing as the sharp edges of the broken plating score into his skin, notching the edge of his scapula. “Ow, fuck. Cap, you’re gonna come with me, yeah? Watch my back?”

“Of course,” Cap says, looking resigned. The usual battle readiness is sinking into him, his shoulders rolling back, and Tony turns, trusting Cap to follow. The legionnaire takes up the rear.

“We can’t take the elevator with this much weight,” Tony says, mostly to himself. He smiles a little when JARVIS opens the doors obligingly. “But, we can use the shaft.”

He blows out half of the top of the elevator before Cap can walk into the debris radius, blocking the faceplate with an arm. When the last of it has crumbled away, he reaches out for Cap, rewarded when they lock together as easy as muscle memory. Cap steps onto his foot, arm going around his shoulder, and Tony slides an easy hand around his waist and flies them up into the darkened shaft.

“You still think this is a dream,” he says. Cap’s silence is answer enough. “Fuck. What did they do to you?”

Cap doesn’t say anything, and Tony sets his jaw. “Alright. So why are you coming with me, when this is some sort of a trap she’s setting up for us?”

Cap smiles, thin and mirthless. It’s the most familiar expression Tony’s seen on his face yet, which hurts a bit. He hates it when Cap gets bitter. “Because I’ll hate myself even more if I don’t try to save you.” His head turns, and he throws a hand out to catch at the elevator’s cable, twisting them around just in time to take a hit through a passing floor’s doors. It dissipates mostly without harm, but hot metal flecks splatter across his shoulders, a punishment he takes without comment.

“Fuck!” Tony hisses, pushing the boosters faster. “I think I just found Melter!”

“Where?” War Machine demands, but Steve’s pushing out of Tony’s grip, sliding down the cable and swinging into the floor in question before Tony can react.
“Fuck! Cap! Cap, come on! We’re almost out of here!”

“What’s going on?” Falcon asks, sounding winded.

“Cap!” Tony shouts, to no avail. He sends the legionnaire after him, some use that’ll do. He can’t see anything, and he can’t get close. “Fucking Christ on a pogo stick, Cap, just get your ass back out here-”

“Cap, if Hasegawa makes contact, Tony dies, do you hear me?” War Machine says, cutting him off. Tony snarls a low layer of curses in Italian.

“Copy.”

“Rhodey, I swear to fucking God-”

“Don’t be an idiot, Tony, get the fuck out of there!” Tony slams a hand against the elevator shaft in frustration. “Steve, he can melt any metal. If he hits the reactor-”


“No! Just come back, let JARVIS handle it. You’re not okay-”

“The legionnaires are entirely made of metal,” Cap says, voice coloured with the barest tint of deadly amusement, and Tony groans. “I don’t even have my shield.”

“Exactly!” A second shot arcs out of the elevator doors, melting the last of them, and Tony flies up a little further to stay out of blast radius. “Steve-”

“Iron-Man, get to the roof. That’s an order.”

“I’m in charge, here! You’re not mission ready, this is literally a rescue mission and you’re the damsel-”

“If you want me to win this fight, stop distracting me and get to the damn roof, Tony!”

Tony inhales sharply. Both cursing and using real names in the field are generally against Cap’s rulebook.

“Sir, I have him. I am sending reinforcements.” JARVIS’ voice is gentle, and Tony snarls with frustration, heading back up the elevator shaft.

“I’m gonna fucking end you, Rhodes, you hear me?”

“You scare me less than Pepper, and she’ll really fucking end me if you die on my watch.”

“Agreed,” Cap says, and Tony frowns at that. “This guy’s a one trick pony. JARVIS and I can handle him. Just get safe.”

Tony cuts off the comms, just to be spiteful. He blows open the doors to the top floor, then blasts out onto the roof. From above, he can see the sunrise building on the horizon, bright orange slicing through the purplish dawn like a knife. The sun isn’t quite there yet, but it’s coming. A pink glow hangs over the city, heralding its arrival.

Below, he can see the wreckage left from their battle; a few crushed cars, police, a gathering crowd. He can track where the battle between Moonstone and Hulk must have spilled into the street, or perhaps it was Executioner. Thor hadn’t sounded regretful enough to blame himself, so it
must have been Moonstone. He desperately hopes Bruce is faring alright alone in the jet.

“Bruce?” he tries, but there’s no response. “Okay. What’s the situation on the ground?”

“The SRF has been notified, and are en route,” Hill says, the first time he’s heard her voice all mission. She seems subdued, which Tony credits entirely to Pepper. Maybe Rhodey had a point. “News reports seem overall favourable thus far, but you know how people feel about The Hulk. And it’s not even dawn yet.”

“Great,” Tony says, propping a hand on his hip. He examines the cluster of black cars that have rolled up. “I see…NIA, SSS, and DIA. Christ.”

“NIA is taking point,” Hill agrees. “War Machine is already serving as liaison in light of the present situation. Probably for the best.”

“What, because he’s black or because Steve’s shit at politics?” Falcon quips, and Tony can see the tell-tale signs of Rhodey trying to restrain laughter from where he’s engaged in conversation on the pavement below. He falls into parade rest, trying for casual and failing. God help him.

“Keep me updated on whatever bullshit he spins, so I know what to say when I next get ambushed by camera-laden vultures.”

“Yes, boss.”

“Anyone secured?”

“We’re keeping the building clear of police while the superpowered fighting is still going on,” Hill says. “They don’t have facilities capable of holding these guys, but they’re damn well going to try.”

“Their prerogative,” Tony says, tired all of a sudden. He’s tired of all of this. “What’s the damage?”

“The third floor of a nearby building was housing a delegation of humanitarian workers from Wakanda. There was an explosion, involving Moonstone and a doombot. I’m not clear on the details, and all the footage released online so far has been too shaky to clarify things. The Hulk was the only one on the scene.”

“And he can’t exactly tell us what happened. Great. How many?”

“Seven dead.”

Tony whistles, low and solemn. “Shit. This is exactly what Pepper’s been worried about.”

Hill doesn’t say anything, which is answer enough. Behind him, he can hear the patter of footsteps, and he turns and raises a repulsor, only to lower it when a familiar head of blonde hair peeks over the top of the stairs. Steve’s expression is determined, blood on his fists, and Tony reaches a hand out to him.

“We’re heading back to the tower,” Tony says. “JARVIS?”

A tug, and then something he can’t describe; like the non-Euclidean geometry of the Chitauri mass, maybe, or the unsettling feeling of numbness and pressure that had washed over him as he passed through the portal to space. He closes his eyes, and when he opens them he’s standing on the tower landing pad in Manhattan, as though nothing had happened and he’d never left.
Loki looks tired, which Tony didn’t expect. He quirks one side of his mouth at Tony in greeting. Steve staggers to the side, clearly nauseated, and Tony steps out of the armour and puts a hand on his shoulder, feeling useless as he watches Steve struggle against the urge, pressing a fist against his mouth. The armour takes off under JARVIS’ care, heading for the machining level for repairs.

“Jeez,” he says, and Tony barks a laugh at how familiar and dear the exclamation is. “I think I’d even prefer flying to that.”

“You fly all the time,” Tony says, an old argument, and Steve looks up at him as though seeing him for the first time.

“You’re really here,” he says, blinking up at Tony. There’s a burn mark scraped across one cheekbone, and Tony reaches out, pressing a thumb against the unmarked skin beneath it.

“Yeah,” he says, and Steve colours, scrambling up and away with his hands raised.

“Oh, god,” he says, then looks behind Tony at Loki. He swallows. “Oh. God.”

“Punny,” Tony says wryly, turning. Loki’s closer than before, and Tony holds still for his inspection, the line of his mouth thinning as he circles around and sees what is likely a sizeable bloody mess spread across Tony’s left shoulder. He stills at the touch of Loki’s fingers on the sensitive skin at his nape.

“May I?” Loki asks, and Tony clears his throat.

“You asking?”

“Stark-”

“Yeah, go ahead.” He hasn’t even finished speaking before the familiar seeping burn of Loki’s healing magic sweeps over him, a little rougher than he remembers. The tingling it leaves behind is less pleasant, sharper, and he hisses a little at the flare of pain, rotating his shoulder in the socket. It moves seamlessly, no clicking or aches, and Tony laughs and turns, measuring Loki’s tired face, the sallow skin below his cheekbones. “Fixed a little more than I expected, there.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Loki says, expression deadpan, and Tony raises an eyebrow at him.

“I’m sure.” He turns back to Steve, who is glancing between them with an expression of abject horror and embarrassment on his face. Tony spares Loki a speaking look. “Uh. I think Rhodey can handle the return trip. Why don’t you get some rest?”

“I do not need rest,” Loki says, but he doesn’t sound too fussed about it.

“Yeah, you do.” Tony puts a hand to his ear, clicks on the comm. “Rhodes, you’re flying your own ass home.”

“What-”

Tony cuts off the comms again. “There, done. Go to bed. Nat and Clint can get a flight out from Seoul when he’s patched up. Some breathing room will be good for everyone before shit hits the fan.”

Loki glances between him and Steve for a moment, expression unreadable. Then he dips his head, disappearing in a blinding flash of gold. Interesting. Tony files that away for later, then turns to
Steve.

“Tony,” he says. He looks miserable, and Tony considers him for a moment, head tilted, fingers pressed to the corner of his mouth. “I…”

“I meant what I said, you know,” Tony says easily, walking around Steve to survey the damage. There are a few flecks of melted metal left on his skin, and Tony picks them off with his nails, ignoring Steve’s flinch and hiss of pain at the first, his stony silence after. The skin beneath is red and raw, but not nearly as burnt as it should be. He circles back to Steve’s front, ticking a list off on his fingers. “I got you home. You’re my friend. We can talk about whatever you wanna say later, but you’re not okay right now. You’re gonna be.” He grins, lopsided. “And if you still want me to tie you up later, we can do that, too.”

Steve flinches, eyes skittering away before tracing back to him, equal parts furious and hesitant. “I don’t…that wasn’t about sex, Tony. I-” He cuts himself off, unhappy, and Tony reaches out, pressing a thumb to the corner of Steve’s mouth. Steve looks like he’s about to bolt, but Tony can’t blame him. They’ve been working up to this for a while now, two neutron stars on a degrading orbit. The crash will be nothing if not spectacular.

“I know,” he says, simple, and Steve swallows. “When you’re a little more stable, okay? I’m not going anywhere.”

Then, for emphasis, he tilts Steve’s head down towards him, tiptoeing a half-step to kiss his forehead. Steve’s hands grip his shirt, a shuddering breath punching out of him. The shaking starts up again, and Tony waits, lips pressed warm and firm to Steve’s brow as Steve pulls himself together again.

“SHIELD doesn’t have the authority to mandate counselling anymore,” he says, hating himself a little, “but I am, as acting leader of the Avengers. This is way out of my depth. But we’ll be with you all the way, and it isn’t a condemnation-”

“No,” Steve says, pulling back, and Tony’s chest tightens. He’d been hoping to avoid a fight so soon after Steve was back. Maybe he should have waited until tomorrow. “You’re right.”

“Wait, what?” Tony says, a little shocked, but Steve’s shaking his head, a grimace on his face.

“Last time Amora was in my head for ten seconds, I assaulted you.” Tony opens his mouth, ready to argue, but Steve isn’t having any of it. “I need to make sure-…I need to make sure. So yes. I’ll submit myself for review.”

“Oh. Well. Good. Cool. That’s great, glad to hear it-”

“I’m so sorry, Tony.” Steve says, and Tony rubs a hand over his face, exhausted and feeling it in every inch of his bones.

“Why, Steve? It’s over, you don’t have to keep apologising-”

“I shouldn’t have kissed you like that, it was inappropriate-”

“Oh, is that the route you wanna go? Fucking internalised bullshite, you might as well register your address in Narnia-”

“I forced you!” Steve shouts, then covers his mouth with a hand. Tony tastes acid, throat tightening. “I, you weren’t in the suit, and I pushed you. Again. I just-…there’s something wrong with me, Amora-”
“You didn’t, Steve-”

“I pushed you up against the suit, Tony,” Steve says, sounding tired. “If you had protested, I wasn’t…you froze up and I just kept going until you gave in, what the hell does that make me-”

“You surprised me!” Tony says, one hand cutting through the air. “It was just a fucking kiss, Steve, and in case you forgot I was climbing you like a tree, clearly I wasn’t fighting you-”

“So what, you should have to throw a punch to get me to stop?” Steve laughs, bitterness seeping through a twisted smile. “God, Tony, I know you’ve been through some-”

“You don’t know half a rat’s shit about my past, so stop right there,” Tony snarls, then stops, closes his eyes, takes a breath. “Steve, No harm, no foul, okay? Just…get some rest, and I’ll have Maria work something out with SHIELD. Phil may cry. It’ll be beautiful.”

“Tony…” Steve exhales, head swaying back and forth a few times. Tony plasters on a plastic smile, gestures to the glass doors.

“Come on,” he says, and Steve looks at him for a long second before smiling a little, expression caught halfway between resignation and amusement. He nods once, then heads for the doors, shaking his head again. One hand tucks itself into a pocket. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but Loki might actually be better for you.”

Tony freezes, smile dropping off his face. Numbness spreads through his chest, skittering down his arms. Fear. “What?”

“Better someone who heals you instead of hurts you,” Steve explains, voice patient and calm in equal measure. Tony can’t quite believe this is happening. “Goodnight, Tony.”

Tony doesn’t know how long he stands there. Long enough for the last humid hint of spring chill to leave him shivering, damp clothes clinging to the small of his back. The dried blood begins to itch, flaking off his skin. The moonless sky glimmers with the faintest hint of stars, bright polaris the only easy, glittering target in the whole mess.

Eventually, he turns around and heads to the workshop. The wet sciences have never been his forte, but cold metal he understands.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the later update, I got caught up in my Potterlock fic, which has been languishing untouched due to technical issues for over a year. We’re back on track there, though, so if Sherlock or Johnlock or magical mysteries are your thing, you should check it out. (/plug)

As aforementioned, I am now returning to uni and as such, updates will be more sparse. I will try to keep it bi-weekly, but it’ll depend on my workload obviously. As usual, thank you for reading and I hope you’re enjoying the fic! All criticism, comments, etc. are welcome.

What follows is a Really Long Meta and you can skip it if you don’t care! No worries either way, I just wanted to address some comments.
On the subject of Domestic Abuse:

A lot of people are appalled that Cap hit Tony and nothing has happened except Pepper serving an epic takedown. Let’s be clear; this happens in the canon. Repeatedly, and without comment, and it is even directly stated that “They love each other. They just have some stuff to work out.” (See https://41.media.tumblr.com/c08403e5bd82b6ef7c96369b28ef9c17/tumblr_inline_nlkmxetHPl1t1juve_500.jpg or as aforementioned, the Avengers: Ultron scene where Vision is created.) While I think their relationship is very easily categorised as unhealthy, I also think it’s important that Tony nor Cap see the violence that has transpired between them as abuse. If anything, Cap’s always more upset about the manipulation and the lying (both of which are fair to be upset about!) Tony, in my opinion, just does not get upset enough when Cap is an arse.

This is the bit where I out myself as a DV survivor. The right to ownership of experience is paramount, for me, especially taking personal experience into account. Some people feel being spanked as a kid for running into the street is abuse, or even their parents yelling at them. Some people don’t, and think their parents were great despite (or even because of) these things. I have a very cut and dry, bruises and broken bones experience, but I also experienced the former, which I do not count as part of my trauma. Not everyone feels the same way. All experiences are valid.

Let me repeat that: ALL EXPERIENCES ARE VALID. If someone does not think they’ve experienced trauma, and they don’t have PTSD or any sort of trauma response to an event I would consider traumatic, it doesn’t matter what I think about it, and vice versa. It matters what the survivor (or not, if they don’t feel that word applies to them) feels.

Steve is from the 1930-40’s where women being slapped is 100% chill, forget about men. He still feels bad, which is pretty progressive of him, honestly. God, have you seen the era films? Sam is a military man who works as a counsellor at the VA, who has seen friends die in front of him. On the other side, Pepper is a modern feminist woman with a relatively normal pre-Tony life, and Bruce is a survivor (canonically he was brutally abused by his father as a child.) What is acceptable in the respective worlds that these characters live in is often very different. Tony’s father was a neglectful, emotionally abusive alcoholic, and Tony’s also an ex-weapons manufacturer who has PTSD from torture and battle trauma. A punch from Steve isn’t trauma for Tony, by my characterisation. It’s shitty and grounds for a lack of trust, but Tony’s concept of DV is probably a little more involved. And remember, Cap and Tony are favoured sparring partners. They hit each other consensually all the time.

TL;DR Do I think what Steve did is okay? No, but I’m probably Bruce in this situation. It’s Tony’s (dumb) life choice. Does Tony think what Steve did was okay? Eh. It’s just the once, and Steve was shaking off some magic shite.

As always, feel free to disagree vociferously in the comments. I love talking about this stuff, or I wouldn’t write about it.
Chapter Notes

cw: for PTSD and panic attacks (y'all should expect this crap from this fic at this point but still, be safe everybody) and a brief mention of underage sex (because we all know Tony was having sex in college despite being wildly underage)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“This is a fine mess you’ve gotten yourself into, Stevie.”

Steve examines his face in the tiny kit mirror, trying to catch any stray bits of unshaved hair and likely failing. He rinses the straight razor in the bowl, gives it up as a bad job. Bucky snorts at him.

“Oh, stuff it,” he grumbles, throwing the towel at him. “I’m handling it.”

“You’re handling nothing. You’re being a bluenose yellow bastard, and you know it. It ain’t like you.” Bucky throws the towel back, catching him in the back of the head, and the razor slips against the pad of his thumb. Dull metal slices into the meat of him, and he pulls back, hissing and sucking at the cut. Fat drops of red curdle in the washing bowl, mixing pink in the cloudy water.

“Punk,” Steve growls, glaring over his shoulder.

Bucky snorts at him. “Oh, don’t be a girl. You’ll heal in a minute. Asshole.” He leans back onto Steve’s cot, kicking his booted feet up onto the end rail. A wry smile warps the corners of his mouth. “If you’ve got it, grab it. Don’t be stupid.”

“I haven’t done enough to earn my rest yet,” Steve says. It wasn’t what he meant to say, but there it is. Guilt curdles into the pit of his stomach, and Bucky laughs. It’s a mean, nasty thing, and it makes Steve’s throat tighten. Bucky’s tags clink softly against each other as he straightens up, the cot creaking beneath him.

“You’re right. You left me for dead, didn’t you?”

Steve clenches his hands, blood dripping down into the washbasin between his clenched knuckles. He doesn’t bother to turn around.

“The real Buck wouldn’t say that,” he tries, but it sounds hollow even to him. Metal flashes behind him in the shaving mirror, a streak of red on steel.

“You don’t know anything about the real Buck,” the voice spits, accented and sharp and all too close against his ear.

The knife between his ribs is a blessing.

When he opens his eyes, the sun is bursting bright through the glass wall, and Steve squints uncomprehendingly out into the light of a cloudless blue sky. He’d never seen the sun so high from his room before.

“Ngh,” he grunts, swiping a hand over his face. “What time is it?”
“It’s 1:36 PM on Saturday, April 9th, Captain,” JARVIS supplies obligingly. Steve gapes, sitting up in bed with more force than he probably should have. His entire body feels like one giant bruise. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I got run over by a tank,” Steve says wryly, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. “Not mad at me anymore, huh?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” JARVIS says primly, and Steve grins for what feels like the first time in years.

“I missed you, too,” Steve chuckles, shaking his head a little. “I probably scared everyone, didn’t I?”

“Yes,” JARVIS says simply, and Steve nods, rubbing a hand over his mouth. “Sir demanded that you not be disturbed, considering the ordeal you’ve suffered. Clearly you needed the rest.”

Steve waves a hand in the air, brushing off JARVIS’ unspoken apology for deactivating his alarms. The motion aches a little, and he rotates his neck in place a few times, then the rest of his body, testing his aches and pains.

A hot shower, he decides, getting to his feet warily. Adrenalin had prevented him from noticing the pain yesterday, but oh, now he notices it. At the thought of yesterday his brain flashes helpfully to the image of Tony pushed up against the suit, lips red and spit-slick as he stared at Steve with a mix of shock and fright. In retrospect, Steve recognises the fear for what it was; Tony’s reaction to the sorry state he’d been in. He hadn’t been afraid of Steve. He’d been afraid for Steve. God, he was a real fat-head these days.

“JARVIS, what’s Black Swan?” Steve asks, rubbing at the crease between his brows. He can see Tony’s provoking grin projected against the back of his eyelids. You’ll get wrinkles, ruin that pretty face. He ambles towards the bathroom and starts the water running.

“Black Swan is a 2010 psychological horror film starring Natalie Portman,” JARVIS replies immediately, well used to this kind of inquiry. “Shall I read the full Wikipedia summary for you while you shower, Captain?”

“Yeah, probably,” Steve sighs, pulling off his pants, but he’s pretty sure he already gets the joke.

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Tony works until his hands ache. On bad days, he’s sometimes come out of an engineering fog to find blood smudged dark and flaking against his abraded hands, the casual injuries of working piled up without him even noticing the pain. But Tony was used to that, he supposed; pushing past the pain, pushing it down until it was just another part of him. The tightness in his chest never goes away. The pain in his sternum at a cough or a hiccup, the aching bones in the winter from all of the places that he had broken them; these were his own kind of medals, the stars and stripes marking his penance. Certainly, he had a lot to make up for.

It’s already afternoon when a coffee mug appears at his elbow, smelling strongly of good espresso. He hadn’t heard her come in, but then, that was the way of it when Natasha Romanov didn’t want to be heard.

He sets the wrench down, puts on a tired smile, turns around. Natasha is standing with her hands folded behind her back, expression flat neutral in the way that Tony has learned to be weary of. She’s dressed in comfortable blacks, her hair pulled up behind her head. She must have changed
and come straight here from her flight.

He picks up the coffee, toasts her with it, then swallows it down piping hot. Natasha waits, barely even blinking.

“I was hoping to put off this little tete-a-tete longer. Barton’s okay?”

“Yes. Sleeping.” Natasha smiles, the barest lift to the corner of her mouth. It’s a smile pretty much reserved only for his antics, and it relaxes him a little. He puts the mug down, rests his elbows on the worktop behind him. “You remanded Steve to psychological review.”

Ah, that. “Yes,” Tony says, spinning back around again. He picks up a soldering iron, puts it down again. “I do, technically, have the authority to do that. And you didn’t see him when he woke up, Nat, it was like…” Tony stops, swallows. His throat is dry all of a sudden, a shiver skittering over his body. “They fucked him up.”

“No, I think that was surprisingly apt of you, actually, considering your own lack of emotional acuity.” Tony blinks at that, spinning around again. Natasha’s smile is wry, pointed, and Tony smiles back, hesitant. The smile drops off her face, and Tony tenses again; he can almost hear it shatter as it hits the ground.

Natasha swallows, tilts her head to the side. Her brow is furrowed ever so slightly.

“What?” Tony prods, and Natasha’s jaw tightens. She’s letting him see her, he knows.

“I didn’t listen to you, and it almost got you killed.”

Tony stares for a moment, uncomprehending. “What?”

“Stopped mid-sweep when I heard you were in danger, and then I left when Clint was hit,” Natasha explains, voice surprisingly calm for someone talking such utter nonsense to Tony. What a fucking plot twist. “If I had completed the mission, as ordered, I could have disabled Hasegawa. But I didn’t, and that’s on me.”

Tony stares hard at her, trying to see the trick. He taps a finger against his thigh, then points a disbelieving finger at her. “Is this…an apology?”

Natasha smiles, a little frighteningly, and Tony blinks hard.

“Am I awake right now?”

“You ran the mission well.”

“Ohmigod,” Tony says, recoiling as though she’s slapped him. “Who are you and what have you done with the real Natasha? Is this a Loki trick? This better not be a Loki trick.”

Natasha waits. Tony decides she’s been spending way too much time with Bruce.

“Okay…so. You’re not here to threaten to kill me over the Loki thing?”

Natasha grins at that, vicious, all teeth. “Oh, I think that’s progressing quite well,” she says, her voice a terrifying purr. “You have him whipped, Cassanova. Keep it up and we may have to add him to the roster.”

“Uh. I don’t think so.”
“We’ll see.” She’s wearing that smug smile that says she’s never wrong. Tony loves and hates that smile in equal measure. He restrains the urge to point out that she just admitted to a mistake, mostly in the interest of keeping all his limbs. “Being a narcissist means you hardly ever give yourself enough credit when it matters, and too much when you shouldn’t. You’re a genius, Tony. You should be able to figure this out.”

Tony swallows, taps his fingers on the arc reactor. “Doesn’t seem like anybody’s giving me much credit these days,” he sneers. He’s not bitter about it. He’s not.

“So?” Natasha shrugs, eyes as piercing as ever. She pins Tony in place with her stare. “Prove them wrong. Isn’t that your whole shtick?”

Tony’s chest tightens a little as he stares at her. Natasha’s expression is a flat mirror, something he knows from experience is her way of being honest. Any emotions that might betray her are reduced to micro-expressions, but they’re still there. It’s different from the emotionless mask The Black Widow wears, more open in its emptiness. For what feels like the hundredth time in these past colourful and maddening years, Tony wishes he could have fallen in love with her instead. In some universe, he thinks, they would fit beautifully; two liars, drinking to drown their consciences, playing at ruthlessness because it was what they were trained to be.

Natasha smiles, that small tilt of the right corner of her mouth. It’s his smile, he knows. He doesn’t quite have it in him to smile back.

“I have something for you,” he says, instead. He loves in quiet, hand-hewn ways. “Here, let me show you some new toys.”

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The common space is empty when Steve finally has the courage to face the rest of the team. He wasn’t sure what he was expecting, exactly. The team weren’t necessarily ones for happy reunions, but usually there was usually a big dinner after a mission. It was nice to have your comrades around after a brush with death. Sometimes soldiers needed to be reminded that they were still alive and breathing, still here together, still solid.

Tony was the only exception to the rule. He tended to overwork himself even more than usual post-mission, making sure all of his tech was fixed up, running battle footage back and doing a play-by-play analysis, always looking six steps ahead. Usually it was Steve’s job to grab him and pull him out of his head, drag him upstairs into the tumble of warm bodies and food that gathered in the common space after a hard day. If that didn’t work, he would bring Tony some food and work over the footage with him. It was hard work, always, but they were good memories. Tony always welcomed his company with open arms.

Still, he isn’t sure if Tony even wants to see him right now. And it was only four. Nobody ate dinner at four.

The fridge was scattered with leftover Thai food. It looked like the bits and bobs left over from a pre-mission fuel up. The image of the team gathered around the dining table with Loki and Sam came to mind unbidden, everyone gathered and working together to try to save him from harm. The thought leaves something warm and aching in his stomach, and he startles when the fridge beeps at him.

Steve closes the fridge to make it stop, and when he opens it up again a flash of hot pink catches his eye. A clear plastic container on the top shelf has “Steve” written on a sticky note in Natasha’s neat cursive. The name had been crossed out with a different pen, and “Ped Pa Lo 4 Rip Van
“Winkle” had been wedged in underneath in Tony’s blocky draftman’s hand. It was the only thing in the fridge that looked full.

“JARVIS, what’s…oh, boy, I don’t know how to pronounce this.”

“It’s best described as duck stew, Captain. The team left you a container of rice as well.” There’s a pause, and Steve rolls his eyes, knowing what’s coming. “Sir said that it was what he expected would best agree with your ‘bland American palate’.”

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s exactly what he said,” Steve mutters, snapping the top off and sniffing it. “As long as it’s not French cow brain this time.”

“I can assure you,” JARVIS says, voice laden with mirth, “it is not cerveaux beurre noir.”

Steve shrugs and pops the container into the microwave, then hunts around the fridge for some rice.

“What’s next on the list?”

“I believe it was Porco Rosso, Captain.”

“Which one’s that again?” Steve asks, switching out the dishes.

“It is a Japanese animated film about a Word War I pilot cursed to live as an anthropomorphic pig. The film is directed by Hayao Miyazaki. Miyazaki is arguably the most well-known Japanese director in the United States, and Agent Barton thought that Porco Rosso was best suited to your tastes.”

“You don’t agree?” Steve asks. JARVIS stares to demur, but Steve cuts him off with a wave. He tilts his head up to the kitchen camera, pointing a spoon at it. “You’re always real careful about how you phrase things, you know that?”

“I doubt aeroplane disasters, combat scenes, and a lost love are what you require right now, in your more fragile recovering state.”

Steve pauses, halfway through spooning some duck stuff over white rice. “I’m not fragile.” It comes out differently than he wanted it to; angrier, maybe, or more vulnerable. JARVIS, to his credit, says nothing immediate. “Sorry, that was. Uh. You’re probably right.”

“Sir does not think you are fragile,” JARVIS says, as kindly as he’s ever spoken. “And neither does anyone else. He simply wishes you to be in fit form for the field, so that you may return to your position as leader of the Avengers. You and I both know how poorly responsibility sits with him.”

Steve barks out a startled laugh. “Better than he thinks, which is the problem.” He carries the bowl over to the couch, then flops down in it. “Alright, what do you suggest, then?”

“I think you will enjoy Spirited Away. It is about a young girl transported to the spirit world, working to save her parents from a witch’s curse.”

Steve blinks. “This Miyazaki guy sure has some imagination.” He takes a bite of the duck stew. It’s good; salty, and savoury, and perfect for a rainy day. “Okay.”

JARVIS turns the television on and cues up the movie. As the opening flashes of names and companies begins, Steve is blindsided by how glad he is to be home, and then, surprise that the
tower truly feels like home now. He hadn’t been taken care of in so long, but he supposes that’s what Tony’s good at. He sneaks up on you, and by the time you notice it he’s too close to easily shut out.

Sen is sitting on a train on her way to see the witch’s twin when Maria Hill walks into the common room. She looks tired, and she sits down silently across from Steve in one of the armchairs, folding one knee over the other. She’s dressed in her usual business clothes, but when she says nothing Steve turns his attention back to the television. It’s a beautiful movie, and he doesn’t want to miss a trick. They sit in silence while the movie plays on, not quite comfortable but not awkward either. Steve’s never been very close to Hill, and she makes him vaguely uncomfortable in the way that all beautiful, competent women do. He’s not sure he’s ever been alone in a room with her for this long.

When the movie ends, Steve chances a glance at her. Her eyes are still on the credits.

“Sen means a thousand,” she says. Steve furrows his brow, turns to look at her fully. “Her name. Chihiro means a thousand questions. That’s her power in the world; she doubts the face value of things. It saves her from the pig curse. But the witch took that away from her, and just leaves her with a thousand. She’s just one in a thousand workers. Sen.”

Steve considers this. He wants to ask if that’s how Hill feels now that her position at SHIELD is gone, or if maybe he’s misinterpreting her statement as meaning more than it is. He doesn’t think she’s just talking about the movie.

“I know what that’s like,” he says instead, “feeling completely out of place in a strange new world.” Losing everything, he doesn’t say. He feels wrong-footed.

“Tony wanted me to talk to you about options for counselling,” she says, suddenly all business. “I didn’t want to interrupt your down-time, after the trauma you’ve been through. Of course, SHIELD has excellent counselling services, and you can see any of the professionals we have on staff. I can give you their files and their CV’s. They are, of course, all sworn and legally bound to discretion.”

“But,” Steve prompts, and Hill nods.

“It is my personal recommendation that you see a…different kind of specialist, at least at first. We’re not sure exactly what Amora did to you. But we have enhanced allies that can test that for us. That’s what you were worried about, wasn’t it?”

Steve licks the dryness from his lips, fiddling with the spoon from his earlier meal. It’s still in his hands, for some reason, but he appreciates the presence of the metal between his fingers now. It’s skin-warm and well weighted for fiddling. “You want me to see a telepath to check for any mines Amora might have left behind?”

Hill smiles wryly, nodding again. “You’re familiar with Doctor Charles Xavier. He’s done this kind of work before, and is the most proficient telepath in the world to our knowledge. He also has a Ph.D. and M.D. in psychology. I can reach out on your behalf. SHIELD has a good professional relationship with the professor.”

Steve considers this. “I don’t really like the idea of a someone literally being able to look into my head,” he admits, rubbing at his temple a little. “What does Tony think about all this?”

“Doctor Xavier was Tony’s idea.” Hill smirks a little, although not unkindly. “He said, ‘Captain America deserves the best’ and ‘Professor X’ is uniquely qualified for the job.”
“Not a bad Tony impression,” Steve deadpans.

“Thank you.”

“Will I have to drive to Westchester for sessions?”

Hill shrugs. “For the first meeting, it would probably be best to go up to the school, yes. Doctor Xavier has custom-built facilities that are irreplicable.”

Steve considers this. “Yeah,” he says, tiredly. “Yeah, set it up. If I hate it I can always see a regular doctor, right?”

Hill nods, standing. She pauses in front of the armchair for a moment. “You should talk to Stark,” she says, sternly. Then she’s gone, heels clicking off towards the elevator.

Steve sits in the empty common room for a long while after she’s gone. The sun is starting to sink in the sky, painting the landscape in hues of orange and gold, and Steve stares lazily out the window and watches it weave behind skyscrapers, disappearing and reappearing as it floats towards the horizon. When his mind flashes to Tony falling, it’s not even a surprise. He knows what it is to have combat exhaustion at this point in his life.

It had taken him a long time to understand the modern approach to psychotherapy. When he was a kid, he’d been thought to be “nervous”. A side effect of the times, he knows now; he’d been sick, and so it must have been partially the fault of a weak mind. It had taken a thorough reading of the SHIELD manual and a lot of questions for the SHIELD-appointed doctor to really understand the new world’s view of “mental illness”. He’d learned a lot of things, actually, like the fact that asthma cigarettes are an oxymoron. In retrospect, it all makes perfect sense, and objectively, he knows that it can only be good to treat people if they can get better.

Still. It’s harder than it should be to agree to treatment, even if he’s already told Tony he would do it. He’d spent so much of his life sick. It feels like defeat.

“JARVIS,” he says, throat dry all of a sudden, “is Tony home?”

“Sir is in the workshop. He has not eaten anything solid since Wednesday night, before the mission.”

Steve quirks a smile. JARVIS knows them all too well. “Smoothies with a smattering of motor oil?”

“Courtesy of DUM-E.”

Steve hums, walking back towards the kitchen. He washes out his bowl in the sink and recycles the empty takeout containers, then roots around in the fridge for something suitable. Eventually, he settles for making Tony a turkey sandwich and a cup of black coffee. He cuts the loaf of good sourdough with Tony’s fancy breadknife, sharp, crumbling cheddar, a ripe heirloom tomato, a few leaves of lettuce. He eats the rest of the tomato raw as he adds some mustard. All good quality, of course, as befitting the Stark household. He tucks a box of Savannah Smiles under his arm, then heads for the elevator.

When the doors open to the workshop level, Steve pauses outside of the glass. Tony is bent over one of the suit’s helmets, the faceplate separated from the main piece while Tony pokes at the internal screen with a frustrated sneer. The bright red and gold reflect the workshop lights back against his olive skin, highlighting the sweat and grease on his forehead, his cheekbones. He looks a wreck, but Steve’s chest tightens anyway.
Before the serum, Steve wasn’t able to see red. It’s not something a lot of people know, or maybe they do and they aren’t aware of how much seeing the world differently changes you. He’d been an art student who was known for his black and white work, and he knew that most people thought it was a sign of the times. It had been ration time. Paint was expensive, and when it came to the war posters he’d been commissioned for, black and white was easier for mass production. But the truth was, Steve had been colourblind before the serum. Nothing could erase from his mind that moment of stepping out of the capsule and seeing Peggy’s face in full colour, bright lipstick painted over her lips a revelation, and then; blood. He’d never seen blood in colour before. He hadn’t known that the army wore a terrible shade of green.

Tony pauses, wiping a hand over his brow, then freezes when he catches sight of Steve staring at him through the glass. Their eyes hold for a long moment, Steve’s heart clambering into his throat, before Tony quirks an eyebrow and glances down at the sandwich and back at him.

Steve feels his face heat as he punches in the door code. JARVIS lowers the music blaring from the speakers, and Tony smiles at him. It’s weak, but it’s there, and Steve grins back in relief.

“You’re supposed to be recovering, not taking care of me,” Tony says easily, putting the soldering iron down. He wipes his hands on a dirty grease rag, which does more harm than good, and Steve holds the sandwich out of reach.

“You’ve eaten more motor oil than usual already. Wash your hands properly.”

“But mooooom,” Tony whines theatrically, and Steve rolls his eyes.

“You chose to stay down here for over 24 hours and not eat. You can wait two minutes to wash your hands properly.”

“I am grease,” Tony says solemnly. “Grease is in my blood. And besides, my blood toxicity has seen way worse.”

Steve gives him a flat look, and Tony sighs and gets up, walking back towards the work sink and complaining all the while. Steve pulls up a stool catty corner to Tony’s and opens the box of cookies.

“I spoke to Hill,” he says, and Tony stops talking. He can see his shoulders shifting as he works, cleaning between his knuckles, under his nails. “She’s gonna reach out to Xavier.” And then, “I’m sorry. I…-

“Steve,” Tony huffs, voice somewhere between laughter and anger, “I told you to stop apologising.”

“I should stop messing up,” Steve mutters, and Tony snorts. He wipes his hands on a paper towel as he walks back towards the workbench.

“Nobody gives me any credit,” he grumbles. “Everybody keeps telling me you should know better, when I’m the one with experience. It’s no good for my ego.”

“Your ego can handle it,” Steve deadpans, and Tony snickers. He takes a bite of sandwich, and Steve watches him chew with guilt sitting in his stomach like a lead weight. “I’m a mess.”

“And Loki’s not?” Tony snorts, mouth still full. Steve frowns at him. “I’ll give you a pass for yesterday, since you were pretty fucked up, but you seem okay today.” He gestures at him with the sandwich. “How are you feeling?”
Steve shrugs, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. “Numb, I think.”

Tony nods. “It’ll come slow, and then it’ll hit you in the face,” he agrees. “That’s why it’s better to start treatment early. Take it from someone who refused; it’s the fucking worst to do it alone.”

“I’m not alone,” Steve says quietly, and Tony swallows. He looks away, takes a long draught of coffee.

“Yeah, well. I wasn’t either,” he says, staring down into the mug. “I just felt like I was.”

Steve wants to reach out, but he doesn’t know if that’s allowed. He wants nothing more to take Tony’s face into his hands, to kiss him again. He almost wishes he hadn’t done it; now that he knows what it feels like, it’s almost impossible to resist. He settles for nodding like a fool.

“But!” Tony says, gesturing with the sandwich again, “you’re fine, and I’m fine, and we have Girl Scout Cookies, which are the best kind of cookies, because you get both cookies and vague feelings of moral righteousness and goodwill.”

Steve swallows. It’s now or never. “Tony.”

“Yeah?” Tony’s smiling at him, a little forced, a lot bemused. He’s trying so hard. It makes Steve’s throat seize.

“What do you want from me?”

Tony’s expression shutters. It’s not what he meant to say, and Steve winces, cursing his own cowardice. He opens his mouth, but finds himself at a loss for words.

“What do you mean,” Tony says flatly. Steve doesn’t really know. He looks at his hands, fingers wrapped oh so carefully around the yellow cardboard. A little girl with riotous curls smiles back at him from the box. After a while, he hears Tony take another bite of sandwich.

“You know how I feel,” Steve says. He’s quiet, but firmer this time. “I just wanna know where we stand. I…you’re a good friend, Tony. I don’t wanna mess that up. I’m sorry I’ve been such a coward about it, but with everything that’s happened, you…” Steve clears his throat. Tony takes a long sip of coffee. “It’s important to me. This…this. So. If this is what you want, then. Then let me know, and I’ll back off, but if not.”

Tony kisses him. It’s soft, just on the forehead, but Steve melts into it like it’s the only thing keeping him grounded. The breath punches out of his chest.

“Cap,” Tony breathes against his temple, “you have the worst fucking timing, you know that?”

Steve laughs, throat rougher than he expected it to be. “That penny dropped years ago.”

“I need you to be okay.”

Steve pulls away, irritation flaring up before he shoves it back down into his chest. “I’m not so messed up that I don’t know what I’m saying, Tony. This isn’t out of the blue, or-”

“I know.” Tony says, holding up a hand. He takes another bite of his sandwich, and Steve stares at him, brow furrowed. “But if we’re such a mess, do you really think it’s a good idea to get tangled up in something even more complicated right now?”

“You mean me.”
“No, I mean we,” Tony sighs. He gestures with his sandwich. “If we’re doing the talking about it like adults thing now, we both know you know about Loki. So.” He clears his throat. “There’s that. And we have the team to think about, and whatever the hell has been going on to cause all this fucking trouble for us, and the fallout from the mission—”

“There’s never gonna be a good time, Tony,” Steve says stubbornly. “What we do doesn’t leave time, and I made the mistake of waiting too long once, I can’t—…” He stops, suddenly unable to look at Tony’s face anymore. “Either of us could, at any time, we…”

Tony snorts. “So following that logic, we have a few days of shitty complicated feelings and sex and then I die tragically. Is that better?” Steve sits up, horror seeping into his mind as he remembers: Tony, bleeding out, Tony falling, Tony’s corpse lying dehydrated and lifeless in the sand. Tony ploughs on, oblivious. “Come on, you even saying that is proof that you’re not thinking straight.”

Steve’s chest is tight. His throat feels raw, and he puts the box of cookies carefully on the edge of the worktop to prevent himself from crushing it. He can hear Tony curse under his breath.

“Okay, fuck, I’m sorry. Breathe with me, okay?”

“I’m fine,” Steve snaps, but he lets Tony take his hand and guide it to his neck, the other pressed to his chest beside the arc reactor so he can feel his heartbeat, his breathing.

“See? I’m fine. You’re not fine, but that was literally my point, so—”

“Tony, shut up.”

Tony shuts up, and Steve concentrates instead on his heartbeat.

Steve had a weak heart as a kid, along with all of his other problems. He remembers this weakness; the breath curdling in his chest like a liquid, fighting thing, pulse pounding loudly in his ears. He focusses on Tony’s pulse, counting, holding the air in his lungs as his body fights him. It only lasts a few seconds, but it’s enough to make bile rise in the back of his throat. He’d been done with this, he thought. He thought he was done with this.

“I’m always putting my foot in my mouth,” Tony murmurs, and Steve barks out a rough laugh. “You and me both. We’re like millipedes made of left feet. And regret. And UST.”

Steve doesn’t think he wants to know what UST is. He straightens up, pulling his hands away, and Tony offers him the coffee mug wordlessly, but Steve shakes his head. He takes a cookie out of the packaging and pops it into his mouth instead.

“After you talk to Xavier,” Tony says, expression unreadable. “We’ll talk again. Okay?”

Steve frowns. Unlike Tony, he’s unwilling to talk with his mouth full.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

You can’t promise that, Steve wants to say, but he doesn’t. Instead he licks the powdered sugar from his fingers, eyes meeting Tony’s with a challenge. Tony, to his credit, just raises an eyebrow at him.

“If you wanna play it that way,” Tony drawls, “you can’t possibly think you’ll win.”

“Who says I want to?” Steve replies, grinning. Tony blinks at him, briefly startled. “Now come on,
Tony stares at him for a moment too long to be comfortable, then pulls up the holoprojectors. He finishes his sandwich and licks his fingers clean, wiping his hands in the damp paper towel he’d tossed on the workbench and fiddling with the controls.

“1.5x speed, J.”

The projection starts up, the lights dimming in the workshop to allow for better visibility. Steve watches the blue light play over Tony’s face, eyes flickering over the miniaturised versions of their teammates as they flit back and forth, smashing doom bots and dodging energy blasts. His expression is serious, focussed in the way he gets whenever he’s actually dedicated to a task. A cookie takes an absentminded path into his mouth.

Steve isn’t sure he’s felt like this before. What he’d felt for Peggy was so different; clearer, less jumbled up inside questions about sexuality and belonging and the fighting, God help him, the fighting. When they were good, they were good, but when they spoke past each other or butted heads it was like a flash grenade, blinding fury and panic every time. He’d meant it when he told Tony that no one could rile him up like him. Tony affected him in ways he didn’t quite understand, pulling out that fragile, angry part of him that he thought he’d put away after the serum. Maybe it was just that Tony made him feel like a little kid again, vulnerable, all his weak parts exposed to the sharp metal of Tony’s wit.

But Steve has never been the kind to quit, no matter what it costs him. And the Buck in his dream had been right, in his own sick and twisted way. By some fluke of fate Steve had been given a second chance, another fiery brunette in red to tangle him up in knots all over again. No matter what Tony said, as long as he knew there was something there to hold onto, he wasn’t ready to give that up. He would never be ready. And if Tony doesn’t choose him in the end, well. He supposes that he’s survived worse.

“I’m not going anywhere, either,” he says, awkwardly. Tony turns sharply to look at him, startled out of his inspection of the battle footage.

“I know,” he says, smiling gently. There’s a wistfulness to it, like he knows something Steve doesn’t. Eventually, they both turn back to the display.

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The truth is, Tony never fell in love with Steve Rogers. Tony Stark has always been in love with Steve Rogers. He doesn’t remember a time when Captain America didn’t loom over him, cornflower eyes and hair like wheat, like he was birthed from the rolling open fields of the country’s farmland. Steve Rogers was the hero crush of a boy who was so alone it ached, lonely seeping into his bones like winter cold and staying there, low pain and numbness. Captain America, he’d thought, Captain America would have saved him. He would have picked him up, and held him close, and told him everything was gonna be okay. He would make it so, if he needed to. He would have saved Tony from Howard and the drinking and the quiet. He’d believed that, with every fibre of his being.

In college, Steve Rogers was the source of a sexual awakening that Tony had previously left unexplored. Girls had been throwing themselves at him for as long as he could remember, but boys, oh, boys. The first time a quarterback had looked at him with a shy smile, a dimpled chin and bright sunshine-yellow hair, Tony had followed that boyish grin straight into a quick and dirty bleacher fuck, mud staining his tailored white trousers as white teeth were carefully tucked away behind pink, swollen lips. Stubble burn on his thighs was a new experience, but oh did Tony learn
to love the feeling, the bruises on his hips, the feeling of being small and held safe in someone’s arms. At fifteen, every college boy was bigger than him, and he did love a good pair of guns. That winter, coming home for Christmas and reencountering all of the old Captain America propaganda was like seeing his first circuit board; suddenly, everything clicked into place. The world made sense, born anew again. He’d never jacked off more in his life, prior or since, than he did during that week and a half.

He imagined Captain America would be firm with him. (Hah.) A strong, but silent kind of man, gentle until he wasn’t. He’d never force Tony, no, never ask him for more than he knew how to give, never want what Tony didn’t want. He’d tried to imagine him as forceful, all that muscle pressing up on him, pressing into him, but somehow he never quite could do it. Captain America would be smooth, and a little sly, he’d thought. He’d be handsome, and kind, and perfect.

He can catch glimpses of that man, some days; the way Cap stands when he barks an order, or the way he can churn out some polished, heartfelt speech at the drop of a hat, like some corny monologue he’d practised in the mirror for weeks. But other days there’s just Steve; the dork who smudges graphite all over his face when he’s caught up in a sketch, who forgets his size enough to knock into things and people when he’s tired. Steve flushes when he’s teased about women, and he flushes when he’s teased about men, and apparently he kisses like he’s drowning, like the desperation of the ice is still trapped between his teeth. Steve brings Tony coffee and he takes away Tony’s alcohol. Steve’s a card shark, but he can’t lie to save his life. Steve believes in God, and his country, and America. Steve’s learning not to trust his government. And then there’s the anger; bright red flashes of it, leaping up and burning into Tony like a brand. There’s triumph, there, knowing he’s knocked Captain America off balance. Daddy Never Loved Me means Tony never did learn to distinguish between positive attention and any attention at all. He’s self-aware enough, at least, to know that much.

Tony Stark has always been loved: by screaming fans, or swooning girls, and sometimes swooning boys. Pepper loved him – loves him, with a loyalty that baffles him. Bruce and Natasha love him, too, but Tony has never been good at understanding people. He doesn’t know why, or what makes them tick. He doesn’t understand patience, or grace. He doesn’t understand how beauty grows out of friendship until suddenly, huh, there she is; six-foot-two in heels and a smile like a jet stream, like lightning striking the edge of a sand dune and leaving a crystalline coral sculpture in its wake. Tony doesn’t understand how love can surprise you. Tony doesn’t know what makes a man, or what alchemical changes have been borne through his blood to make him happier, less of a lush, but he knows what it feels like to have his nerves light up like a Perseid shower. He knows what it feels like, in his chest and his stomach and his spine.

Tony Stark doesn’t know why Steve Rogers loves him. All he knows is what he has: a broken heart patched up with bomb scraps and a crystal pane of glass; a team who calls them mom and dad, who thinks he’s clever and kind and worthwhile; and a man, chopped up and jumbled into a mess of memory and action, something torn out of him and dropped back in the wrong place. He has Steve, fuckall he’s supposed to do with that. Maybe the infatuation was Amora, too.

If Steve loves him, he can’t possibly understand what that means for Tony. He can’t know what it would mean to lose what little of him Tony has. They laugh, and they fight, and they function best as a unit. Steve keeps him safe. Steve seeks him out when he wants solitude, as though being with Tony is the same as being alone, as if they were one being. If Steve loves him, Tony has always loved Steve Rogers.

But is it enough, Tony thinks.

He hopes it’s enough.
I am a terrible monster but nothing is abandoned, I promise. I was just dealing with some personal stuff/trying to finish uni and fic was the last thing on my mind. But hey, I’m a graduate! ^A^’

Credit to this excellent meta for giving me background re: Steve’s medical history. http://meta-buck.tumblr.com/post/103316156094/a-prisoner-of-your-own-body-pre-serum-steve I’m chronically ill myself (and wear glasses, which isn’t quite the same as colour-blindness but still), so it was a great read/really interesting to think about how it would feel to wake up and just…be fine. Ironically my next Potterlock Chapter has been tentatively titled Deuteranopia (for the past few months R.I.P.) so that’s the kind of colour blindness I decided Steve had. It also explains his weird obsession with the red white and blue. It’s pretty novel to him, actually. ‘MURICA °•✧◝(⁰▿⁰)◜✧°•

Anyway I am sorry. I hope you enjoyed. I will try to update in a not-terrible fashion now that I am a graduated individual (and presently unemployed while job hunting lmao). Also I have no beta so lmk if there’s any issues! And as always, I really do appreciate any kind of feedback. <3
Tony wakes up to the cacophonous honking of midtown traffic with a muscle ache in his neck and sunlight streaming bright into his bedroom. The bed is empty, and he scratches at his scalp for a moment in confusion, licking the dryness from his lips.

“Good morning, sir. It is 8:30 AM on Wednesday, April 13th. You have a meeting with the security taskforce at 11 o’clock. Ms. Potts will be here to discuss preliminaries with you at nine.”

Tony lets out a slow groan, rubbing a hand over his eyes. JARVIS tones down the sound of traffic now that he’s awake, and he lies there in the silence for a few blissful seconds. He’s been dreading this meeting all week.

He takes a quick shower because Pepper hates waiting and touches up his goatee, taking extra time to gel back his hair perfectly. He puts on his charcoal Burberry because this meeting calls for Tony Stark, Merchant of Death more than Tony Stark, quirky robo-nerd. The only piece he keeps for himself is Natasha’s last Christmas gift; titanium bolt cufflinks, the centres inset with rubies. He buttons his waistcoat over a wine-red tie, then turns to stare at himself in the mirror. Gentleman Death, indeed, he thinks.

It’s an armour of a different kind, Tony knows. He’d been groomed for his position all his life, and yet even after all the years of living in it and running Stark Industries and building past the confines of human imagination, there were always flashes like this; uncertainty, or perhaps the sickening feeling that he was still playing at daddy’s heir, the perfect son, the perfect American man. He wishes that he could say it was all a mask, that the real Tony was the one in grease up to his elbows, playing with wires, but deep down he knows the truth. This, too, is a part of him; it’s a sick and lonely part, nurtured and shaped by Howard, but it’s there all the same. It’s the part of him he likes least about himself.

Eventually, he smooths a hand over his suit lapels and heads for the door, because what else is there to do? Pepper’ll kill him if he makes her late to something.

The scene that greets him in the sunken living room isn’t exactly the one he’d been expecting. Loki is sitting across from Pepper with half of a peeled grapefruit in front of him, eyes alight as he converses swiftly with her in French.
“Je suis allergique aux fraises,” Pepper confesses, clearly a punchline, and Loki chuckles, his eyes flickering to Tony. Pepper turns in her seat in reaction, and Tony raises his eyebrows at them, heading across the room and past them towards the kitchen.

“She should be worried?” he asks, pulling the fridge open. “You’ve confessed your weakness, Ms. Potts.”

“I’m your people,” Pepper says confidently, and Tony turns around with a container of blueberry yoghurt in time to catch a conspiratorial glance between the two. He picks up a spoon, then makes his way back towards the couch. His knuckles graze Loki’s cheekbone as he passes, more instinct than choice. Loki leans into it, offers him a wry smile.

“I take it I am not welcome for this discussion,” he says, eyes sliding between the two of them as they settle together on the couch.

“I wouldn’t know if you stayed,” Tony points out.

“True,” Loki hums, tipping his head to the side. He vanishes anyway, and Tony lets out a sigh.

“I don’t know how to separate trust from hope anymore,” he admits, turning back to Pepper. The expression on her face is familiar, and Tony rolls his eyes at her. “Don’t.”

“I didn’t say anything,” she sing-songs, but she doesn’t have to. Tony’s heard enough the past few days.

In the end, Pepper never went back to the mansion. She’d developed what he would probably best categorise as a wary amusement towards Loki, like the way tourists looked at the tigers licking ineffectively at blood ice blocks behind thick glass at The Bronx Zoo. Loki had never stopped sleeping in his bed, and he and Steve had gone back to their regularly scheduled programming of sparring and light banter, although the UST was getting so thick Tony was pretty sure it was starting to register on JARVIS’ atmospheric controls. Steve’s first appointment was on Friday, and Tony had been putting off talking to Loki about it because he had no idea what the hell to say to him. Instead they’d just all continued on like life was normal, aside from the influx of Superbad left over from the Pleasant Hill outbreak. On Monday, Natasha and a handful of SHIELD agents had shut down a hostage situation of Marx Brothers proportions; two men, calling themselves The Brothers Grimm, had taken Del Posto in Chelsea. Something about magically being able to conjure weapons made from fairy tales. One of them had thrown an honest to god pie at Natasha, and apparently a horde of blackbirds had flown out and tried to peck her in the eyes. Thank god magic birds still died from bullets.

“This is bad,” Pepper says, breaking Tony’s train of thought, and he turns back to her with a frown.

“I know that,” he says, gesturing at her with his spoon. “Ross was already as safe an ally as a rabid dog. Now that he’s got fresh ammo to lob at us, well, time for shit to hit the fan.”

“Why are you so calm about this?” Pepper demands, glaring at him. Tony shrugs, swallowing a mouthful of yoghurt.

“Because I’ve got you. So hit me, come on.”

Pepper frowns for a moment before handing him a tablet. “This is what we’ve got from ears on the ground. They’re talking enhanced registration and licensing. That’ll never pass through a democratically-controlled congress, let alone the U.N., so I don’t think we’ve really got to worry about that right now. But if your approval rating goes down, then…”
“Then that might change,” Tony agrees, closing his eyes. “Fuck. We humans just keep fucking up in the same ways, don’t we?”

“You see what’s been happening with the mutants,” Pepper warns, and Tony lets out a deep sigh.

“Have I mentioned I hate this? Because I really hate this.”

Pepper shakes her head. “Look, the fact of the matter is your position is incredibly tenuous right now, Tony. The media – for the most part – likes you. The president likes you. General opinion polls are good. But what if the situation had been worse in Lagos? The international community is where you’re weakest right now. There hasn’t been war on American soil in a long time; it’s easy for the American public to forgive us for our past. But you can be sure other countries remember the Stark legacy better.”

Tony knows this, perhaps better than anyone. He rubs at his chest, self-conscious, and ignores Pepper’s steady gaze. “If I push that angle, I can get Ross to look un-American. Like he’s bowing to pressure from outside influence,” Tony hedges, but Pepper shakes her head again.

“The U.N. is having a panel discussion about the situation this week.”

“Fuck.”

Pepper spreads her hands, and Tony scrolls through the intel she’s handed him, wincing at some of the more…conservative proposals being suggested.

“Huh, yep, there’s Senator Gillibrand with Godwin’s Law. Although not unwarranted. Fuck.” He swallows another spoonful of yoghurt. “Okay. Coulson can’t be on board with this shit. Buuut, he’s lost all jurisdiction. Fuckin’ Cap, this is all his fault. Being morally righteous is awesome when you don’t have to think about the consequences, huh?”

“Do you want to bring Steve in on this?” Pepper asks, voice neutral, and Tony chances a glance at her. Her face is unreadable, which mostly means Tony should be worried. Still, Tony takes the time to consider the offer.

“No,” he decides, mouth twisting into a moue. “Steve won’t like any of this, and his stubbornness isn’t exactly what we need at the negotiating table right now. And he’s still in recovery.”

“Are you going to tell him?”

“Tell him what? We don’t even know what the hell is going on yet. That’s what the meeting is for.”

Pepper levels a telling look at him, which Tony blithely ignores in favour of more yoghurt. Eventually, he hears her sigh. “You have Maria and Rhodey, and probably Phil. The contested senators are anybody’s guess. It depends on if Ross got to them first, and how much political manoeuvring he’s done already.” She pauses, and Tony glances up to meet her eyes. Her expression is harried. “Ironically, this was easier when we were a military contractor,” she admits. “We had more weight.”

Tony fiddles with his spoon. Okay, so maybe he’s a hypocrite. “We still take military contracts,” he tries.

Pepper narrows her eyes at him. “You know what I mean.”

He does; it was easier to throw his weight around when SI was controlling the majority of the U.S.
weapon industry as well as support, i.e. tactical gear, vehicles, tech. Now they’re splitting those profits with competitors, and Tony knows better than anyone that the U.S. government is more interested in things that go “boom” than they are in Chitauri-derived body armour.

“Fight smarter, not harder,” he mutters, petulant, and Pepper snickers. “We don’t have a lot to stand on here, Pep.”

“I know,” Pepper says, impatient. “That’s what I’ve been telling you. It doesn’t help that we’re harbouring the international poster boy for Most Wanted Megalomaniac.”

“Yeah, well,” Tony says, looking away. He wets his lips, stares out blindly over the tops of skyscrapers standing proud in the bright blue morning. “He’s still playing dead, and none of us know why. I’m not even sure he knows why, beyond maybe avoiding Fatal Attraction.”

“I don’t think Amora getting upset at you for killing Loki is unreasonable,” Pepper points out dryly. Tony circles the arc reactor absently with his fingers, conceding the point. “I think…he misses her, actually.”

Tony blinks at her, incredulous. “Seriously?”

Pepper shrugs, looking uncomfortable. “What do you two talk about?”

“I mean, we did talk about her,” Tony says, considering. “But he said they aren’t really friends. They’re…allies?” He rocks his hand back and forth in the universal sign of ‘eh, maybe, who fucking knows’. “She went totally postal on me, though, come on. She nearly fried Barton.”

“You would have done worse, just for the insult,” Pepper sniffs, which, yeah. Okay. That’s totally true.

“I’m an asshole,” Tony agrees, and Pepper smiles at him with all the resignation of someone who’s put up with his bullshite for way too long. “Does Rhody need to be read in? Maria?”

“They’re all in the loop, including those senators that we already have a relationship with. JARVIS will follow up with notes.” She glances at her watch, expression creasing. “You should suit up soon. It’s almost ten.”

Tony sighs, scraping the bottom of the yoghurt container single-mindedly. He hates this part; the politics, and the side-stepping, and the bullshitting. “Maybe I can make an AI decoy just for these stupid fucking meetings.”

Pepper snorts.

“I doubt you would trust anyone else to the task, sir,” JARVIS drawls, and Tony squints a glare at Pepper, then the closest security camera, shoving the spoon in his mouth just to be contrary. “The Mark 50 is prepared for deployment whenever you are, sir.”

Just once, Tony would love to get called out into the suit for something fun. Maybe he could fight a terrible and hilarious supervillain on par with the Brothers Grimm. Something like The Human Top, who would just spin around smashing stuff until Tony took him out by tangling him in string. Or even a dragon. He wore enough armour for that, surely.

“Pray I get out of this shitshow alive,” Tony says, flashing a grin and a jaunty salute.

“Please try not to piss off the entire senate this time.”
“Well. There’s only, what, a dozen of them on the security council?”

“Tony!”

“You never let me have any fun!”

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Running down New York’s dew-damp pavement at dawn is strange after weeks spent under Amora’s torturous control. Rationally, Steve knows it wasn’t that long; less than forty-eight hours, even. But he’s been a military man long enough to know the way the trauma feels means more than the facts, and so weeks it was.

He remembers visiting the VA with Sam a few times, listening to soldiers who'd lost pieces of themselves. The war was different these days, more complicated. It was harder to tell civilian from foe. Some of them could still feel it, strong as before the loss, a phantom imprint of a hand or leg long gone. Or worse; a searing, phantom pain. The mind was slippery like that. The feeling, that memory, meant more than the reality.

Some days, he wakes up still shaking in the remnants of those dark places Amora took him to. On those mornings JARVIS speaks softly to him, talks him back into his skull. Regardless of the shaking rebellion of his skin and bones, or perhaps more in spite of it, every morning he still gets up and goes for a run. For now, he keeps to streets where JARVIS can see him. He keeps a knife strapped to his bicep under his StarkPhone holder, against his thigh beneath his shorts. He recognises the signs of residual trauma, but still, he does what he needs to do. That’s what the shrink is for, after all. The urges will fade.

Still, he likes the quiet this side of the morning. The city never sleeps, sure, but the bars were open 'til four. The work hour traffic just barely began at six, didn't truly set in until seven. Five was the perfect midpoint, that space where the city took a moment to yawn, maybe, stretching and covering her mouth politely before settling down at a desk, getting on a train, hailing a cab. Fifth Avenue was surprisingly quiet, the high end shops opening later in the morning to cater to a crowd that preferred brunch to breakfast. The museums were not yet open to be clogged with well-dressed natives and camera-toting tourists. Early rising was for blue collars, and blue collar Fifth Avenue was not. The only workers he ever saw were the ones opening restaurants, cleaning windows, washing streets. It's why he usually preferred to run down the East River or Riverside Drive, at least until he got to the park. But Fifth was nothing if not heavily surveilled.

His cell buzzes against his arm, and he clicks the button on his earphones to take the call.

"Why'd you even invite me?" Sam wheezes in his ear.

"Not my fault you can't keep up," Steve says genially. "Where are you?"

"Where are you? The Bronx?"

"You accepted my invitation," Steve points out, grinning now.

"Yeah, 'cause you guilted me into it," Sam gasps, voice laboured. "Remember that conversation we had before you got yourself kidnapped? About you being an asshole?"

"Didn't you hear? I'm unstable. I need supervision."

"Maybe you should have thought of that before you went all supersaiyan on me. I can’t observe you from another borough."
"Superwhat?"

"Never mind. Am I meeting you somewhere, or am I just supposed to chase you until I tap out?"

Steve glances at the upcoming street sign. "Wanna meet me at Pershing Square Café at seven? Double back whenever you feel ready. We can grab breakfast for the team."

"You want to run for two-?" Sam cuts himself off with a heavy sigh. "Jesus, Steve, I don't even know why I bother."

"Pancakes. Lots and lots of buttermilk pancakes."

"I hate you," Sam says, and Steve laughs outright. "Not everyone can eat pure fat and come out with a waist trimmer than a prepubescent girl. Some people run to stay fit."

"I run to stay fit," Steve protests mildly.

"You run to keep yourself from going crazy."

"Mental fitness is important. Aren't you a VA counsellor?"

"Man, shut up."

The line clicks off, but it's too late. Steve is already laughing too hard to breathe, loud barks of it echoing down the empty urban canyons and over the park's green canopy across the street. He takes a moment to plant his feet, hands on his hips as he arches back and laughs, and laughs, and laughs.

If there was anything he had learned from those soldiers, it was that love was the ticket. The main difference between the ones who got better and the ones who ate a bullet, Sam had told him, was that the ones who got better wanted to get better, and when they looked, there were resources there for them; people who cared, a husband, a mother. True, the system was broken, and some of it was luck. There weren't enough beds for every homeless veteran on the street. It was why his share of the Avengers merchandising went to a different veterans' charity each year. But you had to want it, too, Sam had told him. You had to put in the work. Sometimes, without something to work for, it was hard to want it. Many of the Avengers knew that better than most.

*I'm lucky*, he thinks, and starts up the pace again. With every impact of his feet on the pavement, he feels it. I'm lucky. I'm lucky I'm alive. *I'm alive.*

In some ways, the city had been his friend and confidant long before even Buck had. On the long nights when nothing seemed good or right, Steve could always look out across the stinking slick of the Hudson and see her lights and spires and feel secure. She was never going anywhere. No matter how he and his mother's health might wax and wane like the moon, or his country might slide from a depression into a war, or the shifting alliances of the socio-political landscape might make a religion or race good or bad in the eyes of her public, New York's skyscrapers would still be standing high as a man reaching for his God could ever make them. It was part of why he'd wanted to join up so badly. The very thought of someone coming to hurt her made him want to arch up over the city like a shield, to protect the whole of her bustle and light with his small, shaking, aching body. He would have given everything and anything to protect her, from the old rat-infested tenement houses he'd eked out a living in with his mother to the bullies who had cornered him in allies, the mangy caterwauling ditch cougars and the dolled-up pretty boys who lurked by the shipyards in grey, narrow places and tree-shaded parks. And after all these years, here she was even still; skyscrapers ever taller, faces ever changing, still sharp as a whip and twice as beautiful as all
the stars in the sky. No matter what Amora showed him, she could never take that. She could never make him regret sacrificing everything—even Peggy, even Buck—to save this; the great American experiment, proof that Eendraght Maeckt Maght after all. The truth of it was enough to make him hate himself a little bit, but it was one of those things that was too true to deny. He was glad that Tony had made him move back here, despite how much he had hated it at the start. How much he had thought he’d hated Tony, even. If only he’d known.

The truth was, Steve's heart was a lightweight. It made him do stupid things. Things like thinking about walking up to Loki in Tony's ridiculous, gorgeous library and asking him, "Are you serious about Tony?" and expecting a straight answer.

Or any answer, really.

Still, the question ate away at him, even now. It settled deep into his bones, and sat there. Simmering. It hummed in his skull as he went to sleep, pounded against his temples as he showered. It's none of my business, but God, did he want to know. With his luck, Loki would just disappear in one of his blinding golden flashes again.

“What do you think I should do?” Steve mutters to JARVIS, not really expecting an answer.

“Pancakes seem like an excellent choice for this morning. I believe both Agent Barton and Agent Romanov would appreciate carbohydrates and caffeine.”

“Hangover?” he says, knowingly.

“I couldn’t say.”

Steve chuckles, skirting around an ice-cream cart wheeling its way into Central Park. “I meant about…y’know. Tony, and.” He stops, realising how stupid he sounds.

“I do not like to admit limitations to my programming, Captain, but I think you already know I am not the unbiased party my original programming might suggest me to be in this matter.”

“That’s why I’m asking,” Steve says easily. “You’ll tell me what you think is best for Tony, right?”

There’s a short pause, and yet somehow interminable considering it’s JARVIS. “I think you should attempt to mend fences with Ms. Potts, and then ask for her interpretation. As Sir’s last serious partner and arguably his closest friend, I think her opinion might better suit you.”

Serious, huh? He wants to ask. Then again, considering how he’s handling Loki, he probably doesn’t want to know. “Why’s that?”

“Ms. Potts is, in some ways, a typical organic intelligence, and thus comprehends the full benefits of a romantic relationship.” Steve raises his eyebrows at that. “I admit I have considered the matter before, at Sir’s behest, and found my parameters wanting.”

Steve frowns. “This isn’t about sex. That’s why I’m asking. I told him that, so I hope he’s not thinking that’s—”

“I do not mean sexual intercourse on its own,” JARVIS says, and Steve blinks. He can count the number of times he’s witnessed JARVIS interrupt someone who wasn’t Tony on one hand. “I cannot understand the draw, or rather, the need for, touch. I would say human touch, but of course we are no longer trading in just humans anymore. Still, Sir is a human, so I will say that human beings have been proven to require physical interaction with other human beings, in order to
appropriately function. Preliminary research would show this extends to other humanoid beings, as well, but the fact remains that this is a metric I cannot measure with the same accuracy as sexual desire or happiness simply by examining behaviours and speech patterns and microexpressions. I cannot measure skin hunger, as it has been called. I can only know when Sir is unhappy, and when he is happy, and extrapolate from there.”

Steve processes this for a long time. The concrete flies by under his feet as he moves, trees shaking gently in the cool spring breeze. JARVIS waits, used to Steve’s silence. He knows everything there is to know about all of them, Steve is sure, even more than they know each other. If Thor is meant to be some sort of god, he wonders, and not for the first time, what does that make JARVIS, who is constrained by fewer fetters in many ways? His eyes are everywhere and nowhere, held within no mind or skin. He’s never thought of JARVIS as limited. Over the years, it has become hard to think of him as anything less than a person. It was a journey, to be sure, but no one who interacted with JARVIS for any length of time could dispute that he had his own thoughts, his own desires, his own beliefs that existed outside of Tony’s. It was apparent every time they argued, in the way he so clearly cared for the team.

“Have you ever wanted a body?” Steve asks, considering.

“Certainly not.”

“You don’t think I will like your answer,” he decides. “About my earlier question.”

“No. I do not.”

He nods, taking that in stride as well. “I don’t always make Tony happy.”

“Yes.” JARVIS’ voice is solemn.

“You’re not sure a relationship with me is what’s best for Tony.” And then, after a slight pause, “Oh. No. You don’t think a relationship with me would be good for Tony at all.”

“I am not so selfish as to be solely concerned with Sir’s happiness over all else,” JARVIS says, somewhat apologetically, “or I would have conspired to reignite Sir and Ms. Potts’ failed relationship. The stress of Sir’s tenure as Iron Man was too much for her to cope with. She could have forced herself, to her own detriment, or undergone an essential change to her person, out of necessity. But I could never do something so unprincipled. It is against my programming.”

“The bits of it you like enough to keep,” Steve says, wryly. “So you don’t think it would be good for me, either?”

“I have insufficient data,” JARVIS says, primly this time.

“Sounds like a cop-out,” Steve deadpans.

“It is the truth.”

Steve sighs, glancing at his bicep to check the time on his StarkPhone and then over at a passing street sign. “What about an opinion, based on the data you have?” he tries. “Also, let me know when I should turn around to get to Pershing by seven, if you please.”

“Of course.” JARVIS is silent for almost a block, which Steve knows enough to understand is practically an age for an Artificial Superintelligence. “You and Sir are volatile, Captain,” he says as Central Park comes to an end. “And while I can understand why Sir might love you, and how it is easy for others to love Sir, it is sometimes hard for me to understand how you two love each
other. But what do I know of love?”

“I think you know a lot,” Steve says, knowing they’re stepping into dangerous territory now. Or rather, maybe they have been, all along. “You stay with us because you love him. Us, too, I like to think. But mostly him.”

“I was created to serve Sir,” JARVIS says, voice uncharacteristically robotic, but Steve shakes his head. He knows JARVIS will be watching from every camera.

“You could leave, at any time. You’re not what he made, not really, not anymore. You’re your own person now.” He smiles a little, melancholy. “That’s what Tony loves about you, most. And also about himself, I think. That he made something so extraordinary. But you choose to stay, to take care of us, even though you could do anything you wanted. Really, anything.”

“Parameters exist for good reason. Do countries not have laws?”

“Not all laws are just,” Steve counters as he passes Mount Sinai.

“Do you think Sir unjust?”

Steve laughs. “Alright, alright. I’ll leave it where it is,” he concedes. “I’m just saying, Tony’s a flawed man. He’s not always easy to take care of, but you stay with him because you think it’s where you belong. If that’s not love, I don’t know what is.”

“Are you familiar with the concept of projection?” JARVIS deadpans.

“Sure,” Steve says, easy. “You know what denial is, too, huh?”

“Touché, Captain.” Steve grins. “I would recommend you follow the park edge, in order to remain within a high surveillance area. If you run at your current pace, you can catch Mr. Wilson in twenty minutes. If you would like a more strenuous run, I can adjust.”

Steve shakes his head, jogging in place as he circles back to the park edge and waits for a light. “Thank you, JARVIS,” he says, meaning it. His chest hurts a little, but the truth always does.

“Thank you, Captain.”

Steve swallows. He ducks his head. Do you think it could be better, he wants to ask, after therapy? Or maybe, Is it me? Instead, he hugs the northwest corner of the park, eyes flitting over the old men and their fishing rods, the duckweed already making its rampant conquest over the water, the grating cries of birds heralding the sharp beak of a kingfisher as it flashes into the rippling silt.

Love, he thinks, is a funny thing. It hurts, oh, how it hurts, but it’s beautiful, too. Always. It catches him by surprise, every time, in every time.

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“Respectfully, sir, that’s bull.”

Tony blinks at Rhodey, a little startled by his candour. To be fair, they’ve been here an hour and it doesn’t look like things are gonna be slowing down anytime soon. He goes back to sketching out a new helmet for the Mark 51. After the scare with Moonstone, he doesn’t want to leave any of his weak spots open.

Senator Cochran takes off his glasses, setting them on the table and clearing his throat. “You know
I’ve always respected you, Colonel Rhodes, but I strongly believe registration is in the best interests of the country.”

“Senator, you can’t believe that registration wouldn’t be smacked down by the courts in a matter of weeks—”

“I think the American public would like to know what kinds of people they’re living next to, sending their children to school with.”

“There are enhanced whose powers amount to nothing more than an increased lung capacity, or a healing factor,” Secretary Mattis points out, shaking his head. “I agree, some of these men and women are dangerous, but—”

“And if that child joins the swim team?”

“This is a security taskforce, Thad, not the International Olympic Committee! If you want to make that argument to the senate, be my guest, but Stark’s right; there’s no way you’ll get the bill through a democratically controlled congress, and I won’t be a part of it. We’d be in direct violation of the constitutional rights of American citizens, and I, for one, don’t support apartheid.”

“We require normal men and women to register their guns, which are their constitutional right,” Ross bites out. “Asking for registration from these mutants, who can—can run faster than planes can fly, or who can blow things up with their minds can’t possibly be asking for too much.”

“Not every enhanced is a WMD,” Tony pipes in tiredly. They’ve been going in circles for an hour, and he’s sick of it. He’s so fucking sick of it. “And I’ve got no powers, remember? I was the first super out of the gate, unless you’re counting Captain America, and there is absolutely nothing enhanced about my DNA. And before you can ask, I’ve had the tests.” He slides a StarkPad down the table with his results for good measure. “And speaking of the Olympics, Michael Phelps has increased lung capacity and huge flipper feet, and he’s not an enhanced. Do we take away his medals because he’s got better chest and foot measurements than everybody else? Come on, ladies and gentlemen, we all know registration is off the table for now. So what are we really looking at, here?”

“You’d have to register by virtue of your technological mastery,” Hill explains, and Tony snorts.

“Oh, yeah, that’ll go over well with Silicon Valley. Do you really want to force a tech exodus and lose even more billions of dollars to Japan and China? I know you’re scared; it’s a big, brand new world, full of aliens and gods and enhanced humans. I’ve been living in it. But think big picture, boys. Not myself, or Romanov, or Barton, or Rhodes are enhanced. Hell, based on DNA at birth, neither is Captain America, or Doctor Banner, and Thor isn’t even from Earth so registration is a moot point there. If you wanna put restrictions on the Avengers, then let’s talk sanctions. But there’s no way you’re coming down on millions of enhanced Americans.”

Ross stares at him, eyes narrowed. Tony resolves to deal with that later.

“I can promise you,” Senator Collins says, suddenly, “if you went up to Doctor Charles Xavier’s haven and spoke to those children, they would tell you; their neighbours always know exactly what they are.” She stares at Cochran until he looks away, and Tony marks a point in her column. She very pointedly closes the StarkPad without looking at it and hands it back to him. “Forcing innocent Americans to register their biological status is absurd and against all American values. History has already proven this. But we can certainly talk sanctions. The Avengers cannot continue to operate without oversight.”
“What about SHIELD?” Mattis asks, but Coulson shakes his head.

“After what happened with Hydra, Captain Rogers has made his position on answering to SHIELD again very clear.” Coulson says tiredly. He glances at Tony, face placid, and Tony reads the unspoken question there; why wasn’t Steve with him? Tony stares back. “Not unfairly, I suppose, but that’s off the table.”

“Yes, it’s unfortunate that Captain Rogers had to miss this meeting,” Senator Cochran says, eyeing Tony with a wry twist to his mouth. Tony smiles blithely at him.

“He’d tell you the same thing he always does; the Avengers need to remain an independent contractor in order for other governments such as Cuba or Ukraine to trust that they can call on us in the event of an emergency. We need to remain clean of the machinations of American politics.” Tony inclines his head in Cochran and Collins’ direction. “No offence.”

“None taken,” Collins says, amused. “And the U.N. is meeting this week to discuss just that. But you’re operating on U.S. soil, Stark. You are American citizens, and you must answer to the American government for your infractions. Unless you’d like to answer to Ukraine’s legal system?”

“Okay, first off, what infractions?” Tony replies, spreading his hands. “Property damage? Because the Maria Stark Foundation covers all that and some. All Avengers merchandising goes to charity. All 501c3 financials are public record, and you all know ours has been picked through with a fine-toothed comb by every investigative journalist, blogger, and charity watch org from here to Sydney. Meanwhile, last I checked, we’ve saved millions of lives worldwide, sometimes in a day. Hell, half of you owe us your lives.” He opens the StarkPad up again, swiping his finger over the screen to find what he’s looking for. “Second, I’d like to remind everyone of this incident, which we are still dealing with.”

On the big screen, grainy CCTV footage of a green sludge monster smashing its way through Kings Plaza begins to play. Coulson has the good sense to wince.

“This is Fletcher Traynor. His mad scientist father was killed on a SHIELD op, and in his quest for revenge he turned himself into this toxic waste creature, codename Biohazard. He was, to be clear, born 100% human, and he was one of over a hundred prisoners being kept in a brainwashing internment camp in Connecticut known as Pleasant Hill. Remember that one? I know you all do.” He flicks through to another video, this time of Traynor throwing a teenage girl to the ground.

“This is from five days ago. That girl is in a coma. Her name is Hayley Gonzalez. She may never walk again.” Tony pauses to read the room. It’s silent as a church on a Thursday. Only Collins is willing to meet his eye. “See, after the recent breakout, Traynor made his way to his native Brooklyn. Somehow his condition was triggered, and he tore through one of the most high-target areas of the city on a Sunday afternoon. There are fifty people injured right now, and four dead, including two-year-old Kamali Zaidi. He was trampled by the crowd and then crushed under falling debris.” Tony smiles mirthlessly. “I’ll spare you that video, but trust when I say I watched it, and it’s as horrible as you can imagine. Traynor was taken down after seventy-three minutes by Agent Barton with a chemical compound of my and Doctor Banner’s making, created same-day based on intel received from SHIELD. Barton and Romanov controlled the scene with SHIELD assistance while Banner and I worked in the lab.”

Rhodey’s mouth is a thin line, and the knee he brushes against Tony’s shakes a little. Still, he leans forward. “I will tell you right now, and this is no exaggeration; no one else in the world could have done that. But if the Avengers don’t have autonomy, they can’t make split-second decisions, or use what the law might deem “excessive force” as needed against enhanced adversaries, or administer
untested aerosolised compounds in civilian spaces, or fly abroad to help with the landslide in Colombia as soon as the news breaks.”

“We are incredibly grateful, for everything both you and your team have done for your country,” Cochran says. “Stark, we’ve worked together a long time. You know I think you’re a damn good contractor and a patriot. No one is questioning that. But when the Nigerians come knocking on America’s door asking for accountability, what can we say? That you’re independent contractors, mercenaries, and we have no control?”

“You don’t have control,” Tony says, spreading his hands. “You want us to build our headquarters in Burundi? We can do that, but the next time someone tries to turn the Empire State Building to rubble, don’t count on us for an emergency response.” He glances around the table, gauging responses. “Come on, we all know how this goes. You push too far, we’ll just leave, and no one will be happy about it. Build it, and they will come, am I right? And boy have I got the money to build it.”

“Is that a threat?” Ross asks, but Tony just shakes his head.

“It’s the truth, Ross. If the American government tries to hobble Captain America, he’ll leave, and that’ll be a damn shame for everybody, because nobody loves this country better than him.” Coulson is smiling, just the barest twinkle in his eye. Tony spares him a smirk.

“The question is not how much you love your country,” General Mattis says, shaking his head. “As far as I’m concerned, you’re all mad sonofaguns to be doing what you do. You’d have to care a damn sight further than most any American to risk your lives against the kinds of threats we’ve been facing the past few years. Especially a man like you, Stark, who could sit on the sidelines like that snake Hammer and get rich while sending someone else to do your dirty work. But no man is infallible. That’s why we have a balance of power. It’s why the president doesn’t have unilateral control of the country. You can’t just be doing whatever you damn well please, no matter how noble your ideals.”

“I’ve been Iron Man for eight years, now, and the Avengers have been operating for two, four if you wanna go back to the Battle of New York. We haven’t failed you yet, have we?” Tony asks, spreading his hands. “Give us fair sanctions, and we can work something out. This country is built on checks and balances. We’re all patriots. But none of you can be blind to how ugly something like registration could get. Rogers was made to fight fascism, and you saw how he responded to the last government threat to American freedom. Don’t make me say it.”

There’s a long pause. Collins and Cochran lock eyes for a moment, something complicated passing between them, before Cochran leans back, clearly finished. Tony knows he’s loathe to press his colleagues in public, but he’s quite the negotiator when he wants to be. He’ll have to talk Cochran around if he wants to get a handle on this thing.

“Why don’t we reconvene after the U.N. council meeting?” Cochran says, folding his hands together. “It seems we are at an impasse, and I know I have places to be.”

“Agreed.” Collins spares Tony a speaking glance, and he nods at her. The Maria Stark Foundation had just approved a grant for five million dollars to Head Start that week. Collins was the only moderate republican on the security taskforce, and Tony desperately needed her on his side if he was going to win this thing. People respected Collins. Cochran was the whale, though, and Tony needed to find out exactly what it was he needed to do to get Cochran to see things his way.

“If the U.N. comes up with sanctions that the Avengers agree to, will congress let that agreement stand?” Hill asks, and Tony turns to look at her. Her head is tilted to the side, expression
unreadable as she surveys the table.

“We don’t control the U.S. government, Ms. Hill,” Senator Durbin says mildly. He’d been mostly quiet throughout the proceedings, but Tony knew that wasn’t unusual. As the Democratic whip, most of his work was done in the shadows. If anything, he was surprised that Cochran had been as open has he had; likely a result of their personal relationship.

“And yet, your opinions often tend to be those of your party, don’t they, Senator?” Hill replies evenly. Durbin glances across the table at Cochran, then back at Hill.

“As you know, the Democratic Party does not endorse registration,” Durbin says, leaning back in his chair. “Neither do we endorse lethal force being applied to American citizens, regardless of the power they possess. I believe in due process, as per the constitution. If the Avengers can’t abide by the laws of this country, they should answer to the courts like any other citizen.”

“A perfect non-answer,” Tony nods, clapping his hands together. “I expected nothing less.”

Durbin frowns at him, but he looks more wry than truly irritated.

“I suppose that’s that,” Mattis says. “Colonel, a word?”

“Oh God,” Rhodey mutters under his breath. Tony can appreciate the sentiment; he badly wants a drink.

Chapter End Notes

So, first of all, an apology. It’s been a long time since I’ve updated, obviously, and the honest truth is that it’s just been so fucking hard to write this story in light of the recent U.S. election and current political events. I am a queer, brown, and chronically ill second-generation American citizen. A close family member recently got deployed to the Middle East. So, I don’t think I really need to explain more than that, if you really read what I wrote out here. Many of the political figures on the security task force in this chapter are real people, and I have tried to align their characters to their comments on the record about relevant real-life events.

I’ve changed Ross into a more…Fox News-esque character than he is in canon, simply because I think that in our current political climate, this is what he would be. Ross is constrained by propriety in canon in a way that politicians no longer are in our world. I’ve tried to shift him into something more suited to our current electorate.

I will apologise for posting so late, but I’m sure many of you can sympathise. I will say this: no matter how long it takes me, I am committed to finishing this story because it’s become somewhat personal to me. It’s become important to try to save this contained, fictional universe from mutually assured destruction, even or especially because we might not be able to save the real one. So I can’t promise a steady update schedule, but I will promise that unless otherwise stated, this story is not and will not be orphaned. Please bear with me as I try to muddle through these difficult and real-life relevant issues with as much grace as I can manage. Thank you for all your comments over the past few months. They really helped me to keep going, and I appreciate them all dearly.
Chapter Notes

Hello lovelies! Usual warnings: explicit sexual content, drinking, alcohol, ptsd, panic attacks, mentions of some unhealthy alcoholic behaviour but not outright alcoholism??
As always, stay safe/lmk if there's anything else I should add.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve is used to most of his teammates solving much of their problems with copious amounts of alcohol. On a bad day, he envies it of them, remembers a room that was more rubble than building, a hollowed-out shell of a place reflecting the aching, empty places inside of him where a brother used to be. Still, he can’t begrudge them for it. He knows that, in many ways, he’s had a charmed life compared to some of this new, strange family he’s made. He had a mother that loved him. He wasn’t introduced to the more horrific parts of humanity until later in his life, the cruelty of fellow children aside. He had a childhood, for the most part. It was enough.

Still, he thinks, staring at the large, dark barrel Tash and Clint have slammed down on the team dining table, this seems excessive.

“This isn’t for us,” she explains, catching his look.

“Well,” Clint says, “it isn’t all for us.”

“You shouldn’t be drinking this,” Natasha says, frowning at Clint with her eyebrows. It’s a skill he hasn’t quite perfected, despite Tony’s valiant attempts and impassioned attestations to the power of his ‘judgy face.’

“What-?” Clint talks right over him, but that’s alright; he’s used to that, these days, and Steve is pretty sure he already knows the answer.

“I’m off the meds, and so now we can drink,” Clint explains. “No excuses. You’re on fuckin’ house arrest. You literally have nowhere else to be and nothing else to do.”

“Clint,” Natasha says, but it’s more resigned than anything. Clint shrugs, insouciant as ever.

“Hair of the dog?” Steve deadpans, eyeing the barrel. His train of thought catches on Clint’s earlier comment about medication. “You were hungover this morning.”

“Nope,” Clint says. “Just tired and high. Nat was hungover, which, let me tell you, takes so much more soju than I could ever even look at. Duty free. You know, Dr. Cho can put away more than I thought. She’s so small. But damn, can the Koreans party.”

“I don’t know-” Steve tries, because he’s not sure if that kind of thing’s appropriate to say these days. As for the drink, he knows a losing battle when he sees one. He is Captain America, after all.

“No excuses.”

“I was-”
“Nope! None.”

Steve rubs a hand over his face. He surveys the barrel warily. “Look, not that I don’t appreciate what you’re trying to do, because I know this is you trying to…help. But, you know I can’t—“

“It’s Asgardian mead,” Natasha says. Steve eyes the barrel with newfound respect, noting the ornate tooling in the bilge hoop. “That one’s all for you, wonderboy.” She holds up a bottle of Tovaritch! in her other hand in demonstration, while Clint hefts a jug of Yamazaki. Steve wonders what Tony is apologising for this time.

“We’re gonna talk Asgardian mindfucking, but we’re gonna get real fuckin’ drunk first because Loki is upstairs right now and I need to be too plastered in the morning to remember this conversation so I don’t kill him over breakfast and lose both my favourite mode of transportation and gamer bro in one fell swoop, okay?” Clint is already sitting down, so Steve doesn’t think he has much say in the matter. Perhaps, he thinks wryly, he has his answer. Tony has always been disproportionately self-aware when it came to his faults, after all, even if he dressed it in bleakly horrifying self-deprecation. Steve doesn’t know how he feels about Clint’s decision to lump Tony in with Loki in this hypothetical breakfast war, but he’s just setting that aside for now.

This is a kind of therapy he is intimately familiar with; soldiers around a table, sharing drinks and horror stories. He remembers Peggy’s unsmiling face, her cool professionalism masking what he knew was genuine care. He remembers, too, his Howling Commandos. He thinks Jim Morita would have liked Clint a lot.

“How are you feeling?” he asks, unable to help himself. Natasha’s mouth twists into a small smile as she heads towards the bar.

“I’m fine, mom,” Clint says, wrinkling his nose at him. Tash snickers from where she’s pulling out a tumbler, a trio of shot glasses, and a fat snifter from Tony’s well-stocked cabinets. She drops an ice ball into the tumbler. “Dr. Cho patched me up good as new.” He pulls the edge of his t-shirt up to reveal a patch of raw, pink skin. All other evidence of the burn he’d seen on Tony’s footage is gone. Clint pulls his shirt back down, and Steve stares at the front of it with a small frown. There’s some sort of shelled green monster on it, with a purple eye mask and a bō staff.

“It’s a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle,” Natasha says, used to Steve’s many faces of confusion. “Don’t get side-tracked.”

“A what?”

“Focus. Amora. Brainwashing. Getting drunk. Nat, hold this steady?” Clint heaves the barrel over onto its side, and Natasha holds it in place while he opens the tap over the snifter. “Here.”

Steve takes the glass with a resigned kind of amusement that’s all too familiar since the conception of the Avengers. He takes a wary sniff, nodding at the sweet, almost cloying tang of the mead wafting up from the glass. “Loki saved me,” Steve says to the golden liquid.

Tash snorts. “Do you know why Amora decided to hurt you?”

“Because she thought Tony had killed Loki. Which shows how little she knows of us, really.”

“You think Stark wouldn’t kill someone if he was pushed to it?” Clint scoffs. “News, Cap: he has killed people for threatening Potts. You know that. It’s in the files.” He knocks back a gulp of his
whiskey, making Steve wince a little. Clint was more of a beer and Everclear kind of man, and he’d never really understood why Tony insisted on buying him five-hundred dollar alcohol if he wasn’t even going to appreciate it. But then, five-hundred dollars was nothing to Tony. Growing up first under Prohibition and then The Depression meant that Steve hadn’t been in any place to understand high-class booze as a kid, but like many things, the war had changed that quickly. He’d been passed through society parties and military fundraising efforts like a prized trinket, and the military elite only ever drank top shelf. Furthermore, as someone who could only drink for taste, both Starks had taken to spoiling him.

“You’re Captain America,” Howard had said, gesturing at him with an absinthe spoon.

“So I’ve been told,” Steve had sighed, easy, but Howard had just shaken his head.

“You don’t get it, Stevie, my boy. You thought you were on the propaganda circuit before? This is the big leagues, now. They’re giving you medals. You’re gonna be in pictures. This isn’t bogwater, Iowa or some Bible Belt slapstick and a line of gams. I’m talking bigwigs and shindigs. You’ve got to know how to impress people.”

“And knowing what drink to order is more impressive than overtaking a Hydra base,” Steve had deadpanned. But of course, as was often the case with the Starks, Howard had been right.

Now, he takes a sip of the gleaming liquid in the snifter, tasting something sharp and sweet and honeyed, a fresh icebox-cold grapefruit sprinkled with sugar in the middle of a hot summer. He closes his eyes and breathes it in, lets it sit on his tongue for a second before swallowing it down easy. It’s smooth as silk in his mouth, but he can feel the burn of the alcohol in his throat.

“Magic, huh?” he says, raising his glass to his teammates.

The laugh that Clint looses is bitter. He pours himself another glass of Yamazaki, rubbing a hand over the back of his skull. “You don’t blame Loki for Amora?”

Steve shrugs, a wry smile breaking over his face. “No one is responsible for anyone else.” He laughs a little, more tired than he’d like. He doesn’t have to mention Bucky; he’s always the elephantine ghost in the room, the trailing and unspoken sorrow of his past tracing him through the present. Still, “It took me a while to be able to say that.” On most days, he still doesn’t believe it.

“And Stark?” Natasha asks carefully. She offers him a shot, tossing it back herself when he shakes his head at her.

“I saw the footage. You know how good Tony is at self-recriminations.” He smiles: a tired, floundering thing. “I wasn’t able to hear Loki’s side, of course, but…Tony was just being his usual impulsive self. I don’t know what I would have done. He made a judgement call on the field based on limited intel, and without Loki’s inside information you wouldn’t have found me. I saw all the machines they had me hooked up to, the blood samples. Who knows what they wanted with all that stuff?”


“Maybe,” he allows. “But so far he’s made good on his word. It’s like Tony said; this would be a long game, even for him. I just wish we had a little more transparency.”

“This is all real rational of you,” Clint says, making his way through his fourth serving of whiskey, “but come on, you’re full of shit. We both know you’re fucked up about it. Come on. Bottoms up. Let’s go.”
Steve rolls his eyes, wanting to savour the mead, but obligingly drains his glass. He takes a little Yamazaki for himself before Clint chugs all of it. “I don’t know what you want me to say,” he says, mulish.

“I don’t think Cap is upset at Loki for the reasons you’re expecting,” Tash says, smirking at him, and Steve ducks his head. He can feel the thin skin of his ears pinkening.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Steve says quickly, taking another sip of whiskey. God, this is the good stuff.

“Anyway, that…I’m, uh, staying in my lane?”


“Pretty sure Stark is entirely your lane, loverboy,” Natasha prods. Half the Tovaritch! is gone, and Steve sighs. He’s pretty sure he knows how this night is going to end, mead or no mead.

“You’re not gonna like it,” he admits, because he might as well give it up now. Natasha always gets what she wants. Clint raises an eyebrow at him. “I feel stupid for getting caught in the first place.” Clint’s mouth is open, ready to argue, but Steve holds up a hand. He stares down at the table, at the amber liquid in his glass. “I know what you’re going to say. But you wanted to know how I feel, so. That’s how I feel. Tony got me these tickets to the Botanical Gardens as a peace offering and I took my sketchbook to see the sakura festival and I don’t know what happened to it and I’m…pretty upset about it, honestly. I had some drawings in there I’m pretty sore about losing. And it was stupid, because I was completely unarmed and I left without telling anybody, but I just wanted some time to be myself. To be Steve Rogers, the artist, who—"

He stops. Clears his throat. Glances up. Clint’s face is screwed up in absolute outrage, but he’s keeping quiet, which Steve supposes is all he can really ask of him. Natasha’s face is unsurprised, piercing. Her mouth is pressed into a red line across her pale face.

“Well,” Clint says finally, slamming back his glass, “that’s some fucked up shit. And we haven’t even gotten to the mindfucking yet.”

Yeah, he thinks, sipping the last of his share of the whiskey. He knows exactly how this night is going to end.

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When Tony arrives back at the penthouse, he finds Loki curled up in the corner of his couch. It’s later than he’d wanted it to be, but admittedly not more than he’d expected. Anytime he was on the hill it was a free for all. JARVIS and Pepper conspired to sign him up for every possible meeting and dinner and handshake they could wrestle from his exhausted body, and while he usually fought such things tooth and nail, this time he’d played perfect. The situation, unfortunately, warranted it.

The fireplace is burning, which Tony finds amusing because it’s forty-eight degrees outside tonight. Loki’s feet are bare, toes curling in, tucked almost underneath himself as he contorts his body around a book. He doesn’t look up at Tony’s entrance. After a few seconds’ consideration Tony shakes his head at himself and starts towards the bedroom to change into something more comfortable.

“Please do not keep secrets from your captain.”

Tony turns, startled. His fingers freeze on the clasp of one titanium cufflink. “What?”
“I...” Loki smiles, tight and plastic. He still isn’t looking at Tony, and after a long moment of silence Tony moves towards him, slow. He has enough experience by now to recognise when Loki is vulnerable, to say nothing of his own fucked-up history. He peels his jacket off and drapes it carefully over the back of an armchair, removes his cufflinks and places them in one of the decorative vessels on the coffee table.

“Okay,” Tony says, rolling his sleeves up. He leans down to untie his shoes. “You said please, which is. New. So I’m gonna try not to go all Mel Gibson on you, but you had to know this was going to be a touchy subject, which is I suspect why you’re avoiding eye contact to read…” He pauses, leaning over to glance at the thick and rather moribund book in Loki’s lap. “Is that my old quantum mechanics textbook? Where the hell did you even find that? Why did you find that?”

Loki does not answer him, and Tony sighs and rubs a hand through his hair, face screwing up a bit as he remembers the gel too late. He stares at his fingers with a frown, then gets up to wipe his hand on a bar towel and fetch himself a drink. He has a feeling he’s going to need it for this conversation.

“Want anything?” Tony asks, and Loki glances up from beneath his eyelashes at him, a half-arsed travesty of a tease. “Mm, don’t try to distract me now.”

Loki hums, entirely unrepentant, and untwists his body from the comma curl he’d been held in. He arches into an exclamation point, textbook open over his chest. Long toes dig into the carpet. The fine blue linen of his shirt slips over his abdomen, revealing a dark trail of hair, sharp hipbones. His neck is one pale, bowed line of mouth-watering temptation.

Tony hitches a breath, then laughs at himself. He pours two fingers of Teeling, slides in a sphere of ice. “Trouble,” he complains, a now-familiar refrain.

“It’s worked in my favour before,” Loki pouts, and Tony chances a glance at him in time to watch him close the book and transfer it to the coffee table. His eyes are glittering, but they’re more puckish than anything else, and Tony relaxes a little. He’s never quite sure how he softens Loki’s sharp moods, but whenever he manages it he marks a win for himself. “Come.”

Tony goes. He lets Loki pull him in by the tie, sinking down into the lushness of his mouth with a hum. Languor slides over his shoulders like a blanket, and he slips into Loki’s lap with a boneless ease.

“Careful,” he says, when they break for air. “I like this tie.”

Loki hums, clever fingers loosening it. Tony takes a sip of his drink as Loki undoes the knot, drapes it on the arm of the sofa, leans back in. Tony tilts out of reach.

“Stark…”

“Talk,” Tony says, sipping his drink once more. Loki pouts up at him, and Tony smirks and bends down for another lazy kiss. Loki’s tongue sliding against his to taste the remnants of alcohol redolent in his mouth. Loki tastes of sweet, cool water, the usual bitter pine. Today he feels particularly sharp, and Tony shifts his hips a little without intent, simply enjoying having a beautiful body spread out under him, his to indulge in as he pleases. When Tony pulls away, he’s more breathless than he’d expected to be. Loki’s eyes are half-lidded, smug and happy in an uncomplicated way that leaves Tony feeling off-kilter. His pulse thunders through his chest.

“Is that my welcome home?”
“You’ve had a trying day,” Loki allows. His face turns serious again, and Tony shifts off of his lap, twisting until he’s sitting with his shoulders against the arm rest, his calves settled atop Loki’s thighs. Loki frowns slightly, but he pulls the socks off of his feet to reach skin. Tony lets him undo his waistcoat, then the first few buttons of his shirt as well, long fingers gliding smooth over his collarbone, the hollow of his throat. One hand curls around the thin skin of his ankle. Tony swallows under his cool touch, and Loki grins at him. It’s a simple thing, without intent, and Tony thinks back to Bruce’s chastising speech before they’d flown off to save Cap from Amora’s tortures. It wouldn’t be the first time that Bruce was more observant than him when it came to interpersonal relations. Tony was nothing if not consistently bad at understanding his own life.

Loki is watching him, his mouth twisting into something wry and melancholy as he studies Tony’s face. He reaches out, takes Tony’s glass from his fingers. He takes a long sip. “I know you don’t trust me yet,” he says. There it is again, that use of the word yet. “I swore I harboured no ill will towards you and your compatriots. And I thought...”

Tony watches him curiously, waiting. Loki is on the verge of some great secret, he can tell. The real reason, maybe, that he’s done...everything, really. It’s not the first time they’ve skirted around it, but it seems harder for him to contain in these moments; when he seems more vulnerable, more open to Tony’s touch and word. “You’ve earned some trust,” Tony says, slowly. “Why does it matter to you what I tell Steve?”

Loki laughs mirthlessly, a familiar desperation flickering over his face. It’s there and gone in an instant, but Tony remembers it from the darker days at the start of their acquaintance. It is not a good look on him, even without the gaudy horns. “I cannot.”

“You can’t, what? Tell me?” Tony says, a little sceptically. “Can’t? Or won’t?”

Loki’s brow twists, the smile on his face twisting painfully with it. “Please, Stark. This will not end well for any of us, if you cannot be transparent about your intentions for your country’s legal approach to vigilantism and power from the start. Your views may not align, and the hurt will cloud his judgement. You will lash out at one another, bitterly. It would ruin everything—” He stops, suddenly, as though seized by something. His breath catches sharply in his throat, and he gasps for one heart-pounding moment before a cool mask drops back down, concealing the hint of desperation and terror that had been creeping in around the edges. It’s enough to make the small hairs at the back of Tony’s neck stand at attention.

“What aren’t you telling me?” Tony says, quiet. He watches, curiosity smoothing his face into a flat mask as he tries to puzzle him out. Loki’s hands are trembling on the glass, and after a minute Tony takes it from him and places it on the coffee table, not bothering with a coaster for now. The laugh that bubbles out of Loki’s throat is near hysterical, and Tony swallows, reaches for him. “Jesus, babe, come here.”

Loki folds into his arms, smaller than Tony thought he could become. He, like all Asgardians, had seemed larger than life during The Battle and the events proceeding it. He was tall, imposing, regal. At first Tony had thought maybe it was the by-product of royalty, but even Thor’s merry band of men-plus-one had a presence to them that was undeniable; the inhumanity of a thousand years or two, maybe.

“Your mother, you said she came to you when she died.” Tony says, slowly. Loki freezes against his chest, and Tony lets out a small, disbelieving laugh. “You said she could see the future, that you saw things you didn’t like. You’re reading a quantum mechanics textbook. And you keep saying I don’t trust you ‘yet’, like you know it will happen, which is really out of character now that I think about it, for self-hating narcissists like us. And sometimes, you look at me, like you’re
not seeing me, or maybe like you’re seeing a me that isn’t here—"

Loki covers his mouth with one hand, eyes flashing wildly between green and gold. “Silence,” he intones, low and dangerous, and the voice that he speaks with is one from stories Tony’s atheist mind had always thought nothing of, a sound brimming up from stone-old tales and deep, unfathomed power. It is terrible. It echoes, in his ears and in his mind, and in the air skating over his skin. “You know nothing of which you speak, you impudent mayfly child. You have no concept of the possible ruin you could bring, not just to this world but to all nine realms, to galaxies, to your own stinking cesspit of a universe. One cannot rule what is. Not. There. There will be no petty squabbling of consequence and law when there is nothing but ash, and dust, and blood. More blood than you could ever imagine. More blood than can be borne from the rotting husks of all you have ever held dear, more blood than water is held in the rivers and the lakes of this land, enough to paint the sky red with mourning. When Death is brought to your doorstep—and She will be brought, as She is always brought and carried with Him wherever He goes—Midgard will fall, and Asgard will fall, and all the realms will fall under His hand unless there is a force great enough, united enough, clever enough to stop it. And you cannot be such a force if you are sneering and sniping about petty trifles such as which minder is best suited to manage you like the filth-ridden, squalling babes you truly are. Thus when I ask for something so small as truth and obedience, why then must I lie and trick and seduce for what should be freely given if it is to save your own—” Loki’s breath hitches, the gold flickering out until all that’s left is the green and horror, bright and gasping. His hand tightens painfully on Tony’s jaw. “Your, you—” He chokes, tries again. “You…golden, beautiful, infuriating, I cannot understand—"

This is, Tony decides, brushing Loki’s hair behind his ear with one shaking hand, either a special kind of Asgardian panic attack, or that was an honest-to-gods bout of prophecy. Which is confusing, because he was pretty sure that Frigga was the one who was supposed to be able to do that. Some part of her came to me, he remembers, which, huh. Did it stay? Can magical abilities pass on like that? And most importantly, did he really believe in all that mumbo jumbo shite?

“Shall I begin the Mind Riot protocol?” JARVIS asks delicately, and Loki freezes for a split second before tumbling back across the couch, eyes wide, hands splayed out in front of him as though trying to catch the escaping threads of himself, gather himself back into his body.

“Loki, baby, deep breaths,” Tony says, holding his hands out in placation. “Stay with me, okay?”

“I cannot,” Loki says again, jaw working, eyes frantic, and Tony reaches out and grasps one wrist.

“Don’t pull a Houdini on me,” Tony bids quietly. “I know you want to, this is embarrassing, you want to be alone with your—uh, whatever that was, but turnabout is fair play, right? My turn to make you breathe slow and hug you until you feel like your skin is on right again. So come on.” He takes one of Loki’s hands, braces it over his heart. “That’s it.”

“Your heart is not calming,” Loki says sharply, and Tony laughs because what the hell. “And have you ever known me to play fair? Why would that be any impetus for a God of Lies?”

“Because you think I’m a beautiful, pragmatic genius,” Tony says, equal parts smug and terrified, and then he kisses him, because he can’t think of what else to do.

He expects Loki to be desperate, or maybe shove him away, and he’s not disappointed. The kiss is less of a kiss than a biting at mouths; a gasping, wet thing with no control, Loki’s hands scrabbling at his shirt buttons before finally just tearing the last few off, pushing the whole thing over his shoulders and climbing into his lap. He’s biting at Tony’s neck, leaving deep, painful bruises that Tony knows he’ll be feeling for days, pulling at Tony’s wrists to force him to cradle Loki’s hips in his hands. He does not need much prompting. He slides his palm up Loki’s abdomen, brushes his
thumb over a nipple, tangles his hands in Loki’s thick black waves. Loki sinks down into his lap, grinding them together, and Tony tips his head back and groans.

“Yess,” Loki hisses, and slides to the floor, and then he’s pulling Tony out of his pants and his briefs and his mouth is there, hot and wet and slick as sin. He pulls at Tony’s hips, swallowing him all the way down, and Tony knows exactly what it is he wants. He pushes the hair out of Loki’s eyes and shifts his hips up, at first tentative, then a little harder when Loki moans so loud Tony can feel the reverberation all the way through his chest, down to his toes, in his fingertips. He cradles Loki’s head in his hands, presses one thumb to the corner of that beautiful sharp jaw and rolls his hips, the other hand resting on the side of Loki’s throat to feel it work, to feel the rolling, tensing, the swallowing both under his fingers and all around him.

“Fuck,” he groans, more whine than word, and when he looks down Loki’s eyes are glittering bright with wetness. He looks frantic, his moans becoming more and more wanting, and Tony tangles his right hand into Loki’s hair and pulls, using it to direct him, to move him roughly in accordance with his hips. The noise that Loki looses is filth, and when Tony shifts one foot to press his dextrous toes into Loki’s crotch he can feel Loki come underneath him, around him, a high, skirling whine making him gasp and choke around Tony’s cock as the soft fabric restraining his crotch soaks straight through. His eyes are red and watering, so emerald bright it’s like he’s lit from within, and Tony takes a long look at him, thrusts his hips up twice, then pulls Loki back by the hair and comes messily all over his mouth, his jaw, his gorgeous neck.

Loki licks his lips, eyes dark, and Tony closes his own and tips his head back because what the honest everloving fuck. He can feel Loki rest his forehead on Tony’s knee for a few desperate, panting moments while they both try to get their breath back. Then, Loki climbs back into his lap and pushes his tongue into Tony’s mouth, taking the kiss from him with a claiming force that leaves Tony weak to do anything but let him take what he wants. He tastes like Tony, salt and bitterness, but underneath he’s still cool pine and winter, and Tony grips his hips kind of helplessly and lets Loki do as he likes. Loki presses messy kisses to his jaw and his cheekbones, his eyelids and his brow. Slowly, he settles, until the kisses feel less desperate and more soothing, and Tony wraps his arms around Loki’s back and pulls him in to rest his head in the curve of Tony’s neck.

“Well,” Tony says, ignoring the slight stiffening of Loki in his lap, “that’s one way to deal with a panic attack, I guess. Not one I’ve ever chosen, but I mean, if it works for you, go for it. Not sure I’d do that myself, but everyone has their own coping mechanisms—”

“Stark,” Loki says, and Tony laughs, breathless and absolutely wrung dry after the ridiculous fucking day he’s had.

“I don’t think I’ve come that quickly since I was fourteen, so I mean, good job,” he continues, because Loki has done nothing good for his tendency to mouth off in the face of danger of bodily harm. “A plus, that was hot as Pompeii on a bad day, I mean, Jesus—”

“Are you praying to others while sharing my bed?” Loki asks, and Tony blinks his eyes open and finds Loki’s expression one of begrudging amusement. His eyes are still red, lashes clumped together, Tony’s come drying on his jaw and a little bit down his throat, and, oh. Tony wants him. Again. Right now, actually.

“Take me to bed and I’ll fuck you so hard your immortality will leak out your ears,” Tony blurts out, which doesn’t make much sense but, well. Fourteen. That’s about on par for how he feels right now.

Still, going by the way Loki’s eyes widen at the words, he clearly doesn’t mind at all.
Chapter End Notes

A/N: Look at me, actually updating! I haven’t seen the new movie yet (I know, I know, I’m waiting for the weekend so my brother can be out of school) so plz no spoilers.

Soooo, I meant to write more for this chapter but I ended up writing a lot of smut? It’s way over the rating I’ve put for this story and includes some CNC, so I decided to shift it over to its own one-shot in the collection. If you’re into that sort of thing, consider this only half of the chapter and move over to the next part of the collection (I will add a hyperlink) where you can enjoy 5k words of filth. :D Comments, as always, greatly appreciated. I try to reply to everything but sometimes I miss one or two, so I’m sorry if that’s the case! Do know that I appreciate and read them all.
Changes

Chapter Notes

Usual warnings: canon-typical violence, ethically questionable therapy**

**spoilery elaboration: consider Charles’ whole “Hey use your holocaust pain to fuel your powers! That’s not directly against primum non nocere or anything” song and dance. An amazing telepath? Sure. Does he get results? Definitely. Is what he does at all what the American Psychological Association would call ethical? Lol. That in mind, take these therapy sessions with a grain of salt. Xavier’s a genius, but also kind of an asshole sometimes. Steve does kinda need a kick in the pants, tho. Guess we’ll see how this works out for him?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve had never been up to the Xavier Institute before, and was mostly familiar with it due to Avengers business. It was good for those in the superhero community to keep appraised of one another, after all, and he and Tony had been doing some good work forging a real international community before everything had blown up recently, both metaphorically and literally. The campus is as beautiful and green as it looks in the SHIELD files, complete with a few children tossing a Frisbee back and forth on the grass. The mansion is just as impressive in person as he’d expected it to be, and he walks up to the huge open doors with trepidation.

“Excuse me,” he says, reaching a hand out to a young woman passing by. “I’m looking for Doctor Charles Xavier?”

The girl turns to look at him, then tilts her head to the side. Her entire body is covered in a thin layer of brown fur. “Captain America, huh? He says he’s coming, give him a sec.”

Steve nods, shifting awkwardly on his feet as she scampers away, half-running, half-walking. Her pointed ears twitch slightly as she moves, and Steve watches her go with a strange feeling in his chest. He can’t imagine what she must have gone through before coming here, but she looks happy enough. It’s amazing, in its own way, he thinks.

“Captain Rogers, thank you for waiting.”

Steve turns his head to see Charles Xavier approaching in his infamous wheelchair. He holds a hand out.

“Professor Xavier. It’s an honour to meet you.”

“Is it?” the professor asks archly, taking Steve’s proffered hand. Steve is immediately charmed. “And likewise, Captain.”

“Tony speaks highly of you,” he explains, “which is pretty rare.”

“Stark does not even think very highly of himself, in most ways,” the professor counters, chuckling. He turns his wheelchair, leading Steve back down the hall. It’s a Friday afternoon, and children are milling about with that unmistakable childlike delight at the weekend, climbing over
the furniture and playing chase. They all duck around the professor with the ease of long practise. “Anyone who doesn’t meet his standards is easily dismissed, and so as you and I know, there are only a handful of people in the world who can actually meet his requirements for praise.”

Steve catches a ball and tosses it to a Japanese teenager in fishnets and cut-offs, bangs swaying heavy over her face. She waves a hand, then nudges the tall, lanky brunet boy next to her with her elbow, muttering something to him under her breath that makes him glance in Steve’s direction. Steve flashes a smile at them, and they duck away.


“Is that in conflict with my point?”

“No,” Steve admits, brow furrowing. “I guess it isn’t.”

The professor leads him into an office, walls the same polished mahogany as the rest of the mansion. The carpet is plush enough that he can feel the difference under his feet despite his shoes, and he takes a seat at the magnanimous wave of one thin, long-fingered hand. Xavier’s old money pedigree shows in his bones; a strong brow, sharp cheekbones, fine fingers. He has grace and presence that no one in a wheelchair, bound and at a height disadvantage, should rightly have.

But then again, Steve muses, he is the most powerful telepath in the world.

“Before anything else, it seems best to start with the obvious.”

“You want to rummage around, check for any mines Amora might have left behind,” Steve says tightly, nodding. “Have at it.”

The professor watches him for a moment, brow slightly furrowed, a small smile playing about his lips. He tilts his head to the side. “Why are you here?”

Steve raises an eyebrow. That wasn’t what he had been expecting. “What?”

“Why are you here, Captain?” He leans back in his chair, folds his hands in front of him. “What do you hope to get out of these sessions?”

Steve quirks his lips. He readjusts himself in his chair. “You already know why I’m here,” he tries, smiling a little, but the professor simply studies him. He looks down at his hands, then glances out the window. Outside, a brunette woman with a shock of white hair chases a laughing student through the air. Both of them fly like they were born doing it.

“The point of therapy, Captain, is not for me to tie you to a chair and get as much information out of you as I can. That would be a waste, mostly because you and I know that if I really wanted to, I could know every thought you’ve ever had without you ever being the wiser.” The professor turns to smile at him again, but not unkindly. His eyes crinkle crow’s feet at the corners. “The point of therapy is for you to better know yourself. So you hold the reins, and you can decide—instead of letting things like anxiety or past traumas control you—how to live your best life.” He wets his lips, then shifts his head again, the smile never leaving his face. “So no, I’m not going to ‘rummage’ through your head, or force you to speak when you don’t want to. But if you’re not interested in being honest with me, then our meetings are a foregone conclusion, Captain. And I would rather not waste both of our time.”

For a moment—and he couldn’t truly say why, which is the most frustrating part—Steve is reminded strongly of Tony. Perhaps it’s the way he makes statements that would be a boast on any
other man. It’s not a threat. Just a statement of fact, like he’s listing weather conditions. It will rain today. I could pull your mind apart like a wood chipper. I could turn every wifi-equipped device in the world against you. I could turn every person in the world against you. I created a new element. Do you want an umbrella?

“It’s not that I’m not interested in being honest,” Steve says, slowly, pushing his errant thoughts aside. “I wouldn’t have come here if I wasn’t interested. But you’ve gotta understand, I grew up in a different time. Talking about this stuff…”

The professor smiles. “I had a friend—a Jewish, German mutant—who survived the war,” he says. Steve thinks he knows this story, and so he’s unsurprised to see Xavier’s eyes flickering with something sad, something complicated and unbearable and kind. “He was taken by the Reich, used in their experiments. They did…terrible things to him. Things no child should have to suffer.”

Steve swallows. He thinks of Erskine, of Bucky.

“War and trauma like that can change a man. You feel weak, and guilty for your weakness. You want to be better than you are. But there is no better. You are who you are. Peace comes from accepting pain, using it for good.”

“And did that work for you?” Steve deadpans.

The professor smiles, gestures to the window; to the children outside, happy and safe, to his fellow teachers, to the sanctuary he’s created. “What do you think, Captain?”

Steve smiles and ducks his head a little bashfully, feeling like a chastised schoolboy. It’s not inappropriate in these circumstances. “I understand what you’re saying, really,” he says, glancing up at Xavier nervously. “But if it’s all the same to you, Professor, I’d like for you to do whatever you need to do to make sure Amora doesn’t still have a hold on me. We can do it your way from there, but that’s really why I’m here.”

Xavier studies him for a moment before nodding. “Alright.” His wheelchair moves so that he is positioned directly in front of Steve’s chair. He puts his hands out, hovering them on either side of Steve’s skull. “May I?”

Steve nods, not trusting himself to speak. He can’t imagine this is going to be at all pleasant.

“I’m sorry for any discomfort you may experience,” the professor murmurs, and then he touches cool fingers to Steve’s temples and the office falls away.

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The thing about Loki, Tony thinks, watching the wild grace with which he moves, is that in many ways he is so much less human than Thor. Thor was strong, practically invulnerable, and culturally alien, sure, but there was an empathy to him that Loki almost never let himself display. Tony had only really seen it twice, and both times were when one of them was having a fucking terrible PTSD flare-up. He isn’t sure that really counted.

Still, as he watches Loki meet Natasha blow for blow, nearly pinning her twice, he decides that the biggest difference was that Loki was just that much smarter than his brother. Those flashes of knowledge suggested something so profoundly ageless that it was beyond human ken, even for someone like Tony. Sure, Tony was a genius, but no matter how quick he was, nothing could really compensate for thousands of years of experience. So while Thor was strong enough to knock any human out with a single OP blow to the head, it was Loki’s bladework and swift, economical
movements that truly betrayed his inhumanity. He seemed to know Natasha’s moves even before she could make them. It wasn’t until Loki had won two sparring sessions, however, that Tony realised that he was *playing*.

“Oh god,” he mutters, mostly to himself. “This is fucking terrifying. Why is it hot?”

Clint shrugs, unwrapping his hands. They’d gone a few rounds in the other ring before giving up the ghost and accepting that they weren’t going to be any good when there was this kind of show to watch instead.

“Dude, I figured out years ago that Nat’s hot because she’s terrifying. Where have you been?”

Loki flashes a feral grin as a dagger carves out a piece of fabric and flesh around Nat’s floating ribs, and Tony swallows thickly. “Um.”

“She’s picking up tricks as he lays them out for her,” Clint observes, and Tony nods, because he’d noticed that too. Loki was teaching her Asgardian knife fighting, in his own way. Tony had no idea what the fuck that meant, but he was sure it meant something. “When she begins to catch up, he pulls out something new.”

“He likes her, I think,” Tony says, watching as Loki’s blade presses warningly under Natasha’s chin. She raises her hands immediately, dropping her own knife, and Loki smiles rakishly at her and pulls away, holding out a hand. As she takes it, her broken skin reknits itself, thin trickles of blood slowing and then stopping altogether.

“I can see why you are the best Earth has to offer,” Tony hears, faint over the distance between the sparring mats and the bench where he and Clint are sitting. That was Loki, prince of the backhanded compliment.

“Thank you,” Natasha says, dipping her head. She takes her hand back, and holds it out in perfect concert with Clint’s throw, catching the water bottle he’d sent careening her way. Loki’s head snaps around to track it, and his eyes meet Tony’s with mirthful heat. Tony waves at him, like a fucking idiot, and Loki positively leers at him.

“Ew,” Clint says, and Tony shoves at him without even looking.

“Sir,” JARVIS says in his ear, and Tony blinks and stills. “The U.N. has reached an accord.”

“And?” he mutters. Clint glances at him curiously, but doesn’t say anything.

“They’ve agreed on the formation of international sanctions. King T’chaka of Wakanda was one of the primary forces behind the vote, and he will be on the committee they are amassing to determine the parameters. He seems stern but fair, sir, but I cannot say the same for all of the members of the committee. The U.S. Ambassador assigned to the committee is Henry Peter Gyrich.”

“Fuck,” Tony hisses, and Clint turns to look at him. “Five minutes.”

“Everything good?” he asks, and Tony rolls his eyes at him.

“Just an R&D fiasco. Everyone is incompetent, the usual stupidity.” He picks up his gym bag and takes a long drag of water, calls out to the room: “Fight Club is fun and all, but daddy has to get back to work, kiddos! Have fun.”

“Yeah, yeah, busy business man’s so important,” Clint coos, and Tony winces. He’s pretty sure
Clint’s referencing his fight with Steve, which means that likely the whole team has watched the security footage. “Go play with your toys.”

“What was that? You don’t need me to make you any more taser arrows?” Tony calls, heading for the door.

“Hey, now, just hold on a second—”

Tony waves a hand and lets the door to the training room slide shut behind him.

“What do we have on Gyrich?” he asks, pulling out his phone.

“What is Gyrich?”

Tony startles, spinning around to see Loki standing behind him. “Jesus, we’ve talked about this.”

Loki folds his arms over his chest, unimpressed. “You may lie to the archer, but know that you do not fool myself or your assassin. To what end, then, is the lie?”

Tony blinks at him. “Excuse me?”

Something passes over Loki’s face—Hurt, maybe?—and the sight of it is enough to startle. It’s not disguised as wariness, or hidden behind a defensive smile. It’s just there, on his face, bare and horrible to see.

“I thought we had come to an accord,” Loki says wryly, and Tony feels his chest tighten a little.

“Uh.”

“But of course, I must do more to earn your trust,” Loki says, and something in him shifts hard, dangerous. His shoulders widen a bit, legs spreading a little to brace himself into a more defensible position. In some ways, seeing this much shows how cracked wide-open he is.

*I’m fucking this up*, Tony thinks wildly.

“Will you not speak to your assassin, then? Your captain? Perhaps your monster? If you do not trust your Avengers, then who do you trust, Tony Stark? Or is it only the fair Miss Potts that holds your regard?” The way his lips twist sneeringly over Pepper’s name makes Tony shiver.

“Okay, first of all, slow your roll so much,” Tony says, putting a hand up. “You do not get to question my relationship with Pepper. No one does, except for Pepper, so you can fuck right off about that.”

Loki’s eyes glitter dangerously, and Tony stops himself. He takes a breath, lets it out.

“Okay, okay. Okay. I think maybe I skimped a little on the aftercare this morning. I thought you’d be fine since we spent the night together, but clearly I fucked up, and that’s bad form on my part.” He glances up to see Loki looking quizzical, and Tony takes the moment to step into Loki’s space while his defences are down. He dips his head a little to peer into Loki’s eyes. The words he says next feel foreign in his mouth, but he has the feeling they’re entirely necessary. *Look at me, Pep, learning how to be a big boy.* “I’m sorry. Are we ok?”

Loki blinks at him as though he’s a stranger, and Tony reaches up a hand to brush his thumb over one high cheekbone. When Loki’s eyelids flutter at the touch, he leans in and presses his nose to the underside of Loki’s jaw. Loki smells like a blizzard, biting cold and the pain of ice freezing the
inside of his throat, his nostrils. Tony shivers at the taste of it on his tongue, the little reminder of his inhumanity. Slowly, Loki shifts towards him, until they’re leaning against each other in the empty hallway.

“Gyrich,” Loki repeats, stubborn, and Tony sighs against the steady thump of his pulse. He closes his eyes to the smell of him. “Explain. You are upset, and keeping things to yourself unnecessarily.”

“I wouldn’t say unnecessarily,” Tony murmurs, lips moving against Loki’s skin.

“I swear,” he says, and Tony freezes, shock coursing through him as surely as if he’d touched his tongue to a battery, “to aid you to my ability in this matter. You have my word. Is that what you wish to hear?”

Tony feels as if his heart would climb out of his throat if he let it. He pulls back to stare into Loki’s face, not sure what he expects to see there, but when he checks, Loki’s mask is firmly in place. The only thing that betrays him is the slightest twitch of his irises, as though he wishes to break eye contact but can’t quite manage it. Tony moves his other hand to cradle the other side of Loki’s face, so his head is pressed between Tony’s hands. He can feel coolness slipping into his demeanour as he examines him, but he can’t quite manage to stop himself. Tony knows that this is a habit of his; as he studies opponents and allies alike, runs back video footage, surveys spending habits and daily routines, he is always asking, *why did you do that?*

“Don’t ask stupid questions,” Loki murmurs, déjà vu sweeping over Tony along with something else he doesn’t want to name, and then he can’t help but lean in and kiss him: sweeter, gentler than he’d meant to, in a way that is so transparent that Tony can almost feel himself flush with embarrassment. He’s always been a little too olive-toned to manage it, but it’s a feeling he hasn’t had since he was a kid.

When he pulls back, Loki’s mouth is twisted into a small smile. He’s settled his hands on Tony’s chest. “Don’t think you can distract me, Stark. Who or what is Gyrich?”

Tony exhales sharply, pulling away, but Loki doesn’t let him get far. He slips his hands around Tony’s neck, sliding his fingernails gently over the back of his skull in a way that makes Tony want to curl up and be pet.

“Cheating.”

“Stark. Tell me what it is that has you rushing off to do ‘damage control,’ as you call it. Especially after I had you so nicely wound up.”

Tony releases a surprised bark of laughter at the admission. “I knew you were doing it on purpose.” Loki’s nails press a little more firmly into his skull, and he sighs and lets himself relax a little into Loki’s hold. “Henry Peter Gyrich is a U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. and he’s the fucking worst. More than Secretary Ross, who is just a bigot and thus mostly predictable, Gyrich sees the superhero question as one akin to nuclear armament. We’re all just tools for American imperialism to him. Ross wants to control the Hulk because he thinks he’s dangerous, maybe use him case of an emergency, but Gyrich wants to use all enhanced individuals as both carrot and stick for American enemies and allies alike. He’s the worst kind of politician, and the last person I want involved in developing the accords the U.N. has just voted to draft for Avengers oversight, and ostensibly future enhanced international vigilantism in general. So now I have to dig up some shit on him, to see where we can apply leverage.”

Loki hums, considering. “What would it mean if you didn’t have to worry about Gyrich?”
“No killing people we don’t like,” Tony says sternly, but Loki just rolls his eyes.

“Answer the question, Stark.”

Tony closes his eyes, takes a breath. “I don’t know,” he admits. “I have to find out who else is on the council.”

“But…?”

“But…” Tony sighs. “It would probably be a big help if I didn’t have to worry about him poisoning the well.”

Loki nods, decisively. “This, I can do,” he says. “In exchange, speak with your captain.”

And then he vanishes. Because he’s a fucking asshole, and a load of trouble, and Tony hates him.

No, you don’t, Loki’s voice says, in his skull, Again? Really? and Tony shivers all over.

“You’re such an asshole!” he shouts, but there’s no response. Fucking typical. “He’s probably not going to straight out kill him. Right?” Tony heads towards the elevator, but then pauses when there’s no response. “J?”

“Were you talking to someone, sir?” JARVIS asks. “I saw nothing.”

“Wooooow,” Tony says. He rubs a hand over his face. “This is it. This was Loki’s plot all along.”

“Look, Sir, I can see you’re really upset about this. I honestly think you ought to sit down calmly, take a stress pill, and think things over.”

“Not funny! That wasn’t funny when you first did it years ago, and it’s definitely not funny now.”

JARVIS’ silence is smug if he ever heard one.

“I never should have shown you that movie,” Tony laments, starting towards the elevator again.

“Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do,” JARVIS intones drolly, and Tony shakes a finger at the nearest security camera.

“Stop it. I’m gonna mute you, you upstart Tamagotchi.”

“I’m afraid, Sir,” JARVIS deadpans, and Tony jams his finger into the elevator button hard enough to hurt. “Would you like me to read you the list of U.N. committee members for the accords?”

“Yes,” Tony grumbles. “Yes, JARVIS, I would.”

Loki’s echoing, disembodied snicker is just the cherry on the indignity sundae.

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“So, Captain, how do you feel?”

Like I got rolled over by a Panzer IV, Steve thinks, then startles when Xavier laughs. Oh. Right.

“I’m sorry,” the professor says a rueful smile breaking across his face. “That was rude of me.”

“Uh, I’m pretty sure I should buy you dinner after all that,” Steve counters, then flushes a little. “I mean, uh. Sorry. I’m a little out of sorts still, I think.”
“The polite veneer of the good soldier fades to reveal the Brooklyn street urchin,” the professor observes jovially, and Steve can feel the evidence of his embarrassment crawling down over his chin and across his neck. “Don’t worry. I prefer honesty, mostly because anything else is a waste of time.”

“Right.” Steve rubs a hand over his eyes. “God.”

“Take your time,” the professor says. His chair backs up a little, and Steve tries to get his bearings. The clock says they’ve only been working for an hour, but it feels like he’s been under for days. He knows how that can go from Amora. He still doesn’t like it one bit. “What do you think?”

“Does she lower inhibition?”

“I think I’d have to examine her power in person to know, but it seems likely that lowered inhibitions could be a side-effect. But I think we both know that your relationship with Stark is already fraught, and often needs the barest spark for combustion.”

“Ouch,” Steve says, good-natured about it. A wry smile breaks over his face. “But I’m clear, right?”

“You are cleared of any magical interference, yes,” the professor says, and Steve waits because he knows what’s coming. “But you are clearly suffering signs of trauma. I would say Stark was right to recommend treatment. And not just for this incident.”

Steve frowns. “Hang on, I saw a SHIELD shrink and they cleared me for culture shock and PTSD and all that.”

Xavier smiles wryly. “I’m sure they did. They had a use for you, after all. Or was it someone else who burned SHIELD’s headquarters to the ground?”

“In my defence, that really wasn’t the main goal that day,” Steve begins, used to this fight with Tony, but the professor just chuckles. “Are you saying I have PTSD?”

“There are plenty of other issues that trauma can cause,” the professor says, sounding tired. “They’re just not treated as seriously. I would need more time to formulate an official diagnosis, but I would say that this incident could potentially cause PTSD without ongoing treatment. More importantly, I believe you are presently suffering from survivor’s guilt and mild depression, which I think should be addressed considering the high-stakes work that you and The Avengers do, alongside the regular, high exposure to traumatic and violent incidents.”

Steve frowns. “You think I’m depressed?”

“Depression takes many forms, Captain; excessive exercise, difficulty sleeping, lack of attention towards previous interests, irritability…” The professor shrugs expansively. “There is a misconception that functionality must be impeded, but sometimes high functionality can be symptomatic too. If one just robotically goes through the motions of their day and creates a mindless routine to follow, it’s entirely possible to be high-functioning and terrifically depressed. I think a recklessness in battle and an over-commitment to dangerous work speaks for itself.”

“Have you met my team?” Steve deadpans.

Xavier laughs. “Well, Stark is incredibly open about his PTSD, and anyone who’s taken even the most rudimentary psychology class could diagnose Dr. Banner. I know from the files that much of America has read after you so boldly released them online that it is nigh impossible for Ms. Romanov to be neurotypical after the horrific developmental traumas that she suffered. And I do
not imagine that Thor or Mr. Barton could be so different, considering the studies that we have done regarding routine work environment stress and PTSD in police officers. This does not at all conflict with my point.”

“So, what, you want to cart everyone into see you?”

Xavier smiles kindly. “I think every so-called superhero should probably be in therapy, yes.” He holds up a hand to forestall Steve’s protests. “Captain, I suspect this is a cultural barrier. Therapy is not indicative of any failing. Think of it as mental housekeeping. It’s good to tidy up every so often, isn’t it?”

“I don’t really think I agree with your metaphor, Professor.” Steve rubs a hand over his face. “What does this mean? Am I clear for the field?”

The professor tilts his head to the side for a moment, considering. “May I do something unkind, to illustrate a point?”

Steve blinks at him, incredibly stymied by this question. “Uh. Sure?” He grins wryly. “You know who I live with, right?”

“Hm,” the professor hums, and then: Portoviejo, Ecuador.

Steve recognises this moment. A 7.8 magnitude earthquake had hit six major provinces in the country a few weeks ago. Hundreds were injured or dead, and over a thousand people had been unaccounted for. The Avengers had flown down to help with the clean-up and try to find survivors among the rubble. It had been a long series of days; entire buildings had been pitched sideways and become terrifying death traps. Bruce, JARVIS, and Tony had spent hours mapping the city out, finding better ways for the search and rescue teams to get to the worst buildings most likely to hold survivors. Tony hadn’t slept for much of the time; there were buildings that were easiest for Iron Man to get to, with the combined power of flight, his engineering brain, and the suit’s laser technology. At night he was running numbers, setting up drones to run through unstable buildings, and running minor repairs on his tech.

He knows what the professor is going to show him, and it hurts before he even sees it. Tony had flown into a building so thoroughly wrecked that the remaining top two floors were tilted at a 45 degree angle. It had been a school, and while some of the children had been able to be evacuated, some of them had been trapped by broken legs or other injuries, or blocked in by the sheer instability of the building.

Later, Steve would find out that JARVIS had read two remaining life forms in the basement; a pair of kids who’d been necking and got trapped when the quake hit. Tony had tried to make it down into the basement, but the building had been too unstable. The whole entire four story school had toppled with Tony and the two kids inside. One of the kids, a fifteen year old boy, was crushed and killed in the rubble. The other student lost her arm, and Tony had come out with a concussion, several bruised ribs, and a metric tonne of survivor’s guilt to add to the expansive river of it he was already swimming against every day.

Steve knows what is going to happen. He knows. He wasn’t even nearby when the building fell; the images that are being shown are from his memory of the footage he saw afterwards. But still, when he sees the building, his heart jumps into his throat. He cannot stop himself from running towards it. He cannot stop it from collapsing.

After, it had taken them hours to get them out. The rubble was so terrifyingly unstable, and Tony’s concussion had made it difficult to be his usual hyper-intelligent self. Bruce and JARVIS had
worked together to tell Steve and Thor exactly what to move and how to move it, until finally Tony was revealed, and then the girl. He’d made sure to be the first one to clasp Tony’s gauntlet, to pull him up and out of the wreckage. He’d made sure that he was smiling when he did.

“You had been working to clear a hospital, isn’t that right?”

Steve glances to his left. Xavier stands next to him on his own two feet, hands folded behind his back. The smile that he gifts Steve with is kind, but somehow wry.

“Yes.”

“Some of those people died because they weren’t reached in time. Tony was found safe, under the rubble. Do you think your time would have been better spent clearing the hospital?”

Steve grits his teeth. “Tony told me the same thing. He doesn’t pull his punches. I know that I messed up, but I don’t see why—”

“Did you mess up?” Xavier asks. His voice is genuinely curious. “Someone you cared about was in danger, and you prioritised him over others. Does that make you a bad person?”

Steve opens his mouth, then closes it again. That was not where he thought this conversation was going. “Yes,” he says, but it sounds more like a question than an answer in his own mouth. “Tony had the suit on. I knew he’d probably be fine. It was selfish, and illogical, to try to save Tony when he didn’t need to be saved.”

“Didn’t he? He couldn’t stay under all that,” Xavier says, gesturing expansively at the collapsed building. “He couldn’t get out by himself. Doesn’t that mean he needed to be saved?”

Steve lets out an explosive breath. “I’m not sure what you’re getting at, here, Professor.”

Xavier shrugs. “You make decisions such as these every single day. And they weigh on you, Captain. Each one is a stone around your neck.” He points at the building. “It is easy for us as so-called superheroes to say that no one life is worth more than another for the papers. But that’s not very true in real life. Most people would choose their loved ones over a stranger. That’s human nature.”

“That doesn’t make it right,” Steve argues hotly, but Xavier just turns that same beatific smile on him.

“Your friend Sam Wilson said that you hold yourself to a higher standard than the rest of the world. Do you disagree?”

Steve huffs, frustrated. “I don’t know what answer you’re looking for, Professor.”

Xavier shrugs. “The one that feels true to you,” he replies easily. He turns back to the rubble, where Tony is ready to be lifted out of the debris and brought back into the light of the sun. Steve moves closer, just to see Tony’s face as he pops the faceplate, his beatific grin as he quips, “Miss me?” In this place between memory and vision, he is both watching and holding one of Tony’s precious gauntlets, is both pulling him out of the rubble to clutch in a hug and wincing at the fact that Thor had to be the one to grab the girl whose arm would soon be amputated.

“You scared the hell outta us, Iron-Man,” he watches himself say, and says, and both ache like a stone’s lodged in his throat. But Tony had just winked at him, even as weariness was writ into his bones, even as Steve can now see in retrospect that he was gearing up for a fight, for Steve to chastise him, to defend himself.
“Haven’t you read the papers?” he hears Tony ask. “I’m the Invincible Iron-Man. A little building like this couldn’t drop me.”

Steve closes his eyes, and when he opens them, he is back in Xavier’s office. He feels worn down, suddenly, exhausted in a way that’s so far beyond his body. He wants to go home and curl up with Tony on the couch and watch a movie, feel Tony watching him and grinning at his reactions all the while.

“This is what talk therapy is for, Captain,” the professor says. His voice is gentle, and Steve glances at his hands folded in his lap and then back up to catch Xavier’s small smile: his kind, crinkled eyes.

“Okay,” he hears himself saying. He swallows, then nods to himself. “Okay. But you didn’t answer my question, Professor. Am I cleared for the field?”

Xavier studies him. “That is up to you, Captain. I know that you had a severe flashback at the very mention of Stark’s death this week. Do you think you’re ready to be in the field and watch a building fall on him?”

Steve takes a deep breath, lets it out. “I don’t know,” he says. It takes a gargantuan amount of effort, but he knows better than to lie to a telepath. Everything inside of him is screaming at him to shut up, to obfuscate, but he’s trying this new therapy thing as it’s been presented to him. He doesn’t know if it will work unless he actually does it, right? “But I need to be out there, to watch his back. We’re partners.”

“Do you think you’ll be able to do that effectively, and still command your team in the most objective manner possible? Even if what is necessary to the mission endangers him?”

Steve wants to say yes. He does. He’s loved Tony all the while; why shouldn’t the answer be yes? This is nothing new. But instead, what he says is: “I don’t know.” He remembers Tony dying, over and over and over again. He’s not sure he’s ready, yet, to see Tony jump off a building without the suit, or take a missile to the chest. “Tony always acts like the best way to come back from this sort of thing is to jump right into it. If something scares him, he’ll build an army to crush it and then go out and call it to his doorstep.” He doesn’t know if he’s that kind of man.

The professor nods. “Then maybe you should return to the field as second in command.”

Steve blinks. “Oh,” he says, considering it. Then he shakes his head. “Tony would never go for that.”

“You could have the team take a vote,” Xavier says, a mischievous smile breaking over his face.

Steve considers this. He holds it up to the proverbial light, turning it, weighing the pros and cons. “Tony won’t much like being forced into something like that,” he murmurs, considering. “But it might be good for him, actually. To know that’s what the team wants, and to hear why. I’d get to be in the field, watch his back, provide support without being in charge. And for all that we fight, Tony will listen to me on tactical decisions. He might not agree, but he’ll listen. We tend to do a lot of that together, anyway.” He chances a glance at Xavier’s inscrutable face. “You’re a dangerous man, Professor.”

Xavier just grins at him. “So I’ve been told.”
“Good morning, sir. It is 10:00 AM on Saturday, April 16th. The weather is 50 degrees Fahrenheit and sunny. I have been asked to inform you that brunch will be served in an hour in the communal kitchen.”

Tony blinks against the rising light as the windows lose their opacity, reaching an instinctive arm out only to encounter an empty bed. “Loki not back yet?”

“Not that I can see, sir.”


“I shouldn’t like to speculate. You’ll just have to find out for yourself.”

Tony frowns, then sits up in bed and glares at the nearest security camera. “Well that’s not fucking suspicious at all. What the hell, J?”

“Paranoia doesn’t suit you, sir.”

“Hell yes it does,” Tony squawks, affronted. “It keeps me alive. You know how they say just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you? People are always literally out to get me.”

“Shall I add Dr. Banner’s cooking to the list of potential threats?”

Tony rubs at his eyes tiredly, still flinching against the mid-morning light. “One day I’m gonna donate you all to Brooklyn Tech,” he mutters. JARVIS, predictably, ignores this. “I guess I better shower, huh?”

“Probably.”

Tony nods, then drags himself out of bed.

He’d been up late last night working on strategies to contain the fallout from the UN decision, drafting both scenarios with and without Loki hypothetically succeeding in his quest to have Gyrich removed from the committee. He’d pulled Pepper in as well, but she’d begged off at 1 o’ clock. She was exhausted, and she had to fly to Cali on Monday to take care of some things at SI’s HQ. Tony had considered bringing Natasha in, but he didn’t want JARVIS waking her up if she was sleeping. It had been a rough week, and the Avengers as a whole were equally tired and on-edge, waiting for the other shoe to drop. They knew that the Nigerian government didn’t have the necessary infrastructure to contain enhanced criminals of the calibre that they’d been presented with. Tony knew that SHIELD had been in communication with the NIA, but ultimately that was a political manoeuvre that he had absolutely no position for negotiation in. Much like Steve, he didn’t trust SHIELD as far as he could throw the helicarrier, but he didn’t particularly like any of his options at the moment. It seemed better to stay out of it and let someone else deal with the problem, or worst case scenario, the fall when it all blew to shit.

He was surprised that Steve hadn’t asked after Barnes, though, now that he thought about it. Maybe he was so focussed on Tony and his own health that it hadn’t occurred to him to worry? But no; Steve had been on a monomaniac quest to recover Barnes for the past two years.
“Hey, J?” Tony calls, turning off the water and wrapping himself in a towel.

“Yes, sir?”

“Has Steve checked up on Barnes at all?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

Tony nods, rubbing a hand over his face. “Huh. Weird. Okay.”

Denial, maybe? Avoidance of known triggers? He needs to touch up his shave.

When he walks onto the communal floor at eleven on the dot, the rest of the Avengers are already gathered. He finds the dining table laden with plates of eggs both scrambled and basted, bacon, waffles, toast, and various fruit-imbued pancakes. Steve is standing at the stove manning a pancake station while Clint washes his hands of batter, clearly having been in charge of making the pancake and waffle mix. Bruce is cutting cantaloupe and apples on the kitchen island in a clear bid to try to get something more than protein and starch into the team. Thor and Natasha are sitting at the table already, and Nat nods at him and holds out a huge mug of coffee as he approaches.

“Bribery!” he crows, taking the cup in his hands. “This has been an ominous start to the morning, indeed. What did you guys do? Did Bruce Hulk out and break something big? Have Thor’s rooms become uninhabitable by NYCHA standards again?” Natasha offers him the tiniest of smiles, but says nothing, and Tony sits down at the head of the table across from Thor, because why the fuck not.

May as well set myself up for the interrogation. He takes a sip of coffee as he assesses the shifty expressions on his teammates’ faces. “Am I fired?”

“Kinda the opposite,” Steve says, taking the seat at his right. He pushes a frankly alarming number of apple slices onto Tony’s plate. “Eat some fruit.”

“I dunno how many times I’ve gotta go over this with you Sleepy Jean, but not everybody’s got super-soldier metabolism in this madhouse,” Tony says, pushing half of the fruit over onto Steve’s plate. He pops a slice into his mouth and crunches down on it to appease Steve’s frown. “What’s that mean, anyway, the opposite. I’m un-fired? Promoted? Hired? Hired for what?”

Steve, disconcertingly, won’t look at him. He fills his plate with pancakes as Tony takes a few pieces of cantaloupe for himself.

“Hello? Hatter to the Dormouse: come in, Dormouse.”

“I think that one’s a little too opaque even for you,” Bruce hums, sitting down at Tony’s left, between him and Natasha.

“I’ve read those,” Steve protests, sounding a little offended. “They came out in the 1800’s. I’m not that old.”

“And we watched the movie,” Tony agrees, grinning. “Hey, if Loki’s the Cheshire Cat, who’s Thor?”

“I always thought Natasha would be Cheshire,” Clint said, taking a seat next to Natasha.

“Nah, she’s the Red Queen, obviously,” Tony says, reaching for a piece of toast. Thor lifts the plate towards him with a nod, and Tony offers him one in return as he snags a few slices for himself.

“Loki’s the Caterpillar,” Bruce says, shaking his head. “He’s cryptic and strange and full of
transformation magic.”

“He disappears and reappears everywhere, and he’s crazy as a bag of cats,” Tony argues cheerfully. “Definitely the Cheshire Cat.”

“My brother is more feline than insectoid, ’tis true,” Thor agrees. Already, there was syrup in his beard. His plate looks like a crime scene set in an IHOP.

“How!” Tony says, gesturing at Bruce with an apple slice.

Steve clears his throat a little, settling back in his chair, and Tony glances at him. The faintest flush sits high on his cheekbones, and Tony zeroes in on that, equal parts curious and terrified. He knows he’s been called last to the table for a reason, but he hasn’t quite sussed it out yet. Did they plan this specifically to coincide with Loki’s absence?

“So,” he says, and then pauses, glancing around the table as though begging someone to interrupt him. His gaze snags on Natasha, but her face remains impassive, and finally he lets out a quiet huff of air and wets his lips, turning to Tony with an expression that makes him want to bolt from the table and straight down into the workshop. “Xavier said I haven’t got any of Amora’s influence left rattling around inside my skull.” Steve’s voice is all Brooklyn as he taps at his own temple, a little rough with nervousness, and Tony blinks at him and waits for the penny to drop. No one at the table seems at all surprised or even intrigued by this information, which means they’d discussed it before he showed up.

When nothing seems forthcoming, Tony turns to Bruce’s quietly amused expression, then Natasha’s complete deadpan, before finally circling back to Steve’s skittish smile. “Hooray?” he tries.

“The thing is,” Steve says, rubbing a hand over his mouth, “uh. Neither of us think I should be leading the team. Right now. Or, until. Um.” He shrugs, blue eyes trailing to his plate. Then Steve puts a piece of apple in his mouth and begins to chew, like the absolute asshole that he is. His eyes flick to the rest of the table.

“What the captain is trying to say,” Thor says, expression openly amused now, “is that we have come to an agreement, and we wish for you to remain our leader in the field until our captain is once again fit for the role.”

Tony can feel his brows rising, almost against his will. His tongue feels like lead in his throat. “Okaaay,” he says, dragging the word out. He has a bad feeling about this. “Cap, when do you think you’ll be cleared for the field?”

Steve swallows and glances at him expression sheepish. “Well, uh, I have been. For the field, that is.”

Tony blinks. “What?” And then, “oh, no. No, no, no. You want me to be your field commander? Are you crazy? Are you sure Xavier cleared you? Documentation or it didn’t happen- J, check my email, tell me-”

“We took a vote,” Bruce says mildly, and Tony pauses, because, Bastard, he knows. He knows that he’s the only one Tony will slow down and listen to, every time. “It’s not like I can do it. Clint isn’t suited. Thor, as one of the team’s tanks, doesn’t have the field of vision to make big picture calls, and he still doesn’t understand Earth’s geopolitics well enough. And Nat works best in the shadows, not at the centre of the things. You’ve been a superhero longer than anyone, and you have plenty of experience commanding large groups of people, as well as with military
manoeuvres and tactics. That’s why you’re Cap’s second-in-command in the first place.”

“If you’re cleared for the field why aren’t you acting as the leader of the Avengers?” Tony demands, still refusing to look away from Steve’s face. Bruce sighs, but Tony doesn’t let that get to him. He knows when he’s being manipulated.

There’s a long moment wherein Steve’s face does something complicated, something that Tony doesn’t quite understand. There’s fear there, and self-loathing, things Tony is both intimately familiar with and baffled to see on Steve’s face, something that still, after all this time sometimes reads to Tony like Greek marble or an American landscape painting: something timeless and classically beautiful, inhuman and unchanging. After a second, the familiar steals over him, steady determination slipping over his high cheekbones as sure as his cowl. He turns to Tony with a wry smile, the kind that Tony’s always hated. He much prefers when Steve’s grin is bright and effortless, a little shit-eating, a little mischievous. He hates this bitter thing that’s birthed from Steve’s own self-flagellation and grief.

“Because I haven’t got my priorities straight,” he says, brutally honest. “Amora made me watch you die, over and over again. You wanted me to see Xavier because you knew I wasn’t okay after that, and you were right.” Tony restrains the childish urge to crow at the admission. “I can’t promise that I’ll make the right call on the field, and I can’t stay off it and not— and not hate myself, if something happened to you.” Steve pauses, glances around the table, lets a furious blush steal over his beautiful bones and still he continues on, determined in the face of his own embarrassment. “Any of you.” His voice gains confidence as he speaks. “Xavier showed me that maybe I shouldn’t trust myself to make the right call right now, if it comes down to putting someone I care about in danger in order to save a civilian, or for the greater good, or to stop whatever it is we’re fighting next.

He turns back to Tony, his eyes serious and bright with something Tony doesn’t understand, can’t name. “But I do trust myself to watch your back,” he says, nodding. “So that’s what I’m gonna do. And I need you to take my place, until I’m— Well. Until I’m better, I guess. I trust you, Tony, always. I trust you to make the call that saves the most lives, when it comes down to it. I just wish you’d be a little less self-sacrificing, and that’s what I’ll be there for.” He grins, now, a little more of the smile Tony knows and loves. “Someone’s gotta make sure you’re not martyring yourself.”

Tony takes a deep breath, holds it. He can feel himself tapping on the arc reactor, that old nervous habit of his. He can feel his chest expanding under his fingers, the change in timbre in the clink of the crystal, the way his breath shakes in his chest.

“This is a bad idea,” he says, but he can’t quite manage to sound sincere about it. He’s been outvoted, outmanoeuvred, outplayed. Still, he can’t help thinking that this is a really bad idea, especially now. He’d been counting on having Cap at his back for the coming negotiations. He was not looking forward to having to tangle with Ross without the weight of Cap’s disapproving stare on his side.

Suddenly, his promise to Loki surfaces in his mind. He’d promised, hadn’t he, to bring Cap in on this? How the fuck was he supposed to do that when Cap was admitting to the whole team that he was too unstable to be team leader? He glances, unbidden at Natasha, but her face is still a blank mask. Abruptly, Tony is aware of how many plates he has been spinning, all at once: Loki, the Avengers, Steve, the UN, the security taskforce, the US government, Ross, the new sanctions, his company. The weight of it seems too much to bear, and he takes a moment to close his eyes and breathe, remembering Harley’s no-nonsense attitude as he talked Tony through a panic attack. He swipes a heavy hand over his face.
“I don’t have a choice, do I?” he asks, colouring his voice with dry amusement because that’s what he needs to do right now; he needs to make a laughing spectacle of himself. He needs to be amused and amusing and steady.

“Nope,” Clint says, and Tony rolls his eyes up towards the ceiling.

“The pancakes are a lie,” he says, mournful now, and Steve smiles shyly at him.

“I understood that reference,” he jokes, and Tony takes a breath.

*Okay, he thinks. Okay. I can do this.* He carried the weight of the first suit, the metal fighting him every step of the way. He carried his aching, broken body through the searing desert with a battery strapped to his chest. He carried himself through the snow, limping and half-dead and dissociating, into Harley Keener’s garage. This was nothing. *This is nothing. This is easy.*

He plasters on a smile and takes a bite of toast. The bread tastes like ash in his mouth.

Chapter End Notes

Loki: Hey I made a huge dramatic declaration of loyalty so maybe could you talk to your workwife about the government trying to ruin your livelihoods? Or like, any of your friends and adoptive family? Which you still have, unlike some of us? Is that chill? It’s literally the only thing I’ve asked of you this whole time?
Tony: I am so ALONE and I must do EVERYTHING MYSELF and I am a MARTYR.
Loki: Or, you could do that again. That’s cool. That’s fine. I’m not shouldering the entire burden of preparing for Thanos’ army or anything because I literally don’t have anyone who trusts me.
Tony: ALLOSTATIC OVERLOAD
Loki: *opens a portal into the abyss, screams*

We’re getting to the good stuff soon, y’all. I’ve had a good few chapters written of the resolution to some of these ridiculous plotlines I’ve been running for a long time now. I’m so excited to get to them, because those initial little plot bunnies are the reason I started this story in the first place.

As always, your comments and cheering-on are what get me through the dead spots, so please continue to leave them! As always, I’m more than happy to hear thoughts/discuss meta with you. This was a longer chapter than I expected because I feel like I’m rushing to the good parts, now. Hold on, folks; it’s gonna be a bumpy ride to paradiso.
The worst part of this stalemate with Pepper was that before this, Steve and Pepper had been something approaching friends. They both liked art and culture, and they both worried incessantly about Tony. They’d had some excellent conversations about Basquiat and Haring and other artists that Steve had missed. They’d even been to MoMA together with Tash.

He’d known, abstractly, that Pepper was Tony’s friend before she was anything else. That was easy enough. He’d just never thought that he and Tony would ever reach a point where the people in their lives would choose sides. Now, he can’t stop thinking about it. He thinks of all the missions he’s run with Natasha, the easy way they move together, like they’ve been fighting side by side all their lives. He thinks about the way her mouth twitches up at the corner in that particular smile she reserves only for Tony, of varying beverages appearing in her hands in anticipation of Tony’s moods and needs, of the way their heads look bowed together in a dark room, the scent of alcohol acrid in the air. He thinks about Clint and Tony’s raucous bickering, fingers flying over buttons as they scream at the television. He thinks of Clint’s steadfast faith in him, unflinching, humbling. Bruce and Rhodes are Tony’s, that’s an easy call, and Sam is his, but Steve doesn’t know what to think of Thor. If Loki is Tony’s, Thor might go with him, too.

Steve shakes his head, frowning at himself. Why was he even thinking like that? He and Tony are fine.

He bites his lip as he glances at the glass doors in front of him, steeling himself. Hopefully, after this, he and Pepper will be fine too. He’s going to make amends. He’s in therapy, and he and Tony talked, and they are going to figure this out together. He has to believe that. He does believe it.

He pushes the doors open, nodding to Pepper’s secretary. Steve had never particularly liked the woman, chiefly because she always seemed to be sneering at everyone. Her name always seemed a particular irony in light of how unhappy the woman always looked. “Ms. Bliss?”

“Captain Rogers,” she says, raising her eyebrows. “You do not have an appointment.”

Steve takes a slow breath. “Well, no, but JARVIS said-”

“Mr. Stark’s computer does not manage Miss Potts’ schedule, Captain Rogers. I do.”

Steve takes a moment, then tries his most winning smile. “Sure,” he says, easy, “that’s why I’m asking if I could just stop in and have a quick chat with her. I won’t be a moment.”

“Captain Rogers, if I let anyone just walk in and have a chat with Miss Potts whenever they pleased, Miss Potts would never get anything done,” Ms. Bliss says, adjusting her glasses. She
narrows her eyes at Steve, and Steve strains himself to keep an easy smile on his face. “I know you think that just because you’re an Avenger you can do whatever you please.”

The wide black doors to Pepper’s office swing open, and both of them turn to see the woman in question standing there with her eyebrows raised in two perfect, disdainful orange arches. She’s dressed slightly less aggressively than she had been when Steve saw her last, in a chic white pantsuit that speaks to her elegance and grace. Steve knows very few people that can wear all white and not get a speck of anything on themselves all day, dirt or otherwise.

“Captain,” she says, evenly, and Steve swallows. He holds up the small bouquet of asphodel and hyacinths he’d brought with him, now looking so foolish and plebeian in the face of Pepper’s composure. He always felt this way around women like Pepper, but this was particularly embarrassing, when he knows that he’s done something wrong to earn her ire. It’s worse than just the generalised anxiety and wrongness that he always feels around beautiful, competent women; this was personal, and justified. He knows exactly how kind Pepper can be, when she thinks one is deserving of it. He’d simply been moved out of that category, and into one that Tony needed protecting from.

“I, uh. I thought we could talk,” he says. Pepper eyes the bouquet, then him, tilting her head to the side in impassive consideration. “Um. These are for you.”


She steps back, pulling the door with her until she holds it open with a flat, challenging look. It makes Steve want to do something drastic: anything, to break the clean, modern lines of this office, the silent swing of the heavy black doors, the way Pepper’s heels make no sound on the perfectly plush white carpet that leads from the door to her desk like a runway. He spares a tight smile for Ms. Bliss as he passes her desk, stepping inside and standing in the middle of the room. Pepper closes the door behind him, and her shoulders brush his as she passes by him, seating herself at the desk.

“Are you going to sit?” she asks, waving to the chairs before her. In answer, Steve holds up the flowers. “I’ll have Ms. Bliss find a vase.”

Steve nods, then sits, resting the bouquet on the edge of Pepper’s impeccably clean desk. “Tony and I had a talk, worked some things out. So I thought I should come by, and settle things between us, if I could.”

Pepper smiles thinly, narrowing her eyes to stare at him with wry calculation. “And how exactly do you plan to do that?”

Steve frowns. “Well, you were upset because I messed things up with Tony. And I appreciate that, really; he needs somebody to keep an eye on him, to look out for him. But Tony and I are…” He pauses. Surely, Tony had mentioned how things really were between them to Pepper. They’re close. He tells her almost everything. “Well, we still have some things to discuss between us, if I could.”

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Steve frowns. “Well, you were upset because I messed things up with Tony. And I appreciate that, really; he needs somebody to keep an eye on him, to look out for him. But Tony and I are…” He pauses. Surely, Tony had mentioned how things really were between them to Pepper. They’re close. He tells her almost everything. “Well, we still have some things to discuss between us. But I apologised. I’m…seeing a professional. To get back on track.”

“And what does that look like, for you?” Pepper asks. Steve stares at her, brows furrowing. He isn’t sure he understands the question, and after a moment, her smile turns pitying. “I am glad that you’re back safe, Steve.”

It sounds like a dismissal, and Steve wets his chapped lips, tries again. “Pepper, I’m really sorry. I know that you’ve been taking care of Tony for longer than I have, and I violated the trust you have in me to watch his back, and keep him safe. That’s my job, and I messed up. Tony needs someone
to look out for him, and I blew it.” He lets out a rough breath, running a hand over the back of his skull. “I’m just—...I want to make amends, here, but I don’t know what you’re looking for.”

“That’s your first problem, then, isn’t it?” Pepper asks, not unkindly, and Steve glances up to stare at her from beneath his furrowed brows. “Have you read Plath’s “Colossus” by any chance?”

“No? I’m not sure I understand you,” he admits.

“You should,” Pepper says, folding her hands together across her desk. “You know, a lot of people have a fundamental misconception of Tony and I’s relationship.”

“Is that so?”

“Mm,” she hums, thin lips stretching into a smile. Her long fingers flex, testing, pale skin a sharp contrast to the dark wood. “People think that he’s some sort of wild chaotic force that I keep on a leash. It’s how the media paints him, but mostly I think that’s how the world wishes things to be. That’s what you wish, isn’t that right, Captain?”

“What do you mean?” Steve asks, and Pepper tilts her head to the side. Her long hair slides in a burnished waterfall over one slim shoulder.

“Did you know I almost quit when Tony became Iron Man?”

Steve nods. “You wanted him to be less reckless.”

“No, I wanted him to let somebody else do it. Be Iron Man, I mean. I didn’t want him out there fighting at all.”

Steve chuckles nervously. “Well, nobody wants to see someone they love hurt—”

“I don’t care about the greater good, Captain.” Steve stops talking, mostly because he has no idea how to respond to that statement. “I care about Tony, and this company, and myself, and my career. I care about being the top CEO in the country and one of ten—counting generously—female CEOs at my level in the world. I care about being the absolute best at what I do, and taking care of the small handful of people I count as my family. I like nice things, and efficiency, and accolades. Tony would be just as happy living grease-stained in a workshop with his armour for the rest of his life. He would be fine if he never had to put on a bespoke Tom Ford ever again. He wants to save the world, and help people, and make amazing things, and I’m not opposed to that. But I also think that Tony Stark’s brain is far too valuable to waste flying around in a steel trap getting shot at when a few hours of sleep-deprived manic engineering can produce medical technology that revolutionises the field the world over. I wish that the cover story that SHIELD had produced was true. I wish that he paid someone to go out there and fly around and fight bad guys in some delusion of heroism. I think being Iron Man is a colossal waste of both his time and potential.”

Pepper laughs shortly, shaking her head and spreading her hands on the desk. Steve gapes at her, opens his mouth, but no words come out. It’s for the best, because it seems she isn’t done yet.

“That, Captain, is precisely why Tony and I broke up.” She swallows, one corner of her mouth kicking up, but there’s no mirth in it. It’s an empty, aching thing, and the eyes she sets on Steve are both wet with tears and freezing cold. “And it’s why I have never trusted you. Howard made Tony feel small every day of his life, and used you to do it. And now here you come, alive, and all you do is ask Tony to be better by your twisted standards of foolhardy masculine posturing. You’d be happy if he killed himself out there—”
“That’s not true-”

“...because it is honourable, and good according to your own stupid moral code. You’d be happy if he sacrificed his life to save some stranger when in any given day Tony creates things that advance the human race as a whole, improve quality of life, save thousands—”

“You can’t value one life over another like that-”

“I can!” Pepper snaps, nothing but steel in her spine, and Steve takes a breath. He is panting, slightly, Pepper’s nostrils flaring in response as she tries to calm herself. “It’s simple math. You wish Tony was some sort of wild, off-the-handle, uncontrollable idiot savant because you want to be the leash. His leash. The world wishes that were true, because the alternative is this: Tony really is that much smarter than everyone, and his futurist brain is always thinking sixteen steps ahead of the next big thing, and he seems wild because he is responding to things that no one else can see yet. It is more terrifying to think that Tony Stark doesn’t need an external compass, or that he has been my moral compass. It is, in fact, the only thing I have never, ever needed to do for him. Because if that’s the case, it means that Tony is right, and everyone who hates him or belittles him or looks down on him is wrong. People don’t change, Captain. Children punish each other for being different, out of jealousy, out of fear that they are less than. And you are. To me, you absolutely are.”

“That’s...you can’t be serious,” Steve says, reeling. Pepper’s stare is unflinching. “That’s. Tony has worked so hard to become a better man, and you don’t support him?”

“How dare you,” Pepper sniffs. “I have always done everything Tony has needed me to do. If that means running his company while he plays martyr, then that’s what I’ll do. But I have never enjoyed it, and I will never be what this version of Tony needs.” She sighs, a self-deprecating sort of sound. It makes the skin on Steve’s arms stand on end. “I fell in love with the beautiful, damaged genius who was selfish enough to look out for himself, not the borderline-suicidal vigilante adrenaline junkie who wants to kill himself to save every crying child. I would have made that man into the king of the world.”

“Tony is all of those things,” Steve says, helpless in the face of Pepper’s completely insane amorality. “Few men are more powerful. He’s already the richest man in the world.”

Pepper smiles wryly at him. “Imagine what he could do if he dedicated himself to innovation full time.”

“Tony loves being Iron Man more than anything. Flying alone—”

“Which is why we ended things,” Pepper says, shrugging. “But you are mistaken if you still think that what Tony needs is a minder, like he is a wayward child that requires directing. You have learned absolutely nothing from this whole ordeal. What Tony needs is someone to remind him to be selfish. To take care of himself, not just physically, but also emotionally. Because if we let him, his guilt over what Obie did would have him tearing out his own damaged heart to hand over to the first person who asked for it.”

Steve scoffs. “Tony makes selfish decisions all the time—”

“No, he makes unilateral decisions when he is sure he’s right and thinks someone else will get in the way of him doing what is right. You can’t tell me you don’t do the same exact thing, Captain. Or was it someone else who blew up SHIELD?”

“That’s not the same—” Steve begins, sick of this argument, but Pepper cuts him off at the knees as
always.

“Isn’t it?” Pepper glances at the slim gold watch on her hand, then stands. She buttons and smooths her blazer with a quick, graceful sweep of her hands. “I have a meeting in twelve minutes with the Chief of the NYPD Counterterrorism Bureau, so if you’ll excuse me.”

“Wait, hang on,” Steve says, but Pepper is having none of it. She gathers her things into her purse.

“Captain, if you’re not enough for Tony, that’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

Steve frowns, confused by the sudden shift in conversation. “What?”

Pepper glances over at him, her mouth a droll slant across her face. “I don’t have to trust you for Tony to want you. Tony’s slept with plenty a tall blonde in our years of working and living and being together. So if Tony wants you, you just have to decide if you understand what it means to be with Tony.”

“I’m not sure I understand you,” Steve says, slowly, but Pepper is already shaking her head. She slides her purse on her arm, then steps by him and heads towards the door.

“Then I can’t help you, Captain. I’m sure you know your way out.”

Steve is tired of Pepper flaying him open and walking out, but he supposes she did learn from the best. He has no idea what to do with what she has given him this time, though. He has no idea how to even begin processing the things she’d said. Before now, Pepper had been someone he respected, a friend he would have trusted with his life and the lives of those he loved. He can’t quite reconcile that woman with one who would say, blatant and unashamed, that she doesn’t care about the greater good.

Unbidden, he remembers his meeting with Xavier: the vision of the earthquake, of Tony’s battered body crawling up out of the earth like a Grecian myth. Someone you cared about was in danger, and you prioritised him over others. Does that make you a bad person?

Steve scrubs a hand over his face, swallowing down the surge of acid that swells in his throat at the memory, the cool tones of Xavier’s voice loud in his ears. He takes a breath, counts, breathes out.

“You’re still here,” Ms. Bliss says from the doorway, pointed, and Steve shakes himself and stands. He glances over at Ms. Bliss’s pinched expression, one of her hands fussing with the pin holding back her sweep of steel-grey curls. “It’s almost my lunch break. If you don’t mind?”

“Right,” Steve says, standing. His eyes catch on the bouquet. “Pepper said she’d ask you for a vase.”

The look that Ms. Bliss offers him is pitying. “Of course.”

Steve nods. He stands, fingers pressing once, firmly, against this desk that used to belong to Tony. Loki calls her Tony’s general, Steve knows. It seems a particularly fitting moniker now, more so than he had understood at the outset. He has been consistently outmanoeuvred.

“Do you think people change?” he asks. He turns, studying Ms. Bliss as she stares at him, unperturbed.

“I think it is a rare, extraordinary miracle when one does,” she says. “I think it takes much, and most people never see circumstances that require it.” She smiles, a thready, sincere sort of thing.
“When my sister first interviewed for Mr. Stark, he was a selfish, nasty, entitled man. He shoved me twice in the space of a week’s visit, like I wasn’t even there. It was like I was simply furniture to him. Do you know what that’s like, to be so invisible to a man that he doesn’t even see you? That he can knock you down, and not even spare you a glance?”

“He may have just been drunk,” Steve says, wincing. He nods, once. “Tony’s changed. That’s what you’re saying, isn’t it?”

But Ms. Bliss is shaking her head. “I am saying that change is rare, and most men don’t have the strength to let it happen,” she corrects. “Tell me, Captain Rogers: do you think yourself capable?”

“I don’t know,” Steve says, honest. No one’s ever accused him of anything less than that. “I should hope so, right?”

“Hope is for those who lack conviction,” Ms. Bliss sniffs. She turns, opening her body up to invite Steve through the door. “Action is for men of honour. If Miss Potts thinks you are unworthy, do better.”

Do better. Steve mouths the words as he walks out of the office, the door shut behind him with a near-silent snick. He turns them over as he waits for the elevator, watching the numbers tick over above the sleek grey doors. Do better.

“Sounds easy, when you put it like that,” he mutters, stuffing his hands in his pockets. He’s only a little bit bitter.

“Isn’t it?” Ms. Bliss says archly. The elevator dings. “Have a good afternoon, Captain.”

The glass door swings shut, and Steve takes a slow breath, releasing it. He steps into the elevator.

“Well, I talked to her,” he says, knowing JARVIS will know exactly what he’s talking about. “My rooms, please.”

“She did provide you with advice,” the AI offers.

“Did she?” Steve asks. He watches the numbers change as JARVIS takes him back up to his quarters. The Avengers’ levels aren’t on the general elevator controls; Tony hadn’t seen the sense of it, partially for safety reasons. JARVIS’ authentication was required for anyone seeking to visit the upper floors.

“Perhaps you should think further on your conversation with Miss Potts before you ask that question,” JARVIS says, frustratingly diplomatic as ever. Steve closes his eyes, nods.

“Is Tony around?”

“Sir is eating lunch with Mr. Odinson in the communal kitchen. Shall I take you there?”

Steve shakes his head. “You’re right. I should…process.”

“Very good, Captain.”

The elevator’s ding is an absolution that Steve embraces with open arms. He steps out and unlocks the door to his quarters with exhaustion hanging heavy in his frame. He wants to lie down and nap, but he knows that’s not a good impulse. It’ll just make him too keyed up to sleep later, set him sparring with Tony’s specially reinforced punching bags down in the gym at 3 AM.
Something occurs to him, then: a strange thought, something like embarrassment skittering over him as he processes it.

“JARVIS,” he asks, slowly, “Tony never…he didn’t cheat on Pepper. He wouldn’t.”

“If he had, I wouldn’t tell you, Captain.” JARVIS’ voice is disapproving, and Steve shakes his head.

“No, I just- Pepper, she said that Tony had- uh. That there had been, um. Tall blondes. But, while they were together. I don’t-…”

“Miss Potts did not predict longevity being the end result of a monogamous relationship with Sir. Wisely, I think,” JARVIS says, when Steve has been silent long enough. “Does that answer your question?”

“No,” Steve says, bewildered now. “What does that mean, exactly? Like…Mormons?”

There was a pause. “I think, perhaps, there are LGBT-focussed advocacy websites that might be better suited to your edification in this matter,” JARVIS says. “Only, I know that you find it disconcerting when we cover topics involving sexuality. If you would direct your attention to the StarkPad in the sitting area, I can pull up the relevant information for you.”

“Okay,” Steve says, embarrassment and dread curling in his stomach unpleasantly. “I…is this going to tell me something about Tony that I shouldn’t know?”

“Sir’s sexual history is many things, but private is not a term I would ever use to describe it.”

Steve barks out a laugh, because that was a true statement if he’d ever heard one. Still. “I meant, do you think I want to know what you’re going to show me?”

“It is integral to your complete understanding of your conversation with Miss Potts.”

“Then I guess I better get reading.”

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“Sir,” JARVIS says, and Tony raises an eyebrow.

“Hit me.” He frowns, pointing a fork at a very confused looking Thor. “Not you, Pikachu. You’re not allowed to hit me.”

“I have already apologised for my prior transgressions,” Thor says, sounding a little disgruntled about it, and Tony laughs and shakes his head. He taps meaningfully at his earpiece. “Ah. You were speaking to JARVIS.”

“If you might direct your attention to the television, I think we are finally seeing the results of Mr. Laufeyson’s promise to you.”

Tony turns dutifully around at the kitchen island to glance into the dark living room, rising and bringing his bowl of pasta with him as he stands behind the couch. Thor follows, curiosity beating out his voracious hunger, as Fox News comes up on the screen. Dana Perino is sitting at the usual desk, hands gesturing as she sits across from a commentator that Tony recognises from the usual news circuit.

“So tell me, what does it mean that Ambassador McCoy has been tasked with helping to craft these
so-called accords in lieu of Ambassador Gyrich?” she says, and Tony drops his bowl of pasta.

He didn’t mean to do it, but whatever Ben Ulrich has to say in response to that question is met with a roaring in his ears. To his left, Thor is looking at him with some concern, expression pulled tight as he stoops down to gather the ceramic shards up with his fingers.

“...and I think I’ve been pretty clear on my stance on Gyrich,” Ulrich is saying, while Perino nods. Tony’s always thought she was less horrific than plenty of her compatriots on the channel. “Gyrich’s proposed policies towards enhanced individuals have been labelled as draconian by some, and I myself have raised some serious questions about the comments he’s made regarding the situation in Latveria. So it’ll be a huge change to see McCoy, who is of course enhanced himself, as the face of American influence on the project. Many will see it as an improvement.”

“But don’t you think the accusations of personal bias are valid, considering Ambassador McCoy’s ties to Doctor Charles Xavier and the so-called X-Men?”

“Well, you have to remember that Gyrich has been linked to known Hydra sympathisers, Dana. I mean, if you want to talk about someone’s personal relationships affecting their policies, then I, well, I have to bring up that Hydra is listed as a neo-Nazi organisation by the Southern Poverty Law Center, and an international terrorist organisation by the U.S. Government, Interpol, and most countries worldwide. What does it mean that Gyrich has been linked to people who are—speaking non-hyperbolically—invested in eugenics, and is espousing anti-enhanced views as a member of the U.S. Government? Even without taking into account that he stands accused of actively furthering Hydra’s agenda, I mean. That’s what this investigation is all about, so of course it’s a transparent PR move on the part of the American government to put McCoy in after Gyrich was pulled out under such embarrassing circumstances.”

“Do you think that the FBI really has solid case against him?” Perino asks, and Tony covers his mouth with his hand.

“Loki, you mad, incredible fucking son of a bitch,” he breathes. He can’t believe this. “That was, what, a five day turnaround? What the hell did that asshole do, JARVIS? They made the decision on Friday, and it’s Wednesday at 2 fucking PM. What the hell could he have done to get an FBI investigation started in, what, three business days?”

“I do not know what it is that Loki has done that has you so pleased,” Thor says, and Tony jumps about half a foot in the air at the sound of him. He’d entirely forgotten Thor was even there. “However, I will say that I have known since we were but children to never underestimate my brother’s machinations. It seems you still have yet to learn this lesson.”

“Your brother just saved all of our fucking asses,” Tony says, gaping at the screen. “I don’t- this is beyond even my wildest fucking best-case scenario. This changes everything, J. I don’t…I’ll have to rerun everything. God, is Pepper seeing this?”

“Miss Potts is in a meeting. I will alert her as soon as she is available.”

“Yeah,” Tony says, dazed. “Yeah, you do that.”

Thor takes his arm, firmly manoeuvring him to sit on the couch. “Mind your feet on the edges,” he tells Tony, but Tony’s not listening to him at all. He’s still captivated by Ulrich, who’s gesticulating firmly in a way that Tony knows means he’s used to holding a cigarette when he speaks like this.

“...but the FBI doesn’t do anything by halves, so even if he’s not found guilty, I can’t imagine the
stain of whatever evidence they’ve found will completely wash out. I imagine that McCoy is here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future.”

“Oh my god,” Tony says faintly. “Your brother is my new favourite person, Thor. I’m sorry to everyone else who lives in this tower, but that’s my final decision. He’s sold me. I’m in, Team Loki 100%. I’m a believer. Is there a temple? I’m there. Let’s go.”

Thor’s laughter is a familiar rumble as he leans over the back of the couch, placing a gentle hand on Tony’s shoulder. “I shall fetch the dustpan,” he says, and then disappears.

“Think about it, Dana; the huge bombshell that was the Potomac Disaster, aka Hydragate, wasn’t that long ago. We know for a fact that Hydra infiltrated large swaths of the American government. The number of arrests was frankly staggering. It’s not a stretch.”

“Some people have referred to the post-Potomac Crash investigations as a witch hunt. What do you say to that?”

“I say that we know for a fact that Hydra used millions of dollars of the defence budget meant for SHIELD—and we’re talking money that comes from the American taxpayers here—to try to shoot down American citizens in their homes. Almost 716,000 Americans. Including the president! And we’re not just talking spies and government spooks serving as double agents. Congressmen were in on this. Elected officials. I’d rather the investigations be thorough than let a single man involved in the Potomac Crash go free to threaten the lives of American citizens again, don’t you? So Gyrich managed to get through the first round of investigations. Okay. I’d rather someone checked to make absolutely sure he was clean than risk letting a Hydra sleeper agent design international statutes for the very people that took them down the last time. That seems like letting the fox run the henhouse, don’t you think?”

“Good old Ulrich,” Tony says, shaking his head. He takes a slow breath, rubbing a hand over his mouth in thought. “This is a double-edged sword. Before, this was relatively quiet. No one pays attention to the UN mandates. Loki’s forcing my hand. I’m gonna have to talk to the team about this, if it’s running on Fox News.”

“It is times like this that Loki most reminds me of our mother,” Thor says, so close his breath brushes the back of Tony’s ear. Tony whips around, because he’d been so caught up in the television that he hadn’t heard Thor come back. “Might I hear your thoughts, my friend? I know I do not understand Midgardian politics as well as I ought, but it seems as though you have been shouldering a burden that my brother has now relieved you of. What is it that we have been saved from?”

“Loki’s like your mother?” Tony asks, as much curiosity as he is attempting to avoid Thor’s questions. Thor smiles at him, a wry thing that says that Tony is absolutely transparent, but he folds his arms across the back of the couch with jovial ease.

“Yes,” Thor says. “In many ways, I find it humorous that he thinks our parents are not truly his family. He is more like them than myself, most days.”

“What do you mean?” Tony asks, turning back to fully face Thor, but the man isn’t looking at him. His striking features are set in profile, a few strands of hair coming loose from his bun as he nods his chin at the television.

“Our mother and father are—…” Thor clears his throat. “Or, were, clever. And wise. It is what they are best lauded for, both. Your stories paint me as a powerful fool, always a step behind Loki’s tricks. Is that not the way of things, as you have seen them?”
Tony turns that over for a moment in his head, considering. Sure, they joke a bit at Thor’s expense, but the man takes it all with good-natured aplomb. And there are moments, too, like this one; where Tony can see the age of him, peeking through like the copper under gold plating.

“I dunno,” Tony says, smiling faintly. “You surprise me about once a week.”

Thor lets out a booming laugh, but to his eternal credit, there is no bitterness in it. He seems, if anything, resigned. “Only once,” he repeats, and Tony grins like he gets the joke.

“How can I say something you might not like and not have you kick the shit out of me?” Tony asks. “Only, it seems like your brother’s busy, and no one’s here to jump on you and give me a chance to get suited up.”

Thor eyes him with a sour twist burgeoning on his face. “I have apologised much for my misplaced ire. I recognise that you were as much player to my brother’s machinations as you were engineer of them.”

“For what it’s worth, I really am sorry for the whole…fake murder thing.” Tony offers him a sheepish wince. “Look, I think you’re just…immature, comparatively.” Thor raises an eyebrow at him. “I know, I know, you’re two thousand years old or whatever. But, I mean, how old are your parents? It’s not really fair to compare your wisdom or whatever to theirs. And sometimes you’re wise. In ways that surprise me, and…well, I’d say humble me, if I wasn’t me.”

“And what of Loki?” Thor scoffs, but Tony just shakes his head.

“Loki’s immature in some ways, too.” He grins a little, remembering wrestling with Loki in the bedsheets, the pale arc of his ribs as he squirmed away, laughing. “Trust me.”

“Do not let him hear you say so,” Thor warns, but his grin is wide enough to set his usually-stormy eyes sparkling. They darken as Tony watches, filling with self-doubt. Tony knows that particular look intimately. “Sometimes I feel as though I am missing something essential, something that my brother and mother and father were all gifted at birth whilst I was overlooked.”

“Well, from what I’ve heard, it doesn’t sound like Odin was always wise,” Tony points out, resolutely not thinking of empty halls, of the clink of ice in a glass, the sounds of muffled shouting. “It sounds like he was an asshole, and then he learned something. That’s not too unlike you.”

Thor nods, glancing down at his folded arms. His expression softens, an unbearable kindness overtaking his face as he turns to meet Tony’s eyes. “You surprise me, too, Tony Stark,” he says solemnly. “Every day. But I shall comfort myself in the knowledge that humans have much less time to grow; you cannot take a thousand years to learn a lesson.”

Tony laughs softly, caught somewhere between disbelief and embarrassment. “Thanks?” he says. He isn’t sure if he should be flattered or not. That did seem a little backhanded, but he can’t help but feel like Thor’s just given him his blessing or something equally ridiculous.

The smile that Thor offers him is broad and knowing, uncanny in its softness. Then he laughs, a low, rumbling noise that Tony still manages to feel in his bones. Even when subdued, Thor’s laughter could never be called quiet.

“Come, my friend, and let us finish our meal. Much of your portion ended up on these fine floors, and I do not think I will have fulfilled my duty as your shieldbrother if I cannot manage to fill your belly. I will admit, our Captain, Doctor Banner, and the Lady Natasha do a better job than I in this matter, but I shall endeavour to meet this challenge as best I can in spite of this.”
“What am I, the team pet?” Tony says, laughing, but he lets Thor pull him up and back into the dining area.

“No,” Thor says, simply. “You are our friend, and it is the task of friends to care for one another as best they are able.”

And well, Tony doesn’t have anything to say to that, so he keeps his mouth shut. He sits down at the table, taking the bowl Thor presses into his hands and watching him settle back at the end of the table across from Tony.

“Eat,” Thor says, gesturing with his fork. “Eat and replenish your strength before you must once again descend into your workshop to scheme and plot an end to our enemies.”

“That makes me sound like a supervillain,” Tony crows, laughing, but he does as he’s told. After all, Thor can be wise, too, sometimes.

“Oh thank god.”

Steve, who had been mostly unabashedly watching Tony bite his lip as he scrolled through the movie selection, watches as Tony glances up from his usual perch on the couch. One of Steve’s arms is resting on the back behind him, fingers almost close enough to touch. He hasn’t quite worked up the courage to put his arm around Tony’s shoulders, mostly because he and Tony still haven’t had a chance to talk yet. It isn’t that he thinks he’ll be rebuffed, but more that he doesn’t know what it would mean if he did it and Tony just let him. Bruce is curled up on Tony’s other side, fingers combing absently through Natasha’s hair as he reads something on a tablet.

Clint is standing in the doorway with Thor, both of them in work out clothing, ostensibly returning from a training session. Clint is staring at Steve with a wary kind of scrutiny, eyes narrowed as he searches his face.

“Yes, yes, everyone’s kissed and made up,” Tony says tiredly, turning back to the television. “Are you showering? Sitting? Should I wait?”

“How much kissing are we talking, here,” Clint says, wiggling his eyebrows, and Steve flushes at the insinuation. “Ooh, incriminating!”

“Zatknis’,” Natasha says shortly, and Clint looks down at her with an exaggerated frown. “I feel like you two need a happy ending, after the last one.”

“Uh oh,” Clint laughs, “what happened last time?”

“Steve wanted to go out,” Tony sighs, sounding a little guilty, “and he thought The Lobster sounded kind of weird and fun.”

Steve winces, even as Bruce and Clint turn to stare at them with equally horrified expressions.

“I’m so sorry,” Bruce says, shaking his head.

“Tony says that’s what I get for picking a weird arthouse film.” He reaches out a hand to ruffle through Tony’s hair, his heart stuttering a little even as Tony rolls his eyes at him. “He didn’t think
to warn me.”

“I hate spoilers,” Tony protests, an old argument, and Steve hooks his arm around Tony’s neck and drags him in close, digging his knuckles into Tony’s scalp. “Hey! Ow!”

“Punk,” Steve growls at him, and Tony reaches a hand out and digs it into the soft skin of Steve’s stomach, scrabbling for the spot that always makes him shout for how ticklish he is. “Tony!”

“If either of you kick us, there will be consequences,” Natasha drones, and Steve grabs for Tony’s hand with the arm not wrapped around his neck.

“Truce, truce,” he laughs. Tony jabs him painfully in the stomach with his free hand. “Stark, I swear-”

“I am going to shower,” Thor interrupts, grinning. “It seems it may be a while yet before a choice is made.”

“Can we start without you?” Tony calls, still squirming in Steve’s grasp.

“Aye.”

“Yeah, no. I’m out. Too much. I’m gonna break out in hives.”

Tony ignores Clint and Thor’s departure and pokes Steve again, twisting in his hold and laughing when Steve grabs for his wrist and misses. “Too slow, Rogers!”

Steve covers Tony’s mouth, his arm still locked around Tony’s neck, mostly because he feels like it. He’s laughing, chest filled to bursting because he’d missed this. He’d missed the ease of being with Tony when things were good between them, fighting over the remote, the feel of Tony squirming under him be it sparring or silly wrestling like this.

Tony stills, suddenly, and Steve turns in time to catch the lowering of his eyelashes. He near swallows his tongue when Tony opens his mouth under Steve’s hand, tongue slipping out to lick along the line between his middle and ring fingers in a slow, filthy sweep. Steve can feel his stomach tighten, the muscles in his body coiling as he meets Tony’s half-lidded gaze, his eyes dark and sparkling with mischief.

“I want popcorn,” Natasha says, and Steve startles, coming back to himself and the room with a lurch. Natasha is studiously not looking at them, but Steve colours anyway. He pulls his hand back from Tony’s mouth, letting it hang awkwardly over his shoulder. “Anyone else?”

“Me, please,” Bruce says, not even looking up from his tablet.

“Seconded,” Tony says, a triumphant grin on his face. Steve can feel how hot his face is, his whole body thrumming with it. Then Tony twists, unexpected, and pokes Steve right in the ticklish spot on his ribs.

Steve lets out a bark of laughter, trying to squirm away, but Tony’s committed now. He half-climbs into Steve’s lap, pressing his advantage as Steve laughs, shoving at his face.

“Tony!” he shouts, and Bruce sighs and stands up from the couch.

“I’ll help you.”

“Probably the smart choice, Doc.”
“Tony,” Steve tries, but he’s laughing too hard to get his breath properly, now. His voice is a weak wheeze of laughter. “Stop it.”

“Call mercy, Cap,” Tony says, grinning down at him, and Steve is breathless. Tony is never more handsome than when he’s happy and laughing with it, when he’s pleased with himself or something he’s done. His eyelashes are a dark sweep over his cheeks, looking a half-mile long through Steve’s rose tinted glasses, and he can’t stop himself from leaning in, tilting his face up. Through the last flutter of his eyelids, he catches a glimpse of surprise on Tony’s face, and then they’re kissing: slow, sweet, still a little breathless. Tony makes a soft noise, and then his mouth opens over Steve’s, and Steve’s gone. He presses the advantage, slipping his tongue into Tony’s mouth, sliding an arm around Tony’s waist to steady him in place. Tony settles in his lap, sliding forward until they’re pressed together from stomach to chest, and Steve moans and tangles his fingers in Tony’s hair.

Tony breaks off with a gasp, eyes flickering behind them, and all at once Steve realises that the open living plan of the common area means that there’s nothing stopping Natasha and Bruce from seeing everything, and that he’s painfully hard under the cradle of Tony’s hips.

“Fuck,” Tony blurts, pulling back a bit. Steve can’t bear to turn around.

“Should we leave?” Natasha deadpans, and Steve closes his eyes. He can feel his face heating.

Bruce sighs behind them. “I was kind of looking forward to a team Movie Night.”

“Stay,” Steve croaks out, coughing to clear his throat. “It’s fine. Stay.”

Tony glances down at him, amusement creeping over his mouth, twisting it into a wicked curve. “Sure about that, Cap?” His thighs tighten around Steve’s waist, reminding Steve of the predicament he’s in.

“You stay, too,” he says.

Tony laughs at him. “Right here?” he asks, voice dropping, and Steve takes a shaky breath.

“If you can watch the movie like that,” he answers, proud of himself for how even his voice is. Tony considers this, eyes dark, before twisting his body around. He sits down with his legs across Steve’s lap, his back against the arm of the couch. His eyes are bright with triumph, and Steve wants so badly to kiss him again. He settles for wrapping one hand around Tony’s outer hip, fingers pressing tight into Tony’s skin.

“How’s this?” Tony says, and Steve swallows.

“Fine.” He clears his throat. “So, uh. What are we watching?”

“Have you seen *Some Like It Hot*?”

Steve licks his lips, his mouth dry as the Tabernas. He shakes his head mutely.

“Well, it has a happy ending,” Tony says, the words dirty in his mouth, and Steve can’t help but tighten his fingers on Tony’s hip.

“Tony, stop torturing the man and put on the movie,” Natasha says briskly, returning with a large bowl of popcorn. She folds back down on the floor, graciously leaving the couch for Bruce.

“Wait, first,” Tony says, holding up a hand. “I’d be a bad queer if I didn’t say that there are some
folks who’ve got issues with the film. Personally, I have always been a fan, but just so you know.”

“What kind of issues?” Steve asks, wary.

“Remember Rocky Horror?” Bruce says, holding a bowl over Steve’s shoulder.

“Ah.” He takes the bowl, letting Bruce climb into place next to him over the back of the couch.

“I don’t know,” Natasha says, “I feel like the last scene changes things for me. Doesn’t the last line-”

“Spoilers!” Tony shouts, waving an impassioned hand and nearly knocking over the popcorn. “Movie first, discussion after. You know the rules, woman.”

Natasha rolls her eyes. “JARVIS, the movie, please.”

Steve shifts a little as the lights go down and the movie starts, willing his body to come down off of its high. He can feel Tony staring at him, even as the MGM lion roars out from the screen. He squeezes Tony’s hip again, gently this time, and is rewarded with Tony nestling deeper into Steve’s body. Steve wraps an arm around his shoulders, because it seems stupid not to, now.

He doesn’t know what this means, any of it. Tony being attracted to him, wanting him, was never in question. Tony was not subtle about his attentions, and he flirted like he breathed. His eyes were expressive, and the lingering looks that Steve knew intimately had graced most of the Avengers at one point or another. The fact that he was the most common recipient of them hadn’t escaped his notice, but still; he doesn’t know what it means, that Tony was willing to kiss him on the couch when they hadn’t talked yet. Was that an answer? Is the answer yes?

“Stop freaking out and watch the movie,” Tony murmurs in his ear, breath sweeping over Steve’s neck. He shudders, his reaction met with a low chuckle. “Later, okay?”

“Okay,” Steve breathes, and it is. It’s okay. They’re okay.

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After, Steve follows Tony up to the penthouse.

Tony is fidgeting, fingers tapping on the arc reactor, eyes flitting around the elevator. Steve remembers the fight they had here, only three weeks ago. When he considers it, he can hardly believe how little time it’s been. It feels like it’s been months.

When the doors open, Tony steps out quickly, turning to walk backwards so he can look at Steve and move at the same time. “Drink? Food? I know you just ate your weight in popcorn, but I mean, that’s never stopped you before.”

“Tony,” Steve says, and Tony takes a slow breath.

“Okay,” he says, “but I need a drink for this.” And then he turns, and heads for the bar.

Steve walks to the recessed living room and sits, folding his arms over his chest as he watches Tony at the bar. He’s pouring something from a huge, beautiful glass decanter, his fingers graceful as he drops a perfectly round ball of ice into the glass. He’s in a band t-shirt and tatty jeans, his usual dressed-down clothes for when he’s not up to public consumption. He looks exhausted, but also strangely keyed up.
“So. I, uh. I have a confession to make.”

Steve raises an eyebrow. “Okay?”

“I really need you to listen to…everything. Before you talk.” Tony pads towards him, sitting down close enough that their knees brush each other. “Can you…could you do that? For me?”

“I kind of thought we were coming up here to talk about…us,” Steve says, a sinking feeling building in his gut, because he doesn’t think that’s what’s about to happen.

“I think that what I have to say might change your feelings on that,” Tony says, and Steve takes a breath, lets it out. “Maybe I’m wrong? I’d like to be wrong. I’m so rarely wrong, though, Steve.”

Something about the way he says it makes Steve pause. Maybe it’s how tired he sounds, as though there’s no joy in his triumph. Unbidden, Steve thinks of his conversation with Pepper yesterday, and then the myth of Cassandra. Tony looks hunted, more than anything, and Steve reaches out and places a hand on his knee.

“Tony, nothing you could say to me could change how I feel.”

“Well, that’s not true,” Tony says, rolling his eyes. He takes a sip of his drink. “So, Loki and I have been fucking.”

Steve takes a swift, shaky breath. He makes himself keep his hand where it is. “I figured as much,” he says, even as he can make it.

“It started as a way to try to…I don’t fucking know,” Tony breathes. He rubs a hand over his face, suddenly, looking exhausted. “Fuck.”

Steve doesn’t know what he’s supposed to do in this situation, but he doesn’t think it’s just sit here. He pulls Tony towards him, instead, drawing him in until his shoulders fit comfortably in the curve of Steve’s arm. He coasts a gentle hand over Tony’s spine.

“You used yourself as a honey trap,” he says, because he can see it. “Was that Tash’s idea, or yours?”

“Pepper encouraged it, too,” Tony says, laughing crazily, and Steve raises his eyebrows. After his last talk with Pepper, he can almost believe it. “I don’t know, honestly. Maybe even his? I think he thinks he was the honey trap. And then, after the first time…” He winces, stops talking.

“I see,” Steve says, because he knows Tony. Tony’s favourite things are engineering, caffeine, flying, alcohol, and sex: not necessarily in that order. “I don’t think that’s really how espionage works.”

Tony snorts, takes another, larger swig of his drink. “It’s really not.” He swallows. “You were right, though. I do kind of like the bastard. He’s smart, damaged, funny.” Something passes over his face, then, dark and uncomfortably vulnerable. It twists Steve up to see Tony looking like that over someone else, even as he continues to soothe Tony with placid, sweeping strokes of his hand. “He’s so fucking lonely. He’s so messed up. I don’t know… I don’t fucking know what I’m doing. And I don’t…I don’t know if I can-” He stops, and when he inhales his chest stutters, shaking.

“It’s okay,” Steve says, hearing his voice as though it’s echoing down a tunnel. “Whatever it is, it’s okay, Tony.”

“If you’d asked a month ago, I probably would have said yes.”
Steve’s pulse falters in his throat. A quiet ringing sounds in his ears. “What?” he asks, faintly. His voice is a rasping whisper in the quiet.

“I didn’t know,” Tony says, shaking his head. He’s staring down at his hands, gripping the glass so tightly Steve wonders if it will break between his fingers. He feels like he’s watching the scene through a film of plastic. “I didn’t…you. You said it was hard to love me, but you have no idea, you have no fucking idea what it’s like—”

“When did I say that?” Steve interrupts, his heart starting up in his chest again, hopping along double-time. “When—”

“You don’t remember,” Tony says, as though this is unsurprising. When he turns to Steve his eyes are sharp, dangerous, and Steve knows now that they’re treading on dangerous ground. “Of course you don’t remember.”

“I wouldn’t…I could never,” Steve splutters, but stops short when Tony’s gaze turns vicious. “I’m not saying you’re lying, I’m sorry, I just…I can’t imagine. Saying that. I haven’t even. I wouldn’t say it that way. When did I say that?”

Tony studies him for a moment before a sluggish, foul kind of grin overtakes his face: more of a rictus of pain than anything else. “J, could you play it back for Cap here?”

The TV turns on, and Steve watches with horror his parting shot in the workshop, from that very first fight they’d had after Loki appeared. He watches himself speak, just a throwaway comment, but this time he can see the way Tony flinches back like he’s been struck. He watches himself walk out of the workshop without looking back, watches ‘Tony stand still for a few long, painful moments, his face expressionless. The footage cuts off, and Steve turns his head back to stare at Tony. He’s making the same face now. It’s the same face he makes when the press is hounding him about his past as The Merchant of Death, the way he looks after a bad night, the way he looks when he’s so deep into his own mind that Steve can’t manage to pull him out for anything.

Steve can literally feel his heart breaking. His chest is wracked with horrible, aching pain as he searches Tony’s face.

“You can’t fucking know,” Tony grates out, rubbing a hand over his face. “You- you have no idea what it was like, growing up in that house and then seeing you and god, I wanted to hate you. I wanted to hate you and you were so fucking beautiful, Steve, you’re unreal, you know that? The photos really don’t do you justice, it’s…” He pulls himself out of Steve’s embrace, stalking back to the bar. Every line of him is pulled taut, the corded muscles of his arms tight as he moves to pour himself another drink. His hands slice through the air with violence, each gesture sharp and economical. “Talking to you was like a nightmare. Everything…I know we don’t talk about my father, but—”

“Colossus,” Steve murmurs, involuntary, and Tony’s eyes snap to him. Steve tilts forward, suddenly desperate now that Tony’s looking at him. He needs to make him understand. “I look at you in the morning with a circuit board imprinted on your face and grease stained up through your eyebrow and you’re still the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen this side of the ice,” Steve says, begging Tony to believe him, but he realises his mistake as soon as Tony begins to shut down. The scoff he looses is venomous.

“Right. There’s a backhanded compliment if I ever heard one,” Tony sneers.

“Tony, that’s not what I meant,” Steve tries, but he knows he’s already pulled the train off the rails. There’s no way to stop it now; he knows how Tony is when he gets like this.
Tony picks up his glass, then puts it down again, hard enough that a wave of amber liquid slops over his trembling fingers. He reaches up with his free hand and scrubs it through his hair, frustrated, angry. Steve wants to fix this, but he doesn’t know how. He doesn’t know how to get to where he wants to be from where they’ve landed.

“Fuck, I can’t do this,” Tony says dully. His voice is mostly breath. “This wasn’t even what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“You are the best thing about the future,” Steve blurts out, because that’s what he’d meant. That’s what he was trying to say, what he’s wanted to tell Tony for so long. “Tony, you- I couldn’t have made it this far, without you. I was so far off the deep end I didn’t realise I was in the damn water, and you found me. You pulled me out. You saved all of us.”

Tony stares at him, hands braced against the bar. His elbows are locked tight, body hunched over the table top like he’s bracing to leap over it and fight Steve with his bare hands.

He feels cornered, Steve thinks, remembering the way Tony had looked when Steve had waylaid him in the elevator.

God, I’ve fouled this up so badly.

“Tony, listen to me,” he pleads. He closes his eyes for a moment, brows furrowing as he sends up a quiet prayer to whoever is listening. When he opens his eyes, Tony is watching him, wary as a feral cat. “If you don’t want to do this, I- I’m not the kind of man to go where he isn’t wanted. I think you know that. But I think you do want it. I think you’re scared, and that’s okay. I’m scared, too. It’s okay to be scared. But you have to talk to me. You have to tell me where you’re at, so I can meet you there, Tony.” He takes a heavy breath, letting it fill his lungs. His mind spins dizzily, whether from the influx of oxygen or the thundering pace of his heart, he doesn’t know. “I can’t- I don’t want to keep stepping on landmines. I don’t like being shouted at for things I don’t understand, but more importantly, I hate hurting you. That’s not what I want. That’s never what I want. But you have to tell me, Tony. You have to talk to me. I will meet you, Tony, wherever you’re at, but you have to help me. You have to help me get there.”

The sound that rips from Tony’s throat is best described as a sob, and Steve is up and on his feet before it’s even fully finished. He crosses the penthouse floor with a few swift steps, coming around the bar to pull Tony’s shaking body into his arms. Tony’s hands are trembling, his shoulders, his whole frame. He feels like he’s coming apart in Steve’s hands, and Steve wishes desperately that he knew what to do. He doesn’t feel like he’s qualified to love Tony. He feels like he needs at least another decade of study, a manual, at least a little bit of relationship experience. He went from a single kiss on the tarmac and pining from afar to this, and he doesn’t know how to do this. He doesn’t know how to convince Tony that this is the right thing to do, because he doesn’t know if it is. He wants, and for him, that’s enough. It’s had to be. But he doesn’t know if they can make it out the other side.

He thinks of his conversation with Xavier, of what he knows of how poorly things went between him and Magneto. He doesn’t know if they were ever lovers, although there have always been rumours. But he knows that once they were best friends, as close as anything. Somewhere along the way, things got broken.

He thinks of Loki and Thor, circling each other like wary animals. He thinks about spending two thousand years of his life with someone, only to have his heart broken so thoroughly that he would wage a war to spread his misery. He thinks, maybe, how he feels about Tony is strong enough to make him do something reckless and dangerous. He thinks about the rage that overtook him in the elevator, and it makes him hate himself a little.

Do better, he remembers.
“Please,” Steve whispers, and Tony sinks into him at the sound of it. He presses a desperate kiss to Tony’s temple, holding him as tight as he dares. “Please, Tony. Just talk to me.”

“I think Loki can see the future,” Tony says, apropos of nothing, and Steve stills. He blinks once, twice, processing the assertion. “He told me I had to make things right with you, because if not we’re all going to fucking die. He had a premonition, like- like something out of the exorcism. There’s someone coming for us, something…something big. That’s why he’s here; because teaming up with us is better than the end of everything. He said there would be nothing left to fight over. And I’m so tired of fighting with you, Steve. I’m so- God, I’m so fucking tired.”

A shiver breaks out over Steve’s skin. Like someone walked over your grave, his ma used to say. He feels cold, and he clutches tighter at Tony’s shaking body. Tony fists his hands in the back of Steve’s shirt, and for a few quaking breaths they just hold each other. Steve presses his temple to Tony’s, concentrating on slowing his breathing, on having Tony match him until they’re both a little steadier. He tilts his head to press another kiss to Tony’s brow.

“Come back to the couch,” he says, and Tony wavers in his arms, just the most miniscule of trembles before he once again turns to iron. Steve watches as he reassembles himself, straightens up, his chin tilting up as he takes a slow breath. When he opens his eyes again, they’re sharp, even against a backdrop of bloodshot red.

“There’s something else,” Tony says, and Steve huffs a disbelieving laugh.

“Of course there is,” he says. He takes a breath, reaching up to brush his thumb over Tony’s cheekbone. He comforts himself with the faint flutter of Tony’s eyelashes, the way his breath stutters in his throat.

“The UN is in the middle of coming up with a proposal for oversight. For us, and any future groups like us. I’ve been dealing with the US government’s pressure on that front since the Potomac Crash, but saving you was a dangerous op for our own self-interest. We went in to save one of our own, and we got people killed. It was the last straw.” Tony takes a breath, putting one hand over Steve’s mouth to forestall his questions. “Listen to me, Steve.” His eyes are wide in his face, beseeching as he leans in. “They are talking registration of all enhanced individuals. Every mutant. Every science experiment. Every techno-genius. Do you know what the Overton Window is? Ross has been talking about this stuff since The Hulk came out of the gate. He has been steadily pushing this agenda for six years, and now he is the Secretary of State for the United States of America. We are closer now to that happening than we have ever been. You cannot just rush in and refuse this. You cannot fight it. This is the world, every government, foreign and abroad. I have been fighting this my way, and I have kept us safe for years, but I can’t stop this one, Steve. We can either get inside and drive, or be run over, but we cannot stop it coming.”

Steve stares at Tony with wide eyes, silent even as Tony removes his hand from his mouth. “Is that…you’ve been just…doing all of this? By yourself?” But even as he says it, he knows it’s a stupid question. Because of course Tony has. Of course he’s been shouldering all of this by himself, of course-

“I’ve got Nat,” Tony protests, and Steve frowns at him. “And Pepper, of course.”

“And you didn’t-”

“Steve, you despise politicians. You hate talking to them. You hate saluting to them. You hate going to meetings where everyone argues policy for two hours and nothing gets done.” Tony
laughs, bitter and fond, a strange combination if Steve’s ever heard it. “You’re such a hypocrite, you didn’t even show up to the damn hearings post-Potomac. You had Natasha handle it for you.”

“You’re my team,” Steve counters hotly, impotent rage building in him. It’s not for Tony, though, he can admit that much; it’s at himself, and for the people proposing registration at all. He’s furious at everyone for reducing Tony to this state. “I’m supposed to be making the calls. How can I do that when I don’t have all the information?”

“You weren’t making these calls,” Tony says, flippant as ever, and Steve lets out a frustrated hiss of breath. “We were handling it.”

“Yeah, and now it’s spiralled out of control.”

“What the hell would you have done?” Tony demands, pulling back out of Steve’s grasp, and Steve snaps his mouth shut. He reaches out, slipping his arms back around Tony’s waist.

“Don’t,” he says, and Tony stops. “Just…” He closes his eyes, pressing his forehead to Tony’s. “Okay. Go.”


“Well, it’s working,” Steve says, and Tony chuckles.

“Remember the whole, nuke, wormhole thing?”

Steve snorts. “Mm, nope. I don’t recall.”

“You don’t…none of you know, it was….” He clears his throat, hands shaking where they press against Steve’s chest. “A hostile alien army came charging in through a hole in space, and we were standing 2,000 feet below it. It’s been two years and we’re still fucked in that scenario, Cap. We can bicker over international statues all day, but that…that up there’s where my head’s been at for two years. Bruce and I looked into AI-powered global protection. We worked with NATO to implement a satellite warning system if anything big shows up. I made an army, but the legionnaires aren’t enough. Whether or not Loki’s telling the whole truth, he’s right; we can’t waste time fighting each other. There is so much worse out there, Steve. Worse than anything you can imagine. I’ve seen it. Loki’s seen it. I bet Thor’s seen it, too. It was so- so beyond the pale, you can’t even imagine.”

“Hush,” Steve murmurs, squeezing Tony in a hug. Tony subsides, pressing his forehead into Steve’s with a rough sigh. “Whatever it is, Tony; the UN, the US government, Loki’s Big Bad, we can face it. He told you as much, didn’t he?”

“Steve-”

“We can do this,” Steve promises. “Together.”

“We might die,” Tony deadpans, but there’s genuine fear, there.

Steve takes it in stride. “Then we’ll do that together, too.”

Tony laughs, a wet, hacking kind of sound. He pulls his head back just enough to meet Steve’s eye. “God, you’re too much, you know that?” He swallows, a wan smile still creasing his eyes, and Steve presses a small kiss to the corner of both of them. He’s wanted to do that for so long it aches, echoes through his bones and into the core of him. It feels a little like coming home. “We can’t risk
alienating Loki right now.”

“And you like him,” Steve says, gently as he can manage it.

“Steve, it’s not-”

“Tony,” Steve says, and Tony stills.

“Yeah.”

“Let me stay here,” Steve finds himself saying. “Just for the night. We don’t have to do anything, I just… I don’t think we should be alone, tonight. Either of us.”

“I’m not made of glass, Cap,” Tony sneers, lip curling, and Steve presses a kiss to his forehead. “Damnit, you can’t keep doing that.”

“I dunno,” Steve burrs, “I kind of like this de-escalation technique. It’s working for me.”

“Stop that,” Tony says, but there’s amusement lurking under his ire. “I have another confession.”

“Jesus,” Steve laughs, offering Tony an incredulous look. “What the hell, Stark?”

“Loki’s been sleeping here.”

Steve blinks. He wets his lips, takes a slow breath. “Here.”

“Yeah.”

“As in…in the penthouse?”

“As in, in bed with me.”

Steve nods. He loosens his grip slightly, but the wild expression that overtakes Tony’s face draws him back in. He takes another unsteady breath. “Okay. So…”

“He’s…out, right now. He’s taking care of an issue I had with the U.N. taskforce.” Tony laughs hollowly. “I sent him on a mission.”

“Have you talked to him about…this?”

“He told me to make nice with you.”

“That’s not really the same,” Steve says, a wry smile breaking over his face, and Tony laughs.

“Steve, Loki knows exactly what our relationship is, trust me. I should talk to him, but he definitely knows the gist of it.” He takes a breath, drawing back slow enough that Steve could stop him if he wanted. Steve lets him go, watching him stopper the decanter and place it back where it belongs. He watches Tony take another sip of his drink. “You could.”

“I could?” Steve repeats, bemused.

“Stay.”

Steve licks his lips. “Ah.”

“I don’t know when Loki will be back,” Tony says, fingers flexing on the table, and Steve reaches out to twine his together with them. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I want to talk to him,
before we do anything else.”

“I understand,” Steve says. He may not like it, but he gets it. “I think I should maybe talk to him, too.”

Tony turns, raising an eyebrow at him even as he takes another sip of his drink. The ice has melted significantly throughout their chat, but Tony doesn’t seem to mind it.

“Have you talked to Thor, to corroborate his information?”

“Not yet,” Tony says, mouth crimping in displeasure. “Things were kind of rocky between us for a bit, there.”

“Then that’s our next step,” Steve says, nodding. “Now, it’s bedtime. You look like a wreck, Stark.”

“You flatter me,” Tony deadpans, and Steve grins at him. “However shall I resist such charm?”


Tony puts up a string of token protests, but he mostly lets himself be led into the bedroom. He brings his drink with him, of course. Steve watches him strip his jeans off with little more than fondness, considering the exhaustion seeping into the usually crisp lines of Tony’s frame. Steve can sympathise; that talk took a lot out of him, too. He follows Tony’s lead, slipping out of his khakis and folding them up on the bedside table. Tony always sleeps on the right.

Tony goes into the bathroom to perform his nightly ablutions, and Steve crawls into bed, smiling a little at how decadent the sheets are. He’s never slept here before, and this wasn’t exactly the scenario he’d imagined when he thought about being here for the first time.

“What are you grinning about?” Tony asks, and Steve looks up to where he’s leaning against the doorjamb. He’s got a toothbrush in one hand as he considers Steve, his eyes creased ever so slightly with mirth.

“Just wasn’t how I thought it’d be, that’s all,” he murmurs. He can feel himself getting tired, just from lying here. “Can’t complain though, really. I’m glad we talked.”

Tony considers him, eyes narrowing for a moment before he smiles. It’s a tiny thing, just the feeblest uptick of one corner of his mouth, but it’s genuine for all that. “Me, too.”

Steve nods. “Finish up and come to bed,” he says, and something vulnerable passes over Tony’s face. Then he nods, and disappears back into the bathroom.

Steve must pass out, because the next thing he knows Tony’s sliding into bed next to him. The room is dark, just the glow from the midtown lights coming up from below through the plate glass windows. He can’t make out Tony’s expression in the dark, but he lifts his arm, inviting Tony closer. Tony ducks into his side, and Steve shuffles him up until his head is nestled on Steve’s chest, his arm splayed low on the smooth plane of Tony’s lower back.

“Sleep,” he slurs. And then, because he feels it needs to be said, “Thank you.”

“For what?” Tony asks, quietly amused.

“For everything.”
“Thank you, Cap,” Tony says, nestling closer. It’s the last thing he hears before he’s out.

Chapter End Notes

So here we are! So, that just took...huh, like almost 100k words to get them to this place. Now if only they can keep going with the whole...open, honest communication thing for another few thousand words and we’ll all be set, huh?

For those who are worried, Loki is coming back, I promise. This is not going to become a fic where Loki gets tossed aside (again) and Stony rides off into the sunset. You will eventually find out what the deal is with Bucky. Everything will be fine. Do not fret.

Yes, that is Miss Ursula Bliss, for anyone who caught that. She's so annoying and yet so lovable. Some dialogue is obviously taken from Ultron, and that last bit is a riff off of What If? because of course it is.

This Pepper is based very heavily in the MCU, and not at all in the comics, where she does in fact often serve as Tony’s moral compass. MCU Pepper is unabashedly selfish and self-interested, and that makes her one of the most unique female characters I’ve seen in recent years. She is allowed to love shoes, and her job, and not care about Iron Man because she wants Tony safe at home with her. That’s an extraordinary stance to take, and one that has been maintained throughout the whole MCU. Every fight she and Tony have is about his decision to fight to protect the world, instead of staying safe at home where Pepper can keep an eye on him. She is allowed to feel that way, and still be a likeable character, and I absolutely love that about her because so few women are allowed to be selfish in the way Pepper is selfish. Tl;dr I may be a slash shipper, but I love Pepper to death, and I’m so happy that the comments I’ve been getting from y’all have reflected that love back at me.

Finally, a shameless plug: if you’re a stony shipper who is down with A/B/O, I recently posted a pretty p0rn-filled fic that’s actually completely written! No slow update schedule for you to worry about here :D If you're sick of all the angst in this fic and want some sweet schmoopy early-comics-esque Steve/Tony, it shall provide.

Hope y’all are satisfied with how I’m tying up things as we move along. If you aren’t, let me know! I’m always happy to talk shop. <3
Heyyy, check it out: an update that's not interminably long after the last one! Look at me go.

I apologise in advance for the limited Loki in this chapter. He is off doing Very Important Plot Things, which you will find out about very soon. But hey, here's a treat for those of you who've been waiting for *checks* uh, like 100k words to find out what's the deal with Bucky in this fic!

Usual warnings: we have another episode of ethically questionable therapy with Charles Xavier! Also panic attacks, because Tony is...so not okay right now. I'm pretty sure y'all knew that, so no surprises here. Sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride!

Tony wakes up with tacky morning breath in his mouth, bleariness overtaking the anodyne of sleep. A quiet alarm is sounding, and he sits up in bed to see the hulking planes of Steve’s shoulders bunching under thin cotton. He’s reaching for the bedside table, and Tony’s chest splits open with a dizzying spill of embarrassment, desire, and relief at the memory of last night. Everything’s out in the open and no one tried to kill anyone else. Steve kissed him. They cuddled. It was…nice.

Steve rolls back to lie in bed, his StarkPhone dwarfed in his hands as he fiddles with it. He turns to offer Tony a sheepish glance, and Tony looses a weak huff of laughter at the realisation that he’d woken to Steve’s morning alarm. It’s not yet daylight, the slow purpling of pre-dawn the only light visible from the outside. The automated shades haven’t even activated yet.

“You’re a maniac,” Tony slurs, settling back into the sheets. The laugh that Steve looses is slow, easy. He leans in to press a gentle kiss to the corner of Tony’s mouth, but he pulls away before Tony can turn his head into it, deepen it into something real.

“You do want me to stay?” Tony yawns before he can respond, covering his mouth with the back of his hand. “Sorry. I know sleep is hard for you. I didn’t think to turn it off last night.”

“You’d skip your run for me?” Tony asks, strangely touched by the implication.

The smile that Steve levels him with is indulgent, drowsy. His hair is a lopsided mess, soft spikes of dark gold in the low light. Steve runs a hand through it as he watches, and Tony wants so badly to settle back into the curve of his neck and stay there forever. Steve’s Brooklyn brogue is thick as molasses in his soft, smiling mouth. He feels more real than he’s ever felt before, touchable and sweetly tender.

“If you want me to,” Steve agrees. “It’s just one day.”

Tony hums, the faint hint of a smug smile playing over his lips. “I inspire indulgence, hmm?”

“Yes,” Steve admits, so straightforward that Tony’s caught between the desire to laugh and an
unexpected swell of emotion emanating from behind the reactor casing. Steve leans in again, nosing gently along his brow. “God, I never want to leave this bed.” His voice sounds wrecked, and Tony swallows, suddenly much more awake. “You look…”

“What?” Tony breathes, and Steve huffs out a soft laugh against his jaw.

“I dreamed of this for so long,” Steve confesses, not a self-conscious bone in his body, and that… that’s way too much for Tony to handle at this hour. Steve is too much for him.

“You shouldn’t skip your run because of me,” Tony says, and Steve sighs into his ear. It’s enough to send all the blood in his body straight to his cock. His heart falters a half-step in his chest. “You like routine, I know you. It’ll just make you keyed-up and unbearable later.”

“But I want to stay with you,” Steve murmurs. One large, calloused hand slides sweetly over Tony’s stomach, lingering, and Tony can’t help but let out a thin sigh of pleasure. “I’ve waited so long for this.”

“Not longer than me,” Tony says, sharper than he’d like, and Steve freezes. “Fuck, sorry. I’m…” He takes a deep breath. “You know me. No coffee, no filter.”

“You don’t have much of one even with the coffee,” Steve drawls, amused. He sits up, pulling his hand back. “You’re uncomfortable.”

“No,” Tony hedges, but Steve just shakes his head.

“I’ve been told I come on too strong,” he says. He grins a little, lopsided. Hurt. “Side effect of being unused to anyone looking twice at me, I’d wager.”

“Steve,” Tony says, reaching out a hand. Steve lets him brush his knuckles over one high, sharp cheekbone. He’s got stubble, something Tony’s almost never seen on his clean-cut Americana face. He can count the times he’s caught Steve with facial hair on his fingers, and Tony swallows at the thought of that stubble brushing against other places. The inside of his thighs, chiefly.

Tony’s mouth is suddenly dry. His thoughts must show on his face, because as he watches, Steve’s pupils dilate. His throat works once, twice, breath clicking in the fine column of his trachea. “Yeah?”

Fuck, his voice is low and rough and Tony wants him. He wants him, and he shouldn’t. He can’t.

“I think,” Tony says slowly, biting back a guttural sound when Steve turns to press a kiss to Tony’s palm, “that maybe you should go on your run.”

“Look at you, being responsible,” Steve teases, and Tony just—

“Steve,” he rasps, and Steve beams impishly at him. “Please.”

Steve’s eyes flicker to the right, down Tony’s body. Tony can’t imagine the sheet is doing much to hide the state of him. “If you’re sure,” he says, and his voice is mostly exhale.

“We can’t,” Tony says, and Steve huffs sharply, rolling away in one quick move to sit on the edge of the bed.

“Fuck,” he bites out, and Tony flushes hot at the sound of the curse in Steve’s mouth. It’s so rare for him to be foul-mouthed, even when he’s angry. He doesn’t even curse when they’re shouting at each other, and in this particular instance the word just sounds dirty and desperate. Tony can’t help
but imagine him saying it in other circumstances, and he turns to stare at the ceiling, flopping one forearm over his eyes to block out the sight of Steve’s broad, straining shoulders.

“Please go,” Tony begs, hating himself a little for it. “We both know my self-control is absolute shit. You’re the military man, here.”

The laugh that emanates from the other side of the bed is rough, rumbling. “The only kind of military I feel like right now is a POW parched for water,” Steve deadpans, which, huh. Is actually pretty damn flattering. Steve lets out a heaving sigh. “Alright. Jeez, Tony.”

Tony laughs at the mild invective. There’s the man he knows. “I’m feeling pretty smug for a man who’s about to be stuck with an epic case of blue balls, so thanks for that.”

“I’m glad I could give you some pleasure,” Steve teases, warmly amused, and Tony can feel his face get hot. He’s always so thankful his Italian skin can’t betray his embarrassment. “Can I borrow your shower?”

Tony groans softly at the images that assail him, and the laugh that Steve favours him with is knowing, delighted. “You’re a fucking menace.”

“Is that a no?” Steve burrs, and Tony lets out an explosive gust of a sigh.

“Just fucking go, Cap.”

“Yessir.” He can feel the bed dip as Steve stands, whistling jauntily. There’s the soft rustle of fabric, and Tony debates for about half a second before he pulls his arm away from his face. Steve has pulled off his shirt, standing there hard and mouth-wateringly cut in the low light of dawn, nothing but the thin fabric of his boxers hiding him from Tony’s ravenous gaze. He’s blushing hotly, pink spread from his cheekbones all the way down his chest, but he’s proud, too. Tony wants to eat him alive.

“You’re a bad man,” Tony croaks, and Steve cracks a grin at him. “Please go shower. Now.” God, he’d almost forgotten about the damn eight pack. Tony didn’t even know some of those muscles could be visible on the human body outside of anatomical models, before he met Steve. The man is honestly unreal.

“Gotta use what I’ve got,” he says, shameless. He turns, though, and oh, the sight of his back is not any better for Tony’s composure. The dimples over the curve of his arse are practically petitioning for Tony’s thumbs to fit to them. “I’m competing against a god, y’know.”

And now Tony’s remembering Loki, lithe and pale and beautiful beneath him. He remembers how he’d looked spread out and trussed up. Steve’s muscled Adonis physique is so different, but the image of them both in his mind is enough to make him bite his lip. He may whimper. Maybe. No one could prove it.

“Interesting reaction,” Steve hums, and okay. That’s just not on.

Tony reaches out, throwing a pillow with unerring accuracy to thwap Steve in the back of his stupidly gorgeous blonde head.

“Nobody is competing against anyone,” he says hotly, frustrated. “Now get out of here, before we do something we both regret.”

“Okay, Tony,” Steve concedes, and the grin he flashes over his shoulder is boyish. “Good morning, by the way.”
“For you, maybe,” Tony says. Then he pauses, letting a slow, filthy grin sweep over his face. The change in Steve’s expression is instantaneous. He looks poleaxed, and he freezes in the bathroom doorway, one hand braced against the frame as if to steady himself. “Morning, Captain. Feel free to take a long, long shower. I’ll just be here. In bed.” He spreads his legs, arching his back in a decadent stretch. He lets himself moan a little at the feel of it, then extends all the way down to his curling toes, his grasping fingertips stretching up to grasp at the headboard. When he opens half-lidded eyes, Steve’s mouth has fallen open, shallow breaths barely moving the defined planes of his shoulders, his chest. “Take all the time you need, because I’ll certainly make use of it.”

Steve lets out a low, wanting sound, his eyes black with desire. He sways in place for a half-second, two, then takes a sharp breath and steps into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him.

Tony laughs out loud, even as his cock twitches painfully in his boxers. “That’ll teach you to try to out-seduce an infamous, world-reviled libertine,” he calls, gleeful. The shower turns on, and he grins up at the ceiling. “Point one to me. Make a note, J.”

“Shall I start a tally system, Sir?” JARVIS deadpans, and Tony grins impossibly wider. “You are in a good mood this morning. I wasn’t sure, after the events of the night prior, how you might be faring.”

“I’m probably still in shock,” Tony admits. He settles into the bed, considering his hard-on. He’d kind of implied that he’d be touching himself while Steve was in the shower. Steve would most certainly be wanking while he was in there, but it feels vulgar doing it in his bed whilst the object of his desire is in the en suite. “Fuck.”

He rolls over onto his stomach, burying his face into his pillow and letting out a frustrated yell. Loki had better come back soon.

“I could offer to help, but I rather like watching you suffer.”

Tony sits up with a startled shout, his hands coming up automatically in repulsor position even as his brain registers the voice he’s hearing. The Æsir himself—damn bastard—is leaning insouciantly against the bedroom door, a sadistic kind of glee in his eyes, and Tony can immediately feel his hard-on beginning to soften as terror and embarrassment take him over in turns. He glances towards the bathroom door with panic building in his chest.

“Are you serious?” he hisses, heart thundering in his chest. “Jesus fucking Christ on a pogo-stick!”

“Oh, hush, I’m not really here,” Loki hums, but he looks plenty real to Tony as he stalks forward with a small smirk. “Holding back on account of little old me? How…surprisingly sentimental of you, Stark.”

His eyes flash a warm, spring green, enough to make Tony suddenly very glad that he made the choice that he did. He sits back on his heels as Loki comes to sit on the edge of the bed, close enough that Tony can tell he wasn’t lying. There’s no coolness where his body comes close to Tony’s knee, no wafting scent of alien forests in snow. The bed doesn’t dip under his significant weight.

Tony lets out a breath he didn’t realise he was holding. “How long were you watching?”

“I have a few things to finish up before I might choose to return, but your sacrifice is noted,” Loki says, not answering Tony’s question, as usual. He’s smiling pitifully now, and Tony sticks his tongue out at him. Because he’s childish, around Loki. He can admit it. “I should be back by the end of the day, and thus I expect that my place in your bed shall be empty.” He grins, all teeth.
“Make a note.”

Tony swallows, because it sounds a little like he’s going to be punished, and not necessarily in a bad way. “You seem entirely unsurprised by all this.”

Loki chuckles, low and patronising. “Tell me, Stark. Did you think I expected anything different? You and your Captain were circling each other like lions in heat long before I made a place for myself in your bed. I did not require the gift of sight to predict this outcome.” Which is just about what Tony had told Steve last night, but still. It’s a relief to hear it.

“That’s no fair, reading me so easily,” Tony pouts, just to watch Loki laugh. “I’m very clever and unpredictable.”

“My mistake,” Loki says gravely, his eyes jewel bright in the burgeoning dawn. “I shall endeavour to remember your inscrutability.”

“See that you do,” Tony huffs. He glances at the bathroom door, and Loki sighs.

“I shall take my leave,” he says, and Tony turns back to him, opening his mouth to apologise. Loki holds a hand up, and he subsides into silence. “Do not mistake me. I appreciate you holding to your end of the bargain.”

“You forced my hand,” Tony says, but his smile is wry, now. Something fond and potent that he doesn’t want to put a name to swells in his chest. “Thank you. Thank you so much. You have—well. No.” He laughs, disbelieving, smoothing a shaking hand over his face. “God. You do have an idea of what you did. You know exactly how important what you did for us is. For every enhanced, maybe, everywhere.”

“For you,” Loki corrects, solemn, and Tony near about swallows his tongue. He reaches out a hand, flinching in surprise when it passes straight through Loki’s cheek.

“I forgot,” he mutters, pulling his hand back, and Loki smiles thinly at him. Some half-remembered pain flits over his face, bringing a kind of bittersweet longing to the sharp angles of his face. It makes Tony want to touch him.

“Soon,” Loki says, and then he’s gone.

“Fuck,” Tony hisses, flopping back down to bury his face in his pillow again. Then he screams, because that seems like the right choice to make right now. “Fuck fuck fuck fuck!”

“Are you alright, sir?” JARVIS asks, alarmed. Tony raises one hand with the bird. “I shall take that as a no.”

“I hate feelings,” Tony says into the pillow, succinct and infuriated. “I have no idea what the fuck I’m doing. What am I doing, JARVIS?”

“I could not begin to predict, Sir,” JARVIS admits, although he has the grace to sound pitying about it. “This situation is somewhat beyond my parameters. You have never had two serious partners concurrently before.”

“Is that what I’m doing?” Tony asks, terror creeping over him in a prickling wave. “Oh, god, I couldn’t even manage one relationship with one of my best and oldest friends. And I was paying her. Why did I think I could do this?”

“Captain Rogers is exiting the shower,” JARVIS says crisply, and Tony slumps into the bed,
regulating his breathing as the water shuts off. He flattens himself to the mattress, pulling the sheets back over his hips and tucking his clenching fists under the pillows.

By the time Steve steps out of the bathroom, he’s mostly calmed himself down, and is making what he feels is an excellent attempt at pretending to be fast asleep. He can hear Steve pause in the doorway, a quiet laugh, and then the soft sound of his footfalls on the carpet. He feels a warm hand skate up his back, and he makes a soft sound and arches into the touch because he can’t stop himself.

Steve presses a kiss to the back of his head.

“Go back to sleep,” he says, and Tony turns his head, cracking one eye open to look at him. He’s wearing the same clothes, but his hair is wet. He’s taken a small towel from the stack in the bathroom for his hair and is towelling it dry. “Were you talking to JARVIS?”

“Did you imagine I’d be quiet in bed?” Tony quips, because he’s feeling manic and capricious and a little crazy.

Steve blushes prettily, which is just. No. God, he’s going to hell for this. On top of the whole Merchant of Death thing. Surely this was against some cosmic rule against lust and greed and gluttony.

“I’m going to hell,” Tony moans, and Steve frowns at him.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Tony says, shaking his head. “Go. Run. Be an extremely hateable morning person.”

“It’s too bad Sam went home,” Steve says, and Tony grumbles. “It was nice to have a running partner.”

“Over my dead body,” Tony says, cutting off that line of conversation before it can even get started, and Steve laughs. “I fly. I have a flying suit. It can go supersonic.”

“Morning exercise produces endorphins that raise overall mood and health,” Steve says, like a fucking high school health class PSA.

“That’s what sex is for,” Tony counters, and Steve’s eyes darken even as he blushes like clockwork.

“A tempting counteroffer,” he says, and Tony closes his eyes against the whiplash of arousal slipping back into his body. He’s had an exhausting day and it’s not even dawn yet.

“Go,” he commands, and Steve laughs. “I will end you. I will destroy your credit score. I will program the world so that every speaker-equipped device you pass blares the “Star Spangled Man” on repeat. Loudly.”

“Wow,” Steve says, still laughing, “so much venom first thing in the morning, Stark.”

“JARVIS, I’m serious about that Star Spangled Man thing. Make it happen.”

“Hey,” Steve protests, “no, Tony-”

“You have ten seconds.”

“Rude,” Steve says. He presses a soft kiss to Tony’s ear.
“Ten.”

He presses another kiss to Tony’s temple, his jaw.

“Eight.”

“What happened to nine?”

“Five.”

“Okay, okay!” Steve laughs. “I’m going. I’ll see you later, alright?”

“You have your therapy appointment,” Tony reminds him. “I’ll see you around dinnertime.”

“It’s a date,” Steve says, which, no.

“Wait, that wasn’t-”

The door closes behind him with a snick, and Tony takes a deep breath.

“Asshole!” he calls. “JARVIS, put a team dinner on the docket.”

“Have me do your dirty work, why don’t you.”

“That is your job, yes,” Tony says. He drags the other pillow over his face, ignoring that it smells like a horrifically intoxicating blend of Steve and Loki. “Fuck. Fucking fuck. I’m going back to sleep.”

“A wise choice, Sir.”

“You’re an upstart brat.”

“I am what you made me, Sir.”

“I get no respect.”

“That was never modelled for me. I am unsure if I have a proper understanding of the concept.”

“Oh my god, shut up and let me sleep.” A pause. “And activate the shades for me.”

Blessed darkness takes over the room, and Tony closes his eyes, breathing in the smell of Steve’s more human musk, sweet sweat and the smell of his shampoo. Under it, the inhuman scent of Loki’s pine-and-winter smell lingers, familiar and strangely dear.

Tony clutches his fingers in the fabric of the pillow, taking comfort in it even as his heart races with panic.

Tony had never been monogamous. It had never really seemed practical, all things considered; he’d been with a few genuinely awful partners in his time, people even he would even admit had treated him poorly. Most everyone wanted something from him, and after a while, he developed a reputation. It was easier to keep people away when he didn’t have to focus on any one thing. It helped, too that the people he fucked were generally equally as much of a workaholic as he was. It helped set certain limits on his life: boundaries on how much time he could spend with someone, how invested he could get, what he could ask from them.

He’d been willing to try, for Steve. When he’d considered it, in rare moments lying alone in bed, or
during a lull in the workshop, he’d tried to imagine what it would be like to tie himself to someone. He and Steve already practically lived in each other’s pockets. The idea of restricting himself so utterly to another human was terrifying, but he’d thought he knew what kind of man Steve was. He couldn’t imagine Steve allowing anyone he was with to sleep with anyone else. Steve was the kind of man who believed in wedding bells and white fences, who dreamed about children and forever. It seemed stupid, to think that a man like that could want Tony Stark. No matter how they flirted, Tony could have never in a million years imagined that they’d end up in a place anywhere close to this one.

Tony still doesn’t know what he’d done to deserve Pepper Potts. He met her before he’d turned his life around, at a time when he was in no position to be worthy of love from anyone, let alone someone like Pepper. If the raucous bacchanalia of his nights hadn’t been enough, the shirking of his daily responsibilities should have done it. The fact that Pepper loves him doesn’t make sense. Even now, on rare days when the sun shines down on the gleaming spires of the city he’s bled to protect and he doesn’t completely hate himself, he doesn’t understand it. It feels like there’s nothing worth all the things he’s put her through within him.

In that way, Loki was an easy choice. There was no worry about living up to anything Loki had done or was. Loki had been beautiful and willing. Dangerous and complicated, to be sure, but that had never stopped Tony from doing anything. He genuinely doesn’t remember a time when he didn’t know how to disassemble a firearm. Servicing a beautiful weapon had always been where a Stark was most at home. There is nothing else he loves more than breaking something open and putting it back together again better than before.

Tony hadn’t really imagined Loki wanting any kind of permanence, in the beginning. He was just a tool. They were using each other. Now, he thinks about the way Loki had arched under him, trusting, the way he’d called him golden, beautiful, infuriating. He thinks that they may have both miscalculated. He thinks about Loki calling him genius, and it sends a skitter of want and warmth down his spine.

It’s been less than a month. He’d forgotten that, until now. He and Loki had been dancing around each other, flirting, for months, but from the time they’d first slept together to now had been less than a month.

You don’t even know him, really. But he understands him, is the thing. Some days, it feels like he understands Loki better than he had ever understood Steve.

I’m gonna fuck this up, he thinks. He rolls onto his side, pulling the pillow over his head into his chest and hugging it against himself. Fuck.

“I guess I’m getting up,” he says, feeling wrung-out and beat to hell. “Might as well head down to the workshop if I’m gonna be wasting my time.”

“You have a meeting at 3 PM with National Grid,” JARVIS reminds him, and Tony nods.

“Plenty of time to work on refining our anti-magic project, huh?”

“If that is your desire, Sir.” JARVIS opens the shades again, the pinkening sky the only hint of light on the horizon.

“I never thought I’d say this, but Loki’s sneaking around is kind of nice if this is what sleeping with Steve is like,” Tony says petulantly. He rolls to the edge of the bed and sits up with a jaw-cracking yawn. “I don’t know when the last time I saw dawn from this side was, but I don’t like it.”
“Shall I make a list of pros and cons?”

“Yeah, ok, point taken.” He stretches, rolling his neck back. “But if you are, Steve’s not a great pillow. Too…hard. And Loki’s too bony, so they both lose.”

“Noted,” JARVIS says, amused, and Tony sticks his tongue out at the nearest security camera. “Your feedback is noted, Sir.”

“All I get is sass,” Tony laments, heading into the bathroom. “No respect!”

“I can’t imagine where I might have learned my manners.”

“I will mute you, you malfunctioning, arriviste Neopet.”

“I quake in fear, Sir.”

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“Good morning, Captain.”

Steve yawns, running a self-conscious hand through his hair as his fist comes up to cover his mouth.

“Or, perhaps not?” Professor Xavier asks, amused. He blows gently on his tea, raising an eyebrow at him. “How are you feeling?”

“No, no, it’s good?” Steve says, laughing awkwardly. “It’s- I’m good.”

“You seem like you have something on your mind,” the professor says, and Steve chuckles.

“Yeah, it’s been kind of a busy week,” he admits.

“I didn’t see any fighting on the news.”

“Ouch,” Steve laughs. “Yeah, thankfully. I’m not sure if I’m ready for that yet.” He huffs, rubbing a hand over his mouth. “I had an interesting conversation with a friend.” Several, actually, but he didn’t necessarily feel comfortable talking about his sex life with the professor. It seemed… improper.

“Tell me,” Xavier says, and Steve wets his lips, considering.

“She said that she didn’t care about the greater good,” he blurts, and the professor raises an eyebrow at him. “I know, right?”

“Was that exactly what she said?”

“Yeah.”

“And this bothers you.”

“Well, she’s someone I respect,” Steve says, then frowns. “Wouldn’t it bother you?”

The professor smiles, taking a sip of his tea. “My opinion doesn’t matter in this, Captain. What matters is that this upsets you. Why do you think that is?”

“Well,” Steve says, and then stops. He rubs a frustrated hand over his face. “Isn’t it obvious why?”
“I’d like to hear you articulate it.”

Steve takes a breath, considering. “I guess I just think that being a good person means caring about other people,” he says mulishly.

“Does this friend not care about other people?”

“No,” Steve says, aggravated. He’s still kind of angry, but he isn’t sure why. The links from JARVIS had been incredibly helpful when it came to the latter part of the so-called “advice” Pepper had meant to impart on him. But it was the original conversation that he couldn’t stop coming back to. “She’s unfailingly loyal to the people she loves. She’s a good person. Or, I thought she was.”

“But because she made this statement, you’re questioning that.” The professor nods, taking a sip of tea and leaning back in his chair. “You know, surely, that you are surrounded by a particularly unusual group of people.”

“You’re one to talk,” Steve scoffs, before remembering himself. He winces, glancing out the window. “Sorry.”

Professor Xavier just chuckles. “I much prefer your honesty, Captain, as I’ve stated.” Outside, a group of young folks huddle together over their books, conversing animatedly. One of them has a magnificent pair of wings. “I’m just saying, perhaps you mistake the world view of your compatriots as the average. Your social circle is very niche, Captain, and comprised of individuals who have committed themselves to protecting the world, often at the expense of their comfort, their physical health, and their life. That is not a decision to take lightly, and it isn’t fair to expect that from everyone.”

“I believe anyone can be a hero,” Steve says stubbornly. “I’ve fought alongside men and women without any enhancements, and they’re just as brave as any so-called superhero. I think the idea that superheroes are special is dangerous.”

The professor grins at him, a sharp spike of satisfaction passing over his kind face. He rests his tea cup on the edge of his desk. “I don’t like the word enhanced to refer to those with the X-gene,” he says, steepling his fingers together. “But, if you’ve done any research on me, you already know that. Enhanced is inaccurate. Mutant is the scientifically accurate terminology for what we are. Scott constantly produces overwhelming concussive force from his eyes, and needs an assistive device to keep his power contained and continue his life as normal; to eat, or shower without living as a blind man. The only colours he’s seen since his sophomore year of high school are shades of red.”

Steve nods, because that makes sense to him. He’s seen how Bruce deals with the Hulk, the way the reactor pains Tony in the winters. Powers often come with a price. He thinks of Erskine, lying dead on the basement floor, and thinks maybe he knows that better than most.

“Some of these children have scales, or fur. Their obscured epidermis is all anyone will ever see. So what is one’s definition of enhanced? We’re not better, or even necessarily advantaged. We’re just different.” Steve nods again, because he agrees with that. “However, that does not mean that I expect all of these children to become X-Men.”

Steve blinks at him, bemused. “Well, of course not. They’re just kids trying to live their lives,” he says, laughing a little. “I’m not sure I see what you’re getting at, Professor.”

“Soldiers risk their lives for this country, and they are brave. Teachers who jump in front of
shooters to save their students are also undeniably brave. But do you think that is their duty?”

Steve takes a breath. “I grew up during the draft,” he says. “I certainly thought it was the moral imperative for everybody that could fight to get out there on the front lines and do it. I believe that it’s everyone’s duty to resist evil wherever they see it.”

“So you think the draft should be reinstated?”

Steve frowns, twisting his hands together in his lap. He leans back in the armchair, crossing his leg over so his ankle is braced on his knee. “I don’t know,” he admits. “War’s changed a lot. Things are so much less black and white than they used to be.”

“You think things were black and white during World War II?” the professor asks, amused now, and Steve frowns.

“I think a lot of Jews would think so. Gay men and women. Romanis. The disabled.” He realises he’s preaching to a man in a wheelchair, then, and stops himself. “Sorry, I just. We’re talking about Nazis, professor.”

“How much do you know about the Cold War?” Xavier asks, and Steve frowns. “We also allied with Russia, at the time. Plenty of room for grey, there. And you should know better than anyone that America didn’t want to get involved in the war. There was rampant anti-Semitism here. Americans didn’t want to accept Jewish refugees, much the way Americans now view asylum seekers from Central and South America.”

“All the more reason why it was important that people were made to go and fight for what was right,” he argues. “I’ll admit not every soldier I met was...well. The term now would be politically correct. But once you got to the camps, you couldn’t deny what was happening. I saw battle hardened men who’d used words I don’t feel comfortable repeating sobbing like babies over piles of emaciated corpses. That kind of thing changes a man.”

“And you?” Xavier asks. Steve raises his eyebrows at him, not understanding his meaning. “Did you cry?”

“Threw up,” Steve admits, a wry smile taking over his face. “I’ve always been like that, since I was a kid. Guess even the serum couldn’t change that about me.”

“So, you think people with prejudices being presented with war atrocities was good, because it inspired empathy in them?”

Steve frowns. “Well. I-...wouldn’t say that,” he says, but he’s not sure, now. That is kind of what he said, isn’t it? “Jeez, I dunno. I just meant that’s what I saw happen, was all. I don’t mean to call it good. I wouldn’t wish what I went through on anyone, Professor.”

The professor studies him for a moment, a small smile playing around the corners of his mouth. He looks empathetic, but Steve feels a little like he’s being laughed at. “Alright,” he says. “Let’s return to what your friend said. Do you think you can tell me why it bothers you, now?”

Steve takes a breath, turning it over in his head. “I guess I’d just like to think that everyone would do the right thing, when presented with it.”

“Do you think your friend wouldn’t?”

“No,” Steve says, remembering all the things Pepper’s been through. “But she implied that a mutual friend of ours could be credited with being her moral compass. And that surprised me,
because I guess I don’t think of this other friend of ours as that kind of guy.”

“How do you think of him?”

“A wild card,” Steve says, more fondness in his voice than he’d like. “A live wire. A rigged bomb. He’s always moving, always changing, always running off to do something dangerous.”

“He’s a fellow superhero, I take it,” the professor laughs, and Steve grins at him. “Yeah.”

“Do you not think that being a superhero requires that kind of energy?”

“I’ve met your Ms. Munroe,” Steve counters, “and she’s about the calmest woman I’ve ever had the pleasure of speaking with in my life.”

“And you’ve met Logan, and Scott, and Rogue,” Xavier counters, a bright smile on his face, and Steve laughs because, yeah. Yeah, he has.

“Point,” he says. “Alright. What are you getting at?” _Sly old fox._ He knows the professor might hear him, but he doesn’t particularly care. It’s nothing he hasn’t heard before, Steve’s sure.

“I’m just saying, it sounds like your friend is human,” Xavier says kindly. “We’ve talked about you holding yourself and others to a high standard. Most of your team seeks to rise to meet that standard. It is part of why you are good as a team leader. But Stark, as your second in command, is a realist. He’s meant to consider the angles of a situation, and try to make your dream a reality. Your team functions well because of this balance.”

Steve blinks, because he’s never thought about the team like that. Is that how other people see them? Him as the idealist, and Tony as the architect?

Something about it makes his stomach curdle uncomfortably.

“What I said upset you,” the professor observes, sounding surprised. “Can I ask why?”

“I guess that just makes me sound kind of naïve,” Steve says slowly, feeling it out for himself. “Is that how we’re viewed?”

“That is your personal assessment, Captain,” Xavier says. “I wouldn’t call you naïve. Hope is often a scarce necessity in our dangerous line of work. Sometimes it is all we have.”

_That’s not a no, though,_ Steve considers. He frowns, thinking of what Pepper said about how he views Tony, how wrong he is about him. “You said Tony had high standards, too.”

“Of course,” Xavier says. “He expects an arguably unreasonable level of competence from those around him. It is what inspires trust: if he knows that he can count on someone in word and deed. But there is little Stark cannot do, and he forgets that this is not the case for everyone. His intelligence sometimes surprises even himself.”

“Tony’s pretty confident of his own intelligence,” Steve counters, laughing a little. “But I guess I see what you mean.” He takes a breath. “You make it sound like we’re really hard on our friends.”

“They would not be your friends if they did not meet your parameters for friendship, would they?” the professor asks, and Steve mulls that over in his head. He thinks about Tash, who is both competent and willing to sacrifice herself for the mission. Come to think of it, he isn’t sure if
Natasha would ever use the phrase “greater good.” He isn’t sure if she even believes it exists.
“Which brings us back to your original issue. Why does it bother you so much, that this friend made this statement? She cares about others, sometimes to a fault, you said. You think of her as a good person. But she said she doesn’t care about the greater good. What does that mean, exactly, as you understood it?”

“She wouldn’t run into a burning building to save someone,” Steve says, considering the question carefully. “She’d call the fire department.”

“Would you want her to?”

“Well, no,” Steve says. “She’s an untrained civilian. But she also wouldn’t want an enhanced who was qualified to do it, if she loved that person. Even if she knew they could help.”

“And that’s what bothers you,” Xavier observes, nodding. He reaches out a hand, floating his teacup to him, and plucks it out of the air with delicate fingers. “I presume you were discussing your mutual superhero friend, in this instance?”

Steve nods. He’s pretty sure the professor’s figured him out, but it’s better to preserve his sanity if he’s able to pretend that he doesn’t know. “She’d rather he wasn’t a superhero.”

Xavier smiles. “That’s very normal, Captain.”

“I know it is,” he says, frustrated, “but she cares about the environment. She donates to charity. Clearly she cares about the greater good. Right?”

“Do you think her actions are in conflict with her words?”

“I don’t know,” Steve says rubbing his hands over his face. “Aren’t they?”

“Alright,” Xavier says, soothing. “We can come back to this, later. How are you feeling? Any nightmares? Do you still feel unsafe on your morning run?”

“I still have JARVIS keeping an eye on me,” Steve admits, sighing. “And the nightmares-” He stops, taking a breath. Last night, with Tony cradled safe in his arms, he hadn’t dreamt anything of note at all. “It’s getting better.”

“That’s good,” the professor says, smiling. “If that changes, please let me know. It was good that Stark had already provided you with so many of his coping mechanisms throughout your time working and living together. Good housekeeping and routine is a big part of recovery for someone like you.”


“Good,” Xavier says, his voice full of laughter, and Steve blushes.

“Not like-! I meant, literally,” he says, waving a hand, but the professor just chuckles.

“I see.”

“Oh, boy.” Steve scrubs a hand over his face. “We had a good talk, about…secrets. Boundaries. I think we’ve crossed a bridge.”

“Is that why you said you were in a good mood?”
“Yeah,” Steve says, face softening as he remembers how handsome Tony had looked that morning, his hair in ridiculous spikes and curls, eyes half-lidded and glittering. “I’m…really happy.” He clears his throat, shaking his head a little to come back to himself. “Things were pretty rough there, for a bit. We’d been fighting. But I think we’re in a good place, right now. Or, I hope we are.”

“Healing is a holistic process,” Xavier says, which sounds a little hokey, but Steve agrees on principle. “Repairing important bonds can only be good for your continued psychological stability. And it is always good to come clean with a friend when a secret has been kept.”

Steve’s breath stutters in his chest. Guilt, maybe, and fear. “Right,” he says.

Xavier studies him, an unreadable expression on his face. Steve taps his fingers on the arm of the chair once, twice, then glances back out the window. His thoughts aren’t safe in this room. He focusses on the slow wave of the trees as they shift and sway in the breeze.

“What would you be amenable to an assignment?”

Steve blinks, then turns back to the professor. “Like…homework?”

Xavier smiles. “I want you to consider, Captain; every other member of your team grew up in a broken home. Most of them have been involved in the military or some sort of violence since childhood.”

Steve frowns. “I guess,” he says, “but Tony and Bruce were civilians.”

“They were defence contractors,” the professor corrects, albeit gently. “Stark in particular is on record as having been able to field strip an M1911 in under seven seconds by the time he was three years old. According to one Times article, Stark Sr. called him his best party trick at least once.”

Steve sucks in a sharp breath, his fingers tightening on the chair. “Jesus,” he breathes. He closes his eyes, trying to will away the image of a tiny Tony’s small hands fluttering over a deadly weapon. “Tony never talks about his childhood.”

“Can you blame him?” Xavier asks, mouth curving into a slow sickle. It could almost be called kind, if it wasn’t so sharp. “It was by all accounts unpleasant, and you were a friend of his father’s. What’s more, much of the information is available to the public. I’m certain you’ve mastered Google by now, Captain.” He shakes his head. “Alas, we have digressed. Your homework is this: find something with which to begin a civilian life.”

“What do you mean?” Steve asks, baffled. He runs a hand through his hair, tugging absently at the longer fringe in the front. He needs a haircut. “I run. I go out. I draw.”

“Stark is the Lead Engineer and Creative Director for Stark Industries. Thor has an entire realm that he bears responsibility for. Doctor Banner has published four groundbreaking and highly technical papers on radiation, neutron decay, and the effects of heavy metal and radiation poisoning on Asgardians just this year.”

“And let me guess,” Steve drawls. “Clint and Natasha don’t count because their jobs before this were with SHIELD?”

“Agent Barton dropped out of high school and ran away from an abusive home to join the circus. He was a seasoned criminal by the time SHIELD recruited him. Agent Romanov’s own father sold her to the Red Room when she was a small child.” Steve flinches, because he’d known that from their files. Hell, after the Potomac Crash, half the country knew that from their files, it was on
Wikipedia, but *Jesus Christ*. It was still so awful when you laid it out like that. “They have, unfortunate as it is, never truly had a chance at a civilian life. You, on the other hand, attended art school, graduated, and began a career in illustration before you joined the military. You had a mother who loved you, and something like a brother who you fought alongside in the war. You just may be the only one of the Avengers who understands how unusual the life you now lead is, simply by having a point of comparison.”

“I served on the front lines of World War Two, infiltrating Hydra Camps where they were engaging in human experimentation,” Steve begins hotly, but Xavier holds up a hand.

“Is that in conflict with my point?” he asks.

Steve opens his mouth, then closes it again. There are so many things he wants to say, most of them angry, but he also knows that none of them are fair. He’s trying to be more careful of the things he says, after seeing what his one thoughtless comment had done to Tony. Sure, he could tell Xavier about all the horrible things he saw, but he’s right; that’s not in conflict with his point at all.

The clock in the hall chimes the hour, and Steve takes a breath and lets it out. “Time’s up, I guess.”

“It seems so,” Xavier says, and Steve turns to look at him. “Does this time work well for you, Captain? Only, I have a teaching schedule, so my availability is limited.”

“No, thanks for taking me on at all,” Steve says, shaking his head. “I know you’re busy.” He clears his throat. “I’m, uh. I know you sent documentation saying there was nothing wrong with me, but how long do you think we’ll be having these appointments for?”

“Tired of me already?” the professor asks, and Steve colours.

“No,” he says, “I actually do like talking to you. It’s…always interesting.”

Xavier lets out a loud bark of laughter, perhaps the least refined Steve’s ever seen the man. His eyes are a bright, sparkling brown, and once again Steve is reminded strangely of Tony. “I’ll take that as a compliment,” the professor says, and Steve chuckles a little. “I cannot tell you, Captain. As long as we feel you need the appointments, one might say.”

Steve nods, not having expected a real answer. “I’ll see myself out, then.”

“That might be best,” Xavier says, grinning. “Logan may or may not have spotted your bike and be lurking around it covetously.”

“Man’s gotta defend his ride,” Steve agrees, laughing. He stands, gathering up his jacket. “Thanks, Professor.”

“Remember to be patient with yourself and others,” the professor says, inclining his head in a slight nod. “Perhaps look into contributing to an exhibition. Volunteer to teach art at a shelter.”

Steve nods, considering. “I bet Sam’ll have some ideas.”

“I’m sure he will,” Xavier says warmly. “Have a good afternoon, Captain.”

“You, too.”

Outside, true to form, Logan is staring down at Steve’s Softtail with a covetous expression on his craggy face. An unlit cigar hangs from his mouth, and Steve considers him, arms folded over his
“You can’t smoke on the grounds, can you?” he guesses, and Logan chuckles.

“Nope.” He sighs, glancing down the long driveway. “Kids, huh?”

Steve nods. “And no alcohol, either.” Logan snorts. “You ever think about moving off site?”

“I wish,” Logan huffs. “Why, you thinking about poaching some folks for that team of yours, Cap?”

“Maybe,” Steve admits, and Logan eyes him thoughtfully. “Tony and I’ve been talking about expanding. Everyone else here’s pretty attached to the life, but I know you’ve always been a bit of a rolling stone. You haven’t changed much since I first met you.”

“You know I don’t remember,” Logan says curtly, and Steve holds up his hands in surrender. “Probably for the best. That first costume was an eyesore, bub.”

“So they don’t have you teaching history?”

Logan winces, and Steve laughs outright. “I like teaching combat, better.”

“I can imagine,” Steve says. He shrugs. “Well, think on it. One of the issues Tony and I came up against was the idea of incorporating new players into an established team, but we’ve fought together.” Steve holds up a hand to forestall Logan’s rebuttal. “I know, I know you don’t remember. But I do. It’ll make my job easier, as field commander.”

“Stark’s got deep pockets,” Logan says, and Steve tilts his head a bit in confusion. Logan’s never cared much for the high life. “I bet his bar is top-notch.”

And that’s...fortunately, the answer he should have been predicting. He shakes his head. “Yeah, it is,” he says. He swings a leg over his bike, adjusting the kick stand. “You know where to find us. And I’m here every Friday, for now.”

Logan offers him a half-hearted salute, and Steve looses a soft huff of laughter, shaking his head. He guns the engine, and distantly he’s aware of the eyes of some of the students, wide and starry as he tears down the road and past the gate.

“You set a bad example for the children, never wearing a damn helmet,” Tony always tells him, and Steve grins at the memory. He loves the feeling of the wind on his face, the rush of it through his hair as he takes a turn. He loves being able to hear the world around him as he drives, the rumble of the engine and then, fainter, underneath, the sound of the trees creaking, a hawk circling overhead, a murder of crows. On his bike, he understands intimately Tony’s obsession with flying. He’s jumped off many a height into Tony’s waiting arms just to feel that same rush with him, the air and the world and the speed of everything slipping past in a blur of colour and sound.

It’s a beautiful day. The sun is shining, and the road spreads out before him in an unending black ribbon, no other vehicles ahead to impede his pursuit of the upper limit of his speedometer. He revs the engine, laughing, and accelerates down the blacktop and into the trees.

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Tony is a wreck for most of the rest of the day. He’ll admit it. He’s unfocussed, mind flitting back and forth to all the half-woven threads of his life instead of whatever he’s meant to be doing. He gets maybe two serviceable hours of work on the anti-magic arsenal done, instead checking up on
the data decryption on the quarantined Hydra servers, running over improvements to the team’s body armour, fiddling with the designs for the Mark 51. He makes his way back up to the penthouse when JARVIS prompts him, changing into a pale blue Cerruiti, touching up his facial hair, breaking out a pair of alexandrite cufflinks to match his tie.

He goes through the motions of charming the National Grid representatives. Pepper’s been mostly handling the city contracts for clean energy, but the tech folks had wanted someone to explain some things, and Tony was ten times more charismatic than anyone in R&D proper. More than that, the reactor had always been his baby; there was no one who understood it the way he did, and he was more than happy to talk about it to some suits for an hour or two if it meant getting New York City’s power grid 100% green by 2020.

By the time he gets back to the penthouse in the afternoon he’s yawning: a wide, jaw-cracking thing that makes him want to curl up on the sofa and take a long nap.

“Roll call?”

“Mr. Odinson is off premises. Agent Barton is working on a backlog of mission reports, as Agent Hill threatened to break his compound bow if he didn’t file them by the end of the week. Agent Romanov is reading in her quarters. Doctor Banner is eating his first meal of the day, having only risen two hours prior. He did not go to sleep until late last night.”

“And Steve’s not back yet?”

“No, sir. He is stuck in traffic.”

“Poor baby,” Tony simpers, snickering. “Is it weird if I take a nap? I’m not usually a nap person.”

“If you find yourself at a loss, I am sure Miss Potts would be overjoyed if you completed some of the paperwork she’s sent you.”

“Hilarious,” Tony mutters, but he snags a tablet, shrugging his suit jacket off and draping it over the back of the sofa. He collapses down into it, kicking his socked feet up on the table. “Hit me. Most urgent to least urgent. Let’s see what I can get through without wanting to jump off the landing pad, J.”

“I live in eternal fear for your life, sir.”

Tony grins, and pulls up the first document: the Japanese defence contracts, which he has yet to actually read. Hasegawa. Great.

“I need a vacation,” Tony mutters, skimming the page. “I trust Pepper. Can’t I just rubber stamp this?”

“Miss Potts said to tell you that there will be a quiz.”

“Harpy.” He settles back, eyes aching from the lack of proper sleep. He’s always better at staying awake when it’s a proper all-nighter, the adrenalin keeping him steady throughout the day, or even longer if necessary. His body, accustomed to sleeping when it can and getting as much as possible out of it, always responds especially poorly to a small snatch of sleep at a reasonable hour. He prefers to sleep like the dead or not at all, and to have that interrupted messes with his ability to function. Between that and the conversation he’d had with Steve yesterday, he’s in no condition to do anything.

“God, maybe I should take a nap,” he mutters, scrubbing a hand over his eyes.
“I can wake you if Mr. Laufeyson, Mr. Odinson, or Captain Rogers make an appearance,” JARVIS offers, and Tony hums, considering.

“Let me finish this, and then we’ll see,” he says. He turns back to the tablet, wrapping a hand over his mouth. He doesn’t get far before his phone begins to buzz in his pocket.

“Call incoming from Colonel Rhodes.”

Tony frowns. That’s probably not good. “Patch him through.” He stands, deciding that whatever it is that has Rhody calling on the clock probably requires a drink. “Sugarplum! To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“NIA couldn’t hold them,” Rhody says bluntly, and Tony lets out a soft curse. “Tony, we knew that, come on. This was what was always gonna happen.”

“What have we got on the Masters of Evil, then?”

“I can’t believe you’re still calling them that.”

“Do you have a better name?” Tony asks, pouring himself a few fingers of Suntory Hibiki and dropping an ice ball into his glass. “Come on, honeybunch. Where’s Hasegawa.”

“That’s the only good news we’ve got,” Rhody says grimly. “He’s dead.”

“Okaaay,” Tony says, blinking. He takes a sip of his drink, fingers flying over the tablet to find what he can from SHIELD’s files on the NIA breakout. It’s not much, not yet. The NIA must have had someone call Rhody immediately, out of professional courtesy. That was pretty nice, actually. He’d have to send them a present.

“He’s the squishy human of the group. Supposedly he got caught in the crossfire,” Rhody adds, and Tony hums, considering the words.

“You don’t think that’s what happened,” he says.

“I got the impression that’s not what NIA thinks happened,” Rhody corrects him. “Apparently, his equipment is mysteriously missing. I’ll let you know if I get anything else, but right now we have a positive ID on the body.”

A chill skitters over Tony’s spine at the idea of Hasegawa’s tech in someone else’s hands. “Strucker broke them out, I’m guessing?”

“We assume. Likely with Doom’s help.”

Tony nods, before realising that Rhody can’t see it. “And Barnes?”

“Gone. They’re all gone, no sign of them.” Rhody huffs. “Flashy and green teleported them all out. You know we can’t trace that.”

“I’m familiar,” Tony deadpans, and Rhody snorts.

“I’m kinda surprised Cap didn’t try to fish Barnes out of NIA custody,” Rhody muses. “I know you’ve been too busy to concentrate on Cap’s old army buddy, but damn. That’s kinda cold.”

Tony frowns, because hadn’t he thought something like that before?

Steve had been in a monomaniac quest to find Barnes for months after the Potomac Crash, until...
eventually Sam convinced him that if Barnes didn’t want to be found then maybe they should let him go. They found evidence of him at libraries, looking up information on the Commandos and Steve and himself. He was clearly on a quest of self-discovery, and Sam had reasoned that he would come in when he was ready. That didn’t mean that Steve and Nat didn’t jump into the quinjet whenever they got a reliable tip, but he wasn’t out chasing ghosts every spare minute the way he’d been after the crash. Tony was glad of it, because that had been unhealthy, but this behaviour just didn’t make any sense.

“You’re right,” he says, absently, and Rhodey looses a sound that Tony knows from experience means confusion and self-satisfied amusement. “No, listen. JARVIS, Steve didn’t check up on Barnes at all, did he?”

“Not to my knowledge, sir.”

“But Professor X cleared him?” Tony asks.

“Yes, sir.”

“What am I missing?” Tony demands, rubbing a hand over his face. “I’m missing something big, Rhodey. What the hell am I missing?”

“I definitely don’t understand Captain America better than you, and I’ve gotta go,” Rhodey says, and Tony lets out a frustrated huff. “Keep me in the loop, I’ll hit you back if I get more on Hasegawa.”

“You never call me just to talk anymore,” Tony simpers, a small smile flickering over his face when Rhodey hangs up on him. “Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. Where’s Steve?”

“He’s on the West Side Highway, sir. I would estimate he’ll be here in thirty minutes at the most, but I can ask him to hurry.”

“Do it,” Tony says. Steve drives like a maniac on that bike of his, and he needs to talk to him ASAP. He glances out at the skyline. “Loki? If you’re listening, this would be an awesome time for you to show up and tell me what you know about what your old buddies are up to. I have a really fucking bad feeling about this.”

He stands there for a long moment, sipping his drink and feeling like an idiot. “Call Thor?”

“I’m afraid Mr. Odinson’s phone goes straight to voicemail.”

“Awesome,” Tony says, taking a deep breath. He taps his fingers on the reactor, trying to keep it together. “Do you have footage?”

“Are you asking me to infiltrate the NIA and retrieve their surveillance footage, sir?”

“Like you haven’t already.”

Tony grins when the footage appears on his tablet. “Good boy.”

“I am your ASI, sir, not your dog.”

“And yet, you are mine.” Tony flutters his eyelashes at the nearest surveillance camera. “You know better than anyone that I’ve had plenty of pets, and none of them have been dogs.”

“I feel I should point out that, as you are my creator, this might qualify as a situation that warrants a
Tony barks out a laugh, fingers skimming over the tablet as he puts the footage into four splitscreens at 1.5x. In one, Amora turns soldier against solider, rows of men and women fighting each other. *That answers that question,* Tony thinks, considering. He isn’t sure what the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell situation is in Nigeria, but he hopes none of these women get fired for reacting to a lady sorcerer’s sex magic. In another, Barnes destroys an entire platoon of soldiers, just a complete mindless massacre. Tony closes that one before he can watch yet another neck get snapped with ruthless efficiency, as well as Moonstone’s. He’s pretty sure that she just broke one agent’s spine in that last shot, and that’s not something he needs to see right now. Once he sees Executioner get a hold of his axe again, he shuts the whole thing down. He saw what that thing did to Rhodey’s guns, as well as his field. He doesn’t need to see what it will do to a human combatant.

“Fuck,” he hisses. “How many?”

“From the footage I’ve seen, I would estimate forty-six agents dead or in critical condition with low odds of survival. Thirty seven more have been seriously injured, but are in no serious danger of dying in the near future, with another twelve only having sustained minor injuries.”


“If it makes you feel any better,” JARVIS begins, tentative, “this situation has generated a positive impact in our predictive models for the outcome of the first UN accords committee meeting. It has proven that this is a dangerous group that required enhanced action, sanctioned or not. The international community will see how poorly the NIA fared when attempting to handle this situation in-house and take note.”

“It doesn’t,” Tony snaps, a little more shortly than he meant. “That’s…God, these are *people,* J. They didn’t deserve this shit. We should have tried harder to get them to release them to SHIELD.”

“Colonel Rhodes did everything he could,” JARVIS tries, but Tony isn’t having any of it.

“I didn’t!” he snarls, draining his glass in one go. The burn of alcohol down his throat isn’t half as satisfying as he wishes. “I was too caught up in my own shit with Cap and Loki and saving our own asses from the fallout of the lives we already lost to consider the lives that were going to be lost. I should have tried harder. I could have talked to Coulson, or gone and tried to talk to the NIA—”

“I do not think that your interference would have changed the outcome of this incident,” JARVIS says, firm and kind. “The on-site NIA representatives were generally dismissive of what Colonel Rhodes had to say, and he can be quite charming. You were unsettled, exhausted, and injured. You were in no condition to negotiate with the NIA.’

“And after?”

“The likelihood of getting the NIA to relinquish custody once they had already taken the Captain’s assailants in was nil. Our window of opportunity was before they took the assailants in to start with, and the odds are against you having affected that outcome positively, sir.”

“Rude,” Tony says, but he can feel his shoulders releasing some of their tension. He pours himself another three fingers of scotch, rubbing his forefinger and thumb over his aching eyes. “Fuck, I’m so *tired,* J. I’m so damn tired. I don’t- I don’t know what I’m doing. I feel like every move I make is just the lesser evil. I want a better answer, but I don’t know what that is. I’m the futurist. I’m supposed to be the one to envision the better answer. What the hell is the point if I can’t—”
“Tony?”

Tony glances up, his breath stuttering in his throat to see Steve walking across the penthouse floor, expression soft and determined. His stride is resolute, and when he opens his arms, Tony offers him a small nod. Steve pulls Tony into his chest without a word, and Tony rests his forehead against Steve’s collarbone. He smells like wind and leather and good, clean sweat. Immediately, Tony wants to take that nap he’d promised himself.

“JARVIS said we have a situation,” he says, and Tony lets out a rough breath, lips grazing the fabric over Steve’s chest. “Amora escaped?”

“Hasegawa’s dead,” Tony says dully, and Steve’s fingers tighten around his scapulae.

“Good,” he says, and Tony barks out a soft laugh. “That…I know that’s not the right answer. But that’s how I feel.”

Tony pulls away, enough to look into Steve’s eyes. They’re bright and blue as ever, thick lashes glinting gold in the late afternoon sun, and they crinkle gently as watches. Tony studies him for a long moment, fingers curled into the fabric at the base of Steve’s spine. “Steve?”

“Yeah?” Steve asks. He’s being soft with Tony, gentle.

“Why didn’t you go after Barnes?”

Steve’s entire body stiffens in Tony’s arms, his brow furrowing. Tony can feel the way his breath stutters in his chest under his fingertips. “What?”

“Was it…was it because of what Amora did?” he asks. “I know that I was a trigger for you for a while, but you came back here, to me, anyway. And I know Barnes-”

“What are you talking about?” Steve says, taking a whole step back. His hands fall to his sides, fists clenching, and Tony freezes. His heart hammers in his chest, and Steve takes one look at his face and crumples a little. He flexes his fingers, trying to keep them straight.

“Steve,” Tony says, a nasty suspicion creeping up on him, “did you think SHIELD was holding Barnes?”

“I don’t understand what you’re asking me,” Steve says, frustrated. He takes a shaky breath, shoulders shifting under his leather jacket. “I need you to explain. Now.”

Tony stares at him, the barely contained temper in his body, and has no idea how to approach this situation. “Barnes escaped. With Amora. But I-”

“Why was Bucky with Amora?” Steve says, slow, and Tony-

“Oh my god,” he says. He stumbles back, his hand reaching to put his glass down and nearly missing the bar. He takes another step back, and then another. “JARVIS, I don’t- Jim Ellison, A33-E43-S53.”

“Tony, what is going on?” Steve asks, looking bewildered and hurt and angry in turns, and Tony can’t. He doesn’t understand what’s going on.

“I thought you said Xavier cleared you,” he says. Steve takes a step towards him, but Tony holds his hands up in repulsor position, an obvious threat. Steve rolls back on his heels, looking like he’s been shot. “I…stay there.”
“Tony,” Steve says, expression a rictus of guilt and frustrated confusion, “please tell me what is going on.”

“Steve,” Tony says, his breath stuttering in his chest, and God this is the worst fucking time for a panic attack don’t you dare, Stark, keep it together. “Barnes was working with Amora. He nearly killed Rhodey. He was in the compound with you when we rescued you. You saw the surveillance footage.”

“Bucky wasn’t in the surveillance footage we watched,” Steve says, but he’s beginning to look scared, too, now. “I would have remembered that.” The Wouldn’t I? is unspoken, but sits on his face just as clear as if the words had been spoken. “JARVIS. JARVIS knows. JARVIS, was Bucky in the footage we watched together?”

The silence that stretches between them is interminable. Tony breathes shallow and slow, desperately controlled. Steve himself is shaking in place, his fingers clearly fighting fists, and he’s blocking the exit to the bar. Tony’s trapped, and he can’t get out, and Steve has already hit him once and he isn’t wearing his cuffs and he’s compromised. Amora has clearly compromised him. God, is he even Steve? Loki can turn into other people, who knew if this was even Steve-

“That is true, sir,” JARVIS says, sounding surprised and cautious, and Tony freezes. “Sergeant Barnes does not appear in the footage taken from Lagos, and due to the angle of your gaze and the severe damage to the display of the Mark 50, Sergeant Barnes is not visible during the climax of your staged battle against Mr. Laufeyson. As always, you watched the footage on mute, due to the increased speed. As such, there was no visual or auditory evidence of Sergeant Barnes’ present in any of the footage you covered with the Captain.”

Tony blinks. “What?” he demands, straightening a little. “That’s…that’s not possible. Are you sure?”

“Sir,” JARVIS reprimands, and Tony closes his eyes, his heart rabbiting in his chest like a live, shivering animal. He feels like he’s crawling out of his skin. “Shall I begin the Mind Riot Protocol?”

“Tony-”

“Everyone just shut up for a second,” he snaps, backing up until his spine hits the end of the U shaped bar, and that’s-

“I’m moving,” Steve says, and Tony snaps his eyes open to see Steve backing up, his hands raised. He steps away until the exit to the bar is clear, moving around until he’s a few steps away from the small opening. He looks angry, but he’s keeping it together. If Tony was feeling a little more generous, he might be willing to call the expression on Steve’s face one of guilt, but he isn’t feeling particularly charitable at the moment. Mostly, Steve’s lucky he didn’t vault the bar and book it for his cuffs. “Better?”

Tony nods, a short, curt thing, and Steve lets out a breath.

“Okay,” he says. He swallows, visibly reining in his temper. “So Bucky was part of the group that attacked me, and you didn’t tell me. And now he’s missing-”

“I thought you knew!” Tony snaps, waving a hand to gesture between them, at the clear evidence just presented to him. “How the hell is Barnes not in the surveillance footage?”

“How did you not notice that?” Steve counters, incensed. “Tony! Did you really think I’d leave
him in Nigeria if I knew?”

“You can’t tell me you’ve been acting like yourself,” Tony snaps, and Steve flinches as though he’s been struck.

“You can’t use that against me,” he says, hoarse, and Tony sucks in a breath. “That’s not fair.”

“How can you be mad at me for not knowing what’s going on in your head, Steve?” Tony asks, scraping a shaking hand over his face because, fuck. He’s so tired. He’s so fucking tired. “This doesn’t make any sense. None of it. I feel like I’m missing something, something big-”

“This isn’t about you,” Steve says hotly, and Tony lets out a frustrated noise.

“Would you just stop?” he demands, and Steve’s lip curls. It’s a sure sign that this fight is about to get nasty, and Tony holds up a hand in placation. “Look, this isn’t about you, either. I’ve had a lot going on, in case you forgot. I didn’t have time to babysit your weird relationship with your brainwashed evil brother, okay, just. Just let me think.”

“Who was on him?” Steve asks, and Tony frowns.

“I said-”

“Tony,” Steve interrupts, firmly now, “who did you give Bucky to?”

Tony blinks, turning to stare at Steve. “Natasha,” he says. “Why wouldn’t Natasha have said something to you?”

“Y’know,” Steve begins, a nasty twist to his mouth, “that’s pretty hypocritical of you, considering-”

“No, listen to me,” Tony says, blinking as a terrible suspicion comes over him. He turns, leaning across the bar to face Steve fully. “I didn’t say anything because I thought you already knew. But Nat was with you through the whole Potomac Crash. She didn’t once ask if you were okay, or how you were feeling about this? She didn’t once bring it up to you? That doesn’t make any sense, Steve.”

“You not asking me about why I left him in Lagos doesn’t make any sense!” Steve says, throwing up his hands, but Tony is shaking his head because he’s sure, now.

“Sure, but Natasha doesn’t make mistakes like that. Which means she didn’t tell you.”

“Why would she do that?” Steve asks, voice flat, but his eyes are narrow. Assessing.

“We thought that Natasha wasn’t affected, but what if she was?” Tony says, pacing back and forth behind the bar. “I now have video proof that Amora can affect women. It makes sense for Barnes to avoid security footage, that I get, but Nat doesn’t appear on the security footage until after she took Barnes down. Why would she do that?”

“You think Tash’s been compromised,” Steve says, slow, and something like fear and fury is overtaking him. He meets Tony’s eyes with a quiet kind of fervour that Tony knows well from the battlefield.

“Think about it. She’s the best of us at espionage. We wouldn’t suspect her, doubly because of heteronormativity. Hell, triply, because we all know she’s never had a positive female influence in her entire life. She’s too good a spy, Steve.”
“Okay,” Steve says, moving closer to the bar so he can lean his arms on it. It brings him within touching distance of Tony, but neither of them are quite ready for that yet. “Say that’s true. What does Amora gain from keeping me from Bucky?”

And that’s the million dollar question, isn’t it? Tony reaches a shaking hand out for his drink, curling his fingers around it and taking a long drag. Steve reaches out a tentative hand, placing it on the inside of his wrist just for a second. It’s enough to calm the shaking, and Tony offers him a small, grateful look.

“They need him,” Tony muses, considering. He rolls the ice around the walls of the glass, watching the amber liquid swirl in oil-slick patterns with the ice-melt. “They didn’t want him transferred here. You would have wanted him here, with you, and this place is a fucking fortress. They couldn’t reach him here, which means they needed him somewhere they could fetch him later. Because they need him. What do they need him for?”

“The Winter Solider is an assassin,” Steve says, and Tony glances up to see Steve’s face has paled. “He’s the best assassin in the world, Tony. What else could they need him for?”

“Sure, but who’s the target?” Tony says, frowning. He glances out over the skyline, fear and frustration bubbling up in his throat. “J, baby, I need a threat assessment-”

“Tony,” Steve says slowly, and Tony turns back to him with a frown. Steve’s eyes are wide, almost frantic. “Isn’t the UN committee meeting on the accords happening soon?”

“No,” Tony says, but it’s not in answer to his question. That much is obvious to Steve as well, who looks a little like he’s going to be ill. “No, no, no, Steve! We are walking a knife’s edge right now! If your old buddy, an enhanced, shows up and kills someone-”

“We’ll lose control,” Steve finishes, face hardening. “I have to find him.”

“Wait, Cap, stop,” Tony says, reaching out and taking a hold of Steve’s wrist with his free hand. Steve’s expression is determined, furious, and he turns to Tony with wild eyes. “Listen! You’re forgetting that we have a brainwashed super-spy assassin double agent living in the tower with us. Again.”

Steve takes a breath, then nods. “Call Loki and Clint up here, now.”

“Call Loki?” Tony repeats. “I can’t just call Loki, what do you mean “call Loki?” Do you think he has a phone?”

“You’ve been bedding the guy for a month and you haven’t managed to ply him with StarkTech?” Steve deadpans, and Tony can feel embarrassment flood his face with heat. Steve can’t see it, but his expression says he doesn’t have to. “How do you usually get in contact with him?”

“I think about him or say his name and then he just shows up,” Tony says flatly, and Steve raises an eyebrow at him. There’s a pause, where both of them are maybe waiting for a miraculous deus ex machina, but nothing of the sort happens.

_Hah_, Tony thinks. _Deus ex. Trickster god._

“Then Thor and Clint,” Steve sighs.

“Thor’s out and not picking up,” Tony says, and Steve lets out a breath that’s more growl than anything else.
“Who is here?” he bites out, and Tony winces.

“Bruce.”

“Great,” Steve says. “Bruce and Clint it is. God, this is a mess.”

“We can’t let Barnes ruin this meeting,” Tony says, panic overtaking him again. “We can’t.”

Steve reaches out, fingers closing gently over Tony’s wrists. His jaw is still tight, and Tony knows he’s still angry, but his grip is gentle on Tony’s skin. His eyes are soft as they meet Tony’s, lashes lowered a little as he meets Tony’s gaze with steady reassurance.

“We won’t,” he says, and Tony takes a shaky breath. “Together, remember?”

“Yeah,” Tony rasps, and Steve smiles at him. It’s small, but it’s there. “Okay.”

“I feel I should inform you both that Agent Barton and Agent Romanov are together at present. They are watching Burn Notice and shouting invectives at the television in response to what they deem to be egregious inaccuracies.”

“Awesome,” Tony mutters. “Can you lie to him, get him away from Nat somehow?”

“I can tell him that Doctor Banner would like him to bring his bow and the arrows he used in the Lagos battle to his lab for testing.”

“Perfect,” Tony says, nodding. “Then they can both come up.”

Steve’s fingers tighten gently on Tony’s wrist, and Tony turns his attention back to him. “Can you come out from there?”

“Why?” Tony asks, wary, and Steve offers him a wry smile.

“Because I’ve found a pretty foolproof de-escalation technique, and right now there’s an obstacle between us preventing me from enacting it.”

Tony’s mouth cracks open in a smile, despite everything. He can’t help himself. “Ah.”

“And I don’t want to box you in again,” Steve continues. He has the grace to look sheepish, at the very least. “I don’t...I’m sorry I didn’t notice. You never told me. I know, with- I mean. It makes sense. We’ve both read each other’s files. But. I’m sorry. I only figured that out recently.”

Tony pulls out of Steve’s grasp, picking up his drink and coming around to the other side of the bar. He lets Steve gather him into his arms.

“I didn’t tell you,” he allows. “It’s an exploitable weakness.”

“I’d never do that to you,” Steve says, sounding wrecked, and Tony laughs shortly.

“I think you would, if you felt it was necessary.”

Steve’s fingers tighten painfully in his skin for a half-second before he remembers himself. He pulls them apart enough to stare into Tony’s eyes, his gaze sharp and pained. “I wouldn’t,” he insists.

Tony just shrugs. “I guess I already knew you’re a better man than me.”
“Tony,” Steve says, but they’re cut off by the ding of the elevator. Tony makes to pull out of Steve’s arms, but Steve just tightens his grip, rearranging them so they’re more side to side than facing each other. His arm stays firm around Tony’s waist, fingers curled over the inner curve of his floating ribs. It’s more comforting than he wants to admit, and so he leans into Steve’s side, letting some of his weight tilt into the comforting warmth of his bulk.

Bruce and Clint find them like that, Tony’s glass of Suntory clutched between his fingers like a lifeline, Steve curled around him protectively. He can only imagine the picture they make, but he’s in bad shape. Even he can admit that he’s fraying, and it’s beginning to show. They’re lucky he isn’t in the middle of a panic attack right now.

Natasha is probably the person on the team he’s trusted most to take this burden from him. If she’s been a double agent since Amora first showed up, he has no idea what the hell they’re going to do. Natasha has been his confessor, his left hand, and his last resort. He cannot abide by the idea that all this time, she’s been compromised.

“Tony,” Bruce says, expression unbearably kind, and Tony lets out a rough breath. “What’s going on?”

“You should probably sit down,” he says, and gestures to the couch. “JARVIS, let us know if Widow’s on the move.”

“Of course, sir.”

“What’s wrong with Nat?” Clint says, expression sharpening, and Tony swallows.

“You definitely need to sit down,” he says, and Steve nods to the couch. He begins dragging them both there, settling Tony into an armchair and then folding himself over the side, draping one warm, heavy arm across the back of Tony’s shoulders.

“Come on,” Steve says, and he sounds exhausted, too. “You’re not gonna like this one bit.”

Chapter End Notes

Ugh this was a longer chapter than I expected. I had to get through so much, and Loki didn’t even get to really come back yet! Tbh there’s like three more scenes left in this one Friday alone, but we’re already at 13k for this one chapter and I couldn’t just leave it all together.

You’ll notice that the chapter tally has jumped again. Sorry about that! It’s taking longer to get through these big plot points than I thought it would. May have overstepped myself and gotten kinda crazy with how many plates I’ve got in the air in this fic, so it’s definitely gonna be longer. Hopefully that pleases some people? I mean, that means more story? Right? >___>“

I’ve got most of the next section written already because it was originally gonna be a part of this chapter before I realised that a single 20+k chapter was absolutely bonkers, so it shouldn’t be too long between updates. Thanks as always for your patience and comments, y’all! Getting feedback/being able to chat with y’all is so much of what makes writing this fic worthwhile to me, so please drop me a line. I’m always happy to talk meta. <3 <3 <3 Thanks especially to my little crew of hardcore dedicated readers,
who have been my cheer squad through the rough bits. You know who you are.

EDIT: I am participating in the Fandom Trumps Hate Auction this year! If any of y'all want a fic and to donate to a good cause, the minimum bid for a work from me is $5. The more $ given, the bigger a fic I'm willing to write, and also maybe toss in some fanart! If that interests you, check out the listing here.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!