Losing Battles
by Fitz

Summary

"Tony flung his arms out, daring the man to come at him now. If he did, Tony would deserve it. He was inviting this upon himself again, and he did not know why. Just that he was going to do it, angrily and knowingly."

Or wherein Tony gets himself into trouble, gets back out of trouble, and then proceeds to screw himself over in the aftermath.

Notes

A warning up front: Yes, there is an OC. Yes, he is featured prominently in the first few chapters. I can't find it in myself to use a cannon character to do what I had this OC do, thus his existence.

Bear with me through these first two chapters. I promise the rest of the Avengers will make an appearance soon.
He could not recall the last time he had woken up not knowing where he was. It had not been too terribly long because he did remember Steve’s disapproving frown when he came stumbling in at eight in the morning, looking exactly like he had been engaging in thoroughly disreputable activities. Which, okay, he had been, but Tony never got why Steve should care.

It looked like this morning would be another walk of shame for Tony Stark. He had been doing this more and more lately. He kind of hated himself for it. In the past, he was the one who was gone, and it was his bed partner who shuffled away with eyes averted from the world. Now, he just couldn’t bear to bring anyone home. There were too many other people there, and he really did not want to shove it in their faces that he was seeking the familiarity of a warm body against his. They already looked at him like he was something dirty.

Fuck. He hated this shit. When had it started anyway?

Right. Pepper.

Nope. No. Tony was not thinking about his ex-girlfriend when he was in another person’s bed.

Whose bed was this anyway?

He dared to crack an eye, fearing the headache and nausea that would inevitably follow. He closed his eyes again almost immediately. It was familiar, the instant roiling of his gut and the pressure that settled between his ears. Kind of like waking up after being knocked out by chloroform for impromptu major heart surgery.

It felt a lot like that.

Christ, he had not had a hangover this bad in years. Not since the whole mess with the palladium poisoning had he even imbibed enough alcohol that he could feel it the next day. Before that, he had built up an unhealthy tolerance to the drink. He wasn’t so good with it lately, but he did not recall drinking that much. Obviously he had lost track.

Bracing himself with a deep breath, Tony opened his eyes again. The hangover was already in full swing. Nothing would make it better but time and a lot of water and Aspirin.

Sunlight filtered in past a set of cheap venetian blinds. It was softened by the drape of white eyelet window hangings that looked like they belonged in someone’s grandmother’s house. The covers beneath his hand turned out to be a cheerful yellow and white patchwork quilt.

Tony marveled at the quaintness of it all for a long moment before deciding it was probably best he get the hell out of this place. Hangover or no, he had a business to run, and he could not very well do it while lounging around in some stranger’s bed.

That meant he had to get his body in working order. His left arm was numb, stretched out over his head awkwardly. That was not even taking into consideration the aches he felt throughout the rest of him. He groaned.

“Shhhhhiiiiit.”

He knew what that kind of pain meant. He must have been roaring drunk to let a guy take him home. Tony had not dabbled in that kind of fun since he was a punk kid, determined to cause his
parents some kind of scandal. (It didn’t work. Howard Stark was a master media manipulator and smart with his wallet. Besides, those had been different times, back before every fool with an iPhone was selling their photographs to US Weekly.)

It was definitely time to go. Gathering his dignity—what was left of it anyway—he crawled to the edge of the bed and sat up.

Tony heard the clatter of metal on metal before he registered the pressure of his arm refusing to follow his body. The pull actually hurt his shoulder, his sudden push from the bed not taking into account any possibility that he might be caught on something. He looked back in confusion.

Long seconds passed before he truly registered what he was seeing. A metal bracelet was locked firmly around his left wrist, connected by a short chain to another bracelet which was linked similarly to the bedrail.

He was handcuffed to the bed.

“What the hell,” he complained. This was not a kink of his. He did not enjoy being tied down at all, let alone bound and fucked. Bad enough he had gotten drunk enough to let a strange man get that close to him, but he had actually let someone take him light-years out of his comfort zone. Seriously? It was a damn good thing he did not remember the night or he was certain he would recall not enjoying himself.

This was actually pretty humiliating. Tony cursed himself for being the fool. He had let things spiral way too far out of control. He was tailspinning again, just like that time with Vanko. This had to stop. Even he knew that much.

Jesus, if Fury found out…

Tony cast about for a key. Surely they would have kept it by the bed. No one was that much of an asshole that he would leave a guy trapped to a bed.

Except that there was no key, so obviously this guy was that much of an asshole. Cursing again, Tony yanked at the cuffs, searching for a safety latch. Naturally, there was no safety latch. The guy had used police-grade handcuffs instead of the fluffy, sex-toy kind that allowed the wearer to escape.

“God damn it all to hell!” Tony gave the headboard a violent shake out of sheer fury, mostly at himself and his own stupidity. Turning, he located the door, hanging open several feet across the room. Lifting his voice (he had it on good authority that he could be obnoxiously loud), he hollered for the dickwad who had done this to him. “HEY! WHAT’S THE DEAL WITH THIS, YOU JERK?! COME LET ME OUT!”

He waited. Surely the guy would come let him out rather than allow Tony to wake the neighborhood with his shouting.

Nothing.

“HEY! A KEY WOULD BE NICE! SOME OF US HAVE TO GO TO WORK!”

He gave it another several seconds, straining to hear something, anything, that would indicate someone taking notice of him. Another several rounds of this had his throat aching and his temper fraying. He was going to throttle the bastard that did this to him.

Pissed to an unpleasant extreme, Tony searched the room again. His clothes were nowhere to be
seen, so he could not even attempt to gain access to his phone.

Shockingly, he was not naked, so that was something. The shirt was not his, though, nor were the shorts. If he had not been so caught up in his fury, he might have been embarrassed about that. With the way he felt, there was no way he would have been up for cleaning and redressing himself last night, which meant someone did it for him. He was glad not to be wallowing in sweaty, sexed out sheets, but this was disturbing.

The floor creaked.

Tony perked to the sound like a dog to a whistle, head whipping toward the door.

“Hey! HEY!” he yelled again. Maybe his shouting had drawn some attention after all. Someone was coming to investigate. “I’M IN HERE!”

His call for help died on his tongue when a man appeared at the door, holding, of all things, a breakfast tray. The man looked unreasonably pleasant. He was fairly tall, with dark hair, dark eyes, pale skin, and he was smiling over a tray with a plate of what looked to be scrambled eggs, sausages, fruit and a glass of orange juice.

“Good morning, Anthony.”

Any patience Tony had left snapped like a dry twig.

“Are you kidding me?” he snarled. “Good morning? I have been shouting for help for the last twenty minutes, and you come in here with food and a fucking cutesy greeting? What the hell, you asshole! Screw your breakfast! Let me out of this!”

The man’s expression barely faltered. He came into the room another few steps, still smiling and holding up the tray like a peace offering.

“You shouldn’t be so quick to turn down breakfast,” the prick said lightly. “You’re too thin as it is, Anthony, and breakfast is the most important meal of the day.”

“If you bring that tray anywhere near me, I will break your nose with it,” Tony growled. Pain cut into his wrist like a knife, and he realized he was straining rather hard against the cuffs. His heart was racing, and it wasn’t anger that had it beating so fast. Because he knew this guy. Tony’s head was swimming a bit too much to produce a name, but he was good with faces. This was not one he had only seen once. He had seen him at galas and Stark Industries promotional events several times over the past few years. A wallflower, someone who drifted in and out of his line of sight but never came close that he could recall.

Never in a hundred years would Tony have gone out with this dweeb.

“You should be careful, Anthony,” the man put the tray down on the dresser—an antique number that fit right in with those drapes—and took another few steps forward. It put him just out of reach. He had seen him at galas and Stark Industries promotional events several times over the past few years. A wallflower, someone who drifted in and out of his line of sight but never came close that he could recall.

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“You should be careful, Anthony,” the man put the tray down on the dresser—an antique number that fit right in with those drapes—and took another few steps forward. It put him just out of reach. It proved the guy was not totally stupid. “You might hurt yourself.”

“I might hurt you if you don’t let me out of this right now,” Tony retorted, but he was losing some of his wrathful edge. The way the guy said his name was starting to creep him out. It was caught somewhere between Obadiah’s condescending drawl and Justin Hammer’s weasely whine. The last time his own name had grated on him like that had, in fact, been when Hammer spoke to him.

“Seriously, buddy. It was a great time, I’m sure, but all good things come to an end, right?”
“At least consider the juice, Anthony. You’re dehydrated.”

While that was not untrue, Tony was growing increasingly agitated with the man’s behavior. Warning bells clanged in his head. There was something seriously wrong with this fruit loop. No one was this calm when faced with the angry billionaire (Rhodey and the Avengers totally did not count as they were practically superhuman), and this single-minded persistence was never a good sign when aimed at trivialities.

Convincing the guy to let him free was becoming a losing battle. Tony changed the subject.

“I prefer to go by Tony,” he declared.

“Anthony flows so nicely,” the creep replied pleasantly. “It’s a regal name. You should be proud of it.”

“Yeah?” He was not touching that one with a ten foot pole. “What about you? Are you regal?” He searched his memory frantically, abruptly producing, “Paul?” He knew it was wrong.

“Judas.”

“Shit, really?” What kind of horrible parent would name their child Judas?

“It’s a reminder,” the man said easily. “To keep faith in friends. You, Anthony, have faithless friends. Did you know that?”

Ohhhhh, crap. This guy was a nutbag and a half. Ten minutes of conversation, and he was already revealing himself as a religious fanatic. Not good. Not good at all.

Tony twisted against the restraint uneasily. This kind of crazy needed gentle handling. He was not certain he was up for the task.

“They smile to your face and speak with disgust where you cannot hear,” Judas told him. “Yet you rely on them to have your back on the battlefront. Tell me, Anthony: How can you put your life in the hands of men and women who share such dislike of you?”

This was not new information. Tony knew what Judas had seen and heard. The disgust for his behavior lately was not actually a secret in the Avengers household. It was, however, a secret to the public. Which was why they smiled and played friendly at events but largely avoided each other whenever possible.

Tony knew they had been giving him space after Pepper left. Just as he knew he had let the grief carry on a bit too long. He also knew they would welcome him back with open arms when he stopped acting like an ass and got his shit together.

To an outsider, it would look a little bit like backstabbing. To a lunatic, it could obviously be taken a little further.

“It’s not like that,” he said finally. “They’re good people.”

“They are not good people,” Judas said sharply. “They are hypocrites and fiends! They deserve punishment for how they are willing to ignore your pain!”

“I’m not in pain,” Tony protested. “I’ve been a jerk to them. They’re sick of it. It’s not unfair, really.”
“Don’t lie, Anthony,” Judas scolded, gentle and almost kind. It was getting rather frightening actually. “You told me yourself, of your loss, of your wish to do well for your loved ones. When you wept in my arms, that was truth. Don’t cheapen it with lies now.”

_Wept in his arms?_ Tony was not actually a weepy drunk. He was loopy and reckless and maybe just a little angry. He could sulk with the best of them. This man had to be lying about that. He was bluffing.

That or Tony had been hit with something a whole lot stronger than alcohol. It would explain why he would allow this guy to remain within fifty feet of him, let alone take him out of the building.

“You might think they’re faithless, but they’re going to miss me,” he cautioned the man. He tried not to think that they were actually well accustomed to him disappearing for a couple days at a time and would not truly start worrying for a bit. “They’ll figure out where I am. Where we are. They’ll come here.”

“Why worry about such things?” Judas smiled faintly. “If they come, it won’t matter. You’ll prefer staying with me, Anthony. I promise.”

“Judas, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but you’re crazy,” Tony said, doing a magnificent job of keeping _himself_ calm and steady. He had faced down terrorists under far worse conditions than this. He could handle one little psychopath. “You’re reaching raving loony territory.”

“I don’t think trying to protect the ones I love is crazy.”

“Yeah, but you don’t love me,” Tony protested. “You barely _know_ me. I didn’t even know your name until a few minutes ago!”

Judas sighed, ever patient, and shook his head. Like Tony was just a child, not understanding simple logic. He wanted to grab the man, to shake him, to tell him that he had it all backwards. His logic was flawed, and Tony was _not_ the uncomprehending child.

“You don’t imprison the people you love,” he tried.

“This is an intervention,” Judas replied, just as reasonable. “Sometimes we must be harsh to make our love understood. You should at least have the juice, Anthony. It would do you good.”

Tony stared at the man, contemplating, calculating the odds. There would be no reasoning with this kind of fanaticism. It would be like trying to convince a devout Catholic that their god was not real. Okay, not a fair comparison. Tony had met _Thor_, so he was not one to throw stones at anyone’s religion. But the point was somewhat valid. He was going to have to find a way other than rationalization.

“Okay, fine,” he said. Judas’s face lit up in a smile that sent ants crawling under Tony’s skin. “I’ll have the juice if you’re so determined.”

The man was damned cautious. Tony held back, waiting, but Judas would not get close. The glass was held aloft, an offering to a dangerous animal, and Tony actually had to stretch to reach it.

“You’d think I was going to do something horrible by the way you’re acting,” Tony grumbled, sipping at the drink under Judas’s watchful eye.

“One does not simply walk up to a feral child and expect him not to bite,” Judas said gently. “I will gain your trust, Anthony. You will understand that you belong here.”
“I think I saw this movie,” Tony retorted. “It ended with the crazy person dying gruesomely.”

But not until after the prisoner suffered unspeakable horrors. Good lord, Tony hoped Judas didn’t go *Misery* on his ass. He liked his foot where it was, thank you very much.

“Relax, Anthony,” Judas picked up the tray and walked back out of the room. “You’ll be feeling different very soon. I promise.”

“Don’t bet on it.”

* * *

Tony should have heeded that particular warning. He didn’t know it yet, but it was going to bite him in the ass soon enough.

Judas left him alone most of the morning. Tony tried shouting again, actually screaming for help. Dignity be damned. He wanted out of this place and away from that creepy bastard. He screamed himself hoarse and then started to work on the handcuff.

There was a way to escape these things. Tony had heard that people could do it. People with small hands, probably. No matter how Tony shoved or pulled, the best he could do was slice the skin of his wrists into ribbons.

Well, there was that at least. Judas would have to come close at some point, if only to clean up the mess Tony had made of himself. It was that or let him succumb to infection. Tony doubted he would be able to keep himself from continually attempting this escape method, and he knew better than to think the constant agitation of open wounds would not create opportunity for bacteria.

That got him thinking about flesh-eating diseases, of course, and he had to stop struggling to deal with that momentary panic.

No. He was certain Judas would not let him die that way. The man might *kill* him, but he would not sit idly by while Tony ailed.

Hours later, barely able to form words past the rough of his throat, nursing his swollen and bleeding wrist, and battling with a strong desire to pee, Tony had sunk into irritable contemplation.

This was his own fault. Of this he was fairly well certain. Judas would never have gone after him (or gotten close enough to anyway) if he had stopped acting like such an ass. He could have been talking science with Bruce or introducing Steve to nice women. Maybe sitting back and quietly poking fun at the stuffy guests with Clint.

Instead he had pushed them away, ignored their warnings, and what had it gotten him? Handcuffed to a bed in a house that was probably in the middle of *nowhere* with a psychopath downstairs who might very well be contemplating making BLTs for lunch.

His stomach growled.

 Damn it. Now he was hungry.

Another hour passed before he decided he could not tolerate this any longer.

“Judas!” It hurt like a bitch. He was willing to bet the inside of his throat looked like raw
hamburger. But he was getting a little desperate here. "Judas! I need—!" Well, it was one thing to scream out for help. It was quite another to shout to the world that he had to use the restroom. Tony flinched away from the words, and finished, "I need your help!"

If anything, he could take the man out when they made the trip to the restroom.

* * *

Tony could not recall when he had last been so humiliated. True, he felt much better, physically speaking, but his pride was taking some serious blows.

He glared at the empty soda bottle on the floor by the bed. The request for a bathroom had not gone at all as planned.

"You're kidding."

"You're bedridden, Anthony," Judas said gently.

"I am not bedridden, I am tied to the fucking—I am not pissing in a bottle!"

"I will leave to allow you privacy."

"What if I need to do more than pee?!"

"The waste bin is beside you."

This was hell. What was worse, Judas had taken the bottle away and returned with it several minutes later, empty and clean. Tony knew it was the same bottle. It had the same torn off soda label.

It was, quite frankly, disgusting. Even the damned caves had bathrooms. Sort of. Separate rooms with Biffy-like setups. It was close enough to an outhouse that Tony had not been too horrified.

He knew one thing was for certain. He was not taking a dump in that goddamned trash bin.

* * *

Tony did not expect any help that first day. His bad habits of late ensured that much. At best he could hope someone would start getting worried on the third day, and then it was a matter of detective work. Natasha would find him. She was good at finding people.

That meant he had to last at least another two days. He was being generous with that. It was straight up wishful thinking. Tony suspected it would be something more along the lines of four or five days before he could expect a rescue.

All that meant, really, was that he would have to find his own method of escape. He had done it before. He would do it again. Once he figured out how to free himself from the bed. (Or be strong enough to drag the damned thing with him.) If Thor was in this position, there would be no questioning the escape. But then Thor was a god. Tony was just a man when he wasn’t in his armor.

Pepper had made that point perfectly clear.
No. Self-pity was not the way to go. He had bigger things to worry about than his broken heart.

Besides, Pepper was still around. She still ran his company, still told him where to go, what to do, who to talk to. She was his boss, in essence, though he paid her. She was still there for him if he chose to let her back in. She would never truly leave him. He knew that.

He kind of wished she was here now to tell him to hurry it up because his plane should have left three hours ago. Even stuck in some granny’s bedroom, that would have cheered him up immensely.

Judas checked on him periodically. Tony stopped trying to talk sense to the man. He needed a bit more time to find an angle for this kind of crazy. He had slept with this guy (which, in retrospect, had totally been coerced, which struck an uneasy chord in his mind), and Judas had decided this meant they were meant-to-be. The whole mess would have been very teenage romance if it were not so sick and wrong.

Lunch was another thing that did not happen. Despite his rumbling stomach, Tony took one look at those sandwiches (French dips, not BLTs, which was too bad. At least that might have given him a small amount of amusement for the day) and knew he would never be able to choke it down. Anything he swallowed would just come right back up.

He had already peed in a bottle. He did not need the added embarrassment of vomiting. It had him wondering just how much he had drunk the previous night if he still felt this bad. When he thought back, he struggled to grasp any actual details of the evening. He must have really gotten smashed. Maybe that was how he had ended up with this whack job. Too much to drink tended to make him unpleasantly giddy, which had gotten him kicked out of more than one party.

Tony did accept some water. He requested a vodka martini as a joke and received a bland smile and a rebuke.

“I don’t keep alcohol in the house, Anthony. It leads to bad decisions.”

Tony had simply stared at the man, unable to wrap his mind around the irony of that declaration.

Judas had some sympathy. For dinner he prepared chicken soup, which he cautiously placed at the foot of the bed. Tony felt like an idiot straining to reach the tray and tugging it gently toward him. Still, he was not a fool. Pride had its place, but he would get nowhere fast if he let himself waste away without food and drink.

After peeing into the bottle for the second time, Tony was convinced he would never be drinking soda again. Certainly not if it came as a two liter. He was more than a little revolted by the need to cap it and hold it out when Judas came to retrieve it, but it was better than living with the sight and smell of his own waste by-product on the nightstand.

Tony requested more water as darkness fell outside. Judas watched him drink, the intensity of his stare actually making Tony pause halfway through the glass. He was dehydrated, had been drinking fairly minimal amounts on the fleeting thought that maybe he would not have to use the bottle again. It was foolish, and he knew it, which was why he was forcing the liquid down his throat now.

Still, that stare was a little worrisome. Tony kept his eyes on Judas and finished the drink, dutifully holding the empty glass out as far as he could reach.

Judas took the glass and set it on the dresser, never averting his eyes. Okay, that was just getting
uncomfortable.

“Why are you watching me like that?” he was unable to resist the question.

“Because I like how you look when you are unguarded,” Judas replied. “Your wariness ages you. When you relax, you are innocent and lovely.”

“You are aware that I won’t be relaxing as long as you’re being all tall, dark and creepy in the corner there,” Tony pointed out.

“You will, very soon.”

That was all the warning he had before he felt the drug hit. Tony felt like he had just finished a seventy-two hour project surviving on sugar and coffee. The crash hit him hard, painful almost. He could not hold back his hiss of displeasure as his body sank down, a marionette whose strings had been cut falling in slow motion.

He should have known better than to trust the water.

His mind flew far faster than his body was able. Just for a moment. Tony was not a medical doctor. He did not know what drugs caused which reactions in a person. He had heard of Roofies and had been on the receiving end of the older, much more dangerous chloroform, but he did not know what they were supposed to do. If this was anything like the last time, he could expect another morning after with no memories.

He hoped it was, even as he knew it was not. Tony was all too aware of his surroundings when Judas finally approached. The man looked bigger up close, his hands looming in like great white paws that no amount of squirming would let him escape.

“Relax, Anthony,” Judas murmured. Tony huffed at the sensation of a hand dragging through his hair. The last person to do that had been… Bruce, awkwardly enough. Right after Pepper left. He had tried so hard to be comforting, but Tony just wouldn’t let—

“Nnnnuh…” Tony would worry about the whining quality his voice had taken on later. Presently, he was more concerned about his inability to say the word No. Or maybe nuh-uh. That would get across the same sentiment. Because he wanted to keep his shorts on, thank you, and Judas was tugging at them efficiently.

“Don’t worry,” Judas murmured. “I’ll take care of you.”

That was not comforting. It really was not comforting when there were hands dancing over his hips and groin, places no man had a right to be going without Tony’s express permission.

For some reason, he recalled how Judas had claimed Tony had confessed his sorrow the night before. While the man was not incorrect, he had also been extremely vague. Anyone could have guessed that Tony was having a rough time of things, that he was dwelling in his failures. Considering his inability to voice even the simplest of protests, he was extremely dubious of his story-telling prowess while under the influence of a drug that would later wipe his memory of the event.

There were fingers pressing inside of him, too much, too quick. Despite his forcibly relaxed state and Judas’s promise, it hurt. He heard himself cry out, something that was almost a whimper, and his body gave a weak lurch.

He tried to distance himself from what was happening. If he was being honest, his past was riddled
with ill-advised sex combined with too much alcohol. He had slept with senator’s daughters and high profile models and, on one memorable occasion, the wife of the Idaho state governor. (Which, by the way, did not ruin a marriage because everyone knew that sleeping with Tony Stark was almost expected and did not count as cheating.) A man who was probably certifiably insane barely ranked.

Besides, he had already had sex with the guy once. Another time would hardly make a difference. Although, it might do some interesting things to his reputation if people thought he was out courting men now. Probably some speculation about him swearing off women after breaking up with the famed Pepper Potts.

Not true. Totally not true. He was not against dating or sleeping with men as a general rule. There simply were not many out there who were able to hold his attention for long. Bruce came close, but there were a whole host of issues he was not close to overcoming that would impede on any potentially intimate relationship. Steve caught the eye, sure, but the man was as rigidly straight as they came.

There was a stuttering moment where he came back to himself. Judas was pressed horrifically close. The pressure was intensely uncomfortable, the sliding sensation sickening. Tony tried to recall if he had ever enjoyed this and found he couldn’t. He had probably been smashingly drunk when he had tried it.

“You’re so beautiful,” Judas whispered. “I only wish I could thank God in person for leading you to me.”

Tony closed his eyes and drifted away on a haze of drugged sensation. He reached for the gray, latched onto it, pleading with it. This was not someplace he wanted to be.

Finally, the drugs took their toll, and he spiraled down into sleep.

* * *
“Drink this.”

Tony woke choking on liquid. He gulped instinctively, but then he was coughing, twisting away from the onslaught of water. Pain bit into his wrist and shoulder when he wrenched himself the wrong direction. Tony was too busy trying to vomit up every bit of moisture that had ever found its way into his body to care. It was not really working for him.

Hands soothed at his hair. Someone was murmuring above him. The voice was not a familiar one, not one he trusted. Tony was not quite to the realm of conscious thought when he continued to try to fight the staying force that cut cruelly into the skin of his wrist. He had no idea how much time passed before he realized he was not drowning. It did not matter, not really, but he hated the thought that he could not even keep himself in control when he wasn’t drugged out of his mind.

Actually, he was not certain that was true. His body felt strange—light and fragile, as though the slightest breeze would send him whizzing away like a leaky balloon. He was very certain he would fall if he attempted to dislodge the hand that was so unwelcome on his head. The logic was a little shaky, considering Tony was laying down, but he was positive it held true. He would fall into some terrible depth beyond the bed.

“What did you do to me?” At least he was able to speak against this one, though the very effort of it set his head to spinning. Even with his eyes closed he could sense the intensity of the vertigo.

“Good morning, Anthony,” Judas was disturbingly calm.

Tony dared to open his eyes, staring dully at the sunny quilt and wondering at the incongruence of its cheerful color and manic design. It was as if the person who assembled it had no plan in mind but to get all the pieces connected. Somehow, it was perfect for Judas. All the pieces appeared to be there. Unfortunately, they had been assembled incorrectly and in such a way that they would be very difficult to repair.

“Did you sleep well?”

“Like the dead,” Tony said, dry and utterly honest. He had slept the dead sleep of the drugged after all, dreamless and utterly useless. Though he had slept through the night—the brightness of the room was proof of that—he did not feel at all rested. “What did you give me?”

“Something to help you relax,” Judas said easily. “You were uncooperative yesterday, Anthony. You need to see that I am merely trying to take care of you.”

Talking to this guy was exhausting. It might have been the drugs. His head swam when he breathed too hard. More than that, it was just the scary amounts of crazy this man exuded whenever his mouth opened. Tony could hear a little voice in his head (it sounded remarkably like Bruce) saying how ironic it was that he had encountered someone who could consistently make him not want to talk.

“I was just trying to get some water in you,” Judas said, his tone deceptively kind. “You shouldn’t fight me like that.”

Tony was not going to waste his energy explaining the unpleasantness of waking to the sensation of drowning. He had battled that little phobia months ago, actually forcing himself to sit in his bathtub until that desire to vomit had passed. (If the water had been bitingly cold by the time he got
out, well, no one else needed to know.) Still, there were moments like this, when he could be caught off guard. No one would react well to what Judas had done, so he felt no need to add that perhaps his panic had been a little more extreme than the average person’s.

“Would you like some breakfast?”

Food would not go down well now. Tony grunted and hesitated before murmuring a low dissent. He did not want to speak to the guy, but shaking his head would have been worse.

He felt clean again. Tony knew what a bed and body felt like after a night of sex. Sometime after he had passed out, Judas had bathed him and changed the sheets. For some reason that was more disturbing than the sex act itself.

Actually, that implied that Judas was a lot stronger than he looked. The man was a little on the soft side. His hair was cut in that conservative style that was so popular in the early twentieth century. Steve’s hair was like that, but Steve had the good looks to pull it off. Judas was baby-faced, and the hair just emphasized his pale softness.

Unwilling to move his head for the risk of it spinning right off its perch on his neck, Tony looked at Judas out of the corner of his eye. The man was still talking, but Tony could not have repeated any of it. He was a little concerned that this psychosis was catching, particularly since he was well aware that he was already just a bit crazy (because really, he put on armor and went around the world fighting super villains), so listening to him was not a priority.

He kind of wished he could find something attractive about the guy. His hair was stupid and old-fashioned, his jawline too soft, and there was just something about the fanaticism that leaked from his eyes and mouth to the rest of him. Even his teeth were crooked.

“Why me?” Tony asked abruptly, interrupting whatever Judas had been saying. His voice was weak, slurred by sedation and hoarse from all his shouting the previous day, but Judas stopped talking. This meant Judas’s attention was now fully focused on Tony, but he had been thinking about this for a while. He needed to know. “A lot of people are sad. Why did you… why me?”

Judas looked truly surprised by the question. Then he was smiling, a faint, honest little expression that was kind of heart breaking.

“This was meant to be, Anthony.” Tony closed his eyes again. Of course. It would be that ridiculously oversimplified. “Since the first time we met, when you shook my hand and smiled… it was a connection made by happenstance, a bond that will never be broken.”

“Of course…” Tony breathed. “Fate.”

He did not even remember shaking this guy’s hand. Maybe he had been drunk. The guy had just been another face in the crowd, someone to smile at and please because that’s what he did. He danced for the public, played nice in front of the cameras, and never ever, ever let them think he was anything but happy to be there. This guy was probably not important enough to be someone Tony would have been officially introduced to, but he had been around, and somehow he had gotten to shake Tony Stark’s hand.

Well, lucky him.

“You understand then,” Judas said. “How we were meant always to be here.”

“I have to use the restroom,” Tony mumbled.
This was going to be a problem. He was not up for holding that ridiculous bottle, and at some point he was going to have to do more than pee. If he could not manage the bottle, there was no way he was going to have the balance to use that damned waste bin.

“Of course,” Judas’s hand gave one last pass over Tony’s hair, and then he was fiddling with the handcuffs. “I imagine—”

Tony missed what he said next. The pain that shot up his arm was shockingly intense, sending him lurching toward it with the hopes of stopping whatever was causing it. His hand met Judas’s back. The man had curved himself around Tony’s left arm, and from the feel of it, he was squeezing down on Tony’s injured wrist with the pressure of a vise.

“What are you—fuck! Jesus Christ, you—stop it!”

His head reeled, pain and vertigo converging until he was gagging. Unable to reach to stop the pressure, Tony found himself pressed against Judas’s back, clutching brutally at the man’s shirt.

“Look at what you did,” Judas murmured. “We’ll have to clean you up. Can you walk?”

Disbelieving, Tony could only stare when the man pushed back the hair that had fallen over his forehead and offered him a bland smile.

“Come on, Anthony.” Judas pushed the blankets back, and Tony felt himself immediately tensing to pull away when the man ducked close. An arm pushed beneath his legs and back, and there was no stopping the startled yelp when Judas dragged him toward the edge of the bed and then lifted.

Okay, so this guy was a lot stronger than Tony had anticipated.

“Just try to relax, Anthony,” Judas ordered.

Tony did not think that much was possible. Actually, he was not thinking much of anything except that the room was spinning, his stomach was lurching, and that he needed something to anchor him. The only thing to grab was Judas, which Tony did.

He thought he was grabbing the man hard enough to tear his shirt. It was a bit of a rude shock to feel fabric slipping through his fingers like it was no more substantial than water. Judas was able to pry his hands free with a mere tug against his arm.

By the time he was upright, legs only doing their job because Judas was braced behind him, Tony realized just how much trouble he was in. Here he was, free of restraints, and he could not even collect himself enough to fight back. It was all he could do not to vomit all over himself while Judas put his hand in the front of Tony’s shorts and help him aim at the toilet.

“I can’t do this,” Tony groaned.

His head lolled back on Judas’s shoulder, an indicator of height difference. It wasn’t a big difference. The guy was probably somewhere between Clint’s height and Steve’s. Maybe on the shorter end, because Tony’s knees kept buckling, ruining the comparison of his own size to Judas’s.

“You’ll be fine,” Judas assured him. “I’ve got you.”

Tony had a high threshold for embarrassment. It was not that he had no pride—if anything, he had a little too much—but he had spent most of his life in the public eye. He was smart about it, keeping the important things tucked close to his vest, but he was not about to shy away from
trivialities that people would usually consider embarrassing to admit. Like how many women he had slept with, or how drunk he had been at that party in Malibu when he blew up his own home. He had told some interviewer (when he wasn’t rip-roaringly drunk) that he sometimes peed in the Iron Man suit. (If he spent more than six hours in it, it was kind of a necessity. He made certain to put in a filtration unit that fed directly into a hydraulic cooling unit.) Everyone else was squirmy and laughed, but he just smiled and shrugged. It was just another day for Tony Stark.

This was beyond his ability. Standing in front of a toilet with another man aiming his dick for him (a man who had fucked him, to be sure, but still virtually a stranger), was taking things into a realm of humiliation that even Tony could not tolerate.

“I can’t.” It was true. Tony could not force himself to go to the bathroom like this. Something in him switched over, not allowing the basic bodily function to happen. He fumbled at Judas’s wrist—god, he didn’t dare do more with the way this guy was holding him—willing the man to understand. “It’s not happening.”

“It’ll happen, Anthony.” Judas’s breath over his cheek was just one more muscle clenched in fight or flight. How the hell could he pee when he wanted to run? “Just relax. I won’t let go. I promise.”

Tony closed his eyes and wished he was anywhere else but here.

* * *

The forcing of drugged water down his throat was getting to be a regular occurrence. Tony managed it better the second time around. Sort of.

He tried not to drink it. It was not the mere threat of being drugged that had him spitting the liquid back out when Judas first tried to make him drink. Tony was struggling with the liquid itself, poured over him in a waterfall that had his chest clenching up in panic. He was in that hell of the twenty minutes he had spent standing over a beat up old toilet until the stress and Judas’s hand pressing too hard into his gut had him groaning and releasing in a desperate stream. He hated the way Judas locked thick fingers behind his jaw and held him immobile while that water assaulted him. The cuff sliced at his already bruised and swollen wrist with his continued struggles.

“You are going to be sick if you don’t drink something, Anthony,” Judas told him awhile after the last attempt at getting Tony to drink. The sheets were still damp, so it could not have been long. Also, the room was not spinning quite so badly. Tony had managed to lift his head and look around for several seconds earlier without feeling the need to vomit, so he guessed the drugs were starting to work their way through his system.

“I’ll take my chances,” Tony grumbled. He hated the way his body locked up and drew away from Judas even when he was nowhere near the bed. Experience told him that this man was dangerous, that he should avoid coming into contact at all costs.

“I won’t risk your health,” Judas insisted. There was a bottle in his hand—another of those two liter things, this one with a bit of orange remaining on that mostly torn off label—filled to the top with clear liquid.

Tony scrambled back, ignoring the fire that was his wrist when his retreat drew his arm taut. Judas followed, utterly calm. His hand reached out and caught Tony under the jaw, despite all attempts at avoidance. It was like he knew which way Tony would duck. The grip was solid. Tony pried at the fingers digging into the joint of his jaw without avail.

“This will be much easier for you if you would just drink something, Anthony.”
The pressure against his throat and jaw bone was painful. Tony was gagging even before the bottle was overturned in his face. Then the water was pouring into his mouth and over his nose, and he couldn’t breathe.

Tony did not actually recall a lot of what happened at that point. He remembered struggling—wild flailing and kicking that didn’t seem to do more than get him tangled in bed sheets—and trying to scream, but nothing helped. He was drowning, which, incidentally, was the worst possible way to die in his opinion.

He came to himself vomiting up far more liquid than he could have possibly ingested. There was a waste bin in his face, a gentle hand brushing hair from his forehead, and for a moment Tony thought he was at home with Pepper tending to him. The bin pulled away when Tony was no longer retching, and there was a glass in his face. It was against his teeth, clattering awkwardly against them, tilting back, and he gulped instinctively.

After the first swallow, his throat closed up, and he coughed. Judas pulled the glass away—Tony could not delude himself into thinking it was anyone else—and rubbed his back while he fought for air.


Tony stared at the glass dully. He did not doubt for an instant that he was about to be sent back into that sick-feeling drugged state. When he looked at Judas, he was disheartened to see open concern on the man’s face.

Closing his eyes, viciously hating himself, Tony lifted his hand and helped Judas guide it to his lips.

* * *

Tony was watching daytime television. He had never once in his life watched daytime television (unless it was CNN), and now he was watching something called People’s Court. It was horrible, but changing the channel would require a remote control or the ability to cross the room. Tony had no remote, and he was still handcuffed to the damned bed. That, and he was so doped up that he feared he might have to spend the rest of his day next to a puddle of vomit if he so much as tried to lift his head.

Judas was gone, thus the entertainment. Apparently it was Monday, which—seriously?—when had that happened? Tony had been losing time. He remembered being at a business event on a Wednesday night. It was that night when he had either gotten extraordinarily drunk or had his drink spiked because that was what it would take to get him to leave a building alone with Judas, even before he knew the extent of his creepiness.

By Tony’s calculations, it should be Saturday. He remembered two full days. There was that long first day, filled with angry shouting and fruitless negotiating, which ended just like the night before—in drugged up sex. The next day had been longer, awash in hazy awareness. It never seemed to end. Judas would come, drug him, leave. There were a few trips to the bathroom, a mortifying bath where Judas had cleaned fucking everything (no nook or cranny was too small or too private to invade), more sex (Tony had tried so hard to fade away from this, but either he was growing accustomed to it or Judas had fixed the drug dosage because he was not losing consciousness so quickly), more drugged water, another bath (somehow this was worse than the sex), a nap probably, more sex…

Oh.
It was a schedule. Judas got him up, poured the drugged water down his throat, and went about the day with occasional visits. When night fell, he joined Tony in the bed, and they had sex.

Sex did not actually happen more than once a day. Tony was not sure if it was because Judas was trying to keep his schedule so perfect or if he could not get it up more frequently. The only thing that was certain was that it only happened as the sun went down, and then only once.

He was losing track of day flow while under the influence. This consistency would make it easier to keep a roster of days. For some reason, this seemed extremely important. He should know how long he’s been in this farm house (it might not be a farm house, but considering how there was no one near enough to hear him screaming for help and the quaint décor, Tony was guessing). He could not recall why, but he knew it was important to know that he had been in this house for four solid days.

This would be the fifth day, he thought, but now it was hard to know. Judas was deviating by leaving the house, which meant he had to track by the regular daily occurrences. The ones that were unlikely to change.

Tony smiled faintly. There was something ironic and terribly sick in how he was tracking which day it was by monitoring when he had sex.

*People’s Court* ended. Thank god.

*Divorce Court* started. Wasn’t it bad enough that this shit even happened? Why was it necessary to ham it up and televise it? Did anyone who wasn’t handcuffed to a bed in front of the program even watch this shit?

Moaning piteously, Tony dragged the nearest pillow over his head and wished it was possible to smother himself with it. It helped a bit with muffling the sound at least.

Somehow, this was worse than when Judas was in the house.
Some warnings not on the outside label: Violence. Sort of. At any rate, there will be pain, and it will be descriptive.

I also take some liberties with what the armor may or may not be capable of doing. It seemed possible at the time...

There was one moment when Judas commented on the arc reactor. The man was obviously not an engineer. He was probably a manager somewhere, or, more likely, related to someone important. If Tony could remember exactly which events this man had attended, he could probably pin down what Judas did, but that was asking a little too much of Tony’s memory at the moment.

Regardless of his profession, the subject came up in the evening. Judas was wrapped around Tony in a moment of post-coital bliss. Tony wasn’t feeling so hot, but Judas looked happy enough, his fingers dragging over the reactor lightly. Tony shuddered and stared at the ceiling, swallowing against the sensation of his stomach and heart getting tangled with each other in effort to climb out through his throat simultaneously.

“I saw this once, when we were at a charity event,” Judas told him. “You were leaving with those false friends of yours. You had taken off your tie, and when you unbuttoned the top of your shirt, I could see it. Everyone told me I was seeing things. That you were carrying a penlight. But I was right, Anthony. You are truly a remarkable creature. It’s like the pure light of God, emanating from your heart.”

Judas moved his hand over the arc reactor, tracing the lines of light and the edge where it sank into Tony’s chest. The touch was gentle, almost loving, and it felt like barbed metal tearing into his heart. Tony found the water stain near the wall close to the window and tried to breathe.

It was Wednesday. It had been a week, and he was still in this house. Still alone with a man frighteningly obsessed with him. His wrist was enflamed, was getting worse, and he felt ill and weak even without the drugs. It did not take a doctor to tell him that his temperature was soaring, that if he did not seek medical attention soon, he was not going to last much longer.

The good thing about this was that he dropped off soon after Judas made that creepy statement about the arc reactor. He roused a bit when he was dropped into a bathtub, which was kind of odd. He had thought that the infection (because there was nothing else it could be), combined with the steady stream of sedation, would have kept him unconscious.

The water did not feel as warm as it usually did, a true testament to the fever Tony was running. His lungs were starting to suffer, and the heat of the bath had him laboring for air.

“You’re sick,” Judas actually sounded fairly dismayed over this. Tony turned his head, putting his cheek to the porcelain rim of the tub. The coolness of it was a relief to overheated skin. “Wait here, Anthony. I’ll get some medicine.”

As if he could climb up out of this tub on his own at this point. Tony felt weaker than a newborn,
his muscles protesting the slightest movements and aching fiercely at the mere thought of rising.

“Here,” Judas was by his side a breath later. Either he had not gone far, or Tony was so out of it he was losing track of time again. The water did feel cooler. “Take this.”

“What—” Trying to speak was like coughing up razors. Tony gave up without a second thought to it, not resisting the hands tipping his head back or the thick, overly sweet liquid that drained down his throat. He tried to swallow, mostly got the liquid down the right tube, and when he thought it was safe to breathe, his body knew better and gulped on its own. He had been wrong about speaking being painful. Swallowing was so much worse.

He must have made some noise or motion to show his distress because Judas was there, hovering anxiously.

“Shh, shh, shhhhh,” Judas hushed him, hands clumsy and rough against sensitized skin.

Water lapped at his chest, sloshing up toward the reactor. Toward the battery, with its exposed cables and electricity coursing into a machine embedded in his body. It was going to shock him, electrocute him. They were pushing him down into the water, holding him there. He fought, thrashed, kicked, and punched, and it hurt because he had been screaming for so long, but he howled anyway, grabbing at the nearest body. If he had to go down, this guy would go in too, and maybe that would deter them—

There were arms around him, warm and solid, a plaid shirt against his cheek.

Steve! It was hard to control his limbs, to force them to do his bidding, but he managed to get his arm under Steve’s and clutch at the back of that ridiculous shirt. Steve would help him. Steve would never let anything bad happen if he could stop it. He was safe as long as Steve had him.

He could hear Steve now, mumbling soothing nonsense in his ear.

“It’s okay. I’ve got you. You’re okay.”

Tony felt himself fade, secure in the knowledge that he was completely safe.

* * *

The next time Tony woke, it was because someone laid a hand over his forehead. He sighed and opened his eyes, bracing himself for SHIELD’s medical facilities. They were never friendly.

Relieved brown eyes stared at him, framed by neatly combed brown hair. It was strange, because the only person Tony knew who had brown eyes like that was Bruce, but his hair was wavy, always a mess. Steve sometimes styled his hair like that, but his hair was blond, not brown.

“Anthony?”

Tony could almost hear the snap of something breaking in his mind. It was like part of him cracked away, leaving him numbly staring at Judas, incapable of feeling anything beyond simple resignation.

It was pathetic, really, how much he wanted SHIELD. He had wanted the help so badly that he had created a scenario where Steve was there, where Captain America had come to rescue him. After so many days of this, he had been positive he would be missed. Maybe he was, maybe he wasn’t. Maybe no one was looking for him. Maybe they really were sick of him and his behavior. Maybe they were glad he was gone.
Whatever the case, no one was coming for him.

“Anthony, sweetheart, are you with me?”

He wished he could close his eyes and go back to that dead sleep. He wanted to go back to that place, deep in forgotten dreams, where there was nothing—no fear, no pain—where he was completely safe.

Instead, Tony swallowed and cast his gaze toward the window. The slant of light meant it was morning. At the very least, he had slept through the night.

“I’m so sorry to leave you, but I really must go to work,” Judas was explaining. “Don’t worry, though. I’ll be home tonight, and we’ll have all weekend to spend with each other.”

The last thing Tony wanted to do was look into those insane brown eyes, but Tony found himself turning his head back when Judas’s hand pressed against his cheek warmly. He closed his eyes, submitting to the lingering kiss.

“I gave you some more Tylenol,” Judas murmured, shifting his mouth to Tony’s forehead. “You’re still sick, but it seems to be getting better. Just rest today. I’ll make soup tonight. Would you like chicken soup, Anthony?”

Tony felt nothing but exhaustion. He looked at Judas. The man looked so worried, so sincere. Against his better judgment, Tony forced a weak smile and nodded.

Judas’s returning grin was so broad it had to hurt. He leaned down and kissed Tony again, hard and unrelenting.

And then he was gone, whistling cheerfully as he strode from the room. Tony heard the sound of footsteps on the stairs, the slam of the front door, and the rumble of an engine that needed some fine tuning.

Tony found that water stain again. It was yellow and ugly and had dripped water the other day when it had rained all afternoon. There was probably a matching stain in the carpet below it, but Tony had never quite felt like checking.

He could check now if he wanted. Somehow, in spite of the infection that was likely still raging through his system, Tony felt well enough to lift his head.

For once the room did not spin when he moved. And once he had lifted his head, he figured, well… why not sit up?

He was weak, and his arm shook when he pushed himself upright. He could not use his left hand. The damage to his wrist was not that bad, but it was still hot and swollen and bleeding, and it shot pain up his arm when he shifted it.

Tony ached. He hurt like an old man with arthritis in his joints and cotton stuffed in his lungs. The infection had taken root, and he knew, without a doubt, that Judas was wrong. He wasn’t getting better. The medication had delayed it, had soothed the fever and the worst of the pain, but it was just Tylenol. Judging from the liquid form, it was a pretty low dosage at that. It had merely bought him some time before the infection took full hold and drove Tony into an early grave.

He wished Judas had just killed him outright. This strange game of house the man was playing with him was depressing, and dying from something that should be preventable was just so medieval. Those curtains made it very *Little House on the Prairie.*
Except for the handcuffs. Those were definitely not something Laura Ingalls would have encountered in her lifetime. If she and Alonzo ever engaged in bondage, she never put it in her books.

Tony looked at the spot of mold on the carpet by the window. He really did not want to spend his last days chained to a bed in some farmhouse in the middle of nowhere. If he had to look at Judas one more time, he was going to snap. Tony knew it. He would crack like dry twigs in a fire before burning away to ash. There would be nothing left of him but a husk that would fall apart at the lightest touch.

And then he would die of an infection.

But right now.

Right now, his head wasn’t spinning. His stomach was actually fairly solid. He hurt, and he ached, and he kind of wanted to drop over dead, but it was better than it had been.

Judas had not been drugging him since he had gotten sick. It was Friday. He had been off the sedation for almost two days.

Shivering, listening for signs of anyone else in the house, Tony cautiously pushed back the quilt and sheet. He had to kick at them a bit when his one hand did not do the trick, but he was free of the confines of the blankets. All that was left, then, was the cuff that locked him to the bedrail.

There was something strange happening in his brain. Tony knew this feeling, remembered it, welcomed it. Rage filtered in, pushing out everything else. Because how dare Judas do this to him? How dare he try to imprison Tony Stark?

No one did that and got away with it. The few who tried did not live to regret it.

He tugged at the handcuffs, and he gasped, tears springing to his eyes. But this was okay. This was familiar. Tony had woken up in the middle of open heart surgery in a cave. He could handle a little hurt wrist.

Tony turned, considering the handcuffs calmly. The ring bit into his wrist, blood already rising to the surface, dripping over the metal and onto the sheets.

The bedrails shook when Tony yanked on the cuffs, the entire headboard shuddering. Tony had known of that. The bed always shook when Judas was on it. The wall was scuffed and dented where the knobs at the top of the rails consistently banged into it.

He planted his foot against the rail and shoved.

“Gyuhi!” Tony slipped, his foot sliding between the bars and cracking into the wall. Support lost, he collapsed to the mattress, dry heaving at the pain lancing into his hand and up his arm. He groaned and pressed his face into the sheets. Fuck Afghanistan. This hurt now.

Tony probably laid there for thirty or forty minutes before he mustered the strength to try again. This time he made certain his foot was centered. The bar dug into his heel, creating a painful groove in his skin, but it barely registered when he threw his weight back.

No, then all he felt was the bleeding hot agony that ripped through his arm like a chainsaw.

He was screaming, but he didn’t stop. Tony brought his other foot around, centered it against the
next rail, and heaved with everything he possessed. *Your hand is going to come off before the cuff does!* a frantic little part of his brain shrieked, but Tony drowned out the panic by screaming louder and pulling harder and ignoring it when his shoulder flared hot in protest along with his hand.

And suddenly he was flat on the bed, two feet further than he had been a minute ago, chest heaving and vision flaring in black and white spots.

He had done it.

*He had done it!*

He had dislocated his shoulder and broken something in his hand to do it, but *he was free!*

Tony rolled over and threw up onto the floor.

* * *

The house was not large. Tony never really thought it was. He realized his concept of house sizes might be a little skewed considering the smallest house he ever owned had cost about three million dollars in the eighties, but this house was tiny.

There was one other door upstairs, locked from the outside with a padlock. Tony did not care to know what was behind that door, nor did he have the resources to check. He was lucky he was upright, if he was being honest with himself.

He took the stairs carefully, pathetically grateful there was a handrail lining both sides. If it had been on the left, he was not sure how he would have gotten down the steps without breaking his neck. As it was, he knew he took longer than a few seconds to make it downstairs. It was probably more like fifteen minutes.

Tony Stark, nearly defeated by a staircase.

His first impulse was to rush outside and run as fast and as hard as he could.

Tony quickly squashed the fight or flight instinct (which was leaning distressingly toward flight) and did a quick search through the lower level. By quick, of course, he realized that it was taking him several minutes to cross a room. All the more reason not to try his hand at fleeing on foot. He would make it to the end of the driveway before Judas returned. If he was lucky.

Actually, he was very lucky. Because that was his phone on the kitchen table. The battery had been removed, but it was there as well, a plastic beacon of hope on a dingy laminate table.

The grandfather clock announced that it was noon. Tony had taken a lot of time in this escape endeavor. He hoped Judas did not take off early on Fridays, or this was going to end badly.

Putting the battery into his phone with the use of only one hand turned out to be harder than it looked. In the end, Tony had pinned the phone between his bad hand and the tabletop and shoved the battery into place with his right. He was making a lot of embarrassing, pained noises, but he just let them happen. There was no one around to hear him, and there was no point in straining himself with the effort of keeping silent out of some misplaced sense of pride.

Tony waited an agonizing amount of time for the phone to start. It usually turned on right away for him. (Actually, since he rarely turned it off, he could not actually recall how much time it took to start.) Several seconds later, he realized it was not the phone’s fault but his. He pressed against the power button, dismaying at his rapidly dwindling strength, but held it down until the Stark logo lit
He flicked through the options before hitting the emergency call. Because truly, there was no doubt as to who he should call first.

Lifting the phone to his ear, Tony glanced around the room uncertainly. His tuxedo was there as well, folded neatly over a chair. Like he was just a visitor. Like Judas actually believed he would one day hand the suit back to Tony, kiss him on the cheek, and send him on his way. Or walk out to some event with him, arm in arm, a loving partner.

“Sir?” the usually dry British tones sounded almost frantic as the call was answered off the first ring. “Sir, you have been out of contact for nine days.”

“Trace the call, Jarvis.” He sounded horrible, even to his own ears. Considering the hot scrape of his voice against his throat, he should not have been surprised. Well, Jarvis would not care. “Send the Mark VII. Programmed to assemble on vocal command.”

“Done. Estimated time of arrival: sixteen minutes, thirty-two seconds. If I might add, you sound unwell, sir.”

“It’s been a rough week,” Tony murmured. Rough enough that he was not so sure he would be able to handle flying the Iron Man suit home. “Jarvis… I… I’ll need your help getting home.”

“Sir, if you are unfit to pilot the Iron Man armor, might I suggest I recall it and send assistance?”

“No!”

Tony staggered toward the nearest exit—it looked like a back door off the kitchen. The late date in October meant it was going to be cool, but he had to get out of the house.

The door took him into a yard that needed some serious tending. Beyond that were fields that looked as though they had not seen a backhoe in a decade. It was farmland, but nothing had been grown here in a very long time.

“It’ll get here faster than anyone else can. Just… just get it here, Jarvis.”

“Sir, is this a job for Miss Potts or the Avengers?” Jarvis asked cautiously.

“No—” Tony cut himself off before he finished that request. No. No way. He was not bringing Pepper into this. Judas was not stable. If he went nuts while Pepper was around, and Tony was not able to stop him… That just was not happening. Besides, he was not sure he could bring himself to hang around long enough for more help to arrive. “No. Not Pepper. But… Steve. Tell Rogers I’m coming.”

There was a brief pause, and then Jarvis responded a bit hesitantly.

“Captain Rogers seems upset, sir. Would you like me to connect you?”

“Let’s… not,” Tony did not think his head could handle anything more. “Just tell him I’ll need some help when I get back. Medical help, okay?”

“I could dispatch an ambulance to your location, sir.”

“No unless I’m dying, Jarvis.” Actually, he might be. He was struggling to keep his eyes open, and he was certain that he would not be upright anymore if not for the handrail on a rotting back deck.
It dug into his ribs, and he braced his elbow against it, trying not to lose his phone. God, more filth.

His left arm hung mostly useless at his side. There was blood dripping on the deck, but Tony could not feel the flow of it over his fingers. His hand had gone numb, the only sensation being the occasional lance of pain that shot from thumb to shoulder.

He honestly had no idea how he was going to get the armor on without doing more damage to the arm. But he had to have it. If Judas came back, the only way Tony stood any chance at all was if he was in his armor. This was beyond pitiful, he realized, but he had allowed himself to degrade to this point. The arm was just the last in a long list of ailments which could have been avoided.

“Sir!”

Tony jolted in place, scrambling to keep from dropping his phone. If it hit the ground, he might succeed in picking it up. He was not so sure he would be able to pick himself back up.

“What?!”

“Sir, are you all right? You were unresponsive for the past nine minutes and seventeen seconds.”

“Really?” That… was not good. Although, it was, in a way. “Does that mean the Mark VII is almost here?”

“ETA: less than ninety seconds, sir. Sir, Captain Rogers has assembled a medical team along with Agent Barton. They are en route to a quinjet. They are going to come to you if you don’t respond soon, sir.”

“Oh… wow, really? I mean… oh hey, my suit!”

He didn’t care that he dropped the phone after that. The Mark VII whistled across the sky toward him, honed in on the Stark tech, and Tony was not stupid enough to be holding the phone when the two collided.

Besides, once he was in the armor, he would be back in contact with Jarvis.

Dirt flew as the Mark VII slammed into the ground less than three feet from him. Tony would have cheered if he had been able. As it was, he managed to take the three steps it took to cross the distance between himself and his armor, and he considered that quite an accomplishment.

Now came the hard part. The Mark VII was not like the Mark V. It was bigger, sturdier, and had the ability to home in on any signal Jarvis fed it. It also required a lot less strength to open. All he had to do was activate the bracelets or, failing to have those present, talk to it and hope it would not crush him in the assembly process.

Tony had not tested it without the beacons of the bracelets, but when had he ever let a little thing like that stop him?

“Activate,” he said bluntly.

Just like that, the Mark VII hummed to life. It hissed and clicked and whirred, and Tony turned, his right arm coming up as it should. His left arm, of course, was far less cooperative.

The armor would do worse than wrench his arm if he could not get his entire body lined up properly. Tony barely thought about it. He grabbed his left arm in his right hand and hauled it up, shoving it into the rapidly unfolding armor approximately where it looked like it should go.
That was not the worst part. The worst part came when he had to turn and put his right arm into position. The movement sent fiery pokers stabbing through the entire left side of his body, but there was nothing he could do about it now. The armor was already forming around his outstretched arms, locking them in place, completely uncaring of his agonized scream.

The HUD lit up, voices shouting in his ears long before Tony realized he was completely ensconced in his armor. Panting, horribly grateful that he was finished with that dreadful task, Tony found himself smiling.

He was in the Iron Man armor. He was in bulletproof gold-titanium alloy in screw-you-very-much gold and hotrod red. The world lit around him, individual objects isolated, scanned, and analyzed with blue and red and gray lights.

The relief of the protective encasement of the armor lasted only a moment. Getting the armor on had taken a lot out of him, proven by the bright flashing bulbs that would not stop blinding him. It was worse than the paparazzi, and he was pretty sure it was caused by the same thing that had him swallowing down bile.

Tony could not recall the last time he hurt this much.

It was then that he realized Jarvis was not the only voice he was hearing.

“What?!” he snarled, effectively cutting off the confusing cacophony of shouting.

“Jesus Christ!” Oh. That was definitely Clint. “Stark, what the hell!”

“Tony!” Steve cut through the line, sounding utterly frantic and not a little horrified. “Are you okay?”

Tony swallowed, determined not to throw up again. Inside the helmet, it would not be pretty.

“Well… I am never doing that again.”

“Where the hell have you been?” Clint demanded. “Do you have any idea what—”

“Sir! Your core temperature is forty point six degrees!”

Jarvis was usually so polite. Interrupting Clint was not polite at all. Tony heard his giggle and was a bit embarrassed by the hysterical little sound.

“Is it?” he looked at the numbers flashing across the screen. “Oh, wow. Yeah, that’s… probably not… I knew that Tylenol wasn’t going to be enough.”

“You’re on an antipyretic, and your temperature is still that high?”

Oh damn. That was…

“Jarvis, you didn’t say Phil was part of the team,” Tony grumbled.

He was stalling. He needed to get airborne if he was going to get anywhere in any decent amount of time. The suit could make up for a lot of weaknesses, but Tony’s arm was completely out of commission. No enhancements would change the fact that he could not rotate his shoulder without causing himself to black out.

He was going to have to fly this thing with one arm. It was going to suck.
“Deal with it! You have been missing for nine days,” Steve snapped anxiously. “We thought you were hurt. Why are you running a fever?”

“Questions later,” Tony murmured, bracing himself and hoping for the best. “Flying the hell away from here now. Jarvis?”

“Taking over piloting functions now, sir… Sir, sensors in the left arm—”

“Don’t tell me shit I already know, Jarvis,” Tony grumbled. “And I gave you autopilot capabilities? When did I do that?”

“After you lost consciousness four months ago in the altercation with Victor Von Doom, when the team had to fish you out of the bay.”

Tony opened his mouth to respond, then choked as the repulsors fired, and he was in the air. The armor locked around him, unmoving despite his instant flail reflex. Tony sensed that Jarvis was taking it easy on him. His speed was not even close to what he usually pushed.

Even so, each time Jarvis had to change direction or account for wind shear, Tony felt the strain on his arm. Every movement that followed was not his own. Between that and the typical rocky ride, Tony was actually getting airsick. This was not going to end well at all.

“Sir, your respiration and heart rates are elevated.”

“Stark, are you with us?”

Jesus. Tony had forgotten about Coulson and the others. He blinked rapidly, a little concerned to note that he was suddenly over the city. This persistent loss of time was upsetting. If the speed at which he was currently traveling was anywhere near the speed with which the armor had been sent to him initially, it would have taken at least fifteen minutes to get to Manhattan. How had he missed that?

He had very little time to worry about it. At roughly the same moment he entered the city, the armor banked sharply to avoid the buildings.

Tony would have liked to say he was completely stoic about the whole thing. But he could see his vitals, splashed in front of his face, and he felt the wrench of the armor weaving through the buildings in a way that usually filled him with unparalleled joy. The sound he made was embarrassingly close to a sob. He tried to hide it in a curse, but he could already hear Steve hollering in the background.

“God damn it, Jarvis!” Oh yeah. He whimpered. Considering the kind of week he had been having, he supposed that pitiful little noise was the least of his worries. “What the fuck was that?”

“Try to remain conscious, Stark,” Coulson answered instead of Jarvis. “Your temperature has increased point four degrees. We need to get you into a hospital immediately.”

He somehow choked back the sob when felt the armor barrel roll in a sharp turn that took him around Avengers Tower. Tony knew what happened now, and he found himself extremely resistant to it.

“Y-you know… on second thought, Jarvis, maybe… m-maybe we could take another spin around the city—”

“It’ll be over soon, Tony.” God, Tony hated it when Steve interrupted him. Well, no. No he didn’t.
He appreciated it usually. But right now, he kind of wished this whole thing was not happening, which meant no Steve, no landing pad, no movement of his arms when he needed to stop and hover and

_holy mother of god._

He was distantly aware of his ineffective struggling against the body-wrenching twist of the armor. Jarvis had full control—Tony had already given it over months ago—and he could only howl out vulgar protests.

Tony could not hear the hum and whir of the automated system disassembling the armor over his own screams. Other people were shouting too, Jarvis filtering through the din, relating such horrible information such as his core temperature having gone over 41 degrees Celsius, telling Tony to please be still.

He could not be still. There were hands grabbing at him, and he had done himself serious harm to ensure _that_ sure as hell stopped, and _his fucking arm felt like it was being ripped from his body._

“TONY!”

He jerked, flinching away from the loud voice. A hand was at his face, holding his head still, and Tony realized he was on the floor. The cool stone felt wonderful against his back.

“Holy fuck, he’s on fire.”

“Tony, it’s just us,” Steve was pleading with him. Clint was there too, looking rather horrified. He was probably the one who had just made that rather colorful observation. “It’s me. It’s Steve and Clint and Phil.”

Oh yeah. There was Coulson too, looking agitated. Tony thought he should feel proud that he was one of the few people on the planet who could get Coulson to change his expression like that.

“Tony, you’re going to be okay. I’ve got you. It’s okay.”

He was not sure why that made him sick. Tony was just grateful there was nothing left in his stomach to throw up. He was also glad he could use the excuse of his injuries and the fever to explain away his sudden dry heaving.

It was so horrible laying there, his cheek against Steve’s blue-clad arm, while he tried desperately to throw up what wasn’t there. And Steve—god, Steve just held him and reassured him and told him he was okay.

Tony just did not have the heart to tell him no.

No, he really wasn’t okay.

* * *
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Words cannot express Tony's hatred for SHIELD medical.

It was kind of ironic really. Tony had spent nine days trapped in a bed. Now that he had gotten free of that hell, he was trapped in a bed, on orders to stay put until a doctor cleared him.

Not that he figured that much out for some measure of time. Full awareness was very slow to return to him. In the beginning, it was simply too difficult to bother with it. He was vaguely aware of people shouting, lights flashing, hands hovering over the arc reactor in a way that would have made him nervous under most circumstances. Somewhere in the distance, a machine wailed, a long steady cry, but Tony was too tired to care. For once, nothing hurt.

He closed his eyes and let everything slip away.

There was a horrible moment when he was awake enough to know he was gagging, unable to breathe and not at all happy with the people attempting to drag the contents of his stomach out through his mouth. The moment was brief enough, but he had the impression that there were a lot of unhappy people around him. Fair enough, because he was pretty miserable, and he was willing to let them know.

It was frightening being surrounded by people he didn’t know in a place he did not recognize. When they started messing with his arm, it launched straight into nightmare territory. He fought them, baffled as to why they were hurting him but certain he would not lay idly by and allow it.

Tony was not sure if it was good or bad that he dropped off so quickly after that. It hardly mattered.

Until he woke up in restraints.

That he knew was bad. He screamed while strangers shouted at him to stop. Why would he stop? He was tied up, and he didn’t know these people, and they were touching him, holding him down, and there was no reason not to be afraid. He fought until someone injected something into a tube—an IV, some distant corner of his brain recognized past his howling protests—and the world went tumbling away.

When he woke up, it happened again.

* * *

Clint rescued him. That kind of surprised Tony. Of anyone that would see a problem and instantly know how to fix it, he had not expected it to be Clint Barton.

It had happened very quickly. Tony woke, as sometimes happened. This part was sluggish, the drugs in his system not allowing for rapid comprehension. His forehead was itchy, hair tickling at his face, and all he wanted to do was rub at it. Except his hand would not be budged from where it was locked to the mattress. His left arm was immobilized in a sling that would require more than one hand to remove, and another strap held his shoulders flat against the bed.
Tony was instantly furious. Perhaps he was just the slightest bit terrified (okay, he was ready to flip right on out), but anger really was at the forefront.

Even as the heart monitor began to wail, Clint was there. The archer cursed and yanked at the Velcro straps, freeing Tony from the horrible restraints in a couple of quick movements.

“Those fucking morons,” Clint hissed.

Tony did not even try to resist when the man hauled him upright. He did not have the strength to protest when he was bodily lifted from the bed and set in a chair that he had never noticed was there. It was one of those large ones, cushioned and adjustable, so it probably had always been in the room.

“I am going to kill someone,” Clint continued to rant, even as he tucked a blanket over Tony’s bare legs (if anyone could rock a hospital gown, it was Tony Stark) and another around his shoulders. Tony felt no need to protest when Clint caught his chin, turned his head this way and that, and cursed again. “You are doped to the gills. Does Coulson know about this? Oh, why the hell am I asking you? You couldn’t tell me what two plus two is right now.”

That was kind of insulting. Tony had created Dum-E while so completely drunk, he had been lucky he had not suffered alcohol poisoning. Perhaps Dum-E was a bit special, but it was also the prototype that led to Jarvis’s creation. So fuck that noise. Tony was a goddamned genius, drugged or not.

“Four.”

Clint blinked and looked back at him. The man had halfway risen to leave, and Tony’s murmur could not have been very loud, but he noticed it. He grinned hard at Tony.

“Lowest prime number bigger than a thousand.”

“Thousand nine,” Tony breathed.

Elementary math. He wanted something harder. He wanted his freaking Iron Man armor. One of the gauntlets at least. The one for his right hand would probably be best, though that needle in his arm would make it a little uncomfortable.

“You are one unbelievable son of a bitch,” Clint declared. “Now stay here while I go rip your doctor a new one.”

Tony watched him go. He did not want to be alone, but he was not sure how to call Clint back.

At least he was in a chair. This was so much better than the bed. He thought he might even be able to move if he could get his legs to cooperate. Actually, the thought of moving seemed a little to exhausting right now, so maybe he could be content in the knowledge that he was not restrained in any way.

Except that was not completely true.

Tony considered the needles in his arm, connected by tubes to an IV bag and a machine. The bag hung on a stand that was attached to the bed, and the machine… what the hell was that anyway?

He couldn’t remove them because they were in his right arm, and his left would have been useless even without the sling. Jesus Christ. Was his hand in a cast?
“You’re looking better.”

Sneaking into the room and speaking before Tony knew she was there was such a Natasha thing to do. It was mean, and it was startling, and he glared at her for making his heart attempt to climb out of him through his throat.

Her gaze softened, something Tony had never seen aimed toward him, and she pulled up a chair beside him. Tony watched her, not quite sure what she wanted from him and not liking that he was alone and helpless with her. He was reluctant to face down this woman while wearing the Iron Man suit.

“Clint’s pitching a fit about your doctors,” Natasha informed him. “Cap is calming him down. They should be back soon… How are you feeling?”

Since he was not feeling much of anything, Tony could not quite figure out how to answer. Not to mention he was certain he had used up his quota of energy that could be applied toward speaking for the day with Clint. Now, it took much of what he had left just to continue to keep his eyes on Natasha.

“You’ve been pretty out of it for the past four days,” she told him. “By the time you were brought in, your temperature spiked over 106. Your body started shutting down.”

That explained why he did not recall much between the time when he got to the Tower and waking up here.

“You dislocated your shoulder, damaged your rotator cuff, and broke two bones in your wrist and thumb,” Natasha continued. She stared at him, steady and curious. “Coulson took a team to the coordinates where Jarvis sent the Iron Man suit to retrieve you. They found the house and the handcuffs with your blood on them.

“They checked prints and found yours and a couple others that aren’t in the system. Presumably one belongs to the person on the title, but so far they can’t find the owner of the place. The house is in the name of a Marlys Caratte. Does that mean anything to you?”

He thought about it, but that was pretty useless. This was Pepper’s job. She tracked these things for him.

“No,” he breathed. Speaking took a hair less energy than shaking his head did.

“Agent Coulson just called.” Steve’s announcement preceded his arrival into Tony’s line of sight. Clint appeared on the recently abandoned hospital bed, taking the short route of up and over. Steve walked around the bed and smiled, brilliant and honest and warm. Tony was surprised to realize how much he had missed that. “Good to see you up and about, Tony.”

“About is kind of overstating it,” Clint said with a cocky grin. Tony managed a weak smile in response to that, because it was true. He was out of the bed, but that was about it. That would not be the case if not for Clint.

“They tracked Marlys down to a nursing home in upstate New York,” Steve continued. “She’s in hospice care. According to the nurses, she’s been in a coma for the last three months.”

“That rules her out as a suspect,” Clint said dryly. “Oh wait. Stark’s awake now. We can just ask him who the hell did this.”

Tony would rather talk about anything else in the world. He did not want to talk about why he was
in this hospital in the first place. But the fact that they had not mentioned Judas yet meant the man had either left the house before SHIELD got there, or he had seen them and kept driving. Judas was not in custody. He was still out there somewhere.

Judas was free, and Tony was still trapped in a chair, bound to this room by needles and tubes and a team of doctors and superheroes who would not let him go anywhere. Not until they were satisfied.

It wasn’t fair.

There was some rather frantic movement around him. Tony flinched when a hand closed around his wrist.

He blinked, startled to find Steve’s face so very close. Steve’s big hands cradled his face, which meant someone else was holding his wrist, and that was just unacceptable—

Steve shook him. It was a small, tightly controlled movement, but it jarred him back to those anxious blue eyes and the mouth that moved below them.

“—sten to me, Tony! Tony!”

“Wh-what?”

God, he felt terrible. What the hell was wrong with his head? He couldn’t keep it together long enough to have a conversation with these people, however one-sided. (Well, three-sided, while he was the silent fourth party, but whatever.)

Steve looked horribly relieved.

“Tony, try to focus,” Rogers urged him.

“I can’t move my arm,” Tony protested. This was a huge problem. For obvious reasons.

“Natasha will let you move again if you let go of the IV,” Steve said gently. “Will you do that?”

He could. Maybe. Tony closed his eyes, squeezed them so hard his entire face felt crumpled.

“I can’t think!” he hissed. “My head! I can’t…”

Voices spoke in a flurry around him, only halfway to making sense.

“What’s he on right now?”

“Morphine and some antibiotics.”

“Which one’s the morphine?”

“Clint! You can’t just take him off—”

“Hey! What’s going on in here?! What are you doing?”

His chest hurt. It really hurt. As in there might be some cardiovascular crises happening here kind of hurt. The wailing of the machines in the background did absolutely nothing to dispel this notion. Neither did the sudden chaos of angry voices around him.

Jesus, he couldn’t breathe.
He looked to Steve, bewildered and—yes—scared, but that wasn’t Steve. That was some guy with dark hair and a blinding white shirt, and he had gotten way too far into Tony’s space. He would not have realized how much he was struggling until he saw the guy bracing against his chest and forcing him back—

Tony opened his eyes, confused at the sudden quiet and lack of restraints.

It took him several minutes of staring blankly at the ceiling to realize that was on the bed again. That realization combined with his inability to move his left arm had him gasping and lurching upright.

When his right hand closed around a guardrail, he froze. He stared at his hand, at its white-knuckled grip on a shuddering metal bar, then at the plain blue blanket over his lap.

Someone cleared their throat nearby. Tony’s head snapped up, and he met worried brown eyes.

“Bruce,” he breathed, then winced. Holy shit, he hurt. His shoulder throbbed in a heavy counter beat to his hand, and his body ached like he had gone against a three-hundred pound prize fighter and lost. It even hurt to swallow.

“Yeah, I imagine you’re feeling it now,” Bruce said gently. “They took you off the morphine. You’re on simpler painkillers now—ibuprofen basically—but I imagine you’re feeling a bit less fuzzy in the head?”

This was true. Although Tony still did not feel quite up to his usual speed. He did not know why he was back on the bed. What the hell had happened? Had he imagined Clint putting him in that chair? At least the chair was still sitting next to the bed, right by where Bruce stood actually, so he had not dreamt of its existence. As for Steve and Natasha, had they even been in the room? It would not be the first time Tony had hallucinated to put someone he desperately wanted nearby in the room. It would not even be the first time in the past week.

“I was sitting over there a minute ago,” Tony mumbled.

“You had a panic attack,” Bruce explained. “The doctors sedated you again and moved you back to the bed. I’ve shared some words with them on this subject. You’re cut off from tranquilizers for the foreseeable future.”

Tony considered the guardrail under his hand. He was not quite sure how to let go. He was certain he was not going to lay back down.

“Can I get out of this bed now?” That… sounded so unbelievably pathetic.

“I don’t have much faith in your ability to walk right now,” Bruce said kindly. “But I happen to have a wheelchair with me.”

That was the best offer Tony had heard in months.

It took some doing. Bruce was not as strong as Clint. Tony wrapped his good arm around Bruce, and between the two of them, they got him seated in the wheelchair. Bruce moved an IV bag to a hook attached to the chair—they were down to just one tube sticking out of Tony’s arm now—and they were off.

“Are we in SHIELD medical?” Tony asked, noting the presence of more suits than white coats. Plus, it was difficult not to notice how everyone watched them pass. More of those looks were aimed at Bruce, which was kind of nice. Tony was not ready to be stared at quite yet.
“Yes.” Bruce pushed him to the elevators and punched the up arrow. “The team was ill equipped to deal with your medical emergency at the Tower. Jarvis may have access to WebMD, but he is not a substitute for a doctor.”

“The doctors at SHIELD suck,” Tony muttered.

“Their bedside manner needs some work,” Bruce agreed. “Pepper tracked me down in Pursat when they started doing more harm than good. I’m actually quite furious that no one called me sooner. Steve is still apologizing for not having alerted me that you were missing.”

“You didn’t exactly leave a forwarding address,” Tony said, trying to ignore the sharp squeeze of his chest. Bruce steered him into the elevator and hit the top floor.

“Yes, and I am not much good in a manhunt,” Bruce said wryly. “I’ve gotten good at disappearing, but I’m only good at finding you when it’s someplace you take yourself.”

Tony frowned. It was odd to think of that, but Bruce’s words rang with truth. No matter where he skulked off to whenever he was pissed or hurt or depressed, Bruce always seemed to appear. He would come on a pretense, usually. He would bring food or a drink, sometimes a problem that needed solving. Once he had shown up on the roof of the First National Bank with a camera, saying he was making a picture log of all the places he had not destroyed in New York. He only used that excuse once, since Tony had immediately called him on that blatant lie. Clint could have pulled a variation of that one off. Maybe even Steve. But not Bruce. Tony should have been able to figure out the rest of it.

“There’s a balcony around here where some of the agents go to relax and smoke,” Bruce told him when they got off on the top floor. “What do you say we go frighten whoever’s out there and secure the place for ourselves?”

“I always love watching you scare people,” Tony agreed. Obviously he was not much of a threat to anyone at the moment. He was certain he would do himself a bit of damage if he attempted to move on his own.

Sadly, the balcony was empty.

“They heard we were coming,” Tony decided.

“Word does travel fast in this place,” Bruce mused. He lined the wheelchair up beside a bench overlooking the city and sat down next to Tony. When he looked over, all humor had drained from his eyes.

“There’s not much to talk about,” Tony said immediately.

“You don’t have to tell me everything,” Bruce replied, because Bruce was awesome like that. “I just need a name, Tony. Tell me where to aim our team, because they’re going to rip apart anyone who gets in their way to find out what happened. Phil wanted to see if the nurses could wake Marlys from her coma. Phil suggested this. They’ve already been looking in every shadow of New York since finding out you never showed up for work two weeks ago.”

“Seriously?” Tony looked up in surprise. At Bruce’s frown, he felt he should explain, “I figured at least a couple days before they realized anything was wrong. I’ve been pretty irresponsible lately.”

Bruce’s eyes softened.

“You’ve been reckless, but you always show up to work,” Bruce reminded him. “If I didn’t know
better, I would say working helps you keep your mind off things.”

“Good thing you know better,” Tony murmured. Bruce always was a perceptive little bastard.

“Security at the convention center was pretty lax. The cameras are only good if someone’s in the security watching, and then only if they’re watching the right feed. It came down to witnesses, which isn’t great. The team questioned everyone on the guest list at the party, plus the caterers and cleaning crew,” Bruce sighed. “While the people who remembered seeing you leave could state that you left with a man, no one could identify him or provide a likeness that matches up with anyone in the system. The problem with him walking out with you was that he walked out with you. Everyone saw Tony Stark. No one saw some nondescript guy next to him. The best they could get was that the guy was of average height with brown hair, and he wore a tux.”

That described more than half of the men who showed up at that party. Hell, that described him.

“You can see the source of our frustration,” Bruce said. “Tony, I’m just asking for a name here. A description if you can.”

Tony understood that. He even understood why. He just was not sure he could say it. He never said it when he was staying in that house, in that bed… as if the name would hurt him worse than the man himself.

It was not like Judas hurt him that much. Most of the damage done, Tony had caused. His struggles caused the infection, which had taken a long time to set in because, for the most part, Judas kept him very clean. His determination to get free messed up his arm and hand. Judas had only tried to keep him in one place, safe and sound. Tony was the one who had been so resistant to the idea.

“I don’t even know if it was his real name,” Tony muttered.

Bruce waited. Bruce, the wonderful person that he was, did not press him again. He just sat with Tony, looking out over the city, feeling the cool of the breeze on their faces.

It was cold out, but Tony hardly noticed. Bruce had bundled him up in so many blankets he would have been overheating if he had remained inside. As it was, the outside air felt wonderful. If he looked up, he could almost imagine he was in the sky itself, flying and utterly free.

“He was about five-ten or five eleven,” Tony said. He watched a hawk soar between the buildings, banking and swinging around, stalking something no doubt. “One-ninety, one ninety-five in pounds. Brown hair cut kind of like Steve’s. His eyes were brown. His face was soft and kind of round—he could have been anywhere from twenty-five to forty years old. I’m guessing about thirty or thirty-five. His front teeth were turned in toward each other and kind of yellow…”

Bruce was watching him. He could feel eyes on him.

“He called himself Judas.”

Tony looked at Bruce and offered what was certainly a sickly smile.

“Marlys Caratte,” he declared. “Judas… Iscariot. What do you think the odds are that anyone can find him based on that name and description?”

Bruce’s face was very grim. Tony sighed and looked back over the city.

“It’s okay. Even if he comes back, I can spot him now. I won’t make the mistake of drinking that
much again.”

“You weren’t drinking,” Bruce said softly. “It was a dry event, nothing alcoholic. He probably spiked your drink, if you’re suggesting you were somehow under the influence when you left.”

“I figured as much,” Tony rubbed his eyes wearily. He had been awake for less than an hour and already he was wiped.

“I’ll bring you back to your room,” Bruce said, rising the instant he saw Tony start to yawn.

It was difficult to protest while yawning. Tony shook his head roughly and fumbled for Bruce’s arm, catching on the fabric of his sleeve and clamping down to stop Bruce from rounding the bench. When he was able to speak again, he clarified.

“No. Let’s just… I just want to stay out here a little longer.”

Bruce did not say anything. He sat back down and kindly did not comment when Tony forgot to let go of his shirt.

* * *

The next week was hellish. Tony battled daily to get the doctors—anyone really—to get him out of the bed and up and moving. He was not happy about his weakness, but he would frequently settle for spending his time in a chair.

By the end of the week, Tony was tottering around against doctor’s advice using anything he could get his hands on to keep him on his feet. First it was the bed itself, then it was a rolling IV stand. When he was able to keep down solid foods, he was off the IV, so he graduated to using the wheelchair as an unwieldy walker. The benefit to using the wheelchair was that he could sit if he got to a point where he was too tired to keep upright.

He had a lot of visitors. Tony appreciated it as often as he hated it.

Bruce was good. Bruce was always fine. He knew when to talk and when to shut up, and while he never let Tony get away with lying, he also never forced Tony to tell the truth.

Natasha did not come by again, which was also fine. It was not so much that she was frightening (which she totally was), but she was supposedly out tracking Judas with Coulson, and that was very comforting in an uncomfortable kind of way.

Steve was horribly awkward.

“You’re going to set yourself back, Tony,” the man protested when he found the billionaire shuffling through the hallway one afternoon. “The doctors say you’re not supposed to be walking around this much yet.”

“Are these the same doctors who decided tranquilizers and restraints made for good medical procedure?” Tony retorted. He had left all support behind and was using the wall for balance. So far he was doing all right. He aimed for that bench two rooms down. If he could reach it, he would have someplace to rest that was probably hard and uncomfortable, but it was infinitely better than being in bed. “Because I remember those doctors, and I think I would like a second opinion.”

“You could try talking to the psychologist,” Steve suggested. He hovered close, obviously afraid Tony would fall flat on his face.
“I could try yanking my hair out, one fistful at a time,” Tony countered. “That sounds almost as fun to me.”

“Tony,” Steve rebuked.

“Steve.”

“You were having panic attacks less than a week ago.”

“And then they took me off the tranquilizers so I could tell what was real and what wasn’t.”

Tony was not having any of this. For the love of all that was holy, he just wanted to get to his bench. With what he poured into this stupid organization, he damn well owned that bench.

“Get off it, Cap. I’m fine. I just want to get back on my feet and home, okay?”

“I get that,” Steve relented. “Bruce mentioned you’re planning to quit drinking.”

“You just jump from one uncomfortable topic to the next, don’t you?” Tony grumbled.

“I’m sorry, I—”

“No, it’s fine,” Tony would have waved off his concern, but he needed that hand to make sure he did not face plant into the floor. The wall was his refuge right now. “The more people who know the better, I guess. Since I wouldn’t be here right now if I hadn’t been such an ass for the past few months, I figured I might as well use this hospital stay as a wakeup call. Bruce already promised to donate the alcohol to the nearest charity auction. Well, Pepper will do it, but Bruce promised to ask her to do it.”

“You can donate alcohol to charities?”

Steve reached forward, then snatched his hand back when Tony glared at him. This was his time to walk, and he did not need some super soldier doing his work for him. Besides, Steve was wearing that awful blue plaid shirt he seemed to like so much. Really, he was lucky Tony even associated with him while he was wearing that. He might send him away on for being such an eyesore if not for his own fashion faux pas of sporting a pale blue hospital gown and robe. They practically matched in visual horror.

“You can donate almost anything to something,” Tony said. Only about six feet to go. He was practically ready for the Olympics. Maybe the Special Olympics. Yeah… no. He had seen those athletes, and he would be lucky to compete against them on a good day. Maybe a race against a baby just learning to crawl. “But none of the open stuff. That, Bruce had to pour down the drain. And some of those bottles are worth thousands. Pepper will get it to the right auction.”

“I have a hard time believing anyone would spend a thousand dollars on bourbon,” Steve sighed.

It was a jab at Tony’s own spending habits, though Tony never could tell if Steve realized he was doing it. Tony, on the other hand, knew exactly what he was doing when he made fun of people.

“People spend more on your collector edition cards,” Tony smiled at his own joke and the flush it brought to Steve’s face. He reached the bench. “Hell yeah! I am freakin’ Chris McCormack!”

The fun thing about making pop culture references around Steve or Thor was seeing that blank look cross their faces. Thor would come right out and ask for an explanation, but Steve! Steve liked to pretend as though he understood what was going on and then look it up later. This could be fun if
Tony pushed it until Steve finally admitted he had no idea what was happening in the conversation. Otherwise, it kind of looked like the man was not altogether interested in what Tony had to say. With the energy levels Tony was sporting right now, he decided not to play *make fun of Steve* this time.

“Do you need help getting back to your room?” Steve offered ever so kindly.

“I worked my ass off to get to this bench,” Tony reminded him, carefully lowering himself to the predictably uncomfortable seat. “I am going to enjoy it now. Have a seat, Cap. People watch with me.”

He tried not to rib the man too much. Steve really did mean well. The man was a brilliant battle strategist, but he was not so good with individuals. Particularly, he was not so good with Tony. It was hard to hold this against their team leader. Tony knew he was difficult to handle in general. Most people did not even try. That Steve did… well, that said a great deal about his character. He was working his way up the ranking ladder to Pepper and Rhodey heights of dependability. Truly. He was more dependable than Bruce. (Since Bruce had this nasty habit of running off to the far reaches of the world when he was feeling stressed. Tony never faulted him for that need, but it was sometimes disappointing to send off one of his better friends.)

“Anything interesting happen while I was gone?” Tony asked finally. If Steve got to ask awkward and uncomfortable questions, it was only fair he throw a few out himself.

Steve shot him a look that spoke clearly of the inappropriateness of the question.

“You didn’t spend every waking minute looking for me,” Tony pointed out. “Come on. Humor the invalid. Did you eat anyplace new? Battle any radioactive mutant ducks or the likes?”

Steve chuckled and shook his head, as if Tony was just as ridiculous as a person could get. That was okay. It was nice to see someone actually manage a smile that wasn’t totally put on around him.

“I guess, well… I met Charles Xavier,” Steve admitted finally.

“Professor X?” Tony offered an exaggerated grimace. “Are you joking?”

“You don’t like him?” Steve sounded surprised. Tony could not imagine why. “I thought he was nice.”

“I’m sure he’s perfectly nice. To you,” Tony scratched at his temple, recalling the odd sensation of the telepath in his head. Supposedly people were not supposed to notice it, and maybe Tony had just been paranoid, but he had been completely distractible the entire day he had been forced to spend with Xavier a couple years ago. He also recalled the way Xavier avoided talking to him whenever possible. “He just didn’t like me much. What was he doing in Manhattan?”

“We went to Westchester County, hoping he could help us find you,” Steve said. It brought the topic back to Tony, but he had started this, so he could not protest yet. “Cerebro is more attuned to finding mutants, supposedly, but he thought he might be able to find you with it.”

“Even though I’m not a mutant?”

“He said you were more like me, actually.” Tony looked at Steve in shock. When he thought of being compared to anyone, Captain America did not come close to making that list. Steve grinned, no doubt pleased that he had elicited that kind of response from Stark. “Enhanced. Mentally to my physically, but you see where he got it. He said being around you was like having twenty
“Stop, you’re making me blush,” Tony said bluntly. Steve smiled and shrugged. “So he thought he could… what? Find my busy brain?”

“He said he’d try.” Obviously he had not succeeded. Steve’s rueful frown implied it easily enough. The fact that Tony had not woken up one day with a swarm of Avengers and SHIELD agents breaking him out just proved it. “He said you were either too far out, or something was suppressing your mind.”

“I did spend most of my time high as a kite,” Tony winced. Even now he was not at his peak mental capacity. They said he was on basic pain meds and antibiotics, but something was leaving him fuzzy. He was certain of it, but there was not much he could do about it yet.

“Which was part of the reason your fever escalated so quickly,” Steve informed him. “You were in withdrawal. It’s kind of a miracle that you had the capacity to break out as you did. According to the doctors, you should have been curled up in a corner puking your guts up.”

“That paints such a pleasant picture,” Tony complained. It also explained why it was taking him so long to recover. There were ways to rapidly detox a body, and he was willing to bet they had risked the treatment for him. He was grateful for it. Tony had gone through withdrawal in the past, and it was not pretty.

“Sorry.”

They drifted into an uneasy silence. Surprisingly enough, people watching was not very interesting in SHIELD. Most of the men and women that walked by were either wearing suits or lab coats or that ugly unitard they called a uniform, and they all wore military approved hair styles. It was very dull.

Tony must have drifted off while sitting on that bench because the next time he opened his eyes, he was back on that despicable bed.

* * *
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

The circus produced a strange man-child.

Clint was the true surprise out of all his visitors.

Tony had known what most of them would do. Even Pepper was predictable in attempting to keep him to the doctors’ rigid schedule.

With Clint, he knew nothing. They were never particularly close. Clint had not put up with any of his shit when he had gone out drinking and flirting and generally making an ass of himself. The marksman had pretty much avoided him at that point.

Then he showed up at the hospital with a duffel bag over one shoulder and a scowl on his face when he found Tony arguing with the doctors over when he could go home.

“Mr. Stark, you’re not sleeping,” the doctor, whose name Tony had heard and promptly forgotten, was being ridiculously stubborn. “You’ve refused all manner of sleep aids. I don’t know how you’re even functioning at the capacity you are.”

“I’m sleeping,” Tony said. It was true. He had fallen asleep on Steve’s shoulder. When had the man left?

“You’re taking catnaps,” the irritating man snapped. “Ten minutes here. Fifteen there. You need a solid night’s rest. You need to stop wandering the corridors at night and actually use that time to sleep. Or during the day! I’m not picky!”

“I’ll sleep when I get home,” Tony insisted. It was at this point that Clint walked into the room.

“What’s going on?” the archer asked casually.

“Maybe you can talk some sense into him!” the damnable doctor decided it would be a good idea to try to use Tony’s teammates against him. That was just fighting dirty. “Get him to sleep. A sedative. A Vulcan nerve pinch! I don’t care. Just get him to rest,” the doctor turned his glare back to Tony, “and then maybe we’ll think about sending you home.”

“If I sleep, you’ll let me go home?” Tony perked up at that. Well, he could fake it, right?

“If you show improvement.”

“I got this, doc,” Clint said, again that steady calm. Tony was not sure he appreciated whatever Clint was trying to do. Still, he could not complain when the man escorted the agitated doctor out of the room and well away from Tony.

By the time Clint came back, he looked far more relaxed. Tony felt something in him release at that casual smirk. He had been prepared to have another fight, this time against someone who was far less inclined to roll over for the billionaire. But Clint just rubbed his hands together and went at the side rail on the bed, lowering it with practiced ease.
"You and me, Stark," he declared. "Mario Party battle in the break room."

“What?” Tony was not sure what to make of that. Still, he was not protesting when Clint manhandled him to the edge of the bed and helped him get on his feet. “What are you talking about?”

“I brought the N64,” Clint said, his tone reflecting exactly how slow he thought Tony was being. “And I am going to kick your ass at Mario Party.”

“You brought video games?” Perhaps Clint was right to use that you’re-so-specially-stupid tone with him, because Tony was not following. He just knew that Clint had an arm around his waist and was pulling him toward the door, away from the bed Tony so despised.

“Now you’re getting it.” Clint was patronizing him. Tony should have been offended, but he was just so pleased to be moving around and doing something that could be perceived as normal that he let it slide. “I have Coulson on my side, which means we’re barricading ourselves in the break room, and no one’s going to bother us. We can make a pillow fort and play video games all afternoon.”

“A pillow fort?”

“Are you fuckin’ kidding me?” Clint groaned. He looked at Tony, then cursed again. “You don’t know what a pillow fort is?”

“Some circus thing?” Tony did not like that his face was heating. He was not used to being the one who was ignorant. It just did not happen.

“I can’t believe you’ve never—Okay, that was totally a joke, but now it really isn’t.” Clint declared. “You and me. Video games in a pillow fort. In SHIELD medical. It’ll be awesome.”

Which was how Tony ended up spending the next twenty minutes watching Clint shove furniture around the small SHIELD break room. After he had created a rough semicircle around the old box television set with a sofa and four chairs, he retrieved some blankets and fashioned a droopy tent in the middle of the room.

“Set up the N64,” Clint ordered. “I’m going to get more pillows and blankets.”

Tony shook his head, baffled but amused, and hooked the gaming system up to the ancient television. The TV was a tragedy. SHIELD used state-of-the-art equipment (some of which Tony himself provided), and their break room had a TV set from the eighties. Tony was surprised he was able to connect Clint’s game console to it. The thing still had rabbit ears!

“No one really uses this TV,” Clint announced when he returned with an armload of pillows and blankets and set about spreading them out on the floor. “And the coffee in the cafeteria is way better. Come on in. Your palace awaits.”

It was not a palace. It felt more like a cocoon, if Tony was going to attach a word to it. Light filtered gently through the blanket over their heads, creating a soft blue glow that was quickly overwhelmed by the glow of the television.

It was cozy.

“You’re the mechanical genius, but I kick butt in video games,” Clint informed him. “Be prepared to lick my boots.”
“We’ll see about that,” Tony smirked.

Clint won. Twice. But Tony had fun. He was not a video game master as Clint claimed to be. He had not played video games much growing up, preferring to get his hands onto real robots as opposed to computerized portrayals. Plus, he was at the distinct disadvantage of having only one useable thumb at the moment. Still… he could get used to this gaming thing.

“Okay, you’re getting better, but I’m sick of Mario Party now,” Clint declared after his second win.

“Next time you can try me in backgammon,” Tony said. He ejected the game and cut the power.

“How about one real people know how to play?” Clint retorted. “Hey, leave it. I brought other games.”

“You want to play something else?” Tony had been certain Clint had met his quota for the daily Stark visit. It seemed about time to cart himself back to the hospital room with its awful bed.

“No, I’m done with it now. I just don’t want to keep disconnecting and reconnecting the console.”

“Right.” Tony plucked at the blanket draped over his lap, wondering if he should start cleaning up. The people at SHIELD might tolerate a video gaming system left attached to a television they never used, but he was pretty sure they would not be pleased to come into a room with furniture they could not use in it. Unless they wanted to crawl under a pillow fort with a cup of coffee on their breaks. “So… you have plans for the night?”

“Yeah.” Tony glanced up, a bit surprised to see Clint holding up a book. It was a copy of Fahrenheit 451. “I took this from your library, by the way.”

“I would not have opened it for your use if I never intended to let you take books from it,” Tony retorted. “I might have pegged you for a Bradbury fan. Tell me you’ve read Something Wicked.”

“The one with the carnival? Uh, yeah,” Clint rolled his eyes. “Lay down, Stark. It’s story time.”

That brought Tony up short.

This stupid pillow fort and the video games—it was Clint’s idea of fun, and Tony was a convenient companion. It was not as if he could leave whenever he wanted. Despite this afternoon of games, he was still a virtual prisoner in this hospital. This, though, was something different. Clint was not behaving in the way normal visitors did.

“You’re doing something weird,” Tony felt the need to point out. “What are you doing?”

“Me? I’m sharing a book I like with a guy who is an asshole, but I kind of like him despite it.” Clint leaned back against the sofa and pointed at the pile of pillows next to him. “I’m going to feel like an idiot reading aloud if you run away now, so lay your ass down and humor me, okay?”

“I don’t…” Tony faltered, not quite sure how to feel about this. It seemed a bit like Clint was making fun of him, but the man looked utterly serious. When Tony did not move one way or another, he opened the book and started reading. Aloud.

Tony sat there for a while, watching Clint read. It was like story hour at the library, but Tony was not a toddler, and Barton was not your average volunteer.

He dozed off a couple times, startling awake to that unpleasant sensation of falling and shrugging himself back to the present. Each time he would refocus, try to follow the story, and Clint would
read on as if nothing had happened. The third time he almost dropped off, he came to himself to something different than the story.

“I didn’t make this pile of pillows for show, Stark,” Clint murmured. “Lay down. I promise I won’t make you go back to your room, even if you fall asleep.”

For a moment, Tony was wide awake and staring at Clint uneasily. To his credit, Clint did not say anything else. He just set the book on the sofa (the cushion had been cannibalized to the floor, so it was fabric covered springs rather than a pillow) and held out his hand. Tony stared at the outstretched hand, not entirely convinced it was safe. This was Clint after all, master of the immature prank. But Clint did not lower his hand, and he did not look away.

Finally, Tony reached out and grabbed the proffered hand, squeezing and feeling Clint squeeze back. It took some maneuvering, but between the two of them, Tony managed to get himself settled on the pillows. Clint threw another blanket over him and did not say anything when Tony curled up on his side facing the archer. (He would have faced the other way, but he could not lay on his left arm yet. Really.)

After Tony was settled, Clint picked up the book and started reading again. This time, when he felt his eyelids start to droop, Tony did not feel that horrible feeling of falling. He just closed his eyes and listened until he could no longer hear the words.

* * *

Tony woke up to a camera’s flash and Clint’s snarled cursing.

“Son of a bitch! Hill!”

“Sorry, but you two are too cute for words,” Agent Maria Hill was crouched by an opening in the fort, phone in hand and a smile on her face. “And I felt this needed to be shared with the world.”

“Are you trying to get yourself shot, woman?” Clint demanded. “Give me that phone!”

“Not a chance. Besides, Fury wants to talk to you. Bruce is out here. He can take over Stark-sitting.”

There was something to be said to that, but Tony could not quite find his voice. Hill was taking great pleasure in mocking him, which was nothing new, but right now it actually stung. He was not really concerned about the picture itself. No doubt that would be circulating SHIELD by the time she left the room. Tony did not like that Hill was blatantly laughing at his inability to face the doctors and their demands that he stay in bed.

It was like everyone knew.

Clint scrambled out of the makeshift tent, still snapping and snarling after the woman.

“Are you a complete idiot?” Clint hollered. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“Tony?”

It was impossible not to flinch at that point. Even recognizing Bruce’s voice, Tony could not contain the reflex. He did manage to hide it by grumbling and turning his face into the pillow. As if he simply did not want to rouse when, in fact, he was completely alert. There was very little chance of him falling back to sleep now.
“Wow,” Bruce murmured. “I haven’t been in a fort since I was a kid.”

Tony peered out from the pillow, feeling sour and showing it. Bruce had crawled into the little cave of blankets and chairs. He looked up at the blanket overhead with something akin to awe on his face.

“It’s like being underwater,” he said, which was a comparison Tony could have lived without. Now that Bruce mentioned it, he did feel like he was underwater. The blue filtered light, the muffled sounds—it was very similar.

The pillow fort suddenly felt much less cozy.

“Yeah, well Clint seemed to think I led a deprived childhood,” Tony mumbled. “You’re next for Stark-sitting duty, I hear.”

“I should hope you outgrew babysitters years ago,” Bruce countered. “Actually, I thought you might like to have Jarvis around, so I brought this.”

There was no missing the Stark tablet that Bruce held up. Tony shoved himself upright, immediately reaching for his new favorite toy. He had not been near his tech for almost a month now, save that brief but horrible ride in the Iron Man suit.

“Have I told you recently that you’re my favorite?” he asked.

“Yes, but it’s always nice to be complimented.” Bruce held the tablet out of reach, setting it aside and helping Tony sit up instead. “First, cleanup. Then breakfast. Then Jarvis.”

“I take it all back,” Tony sighed. He hesitated. “Breakfast? What time is it?”

“Seven-thirty, Wednesday morning,” Bruce replied. “Come on. Out first. You have pillow duty.”

“I don’t know where Clint got all of these,” Tony whined. He did not add that he would be incapable of carrying this many pillows, let alone making the multiple trips it would take to get them to their proper places. Bruce knew it anyway.

“Just put the couch cushions back how they belong and pile the rest on there,” Bruce said reasonably.

He held Tony’s arm until he was steady on his feet, then set about disassembling the pillow fort. It took much less time to take the thing apart than it did to put it together, but the process was still fascinating. It took another prompting to tear Tony’s attention away from watching Bruce fix up the room, and he set about awkwardly piling the cushions on the sofa. By the time he was done, Bruce had created a neat pile of folded blankets on a chair that was lined up beside the table where it belonged. The sofa, on the other hand, looked like a pillow monster had walked by and vomited.

At this point, Tony was even more disappointed because he had to add another step between now and getting his tablet.

Bruce was ever so kind to stop at the bathroom for him.

They brought along the wheelchair, as was habit by now. Bruce brought Tony down to the cafeteria to eat, and the chair was along in case Tony could not make it the whole way. Of course, this time Bruce would not let him ride in it down to the cafeteria.

“You just want to be lazy so you can play with your computers while I push you around,” Bruce
said, completely correct in his assumption. Tony glared at him for it. “You’ve waited this long. You can wait until we get our food. Besides, you’re getting better at this. Another couple of days, and we won’t have to worry about you tumbling down the stairs at home.”

“I have an elevator,” Tony said haughtily. Despite his snide remark, a flutter of pleasure flitting through his stomach had him grinning. “I can go home?”

“Another couple nights of sleep like what you had last night, and the doctors will stop screaming to medicate you,” Bruce assured him. The statement sent an uneasy tremor through Tony’s chest.

“Just have Clint read boring books to me again,” he said, and damn it if his voice didn’t waver. He cleared his throat and coughed. Obviously there was something causing that shake. When he finished his remark, he was rock steady. “I’ll drop right off.”

“I’ll see if I can convince him,” Bruce agreed with a smile. They approached the cafeteria and the heavenly aroma of toast and eggs. “Okay, what’ll you have? My treat.”

* * *

Steve came by with Pepper that afternoon, after the doctors had forced Tony back to his bed (where they could supposedly monitor his vitals much more easily), and promptly started off conversation with an awkward opener.

“I heard you slept through the night.” Even Pepper winced at that one. “I’m glad. We were getting worried.”

“We have got to work on your ice breakers,” Tony told him. “Because I am so turned off right now, it’s not even funny.”

Steve flushed, and Pepper glared, and it was so normal that Tony just had to smile.

“I wasn’t trying to… to flirt!” Steve stuttered. It was adorable.

“Really?” Tony affected a look of wide-eyed innocence. “Because you always come in with something nice to say. I just assumed you were trying to get on my good side.”

“Tony! You’re not serious!” Steve blurted, utterly scandalized.

“Of course I’m not. But I had you going for a minute.” Because Tony had to joke while he was sitting in this bed. If he did not lighten things up, he would scream. It would be melodramatic and embarrassing, and he would not have the excuse of mind-altering medication to fall back on. “Bruce brought me Jarvis. I’ll bet you nothing you brought could be that awesome.”

“I brought a book.” Steve held up War and Peace. Literally. That was the book he brought. Tony had forgotten that one was even in the library when he had the books transferred to the tower. He had read it once, back when he was a kid and some tutor thought to broaden his horizons. “I heard you wanted story time later.”

“You could not have found a drier book if you tried,” Tony muttered, but he accepted the book. It was a nice gesture, even if the title choice sucked. “You’re not wrong. This will put me to sleep.”

“That’s okay,” Steve said, even as Pepper added, “Some sleep would do you good right now, Tony.”

Tony was not sure why his heart started racing at that moment. He forced a smile and picked up
his tablet. If Pepper or Steve noticed how he ignored them the rest of their visit, they did not say anything.

* * *

It was difficult to determine how he felt about Clint lately.

“I know you wanted to play backgammon,” Clint announced when he strolled into the room that evening.

Tony instantly felt much better at his arrival. He quickly clamped down on the urge to straighten and perk up like a puppy with its tail wagging. He did not know when this had happened. Never before had he looked at Clint Barton and felt the strong desire to curl up at his feet begging for attention. It was degrading and ridiculous and utterly beneath him, and he would not do it.

“But I don’t know how to play,” Clint continued, oblivious to Tony’s internal battle. “I know I have an unfair advantage in the video game department, what with actually having the use of both hands, so I really should let you kick my ass in backgammon, but it’s no fun if there isn’t at least the illusion of a sporting chance. So I brought chess.”

“Chess?” Tony felt inordinately proud of himself for being remotely coherent. When had he gotten this awkward around Barton? Oh right. It had happened sometime between losing at Mario Party and a night spent curled up sleeping next to him.

“At least I know which way all the pieces are supposed to move in chess.”

Clint did not even ask if Tony wanted to leave the room. He immediately set about helping Tony off the bed and then leading him out into the hallway.

They ended up in the break room again.

“Coulson got on me for the pillow fort thing, so you have to settle for the couch this time,” Clint told him.

Tony took that to mean that he was supposed to sit. Not quite sure why he was following orders from Clint of all people, he sat and watched the other man set up the chess board. It was a cheap set, with a fold out board and plastic pieces. Tony had a nicer set at home. He said as much.

“One: I am not carrying that heavy ass marble chess table around just so you can avoid touching cheap toys,” Clint retorted. “And two: when I inevitably break your big expensive chess set, Rogers will give me that sad look, and we all agree that is something to be avoided.”

“He’s good at the puppy dog stare,” Tony agreed. This was good. This banter was familiar, and he could do this. “Are you sure you want to do this? I’m good at this game.”

“Rogers said he beat you.”

“Steve is a tactician with more patience than God,” Tony pointed out, because Clint was saying things that were seriously ego-damaging, and that was just not nice. “And you are not Steve.”

Clint grinned and sat across from him, watching as Tony lined up the pieces in their proper squares.

“How come I have to be white?” Clint asked when he realized how Tony was setting up the game.
“White goes first,” Tony replied. “I’m a nice guy, so I’ll give you that advantage.”

“You’re just that confident you can win,” Clint griped.

This was also true. Tony was certain by Clint’s second move that he was going to win.

When it came right down to it, Tony always chose black. White went first, and that did, theoretically speaking, give the player a leg up over black. However, there was something about being the proverbial underdog that Tony appreciated. He reveled in the challenge of it, was that much more satisfied when he came out on top. (And, okay Clint was right, Steve always won. But Steve could probably win world championships if he wanted. Besides, Tony would totally kick his all-American ass in backgammon.)

He did win. He beat Clint in what was probably one of the shortest games Tony ever played.

“Are you seriously this bad, or are you just making fun of me?” he wondered.

“I’d like to see you pick up a bow and shoot an arrow straight on your first try—or your fiftieth,” Clint replied. He picked up the pieces and set it up to start a new game.

“When I have full range of motion in my left arm again, I will take that challenge.”

“Are you done bragging yet? Go.”

“You want me to start? White always starts.”

“I’m not a pro, and I’m willing to break the rule this once.”

“Your loss.”

It really was. Clint was one of the worst chess players Tony had ever had the dubious pleasure of playing against. Tony might always lose against Steve, but at least the games lasted longer. Bruce played against Tony a few times, and he was decent, but he was always distracted and too worried about the wrong pieces to ever win. He was still much better than Clint.

“According to Bruce, you actually liked my story hour,” Clint said as he packed up the board in its dilapidated cardboard box. The thing was held together with scotch tape and probably came from the depths of Fury’s cabinets. Tony wondered how much dust Clint had to blow off the box when he found it. “But I brought Goldfinger, Die Hard and the Lethal Weapon movies on DVD. We can dig up a player and watch movies or read. Your choice.”

Tony had the feeling he did not have any choice in the matter, outside of the one Clint had given him of course. He wondered what Clint would say if Tony declared that he wanted to return to his room. Clint would probably call him a liar. They both knew he never would suggest such a dreadful thing.

“I am a Mel Gibson fan.”

At least with a movie he could pretend like it was a mutual decision in entertainment. Although he kind of wanted to finish the book they had started last night.

“Lethal Weapon it is.”

“This is just like watching it when it first came out,” Tony said to fill up the silence while Clint putzed around behind the TV set. “Grainy and very eighties.”
“Somehow, I doubt you ever watched this movie on a TV like this,” Clint snorted. “Get your ass over here and make this thing work.”

“Did you know that even Steve can work the television?” Tony sniped.

Even so, he took Clint’s place behind the television and eyed the cords critically. It was the old component video cables, which were only slightly less difficult to connect than an HDMI cable. Then he looked at the DVD player, which looked very familiar. Clint had scavenged the player from one of the guest rooms at Avengers Tower, presumably his own. He was lucky this thing had component cable hookup. Tony was certain his personal entertainment system did not. (Actually, if he thought about it, his entertainment system was connected directly to Jarvis, and HDMI did not even come close to covering it.)

“Fuck you very much,” Clint flung himself back on the couch. “I tried to bring your player, but it doesn’t travel well.”

“My personal electronics are prototypes I have yet to dumb down for the general public.”

Tony leaned over, satisfied to see the *Lethal Weapon* disc menu page on the screen. He attached the final cord. There was a sharp burst of static, silence, and when he pressed Play, the Warner Bros. Pictures logo appeared, and the opening music started.

“That explains why Jarvis threw a hissy fit when I went near it.”

Clint had adopted a sprawl that made it appear as though he was attempting to become one with the sofa. He had his arms flung over the back cushion, the rest of him slouched down and spread out equally wide. Tony’s sitting space had actually gotten much smaller no thanks to the way Clint splayed across the cushions.

Annoyed, Tony kicked at Clint’s ankle in attempt to get him to move. His only response was a cocky smirk that lasted half a second before Clint focused on the beginning of the film.

“Asshole,” Tony grumbled.

He folded himself into the corner of the sofa. Whatever Clint thought he was doing, Tony was not playing this game. He was fine with some help getting to where he needed to be. He had even come to accept the occasions where people had moved him while he was sleeping, back when he had been shaky from the lingering effects of infection and withdrawal. Tony was not, however, inclined to get cuddly with a guy who had previously only shared a couple drinks and jokes with him. Clint could take his hugs and touchy-feely crap and shove it up his ass.

Ten minutes into the film, Clint was leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, completely engrossed. Tony was surprised that the man had that much interest in a cheesy eighties buddy film. Still, he felt a bit better. This behavior meant Clint was just being his usual asshole self. The cuddle-fest of before was truly just Clint being Clint, deliberately making people around him uncomfortable.

Despite knowing this, it took nearly an hour before Tony was convinced Clint was not going to try to invade his space again. He must have dozed off at some point after that because he missed the end of the movie.

He woke briefly to the sound of Clint reading. It sounded like more *Fahrenheit 451*, and the speaking was from a distance. Sensing he had the sofa to himself, Tony kicked his legs up, stretched out and let himself drift to the low drone of Clint’s voice.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Theory of the naive and desperate: if you can't see it, it's not there...

Chapter Notes

Made up some stuff about the layout of the tower...

He was home. After a week and two days of being in the company of a whack-job and then another two and a half weeks in SHIELD medical, Tony had gotten his wish. He was home.

It felt strange.

Tony recalled coming home from Afghanistan. This was not even remotely the same, being as Judas had never actually threatened him or tried to torture him into cooperating with some horrible agenda. No, not the same at all.

Except that Tony once again felt like a stranger in his own home.

The team was disgustingly kind. Even Natasha showed up to celebrate his return to the tower.

“Welcome home, sir. Might I add what a pleasure it is to see you enter under your own power?” Jarvis offered with his typical acerbic wit.

“Good to be back.”

Tony yanked off his tie, worn only to please the presses when he had to be seen in public. They had tried to downplay it. Bad enough the world knew Tony Stark had been missing (again), it would be worse if he reappeared with serious looking injuries.

His hand was in a cast, but he was able to laugh and shrug that off as a hazard of the job. No one knew anything was wrong with his shoulder. He was not actually required to have the sling on at all times, and the doctors encouraged him to work on moving his shoulder—very carefully, of course. Bruce was helping him with it. The sling still came home with him because it would probably hurt enough that he would need a break.

As far as the country knew, Tony had been off defending them against the evils of the world. While he was a little banged up, he was none the worse for the wear, and they were all perfectly safe.

Tony was fine letting them think that. He was just fine with everyone thinking he just needed a little time to mend.

Because that was all he needed.
Some time in his lab, and he would be right as rain.

Although, when you thought about it, that was a stupid simile.

“Bruce made dinner,” Steve said when Tony brushed past him to stand by the window. The city was busy as always, though at this height the it was less a view of the mania below and more a picture of the buildings’ mirrored sides. He would have to press close to the window and peer directly down to see the reporters camped out on his doorstep. Since he had no desire to see that (he had seen plenty on his way in), Tony just stared at the cityscape.

“I thought we could have a bit of a celebration tonight,” Steve said, sounding dreadfully awkward. Out of sympathy, Tony did not look at him. Steve hated wild parties—they all knew this—which was what he seemed to think all of Tony’s parties were. That he was even suggesting something Tony should enjoy was testament to how hard he was trying.

Tony just wanted them all to leave him alone.

“Some drinks—non-alcoholic, of course, since you’re not drinking,” Steve babbled.

“I’ll take dinner in my lab,” Tony cut the poor man off before he could get too carried away with meaningless chatter. “I want to make sure no one’s been fucking around in there while I was gone.”

He glanced over with a smirk, one which quickly faded into a disapproving frown at the mixed looks of amusement and disgust.

“Not like that, you perverts,” he snapped. “Although, if anyone does that without my permission, I give Jarvis full authorization to record it and post it to Youtube. Got that, Jarvis?”

“Of course, sir.” That was Jarvis’s humoring-Mr.-Stark voice. Tony knew it. Everyone else probably knew it too, but as long as one of them believed Tony would actually do what he claimed, he was okay with this. And Steve was looking dubious.

“Right,” Tony headed toward the elevators. “If anyone needs me, I’ll be in the sublevels.”

“You should eat, Tony,” Steve reminded him sternly. The admonishment sent an unhappy little shiver through his gut, so Tony just ignored him. Besides, Bruce understood. That much was obvious when the man held out a prepared plate for him.

“Don’t stay up too late,” Bruce ordered when Tony accepted the dish on his way to the elevator. “I will send Steve down there to haul your skinny backside to bed.”

Tony shot him an offended glower. Bruce just raised an eyebrow and turned to herd everyone else to the table.

The elevator doors shut behind him, and Tony was finally alone.

* * *

Tony’s days fell into a sort of routine over the next couple months. He would rise early, usually earlier than everyone else, and head to his workshop. There, he would work on the project of the day, until Jarvis informed him that Bruce was announcing breakfast.

Breakfast was always an ordeal. Steve was always there. Sometimes Steve rose earlier than Tony, which was kind of impressive, and he would go for a run through the city before the ambitious workers started making their way toward the surrounding office buildings. Aside from Steve and
Bruce, Natasha would occasionally make an appearance. Coulson showed up at least once a week to have a cup of coffee and a bagel before rounding up Clint and Natasha to keep them up-to-date with the SHIELD side of their jobs.

And to update the group on the status of the Judas hunt.

Tony hated that part. It was not that he wanted the guy to go free in his deluded ways. It just made him uncomfortable to think about. Every time the guy’s name came into conversation he wanted to squirm and excuse himself from the room. Sometimes he did. Sometimes he stayed. Mostly he just tuned it out. Smiled, nodded, thanked Coulson for keeping them informed. Pretended he was perfectly okay with their lacking headway in finding a man with no name who had not been on any guest lists or employee rosters and had otherwise seemed to have dropped off the face of the earth.

As usual, he would escape back to his workshop, where he would usually remain until someone advised him to eat. Typically, that was Steve. Captain America would show up in the lab, inform him in no uncertain terms that it was time for a break, and drag him up to join whoever was home for dinner. Tony remained long enough to eat, share a few meaningless pleasantries, convince everyone he was still alive, and then he was downstairs again.

Projects were spread about the workshops that spanned two floors of the basement levels of the tower. Tony usually kept to sublevel 2. Sublevel 1 was for his cars, and he had wrecked plenty of those while creating and updating the armor. The only time he worked in sublevel 1 was when he felt the sudden urge to rip apart an engine of one of the older vehicles he occasionally indulged in restoring.

He had plenty to do. Bruce might have had a point about him using work to keep his mind focused away from whatever was bothering him, but at least he was not wasting his time. He recalled a time in his life when he had more free time than he knew what to do with. That had resulted in a lot of one-night stands and too many parties to track. Now, it seemed like there was not enough time to finish half of what he needed done.

Tony was working three jobs, after all.

There was the Stark Industries side of his life. Pepper did her best to keep his job easy, but Tony was still the owner and CEO of a multi-billion dollar company. He had to attend board meetings and occasionally walk his plants and make certain business was running smoothly. He also was the power horse behind research and development, which meant he reviewed everything that went through the department and was continually creating or upgrading the products Stark Industries produced.

He spent no less than sixty hours a week on this.

SHIELD was also a demanding bitch. Fury had Tony down as a consultant, but it was amazing how often he would show up on ‘Tony’s’ missed calls list. Tony despised him, which Fury knew. (Tony had made this quite clear the one time the bastard dared show up while he was in the hospital. Tony had been a bit under the influence of some drug or another, but the visit had been brief, and Bruce had later informed him that he had been extremely rude. Get the fuck out of my room may or may not have been words that were used.)

Phil was still the liaison. Fury knew that Tony loved and feared the man by equal measures, which was no doubt one more reason the man kept showing up urging him to provide more help for SHIELD personnel. Please keep our helicarrier in the air, our employees are starving waifs, just look at their sunken eyes. (Yeah, that was because of Fury, not because of lack of funding. Tony was convinced of this.) Still, Tony liked Coulson, and he was hard pressed to say no.
At least forty hours were spent on SHIELD projects.

Avengers business was a little slow these days. The team still went out, still kicked butt with depressing regularity, but Tony was strictly on support. The fact that he could not put on Iron Man’s gauntlet without wanting to cry in agony was the main reason behind this. His shoulder was healing nicely, would be ready for more stressful exercise in a couple weeks, but his hand was going to take some work. Unlike some of the more enhanced members of the team (whose names he would not mention, but they began with Steve and Bruce), Tony needed the full six weeks for healing broken bones, not to mention the rehabilitation of stiffening muscles.

Even so, this business took anywhere from two to thirty hours a week.

Add into that mealtimes, personal grooming, physical therapy, and mandatory socializing, and Tony had anywhere from twenty to thirty hours left for himself.

Those hours were usually spent sleeping on an old sofa he kept near the back of the workshop. If he was lucky.

* * *

Sometime after Thanksgiving (which Tony had cleverly avoided thanks to a factory inspection in Japan), Steve took it upon himself to harass Tony about his current lifestyle.

“You can’t be getting quality sleep on that thing.”

Tony yawned and dragged a hand over his face, feeling the coarseness of his goatee and the stubble around it. He had a meeting with… someone… the next day, according to Jarvis (and as Pepper would no doubt remind him later). He would have to shave.

Steve had indirectly woken him by coming down to the workshop. It was not Steve himself who had woken Tony, but Jarvis. Tony liked to be informed when someone was coming to invade his space, thus he had an earlier-than-usual wakeup call when Steve descended to the lower sublevel.

“What can I do for you, Cap?” It was a little direct, but Tony was not caffeinated yet. Ironically, since he had stopped drinking, he had a worse time rising in the mornings than he ever had before. The notion sent a brief surge of craving through him, which he ruthlessly squashed. There was no alcohol in the tower, and Steve would not let him have any even if this were not the case.

“You have a perfectly serviceable room upstairs—more than serviceable, I’d say—but you never use it.”

Tony did not even try looking at Steve. That would have required craning his neck, and he was too tired for that yet. But Steve wanted eye contact apparently, because a moment later he was sitting on the sofa beside Tony. There was little to be done at this point but to turn his head and squint at the man.

Steve was wearing that blue and white plaid shirt today. That thing was an atrocity. Someone needed to get this boy some clothing better suited to the big city.

“You look tired, Tony,” Steve said bluntly. “You’ve looked tired for the past several weeks. I’m worried you’re working too hard.”

“There are things which need doing,” Tony said around another yawn. It was five thirty—only half an hour before he usually rose—but he was undercaffeinated and speaking with Rogers, who had
gotten up on his high horse it seemed. He had a right to be a little grumpy. “I make sure they get
done. There’s really nothing more to it than that.”

“There is,” Steve insisted, his frown in full force now. “You’re not taking care of yourself. You
seem to think the world will grind to a halt if you take a day off. Trust me, Tony. The world will
not stop turning if you take one day for yourself.”

“I like what I do.” Tony was offended that Steve thought otherwise. Even the crap Fury wanted
was enjoyable to an extent. There were a few dissonant chords that struck when Tony handed
anything over to SHIELD, but that did not change the fact that he liked creating the things in the
first place.

“That’s not the point here,” Steve said. “You need sleep. In a bed.”

“I sleep plenty.” It would have been a better argument had he not gotten caught in a jaw-cracking
yawn at the end of that statement.


“I have a meeting.” It was a weak effort, but Tony was still craving that hit of cappuccino, or
scotch.

“Not until tomorrow.”

Steve had him by the arms and was physically guiding him out of the workshop before Tony could
get past the startling realization that Steve knew his work schedule. Tony resisted a bit. It was
halfhearted at best. He knew better than to fight Steve without the Iron Man armor. He would lose.

“This is ridiculous,” he grumbled. “I have things to do.”

“You have sleep to catch up on,” Steve retorted. “Anything else can wait.”

“It’s daytime,” Tony tried again. “Who can sleep when it’s light out?”

“I’ve seen you do it plenty of times.” Damn the elevator for its speed. They were already on Tony’s
floor and headed toward his room. “Is this an insomnia thing? Because I can get someone to get
you a sleep aid.”

“I’m fine.”

He resented the hell out of the fact that Steve even brought that up. All of them suffered from
insomnia at some point or another, and no one ever said anything about it. Hell, Tony could recall
plenty of nights spent sitting up with Steve, keeping the man company when his mind would not
shut down and let him rest. Steve never thanked him—Tony might have broken out into hives if he
had—and they never spoke of it. How dare this little prick say anything now?

“It’s okay if it is, you know.”

Steve probably thought he was being reassuring. Tony was not comforted at all. He stumbled and
catch himself on the edge of the bed. He wished he could say the stumble was deliberate. He
wished he could convince himself that he had not just snatched his hand back as though burned.

He did spin and flash Steve his biggest, brightest smile.

“Look, I couldn’t sleep a wink, Cap, honest. So why don’t we just go have breakfast—”
The hand at the side of his head effectively gagged him. Tony tensed, eyes darting up to Steve’s face. Steve’s hand was large, spanning from the thumb under Tony’s jaw to the fingertips around the back of his skull, and it was so strange to feel that kind of touch from him. Tony had been convinced the man did not like him that much, despite all attempts at being civil. It was fine. Tony did not make himself easy to like. But that did not explain why Steve was cradling his head and looking at him so calmly.

“Anthony Edward Stark,” Steve said sternly. “Go to bed.”

There was little he could say to that. In fact, it was all he could manage to breathe out any sort of a response.

“Okay.”

Steve smiled warmly, gratefully, and patted the side of his head like he was a small child. Or a dog. Tony stared at him, mesmerized, horrified, and utterly baffled.

“Good. I’ll bring you something to eat later.”

“Yeah.”

The sweatpants and tank top were as good as anything to sleep in, so Tony did not bother changing. He just stood there and watched Steve pull back the covers. When those blue eyes turned on him expectantly, Tony could do nothing but slide between the sheets and eye Steve warily when the man tugged the blankets back over his shoulders.

Steve brushed a hand over his forehead, down over Tony’s eyes, which he closed reflexively.

“Try to sleep,” Steve murmured. “Just a little.”

Tony did not know what to say. He kept his eyes closed when Steve reclaimed his hand.

“Yeah.”

Steve left, and Tony opened his eyes again. He thought of nothing and stared at the ceiling until Steve came back bearing a tray full of food for lunch.

* * *

This, too, became part of the routine.

Steve seemed to think it his purpose in life to make sure Tony slept in his room after his first attempt was deemed successful.

It could have been worse, Tony supposed. His bed had more space than the couch in his lab, and then he was right there by his closet and shower when he got up in the morning. Jarvis was always kind enough to answer when Tony would ask for the morning forecast, despite the fact that both of them knew he didn’t care about the weather.

He hated it. Despised it really. As much as he tried to pretend he was okay with this, he really, really wanted Steve to leave him alone.

The thing about it was, Steve would give him this worried look whenever he tried to protest. It was a small expression, just a crinkle between his eyebrows which invariably preceded a stern lecture. Like he was a child who needed tending. He was a man who was so incredibly inept that someone
else had to step in and take care of him.

Tony was starting to look forward to the days when Steve left on missions, and that was horrible of him. Those were dangerous, and Steve could die, and he was the worst person on the planet for being glad simply because it meant he had a night where Steve would not harangue him into leaving the comfort of his workshop.

To make things worse, the population of the tower had changed a bit—Natasha and Clint were off on some mission halfway around the world (no one would tell him where), and Thor was visiting in their stead. Actually, Thor arrived just the day after they left, a complete coincidence, and Tony thought he would be grateful for the distraction.

Then Thor opened his damned mouth.

“Anthony, my friend!”

Thor’s greetings were always exuberant and nearly backbreaking. Tony yelped as he was wrapped in huge arms and his feet left the carpet. He could not even flail properly. Thor pinned his arms to his sides, and his legs met the resistance of Thor’s body, so there was nothing Tony could do but hang two feet off the ground like an oversized doll.

Fortunately his shoulder had healed considerably, or this would have been an excruciating reunion. He did not say it, but he felt much better that Bruce and Steve were subjected to the same assault. It was horribly gratifying to see that uncomfortable look on Steve’s face.

“Good to see you again, Thor,” Steve said when they had all been thoroughly choked. “How are things in Asgard?”


“I’m sorry to hear that,” Steve said, sounding as honest as he always did. The man was ridiculously sincere. Tony could have said those same words, but he would not have meant them. As far as he was concerned, Loki could rot.

“Fortunately I have friends to share the burden. I spent the past week with Jane,” Thor informed them. He cheered instantly upon speaking the woman’s name. Tony recalled something about Thor having a girlfriend in New Mexico. “She is as brilliant as ever, and she has done much to improve my mood. Alas, she has been called to work in… she called it Alaska?”

“Seriously?” Tony looked up from where he was pouring himself a fortifying cup of coffee. It was getting late, and Steve was frowning at him, but he did not care. Thor’s arrival had thrown off his entire biorhythm. Bruce seemed to agree with him. The man was fixing himself a cup of tea. Say what you would about a relaxing cuppa. That tea was caffeinated. “What could possibly be up in the arctic?”

“My Jane is a scientist of repute, much like yourself and Doctor Banner,” Thor said frankly. “Wherever she is called, she is needed.”

“You do know how to flatter,” Tony snorted. “Well, I’d love to stay and chat, but I’ve got work to do.”


“Steven is correct, Anthony,” Thor smiled. “Could you not relax with friends tonight?”
“Can’t you just leave it?” Tony snapped, then winced. Steve looked offended, not to mention Thor’s startled blink. He backtracked quickly. “Thor, I’m glad you’re here, but I’m on a deadline. I really need to get this done, and I swear we’ll hang later. Okay?”

“Of course,” Thor agreed readily. “You have responsibilities. I would not wish to hinder you.”

“Thank you.”

Tony shot Steve a look, daring him to say something more. Thankfully, he did not. He looked displeased, but he said nothing to try to halt Tony’s retreat. Bruce nodded at him, and Tony fled for the basement.

* * *
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Hitting rock bottom always hurts.

Tony was glad Thor was around. He truly was. When the others were called on a mission, Thor was an invaluable asset. Tony was grounded until January, and he did everything he could to help from home, but Thor was almost invincible. He was right up there with the Hulk, was the only one who could really hold his own against the big green guy, and they needed him.

But Thor was as bad as Steve.

“Steve Rogers says you have injured yourself,” Thor said a couple nights after he arrived. They were sitting at the dinner table (again, Steve had dragged Tony upstairs). Tony had snacked earlier. He felt a bit sorry that he did not feel like eating Bruce’s cooking—Bruce was an awesome cook—but he could not bring himself to do anything but pick at it. “You should be more cautious. Humans are frail.”

“We can’t all be gods,” Tony wagged his fingers, smirking when his thumb cooperated with the movement. It was moving slowly, and he could not put a lot of pressure on it, but he was regaining some of his dexterity. “I’ll be playing the piano again in no time.”

“As an engineer, Tony’s hands are actually very important,” Bruce remarked, taking the attention away from Tony’s comment lest someone ask if he could actually play an instrument. (He could. He just… didn’t.) “We’re happy the injuries were kept to a minimum.”

“I am confused,” Thor admitted. “I was of the belief that the Man of Iron protected you from acquiring such injuries.”

Tony reached for his water. He could not answer when his mouth was so dry. Fortunately, Steve spoke up for him.

“He wasn’t in the armor when it happened,” Steve said. “We’re still looking for the guy who did it.”

That statement was only half true, since they were, in fact, still looking for Judas (so they said, but by this point Tony knew better; the leads were cold, and Judas wasn’t in any federal databases). But Tony had done this to himself. No one seemed to get how very self-inflicted all the damage was. They were all too keen on pinning it on the guy whose actual crime Tony was having difficulty identifying.

“Indeed!” Thor looked furious at the thought. “The man who would commit so grave a sin as to deliberately wound our brave warrior should be found and punished.”

“It wasn’t deliberate,” Tony blurted. It was a little unpleasant that all eyes turned to him when he spoke. He was accustomed to being the center of attention for a much larger crowd, so he could handle three people staring at him. Besides, he should set the record straight. “He wasn’t actually trying to hurt me. It was… an accident.”
The silence was kind of painful. Tony despised silence when he wasn’t alone. Hell, he hated it when he was alone. That was why he had playlists and media to keep from going crazy.

“We’re going to catch him,” Steve said abruptly. It was back to normal. He looked to Thor, and they shared a look of manly determination. (Tony was going to make sure that look got trademarked. Only Steve and Thor seemed capable of it.) “It’s just a matter of time.”

This was what he did not like. Tony was not sure if Steve noticed it, but he had a tendency to talk about people as though they were not present. Or maybe it was just him. Steve talked about him whether or not he was present—this was made plenty obvious by Thor’s initial statement—and when Tony was around, there was no equality. It was as though Tony was a child, a precocious child to be sure, but a child nonetheless.

“Tony?”

He recoiled from the hand on his arm without thinking. This anger was irrational. He knew it, saw it as though from an outsider’s point of view, and had as much influence over it.

“What?!”

Tony felt a little bad about snapping at Bruce. Seriously, though? What was with everyone trying to force him to participate in this family fun time? This was something new, and he did not know quite what to do with it. Normal people wanted to spend a little bit of time with him and then return home to their happier, more sane friends and family. That was how it was, had always been, and should always be. Why were these people deviating?

“Thor was saying he would like a tour of the city while not under foreign attack,” Steve said. He sounded wary, and Tony tried not to be pleased about that. Being happy about making someone else uncomfortable was an asshole way to be, and—yep—he was an asshole. “We figured, since you grew up around here—more recently than I did, anyway—you’d be the best choice for a tour guide.”

That was embarrassingly untrue. Tony had Happy, Pepper, or Jarvis to tell him where he needed to go and how to get there. He had never ventured out to the typical tourist traps. The only time he paid attention to the Statue of Liberty was when he was avoiding flying into it as Iron Man. Ellis Island? Yeah right. Central Park? Like he needed to spend an afternoon communing with a big city’s version of nature. Steve had probably seen more of the sights New York had to offer than Tony ever had.

“Maybe you should have Pepper show you around,” Tony pushed his plate away and stood. “SHIELD’s firewalls are falling to the likes of teenage hackers, and I told Phil I’d help them out, so if no one needs anything? No? Good.”

He left the table, trying not to hear it when Steve muttered apologies to Thor.

“He’s been like this for weeks. I don’t know what’s wrong.”

The elevator was a safe haven. Tony hit the button for sublevel 2 and tried to ignore the clenching in his chest.

Looking at the ceiling and its recessed lighting, Tony wondered at the sudden pang of longing that lodged itself in his throat. For some reason, he really wished Clint would come home.

* * *
Fury called that night. Steve was only slightly more friendly to the director of SHIELD than Tony was, but he was infinitely more willing to listen. This was how Fury kept them on a leash, of course. Tony knew it. Everyone knew it. But they scampered after the dangling carrot anyway.

Steve and Thor headed for somewhere in South America, and Bruce was off to the West Indies. Tony saw them off, more out of habit than anything else.

Bruce looked at him with his usual expression of unease. The man needed to relax. And this was coming from Tony, whose view on life was that there could never be enough caffeine.

Thor left him with another of his manly embraces.

“Take care, Anthony,” he said. “We will miss your presence in battle.”

“I’m sure,” Tony grunted, ever so grateful when his feet were back on the floor.

Steve, naturally, could be trusted not to trust him at all. Tony sighed when a red-gloved hand caught the back of his neck and squeezed gently.

“Remember to sleep. Jarvis promised he’d remind you to go to bed,” Steve told him. “A bed, Tony.”

“Yeah,” he grunted, because it was just easier to let Steve have his way. The man was the worst kind of harpy. Tony did not doubt that, when he returned, he would be asking Jarvis if Tony actually spent his nights in his bed. “Go beat up some bad guys.”

Steve smiled wryly, his hand light on the side of Tony’s head. It should have been a comfort. Tony knew he meant it to be kind. The knowledge that Steve Rogers would never be anything but nice was the only way Tony was able to keep from completely hating him.

The door shut, and Tony was left alone.

He had yet to decide if that was a good thing.

* * *

“Sir, I feel I should remind you that you have been acting against Captain Rogers’ expressed wishes.”

“A night on the couch won’t kill me, Jarvis,” Tony grunted. His head and most of his upper body were in the torso of the Iron Man armor. More upgrades. By the time he actually got to use this baby, he was going to be so amped up he wouldn’t need the rest of the team. Which seemed kind of okay, actually.

“While you are correct, I might add that three days without sleep is less than healthy,” Jarvis said.

“Ever the buzz kill, Jarvis,” Tony sighed. “Three days. Seriously?”

“It is Thursday, sir.”

“Shit. Cap is going to kill me.”

“I sincerely doubt that, sir, as he seems to be doing his best to keep you healthy. Which is more than I can say for anyone else presently in this room.”

“Not nice, Jarvis,” Tony complained.
Okay, okay. So maybe Jarvis was right. Maybe he needed some sleep. But there was so much to do and so little time in which to do it. Without the interruptions of the other Avengers forcing such things as socializing and sleep and mealtimes on him, he had finished two projects for SHIELD, upgraded half a dozen StarkTech items (that perhaps could have waited until they hit the shelves to become outdated, but Tony was always ahead of the scale), and fixed the bugs in Marks VII and IX (namely, the autopilot that took over even if Tony asked it not to). Jarvis had not been happy about that last one.

“Sir, Miss Potts is calling.”

“Does she sound angry? If she’s angry I don’t want to talk to her.”

“She says to remind you of your shareholder meeting tomorrow morning.”

“Noted. It’s on you to make sure I go, Jarvis.”

So useful, Jarvis.

“Sir.”

“You can tell her I have acknowledged and accepted, and I will not embarrass her.” He was not ready to finish yet. He still had miles to go before everyone got back. They were due back tonight, and he had to finish before Steve came down here and made him stop.

“Is that new armor?”

“Jesus fucking Christ!” The pliers and wire cutters fell, one of them hitting his foot while Tony’s startled jump meant that his head impacted quite soundly against the inside of the armor. “Shit!”

“Jeez, Stark. Jumpy much?”

Tony did not dignify that with a response. He was torn between clutching at his bruised skull and grabbing for his injured foot, the result being a rather undignified collapse to the floor while he attempted to do both.

“Crap. You okay?”

How the hell had Barton gotten down here without Jarvis alerting him first? When had the man even gotten back anyway? He was supposed to have this place to himself! Tony forced his eyes open and glared up into Clint’s worried face.

“What. The hell.”

Clint grinned wryly.

“I’ll take that to mean you’re not seriously injured,” he declared. “Jesus, Stark. You look like hell.”

“Thank you,” Tony accepted the arm up and hobbled to the nearest chair. He fell into it with a groan and squinted down at his foot. Already a bruise was forming along the bone. “Ouch. This is why you take the normal route in here, Barton. So Jarvis can tell me you’re coming and I don’t do this shit to myself.”

“I was under the impression that you liked the heads up so you could put on a better game face when you knew we were coming,” Clint retorted.

Dum-E wheeled over holding out an ice pack. Clint intercepted and handed the pack to Tony.
While Tony was distracted with icing his foot, Clint grabbed his head and ran a rough hand over the back of his skull, the resulting stab of pain highly unpleasant. Tony swore colorfully.

“Do you mind?” Tony shook free, wincing at the dull throb of his head when he did so. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Not me,” Clint held up a hand. His fingertips glistened red. “You clocked yourself good. Stay put. I’ll get the first aid kit.”

Tony grumbled and sat still while Clint cleaned up his self-inflicted injuries. This was getting to be a bad habit. At least Clint was kind enough to find more ice and numb the pain that had started pounding through his brain. He worked in silence, only speaking to order Tony to hold a rag, an antiseptic pad, the ice, and to give them back again.

It was nice. Tony could deal with this.


Tony grunted. That was as good of a response as anyone could expect from anybody who was holding two ice packs to different parts of their body. Besides, he had more important things to wonder about, like when had Clint gotten back? And would this adversely affect Tony and his work schedule?

“The new armor looks pretty sweet, by the way,” Clint offered a few minutes later.

If there was ever a way to Tony Stark’s heart, it was by complimenting his work. He could not help but grin.

“I drew up some new designs for your arrowheads as well. There’s a prototype around here somewhere…”

“Yeah? I definitely need to see that. Nat ordered pizza, though, and we need your credit card.”

Tony should have been offended. Instead, he just sighed and held out his hand for Clint to help him up. Clint’s grin was all teeth, a little sinister really, but Tony had not felt this comfortable in a long time. He did not even mind the way Clint automatically gripped his arm and helped him limp his way across the lab to the elevator.

“You should put that up,” Clint suggested. “Hey! We can watch a movie.”

He should have protested. There was more that could be done in the time Steve and Thor were gone.

It was too good to pass up. Pizza and a movie with Clint and Natasha was the best offer he had received in months (as long as Natasha kept to her side of the room; she was still scary as shit).

Natasha was kind enough to keep silent, merely nodding at him in acknowledgment of his presence and handing him a plate for his dinner. After returning the credit card to its rightful slot in Tony’s wallet, Clint joined Tony on the couch and turned on the television. It was apparently Natasha’s turn to pick the film because they were watching *The Princess Bride*. A good movie, to be sure, but Clint would have picked a Bond film. Clint *always* picked a Bond film.

In hindsight, Tony should have realized he would never make it through a movie. Without something to focus his mind, there was nothing to keep him going. He made it through half a slice of pizza before he struck that wall of exhaustion that refused to be bypassed.
Only when a hand ran over his hair did he realize he had fallen asleep. It was dark, the movie long since over, and Tony was alone on the sofa. He blinked, a little confused as to why he was awake, and frowned when a shadowed face appeared over him.

“Hey.”

Steve. Of course. It would be Steve Rogers, waking him from comfortable sleep to force him to a place of rigid insomnia.

“You’re going to be sore if you spend all night like this.”

Steve’s hand trailed back, behind his head, urging him to sit up. Tony groaned, willing the man to just leave him alone, but there was no fighting that kind of amped up strength. Besides, if he let Steve put too much pressure on that bruised part of his skull, he would have some explaining to do. It was a simple explanation, but Tony did not have the strength to try to convince Steve it was the truth.

“Where’s Thor?” Because if Tony was going to be ambushed by the enthusiastic demigod, he wanted to be mentally prepared for it.

“He’s with Banner,” Steve replied. “Hulk was pretty resistant to coming back with us. It’s been kind of rough dealing with him without you to settle him down.”

“Just start reading to him from that book you lent me,” Tony yawned and stumbled along as Steve guided him down the hall toward his room. “He’ll get so bored he’ll have to turn back.”

“Is it that bad?”

“Have you ever actually read it?”

Steve’s hand was at his waist. Tony followed the warm pressure, unable to do anything else and not quite sure what else he would do given the option.

“Um… no, actually.”

“Then yes. It’s that bad.”

“It was in your collection,” Steve sighed. “I thought you liked it.”

“It’s my father’s collection.”

He should not have said that. Tony never spoke of Howard when he could avoid it. The comment had the adverse effect of making that hand rub up from the small of his back and back down again. Gooseflesh broke out over his skin in the wake of that slight movement.

They were in his room, and Steve was urging him to remove his outer layer. Tony huffed and let the man tug the shirt over his head. He still had a tank top on, which Steve did not touch. But then there were hands at his belt, and damned if Captain America was not undressing him.

Had Steve done this before? Tony could not remember. It felt familiar. Warm, gentle hands tugged at his jeans, pushing them past his hips. A light nudge for him to sit. A murmur to relax, I’ll take care of it. Have you been sleeping at all? You should know better.

Tony was not sure what prompted him to do it. One moment he was sitting, horrendously complacent as Rogers got him ready for bed, and the next he was leaning forward and pressing his
The reaction was electric. Steve scrambled back like a man avoiding a punch, his eyes wide and shocked. To be honest, Tony was not sure what his problem was. He had no right to look that confused. None at all.

“Wh-what… Tony!”

The lights were brightening, Jarvis adjusting the controls in response to… well, Tony was not sure what his AI was doing. He just noticed that it was suddenly brighter in the room. Steve’s face was red, and he looked upset. Tony felt sick. That kind of expression never boded well.

“That is not funny!”

The room was way too hot, and Tony’s chest was a mass of pressure. His throat hurt, the lump too big to swallow down. He did not know what he expected when he initiated that kiss, but this was not it. Because shouldn’t Steve like it if Tony returned this kind of affection? He was the one who started all of this!

Something was building inside of him. Something big. Something terrible. He tried to shove it down. Nothing good ever happened when he let this kind of rage out. Things broke. The last time he let his emotions take charge, he had broken. He was still recovering from that. He was out of commission until January because of that.

“Tony,” Steve spoke slowly, carefully, as if Tony was some stupid child who would not get it otherwise. Tony was not an idiot. But Steve might as well have been speaking a foreign language, because lately Tony was not getting him at all. “You’re tired. Why don’t you just lay down, and we’ll—”

“We’ll what?”

It was the ‘we’ that had Tony instantly responding. The idea that anything that happened next would involve both of them somehow. And just like that, his control was gone. Half a dozen shots of hard liquor could not have loosened his tongue like months of living under the pressure of Steve’s kindness had done.

“We’ll what, Captain?” Tony demanded again, harsh and angry and possibly hurting. That feeling in his chest felt a whole lot like pain, and he did not know what to do with it other than throw it back into Steve Rogers’ face. “Because you’re sending me a lot of mixed messages here, and I don’t know what the hell you want from me!”

He couldn’t stop. Tony felt like an out of control steam engine. Whoever was in his path had better move, because he was not stopping, and he would destroy everything in front of him. Unless something big enough could derail him.

Where was Pepper when he needed her? Oh. That’s right. They were keeping it professional. She would not be coming.

“What the hell else do you want, if that’s not it? We’re in my room. You keep bringing me here and looking at me like that and fucking touching me, and I don’t know what the hell else to think!”

“I wasn’t—” Steve stammered, but he was not big enough. Tony steamrolled right over him. He might have been shouting.

“I mean I just figured, let’s get this shit over with!”
Yeah. Top of his lungs shouting. Definitely. He really wished he would stop. He couldn’t. It would throttle him if he tried to keep it in his throat.

“I am sick and tired of waiting for it to happen, and, you know what? I don’t actually like it when I don’t ask for it, so I’m giving you a fucking open invitation here!”

Steve had backed away, hands out, eyes wide. He was a shock of color in a swirl of darkening surroundings, blue and white and blond. In that moment, Tony despised him. Steve with his stupid haircut and his ugly plaid shirts and his gentle touch and anxious words, and Tony wanted nothing more than to rip his heart out. The bastard was lucky Tony did not have access to his armor at the moment, or that might have happened in a completely literal capacity.

“Come on, you self-righteous son of a bitch!” Tony flung his arms out, daring the man to come at him now. If he did, Tony would deserve it. He was inviting this upon himself again, and he did not know why. Just that he was going to do it, angrily and knowingly. “You’re tying me to the goddamn bed every night anyway. You wouldn’t be the first, and you sure as hell won’t be the last, so why don’t we skip all the formalities and just do this already?”

He heard the slap, loud and clear. As an afterthought, he realized he was looking at the wall and that his cheek burned something fierce. The wrath bubbled up again, indignation rushing forward to join it as he turned back to snarl at the asshole that dared strike him.

If that was the game Steve was playing, Tony could give back as well as he received.

He caught a glimpse of cloudy blue eyes under cropped dark blond hair an instant before that hand struck him again, hard across his cheek.

“Fuck!”

Tony choked and grabbed at anything which could keep him from collapsing. The blow had left him dizzy and clutching after the shards of his rage. They hurt, slicing into him like so much broken glass, but he clung to them anyway. Them and Clint, who had appeared out of nowhere to slap him.

“Try to breathe, Stark,” Clint ordered. “I’ve got you.”

“Don’t…” Standing was not happening at the moment. His knees had long since buckled, but Clint’s arms were around him, lowering him slowly to the carpet. “Don’t say that.”

“Oh okay,” Clint agreed readily. “I won’t.”

Something broke then. Or maybe it was already broken, and whatever cheap paste Tony was using to hold it together had finally worn out. Whatever the case, he was beyond control at the moment.

He scrambled for purchase, fingers digging hard into Clint’s forearms despite the pain that sent shooting through his healing hand, and wished he could control his own tear ducts. He felt the tears sliding down his cheeks, could not see anything clearly past them, and Clint said he should try breathing, but that totally was not happening.

Tony had not cried in years. He had not cried when his parents were being lowered into the ground. He didn’t cry. After this long, he had been fairly well convinced he couldn’t cry. It was horrible, and he wanted to stop, but once he had started he was not sure stopping was an option.

Clint just knelt there, hands steady under Tony’s elbows, holding him as upright as he could manage at the moment. He did not say anything when Tony let his head drop dangerously close to
The past several minutes replayed like a nightmare in his mind’s eye. He wished he could take everything back, rewind like an old VHS and record over it with the response he should have given. Steve would not have gotten angry if Tony had let him take his own pace.

“I’m sorry.” His breath hitched, a glaring hiccup in his throat, and he dug his fingers harder into Clint’s arms. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Clint asked, and Tony sobbed again, forehead pressed to Clint’s thigh. “Sorry for freaking out? For crying?”

Yes. Yes. Even more so when the tears renewed themselves, his chest clenching up in strangled whimpers. He was so fucking pathetic.


“All of it,” Tony hissed. It was all he could get out. He could barely think and breathe, let alone collect enough of either to form coherent sentences.

“All of it,” Clint repeated flatly. “You sorry for getting hurt?”

He gave up talking. Nodding worked well enough, and then he could just answer yes again when Clint asked if he was sorry that he was cutting into the man’s arms with blunt nails.

“Sorry for being gone for over a week where we couldn’t find you?” Clint was relentless. “Sorry for being imprisoned and drugged and hurt? Are you sorry for all of that?”

He really was.

“One thing, Stark. You have to answer me this time, so get in a good breath, okay?” Clint shook him lightly, a small jolt that barely rocked him. Tony squeezed his eyes shut and wished his anchor would stop moving. He was shaking badly enough without that adding to it. “Whose fault was it that all of this happened?”

“Clint!”

Christ. Steve was still in the room. Tony huddled lower, wishing he could disappear. But if anyone deserved to hear this after what Tony had done, it was Steve.

“I’m sorry.”

Clint sighed. He sounded tired.

Tony had done that. He had caused this, and yet they kept hanging around. Judas was still wrong about that. These people were unrelentingly decent, tolerating all the shit Tony threw at them, no matter how bad the smell. If he was a better man, he would let them go so they did not have to put up with his mess. But he really, really wasn’t. He was the red check on their chart, and he was too selfish to remove himself.

* * *
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The world will always keep turning.

Time passed.

Tony lost track of it for a while. He drifted in and out of consciousness, dimly aware of people moving around him and not really caring. At this point anything could happen to him, and he would just let it.

A pillow found its way under his head and a blanket around his shoulders. Tony was not usually a fan of sleeping on the floor, but he could not be bothered to move to a more comfortable surface. Besides, the only soft surface close enough to him to be manageable was the bed, and he would never put himself there. By some miracle, no one else put him there either.

He heard voices occasionally, talking around him. He even roused enough to speak to one of them once.

“Jarvis… there’s a meeting…”

“Miss Potts convinced them to postpone.” Jarvis sounded an awful lot like Bruce. “You need sleep a lot more than they need their meeting.”

That seemed reasonable. Tony was distantly aware that his life had lacked a lot of reason lately, so he accepted Bruce-Jarvis’s words as truth and went back to sleep.

In the end, it was his bladder that convinced him he had had enough. Sort of. At some point, in a dream he would not remember, he felt the strong urge to pee. When Tony woke up, he was in the shower, and that urge was gone, so he could only assume he had taken care of that business. Hopefully in the toilet. After having a crying fit on the floor of his bedroom in front of Steve and Clint, Tony really did not need to add having an accident on that same carpet to it. He was pretty sure he would not survive that humiliation.

Since he was already in the shower, Tony washed himself for the day. The fogged up mirror was testament to how much time he had lost just standing under the warm spray. He wiped it off so he could see his reflection well enough to shave. It took some extra time. Not only had it been at least three days since his last official grooming session, but the right side of his face hurt quite a bit. Even in the condensation-smudged mirror, Tony could see the bruise from where Clint had struck him.

That had not been one of his better moments.

Of course, being mostly asleep before heading into the bath meant he had not had the foresight to bring a change of clothing with him. He wrapped his towel around his waist and padded out into the bedroom.

Natasha was sitting on his bed, watching him.
Tony stopped, suddenly uncertain.

“Um… hi.” Because that was a fantastic opening. “Why are you in my room?”

“Making sure you don’t do anything stupid,” Natasha said in her ever-so-charming blunt manner. “Are you awake now?”

“Am I talking to you?” What the hell kind of question was that? Of course he was awake.

“You spoke to me before,” she said. Tony stared at her. Oh. “But you were not so sarcastic then. I think you’re awake now.”

“Yeah…”

It was cold in his room. Tony hesitated, then decided it was not worth it to wait for Natasha to recall her sense of common decency. He walked over to his walk-in closet, as dignified as he could manage while wearing nothing but a towel, and the memory of the previous night still at the forefront of his mind. Thankfully, she did not follow him into his closet.

“If you’re determined to keep me from doing stupid things, then you’ve got your work cut out for you,” he declared as he pulled on a pair of underpants and yanked an undershirt over his head. Once marginally covered, he started digging for something appropriate. He had a meeting. He should dress nicely. A shirt with a tie. Probably a suit. “I am incapable of going a day without doing or saying something stupid.”

“Something stupidly permanent,” Natasha revised.

Tony paused over his tie rack. He had not been expecting that.

“I’m not suicidal,” he said mildly, plucking a tie with a dense, purple pattern. It was a favorite, and he had the feeling he would need a little familiarity soon enough.

“No. Just foolish.”

She was not wrong. Even Tony could admit to that one, so he said nothing in response. Shirt buttoned, tucked into dark gray slacks, collar up. He could tie a tie in his sleep, but it always looked better if he could examine it in the mirror as he did it, so he snatched a blazer off its hanger and stalked back out into the room. Natasha did not even bother to pretend she was not watching him as he put the finishing touches on his clothes. She watched, almost curious as he adjusted his tie at his throat and buttoned his cuffs.

Tony was not sure what to make of it when she rose from the bed, crossed the room to his side, and picked up his coat. She shook it out and held it up helpfully.

Not sure what else to do, Tony slid his arms into the sleeves and shrugged into the sports coat. Natasha adjusted the lapel, then reached up and combed her fingers through his hair, brushing it out of his face. It was terrifying having her this close, so he stood very still.

“You look nice,” she said finally. “Planning an outing?”

“I do have a business to run,” he reminded her. “Are you going to babysit me there too?”

“You slept through the business day,” she replied. “Pepper rescheduled your meetings. So unless you planned a night on the town, the only people around to impress are the people who live in this tower.”

That explained why he was so achy. Even his floors were not soft enough for a comfortable night’s sleep, and he had remained there for the better part of—the clock read 7:34—twenty hours.

“Jesus,” he grumbled.

“You were pretty out of it,” Natasha said. “How do you feel?”

That was a trick question. He was sure of it.

“Hungry,” he said. “When’s dinner?”

“Two hours ago,” she replied. “You would not have gotten it anyway. Bruce is feeding you soup and toast until he’s certain you won’t throw it up again.”

Tony frowned.

“I’m not sick.”


That was a guilt trip. Tony did not appreciate it. He did, however, respond to it. He was out in the hallway and heading toward the common area before he realized his feet had started moving.

“Is he okay?” Surely he was. He had been talking to Tony last night. Or this morning. Probably.


He paused, because that tone had been a little sharp, a little demanding, and Natasha actually did not use that one much with him. She looked up at him, and he had the uneasy impression that she was searching his eyes for something. From the looks of things, she was disappointed by what she found—or did not find, if that were the case.

“You are aware that no means no,” she inquired.

Tony glared. Was that some kind of sick joke?

“I did not force myself on Rogers!” he snapped.

Natasha’s expression pinched up, her eyes darkening the way they always did when she caught him in a lie. Except he wasn’t lying this time. He did not want everyone thinking he was going to start chasing after Steve now.

That had obviously been a mistake. He had been reading the situation wrong, though he was not sure how yet. Tony was vastly relieved at his misreading of the situation, actually. He would apologize to Rogers, assure the man it would never happen again, and maybe they could pretend it never happened.

Maybe he could stop hating the man.

“I meant that you are allowed to say no,” Natasha said. That stated, she turned and walked away, heading for the elevator to go… wherever it was she went when she was not with the group.

Tony stared after her, not quite sure what had happened.
“She’s right, you know.”

He did not jump at the gentle voice speaking behind him. His heart started racing, sure, but he was able to keep from attaching himself to the ceiling. Years of practice and months of living with two master assassins had helped him hone that skill. Okay, he still jumped when those two startled him, but Bruce’s mellow voice rarely seemed to provoke that kind of reaction.

“Of course she’s right, but I don’t see…”

He trailed off, unable to complete the lie. When he looked to Bruce, not certain how to make this make sense, the man just smiled his half-smile and walked into the kitchen. With nothing better to do, Tony trailed after him.

“Are you hungry?” Bruce asked.

“Yeah.”

“Soup or leftover sushi?”

Just to spite Natasha and her lie that he would be relegated to soup and dry toast, Tony chose the latter. It was a childish decision, and he felt like a foolish child when the smell of the wasabi hit him. He liked sushi, had recommended this takeout place to the others, but he had a feeling it would make a quick reappearance if he tried to eat it now.

“Maybe the soup,” Bruce murmured.

“I’m not sick,” Tony protested, more to himself than to Bruce. He wasn’t sick. There was no fever, no aches (aside from the ones leftover from sleeping on the floor), and no reason for this.

“You’ve been under a lot of stress,” Bruce said. He dumped a can of what looked to be straight-up chicken broth into a pan on the stove. Tony grimaced but did not protest. Bruce was good at this after all. “You haven’t been eating or sleeping. You need to be gentle with yourself before you can start up with normal foods again.”

“I eat,” Tony protested. He could not recall what he last had, but he was certain he ate. Didn’t he? He had coffee. Surely he ate something with that. “I sleep.”

“You’ve been forced into a place that scares you, night after night,” Bruce replied, his voice low but challenging. “Tell me again that you’ve been sleeping.”

“I’m not…” Stating he was unafraid would be a lie as well. Bruce was good at ferreting out all of Tony’s lies, but he did it anyway. “I’m not afraid of my own damn bedroom.”

Not wholly a lie.

“Just the bed, then?”

Tony flinched.

Bruce set a spoon on a napkin in front of him, the normalcy of the action jarring. Tony stared at the glass of water that appeared in on the counter in front of him. He pulled his hand away, wanting absolutely nothing to do with that.

“You’re dehydrated,” Bruce prompted. “You need to drink something.”

There was no rational explanation for the way his heart thudded in chest, hard and painful. It was
making a valiant attempt at crawling its way out through the arc reactor. He did not know what it was that this was bothering him now. For weeks he had been drinking water, and not once did he pause to think about it. He deliberately avoided thinking about it. But now he could only stare at the glass and clench his fists on his lap lest he knock the water from the countertop.

“Tea?” Bruce offered.

Tony did not respond, could not respond. Bruce let him hold his silence, and several minutes later there was a steaming mug in front of him.

“Decaf,” Bruce warned.

The cup was a welcome warmth to his icy fingers. Tony held the mug, not yet drinking what was certain to be a too-hot-for-his-tongue tea. The bowl of broth appeared in front of him, and he sighed.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me.” The words were difficult, and he could only say them because it was Bruce. “Nothing makes sense lately.”

Bruce dropped an ice cube in the soup. It was something someone would do for a child.

The bowl hit the floor, ceramic shattering, hot liquid splattering.

As fast as the haze of anger had come, it was gone again, leaving Tony staring at Bruce in horror of his own actions.

“I-I… Bruce, I’m sorry, I—”

“I think I would rather hear the reason why you did that than any apology for it,” Bruce interrupted. He was utterly calm. It was ironic that Bruce was so calm, and Tony was the one losing his temper at every turn. Tony would have laughed, but like the night before, he was vividly aware that once he started, he would be hard pressed to stop.

“I don’t know.”

That much was true. Bruce caught his hand and removed the cup of hot tea before Tony could drop it as well. He would have. He had forgotten it was in his hand when he moved to drag his hands through his hair and clench down, willing himself to be in the here and now.

“Okay then. Would you like to know what I’m seeing?”

From anyone else, Tony might have told them to shove it. But Bruce was looking at him so steadily, and he was Bruce, and the only thing Tony could do was stare at him and will him to understand that he would take help wherever he could get it. He wouldn’t even interrupt. He couldn’t. His hand was pressed too hard over his mouth to allow any coherent sound to pass through.

Bruce was as amazing as ever. He nodded and understood perfectly.

“I see a man who has been waiting a long time for the other shoe to drop,” Bruce explained. “I see someone who has come to fear any form of touch. A man who spent so much time wondering when he was going to be struck that he actually lashed out in attempt to provoke the blow. Because at least then you’ll know what’s coming.”

If not for his elbows braced on the counter, Tony might have collapsed again. Even with both
hands pressed to his mouth, he could not completely suppress the strangled whine that forced its way from his throat.

He did not want to hear this. He was not some sort of… abuse victim.

“Heads admit you objected rather strongly to being asked to sleep in your room,” Bruce continued. “Clint saw the signs months ago, but you weren’t talking, and you seemed better when you were out of the hospital. Obviously, we were mistaken. I’m sorry, Tony. We should have been there for you.”

Tony could not let Bruce think he was that awful. Bruce was always there for him, even when he was being horrible.

He tore his hands away from his face and blurted, “You’ve been here this whole time! I was the one being an ass.”

“Maybe so, but that doesn’t make what happened right,” Bruce said, suddenly harsh. Tony was not sure how he managed it, but somehow he dredged up a smile.

“Yeah, but you’ve got to admit I kind of brought it on myself,” he pointed out.

Bruce was looking angry—like, green around the gills angry—and Tony had no idea how to fix that. He was not even entirely certain what he was doing to cause it, though he was definitely the cause.

“If you think about it, it really could have been worse,” Tony offered hopefully. “It’s not like he hurt me. I mean, all the damage was pretty much self-inf—"

“Stop,” Bruce’s order and the shaking hand held out cut off Tony’s explanation as effectively as a mute button. Tony swallowed and looked away. The broken bowl and cooling broth creeping across the floor was far easier to face than that horrible, blank expression on Bruce’s face. “Are you actually suggesting it was somehow okay that this man handcuffed you to a bed and refused to let you go?”

When put that way…

“Well, no, but—"

“You’re saying it was in his rights to drug you until you were incapable of lasting two days off those very drugs without suffering from withdrawal,” Bruce’s voice was angry and awful. Tony was going to be in so much trouble if he made Bruce Hulk out. There would be yelling. Lots and lots of yelling.

“I—he didn’t—I mean, he did, but—"

“You’re defending someone who should be in jail,” Bruce accused. “Why do you keep doing that? You’re smarter than this, Tony!”

“I left with him!”

It was a good thing Bruce had taken away all the glassware. Tony’s hands burned from where they slammed against the countertop. If there had been anything there to throw, he probably would have done it. Because no one was understanding this. He was not certain of many things, but he did know he had gone with Judas voluntarily. It was a mistake, a stupid one, but how the hell could he place this kind of blame on that kind of crazy?
“You don’t get it,” he hissed.

Bruce had closed himself off. He had that wincing expression he always got when people started yelling at him, but control was not high on Tony’s list of attributes lately. And when Bruce turned green and invincible, well, Tony was almost looking forward to being put out of this misery.

“He was crazy, okay? And I went with him! I was so fucking stuck on keeping myself miserable that I went with him! I let him take me home! I made that choice!”

Bruce’s lips were a small white line. Tony hated that expression. He hated himself for putting it on his friend’s face. But if the only way to erase it was to lie, then he would hate himself for that as well. Besides, Bruce would know he was lying, and then they would be right back at this point.

He sighed, exhausted despite the hours of sleep.

“I went with him, and he didn’t know any better.”

The argument was too much for him right now. His entire body was protesting, the ache not simply a result of a long night on a hard floor. These ups and downs—he was not accustomed to dealing with this kind of emotional rollercoaster without the aid of strong alcohol.

Another bowl appeared in front of him. Tony stared at the dish and its clear amber liquid contents, uncomprehending. A moment later he heard a clinking noise, and he found himself staring dumbly at Bruce. The man was on the floor, picking up the largest shards of the dish Tony had broken.

“I can clean that up,” he mumbled uneasily.

“I’d really rather you not be handling anything sharp right now,” Bruce replied, opening the cabinet and dropping the shards in a trashcan Tony had not even known was there.

“I’m not going to hurt myself.” He was not suicidal, no matter what people seemed to think.

“Oh, that’s a lie,” Bruce said with a sad little smile. Tony was not quite sure what to say to that. It was not as if Bruce was angry with him. Tony knew anger, and that wasn’t it. This was… he wasn’t sure what this was. “Just have some dinner. I’ve got this.”

He really was hungry. And Bruce seemed okay with mopping up the broken ceramic and spilled soup. Plus, Tony had the feeling he might actually see Bruce get irritated if he tried to force the issue.

Chicken broth was not something Tony enjoyed. With the way his stomach growled, he could not protest. The other option was something his stomach had already informed him would be a bad idea, so he suffered through the blandness of the broth. Bruce set a slice of toast on a napkin beside his plate a few minutes later, so at least that was something solid.

He was halfway through the toast when he thought of something that had been nagging at the corners of his memory since the previous night.

“Is Steve mad at me?”

The thought should not have bothered him. Every time he saw the man he was filled with a rage he could not contain.

However, Tony did not feel that right now. When he thought about Steve, he did not feel anything but regret.
“Not at you, no.”

The man really was the paragon of perfection. It was not fair to anyone else.

“I don’t get why not,” he mumbled. “I was horrible to him.”

“You were acting under duress,” Bruce took the empty bowl and loaded into the dishwasher. Tony kept forgetting they had that thing. “Steve knows what it’s like to feel like you’re backed into a corner with no other way out.”

“I should apologize,” Tony decided.

“He will probably do the same,” Bruce sighed. “Look, Tony. I know you don’t want to hear it, but this wasn’t your fault.”

“I kissed him, Bruce. He didn’t ask for—”

“That’s not your fault either, but it wasn’t what I was talking about.”

Tony looked up. He was spending a lot of time confused these days, and he found he was not liking it. Bruce, though, just looked tired. Tony wondered if he had slept at all.

“Did you sleep last night?” he blurted.

“Don’t change the subject,” Bruce rebuked. “I was saying that what Judas did was not your fault.”

“No, but I was the one who—”

“Not your fault,” Bruce interrupted insistently. “None of it, okay?”

“Bruce.”

Even Bruce wasn’t listening to him.

“No, I’m not giving on this one, Tony.” He didn’t look mad, but he didn’t seem happy either. He just looked tired and sad, and Jesus, that was Tony’s doing too. Even his friends were suffering. “You want me to concede to the fact that this guy was insane? Sure. Maybe he didn’t get what he was doing. Maybe he had no idea. Absolving him of blame does not automatically transfer it over to you.”

He kept losing fights. At one point Tony had been good at this. He had never actually been on the debate team (no one liked him because he kept telling off the debate team), but he could have singlehandedly won any debate. He was dragged through court and senate hearings, and he pissed on their arguments like they were week old newspapers.

Bruce was right. But he was missing the point entirely. Tony was just too tired to try to set it right.

“Okay.”

Bruce looked at him, baffled, suspicious.

“Okay?”

“…You’re just agreeing with me so I’ll leave you alone.” Bruce was always too smart for his own good. “Tony—”

“Can we not do this right now?” Where had his life gone so wrong that he had to beg his friends to leave him alone? It used to be the other way around. Tony was accustomed to being the irritating one. “Please, Bruce? I’m tired, my everything hurts, and I… I just…”

He was not sure what he wanted to say. Tony just wanted Bruce to let him stop this conversation.

“Yeah,” Bruce sighed. “Fine. What do you want to do?”

Was it strange that Tony was so grateful? He had been fully prepared for Bruce to press the issue.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “Nothing. Maybe a movie? I fell asleep last time…”

“You’re going to fall asleep this time.”

Despite the prediction, Bruce was already headed toward the living room. Tony watched him go, then rose and followed. Bruce claimed a corner of the sofa, so Tony went for the chair, snatching a pillow from the couch as he went. Tucking himself sideways in the armchair was a bit of a squeeze, but Tony huddled around the pilfered pillow and was surprisingly comfortable. He half expected some comment about his atypical choice of seating arrangement (because he always sat on the sofa), but Bruce said nothing. The other scientist kicked his heels up on the coffee table and slouched down, boneless.

“On second thought, I might fall asleep too.”

Tony snorted and raised an eyebrow at Bruce, who just offered a weak grin.

“What are we watching?” Bruce inquired.

“Whatever.”

Bruce got that pinched look again, but he shrugged and picked up the remote. When the TV came on, the menu for *The Princess Bride* was up.

“This okay?”

“Fine.”

He would watch anything just to get out of this awkward silence. Thankfully, Bruce hit play, and the film started.

Bruce was right. Tony fell asleep twenty minutes in.

* * *
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

One step forward and two...

Chapter Notes

Advance warning: Some unpleasant memories. And Tony being a bullheaded idiot as per usual.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Rationally, Tony was aware that he had poor sleeping habits. He did not like talking about it, but he had suffered from nightmares ever since Afghanistan. They started up several months after Obadiah tore the arc reactor from his chest and got progressively worse as he quietly flipped out over the palladium poisoning his blood. There was a brief, glorious time when he slept soundly. He suspected Pepper had something to do with it.

Then he died while staring at unfamiliar stars. It was a short time, but Tony had felt it, sensed himself slipping away.

The nightmares came back with a vengeance, and sleep was suddenly something to fear. Insomnia became a way of life. He combatted it with coffee and alcohol and a determination to protect Pepper from the evils of the universe.

Pepper, to her credit, had held on for a long time. Until she couldn’t anymore, and he had been forced to let her go.

For some reason, the nightmares stopped after that. Tony suspected it had much to do with the massive amounts of alcohol he imbibed, but he was not complaining. Not about that, anyway. He simply drank more, ignored the worried looks from the people closest to him, and was glad to pretend he had no problems. Business was booming. Pepper a solid force pushing the Fortune 500 company’s numbers into the black. (Well, that and Tony’s engineering prowess.)

There also were no nightmares while he languished in Judas’s care. For these months after, he could not recall dreaming at all, let alone having nightmares. He had to be dreaming. What little Tony bothered to know about biology informed him that he would not be doing half as well as he was if he was not reaching REM cycle. His focus was not great, but it wasn’t that bad either.

He dreamt while he slept through the movie that second time.

His eyes closed, opened, and he stared dumbly at a water stained ceiling. Gentle morning light filtered through lacy window dressings. He stared at the yellowing lace, wondering who he had pissed off to be back here.

A hand smoothed back his hair, big and warm and unwelcome. Tony shifted, trying to turn away
from the gentle movements, but the hand just trailed down his neck instead, curling around his waist and clinging tight.

“You snore. Did you know?”

Tony wanted to crawl out of his skin when the man’s presence became that much more invasive. A face tucked against his neck, cuddling closer than ever.

“It’s quiet, could barely be called snoring.”

The guy always said such strange things. Half compliments, half insults. Tony never knew what he was thinking when he said them.

“I bet you could build an engine, and it would sound just like your snoring—purring soft and smooth.”

It was not just the odd words that made him uncomfortable. There was a cramp in his side, not bad, but not comfortable.

Despite the arms around him, he was cold and shivering. He jerked, startled to find himself in water. He was in the bath, and the reason his side hurt was because he was holding Judas’s arm and trying to twist his way out of the restraining grip.

It was like that first time, when soapy hands ran over his shuddering, protesting skin. He had been unable to do more than cling to Judas’s shirt and whine his objection at the bumbling fingers pressing down and under his groin, too rough to be anything but awkward and uncomfortable. When Judas had taken it a step further, hand slipping down and back, fingers shoving harshly into a place they had no business being, Tony had yelped and scrabbled at the man’s arm in fear and not a small amount of discomfort.

Judas had not stopped. He shook off Tony’s weak grip, twisted his hand, and pressed as deep as he could go. It was impersonal and painful and horrifying, and Tony had been too sick and frightened to do more than sit and suffer through it. Each time was like this, though he stopped trying to struggle.

Judas was not doing this now. Tony was clinging to him, afraid of what was coming next. He thought nothing could be worse than that clinical cleansing. Even the sex was not so gut twisting. But Judas was unpredictable. He was affectionate and heavy handed, leaving Tony feeling like the puppy in Lennie Small’s hand. There was no doubting the love, the simple-minded joy. There was also no doubt in his mind that the hand that petted his hair would one day pet a little too hard, crushing his skull beyond recognition.

“You’re shaking. Are you cold?”

Tony shook his head, half in answer, half in the hopes that it would dislodge the fingers that kept catching in his hair. Judas was wearing that ugly plaid shirt again, the blue one Tony hated so much. He wore it more than any of his others, or maybe it was just the only shirt Tony ever really remembered.

“I wish you would just talk to me,” the man murmured. As if speaking with him ever accomplished anything. Nothing Tony had to say would alter his world view. “I keep hurting you, and I don’t even know that I’m doing it.”

The statement was so jarringly uncharacteristic of Judas, spoken in such a familiar voice, that Tony’s entire body lurched at the shock.
The cramp in his side had morphed into a painful stitch, the sensation so intense Tony had a difficult time believing himself to be dreaming. It was such a visceral experience, clenching the pillow beneath him and wondering where he was now. But there was that despicable plaid, only partially disguised by the sudden darkness, so he could not have gone far.

Then, Tony was looking into all-too familiar pale eyes. The eyes were set in a face marked by light hair, a straight nose, and a strong jaw.

Tony stared at those eyes for a long minute, so sickened by the idea that Steve would suddenly make an appearance as the antagonist in his nightmares that it took him longer than usual to realize he was no longer asleep.

Then, Steve spoke, a soft uttering of Tony’s name. It was unexpected, and Tony hated that he flinched. He despised that anxious look in Steve’s eyes and hated himself for wanting nothing more than to shove the pillow he gripped into Steve’s face and not relent until the other man stopped breathing.

Steve sat on the coffee table, hands clenched together as if to keep himself from reaching for Tony. Why he had this need to be so hands-on was a mystery Tony could not solve. The man had never been like this before. Of this, Tony was certain.

It occurred to him that they were alone. The light in the room was slowly brightening to normal levels, Jarvis responding to the fact that the movie was no longer running and that Tony was now awake. The brightness did nothing to ease the sudden ache in his chest which made it that much harder to breathe.

“Bruce asked me to stay,” Steve murmured. “He needed the sleep.”

Tony felt he should say something. He knew Steve expected it. They all expected it. But he could think of nothing with which to fill the silence.

“Look, uh… Tony.”

Steve shifted. Tony mirrored the move, ready to leave the instant the man reached for him. He was not sure what he would do if Steve touched him right now, but he was positive it would not be nice.

Steve stilled, watching him warily, as if Tony were the one who would attack.

“I’ve, um… I’ve been thinking,” Steve said slowly, easing himself down onto the coffee table again. “Since you came home from the hospital, we’ve been acting like this is just an injury. Like once it heals, it’ll all be back to normal.”

Oh god. He wanted to talk. Tony twisted slightly, realizing he was crunched into an uncomfortable, upright sort of fetal position in his chair, which explained the stitch in his side. If he was going to do this, he wanted his feet to regain their circulation so that he could escape if need be without crashing to his face.

“If this is about last night, I’m sorry,” he said uneasily. He watched his feet turn this way and that, stoically tolerating the pins and needles that rushed through them. “I was out of line, and I shouldn’t have shouted.”

“God, Tony!”

He looked up sharply, startled by the anger in the exclamation. Steve didn’t look like he was going
to move, and his face only showed anxiety. He ran a hand through his ridiculously styled blond hair and pushed himself further back on his perch.

“If anyone should be apologizing, it’s me,” Steve declared. “Which, for the record, I am sorry. I never meant to make you feel like I wanted anything from you. I just thought… I mean, I see you, and you look so tired and sick—all the time!—and I remembered all the times I was sick growing up, and how my mother was, and how nice it felt to have someone take care of me when all I wanted to do was breathe…”

There was a blanket on his shoulders. Tony did not recall grabbing that earlier.

“You’re shaking. Are you cold?”

Echoes of dreams should not be so vivid so long after waking. Tony watched his hand curl in the blanket, gripping it with near-tearing force, and he wondered how long Steve had been sitting there, watching him sleep.

“Tony?”

He looked up. Right. Steve’s heart-to-heart. He had been listening. It was just hard to focus on the words when the actions whispered such unsettling threats.

“Where are you going when you zone out like that?” Steve whispered. He was afraid, Tony realized. Afraid of what he was going to hear.

He wanted to lie. He wanted to brush this off and be normal. If he could not be happy, he wanted at least to be functional. Was that so much to ask?

“Could you just…”

He got caught on the words, not sure which ones to say. Let it go? He knew better than to believe that would be well received. Stop apologizing? Or maybe leave me alone? He was not sure he would like the results.

Steve stared at him, so earnest it hurt. That genuine, open caring was almost physically painful. Tony did not understand how anyone could look at another person like that and not want something in return. Judas had not been capable. He looked just like that, and he certainly cared. The man had cared so much.

His head was fucked up. Tony understood this. He knew that it was socially acceptable for men to be uncomfortable with open displays of affection. He also knew that he was far beyond mere discomfort. At some point he had slipped into outright revulsion and fear, and that was not normal.

Even before this, he had been reserved around people who were not potential bedmates. He rarely touched anyone unless he was aiming to get a rise out of them, never quite understood this concept of hugging just for the sake of it. How many times had he fought with Pepper over this? She had tried so hard to make him understand, but he had still been tense whenever she initiated anything without the intent of making it sexual.

After all, wasn’t that what people wanted? Even people who said they cared, who said they loved him. Why bother otherwise? What was the point of touching someone if not to get a reaction?

“My mother never did that,” he heard himself say. It felt okay. Safe. Steve’s eyes brightened. Tony had never seen anyone look so interested in what he had to say. “I don’t… people don’t… don’t touch me like that.”
Tony did not want to look at that desperately sad look on Steve’s face. He considered the man and wondered… Well, it was not as though he really was Judas. The similarities were there, to be sure, but Tony knew the difference.

“Could you just…” He grimaced and picked at some pilling on the blanket. Where had this thing come from? Tony never kept things once they started *pilling*. He was not aware he owned anything that could.

Steve was ever so patient, not even prompting Tony though minutes had passed since his last aborted question. He watched, apparently willing to wait it out.

Tony’s gaze drifted, landing on a jacket slung over the side of the sofa. It looked like it might belong to Bruce—it was one of those canvas-like button-ups that the other scientist seemed to prefer, cheap but durable. The man must have been exhausted to leave his things just laying around like that.

Steve was still watching him, patient and intent, when Tony looked back at him. An idea was forming. It might be a bad one, could possibly blow up in his face, but Tony had never let the threat of explosions stop him in the past.

“Would you just… just not move for a few minutes?” he asked finally. It was kind of a bold question, if he really thought about it. What kind of person asked Steve Rogers to just sit there and tolerate whatever Tony could think to throw at him?

Steve did not seem to mind. If anything, he looked relieved, though Tony could not imagine why.

“You want me to just sit here?” Steve asked slowly. Despite his valiant effort not to, Tony winced.

“Um… yeah.”

A slow, calm nod released those iron bands from around Tony’s chest. He breathed out in a rush, managed a weak smile, and cautiously stood.

That first movement was the test. Tony knew he would falter. His legs were stiff from the awkward position he had fallen asleep in, and his feet still tingled. He grabbed the chair’s arm to stop his initial stumble, catching himself and bracing to take a stronger second step.

Steve did not move. He looked a bit like he had thought about it, but he was still sitting on the coffee table—that solid boxy piece Pepper had purchased after one too many encounters with Thor’s unexpected strength—and though he watched Tony closely, he kept his hands flat on his thighs.

Tony pushed himself upright, and his next steps were solid. He grabbed the jacket off the sofa and hesitated only a moment before taking those two steps back to Steve’s side.

Dumping the jacket on Steve’s lap was probably rude, but the man did not call him on it. He did, however, inquire as to its purpose.

“Isn’t this Bruce’s?”

“Yeah. Put it on?”

Steve looked at him in surprise, but he played along. Tony shifted uneasily on his feet. This was a whim, really. He had no idea why he thought this might be even close to okay, but Steve was trying, and that had to count for something.
The jacket was far too small, tight across the shoulders, the sleeves barely more than halfway down his forearms. It did, however, almost completely hide that hideous blue plaid shirt Steve always seemed to be wearing.

Tony knew he would feel better when that shirt was gone. He did not like it, was disgusted that the trick worked. All the same, he felt something unclench inside of him, and it was not so hard this time to take the last step that brought him to Steve’s side.

He hesitated before touching the rough canvas of the jacket. Now that Steve was wearing it, that move could be perceived as too forward. After the debacle last night, Tony would not blame Steve if he wanted nothing to do with him.

But Steve was some sort of saint, because he did not even flinch.

“It’s okay,” Steve said softly. He was looking at Tony, eyes utterly calm. He was sedate, confident in a way no one else could hope to imitate. “I promised. I won’t move until you tell me I can.”

Tony swallowed down the sudden lump in his throat and let his hand brush across the fabric over Steve’s shoulder. Already the heat from Steve’s body was penetrating the jacket. The super soldier always ran a bit warmer than the average person. Something about the higher than normal metabolic rate.

He was not sure what he had been planning to do once he had Steve’s promise not to move. The steady stare from those blue eyes should have been intimidating, embarrassing even. Instead, Tony felt emboldened. He reached up and pushed his hand through Steve’s hair, ruffling it, displacing it from its careful, if horrendously outdated, style.

It was getting better, he decided. Steve was patient with him, ever watchful and curious. He must have wondered. He probably had a thousand questions. But he held still and said nothing.

He scruffed up Steve’s hair once more and stepped back, surveying his handiwork. It was nothing big. Messy hair and a jacket that looked as borrowed as it was did not exactly make Steve unrecognizable. The strong jaw was all Steve, as unchangeable as his blue eyes and gentle mouth. His shoulders were as broad as ever, and his pants were those same, silly high-waisted khakis with the pleat in front.

“Stand up?”

This hesitance was cringe-worthy. Tony Stark did not ask for things. He ordered them or got them for himself.

And yet, that questioning lilt to his words was a thousand times better than the way he automatically stumbled back when Steve suddenly shoved upward.

They both froze, staring at each other. Steve was half-crouched, having halted partway to standing. Tony felt an absurd need to apologize, but he was too humiliated by his response to manage the words.

That did not mean the words went unsaid.

“Sorry,” Steve said. He slowly, slowly straightened up to his full height. “Is this okay?”

Words choking in his throat, Tony nodded quickly. He had to force himself to look at the other
man after that. There was no reason for this embarrassment. Starks did not get embarrassed. They didn’t skitter away like spooked dogs either, but Tony could pretend that was a one off.

Here was to hoping it didn’t happen again.

Steve was taller than Judas. Tony knew this. He always had to tilt his head to meet Steve’s eyes. At least he was not Thor’s height. Tony had to crane his neck to meet that man’s eyes. Or just stand far enough back that it was a moot point, as was his usual method, given the big guy’s propensity for hearty backslaps that knocked the air clean out of Tony’s lungs.

The differences were drastic, when it came right down to it. Steve was taller. His shoulders were broader, his hips narrower, and there was definitely a lack of paunch around his midsection. His hands were bigger, his forearms showing the sinew of a man who worked out. He also had a wariness to his eyes that Judas lacked. Judas had the confidence of a fanatic. Steve was afraid of hurting anyone—in this case, Tony himself.

“I won’t move unless you ask me to,” Steve said again.

Tony frowned. He must have been hanging back longer than he realized.

Steve was still but relaxed. His arms hung at his sides, hands loose and easy. Tony wondered if he was making the effort to hold himself that way or if it was just a natural way of being. His expression was too careful, too blank for Tony to know that answer.

Tony suddenly felt foolish. This was stupid and beneath him, and why did he care what these people thought of him anyway?

“Tony.”

His breath caught. But Steve had not moved. He just spoke Tony’s name in that low, beseeching tone.

“This is stupid,” Tony grumbled. He hated himself just a little more for blurting his thoughts aloud.

“It’s not stupid,” Steve replied immediately. “It would be stupid if we continued to ignore this. So go ahead. As long as you’re not going to shoot or stab me, I’m pretty okay with whatever you’ve got planned.”

“And if I planned to shove my hand down your pants?” Tony challenged.

Steve flushed but determinedly held Tony’s bold glare.

“If that’s your aim, I would appreciate you asking first,” he admitted. “And I do reserve the right to tell you to back off if I am uncomfortable.”

“No means no, right?” Tony asked, unable to keep the mocking from his voice.

Steve’s eyes darkened.

“Exactly.”

Tony could not even begin to explain why that set his heart to racing. He suppressed a shudder, but there was no stopping the gooseflesh that rippled across his arms and down his back. His chest hurt again.
“How many times does it have to be said before its meaning is made clear?”

For a soldier, Steve was not good at hiding his emotions for long. The guilt was blatant, etched across his otherwise handsome face.

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For a soldier, Steve was not good at hiding his emotions for long. The guilt was blatant, etched across his otherwise handsome face.
“Bruce said you were drugged,” Steve retorted. “You were coerced, Tony. This isn’t your fault.”

“I’m sick of this song and dance,” Tony sighed.

No means no.

It wasn’t your fault.

God, his life was like the *CliffsNotes* of life’s clichés.

“Tony,” Steve protested.

“No,” Tony insisted, and damn if he didn’t feel completely vindicated just saying that one word. “No, I am done with this shit! Okay? I’m done. I am not a victim. I won’t be one. I can go one goddamn day without flipping out over your stupid shirts or Thor calling me… calling me Anthony, and I will not have you lecturing me about how my world view is skewed!”

“Tony…” Steve sounded wary, or cautionary. “Tony, please don’t do this.”

“That’s what I’m asking you!” Tony snapped. “Leave it, okay? I’ll be fine! I don’t need you all hovering over me, wondering when the hell I’m going to break next.”

He was in full retreat mode now, and he wasn’t even sure why. Tony was pretty sure—no, he was positive that he meant absolutely none of what he was saying, but he had no idea how to fix this. His body moved on autopilot, tracking the path to his workshop. Even as he ran, he hoped Steve would follow. He hoped someone would stop him.

No one did.

Tony stumbled into his lab with much less grace than usual. It was not pretty. He shut the door and fell back against it, clutching at his chest and wishing he could reach in and ease the pain. He could not even get close, the arc reactor a cold, hard barrier between his hand and his heart. His palm pressed flat against the reactor, his fingers digging harshly into the skin around it, painful and useless, but Tony could only press harder.

He could not press hard enough to overwhelm the ache that had settled behind the reactor. As he slid down the door, butt hitting the cold floor, Tony had the grim realization that the only cure for this pain would be death.

“Fuck!” At least no one was around to hear him whimpering like a child. “Jarvis! Lock the door!”

“The door automatically locks, sir,” Jarvis seemed confused. “A code is required—”

“The people that live here,” Tony gasped. “Lock them out. I don’t want them in here right now.”

“I see. Done, sir.”

Thank god. Tony sighed and closed his eyes, resting his head back against the door. The walls were clear, even the door made from the smart glass. If anyone came down the steps, they would see him curled up like a lost child. He hoped Steve would not change his mind about following him.

Okay, not true.

Tony wanted nothing more than for someone to come and put him out of his misery. He was not even all that picky about the method. Considering his status as a former military weapon’s
developer, he thought an explosive might provoke a certain irony.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

I just want to thank those who have taken the time to comment on the story. I'm not sure if it's expected that I respond individually to anything other than a direct question... Either way, I do enjoy other perspectives and observations. Thank you for that.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Everyone should have a Rhodey...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The problem with lies was that they had the unfortunate tendency to perpetuate more of themselves. One lie became two, then four, sixteen, two hundred fifty-six, and on and on it went. Suddenly, there were more lies than truths, and Tony had to wonder why he was doing this to himself.

I’m fine. Lie number one. The biggest lie. He kept saying it, as if repetition would make it spontaneously true.

How many times had he sent people away, lying to them? He told them he wanted to be left alone citing the many things that needed to be done

I’m sick of creating new projects just to keep busy.

He put Pepper off repeatedly. She called with her usual things, trying to keep it to business, disguising her concern between stern lectures on responsibility.

MIT isn’t for months, he had told her. He was starting to think he would have to refurbish an old speech. If he pulled one old enough, maybe no one would notice the similarities. Maybe he could tell them to shove it this year. He was an Avenger. He had shit to do.

He blew off a meeting with the R&D department. Fortunately, they were accustomed to his idiosyncrasies. No one was at all fazed when he shot out a department-wide email demanding their reports be encrypted and uploaded to the company network so that he could review them from home.

Honestly, he was becoming a hermit. Once upon a time he actually liked going out and being the center of attention. Tony was certain there had been a time when he liked drinking and carousing and generally being around more people than he even knew.

Life had been so simple before Obi went power mad. Even afterward, it had not been so bad. Then the Avengers came along with their ideas of teamwork and friendship, and what the hell was that anyway?

Sadly enough, all this alone time was not actually encouraging much in the way of productivity. Usually Tony could not wait to kick people out so that he could get something done. The only thing that seemed to be better was his ability to sleep.

He slept a lot. He figured he probably needed it, going as long as he had with so few hours of sleep
a day. Now he slept all night, napped occasionally, and slept some more when he woke up still
tired.

Tony was not an idiot. By the fourth day of this, he had figured out that this was not wholly normal.
On the fifth straight day of ignoring anyone who asked for entrance into his workshop—and
having Jarvis block all of Clint’s attempts at sneaking in through means other than the door—he
was starting to believe he was better off keeping to himself. The attempts at gaining entrance were
becoming fewer, the time between them greater, and apparently he was not the only one with that
opinion.

“Jarvis, bring up the schematics for the…” What had he been working on again? “—pull up the
last thing I looked at.”

What appeared before him was not, in fact, schematics for anything. It was a video. The last visual
recording made by the Iron Man suit, to be more precise. Tony did not remember watching it. How
could he have pulled up footage from a flight and then proceed to forget ever doing it?

“Pl—” He got caught on the words. Coughing once and clearing the rough from his throat, he
quickly said, “Play it.”

The first thing that came up was an old farmhouse that looked like it used to be white. The paint
was peeling, the roof missing a good chunk of its shingles, and the porch sagged into the hard-
packed dirt.

“Pause.”

It was strange seeing the house from the outside. When he thought back—god, it had been almost
three months ago already—he found he could barely recall anything of the place. The room, yes.
He remembered that room, could recreate it down to the precise detail, from that water stained
spot on the ceiling to the peeling grout around the bathtub. But the rest of the place?

Well, he had only been through it once, and he had been running a high fever at the time. He had
seen his records. He accessed them after he realized how much time he had been in the hospital.
Natasha had alluded to some system failure. She did not tell him that his kidneys had all but
stopped working and that he had been intubated when he stopped breathing on his own. Apparently
he had been on a ventilator for almost twenty-four hours before his body rebooted itself. At one
point, they had to use a defibrillator on him. It was in the side notes. The arc reactor could handle
it, but the electromagnetic backlash had fried the defibrillator. Fortunately, it had only taken one hit
to kick start his heart.

He had been that close to dying.

So it really should not be a surprise that he did not remember any of this. All he recalled was how
much it hurt, and how glad he had been when it ended.

“Jarvis, what’s the date?”

“January third.”

“January. Jesus. Really?”

Jarvis did not bother answering that. He knew better than to answer every stupid rhetorical question
Tony posed.

“Jarvis, I need directions,” he said abruptly. “And I need the Mark V.”
“Sir, I must advise against attempting to put on the armor before consulting with a doctor about your hand.”

“I’m out of the brace, and I’ve been doing my exercises, Jarvis.” Mostly. Well, not much these past few days, but before that he had been quite diligent. Besides, he was actually less likely to cause himself harm in the suit than he was just puttering around in his workshop. “I’ll be driving, Jarvis. I just want it along. If it comes down to it, I’d rather deal with straining my hand.”

“Would you like me to summon the Avengers? Captain Rogers, perhaps.”

“I appreciate your concern about my well-being, but I’ll be fine.”

Tony grabbed the suitcase armor and threw it in the passenger seat of his Audi R8. His phone was ringing, as it had done frequently in the past several days, and he looked down to see a familiar number that he had not seen pop up on his phone in months. He hit the speaker and dropped the phone in his lap.

“Hey, Rhodey,” he greeted, firing the engine and shifting the car into gear. “I see you broke down and got satellite service.”

He was not sure what it was about Rhodey that brought out the sarcastic son-of-a-bitch side of him. He loved Rhodey. Rhodey was the best friend he ever had. The man never put up with any of Tony’s crap and was often willing to beat the snot out of Tony for his own good. Tony did not know a better man.

“I’m stateside. I got a sudden transfer back, which I’m told is completely coincidental and yet somehow reeks of your handiwork.”

Lieutenant Colonel James Rhodes sounded the same as he always did. Annoyed. Although Tony had nothing to do with whatever Rhodey was suggesting. He would never interfere with the man’s career. Rhodey had long ago made it perfectly clear how important the military was to him and how unwelcome Tony’s brand of help was. Obviously Rhodey was wrong, and his transfer was, in fact, a coincidence.

“What the hell, Tony! What’s going on? The tabloids are freaking out over your disappearance.”

“I’ve been catching up on sleep.” Tony wove the car through the traffic like it was a motorcycle rather than a coupe. Horns blared in protest, but he ignored them, making his way toward the city limits in record time. “What? Pepper didn’t call you? Pepper always calls you.”

“How about you call me once in a while?” Rhodey shot back irritably. “According to the tabloids, you dropped off the grid for a month and a half, came back, smiled, waved, and then disappeared again. What happened?”

“Crazy fanboy,” Tony said mildly. “Kept me locked in a cellar.”

“What!”

“Well, a bedroom,” Tony corrected. “There was a bed. And a bathroom. With a tub. TV, too. Do you know what kind of heinous programming runs during the day?”

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“Well, a bedroom,” Tony corrected. “There was a bed. And a bathroom. With a tub. TV, too. Do you know what kind of heinous programming runs during the day?”
“Jesus, Tony. Are you okay?”

“Sure.” God, he had missed Rhodey. “You in town then? You should stop by. We could fondue.”

Steve had always regretted telling Tony that story. Well, not recently. Tony had not brought it up in months—six months at least. It was all about timing, really. Jokes were not funny if they were beat into the dirt.

Of course, Rhodey did not have the inside scoop, so the joke meant nothing to him.

“Stop giving me the runaround, Tony. I know you better than that. What’s wrong?”

“Why would anything be wrong?” It was a valid question. He was Tony Stark. He was always fine. (One itty bitty nervous breakdown notwithstanding.) “I’m driving through the countryside, if you must know. It’s a nice day out—”

“It’s twenty-two degrees out. It’s supposed to snow later.”

“—and I’ve been cooped up for days. I needed some space. Jeez, Rhodey. You always think the worst of me.”

“I don’t think anything until all this shit starts piling up, and people are asking me what’s been wrong with you,” Rhodey shot back. “And then I have to scramble, because I have no idea what they’re talking about. Was that a real offer, Tony? Because I’m in New York. I can be there in twenty minutes.”

“Make it tonight,” Tony countered. He glanced at his clock and ran a quick estimate. “Is eight okay? Make a reservation for that place you like—that place, with the oysters and bacon thing?—make a reservation. My treat.”

“You’d better treat. And you’d better be there.”

“Shoot me the address. Eight.”

“Don’t do anything stupid.”

“You know me.”

“That’s what I’m talking about.”

Tony ended the call. He was smiling faintly. It had been far too long since the last time he had spoken to Rhodey, even longer since they had seen each other. Surely this was a sign that things were looking up.

* * *

It took him almost an hour and a half to reach the destination Jarvis plotted out. He had been speeding, naturally, or it would have taken well over two hours. By some miracle, not a single cop had been out, or he would have had to use some of his considerable influence to keep from losing his license or going to jail.

He pulled to a stop at the end of the long drive leading to the little house. It was piled high with snow. No one had been here in quite some time.

“Shit.”
His car would not make it through those drifts, and there was no way he was walking half a mile through the snow. Tony was nowhere near dressed for that kind of hike. He was lucky he had remembered to bring a jacket. He was layered up, sure, but only in that he wore several shirts. He only had on an old pair of jeans and a beat up pair of tennis shoes. The Mark V did not have flight capabilities, and he was not slogging through snow drifts in the Iron Man armor under anything less than life-threatening circumstances.

Besides, if he put on the suit without being in danger, Jarvis would give him crap and probably tattle to the team. Tony had been enough of an ass to them without pissing them off because he went against doctor’s orders for a snowy day hike.

Drumming his fingers on the steering wheel, he considered the house. It was a tiny, dirty looking thing in the distance. It looked like a hundred other old farm houses he had seen in his lifetime. There was nothing about it that marked it as unique.

It was a wasted trip.

He chastised himself for thinking he could have gotten anything out of this anyway. What could he possibly learn from the place that Coulson and his band of merry men had not already found? Tony was an inventor and a businessman, not an investigative detective.

There was nothing here. Just snow and an abandoned farmhouse and ugly skies for miles. The clouds hung low and dark, making it feel much later than it actually was. A few flurries of snow were starting up. Nothing serious—a snowflake here and there—floating silently around him.

Tony’s eyes narrowed as he studied the horizon. Was that… smoke?

Putting the car back in gear, he eased back onto the highway.

Sure enough, it was smoke. Smoke from a chimney, which meant a house. And if there was smoke, that meant someone was home.

The house was about three miles down. It’s drive was clear but pitted. His car, with its low-sitting sports car suspension, did not like the drive one bit. Tony gritted his teeth against the jouncing of the vehicle and crept along the dirt road at a snail’s pace, until it suddenly opened up into a field-like driveway.

There was a barn at one end, traditionalist red, and a house to his left. He pulled to a stop in front of the quaint little place—painted pale yellow with white shutters and a bold red front door. The house was in much better repair than Judas’s place, and the barn looked to be in good condition from what Tony could tell.

He hesitated on leaving the car, staring at the suitcase in the passenger seat. It took a long moment of rationalizations before he finally closed the door on the armor and set the alarm on the car. This was probably perfectly safe, might be one of those places where they leave their doors unlocked. Then again, the next house down, a guy had kept some poor sap handcuffed to a bed for almost ten days. Would have done it longer, too, if that guy hadn’t gone and all but chewed his arm off just to get free.

Tony felt like a coward, standing on the front porch with his hand poised to knock on the door. He was ready to do it. He wanted to knock. But his arm had frozen solid.

He liked to think he would have knocked. Any second, his body would have unlocked, and his knuckles would have hit the door.
But he didn’t. The door jerked open before he could muster the courage. He yanked his hand back to his chest and stared down in surprise at the kid frowning at him from behind the screen door.

The kid could not have been more than ten or eleven. He was still small, stocky, not yet at that awkward growth spurt stage. His hair hung around his face in sheer blond waves, long and messy as was the style among kids right now.

“Um, hey,” he greeted uncertainly. “Are your, uh… are your parents home?”

Crap. He had to pull himself together. This was no good if he was stuttering in front of a preteen.

The kid frowned at him suspiciously before turning and bellowing into the house.

“MOM! DAD! SOME GUY’S OUTSIDE!”

While that was not untrue, it kind of made him sound like a peeping tom or some sort of trespasser.

Tony sighed and rubbed at a spot of oil on his hand. He did not want to think about what he looked like right now. This trip had been impulsive, and he certainly never intended to speak to anyone. He was mostly clean—he had showered that morning in the workshop washroom—but there had been no attempts at further grooming. His beard was scruffy, his hair uncombed, and he had flung his jacket on over a hooded sweatshirt and stained jeans. He doubted he looked anything like the man who had graced the cover of *Esquire* more than once.

“Thomas, you get inside this instant—oh!”

The woman who had hollered back at the boy stopped at the end of the front hall, looking startled to find someone actually standing outside the door. She hurried forward, pushing the kid—Thomas—aside firmly, to fix a skeptical stare on him.

“We don’t need more workers,” she told him sternly. “John’s already got enough help next season. Check down the road with Old Ben. He’s been looking.”

Apparently he really did look that rough. Not that the woman looked much better. She was pretty enough, but her graying hair was in a sloppy ponytail, and she wore no makeup. Her skin was wind-toughened, aging her. She looked over fifty, but if Thomas or the other boy peeking around the corner was hers, Tony was willing to bet she was closer to forty.

“I’m not here about a job,” he said before she could shut the door in his face. “What do you know about the abandoned house up the road?”

The door stopped, then reopened, revealing a dubious frown on the woman’s face.

“The old Caratte farm?”

“Marlys Caratte, yes,” Tony barely recalled that name, but he was glad he did. “There was an incident there a couple months ago. I was wondering if you knew anything about it.”

“Cops were already here,” the woman remarked. Her eyes were shrewd, dragging over his ragged appearance. “And you don’t look like a cop.”

“I’m not. I just…” Tony glanced over his shoulder, but the house was well out of sight. “The police haven’t gotten much further in the investigation—” As far as he was aware, the police were not involved at all. Coulson had stopped visiting so often, which had Tony believing there were either no more leads or he had shifted his focus onto more important things. “—I was going to look at the
house, but I didn’t really anticipate all the snow. Then I saw the smoke from your house and thought…”

He was babbling. This was getting him nowhere. Tony was not even sure what he was hoping to accomplish here. The woman was giving him a funny look, and the littler kid was staring openly. (Thomas had run off, not remotely interested in the strange guy at the door.)

“If you already talked to the police…”

The woman sighed. Tony stepped back when she suddenly pushed the screen door open.

“You might as well come on in from the cold,” she told him. “You eaten anything recently? I was about to put supper on the table.”

“I have dinner plans,” Tony said, cautiously stepping over the threshold.

“Yeah? You and your lonesome at the truck stop down the road?” the woman looked at him skeptically.

Jeez. Tony had not realized he looked quite that bad. When had he last shaved? Three days ago? Five? He shaved that evening while his own personal Russian stalker watched him walk around in a towel. How long had it been since then? He honestly did not know.

“In New York,” he muttered, looking around warily.

There was an echo of memory here. He knew he had never been in this house, but there was something familiar about it. The chipped Formica table, the eyelet curtains over the sink—it set him on edge. He did not like it at all.

“No offense, honey, but you’re not real good at this private investigator gig,” the woman said frankly. She touched the shoulder of the little boy—maybe seven or eight. “Brian, bring another chair to the table, will you?”

Brian scampered off to do as he was told.

“What makes you say that?”

Tony supposed he should set her straight about her assumptions, but he was curious about her interpretation of him. The woman did not recognize him, obviously. Out here in the boonies, he was not too surprised, but it was strange. He should have looked in a mirror. He was not sure if he was just that unrecognizable or if this was simply a case of a lack of exposure to pop culture.

Either way, it was interesting.

The woman shot him a dubious and somewhat sympathetic look.

“You look exhausted and half-starved,” she declared. “Overworked and underpaid. A guy looks like you shows up at my door, I figure he’s looking for a job.”

This was getting embarrassing. Tony had fallen far and fallen hard in the past. He could not count the number of times he had spent the wee hours of the morning worshipping the porcelain god. His latest backslide had led to an unexpected bondage experience. Apparently he was slipping again if it was starting to show on his face.

Hell, who was he kidding? His belt was notched tighter than ever, and he had never been able to fit
three layers of shirts under this jacket before. He had lost a lot of weight and not truly realized it
until some farmer’s wife pointed it out.

“It’s been a rough couple of months,” he said, which was true enough.

Brian came back with a chair that was too big for him to carry. Tony would have grabbed the chair
himself, but the kid had a particular look in his eyes. It was a familiar stubborn glint, one Tony
recognized. An offer to help would not be appreciated.

The chair went to a place setting Tony had barely noticed the woman putting out. Apparently he
was now expected to eat with this unfamiliar family.

“Dinner’s ready,” the woman told the boy. “Tell your brother and your dad. You,” she pointed at
Tony. “Help me put the food out.”

Tony was too startled to do anything but obey. She pushed a serving platter into his hands, and he
had to brace against its surprising weight. There was a lot of food on it—potatoes, carrots, and
some meat that looked vaguely like beef—but it should not have been that heavy. Either the plate
weighed a ton, or he had actually lost muscle mass.

God damn.

“You want water or milk?”

“Uh…” he looked at the glass container of white liquid uneasily. What the hell? Milk came in
plastic cartons, didn’t it? “Water is fine. You know, I didn’t come here looking for a meal.”

“When Sarah decides to feed a man, he gets fed, whether he likes it or not.”

Tony did not jump at the graveled voice so much as the hand that clapped against his shoulder in
an uncomfortably familiar manner.

The man who had spoken was big—like Steve Rogers big—but built like a man used to hard labor
rather than the physical perfection that was Captain America. His arms were big, his hands scarred,
and he had a barrel chest that threatened the buttons of his flannel shirt. Tony put him around the
same age as the woman (Sarah, apparently). He looked older, but he was probably only a handful
of years older than Tony.

There was no avoiding the hand that grabbed his.

“John Dahlberg,” the man greeted, squeezing Tony’s hand firmly. Tony reflexively squeezed back,
the experienced businessman in him comfortable with this at least. “You’ve met my wife, Sarah.”

Holy god. It was like being back at the tower. Tony tensed but pointedly did not shrug off the
hands that pushed him toward the new chair. He took some comfort in the thought that he really
could leave whenever he wanted. He was not even entirely sure why he had not left yet. It was as
though something with these people compelled him to stay.

“Tony,” he offered. “Sorry for the intrusion.”

“There’s plenty of food.”

John sat at the head of the table, Sarah to his right. Thomas was at the other end, with Brian at
Tony’s side. Thomas was sullen. He hid behind his unruly hair and seemed to be unimpressed by
all of them. Brian, on the other hand, did not hide his interest in the stranger at their table. He
gazed openly at Tony, not stopping even when his mother rebuked him.

“Don’t stare, Brian. It’s impolite.”

Tony was used to people looking at him. One creepy little kid was nothing.

“Where do you hail from, Tony?” John asked. He filled his plate to the point where there was no empty space to speak of, before passing it along to Sarah.

“Manhattan,” Tony said, eyes jumping from the overflowing plate to John’s sun-yellowed eyes.

“I’ve never been one for the big city myself,” John declared. “Too many people trying to lie to you. Give me open land and honest work any day.”

“John,” Sarah scolded mildly.

“What? It’s true. Don’t you remember Aunt Paula got mugged that time in Pittsburgh? Who needs that?” John leaned closer to Tony, speaking in a conspiratorial whisper that everyone else was sure to hear. “I heard some city folk came out here causing some trouble, few months back. Just down the road.”

“Yes,” Tony agreed. Actually, he had no idea where Judas had come from. For all he knew, the man was from the countryside.

Brian tugged at his sleeve, and Tony accepted the serving platter with some hesitation.

“Go on. We don’t let people go hungry ‘round here. And Sarah makes the best roast you’ve ever had.”

Tony was certain he had never eaten a roast like this. He had previously been unable to positively identify what kind of meat it was, let alone classify it as a roast. Still, he served himself a small amount of… roast, and set the platter aside.

And then, to his great discomfort, everyone folded their hands together. With all the awkwardness of an atheist, he folded his hands on his lap and avoided looking at anyone while John led the family in prayer.

“Bless us, oh Lord, for these, thy gifts,” John said. “Which we are about to receive. From thy bounty, through Christ, our lord. Amen.”

There was an echoing chorus of Amen around the table, and Tony shifted uneasily. Not even Steve, who Tony knew to be semi-religious, ever prayed at the table. Natasha sometimes muttered something over her meal, but it was always in a language Tony did not speak, and it never involved crossing herself. And no one else ever felt the need to participate.

“No wonder you’re so thin, Tony,” John raised an eyebrow at Tony’s plate. “You eat like a bird.”

Tony offered a tight smile and cut into his potato with more manners than likely applied to his settings. Everyone else was mashing the things down and dumping on butter and gravy like there was no tomorrow. Tony could not recall the last time he had altered anything once it came to him, but for the occasional salt and pepper. Wasn’t it the chef’s purpose to serve food completely prepared as it was meant to be eaten?

The entire situation felt foreign.
“Tony was asking about the old Caratte farm,” Sarah announced. “You remember the police poking about there a couple months ago?”

John grimaced and shoveled a forkful of potato, gravy and meat into his mouth.

“Old ladies at church kept talking about it,” he grumbled around his food. “Squatters in the house. That’s all. What do you want to know about that for anyway, Tony?”

Squatters?

“Did anyone know someone was… squatting?” Tony asked.

“Nah,” John shrugged. “We’d’ve called the sheriff. Kicked ‘em out. Marlys left that house to the state, but they’re not much interested in land they can’t do nothing with.”

“I thought Marlys still owned the property.”

Sarah cocked an eyebrow at him.

“You have been doing the research,” she remarked.

Tony did not bother to tell her that he was simply picking through what little he recalled from Coulson’s reports.

“She does, but she’s going to kick it any time now.”

“John,” Sarah murmured, a gentle rebuke at his crass attitude. Not that Tony cared. He did not know Marlys. Inappropriate remarks regarding her life or death meant nothing to him. John ignored the warning anyway, plowing forward in the conversation as though Sarah had never spoken.

“State had been out surveying the area months ago. Nothing come of it.”

Tony looked at John sharply. That was very interesting.

“Did you tell Cou—the police about that?” he asked. Coulson should have caught that. He would have chased a lead like that to its very end. Had Coulson mentioned that? Tony did not remember anything being said about State employees.

“Didn’t come up,” John shrugged. “That was earlier, anyway. Police just asked if we seen any cars up at the house. Have you seen that drive? If someone parked back behind that shack, no one’ll see it. I think there’s another road in, too. Side road. Take that—no one ‘round here’d notice.”

“Well?” Tony clenched at his silverware tensely, not remotely interested in the meal. “But you saw the state employee?”

“End of the drive. Tax-exempt license plate,” John shrugged again and shoveled more food into his mouth. “Some guy in a windbreaker. Saw the car a couple times a few months back.”

“Do you remember the plate number?”

“You think he might be a witness?” Sarah inquired. “Someone working for the government would have reported anything fishy to his supervisor, I’d think.”

No, Tony did not think that he was a witness. Until Marlys officially died, that land was hers so long as she did not go into major debt. Coulson said it belonged to her. The state had not seized her property, which meant no one could touch it without the permission of a power of attorney. And,
from what Tony understood, there was no such person in Marlys’s life. The government had to wait until she actually died, legally speaking. And for land like this, rundown acres pinned between two farms, they would not try to make a move on it until they absolutely had to.

Maybe that guy was a state employee. Maybe John had seen Judas. Tony wished he had brought the picture the sketch artist had rendered.

“You remember what the guy looked like?” Tony asked finally.

“Just saw him driving past,” John scrunched up his face, no doubt searching his memory. “Average height, I guess. Dark hair. Crappy car. Engine sounded like it needed some work.”

“Son of a—” Tony hissed, then cut himself off when he caught Brian still staring at him. He grimaced and dragged an anxious hand over his face. How many times had he heard that engine stutter, grind, and skip to a start? “I’ve got to go.”

“Something wrong?” John asked blankly.

“Thanks for dinner.” Even though he had eaten maybe three bites.

“You’re not driving out in that, honey,” Sarah objected, chucking a thumb toward the window.

“You got four-wheel drive?”

Tony stared out at the heavy snow, so thick he could not see the tree he had passed on the way up the drive.

As a matter of fact, he did not have four-wheel drive. The Audi was built for speed on a paved road. He had taken it because it would get him here fast. Tony had not checked the weather service beforehand. If he had, he would have reconsidered driving a hundred twenty miles into the Pennsylvanian countryside.

“Oh, damn,” he groaned and looked at his watch. It was pushing toward six o’clock. He had told Rhodey eight. If his luck with the lack of state patrol on the road had held, he might have made it back in time to clean up and meet his friend. In this snow, he would be lucky if his car did not get stuck in a drift. It would take him at least three hours to get home. Probably four.

“Looks like you won’t be making your dinner date in New York,” Sarah said wryly. “You need a phone?”

Tony sighed and sank back into his chair. He shook his head, cringing inwardly at the reaming he was going to get for breaking his plans with Rhodey. Rhodes was never afraid to give Tony a piece of his mind.

“You might as well finish your supper,” Sarah suggested. “John’s right. You don’t eat enough to keep a bird alive. Thomas, dear, pass the gravy to our guest.”

The gravy dish went from Thomas’s hands to Brian’s, and Tony set it aside. If John’s plate was any indication, he was supposed to pour the gravy over everything he ate. It looked wholly unappealing.

“I’m sorry.” He stared out at the snow, willing it to stop. Naturally, it did not care how he felt. It kept falling—big, white, wet flakes that would probably send him into an uncontrolled spin and straight into a ditch. “I didn’t realize it was going to snow. I wouldn’t have stayed.”

Of course, if he hadn’t stayed, he never would have learned what he had.
Tony pulled out his phone and considered who to call first. Coulson should probably know this. If he was still following the investigation. Still, Tony was supposed to be meeting Rhodey that night. Rhodey got the first call, definitely.

“Whoa! Is that a StarkPhone?”

Tony blinked and looked up, baffled by the fact that the question had come from Thomas. The kid had seemed genuinely disinterested in him. Apparently, all it took was some cool tech to get his attention.

“It’s a prototype,” he said finally, looking back at his phone and flipping through his contacts.

“Cody’s dad has one of those,” Thomas announced. “He says it’s expensive but worth it. Cody got a Stark tablet for Christmas. He’s got the coolest apps.”

Tony offered a tight smile. Excusing himself from the table, he stood and lifted the phone to his ear. Rhodey answered off the first ring.

“You stupid son of a bitch!” Tony yanked the phone away from his ear at the sheer volume. Rhodey sounded a bit more than just annoyed this time. “Pepper said you just disappeared on them after a week of no shows!”

“I can’t make dinner tonight, Rhodey,” Tony tried, only to be interrupted.

“You went out to that damned farm! You in the Audi?”

“Rhodey, what does it—” Tony ignored the curious looks he received and stalked over to the window, peering out into the yard and straining to see beyond two feet. Even with the outside light on, he could hardly see the drive. He upped the travel estimate to five hours. “Are you in my workshop? I told Jarvis to lock it down—”

“There! That’s his car!” This comment was distant, as though Rhodey were speaking to someone else. The next remark was for Tony, if its normal volume was any indicator. “We traced your phone. Are you okay? You’re not in trouble, are you?”

“Do you think I’d be calling you if I was?” Tony snapped. His temper flared. “Did you follow me?”

Suddenly, the snowfall changed. It swirled madly, out, around, up, like it was caught in a twister’s funnel. Something big was stirring up the snow.

“What the hell, Rhodey?” he blurted. “Did you fly a helicopter out here?”

“The quinjet,” Rhodey retorted. “Barton’s piloting. Nice, by the way. I can see your work in the modifications.”

“So glad you approve!” Tony snarled. “You did not take a quinjet out just because I went on an unplanned drive!”

“Be grateful I convinced most of your friends to stay home,” Rhodey said, completely unrepentant.

There was a loud knocking on the door, and Tony cursed again, shoving his phone in his pocket. He stopped, suddenly very aware of the bewildered stares he was receiving. Flashing a broad, practiced grin, he held up his hands as if to ask, what can you do?
“Um, if that’s for me, I don’t suppose you could convince the guy at the door that you guys own that car in the driveway?” he asked with forced levity.

“Depends what kind of car it is,” John said flatly. He threw his napkin on the table and left the kitchen, presumably to answer the door. Tony managed to keep from wincing. The man looked irritated.

“What’s a quinjet?” Brian asked in a hesitantly small child’s voice.

“Modified jet plane,” Tony said dully. “Five engines, so… quinjet.”

The look Sarah gave him was an interesting mingle of alarm and horror.

“Someone’s landing an airplane in our fields?”

“It has vertical takeoff and landing capabilities.” Tony did wince this time, because that was Clint’s icy tone. He looked down at his hand, fingers picking at his sweatshirt’s sleeve, to avoid watching Clint and Rhodey follow John back into the kitchen. “We won’t hurt your land. I can’t say the same about him.”

“Sorry to intrude, ma’am,” Rhodey said politely to Sarah. “We’ll just collect him and get out of your hair.”

“Are you military?” Sarah asked blankly. When no one responded, Tony realized she was asking him.

“Ah, no,” he managed a strained smile. “The guy in the uniform is the only military employee here. He’s the only member of the Air Force still willing to talk to me.”

Rhodey pointedly ignored the barb, instead offering his hand to the bewildered wife and introducing himself politely. Clint was next to Tony, his blank expression far more intimidating than any scowl would have been. Tony warily met his gaze, a little surprised when Clint just shook his head.

“You look like shit, Stark.”

“He works for the state,” Tony replied point-blank.

Clint’s eyebrows shot up.

“No kidding?” And suddenly the simmering fury was gone. There was an undercurrent of malice, lingering behind that smirk, but Tony found himself again at ease. What the hell was it about Barton that did this to him? “You still should have taken backup. Tell me you brought the suit at least.”

“Mark V is in the car,” Tony mumbled. Clint had posed it as a rhetorical question, though, because he ignored Tony’s response and issued a—not unexpected—blunt order.

“Quinjet. Home. Now.”

Tony might have been used to people watching him, but this was a little uncomfortable. He actually felt like he owed someone an explanation, though he was not sure what he was trying to explain, or to whom.

“Someone will pick up the car after the storm ends,” Rhodey was assuring the family as Clint
guided Tony out with a hand at his back. “You probably don’t have to worry about theft out here too much, but you can be sure that if the snow doesn’t keep them from taking that car, Tony’s security will.”

Tony was just outside the kitchen when he heard Brian’s soft voice.

“Is he Iron Man?”

Rhodey let a beat pass before he answered.

“Yes. He is Iron Man.”

* * *

Tony grabbed the Mark V out of his car, which was already almost completely obscured by the snow. He had no idea how Rhodey could have possibly picked it out in the dark in this snowfall.

Clint pushed him to the bench on the quinjet before moving forward to settle into the pilot’s seat. A few seconds later, Rhodey jogged up the ramp, shaking the snow off his uniform and passing Tony to clap a hand against Clint’s shoulder.

“Thanks for the ride, Barton,” he said. “Let’s get this idiot home.”

“Sit down, Colonel,” Clint suggested. “Takeoff could be a bit rough in this weather, even in this bird.”

Normally, Rhodey would have taken the copilot’s chair, but he moved back to sit next to Tony instead. Tony could feel the other man’s stare, heavy on him. He let it sit while they took off, the quinjet lurching up, swooping in the low pressure air currents, and finally breaking through the low clouds into the clear night sky.

Aware that Rhodey was not going to let him get out of this talk, Tony sighed and slumped over against his friend’s shoulder. Rhodey was a solid presence, quietly accepting the behavior without really reciprocating. Tony had always liked that about him.

“I didn’t know it was going to snow,” he said, which was totally an excuse, and they all knew it.

“You should have called me,” Rhodey replied. He did not move, apparently content to let Tony use his shoulder as a pillow. “Seriously, Tony? Don’t ever make me find out this shit that way again. What kind of friend am I if I have to find out you were abducted months after the fact from a bunch of cadets who happen to know I know you?”

Tony had no good answer for that. He really was screwing things up a lot lately.

“You okay?”

“Sure.”

“You’re a shitty liar.”

“Right?” Clint tossed into the conversation. “I am, frankly, shocked he’s as successful as he is. People must be dumber than bricks in the business world. He can’t lie for shit.”

A low chuckle dragged its way through his throat before Tony felt the good humor crumble away. He sighed and let the silence drag out.
“Fury’s thinking you should see a shrink,” Clint offered after a while. “He told Cap you should be suspended until you got your head on straight.”

“I am suspended,” Tony shot back. “My arm is almost good enough to handle the suit, though. And if Steve thinks he has any say over what I do—”

“Relax, Stark,” Clint sounded amused. It was hard to tell, since all Tony could see was the back of his head. “Cap said he wanted to talk to you first. By the way, do you have any idea why he’s suddenly asking about if he can donate his shirts somewhere? He seems to think he needs a new wardrobe.”

It took a few seconds to process that one. When he finally caught the gist of what Clint was suggesting, he could not decide if he should be amused or mortified.

“I, ah… may have suggested that his shirt bothered me,” he admitted. Rhodey chuckled, shoulder shaking slightly under Tony’s head. He sighed and sat up (though not quite abandoning the warm press of his arm against Rhodey’s), scrubbing at his face with both hands to chase away the last of the weariness. “I’ll talk to him. It’s not the shirts that bother me anyway. Not by themselves.”

“What did you mean when you said this guy was a state employee?” Clint asked. It was a change of topics, if not quite a different subject. “Where’d you get that?”

It felt good to be talking again. Locked away in his workshop, Tony found he had not even spoken to Jarvis that much. He did not notice anything at the time. Upon reflection, it had been extremely lonely.

He told them about John Dahlberg, and what he had seen. He told them about the car, its government plates and bad engine. When Clint challenged him, Rhodey helped explain legalities and bureaucratic red tape.

“It’s not a great description, but it’s better than anything else we’ve had lately,” Clint declared when Tony had finished. “I hope you’re up for looking through a shit ton of photographs. I don’t even want to guess how many people work for the state.”

“I’ll have Jarvis run them up against the picture the sketch artist drew,” Tony replied. “If I’m lucky, he’ll be able to narrow down the search.”

He thought they would fall into a companionable silence then. Tony would have preferred it. But Rhodey wasn’t playing ball, and Clint was a stubborn ass when he wanted to be.

“Barton was telling me a bit about what happened,” Rhodey announced. “About where you were, how you got there, and what you did to get out. What’s been happening since.”

“That’s nice,” Tony mumbled. He knew he was not lucky enough for that to be it. A simple, sorry you had to go through that, was too much to ask for.

“Not really,” Rhodey shifted slightly, was probably looking at him again. Tony could not look at him. He kept his eyes on the bench opposite of them. “I know you don’t want to talk about it, and I hate to make you, but I’ve got to ask, Tony.”

He knew what was coming. Actually, Tony was shocked no one had asked before this.

“Yes,” he said before Rhodey could put the question to words. “He did.”

Rhodey’s breath came out in a startled, almost shaky whoosh of air.
“Christ,” Rhodey whispered. “Have you been tested?”

Tony shrugged. He did not know. He had not wanted to know.

“He was tested,” Clint said grimly. “Standard practice, actually. Especially considering the condition he arrived in. They automatically test for anything and everything. If he was a woman, they would have tossed in a pregnancy exam, even if it hadn’t been a concern.”

Just the thought made him shudder. If they had suspected, why hadn’t they asked?

“They did ask.”

Was Clint a psychic? No. Tony realized he was too distracted to notice when he was and was not putting voice to his own thoughts.

“You don’t remember because the idiots asked while you were doped up,” Clint explained. “According to the reports, you told them you were fine and to fuck off.”

“And they believed that?” Rhodey sounded pretty well outraged.

“I did say they were idiots.” The plane banked, then started to descend. “Besides, we knew.”

Tony flinched hard at that one. Seriously?

“Well, I knew,” Clint corrected. He was focused on landing the plane, his eyes steady on their destination. It was not snowing in Manhattan. “I mean, you were handcuffed to a bed. You were wiggy when people touched you—more than usual anyway—and that freak out with Rogers the other night? You might as well have come out and said you were raped, Stark.”

“Don’t—” Tony’s voice broke, and he knew better than to try to say anything more. It was too late anyway. The word was out there, bouncing around his skull like a pong ball, taking out whatever it hit. He couldn’t tear himself away from it.

Until Rhodey’s hand curled around the side of his head and dragged him back to that familiar, safe shoulder.

“God,” Tony groaned. “There was nothing I could do. He would have killed me. He wouldn’t have meant to, but he would have done it all the same.”

Rhodey’s hand was flat against his back, warm between his shoulder blades.

“You don’t have to justify yourself, Tony,” Rhodey said plainly. “I don’t care how it happened. You didn’t want it. That’s on him. It wasn’t your fault.”

Rhodey—steadfast, stoic Rhodey—did not so much as grunt a protest when Tony’s fist came down on his thigh. He did not react with alarm when Tony released a sound that crossed into the realm of wounded dog.

Instead, he gently unfurled Tony’s fingers from his slacks and tugged the resisting limb up until Tony got the hint and wrapped the arm around Rhodey’s neck instead. The move all but dumped him into Rhodey’s lap, but he could not bring himself to care. Rhodey was safe and dependable and always had his back, even when he was a smart-ass little snot in MIT who pissed off too many upperclassmen on his arrogance alone.

Even when he was broken and crying and wondering what the hell he had done to deserve this, and
what he was going to do to get over it.

* * *

By the time Tony came back to himself, the quinjet was on the ground. Rhodey’s arms were draped loosely around his waist, and he was humming quietly. It took Tony a moment to place the song. Had he been in a lighter mood, he would have poked mercilessly at the other man for humming *America the Beautiful*. Given time, he knew he would bring it up later.

The tears dried and his breathing calmed to something approaching normal. He hiccupped and swallowed hard as a result, startled and a bit embarrassed by the sad little noise. Then again, he was sitting in Rhodey’s lap, his face buried in the man’s collar, and he had yet to relent his koala grip. A little hiccup was the least of his problems.

Though reluctant to give up the odd comfort, Tony realized they were sitting on a bench in the quinjet. He was fine, but Rhodey was trapped between the hard bench and Tony’s bony backside, which could not be even slightly comfortable.

Besides, he did feel better. He felt calmer, more relaxed than he had been in—Jesus—months. Tony never would have thought crying could have such a cathartic effect. He certainly had not felt this good after the last time.

Swallowing again, clearing his throat, he pulled back and offered a rueful half-smile.

“Sorry.”

“Yeah, don’t even,” Rhodey retorted. “Barton was right, you know. You look like hell. I am not going to dinner with you looking like this.”

Tony laughed. It was a brittle, watery sound, but it felt almost normal.

“I don’t even want to know,” he protested. He shuffled back, awkwardly, until his butt hit the bench. It still left his legs flung over Rhodey’s lap, but given that the man had yet to let go of his own loose embrace, Tony did not feel too bad about it. “Does that mean dinner is cancelled?”

Leaving one arm around Tony’s back, Rhodey checked his watch.

“It’s quarter to seven,” he said. “We’ve got enough time, and we do have a reservation.”

Tony felt a delighted grin break across his face. It had been a very long time since he had felt this content, and he never had been above a little self-indulgence. Plus, reservation or not (Tony didn’t care if they ended up at a McDonald’s) he was pretty much guaranteed to have a far better mealtime with Rhodey than that awkward blend of roasted food and uncomfortable conversation with the Dahlbergs.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

Part of the reason I put unreliable narrator in the tags was because this is essentially all
from Tony's rather limited point of view. Obviously there are things happening around him that he can't see or doesn't have the wherewithal to investigate.

As such, I've been flirting with the notion of side story, taking the perspective of other characters-notably Coulson, Steve and Clint. If I'm particularly ambitious, it may happen.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Curiously, the end of book, The Princess Bride, is not nearly as romantic as its cinematic counterpart.

(i.e. - even if your true love returns, it may not be the happy ending you were expecting.)

Tony cleaned up, shaved, and changed into something presentable. (Clint had been right—he was pushing beatnik levels of scruffiness.) As promised, he and Rhodey went to dinner before they ultimately retired to Tony’s workshop, where they sat on the couch, drinking ginger ale (Tony) and beer (Rhodey). Rhodey stayed until nearly midnight. They talked about anything, never quite touching on the topic of Judas, though they occasionally danced close to it. Rhodey told Tony about his stint in Kuwait and how the military was still dealing with Hammer tech.

“We always make sure to test it before putting in any orders,” Rhodey said dryly, and Tony had laughed harder than the joke warranted.

They discussed the recent election (Tony had forgotten to vote) and the shaky market and the latest technology.

“I put off my engineers,” Tony admitted. “I’ve got to review their reports and arrange meetings.”

“You owe them that much,” Rhodey agreed.

At one point they brushed on the topic of Pepper. Rhodey had gotten most of his information from Tony’s former personal assistant/girlfriend, and the current CEO of Stark Industries. He had not been overly surprised to discover that they were not dating and had not been for quite some time.

“I’m sorry it didn’t work out,” Rhodey said, completely sincere. Tony managed a lopsided smile.

“I’m beginning to think I’m a little too hard to live with,” he said. “I think I’m pretty much destined to be a lifelong bachelor.”

“We’ll hit the singles bars together when we’re eighty,” Rhodey retorted. “At least you’ll still have the draw of your money.”

“Don’t patronize me,” Tony grinned. “We both know I’ll have my good looks and charm until the day I die.”

Given his hobbies, that was probably going to be long before eighty, but Tony could not bring himself to be too worried about it. He had enough concerns without having to think about the hazards of being a superhero. The shadow passed over Rhodey’s face, but he let it slide as well. He always had the same concern, being as he had made a career in the military.

Rhodey left when Tony was half asleep on the couch, but not before promising to stop by for lunch before he headed back to California.
Tony was surprised the team left him alone as long as they had. When it came right down to it, he was shocked that no one had made a serious run at his workshop days ago. Jarvis was good, but he was not good enough to take on a team of determined superheroes.

As it was, there was not even the slightest sense of alarm when he looked up from his computer the next morning to see the entire team had collected inside his workshop.

They had surrounded him before he realized they were even in the room. Clint slouched on a workbench. Thor was beside Dum-E, oblivious to the bot’s curious whirring. Natasha sat on a small rolling seat beside Steve’s motorcycle (which Tony was planning to repair when he found the time). Steve hung back by the door, and Bruce came to a stop beside Tony’s current workstation. Even Coulson was there, standing stiff and awkward in his off-the-rack suit by the coffeemaker.

Tony could not help himself. He glanced around at them and smirked.

“Avengers, assemble.”

Clint’s lips quirked, so it was not a complete loss.

“You up to looking at some pictures?” Bruce asked, apparently the elected spokesperson of the group.

Tony considered him for a moment, wondering if he knew what Clint and Rhodey knew. If so, he wondered if it angered Bruce, or if it just made him tired. It made Tony tired. He was starting to accept the reality of just being weary for the foreseeable future.

“I’m sorry I was such an ass,” he said, because these people deserved to hear that much. Someday he would offer this apology to Pepper, but he did not feel too terrible about letting that one slide a bit longer.

“You were, kind of,” Bruce smiled. “You know you can talk to us. God knows we all have brought our problems to you at some point or another.”

“Yeah,” Tony rubbed at the back of his neck, uncomfortable with this display. “Well, let’s not get ahead of ourselves. You know I’m not going to change anytime soon.”

While Bruce did not look overly surprised, Steve seemed kind of sad about that, so Tony turned and swiped aside the report he had been reading.

“Jarvis, you finished cross-referencing that drawing against the government employee database?”

“I am, sir. Would you like to view the results?”

“Hit me with your best shot.”

“Fire away,” Natasha murmured, her hand coming to rest lightly on his shoulder. Tony was not expecting it. He was grateful when the woman did not pull her hand away despite his recoil. She just met his eyes and smirked.

“Okay then.” Tony turned back to his terminal and tried not to tense up too much as pictures suddenly flooded the computer screens. “This is going to take forever.”
“We can break whenever you need,” Bruce said.

Tony should have known better. Rather, he should have trusted in Jarvis more. He had designed the AI after all. Of course Jarvis would be brilliant in every way. The second image he pulled up had Tony sucking in his breath and clutching the hand on his shoulder in a death grip. Natasha was unfazed, simply clamping around his fingers in return.

“That’s him,” she said, not even bothering to pose it as a question.

The man in the photograph looked terrible as most people did in government issued IDs. His skin was the washed out white that occurred when the camera’s light flashed. His eyes were dulled and apathetic, uncaring of this job or the image it provided for him. Despite that, the hair was the same, dated style. His eyes were the same, plain brown, and he had that familiar soft jawline.

Tony had spent a great deal of time obsessing over this face. He would know it anywhere.

“Jarvis, details,” he ordered.

Dutifully, Jarvis responded through action. The image shifted to the next screen, and the one in front of Tony filled with a basic file. Date of birth, height, weight, gender, whatnot.

“Peter,” he murmured, reading the name associated with that photograph. “His name is Peter Bastien.”

“Ironic, I’d say,” Bruce remarked. Tony was not able to completely tear his eyes from the picture. He managed a brief glance in Bruce’s direction to demonstrate his interest in the comment before staring at the image again. “He called himself Judas—the betrayer. According to the bible, Simon Peter was one of Jesus’ most devout disciples.”

“Didn’t know you were religious, doc,” Clint drawled.

“You don’t have to believe to know the stories,” Bruce countered. “I took a theology course in college.”

Jarvis was thorough. The file he pulled was more than a simple employee profile. It displayed age (he was 36), social security number (Tony could ruin his credit score with that alone), and his current address (what were the chances he was actually staying there?). This was all perfectly normal. His employment history was indicative of a man with minimal secondary education (an A.A. degree from a community college) who found his way into a low-level government job. From the looks of things, he was in data entry.

“How does data entry analysis warrant the use of a company car?” Tony muttered, more to himself than anyone around him.

His eyes tracked the information, trying to find out where this man had gone wrong. He had no known affiliations, belonged to no groups or clubs. How on earth had he gotten himself invited to any of the events Stark Industries sponsored? Had he actually snuck in each time? If so, Tony was going to have a chat with whoever ran the security detail of these events.

Finally, he lit on the family history section.

Nothing was there. Or rather, there was no record of known blood relatives. The record listed foster home after foster home, each beginning and ending with a couple sentences from a social worker. Foster parents unable to meet child’s needs. Foster parents moving to different state. Foster parents unable to house more children—moved due to lack of space. Moved to different home due
“Putting a special needs kid in the system is asking for trouble.”

“ADD,” he said skeptically. Was that even a real thing? “He seemed pretty mellow to me.”

“ADHD, now,” Bruce explained. “ADD is a little outdated. Though they sometimes use the term as a subcategory. It can sometimes present itself as a simple lack of focus that frequently causes difficulty for kids in school. Actually, I’d say you’ve got a fairly bad case of it.”

“Excuse me?” He let these people into his workshop (they invaded it) and then Bruce just declares that he’s got Attention Deficit Disorder? Was he trying to distract Tony or just insult him?

“Well, you self-medicate with massive amounts of caffeine, and adults are typically better at ignoring the symptoms than children are,” Bruce explained.

That was true enough, so Tony held his tongue. He was holding out in the hopes that Bruce had a point to go with the slight.

“The foster system is pretty ugly,” Bruce continued. “Kids who need any sort of special attention tend to fall through the cracks. Peter probably struggled with school and did not have anyone who cared enough to get him through it.”

“Someone did,” Tony pointed at the degree. Basic or not, Peter had still gone to college and gotten a two-year degree. He frowned at the information—the certificate, the school—and grabbed it from the screen, flinging it to the next. “Jarvis, trace the funds. How did he pay for it?”

Ultimately, he found he was not surprised at what he saw. As an orphan with no support system—financial or otherwise—Peter relied heavily on government compensation. He had not been particularly involved in any extracurricular activities, and his grades were not good enough for scholarships. Also, apparently no one helped him apply for grants, because he only had federal loans.

With a cosigner to keep the interest down.

Tony stared at the cosigner’s name, uncertain of the connection and what it meant, what it should mean.

“That explains why he was using Caratte’s house,” Clint murmured.

Tony was caught on the name. He had no idea what to make of it. Clint’s words were true, but what the hell did it mean? Who was this woman? Why was she relevant? Was she relevant?

Incredibly, Steve put to words Tony’s very issue with this information.

“How is this important?”

“The locked room in that house was a child’s bedroom,” Coulson said. He had probably mentioned that in the past, but Tony could not recall. That might have been one of the times he had tuned the man out. “Marlys Caratte was a teacher with no kids, and she wasn’t a foster parent.”

“So why would a woman without children have a bedroom like that?” Clint asked grimly. “And
why would it be padlocked from the outside?"

“Any theories would be pure conjecture at this point,” Coulson reminded them. “The house is old—older than Marlys. The room was dusty. She may have never opened it. Could be the woman was just a teacher who had a little bit of faith in one of her students. What matters here is that we know where he works.”

That could only mean one thing.

“You’re going to arrest him.”

Tony did not realize how much he was leaning into Natasha until her hand curled around the back of his neck. He had followed the lead of her hand on his shoulder, tilting steadily back until his shoulder blade pressed flat against her stomach, her hip and thigh warm against the line of his back.

Natasha was not his go-to for comfort. In fact, she was about as far down the list as a person could get, after Fury and just above Justin Hammer. Even so, he decided that this much was okay. He did not mind this.

“I’ll be leading the team myself,” Coulson agreed, then asked a completely unexpected question. “Would you like to be there?”

It was a challenging question, to be sure. Did Tony Stark want to look into Judas’s eyes when the man was arrested?

Would anyone think less of him if he said no?

Damn his pride. He was a breath from telling Coulson to just go, to arrest that crazy bastard and hide him away from the world until the end of time.

Then Natasha ran light fingers through his hair.

Tony jerked his head away and blurted out the opposite of what he wanted.

“Yeah.”

He stood, unpleasantly aware of his own agitation and the cautious stares it garnered. Natasha and Bruce both stepped back, the former looking far too closed off for comfort. There was never any question why Tony had problems with Natasha. He made his living being able to read people. People he failed to read correctly were just painful to be around. That, and she could kill him in a hundred different ways that would never normally occur to a man.

Tony was very aware of the watchful gazes on him. He glanced down at his hands, grimy with oil and dirt, and his jeans in similar condition. No way was he going out in public looking like this. Again.

“Let me get dressed.”

* * *

He felt better once he was showered, shaved and dressed. He pulled out a dark gray, tailored suit, the deep red shirt he had always favored, and the tie Pepper claimed complemented both. There was no way to explain why this was true, but there was something about the Kiton that was like his armor. It made him feel… stronger. More confident.
Kiton spoke even when Tony didn’t.

This was important, because Tony did not speak at all aside to answer simple questions put to him. At least the others respected his need for quiet. Mostly.

Tony somehow managed to avoid Thor’s exuberant embrace. Bruce stood quietly beside the big warrior, looking cautious but amused.

“Looks like we both have our baby-sitters,” Bruce said wryly, when Tony paused to give them a dubious look.

“My friend, I am most aggrieved to abandon you in your time of need, but Dr. Banner has explained that my presence will do most good here,” Thor proclaimed sorrowfully.

Tony shot Bruce a look that he hoped conveyed his gratitude. Then, he held up his hands to ward off the handshake that would most certainly turn into an unwanted hug.

“Not the suit, buddy,” he joked. After all, he was the master of ill-timed jests. Poor Thor was confused, but he accepted the distance Tony put between them with grace. Bruce herded the man back inside, and Tony climbed into the car that waited for him. From there they went to a private airstrip ten minutes beyond the city limits. They were loaded onto a jet and flown to Philadelphia, where there were more cars with tinted windows waiting for them.

This was SHIELD sponsored in a way that suggested Fury had very little say in the matter. SHIELD flew below the radar when it could. Most people did not even know it existed. Actually, Tony was fairly certain the current president was unaware of SHIELD’s existence. The fact that they were taking an entourage of government-issued sedans was a noteworthy occurrence. Three cars was overkill, even for Tony Stark.

No one was speaking to him, a fact for which Tony was extremely grateful. If he had been placed in a car with Steve, he was certain there would be talking—lots of awkward, rambling conversation that was just as well avoided. Fortunately, Tony shared a vehicle with Coulson and Clint and some agent Tony had never seen in his life.

It was comfortably quiet. Coulson did not speak until they were three blocks from their destination.

“He’s being held in a private office in the lower level,” the agent who seemed to have a handle on everything all the time explained. Though Coulson sat up front with the driver, he did not bother turning around to make this announcement. His head was down. From what Tony could tell, he was reading something in his hands. “The head of security will escort us down. We’re trying to avoid any involvement from the press, but if someone recognizes you—”

“I know the drill.”

It was one of the reasons Tony had not protested SHIELD taking lead on this. He put on a pair of dark sunglasses, adjusted the scarf around his neck, and tugged on his gloves. Winter was useful in its own right. People kept their heads down and hurried along to escape the chill, barely taking notice of their surroundings let alone the people in them. It allowed for the added bonus of Tony being able to hide in bulky clothing and dark glasses without looking out of place.

“Trust me, Phil. I know how to avoid the press.”

None of the Avengers were in uniform. They were keeping this low profile, even Clint relenting to a pair of slacks that did not contain any visible extra pockets. It felt oddly like an inspection—probably looked like one too. A group of men and women in suits walking through an office
building was always an intimidating sight.

Tony was caught in the middle of the pack. It was most likely deliberate, but he did not much like it. Clint appeared out of nowhere and nudged him lightly with an elbow. It would have made Tony smile under almost any other circumstances.

As promised, they were met in the front lobby by a dark-eyed man in a black windbreaker. When he turned to shake Coulson’s hand, Tony caught a glimpse of the white lettering across his back, spelling out SECURITY. Not exactly low profile.

“Agent Coulson?” the man asked, and when he received a nod added, “Scott Nguyen. We’ve got a room set up for you downstairs.”

Coulson politely did not remind the man that this was information he already had. Tony supposed that was part of what made Coulson a good behind-the-scenes man. He kept things smooth, cool and polite. He rarely offered any humor or rudeness that would mark him as threatening or memorable.

They traipsed after him, a large group that certainly would not fit in that little bitty elevator.

“All right, let’s get comfortable with more than two or three of you with the guy.”

All it took was a glance. The agents—none of whom Tony recognized—hung back, allowing Coulson, Tony, Clint, Steve, and Natasha to enter the elevator after Scott. Even shaving five people from the group, it was a tight squeeze.

Scott looked around at them, a cursory glance that had Tony wondering how the man had made it to head of security. Either he had extraordinary peripheral vision, or he just knew how to work the system. From the way he kept focusing on Coulson as the presumed leader of their group, Tony was guessing it was the latter. Unless he had some serious skills he was hiding, Scott never would have made this position in Stark Industries.

“How long has Mr. Bastien been taking company vehicles without authorization?” he asked. It was a stab in the dark. They had not followed the paper trail quite that far. However, no way did a data entry worker get a company car.

The guess was good. Scott twitched and looked at him in surprise. Then, the elevator door opened, and they stepped out into a dimly lit hallway. Obviously this part of the building was strictly for security and other basement-worthy departments. The white-painted brick hallway felt like a dungeon.

“No one reported any vehicles missing,” Scott said.

Natasha gave an unladylike snort.

“Maybe no one noticed because it was one no one used,” Tony murmured. “Engine needed some work, and there was a knocking under the hood.”

“I’ll have to call the garage,” Scott said anxiously. “Is that what this is about? Car theft?”

The poor idiot kept looking at Coulson. He would have had better luck getting information from Natasha. Coulson merely offered his half smile and said nothing.

They stopped outside of a nondescript door, marked Room B-7. Scott looked at Coulson, who
promptly ignored him.

Tony was aware of this, of Coulson’s eyes on him, but he could only stare at the door. He could not have explained the pounding of his heart if anyone were to ask. His hands were shaking. He shoved them into the pockets of his luxury, knee-length wool coat and shrugged his shoulders to force them back down from around his ears.

He jerked when he realized Coulson had gotten close enough to touch his elbow. The man was beside him, mouth by his ear, and while Tony listened, he wished the man would back off. Getting up close and personal was not usually Coulson’s style.

“You don’t need to talk to him,” Coulson murmured, low enough that Tony was probably the only one to hear. Unless Steve’s amped up hearing was that good. “Just identify him. I can handle the rest.”

Swallowing thickly, Tony managed a quick, jerking nod.

God, he hated this. When had he become a coward?

Coulson turned back to Scott, who, Tony noticed, was starting to take notice of the other people in the group. He was noticing Tony, at the very least. His eyes were narrow and uneasy. Recognition had yet to hit, but he was starting to figure out that this was not about a simple misuse of company property.

“We’ll take it from here,” Coulson stated, his flat tone leaving no room for argument. Not that Scott let that stop him.

“As long as Mr. Bastien remains in the employ of the company, a security official has to remain in the room with him. To ensure the safety of the employee and the integrity of the company.”

Scott was quoting the rulebook. Tony felt his mouth attempt to curl into a smirk, the edge of an hysterical little giggle pressing at his throat. He swallowed it back, feeling it settle down with the rest of the turmoil in his gut. It roiled around in him, a vaguely nauseating sensation that experience told him was actually a good thing.

While Coulson and Scott started tossing rules and citations back and forth, Tony let his eyes drift shut. He just wanted to this to be over. He did not care if Judas—if Bastien—went to prison or died in transit (one never really knew with SHIELD). Tony knew he would be satisfied if he knew he would never have to lay eyes on the man again.

He would have liked to say it would make him feel better to know that Bastien was away where he could never hurt anyone again. Tony would really like to be the man who said the streets were a little safer because a sick man was put away where he belonged.

Tony was not that noble.

What Tony wanted was to know that he was never going to be put in the kind of situation he had found himself in last October. He wanted to know that the next crazy that came after him was going to do it because of his weapons or for Iron Man or the Avengers. He wanted to be assured that he could go to charity events and not feel like, of all the sets of eyes on him, one of them might be that fanatical gaze.

He wanted to put Judas away and never think about him again.

“Enough!”
For once, Tony felt perfectly confident in his actions. He walked past the startled bureaucrats (for all that Coulson was weapons and combat trained, Tony would never see him as anything other than a pencil-pusher, and Scott was no better). He grabbed the handle and pushed the door open. His eyes caught on a bored-looking security guard who sat at a desk filling out a Sudoku puzzle, and he jerked his chin toward the door in a sharp, rude gesture.

“Out.”

The order was steady, with the weighty force of Tony Stark behind it, enough that the guard scrambled up and past him without question.

And then he was staring into Judas’s startled brown eyes.

The surprise quickly morphed into a delighted smile.

“Anthony!”

“Sit,” Tony snapped. He was mildly surprised that the command was obeyed. Judas fell back into his chair, looking bewildered but no less pleased.

“You came back!”

Tony studied the man for a few seconds. He looked the same, with his dark hair neatly parted and combed to the side. His face had the same pale, soft lines that Tony remembered. He even wore one of his ugly white shirts with a thin blue crisscross pattern across it, his red tie a glaring stain across the front.

Maybe it was because there were no drugs dizzying him, no handcuff trapping him, and the awareness of Clint standing just inside the doorway, but Judas looked smaller to Tony. That man sitting in a small chair in front of a beat-up wooden desk was not a Judas. Tony looked at him and saw Peter Bastien, a hapless idiot whose life skills never allowed him to make use of his degree for anything other than a job that required less than a high school education.

Bastien spotted Clint and frowned.

“Anthony.” Even his gentle rebuke held less power now. Tony stared at him, anticipating what the man would say, unsurprised when he actually said it. “That is one of the people who spoke ill of you behind your back!”

Tony glanced at Clint. The archer seemed uncertain of whether he should be amused, angry, or disgusted. Tony understood completely.

“I’m not discussing misperceptions with you,” Tony said coldly. “Here’s what’s going to happen, Peter.”

Bastien flinched, the slightest twitch of muscles around his eyes. He was surprised that Tony knew his name. Tony was not proud that he could shock this man.

Tony was angry. Nothing more. Nothing less.

“You’re going away. I’ll never look at you or think about you again.” A lie. Tony would remember for the rest of his life. But maybe he could stop thinking about it every single day.

“I don’t understand.” From the bewildered frown on Bastien’s face, he was telling the truth. “Anthony, what—”
“You’re sick, Peter,” Tony told him. “You deluded yourself into thinking many things, but I’ll tell you the truth. Are you ready for it?”

Bastien’s mouth opened, but Tony did not let him respond.

“I hate you,” he said bluntly. “I only put up with you because I didn’t want to die. I nearly destroyed my own arm—just to get away from you. Do you understand that? I would rather live my life a cripple than spend another waking minute in your presence. This is how much I loathe your existence.”

The shattered look on Bastien’s face should have left Tony feeling triumphant. Maybe even guilty. In the end, he felt nothing. The anger fled, leaving behind only apathy.

He turned to leave.

“Anthony!”

Bastien’s broken plea did have him stopping at the door. He looked back at the man, one last surge of vindication rushing through him.

“My name is Tony,” he said sharply. “I am Tony Stark, and I submit to no one.”

He stalked out of the room, blowing past Scott’s wide-eyed stare and only barely pausing to say to Coulson:

“We’re done here.”

There was a unisex bathroom between the holding room and the elevator. Tony shouldered through the doorway and barely made it to the sink in time to empty his stomach. Breakfast had consisted of coffee and an English muffin, and that had been hours ago, so the only thing that really came up was bile.

It was still pretty horrible.

As much as he would have liked to have been alone for this private moment, if there had to be someone in the bathroom with him, Tony was glad it was Clint. Oddly, Natasha would have been his second choice. Steve still set him on edge, and not because he was frightening. The man was simply too kind for Tony to tolerate at the moment.

His legs shook, and his stomach felt like it was going to make another attempt at flipping itself inside out, but Tony finally held firm. The porcelain of the sink held when he braced against it, and the water ran cold and only held the slightest metallic flavor when he used it to rinse out his mouth.

“You should have just done that on Bastien,” Clint announced when Tony fumbled for a paper towel. The towel appeared, Clint helpfully holding out a couple, and Tony shot him an irritated look before snatching them away to wipe his mouth. “Of course, after watching you hurl, I’m a little nauseous myself. I could go back there and do it for you, if you want.”

Tony huffed, a weak attempt at an amused snort, and shook his head.

“That would have required getting up close and personal, and I’ve had enough of that to last a lifetime,” he retorted.

“As much as I hate ever admitting you’re right,” Clint sighed. “Not worth the minor satisfaction.”
There was a light tap at the door. The sound sent a shiver of irritation through Tony, because—really?—he was having a moment here.

“We’re clear to go,” Clint announced needlessly. “Fresh air will help.”

“Let me be sure I won’t throw up again before I get into that rickety elevator,” Tony growled. He honestly was not sure he was stable enough yet. It was getting better, but he had yet to move.

“You going to manage a car ride okay?” Clint demanded. “Because I’m sitting next to you, and I like you, Stark, but not that much.”

“You can go to hell.” Despite his complaining, he was feeling better. The nausea lingered a bit, but he did not have the urgent need to remain near the bathroom or a garbage receptacle.

“Seriously, though. Do you need help getting to the car?”

“You’re annoying,” Tony shoved against the sink, forcing his legs to take his weight or give out. He was ridiculously pleased that he remained solidly upright. “Does that mean things are getting back to normal? Because I remember always thinking you were annoying.”

“See if I ever offer to help you again, you asshole.”

Despite the insult, Clint was grinning at him. Tony offered his own smirk in return.

“Come on, Hunger Games. It’s time for dinner.”

Clint pulled the door open with a flourish, half-bowing and gesturing for Tony to precede him. Raising an eyebrow at the mockery, Tony blew past him and again past Natasha and Steve.

They followed him, his own little entourage of superheroes, to the elevator and out to the town cars waiting for them.

Despite the circumstances—and the fact that the Avengers were hovering around him like overly determined presidential bodyguards—Tony did not mind the presence of the team. For the first time in a very long time, Tony did not feel like the odd man out.

* * *
It did not get better all at once. While Tony was back at work the next day, chipping away at the massive pile of paper that had formed on his desk, things were not back to normal.

Still, there were changes, small ones that he noticed immediately.

Thor stopped calling him Anthony. Tony had not brought this one up, and no one said anything to him about it, but he noticed it the next time (and all the following times) that Thor addressed him.

“Tony, my friend!” Thor’s initial bellowing of his name had been more jarring than usual. Tony scalded his tongue on an alarmed gulp of hot coffee when the man appeared out of nowhere to boom at him. (For someone who could be so loud, Thor was unsettlingly silent when he walked.) “I fear I require some assistance in operating your communication device. It appears that I have been separated from my beloved Jane.”

That first time, Tony had stared at Thor through watering eyes (that coffee had burned like a bitch), not quite comprehending that the man was actually speaking to him. He looked at Thor, looked at the phone dwarfed in that monster-sized hand. Then it clicked, and he was off to the races.

“You hung up on your girlfriend?” At Thor’s solemn nod, Tony hopped off his stool and snatched the phone from Thor’s hand. “We can’t have that. Oh. No, you didn’t hang up. You just muted her. She’s probably listening to this and laughing at you right now.”

He set things right and returned the phone to Thor with a smile.

“Come back when you’re done with your call. I’ll set you up with a hands-free system so this doesn’t happen again.”

“Ah! Thank you, Tony. Your intellect is, as always, truly impressive.”

“Save it for Jane,” Tony waved him off and returned to his coffee.

* * *

The Friday after Bastien’s arrest, Steve showed up in Tony’s workshop with a sketchpad in hand and a question in his eyes. Tony waved him in, noting the slicked-back hair and workout attire.

“I hope those are clean clothes and not the ones you trained in,” Tony said as Steve stepped hesitantly into the room. “I know what you smell like after a workout, and I don’t want that funk in here.”

Steve smiled at the wry comment.

“They’re clean, and I just showered,” he assured Tony. “I’m not interrupting anything, am I?”

“Nothing that will explode if left unattended for five minutes,” Tony retorted. “If you’re any good, I’ll commission you to paint my wall, Michelangelo.”

Steve shook his head and sat on a bench a few yards away.
“I’m not so great. Sketching relaxes me, mostly,” he admitted. “Michelangelo was an amazing painter, but he actually preferred—”


“I’d say I’m more like Gary Larson,” Steve countered.

Tony chuckled. He was surprised by Steve’s sudden display of knowledge of modern (well, sort of modern) popular culture, and from the smirk on Steve’s face, the man knew it.

“You got me there. Just no caricatures, right? Dum-E’s flaws do not need to be exaggerated for the world to see.”

“You just don’t want me to draw you with a big nose and overly fluttery eyelashes,” Steve countered.

“Fluttery?” Tony sneered at him. “Wax poetic about my beauty, but don’t be telling me I flutter.”

“Whatever you say.”

“And my nose is not big.”

“Of course not.”

They settled into a comfortable silence. Tony had mysteriously stopped receiving any messages from Fury, so most of his work lately had been for Stark Industries and Iron Man. He had to admit, it was kind of nice. It left him plenty of time to catch up with his missed paperwork. Plus, apparently there was this thing Stark Industries was doing—something about a summer internship program. It was not for months, but there were already dozens of applicants.

The applicants were abysmal for the most part. Tony had only seen a few who were even worth considering. This Parker kid seemed to have a good head on his shoulders. At least his IQ was over 100.

“So I’ve been told that my wardrobe is wildly out of date,” Steve announced abruptly, the comment jarring Tony out of his headspace. He looked up, but Steve was very intent upon whatever he was sketching. He did speak again, though. “I was wondering if you had some time this weekend to help me rectify this situation.”

Tony could not help but cringe away from that particular topic.

“Look, Steve—”

“Natasha informed me that the only people who wear pleated khakis are small children and men over the age of seventy-five,” Steve interrupted. “Technically I fit into the latter category, but apparently this is a poor argument and I need to go shopping immediately. So, what do you say?”

He was not stupid. Tony knew what sparked this sudden desire to shop, no matter how Steve tried to disguise it.

Still, the man was trying.

“Rhodey’s still in town,” Tony said finally. “He owes me lunch, and he’ll probably jump at the opportunity to shop with Captain America.” (Not to mention Rhodey had a better feel for where to
go so that Steve would not suffer from instant sticker shock.) “If that’s okay with you.”

Steve’s smile was blinding. Tony pulled out his phone to call Rhodey.

Rhodey was thrilled for the opportunity to spend an afternoon with Steve, even if their date was a bit dampened by Tony’s chaperoning presence.

Tony was just pleased to be out and about without feeling like anyone truly wanted something from him. (Well, Steve did ask for an opinion on clothing, but Rhodey immediately dismissed Tony’s suggestions and took Steve to a store that was not primarily tailored menswear.)

Just because he was nice, Tony picked up the bill for dinner.

* * *

Bruce, Clint and Natasha did not act any differently than they had prior to the arrest. Clint was still a little too knowledgeable for Tony’s comfort, and he suspected Natasha knew everything he knew. Actually, aside from Thor and Steve (not that Tony could ever get a read on Thor), Tony was positive everyone knew exactly what had happened in that crappy little farmhouse in Pennsylvania. Tony had no idea what Thor thought—the culture clash made it impossible to know unless Thor said something. Thankfully, if Thor had any thoughts on the matter, he kept them to himself. Steve probably had some inkling, but the man was doing his level best to avoid the topic altogether.

No one bothered him about it for a long time. Bruce reminded him to eat. Clint reminded him to relax. Natasha dragged him to the gym and reminded him that he was still human. (Also that she was a scary woman with vaguely inhuman ninja skills, and no, he should not feel bad that he would never be able to match her in an even fight.)

When the doctors declared him good to operate the Iron Man armor, Natasha ambushed him.

It happened almost literally.

“Pay attention, Stark,” the woman demanded, then promptly brought him down to the mats in a move so fast he was amazed she had not spontaneously transformed into a pretzel. He certainly would have. He was certain he would strain something or, more likely, require corrective surgery when one of his limbs lodged itself behind his neck if he ever tried to do what Natasha did.

Still, he had lasted longer than usual. No one else could have known the difference from the way he struggled to regain his breath. (He did not even try for his dignity. That was long gone as far as Natasha was concerned.) However, he knew he had done well, and Natasha knew, and that was all that mattered.

Natasha did not even taunt him this time. She merely sat on the mat next to him, poised and beautiful as ever, while he decided that he would rather remain flat on his back until the world stopped spinning.

She struck then.

“I was fifteen the first time I slept with a man,” she announced, utterly casual, completely calm.

Tony twitched, the words like a blow, and he realized (with no small amount of frustration) that she had brought him down hard to keep him from running away. It was an illusion of control. He could pretend he was perfectly comfortable remaining where he was, where in actuality, another five minutes would pass before he felt solid enough to get to his feet. More than likely she would stop him if he tried to leave before she was finished. At least he would not make a fool of himself
trying to flee the inescapable.

“I let him think he seduced me, and we fucked in the back seat of his car,” she said evenly. “Afterward, I slit his throat and stole the documents he was carrying. State documents. Very valuable.”

Tony closed his eyes and focused on breathing. Natasha had a point to this. He was not sure he would like it, but he knew better than to think she was sharing this for sharing’s sake.

“I was young and foolish and thought I could handle it.” Inexorably, the story continued. “We did not use protection, and he was not gentle. It hurt in ways I had never experienced. I cried for days and could not understand why I could not stop. After all, it was I who had seduced him. I… asked for it.”

He wondered if this story was true. Natasha was not above lying to achieve her objective. A second later, Tony wondered if he was a horrible person for hoping she was not lying to him. What kind of person would prefer that kind of story to be truth?

“It was not the only time I used sex to get what I wanted,” Natasha murmured. “Men are easily distracted by a pretty face and the offer of no-strings sex. I was more cautious the next time, of course. I remembered to bring condoms, and I did not wait until it was over to kill him.”

Tony looked at her in horror. She had just admitted to having sex with a man as he died. Somehow, that was more appalling to him than the fact that she had killed someone.

“Yes, that was actually quite unpleasant. Usually I waited to kill them. But it was never enjoyable.”

“Why’d you keep doing it?” It was probably the most personal question he had ever asked this woman. Oh well. She had started it.

“It got the job done,” she shrugged. “Men let their guard down when they feel they are in control.”

Ever practical, Natasha Romanov. Tony grimaced and rolled over, relieved when his back did not immediately scream in protest. Natasha did not bother attempting to disguise the fact that she was watching him. She gazed on in quiet observation until he sat on the mat next to her.

It felt like an R-rated kindergarten show-and-tell.

“That was what made you a difficult man to pin down,” Natasha smiled faintly as she said this. “You were out of control, and you knew it and embraced it.”

“Are you saying you don’t know all my secrets, Agent Romanov?” Tony returned her wry smirk.

“I know where there are secrets and where there are outright lies,” she replied. “However, I do not know the truth. I am only human after all.”

“Ah.” Tony rubbed his hands briskly over his sweatpants, aggravated at his own sweaty palms. “Is this the part where I spill my secrets to you then?”

“Only the ones you feel need spilling.”

He nodded, accepting that statement as being completely true. It was interesting to note that Natasha had as difficult a time reading him as he did with her. It was no wonder they spent their time dancing around each other, barely speaking and even then only in uncomfortable exchanges of information.
Assuming it was true, Natasha had taken a risk telling him that story. Tony was not about to run off and spread those words to the wind and whoever would listen. He was an asshole, but he was not a horrible person. At least, he tried very hard not to be.

None of this meant he was up for getting his story out there with the rest of the campfire ghost tales.

“Thanks for beating me up.”

He pretended not to know that she watched him as he walked out. He told himself that shuddering sensation rattling around in his chest was allergies. Minutes later, in his bathroom, he told himself the dampness of his face was from the shower.

* * *

There were good days and bad days, the good generally outnumbering the bad. It tended to run in streaks. He would be cruising along, on top of the world, content as can be. However, if there was anything life had taught him, it was that there was always someone or something that would come along and kick him in the teeth when he was least aware. Usually he would come back with a bloody grin and a repulsor blast to the face.

Sometimes that was not a viable option.

“What the hell is this?”

When he could not take it out on the culprit, Tony was embarrassed to admit, everyone else suffered.

“One simple task. That’s all I gave you. One task. You’re useless.”

To be fair, Dum-E should have been perfectly capable of cleaning his workbench. The bot had done it a hundred—a thousand—times. That the robot was creating a mess now indicated it was pulling attitude with him, which was just not acceptable.

Butterfingers was not doing any better. The bot hovered at Tony’s side while he attempted to bring Steve’s bike into the current century. Tony’s attention was drawn away from the disaster on his workbench when his hapless so-called helper conked him on the head with a socket wrench.

“Jesus fuck! Are you kidding me?”

It had not hurt all that much. There was no blood. He probably would not even be bruised come morning. That was of little comfort when the wrench came swinging toward him again. Fortunately for the integrity of his skull, Tony saw it happening and ducked.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

He snatched the tool from the bot, turned, and heaved it across the room. It collided with something—he heard the crunching shatter of breaking machinery—and there was no stopping the anger from spilling out.

“Why do I even keep you? Get away from me, or you’ll be the next thing that breaks!”

Perhaps he should have felt a little guilty for the venom spilling out of him. Tossing insults and mild threats at his bots was nothing new, but he never really meant it. This time, he had a toolbox close at hand, and he was a breath away from doing serious damage.
Butterfingers skittered away, perhaps finally understanding the intent behind the words. Viciously satisfied, Tony wheeled on Dum-E. That bot was not clever enough to get out of his way. Dum-E merely whirred and hurried to grab at a welding torch, succeeding in knocking it to the ground in his haste.

Tony snarled and bullied his way into the space.

“Out! Get out of my way! You are ruining everything! Don’t—Hey! Stop touching things!”

He was distantly aware of someone entering the workshop, but Dum-E was still darting around and making a complete nuisance of himself. Tony was of a mind to just deactivate the useless thing. That impulse increased when someone cleared their throat behind him, and Dum-E nearly bowled him over in a sudden haste to get everything cleaned now that there was an audience.

“You are next in line for target practice, you worthless piece of sh—”

“Tony!”

“What?!”

Anyone who claimed that Pepper was a normal human being had never met the woman. Tony was half convinced she was some sort of mutant, capable of leeching strong negative emotions out of a room by her presence alone. It was conditional, of course. Tony had to focus on her. If anyone else held his attention, her powers became null and void. God forbid anyone threaten her. Then all bets were off.

But at that instant, when Tony had been a heartbeat from taking a tire iron to Dum-E’s overly curious camera, Pepper had caught his attention. It was as though he was a ship in space, and the door had just been ripped off. Everything was sucked out in an instant, leaving him gutted and drifting, uncertain of his fate.

Pepper stood a few feet away, statuesque and beautiful in a black formal gown and shoes that had probably been a gift from him. (He never knew. These things just appeared on his credit card bill, which was then paid when Pepper put a check in front of him to sign.) She had obviously come from the charity gala he had left a couple hours ago. His tux jacket was around here somewhere…

“What are you doing?”

“Ah… repairing Steve’s motorcycle,” he said. He was nowhere near the bike, had not touched it really, but good intentions and all that bull. No sooner had he sat in front of the thing, then Dum-E decided to ‘help’ and Butterfingers got in his face with the tool kit.

Pepper shot him a look which clearly stated that she did not believe him. Tony liked that about Pepper. She never hid what she was feeling from him—from anyone really. She simply was not capable of subterfuge.

“Would you mind explaining to me why I spent the last three hours dodging questions about your whereabouts?” she demanded. “The Maria Stark Foundation was hosting, Tony! You can’t just leave because you have an itch to play with engines!”

She had a point. He rarely missed a charity event when the Maria Stark Foundation was involved. Officially, he had very little to do with the workings of the nonprofit organization aside from the name. Unofficially, he was missed when he did not show, or if he disappeared early, as was the case that evening.
“You’re right. Sorry,” he cast about for his bowtie and jacket. The tie hung open around his collar yet, and he had no idea where the jacket had wound up. Probably in that mess of broken machinery by the storage shelves. “I can go back—”

Pepper caught his arm as he passed her to search for that jacket. It was not until after Tony snarled and tore out of her light grip that it even occurred to him that he might be overreacting to the aggravations around him. He was certain of it when he saw Pepper staring at him as if he had just dropkicked her cat across the room. The frustrating thing about it was that he had no idea what he had even said to her, if he had said anything coherent at all.

He studied her, debating over if he should apologize or pretend as though it had not happened. Pepper’s face had settled into a forced sort of acceptance, and she folded her hands demurely before her.

Right. Apology.

“That was uncalled for,” he said, bringing forth an easy smile. “Won’t happen again.”

For everything they had been through, Pepper would ever be Pepper. She waited until he moved, once more on the path to where he suspected his jacket might be, and then her hand snaked out and caught his.

It was less shocking this time. He clamped down over that urge to recoil, but there was no suppressing the sensation of ants crawling beneath his skin. There was a phantom hand trailing down his spine, over his arm, and one horrifying trail of fingers toward the arc reactor, and he had no idea how to scrub the feeling away. He had not taken a shower earlier, though that had been the first instinct. Rationally, he knew it was pointless, and experience told him it would not help.

In retrospect, he wondered if that woman—what was her name? Miranda? Melanie? Marcella? It began with an M—had been offended by his quick retreat. Obviously Pepper had been, and she had not even been there. She had been off in the crowd, chatting up some guy who was probably relevant in some non-profit organization, while Tony had been trying to ignore the friendly hands of some woman whose name he could not recall and whose purpose he had never discovered.

“It’s after two in the morning, Tony,” Pepper said softly. “The gala is over.”

Was he supposed to respond? His brain was having a difficult time processing past the hand holding his. Why would Pepper do that to him? They had a strict no-touch policy ever since she broke it off, which made sense in a business kind of way, but now she was violating her own rules. It really was not fair.

If he pulled away a second time, would she go tell on him to the Avengers?

“You should say something.”

Pepper’s words filtered in, and it made little enough sense that he focused on them. A puzzle—any sort of puzzle—was welcome at this point. He shifted his gaze from their hands to her eyes, and that was an expression he had never seen on her. It was difficult to identify, but he got the impression she was examining him.

“You’ve lost me,” he declared.

“You built a reputation, Tony,” Pepper said frankly. “People think these things are okay, but it’s obvious they’re not anymore.”
He tugged his hand away, but it did nothing to dispel the gooseflesh that chased up and down his torso. It wasn’t Pepper’s touch that bothered him.

“Pep, I don’t—” He didn’t what? Didn’t want to talk about it? That was true, but at the same time… he kind of wished she knew. It would be awful, but it would also be easier. It was obvious that she was figuring things out on her own without his help, but guesswork was not actuality. God only knew what horrors were running through her head.

Pepper watched him flounder for a moment before diving in to rescue him as she always did.

“If you can’t handle being the asshole who tells someone to lay off, then you need to call me,” she said bluntly. “I know I’m not your PA anymore, but that’s part of what you originally hired me to do, isn’t it?”

“Actually, I think I hired Happy to be my bodyguard.” This was easy. This was familiar. There were no words to express how much Tony loved Pepper in this instant.

“You don’t need a bodyguard, Mr. Stark,” Pepper said firmly. “You need someone to field your calls. And handsy women. I can do that without making you look like a prude.”

“Did you seriously just call me a prude?”

That was hilarious.

Pepper smiled, briefly. But she was still in serious conversation mode, so it did not last long.

“You just need to tell me to run interference, Tony,” she ordered. “It’s not a sin to appreciate a sense of personal space.”

The relief he felt was unfortunate in so many ways. He glanced over at Dum-E, who was actually putting things in their proper places now that Pepper was a witness. That ridiculous bot had such a willful personality. Tony was not sure what had caused that, but it was good Pepper had stopped him before he could do more than threaten the bot.

Glad he could, but displeased by the necessity of it, Tony nodded. He did not look at Pepper when he did it, but she was smart enough to know what he meant.

“Oh, Tony,” she sighed. “What are we going to do with you?”

“Love me forever?” he asked. It was a weak response. He was so much more clever than that.

“That goes without saying,” Pepper murmured.

“Does it?” Tony was certain that had not been what he intended to say. These confessional moments seemed to be increasing in frequency. He needed to work on that. For the moment, he tried to recover by flashing a roguish smirk. “You know I love it when you sing me praises.”

Pepper’s returning look was daunting. Tony had some practice dealing with that glare, though. His smile never wavered.

“Your ego does not need inflating,” Pepper murmured. “Just promise me one thing, Tony: don’t run away next time. Whatever you seem to think, you have a lot of people who care enough to back you up.”

Something clattered off to the right, and oh look. Dum-E was sloughing off work again. The
machine was eavesdropping, Tony was certain. What a robot that consisted of an arm and a claw
could gain from eavesdropping on this conversation, Tony did not know. He only knew that it was
true, and Dum-E would fully deserve the lecture he would get later—

“Tony.” Trust Pepper to call him on avoiding her when she was standing directly in front of him.
“I’m not saying you should let the others fight your battles. Just acknowledge the fact that
everyone benefits from a little backup once in a great while.”

“Yes,” Tony forced a smile, one which degenerated into a grimace rather quickly. “Pepper, I—”

He paused, frowning. This was not something he had been intending to do right now. He had
planned on dinner and flowers and maybe a new pair of shoes. Definitely, he would have been
pulling out all the stops to ensure full forgiveness. No doubt he would have screwed it up and just
left with her angry at him and himself feeling a bit more lost, as he always did when Pepper berated
him. But now that he started, and she was waiting expectantly, he figured he might as well get it
over with.

“I didn’t handle our breakup very well,” he admitted. This was obviously not new information if
Pepper’s knowing look was any indicator. “My own issues. I don’t blame you for any of it—I
swear, I never blamed you.”

“Tony—”

“No, just let me—” He waved off her interjection irritably. He needed this off his chest. It should
have been done months ago. “Look, I made a lot of bad choices. One of them landed me in a lot of
trouble, obviously.”

He shot her a wary (okay, completely suspicious) look. If she said anything about fault or no means
no, Tony would take his apology and walk. But she said nothing, and he continued.

“Now everyone here is stuck playing cleanup Tony’s mess, and I just… I just wanted to
apologize.”

It fell out of his mouth, quick and heavy, dropping to the ground between them in an awkward
clump. He was horrible at this.

“I’m sorry for putting you through this again, for making you worry. And I can’t even promise it
won’t happen again, because it probably will, but… well, I’m sorry either way.”

Pepper was quiet. For one horrible moment Tony feared she had left, but then she sighed, and he
dared to look at her. Her eyes were tired. Tony wished he knew how to stop causing that reaction in
people.

“Thank you for that, Tony,” she said finally. “I owe you an apology too. I broke this off knowing
full well how you are and what you would do. I should have made sure someone was here to
protect you from yourself.”

“Rhodey came and verbally kicked my ass,” Tony replied lightly. He was back into familiar
territory now, easily disregarding Pepper’s apology. There was no need for her to apologize for his
faults. “Better late than never.”

“I’m not so sure that applies in this situation,” Pepper rebuked.

Tony tried so hard not to flinch when she touched his cheek. This physical response to people was
so mercurial. It had not been so bad at first, years of practice allowing him to repress those urges,
until suddenly he could not do it anymore. Now, he found he had moments when he jumped at anything that moved.

Pepper was wonderful. She was always wonderful. Even at the moment he cringed from the unexpected contact, she stilled, then slowly touched him again, letting him relax into it on his own. Tony felt the tension and nervous energy bleed out of him like water from a failed dam. Pepper reacted easily, slender arms sweeping around his back when he half collapsed against her. He clung to her, not even caring that this would never be anything more than platonic. She loved him, and he loved her, and that was all that mattered.

* * *

He was not sure when or how it happened, but Tony ended up in his room. In his bed. Pepper had to have led him there—no one else was around at three in the morning. Even more surprising was his complete calm upon waking.

“Jarvis,” he murmured.

“It is ten-oh-six, Saturday morning, sir,” Jarvis replied, by now accustomed to what he needed.

Perhaps he was calm, but it still took that to put him at ease. He sighed and turned his head, appreciative of the luxury down pillow and the lacking residual ache that usually accompanied his waking. As much as he hated to admit it, Steve was right about the couch. Tony had not slept so well in months.

* * *

He started sleeping in his bed again. It was not always so easy, and there were plenty of mornings that started badly. Jarvis was always quick to reassure him, his ghostly presence a balm to shattered nerves. Tony briefly wondered how sick it was that he was so in love with his own computer program. He decided he didn’t care.

Tony was wary of routine, but in the end, he fell into another. This one, at least, was fairly comforting.

He would wake early, because he did have a job outside of saving the world. As awesome as world-saving was, it did not pay well. Stark Industries, on the other hand, kept the Avengers housed and fed and generally happy with him.

Every morning, Jarvis would talk him through the daily news, rattling off stock prices and weather conditions like a boring first date. After a while it became more habitual than necessary, but Tony never felt the need to tempt fate. He liked getting the news in the morning without having to ask.

Then came the morning that Jarvis broke routine.

“Sir, Agent Coulson is calling,” Jarvis said as Tony was shutting off the water to his shower.

That was normally something which Tony would try to ignore. Admittedly, he was not keen on Coulson bullying his way into Tony’s room while he was wet and naked. Add to that the fact that Coulson would never call so early without a very good reason, and Tony was relenting much more easily than usual to the inevitable.

“Patch him through,” he sighed. Giving Jarvis a second to follow through, Tony asked, “What’s shakin’, Double-Oh?”
“Marlys Caratte died last night,” Coulson announced without preamble.

Tony paused in the act of drying his hair. The name jangled against his nerves unpleasantly, and yet it took him a moment to place it. When he did remember, he was surprised at how calm he felt. He snatched another towel off the rack, wrapped it about his waist (he never knew when someone would be sitting in his room waiting for him) and headed for his closet.

“That’s…” He shook his head. What was he supposed to do with that information? “I’m sorry. Am I supposed to feel good or bad about that?”

“That’s entirely up to you, Mr. Stark,” Coulson replied with his usual ease. “The investigation is over, but I don’t like loose ends. I figured you would like to know.”


“If you have some time later, I would like to run a couple programs by you,” Coulson ignored the halfhearted gratitude. “Our software designers are good, but it could use your eye.”

“Flattery, Agent,” Tony warned. “Fury’s probationary period must be up if Cap’s not pitching a fit that you’re darkening my doorstep asking for handouts again.”

“SHIELD would never ask you to labor free of charge.” Tony never could tell if Coulson found anything even slightly amusing. “You’ll be paid your usual consultant’s fee.”

“You know I discount heavily for you people,” Tony retorted.

Sadly enough, that was true. He had only been half joking when he originally told Fury the man could not afford him. SHIELD had a big budget, but Congress was more inclined to approve expenditure reports when they were not heavily edited by black, permanent marker lines over all the classified information. Since Tony dealt in intelligence, he had little doubt that most of what he produced for SHIELD was deemed classified.

“We are ever in your debt, Mr. Stark.”

“Don’t you forget it,” Tony said lightly.

“You never let me.”

Tony had no good response for that one. He admitted defeat—he usually did when Coulson was involved—and let the call end.

He was about halfway through brushing his teeth when he looked up, catching his own surprised stare in the mirror. Garbling out a curse, he quickly finished brushing and spat in the sink.

“Jarvis, get Pepper on the line!” he ordered, slinging a tie around his neck and grabbing his jacket as he flew from his room. “I need to negotiate a real estate transaction!”

Never let it be said that Tony Stark was not business savvy. He could finesse his way into the White House without an appointment—had, in fact, done so in the past. The government was like any other buyer. While they frequently worked with dollar amounts in the billions, they were actually on a budget. (Okay, sometimes they ignored it, but that was hardly the point.)

The point was, Tony paid less than half of what the land was worth. The lawyers pressed him hard,
but Tony knew they had gotten the land virtually for free. He could pay them a fraction of its worth, and they would still make money on it. They did make money.

In the end, the government made a quick and easy buck, and by Monday morning, Tony was onsite, surveying his purchase.

The place did not look much different. It was still faded and ugly, missing shingles, sagging porch and dead fields. The last time Tony had been there, the view had been slightly improved by a swath of pure white. Now there was soggy ground and rotting leaves. The drive was a muddy, ragged path that would require an all-terrain vehicle to navigate. Had Tony been interested in updating the place, he would have made certain that drive was better maintained.

“What a dump.”

Tony could not quite tear his eyes from the dilapidated farmhouse. Clint’s wry commentary was nowhere near incentive enough to make him look away. It was almost as though to avert his eyes would be invitation of ambush. Of course that empty house was as dangerous to them as the cool morning air, so the thought was ridiculous. That did not mean Tony was going to look away just because Clint was muttering.

The amount of convincing it had taken to keep the other Avengers from joining him on this trip was still shudder-worthy. In the end, Pepper had been the one to step in and inform them, point blank, that a team of superheroes would intimidate the workforce, and they would have to bicker amongst themselves over the single guest who would be allowed to tag along.

Not that Tony was complaining, but he would have voted for Bruce first. Steve was getting better, but he was not ready to be alone with the man—Tony had driven, which would have meant being stuck in a car with Captain Cuddles for two hours—each way. Natasha was out for the obvious reason that Tony was still mildly terrified of her killer thighs—literally, those thighs could kill, Tony had seen it happen. While he was not complaining about Thor being left behind, Pepper’s explanation ruled out Bruce in the same manner. People would be intimidated if they had even an inkling of who Bruce Banner was.

Clint was, by default, Tony’s less-than-scary-looking escort. Dressed in cargo pants, a leather jacket, and sunglasses, Clint looked more like a member of the survey crew than his heroic alter-ego.

“You going to go inside?” Clint asked, heedless of the fact that Tony had not responded to his earlier comment.

“I’ve seen it.” Tony replied. “It is a dump, isn’t it?”

“You’re lucky that thing didn’t collapse on you,” Clint declared.

“At the time, I would have been relieved if it had,” Tony murmured.

It really was a good thing that Clint had been the one to come along. Steve would have said something disgustingly nice, with every intention of being morally supportive. Bruce would have been awkwardly silent. Clint didn’t go in for any of that crap.

“With your luck, you’d have survived and had to move into that guy’s fleabag apartment,” Clint decided. “Then you’d have been dealing with roaches.”

The thought actually made him shudder. Tony was not a squeamish man by nature, but the idea of being trapped in a room with a bunch of creepy-crawlies was revolting.
Oddly, another bit of proof of how much worse things could have been was not altogether comforting. All it did was remind Tony of how sick Bastien had been. Every time he remembered that, he had to force down his own sense of guilt.

So far, Steve, Bruce, Rhodey, and even Natasha had told him how ridiculous he was being, and to some extent Tony got where they were coming from. He just could never quite force the rest of himself to fall in with that line of thinking. No matter how hard he tried, how much he wanted to believe it, all he could see were the stupid choices and Bastien’s adoring stare. It was ugly, and he wished he could figure out how to change his own thought processes. As it was, he could only resign himself to feeling at least partly responsible for what had happened.

“What are you going to do with it?” Clint asked finally. “I really don’t see you in the family farm business.”

“You don’t want to know what I’ve got invested in intellicrops right now,” Tony sighed. “This isn’t big enough for that. I’d have to buy out the two adjacent farms to make it even marginally profitable.”

“Huh,” Clint grunted.

Finally, Tony looked at him. Good god, it was a relief to see something other than peeling paint and rotting wood.

“What?”

Clint shrugged and scratched at his cheek absently.

“It’s easy to forget with you,” he explained. “The money isn’t just there. You actually do shit to get it.”

Tony was not quite sure how he was supposed to respond to that. What did Clint think he did every day? The Iron Man armor, with all the technology which went into it, was not cheap. Not to mention the Avengers themselves. Between Thor, Steve, and Bruce, they went through a great deal of food. Thor broke a lot of electronics (though Tony had developed a much better surge protector thanks to the God of Thunder), and Natasha kept swiping his credit card whenever she wanted a spa day. Tony would have gone bankrupt long ago if he spent money the way he usually did without bringing any back in.

“For that, I should charge you rent,” he said finally.

“The benefits are good, but I got to tell you, government salary is shit,” Clint retorted. “I’ll put some quarters in the swear jar. That sound fair?”

“We don’t have a swear jar.”

“You think if we started one, Steve would stop frowning at me whenever I say fuck?”

Tony huffed, not sure if he found that one funny or just stupid.

“You’re right. He’d probably just frown until I put money in the jar,” Clint decided. “We’ve got incoming.”

“What?”

Tony’s eyes immediately went back to the house, but there was nothing. No one came down the
sloppy drive toward them. Why would they? The house was empty.

The more likely answer was that the survey crew had finally arrived. They were not late. Tony was just early, considering he could not travel the speed limit if he had a gun aimed at his head.

It wasn’t the survey crew. It was John Dahlberg, rumbling their way on an old John Deere tractor.

Clint leaned over to mutter into Tony’s ear.

“That’s how I could tell it was your car under two inches of snow.”

Tony looked at him askance, but he let it slide as the roar of the Deere’s motor increased with proximity. The tractor spluttered to a halt in front of Tony’s car. The man looked down at them for a moment, squinting gaze lingering on him, then shifting to Clint.

Tony was grateful for the barrier of his sunglasses. The last time he had seen this man, he had not made the best impression. That much was proven when John focused on Clint in the end.

“I’ve seen you before,” Dahlberg decided. “You landed a plane in my yard.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Clint said. Tony didn’t think he sounded sorry at all. He knew the man to be remorseless when he casually chucked a thumb at Tony and added, “This idiot needs special handling sometimes. We didn’t want him getting lost or accidentally upgrading all your machinery.”

That was offensive somehow. Mostly it was in how the comment had Dahlberg looking at him with renewed interest and sudden recognition.

“Well criminally!” Dahlberg blurted. “You clean up good, pal.”

Clint snorted. Tony ignored him and cleared his throat.

“Ah, yeah.” The smile was so practiced that it came more naturally than anything real. Tony flashed his teeth and held out his hand when Dahlberg hopped off the tractor to greet them. “It’s amazing what a razor and a good suit can do.”

That, and almost eight weeks of healthier sleeping and eating habits. Tony had put on most of the weight he had lost, much to the relief of the people around him. They tried to hide it, but he knew they were monitoring him. It was a subtle suicide watch. No matter what Tony said, he could not quite convince them that he was not now, nor had he ever been, of a mind to actively attempt to kill himself.

“My kids ain’t stopped talking about Iron Man since you left,” Dahlberg told him, clasping Tony’s hand in a brief greeting squeeze. “That was near two months ago now. If you don’t mind my asking, why’re you so interested in this old derelict anyhow?”

Tony’s eyes drifted back to the house in question. The shutters were so washed out, he couldn’t tell what color they had been originally. Probably a variation of red. Maybe brown. Who would paint their house white and put on red window shutters? That was just asking for bad Christmas jokes.

He must have been quiet for too long because Dahlberg prompted with another question.

“You ever find the people that squatted here?”

He blinked hard, sharp memory reminding him that the rest of the world remained in the dark.
Dahlberg and the rest of the community believed the problem to be little more than a couple of vagrants passing through. The only people who knew even a fraction of what had happened in that house (aside from himself and Bastien) were the Avengers, Rhodey, and Pepper.

Considering how much of the rest of his life was examined through a camera’s lens, Tony was not sure how to feel about it.

“Yeah,” Clint offered finally. “We got the guy. Stark tracked him down.”

He may or may not have told Clint late one night how Mrs. Dahlberg had accused him of being a shitty P.I. Obviously Clint was having some fun with it now, though he did lean over to mutter in Tony’s ear.

“Squatters? Seriously?”

It was rather amusing in a completely dark and inappropriate way. Tony sighed and reached up to rub at the tension in his neck.

“Well, technically…”

“How did no one notice this anyway?” Clint asked abruptly. “I mean, the place has power. Didn’t anyone ever see a light? Hear the TV going?” He did not add, hear Stark screaming at the top of his lungs, which would have been a valid question in its own right.

Dahlberg squinted down the winding muddy drive at the house, a good fifty meters from the road at least.

“TV’d have to be turned up pretty loud. Tractor gets kinda noisy—hard to hear anything over it,” the weathered farmer decided. “Nobody’d seen lights that I heard.”

“He never turned on the lights,” Tony said absently. “The TV wasn’t up loud. Besides, I asked him to stop tormenting me with daytime courtroom programming.”

He did not catch the full extent of what he had said until Clint cleared his throat in that clearly awkward manner. By this point, Tony was feeling little more than apathy. There was a distant sense of anger, boiling low, but that was something he released in small doses, usually in combat training. He had gotten a lot better at channeling this particular brand of rage.

And Tony Stark had always been good at faking good cheer.

Even Clint jumped when Tony’s hands came together in a hard clap.

“Well I, for one, am sick of looking at this eye sore!” he declared, rubbing his hands together briskly as he turned a practiced smile on the two startled men beside him. “Your arrival is opportune, Mr. Dahlberg. I had planned on just letting this piece of land rot, but now that you’re here, I seem to recall a certain covetous look in your eyes when we last discussed it. I am prepared to offer you the deal of a lifetime!”

He expected the shock and the suspicion that immediately crossed the farmer’s face.

“I recently acquired this land, and yet I find I have no used for it. I am, therefore, prepared to sell it to you,” Tony said easily.

“Your budget is a bit higher than mine, Mr. Stark,” Dahlberg said darkly, quickly reminding Tony of that grim-faced man who had been the first to determine that the stranger in his kitchen was not
who they had originally thought him to be. The guy was a country hick, but he was also a shrewd businessman. Tony had seen it the first time they met. “I’m pretty sure I don’t have the means to buy you out.”

“I am a businessman, so I do expect a profit out of this eyesore,” Tony declared, for all intents agreeing with the man.

Dahlberg was right, of course. Had Tony rushed this purchase with the full force of his financial backing, never considering pushing for a deal, there was no way Dahlberg would be able to compete with his budget. But Tony was a businessman, as he had just said. A good one at that.

He pulled out his phone and started working the numbers. He already had them calculated out in his head, but people were always more receptive to a visual aid.

“Take in the cost of removing the old farmhouse and barn—do you want the moldy barn?” Dahlberg scowled at him but shook his head slowly, and Tony continued like the showman he was, “And we don’t need a wrecking crew, so that will save on bottom line. However you choose to develop the land is your business. I’m not paying for that. And the title transfer…”

He held out his phone—shoved it into Dahlberg’s face, really—just to see the man recoil. Tony did not even care that it was an asshole move. Sometimes it was nice knowing it was actually a natural reaction to not like strange people getting in your space.

Besides, it was worth it when Dahlberg frowned, squinted, and then made that awkward move to grab Tony’s hand to hold the phone where he wanted it.

Clint was tense beside him, but Tony was fine. This was expected behavior. Dahlberg would probably never get this kind of deal on a hundred acres of conveniently located viable land again in his lifetime. It was only fair to let him gape over it for a while. If he wanted to engage in a bit of hand-holding, Tony was fine, as long as he paid for dinner.

No, seriously. For this kind of deal, dinner was on Dahlberg.

“I believe the question is: deal, or no deal, Mr. Dahlberg,” Tony said finally.

Dahlberg staggered back a step and ran a shaking hand through his salt and pepper hair.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” he gurgled. “I can’t believe—are you serious?”

“As a heart attack,” Tony replied, easily sliding into clichéd responses for a traditional man. He forwarded the offer to Pepper’s phone with a quick note before tucking the phone back into his jacket pocket. “Call the Stark Industries New York office and give your name, and you’ll be forwarded to my attorneys for help with the paperwork. You’ve got until the end of the business day Wednesday.”

“What happens if I don’t get back to you by then?” Dahlberg asked. Half of his curiosity was from the question itself. The other half was probably because Tony popped the trunk of his car while shrugging out of his jacket. Clint rolled his eyes but took the jacket when Tony silently held it out to him.

It was cold out yet, but Tony was not planning to be standing around in shirtsleeves for long.

“Don’t play that game, Mr. Dahlberg,” he rebuked. “We both know you’re an ambitious man.”

He hauled a suitcase from the trunk that little Brian Dahlberg would have recognized instantly. It
was revamped and updated since the last time he had used it, not yet tested. But hey—he was standing by a field, and wasn’t that just irony for you?

“You’ll have to sink quite a bit of money into it for a couple of years, but I bet the payout will be worth it long before you retire.”

There was the high whine of machinery buzzing to life, and Tony grinned hard at the smooth flow of perfectly fitted, interlocking pieces of metal as he gave the suitcase a hard yank. It was the first time he had been in the armor since October. The very act of the Iron Man armor folding itself around him brought with it a contrary mix of emotions. As always, he felt a calm focus that always presented itself when he was in the armor. Under that, there was a thrilling current of elation.

He had not been so happy to put on the armor in a long time.

“Brian’s gonna shit a brick,” Dahlberg gasped.

“We’ll get some photos before I go,” Tony said, mildly distracted by the sudden flow of information spinning across the HUD. “Jarvis?”

“Might I just say, sir, that I disapprove of taking the armor into the field before testing it.”

“No battles this time, honey,” Tony held out an arm. “Demolition time.”

The house came down in burst of flying wood and dirt. Clint whooped in the background, then shot an exploding arrow at the barn—Tony had not even known the man brought his compound bow along—and the building went up in flames. Dahlberg stood at the side of the road, slack jawed until the enthusiasm of the two superheroes got to him. Then there were three grown men, laughing and cheering at the wonton destruction while the baffled survey crew hung back and looked mildly terrified.

All in all, it was a successful test run and a very good day.

* * *

Chapter End Notes

I had originally intended another chapter, one which would round this off and wrap it up in a pretty bow. However, massive amounts of writing and irritation later, it occurred to me that the Avengers are not a cuddly bunch no matter how much I tried to force the fluff. There is no perfect, cheerful ending. Scars form and scars remain. They keep trying, but nothing is ever one hundred percent happy for each of them at any given time. This story is as complete as it can be without creating another multi-chaptered story which would be best put as a separate entity.

So, many thanks to all who have read this through to the end. I hope it’s been a good read.

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