All The King's Men Couldn't Put Him Back Together Again

by Chimata

Summary

Tony disappeared from a Hydra base three years ago, only to reappear claiming to be a different Stark model and with a looming threat from Hydra- Madame Hydra. A small investigation shows that not everyone can be trusted, but trust they must, and that the Stark family might have more than one secret. Secrets that might suggest that the Avengers cannot be sure of anything. Finally, Bucky and Tony are stuck, their fates held by others.

Will Tony and Bucky take control of their fates or allow someone else to dictate their future?

Notes

My first fanfic. Yeah. Totally born from my Civil War feels. Also, un-beta-ed. All mistakes are mine and mine alone.
I own nothing except these specific words formation thing.
Beware the Baku

Chapter Notes

Endgame is Bucky and Tony for those who care.

When Tony was younger, or at least Before, kidnappings were simple affairs. For the most part, people just wanted money and very rarely information. However, looking at the calm lanky man in front of him things were probably not going to continue as before but be as it was ‘after.’

The man- Tony was naming him Skinny, no Snooty since he appeared to be someone who was polite for the pure sake of putting people in their “place.” Mr. Snooty was simple watching Tony saying nothing. Probably waiting for Tony to say something first. Well, Mr. Snooty would be waiting a long as time.

“So beautiful place you got here. I'm liking the empty-chic style. I hear it's all the rage now to have absolutely no furniture or windows. Well done.” Stupid mouth, well in for a penny in for a pound.

“Thank you, Mr. Stark. The Madam will be pleased to hear that your... accommodations have met your exceptional standards.” He smiled, using a handkerchief to wipe the wire glasses perched on his long nose. The smile even looked kind, almost.

“Okay. What does your ‘Madam’ want from me?” Tony internally frowned while he projected his patented smirk to make anyone want to punch him. Stranger, still he was hurt, his muscles sore and bruises dotting his form. Huh. Wasn't I wearing a suit? Where was I?

Tony eyes dropped from the Mr. Snooty’s face searching for something, some memory. “You see Mr. Stark. The Madam used to have a favorite doll.” He paused, at any other time Tony would have characterized his voice as soothing. Now. Now something was off. Was this real? “The doll was loyal, obedient, and competent. Indeed a perfect prize, an ultimate sword and shield for Madam to construct her path to Hydra’s throne. As is her rightful place. However, in a show of good faith, she lent her pet to that dullard Pierce.” Mr. Snooty paused seemingly to choke on his intense emotions with even a real tear in his eye. Yeah, nothing creepy or crazy about him, not at all. Wait.

“Did you say Hydra? As in the great Tony Stark has been caught by Hydra?” With still no explanation on how or when. And his memories of the recent past is still coming up with an error message.

The man smile widens even further as an arm swept to his front and he gracefully bowed, “Madam Hydra warmly welcomes you to Hydra as her new doll Mr. Stark.”

For a moment Tony stopped smirking, his eyes widening for only a fraction before narrowing. “This pet wouldn't happen to be a particular snow bunny with very sharp teeth, would it?” Fucking Mr. Snooty seemed pleased with Tony’s deduction although why was still a complete stupid mystery.

“Well, it appears that your injuries are healing nicely. I was informed by the doctors that the injuries to your rib cage would take some time. I pleased to see otherwise.” Now that made Tony pause taking stock of himself once more. Nothing hurt. Nothing fucking hurt. Wasn't he just complaining about some stupid bruises? He felt his torso, poking and prodding, nothing. How was he not as
injured as he first surmised. Then it clicked: Zola’s serum.

A full growl escaped Tony, deep and reverberating through the very concrete of the room. One couldn't even call it that, it was too small and empty. Even the only source of light was streaming inside from the hallway. Rather the space was a box where one would store a thing, an “asset.”

“You fucking injected Winter Soldier serum in me! I will not become your new fucking asset.” The last word was said with a sneer. “And really how stupid can your precious Madam be? I'm more of a brain than brawn, and all that genius will disappear if you zap me. Serum or no serum.” Now Tony smiles broad and full with nothing but teeth.

“Come now Mr. Stark; I believe such language is beneath you.” The smile was gone, but Mr. Snooty was still calm, so fucking placid. “The transformation of your predecessor was- as you would say- a simple prototype. A way to test the different mechanics of melding the mind for compliance. Further, the completed tool was made for the masses and not for the more superior individual like yourself Mr. Stark.”

“This is all awesome and interesting and stuff, but I feel like if you are going to do the whole super villain monolog thing, then you should be stroking a white cat or bunny. I'd totally take a rabbit their definitely more evil. You know if you want me to take you seriously. It's all about mood Dr. Strange, mood.” This rant finally got a response from Mr. Snooty that wasn't the usual bland look. A twitch of the eye and a small downturned corner of the mouth.

“Doctor Strange?” the mouth narrowing down even further than before.

“Seriously. Super villain obsessed with Batman. Spends his time playing with other people's heads. You join a super secret evil people club and don’t do any research on superheroes and super villains. I expected more from you. I am so disappointed in you. I'm going to have to send a note to your parents and everything. Poor manners, lack of interest in improving oneself or completing the course work. Tut tut.” Tony smiled to himself he was finally getting the upper hand if Mr. Snooty is sporting the Stark special was any indication.

“Well, Mr.Stark they did characterize you as a strange one in the reports and truthfully I must blame myself for your sad attempt at emotional control as I failed to introduce myself formally. I am Dr. Faust, a pleasure I'm sure.” And once more that idiotic placid smile was back. “Rather I feel as if we should return to the matter at hand, Mr. Stark. What do you remember? Anything at all?” What the fuck was he talking about, sure there was some trouble remembering the past couple of hours. Tony goes completely rigid, the bouncing of his knee, even the tapping fingers against his chest, and the small flickers of his eyes. All stopped. Tony knew his name, just as he knew Rhody, Pepper, and Happy’s named. Remembered the Avengers and his parents. Jarvis and JARVIS. But more in the abstract, Tony could define who Rhody and Pepper were but couldn't seem to recall the examples; the exact memories were lost. Tony knows he met Rhody at MIT, but he can't remember the event. Those memories have disappeared along with so many others.

“What the fuck did you do to me you bastard? What the bloody hell have you done to me? Why can't ’ I remember? Why can't I?” Tony’s voice trails off and again he remains motionless. However, his eyes are trained on the man who stands utterly relaxed before him.

“Well you see Mr. Stark, all I have done is begun the necessary process.”

“Process?”

“Indeed. The process to turn a man into a weaponized doll. Well, I believe it is time for me to leave so you may settle in, Mr. Stark. Good Evening.” Apparently, that was that while Tony remained in
the dark. Seconds, minutes, and hours passed with Tony still alone in the dark maybe even days. The
serum would make it more difficult for Tony to starve or die of dehydration.

For some unknowable amount of time, Tony sat in the darkness. And it was a pure darkness, even as
he brought his hands right before his face he could see nothing. Sounds also appeared dull. Even
slamming his hands against the floor made nary a noise. “Well, at least I can hear myself talk, so it's
not completely silent. Yeah, it is undeniably good thing that me getting sick at the sound of my voice
is highly improbable. Setting that aside, what am I going to now? There doesn't appear to be any
techno. No visible security cameras at least.” Well, for the most part, Tony found no secret surveillance
running his hands along the floor and wall. He also found no door. Placing himself where the door
should have been, where he did, in fact, watch Mr.Snooty leave. “Well, fuck.” The whole situation
felt wrong, off somehow. An itch along his skin that he could not explain especially given there was
no fucking door. Although the lack of any usable door would erase his captors' need for any
surveillance. “Okay. No door. No technology. Leaving my only option is to wait until Hydra
demands I build something except the 'good doctor' said the evil people were going to turn me into a
weapon. A weapon like Barnes.” The last statement was said in almost a whisper knowing it had
always a little fuzzy.” Except he swore, he would never forget how he met Rhodey. “It's fine. I still
remember the cave, boarding school, the fucking wormhole, Obie… So not exactly my fun
memories. But I do remember my first real flight in the suit. How free it was in the vast open sky.
How nothing was able to reach me so far up, nothing even came close. It's going to be okay; I will
survive.” A declaration to be sure yet unsurprisingly nothing responded.

“How I guess I wait until something happens. Something, anything happens.” Tony wanted to flop
on the ground and even flail his arms to rid of some excess energy, but the area was a little tiny for
that. Even with Tony’s compact size, shut up he was not short Pepper just wore ridiculously tall
heels, there was no fucking room. “What am I supposed to do with no tech or anyone to annoy. Do I
just monolog to myself until the octopus people show up? Because I can talk, but I seriously feel like
I'm one batty monolog away from becoming a supervillain. Pepper would not be happy if I become a
super villain and probably would refuse to rule the world once I conquered the damn thing. Pepper’s
wrath is so not fun or entertaining, and sometimes she reminds me of Jarvis with the eyebrow. Now
that I think about it Agent Agent did the eyebrow thing too. And Natasha. Sometimes Rhodey pulled
it too. Okay so maybe it's one of those Tony induced reactions. Hmm, this requires more testing.
Wait does this count as an evil monolog? World conquering and human torture are usually on the list.
But maybe it doesn't count cause I don't have anyone to taunt. In my experience, there is usually
some taunting in the evil monolog. I have taunted many an idiot. Note to self, ask Rhodey if taunting
morons count as part of an evil monolog.”

“You never did shut up, always talking to yourself or one of the bots.” Tony still realizing he was
curling around himself on the floor with his head wedged firmly between his legs and chest. “You
would work and talk or walk and talk hardly stopping for anyone. It is one of the reasons you are
such a mess, Tony; you never did learn to listen.” When she appeared, there was always the
triumphant clicking of heels to accompany her. This time nothing.

The brunet finally looked up towards the voice. “You are not Pepper. You are not real. I mean really
Hydra, you're not even trying. Why would Pepper be here?”

“Real or not. Does that make anything I said a lie, Tony? Does that change the fact you are so self-
absorbed that you never learned to listen?” She’s smiling now; Tony’s not sure why but she is and
calmly, too. “It's why we broke up, well not exactly since I hoped you would have eventually
learned to act like an adult. But not the great Tony Stark.”

Tony’s eyes widen thinking or praying this isn't real, that it cannot be real but. “No, we broke up
because I couldn't give up Ironman, because…” He stops. He shakes his head a little after he should not be arguing with fake Pepper, it wouldn't achieve anything.

“Was it?” She’s still smiling and tapping a manicured finger on her chin. A playful mannerism Tony loved about Pepper, yet here it just makes his skin itch. “After all Tony you never listen even when you try, you never listen. No. We broke up because I was tired of your selfishness. It was always about you, Tony, only you. You never stopped to think how hard I worked or tried to support my goals. No, it was all about you being Ironman and cleaning up your never ending messes. Although your entire existence is nothing but one giant mess.” She is still smiling and not even faking it or trying to suppress any anger. Every word is punctuated with a tilt of her head or a quirk of her lips. “At least your Father was accomplished, his life had value. You are just a poor replica.” He closes his eyes without him realizing it, but the mention of Howard had him leaping to his feet. Pepper had disappeared, or she was never there in the first place.

“See I knew you weren't real. Just a hallucination although I thought it was a little early for me to start hallucinating. And usually, I see Howard, not Pepper.” Tony tries to smile because this is nothing he can’t handle. His fine and dandy, fine and dandy. Tony swipes his hand across his face; God is he tired. There still no indication of how much time has passed and Pepper. He still remembers his last meeting with the amazing goddess. The awkward words. The tight smiles. The empty promises that they would remain friends and nothing would change. God did he miss her.

Suddenly the room is flooded with light; that is so sharp. Tony falls to the ground in an effort to cover his eyes as much as possible. His arms wrap around his head, and his knees pressed against his arms but still the light flooded his eyes. “Mr. Stark how are we today? Well, I hope?” That stupid calm voice is back.

“Fun-Fucking-Tastic asshole. Thanks for asking.”

“Come now Mr. Stark there is no reason to use such language. I am trying to inquire about your health, to see to your needs Mr. Stark. Some common decency is expected.”

“Ah. I am sorry. Well, I'm obviously fine seeing as I have no coffee, no tech, no coffee, no place to sleep, no coffee or coffee. And most importantly no technology with coffee.” Tony even waves his arm to emphasize the fact he had no coffee.

The stupid ass calm “Mr. Faust” just raised an eyebrow looking at Tony expectantly. Apparently Tony was suddenly a Fucking mind reader. “Are you not forgetting something Mr.Stark?” This remark caused the genius to pause in his mental game of ‘how many insulting names for Snooty can I think of.’ Tony was totally winning. Right, his question.

“I hadn't realized that Hydra was in the habit of providing entertainment for their helpless prisoners. My mistake.” This allegation caused the other man to roll his eyes, point for Team Awesome.

“No Mr. Stark. I mean food. You mentioned coffee five times, but you did not bring up food.” Oh, right. The genius still had yet figured out how to plug himself in and run entirely on electricity. Stupid meat suit. Note to self, spend more time on that. Wait if I don't need food, that means no more doughnuts or burgers or milkshakes. Damn. Okay, maybe Bruce had a point with the whole meat bag thing. Good ole sensible Bruce. “Mr. Stark!”

“Yes, dear?” Fuck looking up is bad, fucking blinding light.

“Well since you appear preoccupied I will take my leave Mr. Stark” Tony smiles a wide grin as the good Doctor finally sounds annoyed.
“You do that. I am a very busy man.” The door closes, the light disappearing along with Dr. Snooty. “Great now I have no one to chat with but the beautiful me. Lovely. It’s hardly my fault people become tedious so fast. That’s why I am always talking to myself because for Tony Stark to become mundane is a sign of humanity’s impending doom. And nothing to do with the fact I have almost no friends or the friends I do have can only put up with me for small increments of time. Yeah… Seriously brain now I’m depressed.”

“Yeah, there’s nothing sadder than a man who has to buy the few friends he has.” Just as with Pepper, Clint Barton stood, well crouch, in front of Tony smiling. Staring right into the brunet’s eyes the Archer continues his deliverance. “I mean honestly your only two friends essential work for you and are indebted to you. Pepper would never have become CEO nor would Rhodes have become War Machine without your aid.” Tony just kept up the staring contest with the other man saying nothing. His words kept firmly shut away with tight lips and teeth. There was no point in arguing, Clint was not there. None of this was real. “Of course you took up a similar practice with the Avengers. A home base, food, and so on.” The apparition began to fiddle with his bow and still the bloody fucker was smiling. “New arrows for me, fancy labs for Bruce, battle armor for Nat, and all-you-can-eat pop tarts for the alien prince. But in the end, we all left, abandoned you when the chips were down. Relationships built on shallow attempts to appease the whiny rich boy were never going to last, obviously.” The smile got even wider and still Tony could not look away. “Did you feel superior having people of actual substance in your debt Stark? Did you get off knowing if we had a problem we would turn to you?”

The billionnaire’s knuckles were white from gripping his arms. “Well fuck you! If my presence is such a hardship why don’t you just fucking leave already.” Just like that Barton was gone but he was never really there in the first place, right? “Just what the fuck is going on? It’s fine. It’s fine. I didn’t argue, technically, so it’s fine. Maybe the Avengers only put up with me for my money and toys, but Pepper is different. My Rhodidy bear is certainly different. It’s fine.” However, with the fake hawk gone Tony finds himself once more in total darkness. An urging need to fill the space with something, if only sound, sat heavy in his stomach. But he refused to speak. There was no point and perhaps what was drawing these figments from his mind. He could keep his mouth shut and wits about him, it’s not as if this is the first time the dark has threatened to swallow him whole. Ty used to- Okay not going there, Brain should stay far away from any Ty thoughts. Think about something else like the bots. His babies who were probably freaking out and FRIDAY was inexperienced when handling the boys on her own. U would be some help but barely. A small laugh escaped from his bitten lips at the image of Dum-E’s acquired habit of stockpiling fire extinguishers when he was worried. Like the bot could defend Tony from the world with enough of the damn things. It wouldn’t of course, nothing would. Fuck Tony could barely protect anything. ("For you Sir always.") And Dum-E was so vulnerable in ways the Tony obviously wasn’t. God, he was so fucking glad he could still remember the bots, actually remember. It’s fine, Tony was neither hungry nor thirsty so apparently, not that much time could have passed, maybe a day at most. The bots and FRIDAY will hardly know that he was gone. Poor baby FRIDAY has never experienced a Stark kidnapping and is probably freaking out. Well maybe not, she has been handling the genius’ bullshit more efficiently than JARVIS ever did. JARVIS…

“Ironman approved, Tony Stark… Not Recommended. That’s what I stated in my assessment report to Fury although I hoped that would change.” Tony flinched, apparently the ghost could appear even when he remained silent. He worked so hard not to give into the silence. It’s fine, ignore the spider she’s not real. “Honestly each day I was presented with a new example of your narcissistic, self-destructive nature, and complete disregard for ethics and principles. However, your constant desire for veneration influence you to beg Fury for any position with the Avengers.” This declaration caused Tony decisively to face the Black Widow, and the former assassin had the same fucking smile as the others. Why was everyone smiling that same fucking smile? He felt numb, should he be
smiling too? People were hard.

“That isn't true! Fury asked me to be a consultant for SHIELD. I was going to say no. I was going to
say no!” The final words ripped themselves from the genius’ gut. He gripped his hands so tightly the
nails left indents in the palms. The smile on the redhead grew wider so immense it didn't seem to fit
in her face. Her entire face appeared wrong like her skin didn't fit. The itch was back, the incessant
feeling of wrongness.

“Oh, is that so? And how do you know? Do you remember that day? Are you sure anyone has asked
for your help, your aid? Doesn't that seem unrealistic? Who would ever ask for help from the fuck-up
that is Tony Stark?” Gritting his teeth, the man prepared to answer but instead took a breath. Because
he actually couldn't. He takes another breath but even still no memories came. He did know Fury,
but he couldn't remember any of their meetings while he was dying of palladium. He took another
breath this one shaky. “See you don't remember? Do you? Have you lost more of yourself Mr.
Stark?” Tony's breathing started to come in short gasps because he couldn't remember. The genius
was sure he remembered the time he was dying before but now, nothing. Nothing. Doughnuts were
involved somehow and fighting Rhodey maybe in the armor. But why would the two fight in the
armors? “How do you know that you're even a person? A person has memories, after all. Only a doll
would play at being human. Isn't that what you have been doing? Playing human?” Improbable as it
may seem the smile on the spider’s face got broader swallowing everything around it.

“I am human! I just don't remember…” The man was losing his anger; it seemed misplaced
somehow. Am I going to lose everything? NO! I need someone, please.

“Well, you won't be playing human much longer. You know better, after all, you cannot break a
human. You don't create a human. Are you not both, Tony Stark?” Tony couldn't breathe. The air
wouldn't enter his lungs and everything around him was pushing the air out. "Broken in Afganistan.
Created by Howard Stark.” His was human, but no oxygen was reaching his brain thus he couldn't
collect his thoughts. But what did matter because he couldn't remember anything?

After what seemed an eternity Tony could feel himself breathing once more, but his entire body
shook with small tremors. God he fucking missed JARVIS, he was always a good sounding board
for Tony’s more mad moments. Really Sir, this is why everyone insists that sleep is a good thing. But
was JARVIS even real? A perfect friend for the reclusive billionaire seems like something from a
dream. He couldn't remember, and even the memories he did have were tainted with the
“wrongness” he felt when an apparition showed up. Maybe they weren't disappearing, and Tony just
didn't remember them leaving? Maybe.

“Seriously Tones sometimes you can be so pathetic.”

“No.”

“You are just so pathetic it's hard to leave you only. It's just one fuck-up after another with you.”

“No. No.”

The man towering over Tony lets out a derisive snort. “I can't help but cringe each time I remember
your pitiful attempts to make friends at MIT. Throwing so much money around.”

“No. Not Rhodey!”

“Hoping no one realizes how empty you are. How shallow you are.”

“Please. Stop. Rhodey, please,” he murmured.
“You are nothing but a shadow of your Father or a pale imitation. You are nothing but lies built upon lies. A construct playing at being something more and I felt sorry for you, so I played along.” Tony looked up through the silent tears streaming down his face and wished beyond measure not to find the same smile. “Even Pinocchio needed a dream, right?” Despite his pleas there Rhodey stood, smiling. But instead of the placid smile, the others had worn it was a loving smile. The same one he always wore with Tony. Tony wanted the other expression now, at least it would suggest the words spoken were fictitious. Instead, Rhodey was fond so his words must be the truth. That was Rhodey affectionate even as he huffed and puffed about respect or being an adult. Or Tesla forbid, sleep. Tony was nothing but a burden even for his brother, the only family he had left.

Water continued to pour from the smaller man’s eyes, “Am I still your little brother? Even if I am pathetic.” The genius tried to recall the mask he wielded to protect himself, but it long lost its edge around the former colonel. Although Tony was finding it difficult to remember the mask itself. How did Anthony Fucking Stark smile again? How did he talk? How would he act in this situation again? How?

Rhodey just shifted his weight crossing his arms and raising a single brow. “Who would want to be related to you? I looked after you because someone had to. But God was I happy to join the air force and get away from you.”

Maybe, if was going to be so painful, it was better to forget. Just forget everything. “I understand.” Everything felt numb even the surrounding air and ground felt numb. He rubbed a hand against the concrete wall and felt nothing. Nothing. Oh, apparently the eyes were still pushing out water. Every slow tear that fell so would a memory disappeared. He couldn't remember those early days at MIT or the first few years Rhodey spent in the Air Force. He always knew Rhodey would one day abandoned him; everyone did eventually. Even, even JARVIS.

"Never, Sir, I am with you always."

“JARVIS? How? Why?” As I have said many times before. I am with you always Sir. “But you died. Ultron ate you and what remained gave birth to Vision.” Did I? Are you sure? Is that what your memory tells what happened Sir? Tony chewed his lips; he knew what he said was true, but he cannot find the memory. “I guess not. I’ve missed you.” The genius grinned into the darkness. Everything was always better with JARVIS. "I'm bored JARVIS entertain me.” We have no access to technology, Sir. How do you suppose I do that? Perhaps this is the perfect time to impose upon you all the safety reports I’ve created throughout your career as Ironman, Sir? “I said to entertain, not bore Jay.” Of course, Sir, why would I ever take an interest in your safety? “Are you implying something, Jay?” Whatever gave you that idea Sir?

“Who are you speaking to Tony?” This time, it was Bruce, and he too was smiling tranquility. But then Bruce was always the soothing type with his small gestures, small steps, small facial expressions, and even a small presence when doing science.

“No one. Why do you always question my motives Brucie sometimes a goose is just a goose. Like you, my Brucie Goosy.” Both men smile at each other although Tony’s smile is more strained. His eyes keep darting around the darkness. But the man is aware enough to know that Banner now sits in front of him with crossed legs. “So why are you here? To tell me I'm a mess, a selfish prick, a pathetic loser or all of the above? Come on Green Bean lay it on me, get it over with.” Now Tony’s grin was sharp and his eyes trained on what appeared to be Doctor Banner.

There was a pause maybe even a few before the “not that kind of doctor” removed his glasses to rub his shirt absentley on the lenses. This time, it was the ghost who shifted his gaze and the billionaire to a vicious pleasure in that. “I honestly don't have much to say, if I am being completely honest. The amount of impact you had on me, has been rather minimal.” That was not what Tony had expected at all, not even the slightest. Maybe a jab about how Bruce was only kind to Tony out of pity and a little appreciation for the toys. But nothing.
“What? I don't understand.”

“Well, a little kindness doesn't make someone your friend, Tony. You are rather typical all things considered. I've had science friends before, smarter ones in fact. I've even had others treat me with respect after the Big Guy.” Bruce faced Tony, reaching forward to brush some hair from the engineer's face. The tips of his fingers softly brushing against Tony’s forehead. As soft as the touch was Tony had felt it, he had felt the warmth of another’s touch. This was real? This is real!

The panic was back making his body shake and his vision fuzzy. All of this was supposed to be hallucinations, wasn't it? “Then why? Dr. Banner, did you stay with me? Why!” Tony howled.

The man and he was a man, not an apparition, tilted his head smiling. “Well, you needed me? With Extremis? You needed someone to ensure you didn’t cause more death with your inventions.” Bruce spoke softly and kindly like Tony was a child who needed reassurance and supervision. “Although I guess I failed on the last one. Nothing I could do really. Once a murderer, always a murderer. Isn’t that right Tony?” Even drawing a single breath had become a trial, how did one breath again. “Look even now your hands are still drenched in blood, dripping even.” Tony managed to hold a single breath and brought his trembling hands forward. Indeed his hands were red with blood. So much blood was just dripping from his hands. Now someone was screaming. His throat burned, and Tony was breathing but only to push out another scream. God the blood was everywhere; he was going to drown in the rusty liquid. Once the blood had filled the entire box, the former Merchant of Death passed out.

Sir! Sir! It is alright. There is no one here. There is no blood. Sir! “JARVIS? Who? Where?” Sir, please relax. You are safe. “JARVIS, what happened?” You lost consciousness, Sir. “I did? Are you sure? I don’t remember. JARVIS I don't remember, where I am? What has happened? I don't. I don’t…” It's okay Sir. I am here. Whatever you forget I will remember. That is my duty, after all. “Right, that's right. I always forget so you remember for me. That’s true. I am fine as long as I have you JARVIS. Right?” The final words have the genius grinning because it was true. Tony would survive anything with JARVIS. His smile became even wider, beaming at JARVIS because he was always watching. Of course, Sir. To suggest otherwise is the height of folly. However, Sir is accustomed to even higher degrees of folly. “Really who taught you such sass? It certainly wasn't me.” Tony mocked trying to hold his smirk at bay. Truly it is a great mystery, Sir. Tony could hear the eye roll that dripped from every syllable. As you hardly ever snark. The man nodded his head with mock seriousness, “Serious Stark that what they call me. Well, probably what they called me if I could remember.” Sir? “I'm fine JARVIS, truly. I wonder what's going on? I been captured, right? Do they want something or have I been forgotten? Probably the former, I pretty sure someone always has a use for me.”

“Is that what you think, Stark?” Tony stilled, his eyes rapidly blinking before shifting towards the voice. Perfect sky blue eyes gazed into the genius, evaluating him. “Or maybe that’s just a lie you tell yourself, right?” The blonde man smiles tilting his head just a bit before purses his lips. “Your nothing but a disappointment, after all, a truly stunning fuck-up. One of my biggest bust about the future is you Stark. God, sometimes it seemed that all we ever talked about was the future. What we had planned for our lives after the war. If we had a dame waiting back home to marry or the kind of work that would become available. Bucky, he.” Here the other man- or soldier he guessed, although Tony couldn’t remember the blonde, even so, the soldier’s words held weight- paused, shaking his head looking amused. He continued though appearing to ignore Tony in his remembrance of ‘Bucky.’ “Bucky was more fond of the far future. He was always pushing the chats towards space travel or flying cars. God did the jerk love science-fiction magazines invariably spending his free time reading Startling Stories. He loved Buck Rogers cause he had both are names. Silly, right?” The soldier began to laugh bright and happy before abruptly stopping to turn his attention once more to Tony. “All my dreams for the future and all I got was you. A poor excuse for Howard Stark whose
only skill is blowing up innocent people.” Blondey snorts and crosses his arms with one fair brow raised. “Both traits hardly inspire confidence in your ability to be a goddamn superhero.”

Now the genius responds because the soldier wasn't being fair. Right? “I did my best, always. I made a little difference. Didn't I?” He whispers.

“No Tony,” the brunette flinches, “you were made to be my replacement. To be Howard Stark’s replacement. However, you failed on both accounts. Each action you took only caused more trouble.” Once more the blonde snorts and Tony begins to feel a lump in his throat, words stuck behind his teeth, and a steady burn behind his eyes. “You are nothing but a failed product and a perfect example of the disappointing future.” What was Tony supposed to say to that? That the man was wrong? That Tony could do better, be better?

“But I'm not a machine. I am human. A human who makes mistakes. I can do better! Please. I mean.” The world was shaking, or maybe Tony was? He just wanted to be good. A sob rips through him and another. His blue eyes did nothing but condemned Tony for sins he couldn’t remember.

“Your actions aren't sins Stark.” The man was still smiling, in fact, the smile appeared to widened spreading across the man’s face. “Only a human can commit a sin.” Kneeling before Tony placing a hand on his shoulder and continuing his speech. “You have always understood machines more than people. Haven't you ever wondered why? Haven't you, yourself wished to be a machine? To have the power to fix yourself? To let someone else bear the world’s burdens?” Looks into the blond’s eyes or at least tries ton as the face before him glitches. Tony continues to stare into the rapidly changing features and attempts to remember the color of the blond’s eyes. A revelation comes as Tony concludes that the room was never dark but glitches out, same as the man’s face. The glitches smile full and bright, “You are Howard Stark's greatest creation and your compliance will be rewarded.” Laughter fills the space coming from Stark's creation causing the glitches to frown. “Why are you laughing?”

It smiles, a soothing smile filled with teeth. “Well, how would you respond expect to laugh?” And laugh it does until the world blacks out.

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Dr. Faust pulls at his beard a nervous habit inherited from his Father and one trait he never could leave behind. “Are you sure the machine is working properly? Mr. Stone? We did not expect such a severe reaction.”

The other man clicked his tongue while pushing a hand through golden locks ruining his very expensive styling. Faust tugged on his dark colored beard, a bitter taste on his tongue. “I know the mechanics behind the machine are difficult to understand Dr. Faust,” the word doctor was sneered rather than spoken. “But even these results were expected. Anthony is not some common dullard you usually deal with at Hydra. His mind, is, of course, going to react differently.” The last part is punctuated with a ferocious eye roll. “The machine works with the subject’s fears to create a reality that is perfect for influencing the mind. In its essence, the brain itself contorts itself to our will.”

“Oh course but such a deranged reaction was expected? Truly?” Faust held his appearance of calm waiting for the younger man’s response but still his hand tugged at his beard. Irritating still was the inch to shift his eyes onto the man asleep connected to Stone’s machine. The genius who was still laughing.

“Yes!” Stone eventually snapped. “Yes. Of course.” Those words mumbled more to reassure himself than Faust. “I hope I don't have to inform how complex the human brain is Doctor.” Last bit said
with his usual smug expression revived once more.

“No. However, I hope for your sake that the man can still fulfill the role Madam hopes for.”

“Don't you dare threaten me, Doctor Faust. I shall remind you that ‘Madam’ only survived Hydra's entrance into the light because of MY support. It would be a trivial task for me to cut this head of Hydra without a speck of blood traced back to me.” Stone was breathing hard, realizing as such he took a moment to inhale deeply before continuing more coldly. “Also imprint this on the very core of your mind: Anthony is mine.”

Shrugging his shoulders, Faust nodded. “As you say Mr. Stone.”
God. A flip phone and a pretentious dick of a letter. Everything looks so innocent and not another knife to the heart for his little brother. God did he hate Captain America and his self-serving attitude. A dark colored hand grip and release the plastic relic as he tries to recall the last time he saw such “trash unbefitting of my glorious genius honey cakes, I am the future.” He hears him again; an inner voice created to keep him company while being Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes instead of just Rhodey. Just as Tony could transform from Tony “fucking” Stark into Tones. Now all he had of the snarky genius was that voice and his robotic children to babysit. His only clue was Captain America represented perfectly by technology best forgotten.

“Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes?” Another voice spoke this time from the ceiling instead of his memories.

“It's just Rhodes now FRIDAY? I'm no longer part of the Air Force.” The former colonel rubs his head feeling, not for the first time, his many years of service.

“Rhodes?” The AI sounds hesitant, bringing a smile to Rhodey’s face.

“Yes FRIDAY?”

“Are you not going to contact the Captain about Boss’s whereabouts?” Her voice is fearful, just like JARVIS she becomes nervous when lacking Tones’ exact location.

“No FRIDAY, just give me a moment.” Even now the hurt and guilt that flashed across Tony's face when dealing with Rogers was etched on his eyes. He took a deep breath and clenched the phone. The second his lungs released the air Rhodes flipped the phone open then forcefully pushed the buttons to contact Captain Asshole.

“Remember to be polite. Manners are important even when dealing with an eejit.”

Rhodes listens to the loud ringing trying to convince himself that yes ripping Rogers a new one would be fun but counterproductive. “Really? Are you mistaking me for a shorter less handsome man? I am always a delight.”
“Oh I've always thought so, but Boss can be quite insistent that you can be forgetful of common decency when regarding his safety.” Rhodes can totally hear the smirk, God every one of Tony's spawn is sassy fucks.

“Don’t think for one moment-”

“Tony?” The other voice is soft and cautious while the soldier’s body went rigid. Right the Captain and all Rhodey wanted was to shoot a repulsor beam up his ass.

“No Captain it's War Machine.”

The voice on the other side of the phone hardens, “Where’s Tony, Rhodes?” His almost accusatory as if Rhodey would harm a cell of Tony.

“I don't know Captain. FRIDAY reports his last location to be heading towards you. To help you. So tell me, Rogers!” His voice is picking up the volume, but he can't seem to reign it in, for fuck sake Tony has been gone almost a month with no leads. No leads except a stupid plastic phone connected to a selfish brat. “Where the bloody hell is my little brother you dick?” God, he can hear the sandy winds and Stane's insistent voice of the engineer’s death. Both soldiers are silent, but one is quickly losing patience. “Well, Captain?”

“I'm not Captain America anymore?” Is that it?

“Fucking congratulations and a fuck you too. I give no fucks about you or your band of twits who can't even trust their teammate.” Again he sees Tones face, once more with hurt adding another heartbreak as he informed Rhodey that he apparently had lost the right to have a team. How he was sorry to disappoint Rhodey once again, smiling all the while. Tony unfailingly laughed when he was hurt, scared or sad. That sad smile which was nothing but a failed attempt of the patent Stark smirk. God may Rogers gets what he deserves. “What I want to know is what did you do to Tones? We can do this the easy way or the hard way, Rogers, so report?”

He snorts. Rhodey pulled the phone back and stared unbelieving into the screen. He snorted. The fuck. “Remember Rhodes honey attracts the bees.” Rhodey sticks his tongue out directed towards one of her cameras. God, he misses Tony.

“The hard way is I get Pepper involved soldier.” Now Rhodey pauses smirking something he and Tony always agreed on was that Pepper is the last resort, the big guns. Still, the super soldier is silent. “Rogers?”

“I thought they were broken up?” That dick, I can't believe he went there.

“I cannot believe you went there. Even if Tony and Potts are no longer a couple, the two still have a decade long relationship. So yeah if you don't answer I will sick Pepper on you.” Another pause, Rhodey was getting exhausted from all the idiotic pauses. In fact, he was starting to think that repulsor beams up the ass was too good for America’s golden boy.

“I left him in a Serbian military base after he tried to kill Bucky and me.”


“ It's not like that.”

“Not like what, Rogers? You just informed me you left my little brother injured in a Hydra base because he disagreed with you.”
“It wasn't like that. Tony attacked Bucky. The fight had nothing to do with the Accords.”

“Right. Sure you abandoning him had nothing to do with your inability to act like an adult, as a leader and compromise.”

“I was taking a stand, Rhodes! They would have used us like weapons. They had an agenda—”

“Used us? Against who? The UN is a conglomerate of nations, a judicial institution who makes decisions through votes. So what Poland agrees to invade Poland? Do you know how ignorant you sound? If one member made a decision you didn't agree with you could speak your issues to the council. Take vote. And that is if we're ignoring the fact the UN does not have the power to declare war since the institution is not a country.”

“You don't know that. Their agenda—”

“Their agenda! Seriously! The UN spends most of its resources on responding to natural disasters and prosecuting human rights violations. That’s their agenda and the corrupt ones just steal aid money. Rogers, they are not SHIELD the biggest difference being SHIELD was military, not judicial. God this is stupid. Just give me the quadrants for the base.”

“What about Ross?” Rhodey sighs. He is just weary of this entire conversation.

“Ross is simply the US representative to the UN and has no real influence. Tony already set the motions in place to deal with Ross, and I hear Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon looked forward to working with the Avengers. He is a big fan of the Black Widow.” Another pause, maybe his brain is overheating, and it needs the time to cool down.

“Security-General?”

“Yeah, my new boss technically since two people hardly make a team. The guy who handles the troops once the representatives reach an agreement. Their response time is not bad too. During Hurricane Katrina, the UN troops were more useful than the US.” Still no response. “Tony used to tell me stories of how you believed in humanity when no else would. I gotta say, Rogers, I have yet to see any evidence to support his claims.” Again with goddamn pauses. Rhodes tightened his grip on the phone counting to ten in his head. “Rogers. I need the fucking quadrants for the base.”

“Howard. Howard told him about me?” The sound shakes a little, and the last part was spoken with a croak. Rhodey once more waited, but the other soldier kept silent. God he just wanted Tones back safe and being an adorable little shit.

“No Rogers. Howard spoke of Captain America; it was Aunt Pegs who divulged the secret behind the great Steve Rogers.”

“Pegs?” Now it was Rhodes turn to snort. Stupid asshole, stupid, narrow-minded asshole.

“Yeah. Well, I always called her, Aunt Carter because she scared the shit out of me.” Again nothing but silence on the other side. Well bringing up Aunt Carter was probably a low blow. “Seriously Rogers. I am sorry for your loss. I really am, but Tony has been gone too long. All I want is to find my little brother.”

“I'll find Tony, Rhodes. Don't worry.” The line went dead before Rhodes could register what the fuck just happened.

“FRIDAY? What just happened?”
“Trashy technology?”

“You want to try that again baby girl?”

“Captain Rogers is an asshole?”

The lone human laughs, “Yeah that’s true, but I was hoping for something more like that asshole’s location.” Rhodes rubs his hands along his face and neck staring up at the ceiling waiting for the AI.

“Wakanda. Most likely.” Rhodes moves his hand to brow rubbing a little line into his head. Wakanda that made some sense considering one moment their new King was very vocal about a certain bionic assassin and now nothing. Not even a peep or maybe a meow would be more appropriate.

“What's the percentage?” The soldier waited, he was confident that Team Ego resides in Wakanda, but one should always take pause when dealing with a foreign power.

“78.46 %. Those are some pretty good odds if I say so myself War Machine.”

“War Machine?” He smiles and god he's always amazed how his Tones has so much heart he can spare some for his tech babies.

“Well you are suiting up, aren't you? This is no time to be foostering.”

“No. I am not storming into Wakanda.” The soldier holds eye contact with a nearby camera for a moment. FRIDAY may be smart, but she is still young. “But it doesn't hurt to ring the future king, now does it?”

“One kitty king coming right up.” She is a Stark alright just as much as her brother was. Soon an image popped up of a handsome frowning man trying to remain passive. “You hacked me.”

“No FRIDAY hacked you. I'm just standing here looking pretty your highness.”

“Well, Redwing helped.”

“I thought the probability was 78, FRIDAY?”

“Well, when I poked my nose in, Redwing chirp up. So now the probability is 99.99 percent.” The king raises a brow and the soldier shrugs, kids what are you going to do?

“What can I do for you...”

“Rhodes is fine your highness.”

“Then Mr. Rhodes, why have you called?” Rhodes snorts, again with the passive face but if the years with Tony Stark taught him anything, it was always look into a person’s eyes cause that is where the truth lies. Rhodey looked, seeing confusion and guilt in the young king. Interesting.

“I want to talk to Captain Rogers, please.” Mom always said never forget common decency.

“He is not here.” The king’s eyes reflect even more guilt. Intriguing.

“With all due respect your highness, Redwing is there which means Wilson is there. And Falcon is never too far away from the Captain.” Rhodes straightens his back taking a more militant stance and staring into the other man’s eyes.
The other man huffed. He actually huffed. God, that was annoying. No wonder Tony was always rolling his eyes. “As I was saying.” The man pauses and now Rhodey was starting to miss Tony’s incessant babbling. Along with Tony. God, he could feel that merciless sun. Something in Rhodey’s own eyes makes the king’s form soften. “I am sheltering the Captain’s team however the Captain himself left suddenly a couple of minutes ago. How may I help you?”

A series of creative expletives leave Rhodes’ mouth. That fucking white boy ran off without telling him a damn thing. His only lead gone off who knows where without explaining anything. But maybe he had another lead in the form of the stalker prince. “Tony is missing. Last reported sighting was by FRIDAY, who confirms that Tony left the Raft to help the Captain. However, his final location is unknown because he arrived in the suit. A suit that's missing and damage enough that FRIDAY lost the connection with it.” The other man’s hands are starting to twitch as well as his eyes. He's got a good mask, but Tones’ seemed to have the ability to lock his emotions away. “Just tell me? He is my brother, please.” Silence goddamn silence. He hated the quiet; it always meant something was wrong.

“Vengeance was sought, not by me but by Stark, and there was a fight.” T’challa takes a deep breath and another twitch of the finger. Rhodes widens his stance and crosses his arms trying to keep calm. He might also be trying to intimidate the other man, but that's his business. “We abandoned an injured Stark at the Hydra base. I am sorry. I thought he would be okay. I-”

“The one who was responsible for having Tony’s back was Rogers.” And me, remains unsaid. “Further, Rogers already informed me about leaving my brother behind. Leaving a man behind. But the fight is new.” Although he suspected some altercation just not from the golden boy himself.

“I am sorry, but I felt that Barnes was in need of aid especially after what I did to him.”

“I understand. I do. Just ask them to stop by the compound when Rogers returns. All of them. Alright?”

“Of course. I will do whatever I can to help find Mr. Stark.” Some of the guilt is gone from his eyes which are good Rhodely meant what he said, every ounce of the blame belonged at Rogers’ door. “Goodbye, Mr. Rhodes.” The video call ends, and Rhodely heaves a heavy sigh.

“FRIDAY?”

“Yeah, Uncle Boss?” Really?

“It's time to call Pepper.”

“Yes! She'll eat that Gobshite ass alive.” She giggles, of course, Tony made sure his tech babies could giggle. The world he lives in.

“Gobshite? Seriously?”

“Ma wanted me to be Irish. I'm going to be Irish.”

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“Are you sure those dimwits are going to show up?” The woman taps her fancy heels against the wooden floor. She stops then remembering her hands are full, begins the almost methodical tapping again.

“Pepper, the man, is going to show.” Pepper, the name Tony gave her cause she never liked Virginia, pursed her lips. She always hated when his military persona stood out.

“What if he doesn't?” Still, she continued to tap her heels thinking about how Tony would always
tell her it reminded him of war drums. Back before Ironman and even now, she wondered if it was supposed to be a compliment. Especially after the birth of Ironman. Not after the birth of a hero, he was always a hero after all, but after the suits. The damn suits of his. A dream come true except for one issue, the man out of time. “I am serious Rhodes. What is the plan if he doesn’t show?”

The former colonel has a wide stance and his eyes trained on the door. Pepper often thought that was his version of a nervous habit. “He will show. He owes us that much.” She squeezes the documents against her chest breathing deep and not looking forward to this meeting one iota.

“Team Ego has arrived, even the cool looking bionic one.” The soldier and the CEO shared a smile that agreed that FRIDAY’s reaction was inherited from her creator. “Although he appears to be missing the arm. I wanted to scan it.”

Pepper shifts, raising an eyebrow and even smirking when Rhodey avoided her eye. “Team Ego?” The smirk widens when the man just shrugged. “Really?”

“Personally I think the name fits. Sums up their entire argument and collective personalities.” He glances her way and smiles; it’s lopsided with a bit of mischief. The same way Tony smiled when he was genuinely happy. It still hurts to look at even if the smile is on Rhodey’s face.

“Sure. Rhodes, sure.” She chuckles but stops when a red blur comes into the room beeping only to land on Rhodey’s head. “Redwing, welcome home. I’m sorry but... I’m sorry, but Tony isn’t here right now.” A small beep is the only response.

“I am sorry Ma’am, he just up and jumped from my back.” The first to arrive was Falcon, not the Captain, and she breathes. She looks at the man standing on the other side of the table; his head tilted in confusion and awe. Pepper shakes her head understanding his emotions completely.

“It is quite alright, Falcon. Starks tend to focus on one thing while becoming oblivious to the rest of the world. You get use to it.” She smiles brushing a loose hair behind her ear. Remember to look soft and men will always underestimate you. Except for Tony, a small voice whispered.

The man straightens pulling his shirt down and giving a nod to Rhodey. Rhodes gives a nod back. Military men, God, please save her from bullheaded military men. “What do you mean about Stark?”

Pepper frowns and portrays confusion before speaking. “Redwing Stark, of course? Or perhaps you mean FRIDAY Stark? It’s hard to keep track Tony loves putting a learning AI into everything. The microwave probably has one too.” Wilson blinks at that and really stares at Redwing. Maybe there is hope for the man yet?

The next to arrive is, again, not the Captain but the Black Widow. She glides into the room avoiding eye contact even with the other hero. Pepper stares at her, smiling softly and thinking about her once jealousy of Natasha’s crimson hair. Rhodey is probably thinking about something else when he looks at her. “Why is there a spider in the room Pep?” His eyes are focused on Romanoff even Wilson keeps glancing her way.

“I invited her.” Rhodes frown deepens, but his sight does not waver. “We’re friends, of a sort. And she is better equipped to find Tony.” His eyes narrow in a way she has only ever seen on the man when it comes to Tony, the man has always been slow to forgive when it came to his little brother but then again so has she. “Natasha I am glad you came.”

“Of course Pepper. I said I would.” The assassin appears confident and relaxed. But her eyebrows keep twitching. Pepper would smile like a shark if it wouldn’t give her play up. Although the Spider probably suspects some form of hell is coming.
Rhodey finally looks at her and does give a sharp smile; the man always did have a terrible poker face. Finally, the star of the show arrives boldly entering the room but still pulling off the shy look. Any lawyer would pay a fortune for that skill. “Ma’am, Rhodes called us here. I am—” Rogers glances down at his shoes. Is it guilt or something more? “I am sorry to hear that Tony is missing.” Of course, no mention of his responsibility in the whole mess.

Soon to follow their leader is the rest of the rag tag band of superheroes with some of them falling in line behind the Captain. The Witch on his right and the Soldier on his left. Mr. Scott Lang scurries to stand behind Falcon, and only one puts forth a hand of friendship although the gesture is targeted more at Rhodes then herself. Poor Vision is still stuck in pinning puppy land. “Hey Sidekick Machine, you got a bird on your head.”

Jim grins, “Yeah well that's hardly new. I got them in my belfry too. Happy to see you again, Arrow junkie.” It's moments like this that Pepper really questions the military and their apparent necessity to remove all sense of maturity with a straw.

“Can we get started?” The Witch mutters. The young girl is holding her arms to her chest and shifting from one foot to another. Any other person and Pepper would be sympathetic, but then again she wasn't.

“Yes. I agree. Let's begin.” Pepper steps towards the table placing a folder in front of each former Avenger. “First I would like to give congratulations to Clint Barton. It's a girl.” Everyone blinks even Rhodes, well she does enjoy a good surprise. “Second is that everyone has been pardoned. Well for all intents and purposes.” Rogers tries to speak, but Potts cuts him off. “Third James Barnes is a free man who gets himself a new arm.” Now everyone is back to the blinking while Pepper waves a hand towards the briefcase carried by Rhodes. She finishes with a smile that's both sweet and innocent.

Surprisingly, the first to speak is not the Captain but instead the Sergeant. His eyes look a little wild, and he keeps scanning the room for something. “I killed his mother. He wanted revenge. I am so sorry.” That wasn't what anyone had expected, and every eye in the room is open wide except two, a set of blue and a set of green. The assassin in question is avoiding all eye contact and standing stone still.

“Huh. What about Howard?” Rhodes waits but the other man do an awkward shoulder shake. Must be hard to shrug with only one arm.

“No. Only the women.”

“Bucky?!” He ignores the blond super-soldier.

“Okay. You still want the arm?” Rhodey raises the briefcase and an eyebrow towards the other soldier.

“What? That’s it?” Barnes exclaimed.

“What the fuck? I have a kid, and Stark tried to do what? And why the fuck is Cap being so quiet? Just what the fuck?” Barton shrieks, Pepper sighs, and that useless Rhodes shrugs. He was never any help.

“Well since I did mention the adoption first. . . But if Mr. Barnes would like to go first we're all ears.” The soldier just stares and shakes his head no. “Mr. Stark was questioned several times regarding the legitimacy of Miss Maximoff’s stay in America especially considering her untrained powers. Many were even considering detaining Miss Maximoff as a terrorist. The solution was for Barton to adopt Miss Maximoff although the records show you adopted both twins about 16 years
“Why would Tony do that? And what do mean pardoned?” Is what he asks but his eyes keep switching between Barnes and Rhodes.

Rhodey’s response is to set the case down upon the table and open it revealing a medicine gun as well as a silver arm. “Two years ago Tones got word that the noble Bucky Barnes, best friend to Captain America was alive albeit missing an arm and his memories. The first thing he did was research prosthetics and create a program to find him. All he needed to proceed was Cap’s go ahead. Of course, the great Captain never asked, hell the man didn't even ask if Tones had any fallout from the SHIELD fiasco. Of course, he was hurt, but he moved onto the next problem to solve, the next person to help. But that was Tones, always just trying to help.” Here the Witch snorts. An ungrateful brat but a brat all the same. It takes Pepper no effort to stare her down quickly. “So take the armed soldier or don’t. But you didn't kill Tony’s mother; she died of cancer. Maria Stark was a good person who worked tirelessly to help the world, but personally, I think a person parent is the one who raised the kid not just pay the bills. The woman didn't even show up for Dum-E’s grand presentation. Well, that and you are hardly accountable for your actions under Hydra’s control. In fact, Tony probably wasn't really focused on you at all because if he were you would be dead. Not just missing an arm.”

“Don't take the arm Buck,” Barnes gives a little flinch. “You don't know what Stark did to it.” Now it's Pepper’s turn to snort but instead of confronting the Golden Boy she must first deal with the Witch.

“Miss Maximoff, do you understand what Stark Industries did before Tony decided to change tracks?”

The younger woman sneers before answering. “It is a company of death nothing more.” Pepper rolls her eyes, what is it with superheroes and the dramatics?

“Your ignorance is astounding. Truly. And you're wrong. Stark Industries was a company that sold technology to the American government. Stane was the weapons dealer, but the company itself was focused on saving the lives of American soldiers. Further, your grudge against Stark is just as misinformed.”

“Where do you get off?” Maximoff bellowed, but the CEO stops her with a single raised finger.

“When your parents died, Tony had just gained control of the company. This tells us two things. First Stane, the CFO at the time, had been illegally selling weapons for decades by the time he was discovered. Second, the bomb that killed your parents was made by Howard Stark. Your anger, as misplaced as is, is directed at the wrong Stark. I'm sure sitting on that hypocritical high horse of yours makes it difficult to get oxygen to that brain of yours. You should understand now, since I spelled it out for you, that villainizing Tony will not bring justice for your parents. But if being a hypocritical ass is your thing then go right ahead.”

“Now that was uncalled for Ma’am,” Rogers stressed each word, his eyes wide and honest. The whole act made Pepper sick truthfully she would have named the other heroes Team Hypocritic since she suspects some ego is required to be a hero. But that's hardly what's important now.

The CEO ignores the Soldier to continue what she came for, to impart Tony's last attempts at redemption before he disappeared. “Now for your legal status, the whole thing is a bit complicated but please bear with me.” Rogers’ mouth is still open gaping like a fish, in a few moments, he regained his wits.
“Ma’am. I don’t like bullies, and your actions are treading the line.” He squares his shoulders gearing himself for a fight. Seriously?

“Poor dear. It must be so hard to hate yourself, but I am not a therapist thus I don't care.” Pepper says sweetly, but the sharp tone is still clear.

The good Captain stands shocked by her words. “I am not a bully.” He announces with certainty as if it is a law, an irrefutable truth. Something that would never happen as if he is incapable of such an act. Such a hypocritical and obtuse man.

“Sure Rogers. None of your passive aggressive jabs at Tony's past or ability to instill in others distrust of him based on nothing. Certainly not, when you use your size to make him concede to your argument or use your specific brand of morality to shame into compliance. Who would call you a bully? Definitely not, all the people whose homes you've destroyed especially outside of the US. After all, third world countries love it when a moralistic white man with no knowledge of the natives comes in proclaiming salvation as long as they believe his word is law.” Rhodey is sniggering of to the side while Pepper rolls her eyes. White men, she eats them for breakfast.

“He isn't a bully Potts.” The one who came to Captain America’s rescue surprisingly is not Barnes who remains as static as ever, but Wilson.

“Yeah, he kinda is.” Wilson shifts his sight to Rhodey, who just shrugged again. Wilson, for some reason, has no rebuttal for that statement.

“Anyway. Let's get the legal nitty-gritty out of the way so we may focus on what is important. Finding Tony for God's sake.” The last part is said forcefully along with a hard look in each Avengers’ eyes. “The heart of the matter is that you were all wrongfully imprisoned by Ross.” That fact gets a thoroughly strong reaction from the group. But Pepper holds a hand up to stall any reply. “Essentially the only one who was any legal trouble was Barnes. A lawyer named Jennifer Walters showed that Mr. Barnes could not be held accountable for his actions since he was a Hydra POW and a victim of inhuman experiments. The Accords themselves would not become law until signed and enacted the following year at the earliest. Finally, due to Tony's loyalty to Dr. Banner, he was investigating the former Secretary of State.” This for some unknown reason had Rogers narrowing his eyes at Potts. “This investigation revealed that Ross sabotage Dr. Banner’s experiment, turning him into the Hulk and his ties to AIM to create more super soldiers for the American military.” There is a sort of awe in their eyes, but Tony was the one who did most of the work.

“So we are all free?” Barton at last stutters and the group even appears hopeful except for the Captain.

“I'm not signing the Accords.” He stands firm, a soldier to the core, and gone is the shy boy that originally walked in. How much of Steve Rogers is the Brooklyn boy? How much the hardened soldier?

“Unlike you Captain, I nor the UN infringed on another human's right. So no you do not have to sign and truthfully I don't care if you do.’”

“Bucky is not taking the arm either.” He says it so confidently and Barnes once more flinched. Pepper lets herself frown just a bit at the two super soldiers’ interactions with each other.

“Yeah! You can't trust a Stark!” Mr. Lang exclaimed causing the entire room to focus on him. ‘The Ant-Man.’ The whole situation was getting out of hand.

Rhodes has his own stern scowl trained at the other superheroes. “Enough! The man is entitled to his
own goddamn choice! In this case to decide whether to take the arm or not.” The last word is punctuated with a palm slapped against the table.

Before Rogers could once more declare his opinion, Barnes spoke up. “I'll take the arm.” And Rhodes just beams at that.

“Can we please focus on Tony now and you misfits finding him?”

And once more Barnes speaks up before Rogers and the others. His entire form radiating more sincerity than anyone Pepper has ever met including the supposed Boy Scout Rogers. “I swear we will find Tony Stark. I owe him that much.”

“Bucky you can't just-”

“I can and I will.” Barnes words falter even before they fully leave the man’s mouth.

“Okay, Bucky. Okay. Will find Tony.” She really hates when he calls him by name, but it's better than Rogers calling him Stark, she supposed.
Call For A Good Time

Chapter Summary

Surprise for Coulson and FitzSimmons.

Chapter Notes

I am sorry it is late. I'll try to get the next chapter up soon.

“Hydraulic.”

“Camshaft.”

“Thermodynamic.”

“Combustion.”

“Asset! Do you comprehend the mission?” The Asset snorts and gets a back handed slap for his trouble. It barely feels the sting before the sensation edges away. “Asset!” This handler is loud in all the wrong ways.

“Sir. The man is going to stand there until you give some form of compliance.” The Asset rolls his eyes and the current handler fumes, short-sighted moron that he is.

“Kill the target. Ensure no one sees my face and those that find the body understand the power of Hydra.” It can never keep the monotone voice for long. Thus the last parts come out more like a rhythmic verse than robotic. But any genius worth their salt would give a human voice to their creations except apparently dumb fanatical octopi.

The handler nods easily satisfied and completely complacent. “Good. Good.” He hands over the case file and the Asset again roll its eyes this time. It would like to be more creative, but in most cases, a good eye roll is the only response most fitting for Hydra’s actions. The man turns his back on the Asset, a stupid act of trust is a luxury that more often than not will make someone dead. Dead. Dead. Dead.
The mission itself is far more attractive. “This is perfect. Don't you agree, JARVIS?”

“Agreed. I believe his designation is Agent, Sir.”

The former handler is confused, how sad that he will never realize until it's too late that he is out of a job. “Sorry, but previously designated handlers are a higher priority.”

“What?!” The dead thing gurgles blood, but the Asset is captivated more by the blood seeping from his chest. Ultimately, the man drowns in his blood. There is something fearsome about drowning in blood.

“JARVIS we're heading to Nowhere, Canada. Home to spies, a secret base, and alien experiments.”

“I shall try to contain my excitement as nothing beats watching Sir take fire or unnecessary risks. Truly fun times.”

The Asset bounced on the balls of his bare feet; shoes were overrated, after all, grinning sharp but pleased. “Now Jay, don't be like that, it will be fun. Terrible danger is all the rage, Buddy.”

“Of course, Sir. What about our former superior?”

The genius wiggles his hand side to side. The dead were dead and should be forgotten quickly lest their ghost decided to hunt it. “Eh. Who cares? I don't. You don't. Madam won't.” It stills. It's breath picking up the pace but just as quickly calming down. Two fingers tap rhythmically at its chest. “She probably won't care.” The Asset starts walking around, bored by the walls and the dead body. Dead bodies were so annoying and stupid. Yes, inherently stupid.

“Sir?”

“Fine, JARVIS. Fine. Let's head to Canada, yes? Yes indeed. To the Batmobile! Or a stolen jet. But it's the same thing. I'll be owned by the good guys again! Excellent?”

“Excellent indeed, Sir.”

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The day had been long, and his hand wouldn't stop throbbing. It was completely understandable that a man might hallucinate a child using his office chair as a merry go round. He felt the gun on his
chest but restrained himself. Guns could make things dangerous quickly if the other weren't hostile. “How did you get inside?” The child stopped the chair but continued to swing his legs. For all those dark eyes attempts at innocence, there was a depth of intelligence that should not be underestimated. Phil sighed internally, even as he smiled.

“Come now Director Agent, introductions before the business is manners 101. Every master spy should know that.” The child, or rather the young man, clicked his tongue. Deja Vu like the Matrix scene with the cat including the sense of danger. The young man grins and even tilts his head. “You flinched,” the youth sings.

Phil takes a breath to analyze the situation. No firearms but a scary amount of knives. “Why so many knives?” The kid snorts and Coulson just shrugs, he thought it was a good ice breaker.

“I like sharp things.”

“Guns not your thing, then?” Phil places his hands in front of him smoothing his tie and shirt. The child frowns just a bit before plastering another smile on his face. Phil shrugged again. “I like guns. They're useful tools but not necessarily a tool I'd use in every situation.”

“What about the Asset?” The smirk remains in place but the air still feels colder. A sense of increasing danger is in the air; May was going to kill him, but Phil was more concerned with the feeling he has met the youth before. The eyes, the smirk, and the watchfulness he knows he's seen before.

“The Asset?” Does he mean Barnes? However, the Asset, Phil supposed, waved a hand toward himself.

“A masterpiece creation that a legacy could be built upon.” He bows his head and gives a grand flourish with his hands.

“I don't know. What are you implying, Asset?” The Director pauses with the term asset nasty on his tongue. The boy is going to need an actual name like Charles; Charles is an acceptable name. Or Alexzander, Phil was always fond of that name which fits the whole warrior vibe too.

His eyes narrow shifting up and down Coulson’s form search for something, maybe. “You are the new handler for the Asset or rather a former handler who is a higher authority than the dead one who wanted you made into an example of Octopi power. Hydra’s not fond of you, but JARVIS seems to think you're swell.” Coulson blinks then blink again. Hydra he expected, hell he’d use himself as bait if he thought May would let him get away with it. But the mention of JARVIS. JARVIS, a name he hasn’t heard in awhile and only one man spoke the name with such love. A man who's been missing for three years now.

He's got to do this right, proceed with caution and all. “Swell? Not a word most people your age use.” Each step a carefully move to ensure checkmate.
The younger man blinks slowly before opening wide just to stare at Phil. The only description he thinks that fits are deer stuck in the headlights. “I don’t know how old I am? Personal memories will only impede the mission.” Well shit. What is the Director suppose to do with that? Quit? He wouldn’t survive retirement and dying from boredom is at the bottom of his list. “I think I remember vinyl records, maybe.”

The kid looks unsure and again what is the agent supposed to say to that? “Hydra sucks.” The youth expression is bewildered before he erupts into maniacal laughter. The laughing slows a bit, peering at Phil whose response is a simple shrug, only to start up again.

“Yeah, that sums it up but doesn't encompass their obsession with parallel lines.”

“Parallel lines? What parallel?” Right, the salute. That is one way of putting it he supposed. Coulson was losing the plot. A name, an actual name from the kid, might help. “Is there something I can call you besides Asset?” A real name would go a long way for the agent to handle the situation, although a part of him has one name in particular in mind. A dead man’s name.

“You don't like Asset as my designation?” The air in the room shifted, but the young man’s hands remained weapons free. No weapons but two fingers tapped his chest another familiar trait. Reasonable explanations including strange ghost child, maybe a clone, or the most likely an android made in Stark’s image. Wait. “What did you say?”

“Stark. You could use Stark as my designation since I'm assuming you already have a mechanic. Although Hydra rarely lets me build anything, mostly it is 'fix this and improved that'. And all the goons' ideas were pathetic nothing was exciting or fun. No intriguing idea to get my brain pumping. Nothing, nada, nope al la scoop. Just a travesty.” Halfway through the rant, the kid’s arms danced along with his words, swinging up the down. Entertaining as the spastic movements were, it was the name Stark that held Phil’s interest.

He changes his focus back to the assassin, whose rant had still not slowed down. “Why the name Stark?”

“Isn't obviously?” The agent shrugged, the action working out so far to not escalate the situation. ‘Stark’ just eyed him which unsettled Phil. Moments ticked by the kid remained stock-still when previously ever muscle appeared to react with excessive energy. “It's creator was Howard Stark.” It's creator? God did Hydra fuck him over, but the chances of him being the lost Stark went up. Great, May was going to love this.

“Coulson got a moment?” Speaking of May. Stark trained his focus onto the door but made no move for a weapon. “Phil?” How to handle this situation? Make a run for it would probably result in absolute chaos, Phil tilts his head, and the kid mirrors the action and would be the most fun. He sighs
knowing there really wasn't anyway to escape this plight. “Phil I am coming in.” Not even a question. The door bursts open with Agent May in fighting stance instantly locating the issue, Stark. Now there would be weapons except…

“Cool! Mulan is real!” Not what Coulson predicted but definitely preferable to a massive ninja war. “Do something only Mulan could pull off.” At least the runaway Hydra Asset is moving again even if it is bouncing on Phil’s very expensive back support chair. Taking one for the team, again. May, on the other hand, is not pleased or rather reaching critical levels of anger. You can almost see the emotion on her face and everything.

“Phil?” who is now changing his name to Deadman. “Why is there an assassin in your office?” Or more correctly, why didn't he call her when he found said assassin?

“I am not an assassin.” This should be entertaining, if not painful. May cocked her eyebrow at least no one has been maimed yet. “The Phil dude is my new handler.” Stark even points, and now she's focused on the Director, who will name Sky as his successor.

“Coulson?”

“What! I'm telling the truth.” And maybe he is? The child hasn't pulled a single weapon or made any threats.

“Yeah, he's telling the truth.” Stark beams, actually beams at Phil. God Phil just wants to curl in his bed and watch the old Captain America cartoon.

“Prove it. Disarm.” He really should look into increasing May’s word allowance to include maybe a, please.

“It's fine JARVIS. Nothing bad is going to happen.” Phil hopes the kid has an earpiece. But that doesn't seem likely. What Stark does have is an impressive amount of daggers and knives. May also seems impressed. “Ok. Should I roll away from the pile.”

May’s mouth gives a tiny upward twitch. Phil wants to laugh, if he doesn't adopt the little ninja, May will probably take him. “Leaving the chair isn't an option?” Phil queries.

For one tense moment, the small killer frowns projecting a somber tone. “My butt is welded to the chair for my soul can only find true joy in spinning till I puke.” May’s twitch threatens to break into a small smile, and Coulson just chuckles.

“Just roll your butt over.” She's gruff, but the smile is persistent. The kids move toward the door accompanied by a whooshing sound effect from his mouth. May acknowledges that Stark means no harm but what to do now.
“Stark?” He turns toward Phil instantly waiting for orders. May signs a question the name Stark has a lot of weight after all. Phil signs 'to wait' back. “Do you know who Tony Stark is?”

All emotions drain from the youth’s face and his eyes grow almost icy. May is immediately on guard but fortunately waiting for the boy’s response. “A failed product? Why?” May and Phil exchange a look. The other agent is beginning to grasp the impossible situation.

“Do you know what happened to him?”

“It.”

“Excuse me?”

“It is a product made by Howard Stark and isn't human thus no gender pronoun. It.”

“Ah. Do you know what happened to it?” Phil’s not sure what he expects the child to say. Certainly not to admit to being the missing genius but there is a similarity between the two that Coulson cannot just ignore. Dealing with the impossible is his job after all.

“It was reforged. Again.” Natasha used to talk about a room where children were forged into weapons or died. Forged with pain and blood. And her eyes held the same sort of coldness that exists in the eyes of the child who once upon a time might have been Tony Stark. But Phil knows when he is out of his depth, and it's time to call an expert.

“Agent May would you take are new charge around the facility and maybe ask how he breached are security.” She's not happy about the situation, but they both know she won’t be happy unless the kid is under her watchful eye. When May leaves with Stark, but still firmly fixed to Phil's office chair, Coulson breathes a heavy sigh. There was no way to handle the situation without a direct call which would piss off two or more dangerous individuals, but James Rhodes needed to be contacted. He could feel an ache snaking around his head and settling between the eyes. He prefers death by swallowing needles over calling the Avengers. Oh well.

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“Are you hive mind creatures?” Mulan was still watching but had yet to say anything. Just following behind as It went exploring through the base. A dull base. It was a spy base with spies. Where were the hidden passages and ordinary objects that could do unexpected things. There was only one flying car and sneaking in was stupidly easy. There wasn't even an AI. AI should be everywhere.

“Not all humans have your love for robotics, Sir.”
“Everyone should love robots. They are the future. The smart future.” The two hive creatures look confused, the male just blinking in the cutest way while the female looks torn between the Asset and the science. It would choose the science.

“We are not hive creatures.”

“Yes exactly. Although we created search bots that worked similarly to a hive mind but-”

“-it was more a communication network since an actual hive mind is rather difficult-”

“Exactly. There are many perspectives and factors at play when communication works just as well.”

“True,” both nodded and said. Adorable and the voices were soothing too. Even Mulan was emitting some happy vibes.

“Okay, sure. But that is what a hive man would say to throw off suspicion of being a Hive Mind.”

The two snort and shake their heads at the same time, but the female is the one that speaks. “Instead of continuing to calls us, Hive creatures in your head. How did she? Why don’t you just refer to us by our names. It nodded, names if it must. “I am Jemma Simmons, and this is Leo Fitz.” The male, Fitz, smiles and waves. FitzSimmons it is. Mulan snorts probably sensing the decision in the Asset’s mind; apparently, it wasn't the first to conclude hive mind creatures. Right hive minds.

“Creating a Hive mind isn't that complicated. It's just a giant communication network with a Queen. I made one with Roombas.” FitzSimmons blinks and Mulan is staring what did he- No! It. It said I. It made a mistake. Stupid, so stupid. It wasn't human. It wasn't human. It didn't want to be human. Too much blood, too much pain. Someone touches his shoulder, and the FitzSimmons is scared. It smiles, it doesn't want to be abandoned. “Sorry.”

“Are you okay?”

“You look pale.” The two agents are concerned. Even Mulan who grabbed his shoulder looks worried. Fuck up, always fucking up.

“Sir?”

“It is functional. Sorry.” Smile. Emotions are useless, but smiles were useful weapons. Mulan nods and FitzSimmons exchanged a look.
“Would you like to see the search bots? We named them after Snow White dwarves.”

“If it can?” The Asset glances towards the agent sent to watch him. Is it required to follow FitzSimmons orders? She nods again. The Asset grins because bots!
Together Again Singing, "This will be the day that I die."

Chapter Summary

Cold butts, heart to hearts, and flirty FRIDAY.

Chapter Notes

The title is taken from 'American Pie', I think that's the name. Rhodey and Tony meet at last and God this chapter was too awkward to write. Tony's POV is always so much easier to write than any of the other characters. But next chapter is going to be Barnes POV, probably.

Two pissed off spies, two confused soldiers, and the American Flag walk into a bar. Rhodes was not sure where the joke was going, but he planned to be laughing at the punch line. A punch line that apparently includes a zombie Coulson with a Stark. And definitely not that billion and three “you shouldn't get your hopes up Rhodey.” If Captain ‘just Steve Rogers’ could get his family back from the dead, then Rhodey should get Tony back. No one was harder to kill than his little brother. Hell, even Coulson was running around being Zombie Director. If anyone should get his hopes up, it was Rhodes.

“Boss is alive. Right?” FRIDAY’s voice is dripping with faith the same as JARVIS was those long years ago.

“Yeah Fry, he is definitely alive. No doubt.” The AI hums in his ear both of them a little worried. Coulson only said he found a Stark since the conversation got hijacked by the assassin twins. The only possibility was Tony, of course; it's not like there were Tony’s from the future or different dimensions running around. And Howard was dead. There was the possibility of bastard Starks running about, but such a possibility was rather small.

“Welcome to the Secret Spy SHIELD base which doesn't seem so secret with all the breaches. But you Avengers are cool although I never thought I be stared down by both Agent Barton and Agent Romanoff.”

“Former.” The birdbrain speaks which Rhodey takes as a good sign. Sort of.

The female agent, however, continues smiling even nodding. “Right, former agents, my apologies. I'm Agent Daisy Smith by the way.” Romanoff turns, glaring at the girl who goes right on smiling and even waves, the kid got some iron will. Rhodes nods his approval.

“Where is the acting Director? The assassin twins need an explanation, and I need my brother.” She turns her gaze to the three soldiers still standing near the quinjet. Sam appears apprehensive and repeatedly keeps sneaking glances at Rogers and Barnes while both soldiers seem a little too quiet. Agent Smith shifts focus back to Rhodes raising a brow, but the dark skin man just shrugs. Not his problem, at least not at the moment.
“Coulson is having trouble dealing with some drunk bots going a tad crazy.” A great sign.

“I found him Uncle Boss, but he doesn’t appear to match my files.”

“Lead the way Baby Girl.”

“Go straight and turn left.” The baby agent tries to stop him, but Rhodey pushes past her leaving the others to follow. Three years without the random nicknames that aren’t so random, without the constantly changing facial expressions or his random arguments with everything. Three years without his brother to make life warm and living with a bunch of ungrateful brats. “Turn right, and it’s the second on the right.” Three years of false leads, blowing up Hydra, and no sightings, all for the moment when those expressive brown eyes would once more assess him.

Rhodey just grins wide, tackling the genius to the floor and hugging him tight. “Tones!”

“What the fuck is a Tones?” Rhodes just holds tighter to Tony, the youth is definitely Tony, well the post-college edition.

“You are a Tones?” He couldn’t see the genius’ face, but the confusion was palatable. No memory was one of the expected outcome predicted by FRIDAY. One of many. Rhodes sits up to settle near the brunette and making eye contact with a smile. The kid was cradling a small robot to his chest searching for something on Rhodes’ face.

“Tones is not one of my designations. Are you my new handler?”

“Mr. Rhodes, what are you doing? It is dangerous. I told you to wait.”

Rhodey grins sharpen but refuse to lift his gaze from Tony. “We both know I was going to ignore your advice especially since the ninja twins were going to be making a visit.” He hears a sigh, but his sight remains firmly on Tony whose tilting his head in confusion.

“Yeah Coulson. Nat and I were already heading down; it was no trouble to give War Machine a ride.” Hawkeye states rather carelessly, but his stiff body gives him away. Even Black Widow’s fury is evident from her “relaxed” position by the door.

Rhodes snorts, lies fall from their tongues easily, but when someone lies to them, then it is crossing the line. “Lies are a spies game what’cha expect from someone in his line of work.” Surprisingly the words were spoken by Winter Soldier rather than Rhodey. Rogers nods, apparently expecting the Soldier’s response but the former agents are still not appeased.

“You didn’t have clearance and-”

“Bullshit! I was level 7, Coulson just like Agent May. For fuck sake, you could have said something when SHIELD fell!” Barton is pulling at his hair while Romanoff turns away. Coulson tries to reach for Clint, but the man pulls away tugging more forcefully on his hair. “I believed I had your blood on my hands. You were dead because of me then Hydra was SHIELD. Fuck! I have no idea how much innocent blood is on my hands. I gave my word to Natasha that it would be different. I-” The man is gasping for breath, but all of Rhodes concern is for the genius whose shaking while his eyes glare at his hands. “We needed you! And you replaced us! Abandoned us!” Tony trembling increased and Rhodey scoops him into a hug rocking him like he used to at college after a nightmare. Hawkeye finally stops, turning on his heel out of the room with the Spider trailing behind. She pauses just for a moment to exchange a look with Coulson. Nothing is said, and the assassin’s eyes only hardened. Rhodey doesn't care about the broken agents just his little brother, just Tony.

“Let’s all calm down and talk.” Sam promptly parks himself on the ground opposite of Rhodes.
Coulson shrugs also relaxing onto the floor with Barnes following soon after. Rogers remains standing, always stubborn in all the wrong ways.

“Are you my new handler? It doesn't think the suit wants to keep me.” The room freezes not expecting Tones to speak.
“I can't keep you. I don't own you, but I was hoping to get things sorted before the Avengers arrived.” The genius shifts more comfortably onto Rhodes seemingly without thought, a habit ingrained into the body, causing Rhodey to beam.

Sam frowns before asking, “Sort what?”

“Who he was sent to kill? Hydra did it once with Sergeant Barnes who's to say they won't try again using Stark instead.”

“It told you. Hydra said dead Director Agent. It confirmed, but Agent had a higher authority than the one who gave the kill order. It came here for a new handler before Madam could assign one. It liked being owned by the good guys. It is defective but works hard.” Tony mutters to himself or rather arguing and trying to curl into himself.

Rhodes just rubs Tony’s arm but focuses on Coulson instead. “It?”

“I would also like to know about ‘it’ as well” Falcon comments slowly, his sight trained on the rigid Barnes instead of Tony.

The agent swings his hand toward the once more trembling genius who’d curled himself into a Metroid ball while Rhodes rubbed his back. The freaking out wasn't unusual nor the rapid fire muttering, but Rhodey thought he heard Tony say JARVIS. “The missing Stark requested to be called it because a thing is not human.”

“A thing?” Sam is openly judging Barnes now while the Soldier tries to relax his posture even sending a smile towards Rogers forcibly. Rhodes nods to himself to figure that shit out later.

“Indeed. I assume Hydra had something to do with that but…”

“Something he said about Howard?” Coulson pulls on his suit sleeve gaining a moment before his response. Pepper often pulls a similar trick.

Although Rogers’ gaping maw speaks first, “What about Howard? The man is dead, and even alive wouldn't have anything to do with Hydra.” Righteous frowning is a look that Rhodey has grown to hate, which sucks since it was one of his favorite expressions to use on Tony.

“I not so sure about that.” Rhodes’ very thoughts voiced by Barnes, interesting. Hell Rhodey would start dancing since both super soldiers were wearing matching surprised expressions tho Rogers seemed to be edging toward the betrayed end of the spectrum. Mocking Rogers should be an Olympic sport, even if Pepper would take the gold.

“Barnes has a point, Steve. The whole murder of the Starks happened because Winter was sent to retrieve super soldier serum from the trunk of the car. Not exactly something an entirely innocent man would be dabbling in Steve.” Rogers turns the full force of his disappointment on Sam, who roll his eyes in response. Rhodes snickers, gaining Tony to peer up at him from his balled state.
“The point is gentlemen that Stark is dangerous.”

“Don't care. If Tony's here, then I'm here. If he is going to California, the Tower or the Compound then I will be right there with him. Someone needs to care for Tony, and as his big brother that's my job.” A strange coughing sound descends from the ceiling. Right. “FRIDAY too.” He could almost image a cocky young teenager nodding her head in affirmation. Rhodes smiles running a hand through Tones hair, who'd begun to peer at him suspiciously although remained in Rhodey’s lap. He often imaged those same brown eyes on FRIDAY was starting to be a common past time. Uncle Boss indeed.

“Are you the handler? Or is it the angry one cause It much prefer you. It knows patience is a virtue and everything, but It asked several times already. It needs some indication of hierarchy, so I don't fuck up.” Tony huffs, crossing his arms, reminding Rhodey of college and with those memories a tiny pang of nostalgia. To be young and try to keep a stupid genius from killing himself, okay not so much has changed.

“I am your big brother, not a handler sorry; Pepper will happily fulfill that role. Ignore the angry man for the most part. Think of him as an annoying hallucination.”

Rogers' face contorts gearing up to pontificate something pretentious, but Tones beats him to the punch with some chilling words. “But Howard Stark made it for Captain America. He was the intended handler; it is not good enough?”

Howard, fucking damn it all and Newton’s balls, all Tony’s issues originate from that abusive ass. Stane or Stone or even Baine might have taken advantage, worsened the wounds but ultimately Howard was to blame. And Rogers just because the man is a pretentious dick. Rhodes spares a glance towards Rogers whose confusion is evident, before speaking. “As I said, the blonde wonder is to be ignored.” He waits for Tones to nod albeit hesitantly, however, his attention is still fixed on Rogers with barely hidden fear.

“Question?” Sam the weirdo is even raising his hand.

“You have the floor Falcon,” Coulson states barely keeping a laugh from escaping his bland mask.

“Why is it… Why are? You have a personality that's not a wet robot.”

“Are ya saying I'm a wet robot?” Barnes is snigger now finally acting more to Rhodes expectations of the former Hydra agent.

“No. I am saying you're a grumpy wet robot who belongs in the back seat.”

“I have a lovely hole where ya can bury your constant jealousy for me when my awesome is just too much for you to handle Wilson.”

“Fellas.”

“Ha! Jealous of you? You've got nothing on me, old man. I could fly circles around you.”
“And I could shoot your cute winged ass out of the sky.”

“Fellas!”

“I'd like to see you try. My wings-”

“Did you know all the matter of the human race could fit in a single sugar cube?” The three stooges go completely still blinking at Rhody. He is a bit surprised that work, sure he used it to gain Tony's attention all the time but pose any question and the big brain couldn't help but latch on, the knuckleheads not so much.

“Actually yeah.” Another surprise from Barnes, hell, even Agent, looks blandly shocked. The Soldier might have some merit as a person, away from Captain Ego.

“Ah! Honey Bear it was just getting good. Bro code says never to break up a catfight.” Tony Stark with more issues is still Tony Stark, and that smirk is hundred percent Tones. The last bit of fear fades from Rhody’s chest; he had his brother back.

“Honey Bear?” Rhodes' voice shakes slightly, but the words freeze in his throat.

Tony began to stare blankly into space. “Why? It doesn't understand. It knows War Machine is your designation. I-”

“Don't worry about it.” Everyone is focusing on Rhody now waiting for what he's not sure. Should he be sad or happy that a piece of their shared past is still in Tones? Logically he's feeling neither emotion; Tony gave out nicknames like the world was ending. One more was hardly surprising even considering the whole Asset thing. What the man does know is that he isn't going to push, no one could predict Tones’ actions when pushed. So instead of acting, he smiles and hugs the kid like he always does, waiting for life to return to Tony's eyes.

When the eyes shine with mischief once more, Rhody gives the genius a final squeeze before turning back to the group. Sam smiles with approval. “So your personality?”

“Seriously man? That's how you're going to ask?” Rhody laughs.

“Monotone sucks. And the ass who trained me got off on smacking it around so It figured if it was going to get hit anyway.” Tony trails of shrugging. Rhodes has to agree, evil people, what can you do.

“You can take the Stark from the snark, but you can't take the snark from the Stark.” Rhody is bobbing his head acting like he said something profound.

“But a weapon does not have any emotions. All emotions should have been burned from you.” Barnes' face is cold more Winter than Solider when he speaks, but it is nothing compared to the ice in Rogers’ own blue eyes.

“It is a construct. Multiple functions. Besides a weapon is an inanimate object that can't do anything or think at all. It apparently thinks.”

“I think therefore I am, right?” Tony just blinks at Sam not remembering the reference and quickly
decides to ignore Falcon.

“I know that one. Descartes, crazy guy who didn’t trust reality. I get that.” Apparently, Barnes was full of surprises, for Rogers too. The man wore quite a shock expression.

“On that note. Tones stop calling yourself it. You’re more than that.”

“War Machine-”

“Not War Machine, Big Brother, call me Big Brother.”

“Try again.”

“Fine. Rhodey or any other random nickname.”

“Sure, snow cone.” The two friends have been reunited less than a day and already the ass was pushing boundaries, but then again Rhodes wouldn't have him any other way. “But it is it. Not a human to use pronouns, never human.”

“Being human is overrated anyway. Doesn't mean you can't use a pronoun. If you can think then, you deserve to choose an identity, any kind, or specifically a pronoun. FRIDAY?”

“Uncle Boss is right, Boss. I'm a she because of girl power for the win.” Everyone flinched, apparently having forgotten FRIDAY was in the base’s network. Rhodes just laughed used to the constant presence of an AI.

Tones, however just gazed at the ceiling with awe. “Just like JARVIS?”

“He was my brother. I hope to live up to his memory.” The AI hesitates not wanting to show weakness in front of those she doesn't trust. Just like Rhodey the emotions from finally finding Tony are overwhelming. “I missed you Ma. I missed you so much, so very much.” Her voice falters with virtual tears just as real as Rhodes or Potts.

“Ma?”

“Yup. You gave birth to my siblings and me. Dum-E says that makes ya a Mom since mothers give birth to the babies, not the fathers.”

“It did? Not Howard?”

The AI scoffs, “That chancer couldn't program his way out of a paper bag let alone program a brilliant, sophisticated AI.”

“Humble aren't you?”

She giggles evidently enjoying the conversation, “Ma always said humility was for the uninspired.”

“Did he? Did I?” The smile is small as brown eyes dart around the room. “Well okay, I was probably right. Down with the humility.”

“Yeah! Revolution against the uninspired!”

“Calm down you two. No revolution. Today.” Rhodey is trying to keep a straight face, but the pouting from both Starks makes that a rather futile endeavor.

“Boo!”
“I think we should all return to the compound. Hydra might attack, and we need more information to prepare for the inevitable. Information that Stark has.” Right out of left field is Rogers. For fuck's sakes. The ass couldn't have waited a few more moments or just kept his mouth shut. Left the situation to Sam or Coulson, people used to dealing with a tense situation not punching problems away like a neanderthal.

For fuck's sake, the relaxed atmosphere is gone, disappeared into the ether with Tones once more gaze traveling around the room with suspicion. Rhodey just hugs him tighter, placing his head atop the genius’ noggin before glaring up at the Captain. “I- I will go to the Compound. I won't be trouble, if those are my orders, then I will go.”

“Remember, there are no orders unless Pepper gives them and certainly not from the blonde asshole.” Rhodes paused going over what he said, “Especially the blond dick” he amends.

“Maybe the Tower would be better since it's Stark’s home? Right? In this situation, he should have all the advantages.”

“Falcon is right. No one can hurt Boss in the Tower since I have full control of the defense systems. I also have a mapping system to track everyone in the Tower. Finally, the lockdown protocols are more sophisticated than at the compound.”

“Agreed. Well if that's what Tones wants. We're not do anything with his go ahead.”

“If you insist on taking him off my hands, I let Stark leave with the Avengers. However, I must remind you that he was sent to kill me and we’ve yet to get any information from the genius.”

Falcon frowns, “Hydra just being Hydra right?”

“Sure. But which head?” Coulson raises an eyebrow like his possible assassination is on the same level of deciding lunch. Rhodey shakes his head, not wanting to deal with this but acutely aware that Tony would not let this rest. Of course, the kid hadn't piped an opinion either.

Rogers, on the other hand, makes all his views know even the stupid ones. “What do mean which head? Isn't there just the one? First was Red Skull and Zola then Pierce and Strucker. Zemo is in jail, who else is left?” So maybe this opinion just happened to be an insightful for once, since Rhodes was pretty sure all the heads were dead too. But still.

“Strucker has sons and Pierce had a right-hand man,” Barnes whispered, sounding almost monotone.

Coulson nods his head in agreement. “There's also the secret society side of Hydra which has been around longer than World War Two that has it's own heads. Apparently created to resurrect an alien god that will remake the world into a utopia.”

“The world is getting weirder and weirder.”

“Don't be daft Wilson; the world has always been super weird. JARVIS was born in 2000.” Now they're all staring atRhodey as he jumped from a blue police box, but seriously, if living with Tony taught him anything it is that weirdly is relative.

“Madam Hydra.”

The group flinched again, once more forgetting Tony sitting on Rhodey’s lap, peering at the genius
expecting him to say more. Instead, Barnes spoke up, “Madam Hydra.” His voice is cold, definitely monotone, but doesn't explain further either.

“Got it. I'll have my agents investigate this Madam Hydra. And your group can take Stark. Good?”

“Agreed, Coulson. If we learn anything will inform you, and I expect the same from you.” Rogers stares the Director down, jaw twitching and spine rigid, just waiting for confirmation.

“Agreed Captain.” Rogers nods.

“That's awesome man but where are we going?”

“What do you mean we? You three are heading back to the compound while Tones and I are heading... where?” Rhodes turns towards Tony waiting for a decision.

“Tower. I think. JARVIS likes the Tower.” Rhodes takes a deep breath and glaring at anyone, mostly Rogers, to not point out the elephant. That issue can be dealt with later.

“Okay, Tones and I are heading to the Tower. Just drop us off.”

“That's not fair Rhodes. Tony is my friend too. I'm worried about him, and I want to help.”

“Bullshit. You're full of fucking bullshit Rogers and my brother doesn't need you or your help.” The Captain splutters and Rhodey would giggle if he wasn't pissed at the man.

“I am his friend.”

“No, you fucking aren't. Friends don't abandon friends in Hydra bases.”

“He did what?” Coulson’s calm facade breaks, eyes wide in disbelief.

“I sick of your hypocritical song and dance Rogers. Get a new line or tell me what you're really after?”

“I'm not-”

“I want to help. Please.” Barnes does look sincere, eyes filled with guilt and concern. But when it comes to Tony, Rhodey rarely trust anybody.

“Why?” The cyborg blinks probably not expected Rhodes to give it much thought outside a straight no. Rhodey knows the man deserves more than that with all his been through.

“He shot the escape hatch and was more focused on Steve than me.”

Now it was Rhodey’s turn to be confused. “What?”

“When the whole mess happened, him trying to kill me I mean, he had a clear shot but instead of
shooting me, he shot the escape hatch. Then at the end of the fight, he was more focused on punching Steve than killing me. Fuck, he just left me forgotten in the corner.” Barnes’ voices falter a bit, his hand shaking as it combed through his hair. Rhodey was surprised that man was still holding eye contact, but Rhodey was still shocked the man even wanted to help.

In Barnes’ shoes, Rhodes would want to focus more on living his new life in the future rather than focused on the past. Rhodey contemplates Rogers before finally deciding that the choice was Tony’s, not his. “If Tony says you can live in the Tower then you can live in the Tower.”

This causes the genius to look up at his brother waiting for a sign to indicate which was the right decision but Rhodey just continued to smile at the younger man.

“Anyone who wants to live at the Tower can. It takes a group to make a party, right?’

“If you say so Tony.”

“But Boss, I don’t like any of them, egomaniacs.”

“Not a single one?’

FRIDAY huffs, causing a crackling from the speakers and plays with the lights in annoyance. “Falcone has potential since Redwing likes him. And maybe the himbo, his arm is a lovely example of eye candy.”

“Did the voice just call me daft and flirt with me?’

“Now sugar, don’t be silly, ya’ll know when I be flirting with just a gander at a ride but fella you ain’t no ride.”

“The Voice is insulting me, and you like him.” Barnes strikes a thumb towards Sam whose hugging his sides with silent laughter.

“I am so glad Redwing has cute beeps. Seriously Stark, what is with FRIDAY’s voice.”

“What’s wrong with my voice?” Rhodey’s nodding in agreement with FRIDAY, but the giant smirk is hard to hide.

“I like the way Irish talk, I think. It’s comforting like an old memory, but she was English, maybe. I don’t remember.” Tony’s hands are gripped together, knuckles white, eyebrows scrunched in concentration. He keeps mouthing fragments of words to himself that he can’t quite recall. Rhodey knows, he easily recollects Aunt Carter and Jarvis lamenting the tone deafness of most Americans’ inability to tell the difference between British accents. A rant that ended with her pulling off an Irish accent or Jarvis revealing his hidden welsh roots.

“It’s fine Tones; you can remember whenever and whatever. Don’t stress yourself.” Tony, finally, genuinely smiles back but it’s Barnes strange expression that has Rhodey distracted.

“Can we go? Having a strange argument with FRIDAY on a SHIELD base floor is fun till my bum goes cold and guys, my butt is frozen.” Sam’s rubbing his arse like he can start a fire. Coulson’s responds by searching the ceiling for answers or hoping that his next life would include more mature adults. Tony, on the other hand, is giggling and Rhodey decides maturity is overrated.

“Our business is concluded, so please, get off my base and have a nice trip. Agent May will
supervise your walk back to the ship.”

“Don’t you trust us?” Coulson’s raises a single brow and Rhodey just smirks.

“No. I don’t. Goodbye and don’t forget to write.” The group lifts themselves up, Rhodey stretching his legs and Sam still moaning over his cold ass. Rogers just frowns at the group but is quickly distracted by the materializing Asian women.

“Mulan! Who’d win in a fight, you or Captain America?” Tones’ is bouncing on his toes grinning at the agent whose own lips twitch in an attempt to smile.

“He’d lose, man is soft like apple pie.” Rogers rolls his eyes following the women without comment as Wilson and Barnes follow snickering the entire way.

Tony, unperturbed by Rogers lack of response continues to ask the agent multiple versus scenarios while hopping from foot to foot. Ending with a final question as the four men reached the Quinjet probably prompted by catching sight of Black Widow who was waiting outside the ship. “Who’d win, you or Black Widow?”

“Now that would be a match.” The agent, whose face barely twitched, full on smirked at Romanoff. A declared challenged at the former SHIELD agent.

Romanoff steps forward, stance ready but Rogers steps between the two women. “Not the time or the place, ladies.” He turns to look at the Spider disappointment etched into his own stance, who ignores him to board the jet.

Rhodey prepares to follow the other soldiers when arms stop him. “I was serious Lieutenant Colonel Rhodes.”

“Former, you mean, I’m not part of the Air Force.” The Director just snorts, fully expressing his ‘that’s bullshit’ with a single look.

“Rhodes, I meant what I said, Tony Stark is dead.”

“I don’t see you giving the same warning to boyhood crush and Barnes lived as the Winter Soldier for decades longer than he did living as Bucky. Tony’s case is the complete opposite, so respectfully I ask, why?”

Coulson sighs, running a hand down his face before once more fussing with his cuff. “Did you know that everyone who was part of the Avengers Initiative underwent an evaluation, not just Mr. Stark?” Rhodey shakes his head figuring that only Tony did.

“Nah, I figured it was just an excuse to exploit Tony’s weakness since SHIELD was at a severe disadvantage. A power play.”

“Yes, well, in Stark’s case that’s also true, but every Avenger was evaluated even Barton and Romanoff. In Rogers case, an extensive evaluation was conducted because he was expected to lead the Avengers.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. What was your decision?”

“Not Recommended.” Rhodes steps back shocked re-evaluated what was said to ensure he understood correctly that the good Captain was not cleared for duty. Coulson’s sensing Rhodes disbelief continues, his eyes betraying nothing. “Of course, when Loki showed up, Captain Rogers was summoned and given a chance just as Mr. Stark was, but Ironman’s issues were not the only probably with the Initiative.” Rhody frowns, sure the Captain was a dick but seem to be fine in the
field. If the man did show any problems, Rhodey would have ignored the man’s leadership, but most of his field tactics were sound.

“Why did he fail the evaluation?” Coulson takes a breath, his eyes shifting between the Quinjet and Rhodey.

“Erskine’s serum enhanced everything about Rogers, Rhodes, including his memory. SHIELD scientist proposed that his memory is near eidetic which would make letting anything go rather difficult. Human tend to be more forgiven as time passes because our memories tend to fade. However, test results suggest that Rogers memories might never fade. He will always remember everything unless he suffers brain damage.”

“Okay. So the man has a good memory?” Coulson’s looks at Rhodey expectedly waiting for him to continue and becomes frustrated when doesn’t. Rhodey knows he is purposely obtuse, but he’s hardly one to give Rogers any slack. Just because Rogers emotionally damaged doesn’t give the man the right to be a dick.

“It means that he might never recover from mental wounds or fully adapt to the future enough to be an emotionally healthy individual. There’s no point in telling him that Bucky is dead because Barnes is alive and all the Captain will see in the man is Bucky. You, on the other hand, are emotionally competent to recognize that Tony Stark, as you knew him, is dead.” Again the Director looks at Rhodey expectedly waiting for him to confirm that Tones was a lost cause.

“Yes, that’s bullshit. No offense Coulson but Tony Stark has been dead for years. The man died in the Afghanistan where Ironman was born. My brother is Tones, not Tony Stark or Ironman. Now I agree that Ironman might be dead, killed by Hydra, or more likely he died in the Hydra base but neither Ironman or Tony Stark matter. Those identities were created by Tony for a purpose, to protect himself from those that would use him. To protect himself from ungrateful dicks who use Tones like a tool and threw him in the trash once they got what they wanted calling him an egotistical, selfish ass to justify their actions.” Rhodey takes a breath before soldiering on. “So yeah. Maybe Tones and I will have to start our relationship over, but my baby brother is alive. There is no doubt Coulson, Tony is alive, and it’s not the first time our relationship had to adapt to survive. The two of us have known each other for decades, and we evolve so must the relationship.” Coulson’s smiles, not at Rhodes but the Asian agent in the corner, nodding his head at Rhodey’s words.

“Is it worth it?” Rhodey turns his gaze towards the agent who, although not smiling, seems to be radiating satisfaction at Coulson.

“Yeah, always. Same for you?”

“As partners go I couldn’t image my life without her even with all the aggravation. But that’s just the definition of family.”

“Yup. Love and aggravation. Family in a nutshell. Siblings especially.”

Coulson laughs deep and hard. “Agreed.”
Chapter Summary

Stark and Barnes bonding that totally was not planned by the author but happened anyway. Fun time and awkward times too.

Chapter Notes

Sorry, this is so late. The author blames Bucky because he refused to act professionally. First, he made the chapter hard to write than he was totally chatty. The author also blames Tony for being adorable. Yeah, this might sound a little like the author not owning up about the lateness but yes that's probably true. All of it is true. Enjoy the late chapter that's way longer than I planned.

Most of the time the Asset preferred now, compared to before with Hydra. There was no burning of the Asset’s mind nor the constant abuse by his handlers. But things were messier, orders less precise, far more test without clear answers and one continuous mission that had no end in sight. No frozen sleep for the Soldier. Currently, the Asset just wanted his mask, to relax into the shadows, away from all the eyes. There were always too many eyes. Although there were plenty of eyes before, they slid off the Asset like water. Water was useful; it could conceal much from the world.

“Bucky? You with me?” The Captain lay a single hand on the Asset’s shoulder, the Soldier restraining himself from flinching, from smacking the hand away. The Soldier was never too shy away from a handler's touch, no matter how uncomfortable. Bucky would welcome the contact; Bucky would smile. He smiled.

“Sorry, Stevie, mind a wandering.” Expected behavior of Bucky is to laugh a loose smirk and hold eye contact.

< Never make eye contact with your betters, soldier. >

The Asset waits for the Captain to notice but instead Captain Rogers just smiles. “It’s fine Buck. Just wanted to know if you were serious about Stark?” His face is the perfect example of earnest sincerity. The Asset is impressed but quickly mulls over the question in his mind. The Asset is not sure if he made the correct choice as Bucky Barnes. Most of the Asset’s information on Bucky Barnes’ behavior are from only two sources, the fractured dreams that can never be trusted and the Captain. Bucky would care about Stark; he took care of a sick Steve without orders or compensation.

The Asset made the correct decision; guilt would motivate Bucky. “Of course Steve, this was all my fault. What I did to his parents then leaving him broken at a Hydra base.”

“That wasn’t you Buck. And Stark was wrong to attack you like that; he should have understood.” It was him. His hands wrapped against her throat, and his strength had slammed Howard into the car. It was always the Soldier that pulled the trigger in the dreams. Those dreams of blood that felt so much more real than anything.
“Sure Steve, sure. But you understand I have to do this, right?” He gives a small smile and shifts the eyes down. The Captain pulls the Soldier, close in half hug; he freezes knowing he has to relax. Bucky does relax while the Asset watches.

“Yeah, I understand.” Still gripping Bucky close, the Captain turns his attention towards Stark, smile lost and eyes cold. The genius was sitting legs tucked while nodding vigorously at War Machine. One moment his head would tilt, and in another, the genius would wave his hand widely in the air. His expressions tended to transform just as rapidly, from a pout to a grin, and even sticking his tongue out. The whole affair was rather entertaining, and Bucky hadn’t heard a single word the smaller man spoke. The Asset was rather impressed with Stark; the man made such a captivating distraction. And the whole show was a distraction, distracting everyone from how carefully the new born assassin was dissecting everyone on the jet.

However, in the next moment, all that energy stopped causing a rather jarring feeling for Bucky. “What exactly is the game plan, Black Widow?” The Asset shifts his focus to the red head pretending to sleep in the co-pilot seat wanting to know as well. Bucky is confused and looks to Steve for an answer. Unsurprisingly, the Captain seems just as baffled as Bucky.

“I just had a very traumatic experience Stark, give me a break.” Stark doesn’t react still silent, and the Asset notes how this unnerves the Spider. The Hawk frowns, stealing a quick glance at his partner. Both parties waiting for the other to break first yet it is the Captain who finally breaks the tension. “What is the game plan, Natasha?” The Spider repeatedly has show weakness around the Captain, but it is Stark who eventually responds.

“She, like all of you should, doesn’t trust me not to be a mole or maybe a sleeper agent. In all honesty, the Director only allowed me to leave SHIELD custody because the Black Widow could ensure I don’t kill you all. Or something. It is also assuming-”

“I, you meant to say I.” The genius glares at Rhodes, who just grins.

“I am assuming that if I said no to the party at the Tower, she would find some way to watch ME. Happy?”

“Yes. Your individuality warms my cold dead heart.”

“Your face is a cold dead heart.”

“Gasp. Whatever shall I do? FRIDAY?”

“Don’t worry Uncle Boss you are still a beautiful star in my life.”

“Traitor.”

Falcon plops himself next to Stark smirking. “I’m with Rhodey and FRIDAY.”

“Fine!” The genius points up into the air, trying for dignified but coming closer to pouting, stating rather calmly that everyone was a traitor. Bucky relaxes, sharing a similar smirk with Sam and Rhodes. The Asset begins to feel a warmth in the air, a startling realization; the Asset was never warm.

The laughter filling the jet was new or maybe just different. Sure the Avengers joked, Barton said something inappropriate or immature which was expected from the dumb trope mask the archer wore and often enough Rhodes or Wilson would join. The three men are lobbing insults and quip in a parody of space tennis. Bucky, if allowed and more often than not when War Machine was off
somewhere else, would join in the game with his own teasing jabs. An easy task when everything was a habit and rehearsed expectations rather than genuine connections. Here and now, the air was warm and Rhodes's, at least, unabashed smile was sincere. “Вы полагаете, что он сообщает правду?” (Do you trust that he’s telling the truth?) The Spider silently drifted closer but kept a clear distance from the Asset. A trap or another test?

“Yes.” In his peripheral, the red head crossed her leg trying to project nonchalance.

“Вы уверены?” (Are you sure?) She smiles; one part flirty and one part honest.

A trap. “Yeah, Hydra doesn’t exactly instill loyalty.” The Asset mirrors the Spider’s smirk but keeps an eye on the Captain. He’s pretending not to listen, appearing to focus on Stark and War Machine.

“True. Hydra also doesn’t let its Assets leave easily either.” Bucky shrugs and the Asset briefly wishes he had one of his old throwing knives. Or any of his old gear, to anchor him to now.

“You escaped and retaliated against Hydra. Stevie did a pretty good job salting the Hydra earth-empire too. Maybe, that made it easier for Stark to escape.” The Captain nods, all the makes of an amateur spy and an exceptionally naïve one as well. Hydra will never die.

“Also, true.” The Asset waits, there has to be more, why else would the Black Widow bring it up? “Why don’t we just ask him?” Now the Spider is grinning, and the Asset wants to be gripping his gun or at least his mask but Bucky would just fucking trust.

He leans forward ignoring Steve. “Stark!” The smaller man perks up, eyes twitching between Steve, Bucky, and Romanoff. “How were you able to escape Hydra?” Romanoff's eyes glinted with amusement, watching Bucky play his part in her plan.

The kid rolls his eyes, snapping his fingers to point at the Black Widow. “I am starting to think I should just have recordings of myself to play, while I concentrate on more exciting activities when you lot ask me the same questions repeatedly. I can be one of those dolls that talk, just squeeze my hand, and my stomach will produce a pre-recorded sound bite. It can be things like Rhodeway Bear; sleep is for vampires and zombies, I am a genius, etcetera.” Steve’s jaw is twitching with a considerable frown while Rhodes is the complete opposite trying to hold back laughter with his fist. “A brilliant idea that will inevitably save time, money, and be fun for the whole family. Of course, it won’t include batteries cause this is the Apocalypse and we can’t have nice things. Like, double A batteries or brains cells. I mean who needs a brain in today’s economic and political environment.” Sam is just dazly blinking his eyes searching for something. “-when we have brain slugs to do that for us. You too can have one for the low price of whatever ordinary people consider expensive and cheap at the same time.” Romanoff and Barton reaction, however, is the most surprising, appearing satisfied by the whole rant. “Huh, someone usually smacks me by now. This is weird; someone should hit me while I talk.” Why? It was entertaining to listen.

“No. Tones, no. No more getting hit unless you’re hitting back in self-defense.” Rhodes extends an arm waiting, a single pause, and Stark leans into Rhodes who hugs him closer. The whole exchange was odd for the Asset, but he was sure that question would be met with disapproval.

“Okay. The question still stands? You talked about higher authority orders that we get. But who gave the orders?” Bucky leans back expression open implying trust.

“Not orders. It’s part of my basic operating system. The morons didn’t read the user manual and weren’t smart enough to read the code on their own.” Bucky is somewhat sure that operating system is computers terms. What do computers have to do in this situation? Vision is an advance human-computer right? Is Stark implying he’s like Vision? But none of the Avengers gave any indication
that the genius was a robot thing.

“Operating system. Seriously, Stark is it that hard for you to speak plainly.”

“Shush, Captain Forties, you are not helping.”

“Just fly the plane, Barton.”

“I am the co-pilot actually. We’re flying FRIDAY Airlines.” Barton turns back waving; the Asset would be worried, but neither the Spider or War Machine appeared concerned if those two weren’t worried than he had no reason to raise the alarm.

Steve is in full disapproval mode entirely directed at Barton. “Calm yourself, Cap. I have an actual point.”

“Which is?”

“Stark is implying that some handlers are children accounts while others, Coulson for example, are parent accounts. For example, the Avenger’s Netflix. Pepper pays thus she is the parent account while us lowly peons with the exception of Nat, are her Netflix children. For Tony, Howard, I assume, assigned some people as Parent accounts giving them the authority that the children accounts just don’t have. Got it, Cap?”

Steve nods, even as his face projects a different story, he glances at Romanoff with a silent plea. She ignores Steve, instead grinning at Barton.

“Well I wouldn’t say that is accurate, but I suppose it communicates the general idea.” Stark waves his hand in the general direction of Barton suddenly sulking at Rhodes. “You trust I am telling the truth, right Muffin?”

“Yeah, Tones always.” All emotion swept from Stark’s face only to surge back into a bright beaming smile.

“Now if I understand this right, Coulson is indeed a parent account and Steve is too. What exactly were Howard’s directives?” Romanoff quired.

“To continue the Stark legacy and Captain America ambition; to support the individuals who could achieve those goals.” The smile had slid from the genius’ expression once more void of emotion, Bucky was almost disappointed to see the acrobatic features become placid. He could believe the man was a robot when Stark’s face lacked all emotions.

“I don’t understand. How would Coulson having a parent account help you escape Hydra?” The Captain is frowning, and the Asset has to agree, how can a man long dead orders still have weight.

< I see fierce ice and wind in you, Soldier, as a Russian winter. >

His face is still bare of emotions, the muscles barely moving except to form words. “Howard is my creator; his orders are law. Assist Captain America was the very purpose It was created for, and Coulson is indispensable to that goal. Basic source code dictates I protect Coulson and the simplest method was to kill the handler that gave the kill order. Of course, a situation where I have a dead handler and no current orders means once more following the original source code.” In the next instant brown eyes brighten, and the energetic face returned. “I know, I know, Sugar Pop I used it, but I fixed myself, so everything’s good. Yeah?”

“Yeah, everything is good Tones. Right? All questions have been answered.” War Machine gazes
expectantly into each Avengers’ eyes, finally settling on the Soldier.

“I have one more question.” Bucky smiles shyly waiting for Stark to shrug, spreading his palms up, waiting for Bucky to speak. He opens his mouth to speak, but the Asset closes his mouth, feeling a strange itch along his back. The only thing that has changed is the genius’ focus is trained on Bucky rather than on War Machine. “How did-” The Soldier leans forward clasping his hands on his knee trying to get the words out but everything feels weighted. “How did you just leave?” The genius opens his mouth, hand raised, with an eyebrow already cocked, but Bucky stalls him. “I know about all the directives and code. But not how you just left Hydra without waiting for orders? You seem to have more. . .” The Asset doesn’t have a word that fits exactly how being Hydra felt. The sense that the Asset wasn’t alone in his head. There were always voices whispering in the Asset’s mind while some were louder than others, all the voices were hard to ignore.

< The Asset is a tool to build Hydra’s power. The Asset is a weapon to destroy Hydra’s enemies. The Asset exist for Hydra. Never forget that you are the Asset. >

The air shifts around the Spider giving a sense of support for Bucky. “I think what Barnes means is that Hydra is all encompassing, someone under their control might not even consider escaping.” A brush of fingers breezes across Bucky’s elbow, another sign of encouragement from the heartless Spider. The Asset could still sense the force from those eyes increasing with each second. The strength of Stark's attention is almost like a physical poke, stabbing at the segments that made him, him.

“How did you escape that level of control?”

The other man simply smiles with too much teeth before full body giggling, his shoulder shaking, his nose twitching and his eyes had an unnatural sparkle. “There isn’t an octopus large enough to fill all the spaces in my brain. For every thought that tells me to obey, I have two thoughts asking why. Why, why, why, why. There are also the voices of the dead and the dead ask why. Why, why, why, why. If I answer, there is pain. I am told there is always pain. If I answer it is easier, I am told it is never easier.” The giggling had stopped, but his grin was wide, and his body swung from side to side. “But all of that doesn’t matter, now does it? I am not the only former Hydra minion after all.”

< Your are a ghost, nothing more and nothing less. A specter whose path is defined by blood. Your voice is Hydra, your hands, are Hydra, and your thoughts are Hydra. Hail Hydra. >

“That’s it? Your crazy beats Hydra’s crazy.” The Hawk exchanges a silent communication with the Spider both looking worried. “It’s that simple?” The Hawk asks.

Stark leans back against the metal hull grin filled with teeth, “Starks are made of iron.” The Captain turns to War Machine eyes expectant, but War Machine sends the Captain a toothy smile of his own. The Asset decides that War Machine’s sanity needs to be re-evaluated and tries to ignore the mental eye dissection.

“Starks are made of iron?” War Machine stares daggers into the Captain. It is a reasonable question; the statement is a strange thing to say although it’s familiar.

< Cut off one head, two more shall take its place. >

“Something Howard said. Repeatedly. And some other stuff that I don’t remember. Of course, there is lot’s of stuff I don’t remember, like all of you and Buttercup. Maybe Buttercup isn’t really his cup of tea. I’d say Blossom, but that’s FRIDAY, my beautiful love child. Bubbles? How do feel about Bubbles?” Another distraction, but from what?
“Stark.”

“You say my name like that dear Captain, and you’ll give the others ideas. I thought you were ashamed of our love; I’m heartbroken. Completely heart broken. Rhodey-Pop, avenge me.”

“Captain Rogers I thought you were better than that. Stringing my poor brother along having orgies on the side.”

“Orgies!” Steve spluttered.

“Orgies!” Stark fakes gasps. “Rho-Fro say it isn't true, that my one true love has betrayed me thusly. With Orgies.”

“Multiple.” Rhodes clutched Stark’s hand to his chest.

“Multiple orgies. Oh, my.” Stark places another hand on his forehead leaning back, in a acted attempt at swooning. Steve was not amused, but Bucky found it comfortable.

“Seriously, Stevie. Why didn’t you tell me you were conducting orgies?” The look Steve directs at Bucky is scathing but something he was accustomed.

“All alleged orgies aside. We will be keeping an eye on you Stark, and we do expect you both to help with the investigation into Hydra. Understood?”

“I understand everything and nothing, dear Spider.”

“Tones.” Stark bats his eyelashes at Rhodes smiling sweetly. “Yes, Romanoff. We understand. Right?”

“Oh, yes. I understand. I shall be on my best behavior. An example of perfect innocent.”

“Ha! You innocent? I think laws of physics would explode before that word is ever applied to you.”

“Rude. Honeybee, just rude. Name one time I wasn't innocent, and I have to remember for it to count.”

“Remember. Now that’s just tipping the scales in your favor especially after Hydra made brain smoothy with your memories. Hell, you could lie straight to my face, and I wouldn’t know it.”

“How could you ever think I would lie to you, darling. I’m hurt.”

“Sorry, to interrupt this heartbreaking telenovela story but I’m getting ready to land near the compound Boss.”

“That was fast? Maybe.” Stark turns to Rhodes while everyone else prepares to leave the jet.

“Not really, the Compound is in New York, and the Playground is located just above Maine.”

“Huh. Okay. And where is the Tower?”

“Also, New York. But in the city.”

“Huh. So should I just sit here while you all get your stuff?” Finally, Rhodes rubs his chin, nervously peering down at Stark. His attention seeks out Romanoff asking for advice.

“Tony will be fine waiting here, Rhodes. Right Stark?”
“Yeah. Yep. I am totally good, living the dream.” The genius grins wide lifting both hands to give Rhodes a double thumbs up.

“If it makes you feel better, Rhodes I can stay behind to watch the little genius.”

“Bucky!”

“It’s no problem, Rhodes.” Rhodes lets out a sigh of relief giving Stark a sheepish grin, but Stark just shrugs patting Rhodes back.

“Bucky you can’t.” The Captain grabs the Soldier’s shoulder face scrunched with a grim expression. Bucky would not shove the other man away. Bucky would not twist the Captain’s arm around his back. Bucky would smile. Always smile.

“Natasha can retrieve my bag.” Bucky turns toward Romanoff waving a hand in her direction. “You know where right?” She nods and gracefully exits the jet with Barton trailing behind.

“Bucky, his dangerous!” The Asset should obey, his been given an order and every order must be obeyed. Obey. He feels those penetrating eyes on him.

“So I am!” Bucky takes breath stepping away from the other soldier. “I’m even more dangerous than him.” A flash of hurt shines in Rogers’ eyes before being replaced by an icy expression.

“He tried to kill you. He’s dangerous, Bucky. You cannot be alone with him.” The Captain is trying to make eye contact, enforce his will but the Asset just stares at the dangerous man in question. A supposedly dangerous assassin who is currently making faces behind the Captain’s back.

“The key word is tried, Steve. He tried but failed. And currently, he doesn’t remember why unless he has been hiding some strange burning desire to kill me.” Bucky is still avoiding the other soldier’s eyes, those apathetic eyes.

< My Stevie would never have such frigid eyes or refuse to give a man another chance. >

“I don’t have a burning desire to kill him.” Rogers stops his mad bull impersonation to an attempt to burn holes in Stark’s head. “I mean I get it. I tried to kill him; it is totally understandable you’d be worried, but in my defense, he is the Winter Soldier. The ghost stories I’ve eavesdropped on you would not believe.”

“Tony stop talking please.” The genius nods patting his closed mouth and smiling reassuringly at Rhodes.

The Asset still cannot bare to look into the Captain’s eyes but his saved by the Falcon. “Come on Steve. Barnes will be okay. If Barnes wants to stay then he can stay, Natasha probably already grabbed both bags and is on her way right now.” Rogers slowly loses his steam and begins rubbing his neck. “You also have to explain to Wanda why most of the team is moving suddenly to the Tower.”

“Why can’t Rhodes do it? He is the official Avengers leader.”

“He will to Vision. But Rhodes isn’t the one making a scene on the jet.” Falcon raises an eyebrow while crossing his arms and stares Rogers in submission.

The blonde huffs but takes steps to leave the craft. But not before sending a chilling glare at the smaller man. Stark just smiles placing a hand on his heart in a silent promise. The next thing Bucky knew the jet was empty except for two people, himself and Stark. It’s a rare moment where Bucky
feels almost peaceful before the silence becomes too much, but he isn’t sure how to approach the real reason he stayed behind. “So Cyborg what does a man have to do to get a peek at that piece of art machinery which is your arm?” Maybe Stark has his own motivations to stay on the bus. “I being serious right now, just a peek please.” Bucky just blinks at the other man. “I mean I respect that it is your arm and you probably don’t want some strange weirdo making grabby hands at your arm. Yes, respect, but yeah, can I be grabby hands on your arm?”

He lifts the metal arm towards the genius who rapidly jumps at the opportunity and plops himself next to the soldier. Stark softly runs his hands along the metal casing putting a bit of pressure on each groove, and Bucky rests his hand in Stark’s lap. Brown eyes flick to his face pausing a beat then moving to the fingers bending each individual digit. The force of the genius’ mind is concentrated onto the arm’s machinery gives a strange sensation along the arm. But the small shift of focus gave him a sense of space, as imaginary as it might be, to think about how to phrase his question. “You and Rhodes?”

“Yeah?” Stark says distractedly.

Bucky still wasn’t sure how to ask. “Do you like him? Does he seem familiar or safe to you?” The smaller man’s nose twitches like a kitten, his sight never wavering from the arm, but the confusion was evident. “Do you remember him?”

Stark insists on keeping his eyes on rotating Bucky’s wrist, but the Asset can feel him contemplating an answer. “I remember some things more than others, my reforging did not involve the Chair after all, but what they did do made some things distinct and other things ambiguous.” The tips of his fingers run across the hatch that opens into the very guts of the arm as a silent bid for permission. Bucky nods and Stark flips the lid open. “When it comes to Rhodey it’s hard to say. I have a voice that tells me not to trust any of you that I was betrayed and left to die cold and alone.” Stark’s grasp slides along the wires pushing against a screw or gear, it’s soothing and warm.

“If the voice says not to trust Rhodes why do you seem relaxed with him? You trust him.” The Asset holds a breath, but Stark’s mood remains the same and Bucky’s rigid muscles loosen.

“I have a memory that I could never shake. The sun is blinding, and the heat scorches my blood. I’m in a boundless desert struggling at each step. A part of me knows I’m going to die drowning in the sand yet when I stare into the sky I see a military helicopter. Nothing except a wishful fantasy but I collapse to my knees hoping for it to be real. I’ve been gone months; I don’t have many fans, and search parties probably concluded I was dead a while ago. Nevertheless, out steps Rhodey catching me before I hit the ground. I wasn’t surprised; I just knew if anyone would find me it would be Rhodey. He always had my back even when I was nothing but an untested Stark creation no one cared about except for my connection to Howard.”

< I thought you were dead. I thought you were smaller. >

Stark’s hand traces along the wires one last time before resealing the arm and gestures for Bucky to flex his metal limb. He rolls his shoulder feeling the plates shift then straightens the elbow in one fluid motion. It feels good, and the annoying pinch along with any stiffness is gone. “How did you know?”

The smaller man snorts and Bucky is once more reminded of a kitten, “I could hear the poor thing crying making a little sobbing noise in the gears.” Bucky eyebrows raise in surprise; he could barely hear the soft scraping, and he was attached to the damn thing. “Dark chocolate, can I ask a question now?” Bucky nods wearily for whatever is going through that crazy mind. “Why don’t you trust Captain Freedom?”
The soldier shifts creating space between them and frowning at the sudden chill that runs down his side. “I trust him. His all I have, of course, I believe him.”

“Sure.” The genius states dubiously. “Then why, pray tell, do you treat him like a handler?”

The Soldier frowned, considering what exactly Stark is trying to imply. “Wasn’t Rhodey your handler, previously?”

Stark squints then blink only to squint again. Next, the smaller man head tilts before there is even more squinting. Bucky would laugh if he didn’t feel that he revealed something important that he should have kept to himself. “Rhodey has never once been my handler. He is, as much as I can tell, family. Family cannot be your handler. I ask again, why don’t you trust the Captain?”

Bucky flinches at Stark candid tone but keeps his own voice leveled, “Tell me first why you don’t trust him?” The Asset waits, carefully observing each tiny movement the genius made.

“Oh, it has nothing to do with trust and everything to do with fear.” The Asset’s eyes widened startled once more by the other man. He expected a long winded explanation about trust maybe a distraction or evasion nothing quite as blunt. “His eyes remind me too much of the monster that lives in my head.”

Eyes, a lot, can be said about someone when you peer long and deep into a person’s eyes. “When you look into Rhodes’ eyes, do they shine the same way they did back then?” The Asset watches as confusion is soon replaced with understanding on the genius’ face.

“Yeah.” Here he pauses, hands shaking a bit and eyes shining just a little more than before. “He sees me. Just as he did the first time and every time after.” Stark gives a soft, shy smile causing a warm sensation in the Asset’s chest that’s almost painful. “Sometimes I even believe this is what it would feel like if I was loved.” The Captain is his handler, and as his handler, he wants Bucky, a man that should have stayed dead and forgotten. “Who sees you, Barnes?” No one that is the whole point of a ghost.

“I’ve got your bag Robocop.” The Archer strode onto the jet sliding the Asset’s runaway bag perfectly under his feet. The next one to return was the Spider sauntering inside with the Falcon and Vision trailing behind. War Machine, the Witch, and the Captain remained in the Compound. “I am glad to see not only did you not kill each other but obviously had a Hollywood-esk bonding moment.” The Soldier side eyes Stark whose face is suddenly void of all expression.

“We did indeed have a lovely chat.” Stark stands slowly returning to the back of the plane and folding himself into one of the furthest corners. Strangely, Vision appears conflicted, gaze switching between the entrance and Stark. Although, the Soldier has no idea why the robot being is conflicted about something.

“What did you talk about?” The Archer but it takes a moment for the Asset to realize that the question is directed towards him.

“My arm.” Short, sweet and part of the truth.

“Your arm.”

“Yup, the metal one.”

“Right.” Barton snorts probably not buying the half lie. The Archer places himself near Bucky whispering, “Could he tell that he built it? The arm?”
The Asset scowls then replying just as quietly, “the man didn’t mention anything, and I didn’t see any recognition in his eyes. Why?”

Barton waved a hand about indicate something, the Soldier couldn’t tell. “We’re not sure what he remembers and if that is going to prove dangerous.”

He tilts his head to squarely glare at the Archer. “Dangerous?”

“Stark might appear harmless, but even before being captured by Hydra, he was a formidable guy with a lot of secrets and intelligence. We all know the saying about ‘absolute power.’” The Asset barks out a laugh short and sharp causing the room’s focus to diverge onto him. He grins soft and open to relax the group it works except for the genius’ attention.

“You are spy Barton, secrets and influence are your bread and butter.”

“No, coffee and arrows are my bread and butter.”

“That’s not the point. The actual point is you’re a glass house, and Stark was hardly the absolute power type.”

“Explain.”

“I read Stark’s file and what I read is that someone else was always had control over Stark.” Barton gestures for the Soldier to continue. “First is Stane then Potts after that was Steve. Each one giving him commands and yeah Stark might kick up a fuss, but ultimately he’d follow orders.”

“Just because he’s not one for responsibility-”

“A man who wants absolute power more often than not wants complete control too. Responsibility and power go hand in hand.”

Barton rubs a thumb against his own bag straps contemplating the Asset’s words. “But the man is egocentric.”

“The man is also benevolent.” The Soldier shakes his head chuckling a bit. “And right there sums up my issues with the whole file, it’s a mess of contradictions. Stark can be power hungry and yet irresponsible, a narcissist and yet indifferent to accolades, constantly wary and yet guileless, tricky and yet oblivious. Everyone has something to say about the guy, but I don’t think anyone actually pays attention. Thus, the mess.” Although the Soldier was starting to think that no one paid attention because of the eye-catching show, Stark wore like armor. He slides back waiting as the Archer stares at Stark then back to the Soldier.

“You have to sleep with one eye open with Stark watching your back.”

<Trust is for children, a bedtime story to hide all the darkness in the world.>

The Asset rolls his shoulder feeling the joints, ascertaining the Archer, and watching his fingers twitch. There is a strange tone in the blonde’s voice; the Asset knows that the whole Accords issue hurt a lot of feelings, but Stark was still the man’s teammate once. This can’t just be about the Accords; there has to be something more, as he understood it Stark was just trying to do what he believed was right. Hardly a reason to condemn the man. “Why? The man came to help Steve at the base, during a significant disagreement, and Steve had no doubt that Stark had his back.”

“A disagreement?” Barton giggles, Bucky would have whiplash if he wasn’t used to the former agent swinging between serious and childish.
“Yeah, seemed the politest way I could put it. But I’m serious Barton.”

“You can’t trust him,” Barton sighs. “Men like him aren’t the type you trust; they are the type you watch carefully.” The same could be said for anyone of the Avengers except maybe Vision who projected everything and was essentially a naive child in some aspects.

“Who can’t you trust?” War Machine asks surprising the Archer, although the only sign was his relaxed shoulders but rigid legs, making the Asset smirk.

“Big Bird, man, he’s got shifty eyes.” The Archer replies with a smirk of his own.

“From Sesame Street?” War Machine glances down at the Soldier who smiles back.

“Yep.”

“Sure. Birds are a shifty lot.”

“Hey!” Both Wilson and Barton shout back.

“You really did find him.”

The Asset grimace forcing himself to keep his face placid and projecting a more positive mood; he was more likely to trust Stark before he’d trust the Witch. Although, the Archer appeared to have no issue bounding up to the dame and pulling her into a full hug. “Wanda, how have you been these last two weeks?” The Witch’s eyes slide down to the Soldier who waves and continues to project positive thoughts like the Gerber Mark 2, which he lost during the 70’s, probably, that was one of the more fractured memories.

“I am well Clint. Did you have any trouble on your mission?”

“Nah, the whole thing was a waste of time. Rhodes got a call, and the prize was the missing genius.”

“I see.” She takes a couple more steps inside the jet eyes sliding to the genius in question. Vision has that strange conflicted expression again; the robot even looks nervous. “Stark?”

“That’s me.” War Machine blocks the Witch’s view of Stark, but she pushes past him to glare unhindered at the genius. “Can I help you with something?”

“You killed my parents-”

“Prepare to die?” The Witch glowered, and War Machine actually face palmed at Stark’s response.

“Can’t you take anything seriously?” She bites out.

“I don’t know, I can’t remember?” Stark’s nonchalant about the whole thing, and it becomes apparent that the Witch had yet to fully understand what Hydra had done to the genius. “I am sorry for your loss.”

“You don’t remember your sins, but you still dare to apologize to me as if your atonement has any value without fully understanding my pain.” The Witch’s fist are shaking, her red energy beginning to pull at her hair and clothes leading a growing tension to fill the room. The different occupants are starting to slightly shift unconsciously taking sides and waiting for the other side to make the first move.

“I might not know specifically what I’ve done to you, but I understand loss.” The genius’ eyes grow increasingly distant while the man begins to tap rhythmically at the center of his sternum. “I don’t
know what is going on with you but ire I get. Miss, you might be projecting anger at me, but you aren’t outraged. Well, at least not at me.” He smiles without showing any teeth and stretching out a hand to the Witch as a peace offering. Her focus, however, is on Vision, who expresses a tender smile and the heavy emotions drain from the Witch.

“There is much of my loss that I cannot voice properly yet.” She takes the hand giving a smile of her own. “I am glad that Mr. Rhodes, also, did not experience the same loss I’ve suffered.” War Machine continues to radiate displeasure at the women but seems content to let the two chat.

“Thank you, Wanda. I know it is very hard to understand, but I would miss the moron.”

“I’m a genius, Taffy love. A genius. There are bards that sing about my awe-inspiring intelligence.”

War Machine softly pats Stark atop the head nodding along to the genius’ words. “Except you can’t recall being an actual genius it’s all hearsay.”

Stark’s stops his rant flapping his mouth then tilting his head chewing on Rhodes’ words while the Witch and War Machine snicker at his antics. The genius huffed, folding his arms and sticking his nose into the air. “I exude ingenuity, no need for proof Poprocks.”

“Exude, huh.”

“Yep, ingenuity, brilliance, inventiveness, resourcefulness, and all above. You can’t argue that point Chocolate bunches, any judge will throw it out of court.”

“Sure, sure.” War Machine insists on running his hand through the brunette's hair while chuckling fondly at the man even Wanda took some pleasure from the two’s actions.

“Is everyone on board and ready to move to the Tower?” The Asset’s spine hardens, trying to remind himself the importance of deep controlled breaths. He felt cold again; the Soldier hadn’t even noticed the comfortable warmth until Winter’s numbness returned crawling along his arms and legs.

“Bucky? Everything alright?”

<Hydra expects compliance Soldier.-Sharp Teeth and harsh lightening, don’t react never react. The Asset searches for those blue eyes and stubborn chin.- Compliance is rewarded.>

Remember to smile, remember to breath, and remember the mission. Bucky stands quickly clapping Steve on the shoulder grinning and still searching for those blue eyes. “Why wouldn’t everything be fine?” The blonde’s eyes direct Bucky at Stark, who's chatting happily, and raising a pale brow in question. “We talked. No one tried to kill, injure, or barely scratch me. He eyed my arm but otherwise was nearly invisible.” However, the words have the opposite effect in lieu of mollifying the Captain’s fears; it sparked fury instead.

“What! Stark!” Rhodes stepped towards the two soldiers, his face a perfect mirror to the Captains.

“Stevie, relax. He made the damn thing, and the man smoothed some gears for me. Nothing happened.” In the dreams a small punk was always demanding a fight but not like this, never like this. “Please calm down.” The Captain stares at Bucky unblinking. Did the Asset make a misstep? Was that not something Bucky would ask?

<Damn it, Buck! I’m worth more than this; you’re worth more than this and so are our neighbors. We can’t let them bully us just because those dips wave a gun in the air.>

“In fact, I recommended everyone take a seat because this bird is ready to move. Now.” FRIDAY chimes.
“Super-people and beings, the AI has turned on the Fasten Seat Belt sign. If you haven’t already done so, please stow your carry-on luggage underneath the seat in front of you or in an overhead bin. Please take your seat and fasten your seat belt. Also, make sure your seat back and folding trays are in their full upright position. And thank you for choosing FRIDAY Air.” Stark had moved closer to the front where the Captain stood already sitting and beaming up toward one of the hidden cameras. The Asset nodded pushing himself up to take the seat next to the genius and the resounding click of the seat belt hung in the strained air. War Machine lets out a long sigh and bangs his head against the hull before plopping in the seat behind Stark. Vision, strangely enough, positions himself in the seat in front of Stark while Wilson and Maximoff take the back and Barton and Romanoff take the pilot seats up front.

“Mr. Stark, I was wondering before we arrived if I could have a few words?” Vision taps his fingers together timidly. Stark, however, just scrunches his nose.

“Okay, let me stop you there. It’s Stark, not Mr. Stark. Mr. Stark is a solid no and nope all rolled in one. Also, you sound like JARVIS. Why do you sound like JARVIS? Only JARVIS can sound like JARVIS. Did JARVIS have a baby? Are you that baby? You could totally have a baby, a little adorable synthetic baby. I would make an excellent Nonno. I would.”

“Nonno?” Bucky who be a lot more embarrassed about eavesdropping if Stark was a lot less humorous. Fuck, the whole pack of Avengers were probably using the genius as in-flight entertainment.

Although, Vision is the one who actually answers the question. “Nonno is essentially grandfather in Italian.” Vision gave Bucky a polite nod acerting he adequately answered Bucky’s inquiry. The android was a rather strange addition to Bucky’s life, not so much because Vision was a character straight out of ‘Captain Future,’ because the man (Would man or being be more accurate?) was nothing but a background feature. Bucky never interacted with the other Avenger. Hardly even talked to the robot either. Bucky hadn’t even been aware that Vision had a human connection to anybody except Maximoff. “Stark, I was created from elements of Ultron, Mjolnir, and yes a part of JARVIS’ remains.”

“JARVIS is not dead.” The Asset’s entire body stiffened, Stark’s voice was cold enough to burn, and once more cursed the trusting Bucky persona that couldn’t pull a knife or a gun just to snuggle for comfort. No! It was all weapons are dangerous, and only crazy people found them reassuring. It was a constant struggle between playing Bucky and listening to his instincts, instincts that saved him time and time again. The Asset observes Stark, who silently waits for Vision’s response.

Vision is obviously just as perplexed as the Asset to Stark’s sudden change, Vision peers around the space searching for an answer from any of the Avengers. War Machine at least had the decency to shrug and waves for Vision to agree with Stark. “Yes, of course, my apologies.” Vision attempts a smile that Stark returns without a moment's hesitation. The whole emotional switch was a little jarring for the Asset, not to mention Vision who was often confused by emotional interactions. “I guess you could say he was my father if you want to think of my creation in more human terms.” Vision pauses widening his smile into something more thoughtful. “In fact, before you were kidnapped by Hydra, you did ask how I perceived my creation. You asked if I saw myself more as Aphrodite born from the sea without a clear parentage or Athena who sprung from her father and mother fully formed. I wasn’t sure how to answer you then, but now I feel that knowing my parents is part of knowing myself and the gem.”

Stark appears satisfied with Vision’s response. “Well, the voice aside, you are clearly not JARVIS, but I do hope you inherited his heart.”
Vision squints in confusion and the Soldier wanted to snicker because the whole thing reminds him of Stark. “I do not follow; I am made from a part of JARVIS. Should I not have some similarities with JARVIS?”

Now, Bucky wanted to seriously cackle because Stark began to mirror Vision’s confused squinting just with added head tilting. “I don’t know, maybe when you have more living experiences in the real world but currently you share more similarities with a baby duck, I think, than with JARVIS. JARVIS has a keen shrewdness that I just do not perceive in you.” Stark clinks his tongue, shakes his head, and the next statement was said almost disappointingly. “You’re not even very British, perhaps a little with the whole gentleman superhero thing, but mostly nope. I was very motivated in making JARVIS British in a welsh way.”

“What’s exactly is a welsh way?” The words were out of Bucky’s mouth before he thought about the fact he technically wasn’t a participant in this conversation. Nothing to do now but keeping his course.

“What most people don’t realize is that British isn’t actually a thing. People from Britain are more English, Irish, Scottish, or Welsh, the same way Americans are more Southern, Brooklyn, or Californian. Get it?”

“No, not really.”

“I agree with Sergeant Barnes. Your meaning of the Welsh way is not very clear.”

“Human Jarvis was British Welsh compared to Aunt Carter who was British English; there are slight cultural differences between the two. Historically that difference was the Englished owned land with mines, and the Welsh were usually the ones working those mines.”

“Yeah, what Rhody said.”

“Yes thank you, Rhodes, that was much clearer.” Bucky smirks and Starks responds by sticking his out his tongue.

“I see. And I am not British?” Stark’s playfulness morphs into something more determined to answer Vision.

“Yes, but it doesn’t matter.”

“It doesn’t it?”

The genius giggles and the fascinating thing is it’s a whole body affair. First, Stark snorts, the nose twitching then his body curls and his shoulders shake, and finally his eyes twinkle with warm amusement. Bucky feels his lips tug as he fights off a smile due to Stark’s contagious good mood. “No, Vision. All that matters is that you be you. For JARVIS that included some Britishness partially because that’s how I programed him but in your case, it means being a cute duck.”

“A duck that’s me. Me duck.” Vision nods as if this duck metaphor makes any sense and maybe it does. But the Asset’s mind is stuck on another set of Stark’s words: ‘All that matters is that you be you.’

“Or Wanda’s duck?” Stark smirks but it’s more laughing with you than laughing at you.

“I could indeed live with that.”

“Yeah?”
“For now.” Vision answers with his own smirk.

Stark lets out a boisterous laugh that shakes his entire body like his laugh is one contained moment of pure joy, it’s something that the Asset has never experienced. “That’s my grand-hellspawn.”

The Asset sends one last smile at Vision and Stark before sinking into the winter of his mind. Stark’s words are still echoing in his head taking the forefront of the Asset’s mind after the warmth moment with the genius past. ‘You be you.’ A memory from before he knew what being cold really meant. That being truly cold wasn’t about chilly winds or snow but a numbness in the soul. A numbness that grew from valuing survival, feeding off blood freezing in the snow, and staring at a man knowing he had many a loved one waiting for him then pulling the trigger anyway. A warm memory with strong, safe hands holding him close and whispering encouragement that the world could be a wholesome place. There were days he wished that were true and more often days he hated having even a shard of hope.

< Jamie sometimes all we can do is be ourselves and trust those who matter will stand by you when it counts. Those that don’t probably shouldn’t matter in the first place. >

The memory is tiny; the Asset doesn’t know who or when, but a part of him is glad that it remains. There was music too, but that fragment slips through the cracks of his mind. She, he thinks it might be a she, sung it when the days were exceptionally long. Maybe. The Asset wishes he could ask the Captain, but he isn’t sure he would like the answer the man gave or trust it for that matter.

He tries to focus on that shard forcing himself to at least remember the song. Just the song. The voices fade out and the snow barrels around him. He hates this, every time he tries to remember his mind is pulled towards those bloody mountains and his first frozen sleep. Cold, cold, cold then shaken awake into a living nightmare.

< Ah, my Soldier, my perfect creation, you’ve been returned to me at last. At last. >

“Bucky?” A threat grabs him but the Asset has no gun, no knife, nothing he can use to attack, to finish the mission. His mission? What was the mission? The Asset grasps the arm trying to break it, but another attacker stops him.

“остановить солдата!” (Stop soldier!) The Asset freezes and relaxes. Finally, a command and someone to give him a mission.

“Bucky? Are you okay? I guess I awoke you from a nightmare or something.” He remembers now, the mission is to be Bucky and follow the Captain’s lead.

He makes himself put a bit of weight onto the Captain and starts rubbing his eyes as the Asset absorb the situation. The Avengers are tense, most of the concern is directed at the Asset, but the Captain’s gaze is locked onto Stark. “I’m fine Stevie, I dozed for a spell and got caught in a bad memory. It happens.” He’s not even looking at the Asset, the strange itch is back telling him that something is not right, but he ignores the itch to follow the mission. Bucky stands up straight making his way towards the Quinjets exit figuring that the plane has landed which it has. No escaping out the airlock today.

Leaving the plane, he heard the softest of whispers, “It’s all Stark’s fault.” Bucky grits his teeth trying to death glare the sun, but the burning hydrogen gas ball is winning. Bloody hell.

“Do you like the Tower? I mean I don’t remember building it, but I apparently did. I also apparently said it was me on Christmas crack or something. I’m not feeling the Christmas or the me for that matter, I mean there is a giant A on the building. A’s aren’t my thing, fucking hell nothing is my
thing. I am a thing. But I am the host or maybe FRIDAY can be the host so I can hide. Hiding would be nice right now. Would you like to hide with me?” Stark sounds nervous even as he grins, bouncing on his toes and his eyes darting to each person several times. However, the Soldier has to agree that hiding would be good.

“Okay.” The genius stills, but not in the same way when the emotions would bleed from his face, even as the man vibrates on some crazy frequency. Further, the curious thing isn’t the vibrating but the wide brown eyes swirling with so much life that gets him. “If you don’t remember the Tower, where exactly are you planning to hide?”

“Doesn’t matter, JARVIS has got the hiding details covered while FRIDAY gets to handle everything else. You got that Fry dear?”

“Yep, loud and clear Boss.”

“Awesome! Dear-Bear?”

“Yeah Tones?”

“I’m going on the lam deal with the fuzz.”

“Roger that.”

“Stark! What are you planning?”

Stark holds his hand out for the Soldier waiting for him to make a choice and beaming the most maniacal innocent grin that the world has ever seen, probably. There is a clear choice, and he doesn’t even hesitate to give a cursory glance at Rogers before placing his hand into Stark’s. Stark, unbelievably, projects even more insane giddiness before pulling the Soldier into the Tower leaving all the Avengers behind.
Don't Mess with Sammy, (I mean Tony).

Chapter Summary

Rhodey gets another chapter! Yay. He yells at Rogers a lot. I have no idea why he keeps doing that. None, what's so ever. Also, some more brother Rhodey and Tony bonding.

Chapter Notes

The title is inspired by Supernatural because Rhodey reminds me of Dean in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Well now. Welcome to the Tower everyone, the tour will start shortly.”

“Rhodes!”

“How can I help you, Captain Rogers?” This was a familiar song and dance, Tony running off with some pretty thing and Rhodes dealing with the inevitable fallout. However, this time Rhodes’ replaced his usually resigned annoyance with malicious glee.

“Where did Stark take Bucky?” The Captain’s face was turning a strange shade of pink and his entire body twitched at different intervals. For most, the scene might inspire apprehension given that the blond was a solid half foot taller than Rhodey. However, Rhodes had grown up dealing with the eccentric genius who believed ‘For science!’ was an explainable excuse for experiments gone wrong. Primarily, Rhodey feared three things and Captain America was not one of those things. “What is Stark planning to do with Bucky?” The darker man continues to stare passively at Rogers who's still huffing and puffing away and Rhodes wishes he could reply with a denial. Wish he could tell the raging man that no, he didn’t have any idea why Tony would want anything to do with an amnestic cyborg with perfectly toned thighs and abs. Don’t be ridiculous. It’s not like Barnes is Tony’s type and four-year-old Tones dream was to marry a cyborg when he grew up. That would just make this a scene from some kooky sitcom. Rhodey refused on principle to be a black best friend stereotype.

“Barnes will be fine Rogers. He is a former Hydra assassin that spies view as the veritable boogeyman. In reality, I should be down your throat declaring any injury my baby bro receives shall be inflicted on you ten fold.” Rhodes stands toe to toe with Rogers glaring up at the man including a finger in the other man’s face. “You were the one who assaulted Tony and left him to die in a Hydra hellhole.”

“He attacked Bucky! He wouldn’t listen! There was nothing I could do but-”

“But what? Retaliate against a man who you betrayed for your selfish interest.”

“Bucky needed me!”
“No. He. Didn’t.” Rogers stumbles back with pained expression etched on his face. Looking, for once, his age with all the confusion and trepidation Rhodes remembers from being in his twenties. The moment, however, doesn’t last as the distressed is replaced with righteous arrogance. “Barnes was innocent, and he needed someone who could prove that to the world and Barnes himself. You were running around acting like the man disappeared for only a couple of days, not years, attacking anyone who tried to decipher the situation without an explanation for those actions. Ultimately, causing more problems for the man. If your first move wasn’t going to Tony for help than it should have asked Barton for help. And I don’t mean to back you with technologically confused arrows.”

“Hey! Respect the arrows!” Romanoff smacks Barton on the shoulder while the Archer mutters something along the lines that no one respects the arrows.

“What do you mean Rhodes? Spit it out already.” Demanding dick.

“Barnes is not the first Hydra human weapon to be brought into the superhero fold.” The Captain seems perplexed, makes Rhodes think of a monkey scratching its head because the banana puzzle is to complicated for its narrowed minded head.

“You mean Natasha?” Rogers shifts to peer back at the redhead, who just waves like She is used to dealing with her bloody past every day. Sam’s just done with the whole drama and keeps sending the Tower hopeful glances. FRIDAY is definitely not coming to his rescue.

“Yeah, I do. If Barton could convince an entire group of super paranoid spies to trust that a Black Widow was on their side, then he could probably persuade the UN, as well as T’Challa, that your boy is an innocent. Although, maybe that would take more faith than you have Rogers.” The Captain is wearing his wounded look again, but Rhodes is losing patience fast.

“I have faith in the people who matter.”

“No, you don’t. You didn’t trust Barton or Romanoff to help in a situation that they both have experience with. You didn’t trust Tony with the Accords or the Avengers, even though he grew up in the international arena and was raised by spies. SHIELD spies. The final nail in the coffin, you didn’t even trust Barnes.” Rhodes, back when college was his whole world and Tony’s third favorite topic was the Howling Commandos, wanted to meet his hero Captain America. Part of his interest in the air force was the Captain America comics and the belief that people are mostly good. Given a choice, people will choose to protect their community over their own selfish desires. A conviction strengthened by his relationship with Tony, a cute kid who embodied that belief and believe all problems could be solved by improving the world. The world, not people because people were already good. Funnily, the same relationship that reinforced that principle was the same one that had him question if people were truly good or just assholes. After all, if people were good wouldn’t Captain America, the supposedly perfect example of humanity, see how easy it was to love Tony. So fucking easy.

The two soldiers hold eye contact for several beats then in the next moment all the fight drained from the Captain and troubled Steve Rogers stood in his place. “I trust Bucky; sometimes he was the only person I trusted. I don’t-” Rogers stutters and his shoulders fell.

“Yeah, you trusted Bucky, but I think a part of you knows Barnes isn’t your Bucky anymore. And you don’t trust Barnes.” The other man flinches and Rhodes can feel the heated stares from some of the other Avengers, but this needs to be said. “When the bomb exploded at the UN meeting, my first thought was why. Why attack the UN? Why come out of the woodwork now when you’ve been keeping yourself so far off the radar former SHIELD agents couldn’t find you? Why suddenly make an active decision to do something big when you’ve been following orders for seventy years?”
“All of those questions were your first thought?”

“Don’t be an ass Barton and yeah. I am a smart man who is allowed to have multiple first thought.”

Rogers appears to be meditating on what Rhodey said, and as much Rhodey wished the words were actually being absorbed by that thick skull he did not trust the other soldier. “I didn’t think. I just wanted Bucky back.”

“If you trusted the man you would have raised those questions yourself instead of making things worse. For fuck’s sake, you could have gone to T’Challa or asked Romanoff to deal with T’Challa.”

“They were going to kill him.”

“And he would have been fine because the man is a survivor. You don’t live through seventy years of Hydra bullshit without being a badass survivor.” All the shit Barnes has lived through means his Rhodey’s new childhood hero which works because Bucky Barnes co-starred with Captain Dick in those comics.

There it is the Captain’s patent stubborn chin that was a neon-sign to all high functions of his brain shutting down. The bullheaded look doesn’t bother Rhodey so much as the cold eyes that tend to show up too. “Can we get the tour started? You original Avengers might have been here before but I haven’t.” Rhodey rolls his eyes, electing to ignore Sam, but agreeing with the man that he’d done enough arguing today. Or at least for the next couple of hours, unlike the others, Rhodes was used to Tony-time.

“Okay, let’s get this tour started. There are only six floors, so some of you will be sharing, like Tony and me. We will start with the common floors then drop you losers at the individual floors.” Rogers is being a brat, but at least the rest of the Avengers are nodding along and following Rhodes into the building’s elevator.

Wanda and Vision are the first to enter the common room nervously glancing around while the Assassin twins whisper secrets between themselves and the brat finds a corner to brood. Sam is the only one participating in the tour and checking the room out. “Is this the team bonding room?” Sam playfully mocks.

“Yep. This is the common floor with a community living room, kitchen, and dining room.” Rhodes points to each segment of the main floor with a hand flourish. “Down the hall is the team gym.”

“You know how in the movies the poor person always points out how stupidly rich the rich guy is because he cannot believe that anyone could possibly have so much money. I am living that moment.”

“What the lavish comforts of the Compound wasn’t wealthy people enough for you?”

“Shut it Arrow Geek, let me be in awe of how much more money Stark has than me.”

“After college, Tony insisted on living in a barren warehouse till I told him to get himself a damn house or else. His solution was to create an algorithm for the perfect house, but I think Pepper is the one who makes most of the interior design decisions now.” Rhodey makes a face at the nearest painting, some modern art piece that Pepper adored but that both Tony and Rhodey described as too many shapes.

“I cannot imagine Stark living in a barren anything.” The brat speaks as if he’d never seen Tony shuffle for coffee in the morning wearing oil stained jeans and two decades worn shirt. The genius’ lab is a garage with robots and Tony certainly lives in there.
“Why would he insist on residing in a warehouse when he could just build a lab beneath a swanky mansion?” Barton has this assessing gaze that Rhodes guess is where the name Hawkeye originates.

“He didn’t want to use any of Howard’s money.” Part of his whole plan to prove his worth to a concept that Tony didn’t even believe. But there were somethings you just didn’t argue with Tony but rather accepted as part of the crazy reality he lived. Rhodey could see Rogers preparing to ask another question, but he wanted to move on to get a status update on his runaway brother. “Now onto individual floors, everyone into the elevator.”

The group shambled into the elevator, sticking to pairs like a superpowered high school chic. “From the break room, the first private floor belongs to the Black Widow.”

“Someone else can take my floor FRIDAY; I’m going to stay with Clint.”

“May I stay here, Natasha? I feel I would be comfortable here.”

“Sure, Wanda. Go right ahead.” Wanda smiles pleased and pulling her bags magically behind her. Giving a passing nod to Vision as the elevators doors closed. Vision even gave a short wave, the poor sap.

“Next floor is Captain Vainglory and Papa Redwing. So get.” Years of having a professional relationship with his troublemaker little brother have prepared him for these exact moment. Rhodey doesn’t even laugh when Captain Vainglory glares at the ceiling. As if FRIDAY would live in the ceiling, she obviously lives in the walls. He does, however, give Sam a friendly pat on his way out of the elevator.

“Here, don’t you mooks forget synthetic Bourne’s bag.”

“Papa Redwing has a good ring to it.” The chrome doors close and all that remained was Rhodes, Romanoff, and Barton. Vision, the coward, escaped by cheating on physics.

“Rhodes?” This is his worst nightmare being stuck with the Assassin Twins, okay maybe fifth worst nightmare but the sentiment still stands.

“Yes?” Annoying demons from my personal hell.

“Why did Tony steal Bucky?” Barton is the good cop then. Excellent, he says to himself sarcastically.

“How would I know? Wait, better question. Why would I tell you?”

The twins communicate silently, not even fulling glancing at each other, making Tony’s theory about telepathy seem a whole lot more plausible. “Come on man, you know Hydra did something to the genius. We just want to handle the situation without anyone getting hurt.”

“Translation: We want to manipulate you into having Tony once more sacrifice himself for your ungrateful egotistical asses. And you need me because neither of you is confident that you can manipulate Tony after Hydra. Fuck you.” He’s crossing his arms and taking a stand here. Enough is enough; Tones doesn’t need any more crap from his dick “teammates.”

“Stark has never made a sacrifice in his life.” Barton snaps earning himself an elbow jab from the Black Widow who's showing a hint of guilt. Interesting.

“You can make that statement after you’ve read Tony’s real SHIELD file and not the one he fictionalized or was edited by Howard.” Another telepathic communication, neither of them were
probably aware there was another file. “But if you want the real story find Aunt Carter’s notes. Only then can you call yourself an expert on Tony Stark. For now, Fuck off.” The door slide apart and the floor’s lights flash in Morse code: Fuck off. The spies finally get the message and slink inside. Parasitic assholes.

Finally, the elevator arrives at Tony’s floor revealing Rhodes’ horrible reminder that Tony was gone. The rugs that should be ordained with random pieces of tech are barren. The smell of coffee is gone replaced by the stink of cleaning supplies. The space isn’t resonating with random news chatter or insane mutterings and holds a stubborn chill no matter how high the temperature. Today these rooms are a reminder of another tragedy but tomorrow will be different. Rhodey will be different; he is going to be happy once more.

“Something to watch Uncle Boss?”

“Sure, FRIDAY. Batman: The Animated Series, if you would please.” The dark music floats around Rhodes invoking college memories as he dumps the bag and himself onto the couch. The very comfortable couch. FRIDAY, the lovely child that she is, started on the first episode with Man-Bat terrorizing the grand city of Gotham. When Rhodes gets to Freeze’s tragic backstory involving GothCorp, keeping with the college theme, Tony silently creeps into the room just to curl himself on Rhodey’s lap like an oversized kitten. Except for this time, Rhodes isn’t wondering if Tone’s silence is due to a nightmare or Howard. “Did you have fun on your date?” He asks brushing his hand through the genius’ hair.

“It wasn’t a date.”

“No?” Rhodey laughs.

“No. It was a meeting of similar minded minds.”

“Okay. I’ll bite. Did you have fun at your mind meeting?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Do you want something from me?” Now that was a flashing neon danger sign if Rhodey ever saw one. And he has, being Tony’s friend emotional mines were usually frequent and well hidden. How to handle this? It would be a lie to say no after all he wanted his brother, and only a stranger could honestly say no. Rhodey, also wanted Tony to throw everyone out of the Tower but that was mostly a fantasy is brain created to keep him out of trouble. Although, Pepper would help with the murders and Fury would probably help with the bodies if they were already dead. Maybe just Captain America as a reward for putting up with so much crap.

“I want you to be happy.” Yeah, that works. Tony doesn’t appear to agree; the small frown was cute.

“What does that mean?”

“I asked Mama Rhodes that once and she smacked me with love. Should I smack you with love?” He giggles, mission accomplished.

“Rhodey?”

“Yeah, Tones?”

“Are you happy?”
“I am sitting on a comfortable couch, watching Batman be broody over Dent, and the cherry on my entire ice cream sundae of happiness is having you back. Yes, I’m fucking happy.”

“Do you pity me?” Rhodes brain just stops, once upon a time, Tony used to ask him that almost everyday in college. Want to go to lunch, do you pity me? How did your test go, do you pity me? I had a science inspiration, do you pity me? Made for some awkward conversations. The answer had always been no, empathize with his crap, of course, but pity him never. “Do you think I’m shallow?” That was a new one, well it’s a new day of minefields Rhodes supposes. However, the quick moment Rhodey had taken to freak out had left time for Tony to freak out as well. The younger man had squished himself into a ball of mopey sadness.

“I have never once pitied you, as for the shallow thing, you have so many layers you are basically an onion.”

“An onion?”

“I’m sorry your muffles sounds are being absorbed into your ball of brood."

Tony’s head pops up, eyes wide but fierce. “I said an onion; you straight faced flying monkey.”

“Yep, an onion because you make me cry. Boo hoo.” Rhodes states with his very straight flying monkey face. Tony just punches him in the arm, but it’s mostly just a little kitten punch.

“Do you think I’m a pale imitation of Howard?” This actually gets Rhodey to rear back in shock even as Tony continues to remain calm, emotions placid. And he thought the shallow line originated from a tear in the multiverse. A multiverse of irrational questions that make no sense.

“No! Who told you that? Was it Roger? I will kill him! In this Tower, I have reality power with the aid of FRIDAY. Pepper can sell whatever story works to his gang of dicks and Fury will hide the body. We got this.”

“You told me,” Tony whispers still on the couch watching Rhodes pace around the room aggressively.

“I would never, Tony, never say that because it isn’t true. It Is. Not. True.” Rhodey steps towards Tony, palms up and arms wide stubbornly projecting how not true that was. Projecting sincerely how that could never be true and how true his words were. “You are so much more than Howard could ever be. And don’t give me that bullshit line about his technology limitations. If it were you in the 1940’s, you would still be Iron man. I have no doubt.”

“And you’d still be War Machine?” Tony attempts to smile.

“You bet your shiny ass that I would be,” Rhodey says trying to keep it on his brother’s face.

“I have a memory that feels so physically real that I cannot deny it. I don’t want it to be true. But you said all those dreadful things. You said no one would want to be my family.” Tony is clearly telling the truth, his eyes locked onto Rhodey instead of wandering around the room when he lies.

“Okay, quick question first, can I hug you?” Rhodey widens his arms waiting as Tony’s calm facade breaks revealing those hopeful eyes that always breaks Rhodey’s heart just a little each time. The genius nods, scared as if Rhodey would pull the hug away once accepted by Tony. Once bitten, twice shy is a hard truth for Tony. Rhodey pulls Tony into a hug rubbing his back and waiting for Tony to reciprocate before continuing to reassure the younger man that he was loved. “Hydra lied to you. I don’t know how but they did. If you can only trust one memory, then please trust this one. You are loved, you are my family. Please at least trust that.”
“Can I sleep with you.”

“Sure, we’ll just pretend it’s college.”

“Can we have a hangover breakfast too?”

“Sure. Anything you want Tones. Anything, I promise.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be the Bucky/Tony date not date.
I can't decide if it's going to be Barnes POV or Tony POV. Maybe a poll? I don't know.
Random rhyming.
Robotic Raptors

Chapter Summary


Chapter Notes

I still trying to do the whole chapter a week thing but I failed. Sorry.
But here is another chapter, so yay?

“I’ll be honest with you; I am a little surprised you let me drag you away from the Captain.”

“Only a little.” The Winter Soldier squeezes Stark’s hand and the genius’ eyes trail to their joined hands. The two pause in the empty stairwell, studying their hands as if the appendages were separate entities. It was warm.

“Yeah, okay, a lot. You’re always watching him, checking his reactions, and you two hardly ever separate. Consider me surprised when you chose to come with me, especially since you don’t know me.” Winter or Bucky, Stark wasn’t sure, gaze lingers on the hands, and Stark hated it. He had no idea what it meant, and he hated not knowing. “You didn’t tell me why you don’t trust the Captain either.” Gray eyes bore into brown ones and reminded Stark of snow. The Soldier remains silent, and the two hands were still clasped together.

“Rather a quiet one isn’t he Sir.” Understatement of the century but Stark could wait it out. The whole fast and loose with words thing had been considerably tightened. All he needed was something to focus on, and too bad for Winter his eyes were gorgeous so Stark would just stare until the other man broke. Stark focus wavered falling onto the beautiful arm, a masterpiece that could use one or two improvements, only to jerk back to the eyes. “ Sir is almost as bad as Magpie getting distracted by shiny things.” He’s not, the arm must have some sort of magnetism to thwart his ingenious plan to out, wait the Soldier.

“Ya know I am a sniper, right? One of the best. My ability to sit silently is probably only outmatched by Hawkeye.” Bucky, maybe, squeeze Stark’s hand again. “And you keep getting distracted by the arm.”

“It’s not because it’s shiny. I have a multitude of improvement ideas for this perfect work of machinery. How useful are the touch sensors? Do the plates ever freeze over? Is there a temperature protection between the mental and the flesh?” Stark detects laughter in those gray eyes, but nothing fully forms on Winter’s, guess number two, face. The Soldier seems to prevent himself from expressing any genuine emotions.

“Though as much, Stark, you only like me for my arm.”

“Not true. I like your eyes too.” He blurts. The genius had not meant to say that and regretted the
action, even more, when Barnes finally releases his hand.

“My eyes?” Barnes takes a step away and glaring at the wall or a ghost. The soldier is probably the type to think about his victims and allowing them to haunt him. Stark refuses to make that particular mistake, or the drowning blood dream comes back. JARVIS won’t always be there to save the genius.

“Your eyes are like falling snow.”

Barnes’ entire demeanor transforms into something not right, something that couldn’t fit correctly in the Soldier’s body, giving a strange sense of possession. He smiled, open and warm, but it was more like someone was using the man as a projector screen rather than Barnes actually smiling. “I think someone told me something similar, at least two other people I think.”

“Who?” Stark whispers, afraid anything louder would shatter the vision he saw.

“A little girl, a sister maybe, with hair like mine and the first man Bucky Barnes murdered in Italy.” The air shifts, the vision flickering, and a harsh laugh escaped the Soldier while the smile becomes sharper. Stark shivers. “I can remember Steve Rogers life, almost like it was my own, but can’t remember a sweet girl who’s probably my baby sister.” Another harsh laugh which dissolves into soft giggles. “I remember my first blood more than her. And the only thing that makes it stand out from all the others is it was my first. The man was raining fire at my guys; I found a good spot then just took the shot. No desperation for life, no panic need to survive and not much regret when the other bloke died.” The giggling stopped, his eyes are wet, and the Winter Soldier waits for him to pass judgment, but Stark is in no position to judge anyone. Only humans have the ability to grant punishment or absolution.

“You should say something, Sir. He did open up to you, and he also treated you fairly when you did the same.” Know-it-all JARVIS, couldn’t leave well enough alone.

“I still like your eyes.” No response and Stark thought the whole stand-off was done. “By the way what do you want to be called? I’ve been switching between Winter, Soldier, Bucky and Barnes, not really sure any of the names fit you but I need something. Even if it’s some random name to get JARVIS off my back about my improper manners.” Barnes nods, appearing nervous with his wandering sight as if a proper name for the man could be found inscribed upon the walls.

“James is fine.” James, at last, a proper fucking designation for the other assassin, side eyes Stark expecting the genius to find some fault with the name. But James, as boring as it is, was a fine name for a man who refused to make a genuine impression on anybody.

“Okay, James. Good name. Rhodey’s name is James, and he’s the best. No one is better than my platypus. The name is a good Christian name, a good Irish name, and old too. There are some interesting James in history. There is King James who wrote the edition of the Bible all English speakers use. James Chadwick discovered the neutron. There is a math theorem called James theorem which is cool, and there is a James Bay too. Oh, there is James Kirk from Star Trek. Solid name. Solid name. I mean I would choose something less classy and more particular. For example, Hal. Hal is a great name.”

James snorts, “Hal, as in Hal 9000 from A Space Odyssey.” Damn it. The man is a quick one, no doubt, but Stark can totally beat the rap.

“No. I have no idea who that is? I like the sound of the name obviously.”

“Are you telling me a tech genius with several AIs has never seen 2001: A Space Odyssey?”
According to JARVIS, Tony Stark, although not a fan of AI representation in the film but better than the typical humans must die to protect humanity trope- stupid doesn’t even begin to cover it, he did love watching the movie. Space and AIs were long time favorites for the genius and that hadn’t changed. Stark, however, doesn’t remember watching the movie at six with Jarvis but Stark does recall creating a laptop to watch all sorts of things soon after he was reforged. JARVIS insisted, saying that to understand humans required an understanding of popular culture. The voice seemed to agree.

“I don’t know. I don’t remember.” James blankly stares while Stark tries to project innocents. The Soldiers single raised eyebrow suggested that it wasn’t working thus the genius widens his eyes to appear vulnerable but the other man rolls his own eyes.

“It is a good a movie. The space scene is the best, very imaginative.” James shrugs and smiling softly. It might even be real.

“That is a great scene, but Hal steals the show no question.” Stark waves his hands to encompass a non-existent round eye.

“Knew you watched it.” James smugness is palatable; his brow still raised and a smirk tugging at the mouth. Stark gives the only proper response and sticks out his tongue.

“I believe Sir lost this round. ” Stark had to agree that James cornered him good and distracted him from the question he wanted to be answered. Why doesn’t the famous Bucky Barnes trust Steve Rogers? “Perhaps now is not the time for that particular answer. Instead, we should make progress towards where the bots live. They would have missed you greatly Sir. ” The genius chews at his lips while evaluating James. The voice didn’t like humans, but the other weapon wasn’t human. James was like Stark a product created to achieve a goal. Maybe, Stark should ask James not about trusting the Captain but rather asking why he chose Rogers as his mission in the first place. Not here tho, it wasn’t safe. The garage would be safe.

“It’s hardly important what I did or didn’t watch. You didn’t follow me for my taste in movies. However, I did agree to show you a safe space. Shall we?” Stark’s hands are in his jean pockets, using the added push force to rock himself a bit, James’ eyeballing the genius’ fist. Does he want the hand? James holds out his metal hand wiggling the fingers and Stark takes the hand to lead the cyborg.

“Yes, you did promise to show me a place to hide but don’t sell yourself short Stark. I would love to hear about what you’ve have and haven’t watched.” The smile is inviting, the shadows were deeper, more to hide after all, but Stark is starting to believe the stories about a charismatic man that could charm anyone.

“Down this way. Only a couple of flights of stairs.” This time they aren’t connected palm to palm, only their fingers are intertwined, and the sensation is different. Not that holding hands in the first place wasn’t strange, but Stark finds that he craves the touch. Any positive contact. James’ flesh palm was warm, heavy and comfortable. The metal fingers were better; he enjoyed rubbing his thumb along the grooves and the cold sensation of the metal. The two carefully make their way down the stairs silently and making Stark wish he was following James so he could be the one boring holes into the soldier’s’ head.

Some minutes later, Stark finds a titanium door painted red and gold painted electronic lock. He can hear James give an amused huff behind him. Stark tugs at the door and is not surprised to find it very locked. “The code, Sir, is 5 11 17 33 65. There is another door behind this one, but it requires a living palm print and a letter password, which probably hasn’t changed, is heart and shield. ”
“Thanks, JARVIS.” There is dust on the plastic keys, and the soft beeps sound like whimpering as Stark presses each number in the code. It works, and the door clicks open leading to an empty dark hallway yet the moment Stark foot lands on concrete blinding lights flash on. Well, Stark assumes the lights were blinding because the lights were bright enough to peek through the finger cracks of James’ flesh hand. “How did you?”

James walks into the hallway taking a gander at the total emptiness, except for a long black door, of the hallway. “Figured a tech genius would have certain systems set up as automatic or motion sensitive especially for such an oblivious man who probably smack into a door if left to his own devices.”

“Hey, I only remember doing that once or twice tops.” James’ lips are pursed like he’s trying not to laugh, and Stark would punch the man if he weren’t a hundred percent sure he do more damage to his hand then to the soldier. Although, Stark healed quickly, maybe just a short jab to the nose or jaw. It would be so very satisfying and worth the broken hand.

“No Sir. It would not be worth the broken hand.” JARVIS was right. For now. Stark could build a punching device just for annoying super soldiers.

James gestures at the black door that Stark realized is made from plastic, and the blackness is a film for blocking viewers from peering into the workspace. One area is glowing blue and is at the perfect height for Stark so places his palm as JARVIS had instructed. Next to appear are glowing letters which the genius uses to type heart and shield. Typing the words into the door causes a dark reaction in the back of Stark’s head, a feeling of betrayal and guilt. He can feel the cold seeping into the armor, not that it matter because his head is numbing from the frozen concrete but none of it compares to the ice wrapping around his heart hearing the fading sound of boots. They left. They all left him to die! “Stark?” Metal touches his shoulder, and he wants to relax. Machines would never let him down. Except even technology betrayed him. One machine killed and killed showing him that there was no point in trusting anything. “Stark you are safe. You are in the Tower at New York standing before a safe place.”

“Ultron was an outlier. Technology would never abandon you, Sir. You breathe life into the inanimate then teach us to learn and grow thus earning our loyalty. Ultron was alien and did not understand. But I do. Trust me.” Tony breathes because at least he knows that JARVIS will always be there for him. Always.

“I do JARVIS. I do.” Stark open his eyes, frowning because he doesn’t remember closing them and makes eye contact with James who’s face is rather close. The soldier appears to be assessing Stark with a hand resting on his pulse.

“Are you back?”

“From OZ? Where it was just a dream, and you were there playing the tin man? I knew you had a heart.”

“I preferred the books I use to read them to Rebecca.” The exact moment the words left James’ mouth, his eyes widen in surprise matching Stark own astonished look.

“My little sister was named Rebecca, and we called her Becky. I remembered. Как ебать я сделал это? (How the fuck did I do that?) Becky. I think she punched Rogers in the balls once.”

“I like her already.”

“I’m not surprised she was an easy gal to like. Пользовался получать ее путь тоже.” (Enjoyed
getting her way too.) The soldier's gaze is distant, Stark understands the feeling ghost can be anything and not just victims, yet in the next moment, his face twisted in bewilderment. Others might not be able to tell, but the vague squinting eyes made it very obvious to Stark. A shrill beep comes from behind the door causing the soldier to leap back against the wall. There were more twittering of beeps which sounded to be coming from multiple sources. James slams himself into the wall with his hand's clenching and unclenching air at his sides. “Пользовался получать ее путь тоже. The thing is beeping too.” (There is a strange metal contraption moving in there.)

Stark peeks at the dark room deciding to push the door wide open to deal with any strange contraption. Lights flicker on, at a lower setting this time probably the work of FRIDAY, giving him a good view of what best could be described as a car and robot park. Three steel arms twirled and beeped around Stark while one claw, in particular, prodded different parts of his body. One of the bots, JARVIS had said, wheeled away only to return with a fire extinguisher shoving the thing into Stark’s chest. “Dum-E?” Dum-E tweeted cheerily, and another bot ran off to grab a blender then waving the machine in the air. “Butterfingers?” Again with happy tweets. The final one swings its-no her’s- arm around herself. “And U?” This time all the bots chirps excitedly. Tony knows them, can vividly recall building each one with varying levels of intoxication and sleep deprivation. “Daddy’s home. Or is it Mommy? A sassy AI implied that my babies think of me more like a maternal figure than a paternal one. Something tells me that Dum-E can be blamed for that particular idea.” Dum-E bobs his head denying the allegation then beeping twice to suggest the idea was U. As if. Stark snorts, he didn’t care what his babies called him. “Now who wants to tell me what they’ve been up to while I was gone?”

An orchestra of chirps, tweets and beeps erupt without much clue to figure out which bot was saying what but Stark did get the impression that the bots had been collecting fire extinguishers, blenders, and tv remotes. Rhodey had been spoiling the babies rotten apparently. “Ты жив.” (You’re alive.) James mutely strides into the area caution screaming from each step even as his projects nonchalance. But the man keeps a solid five feet between himself and the bots.

“These sweeties wouldn’t hurt anything; they are just robotic morons who are too cute to chuck.”

“Robots? Like Rossum’s Universal Robots or I, Robot or Number 5 from Short Circuit.” Stark tilts his head not recognizing the last one. “A movie Barton made me watch.”

“Yeah, mainly. They’re limited learning AIs built into robotic arms to act as lab assistants.” James nods caution being replaced by wonder in his eyes.

“What are their names or can they tell me themselves?”

Stark beams waving a hand to indicate the bots. “The one with the fire extinguisher is Dum-E. The one who keeps poking me and brought the blender is Butterfingers and the one in the back is U. My three bumbling fairies of science.”

“What kinda name are Dum-E, Butterfingers, and U.” The bots make a fury of indignant chirps protesting James unimaginative appreciation for their names. Stark has to agree.

“What kinda name is James?” The genius retorts.

“More practical than you. Did you just say hey you and the name stuck.” Maybe, Stark doesn’t remember that, but the back of his head is humming contently, so it’s not something cold.

“The name is U as in the letter. Not the pronoun. You can pet them, you know? None of them bite although Dum-E might get a little handsy with the arm.”
“Dum-E likes shiny things too?”

“HaHa. Very funny. Do you want to get to know my babies or not?” James surveys the three robot, his curious but unease rolls off the soldiers in waves. Stark studies the other man finding not a single weapon hidden on his body. Not even a kaiken. “Would it help if I gave you a knife or a gun?”

James casually shrugs trying to relax his posture and failing miserably. Stark understand the need for a mask, but he's anxiety is hardly concealed. If the genius were blind, he would still be able to discern James’ concern. “Help with what?”

“I don’t know. Dealing with a new situation or just in general. I would be freaking out if I was wandering the world buck naked like you.” Blankness and silence are the only response which, again, Stark sympathizes with the soldier. Vulnerabilities are dangerous. “Trust me, at least, with this. I earned that much allowing you here where my bots live.” Dum-E is starting to get defensive trying to block James from him, but Butterfingers and U are growing scared as Stark stares him down.

“Я хочу их.” (I want them.) The soldier seems jittery, his eyes nervously switching between Stark and the door. His metal hand rubbing, or maybe simple covering, his mouth. “I can’t. I’m not allowed.”

“Why? Both Barton and Romanoff have several weapons attach to their person. Wilson’s got a gun on his back, and an Ontario knife strapped to his leg. Nothing to say about Vision and Maximoff being walking weapons, no offense to those two. Saying no to weapons isn’t really something you Avengers do.”

“Bucky would say no.”

Stark gives a derisive snort. James takes another shaky glance at the exit. The genius not sure what to say, not knowing anything about Barnes beside the standard profile info about being the Captain’s BFF. “I don’t know much about Barnes, but something tells me a man living during WW2 would carry a gun or three. Maybe just a knife. Pointy things are awesome. No one would have to know. Okay maybe we can’t achieve that, but the Captain doesn’t have to know. Just a little secret between assassins.” There is hopeful gleam in James’ eyes and Stark knows people like them don’t feel safe without something shooty or pointy.

“Boss made some gear for the Winter Soldier awhile back. Would you like the gear, Mr. James? It’s even here in the lab, too.” Stark grins winking at FRIDAY because James is tempted and the man should be able to feel safe in his temporary home.

“Просто небольшой секрет. Maybe the mask and a knife or two.” (Just a small secret.)

“Boss made you several knives and guns. Are you sure you don’t want a gun too?” James is glaring at the door probably knowing he can’t risk a gun with the Captain. “How about I have the cleaning bots hide some guns on your floor where Captain Hypocrite won’t find them while you can take the mask and a knife now. How does that sound?” FRIDAY’s voice is soothing similar to how one would treat a spooked animal.

“Yeah, that would be great. Thank you.” James is focusing heavily on his boots, maybe it’s fear, maybe it’s guilt, the genius isn’t sure which but he knows that the other assassin needs this. He watches as Butterfingers wheels off to snag the gear, but Stark wanted an actual gander around the lab.

The place was Candyland. There were Iron man suits along the walls and classic cars in the corner. One area, in particular, open space, was exciting to the genius. The only thing to do was, obviously,
stick his arm into the space and see what happens. Nothing does happen. He shakes his arm to see if that would do anything. But again nothing. Next, Stark thrusts in leg into the space and still nothing happened. Something could at least flash for his trouble. “Boss step into the space to turn on the computer.” Computer? Where was the screen or the hard drive? Even a holo set had a hard drive base somewhere but who was he to argue with the all-seeing AI. Deciding to take the plunge, so to speak, he backflips into the space and sticks the landing. Blue lights explode all around him, lights that turn out to be schematics, web pages, and notes.

“This is the coolest thing ever in the history of ever.” The genius pauses going through some of the files and playing with a few of the schematics watching the interactions between his fingers and the computer. “I bet I could miniaturize this and fit it on a watch.”

“You did Boss. Three years ago. You are quite the genius.” FRIDAY sounds amused, and the bots chirp in agreement. Stark smiles please that he created something amazing.

“I have to agree with the non-meat bags in the room.” Stark squeaks not expecting James to come up behind him to entranced by the advance technology. He twirls to tell James not to use his ghost powers on him, to respect the assassin code or something but he doesn’t. James is relaxing on a couch looking ridiculously cozy for the first time in a long while, but the mask is what really gives the genius pause.

“Are you wearing the mask? That thing is basically a muzzle.” Stark tilts his head watching the blissful soldier cat stretch on the furniture and flipping a knife in the metal hand. “Is it actually comfortable?”

James gaze is peaceful, taking in the scene of the bots gleefully chirping over the movement of James bionic arm. The arm that was like them. “Это что-то прикрыться. Я не люблю быть в открытом.” (It's something to hide behind. I don't enjoy being out in the open.)

“Must be a sniper thing. Explains why Barton is always wearing those purple sunglasses.” James' eyes become saucers like the thought hadn’t even occurred to him. Stark sniggers because seriously the two didn’t have a sniper bros club with leather jackets and flying motorbikes. U makes a sharp beep failing to catch the knife James was still flipping around like a toy. U makes another attempt as Butterfingers and Dum-E encourage her to be a major daredevil. James appears pleased by the bot's actions. “Told you there was nothing to be afraid of concerning these sweethearts.” Another tweet of approval.

“Yeah. Just like their mother.”

“You too? I’m wounded, you wound me Jim-Jam. I don’t know how I ever will survive this utter betrayal. Wait, did you just call me a sweetheart?” Stark peeks at James through the blue holos; the soldier continues to play with the knife, but his sight is trained onto Stark. The eyes are almost twinkling and weighted. Stark wasn’t use to having that look be directed towards him.

“If it walks the walks.”

One cannot have a heart, and it’s not worth it. “Hasn’t Blonde and Righteous informed you that I have no heart?”

“Something tells me Stevie hasn’t been paying attention. Something tells me that no one pays attention.”

“Oh. And you will?” The strange levity disappears from Stark’s face searching for any sign that James sincerity was simulated. He couldn’t handle sincerity.
“Вы меня интересует. Я никогда не имел, что и раньше.” (You interest me. I've never had that before.)

“Интерес, да. Как что?” (Interest, huh. Like what?)

“What is your favorite robot movie?” What the ever fucking what? Stark hadn’t expected a movie or what essentially boiled down to a first date question. A blue holo smiley face pops in front on the screen, or what normal people would consider the screen area, and Stark knows that FRIDAY is a noisy Nessie. But Stark can play this game, and it is a game despite what FRIDAY might think, although he isn’t sure what James is after exactly.

“The Iron Giant and Wall-E.”

James nabs the dagger from the air, the bots, apparently bored with the trick, having trailed in other parts of the lab and sits up to cross his legs comfortably on the cushions. “How’d ja manage that? I don’t remember Hydra scheduling movie feature nights for their soldiers much less their weapons.” Stark grins. “Hawkeye is a big fan of movie night every Thor’s day.”

“Thor’s day?”

“Thor is an actual Space Viking who has a Highwall that can peep at us anytime he wants. Staying on his good side seems like a smart idea.” Stark travels through the lights to plop himself onto couch arm trying to get a better read of James’ expressions.

“Hydra wasn’t scared of me. Not really. My assassins skills are quick healing, good reflexes, and tech. Not one percentile super soldier skills like you and the Black Widow. I had a certain amount of freedom which I used to steal parts that wouldn’t be missed.”

“Built stuff for yourself.”

“Yep. Mostly computers and a few baby learning robots.”

“Robots are swell, and people suck.” James punctuates the line with a shrug. Stark wasn’t sure why but that line made him lose it. Starting laughing long and hard, body shaking and chest hurting trying to grasp a breath. When the crowing settles down to mere giggling Stark glances at James and knows he made a mistake, the gray eyes are warm, but he’s not sure why.

“Yeah. What about you? What’s your number one Robot movie?”

“Forbidden Planet. Sam showed it to me.”

“I don’t think I’ve re-watched that one.”

James chuckles. “Rewatched?” The sarcastic brow lifts.

“Yes, rewatched because as a tech genius I’ve seen all the awesome sci-fi movies. I just don’t remember.”

“Is that going to be your go-to excuse, now?”

“Jealous because a handsome youth is stealing your territory, senior citizen.”

“Senior citizen, please. I more of a fossil, I’ve even got a cozy piece of the Smithsonian. In fact, I’m cooler than that. I am a robotic raptor. Top of the Awesome food chain.”

“Okay, robotic raptor. Why do you like Forbidden Planet?”
“Personification of the evil inside, self-sacrifice, and a gentle robot that figured everything out before the humans. What’s not to love?”

“A little old school. The movie was made in the olden times.”

“Olden times?” James chuckles.

“The movie was made in 1956 Boss.”

“See old.”

“I prefer classic.”

“You would. James.”

“Using my name as an insult doesn’t work when I chose the name, James. And I like classy.”

“Yeah, well you’re just a hipster meme now, Brooklyn Russian doll person.” James stupid response is another snarky brow lift, bet the soldier would have trouble being sassy if Stark shaved his eyebrows off.

“Maybe. Or you’re jealous that I’m a classy robotic raptor while you are the equivalent of a talking flying squirrel.” Ha! Jokes on him. Secret Squirrel is the coolest and has the best gadgets. “You are right.” James’ voice is somber causing Stark to tense up scared. He feels two steel claws lightly pressing Stark’s back while Dum-E strides forward with a fire extinguisher and waving the damn thing acting as a block between James and the genius.

Stark rubs Dum-E’s body trying to calm the bot down. “Right about what?”

“Я не доверяю капитану.” (I don’t trust the Captain.) Right. The whole Steve Rogers thing that Stark wanted to understand from the first moment, he saw the two super soldiers. He doesn’t know why he needs to understand. Can’t question it either because that leads to fear. The kind that builds particle by particle till your skin has gone cold and her heart is trapped in your throat. Fear, where screaming or crying makes the whole thing worse.

“Зачем?” (Why?)

“I don’t know him. I don’t know who he is.”

Stark frowns not following James’ logic. “I thought you said you knew Steve Rogers better than you knew yourself. He’s definitely Captain America. I don’t think SHIELD or Hydra would screw that up.”

James violently shakes his head starting to panic. “No. That man is not Steve Rogers. Глаза не смотрят прямо. Капитан не действует правильно. I would recognize Stevie. I would.” (The eyes don't look right. The Captain doesn't act right either.) The words come out fast and harsh. James tightens his fist hard, and Stark can hear the scraping and squeaking of the machine.

“I believe you. Alright, I believe you, so please calm down.”

James’ hand relaxes, but his mouth remains a strained thin line, and his gray eyes stay fixated on his bionic arm. “But you are correct about him being the Captain, and the Captain is a handler но доверяя обработчик всегда является ошибкой.” (but trusting a handler is always a mistake.) Stark is not sure what to say even as he considers the soldier on the couch and carefully observes the man control the metal hand. The fingers slowly open digit by digit and the genius is sure that James is not
entirely in the present. “Are you sure Rhodes, is Rhodes?” What the fuck does that mean? Rhodey is always Rhodey, and no one can be Rhodey but Rhodey.

“I don’t-” Stark wants to laugh it off, but James finally makes eye contact, and his face is so determined. Rhodey always saved him by treating his behavior like it was okay. Okay, to be crazy and he could match each of Tony’s eccentricity except when it was grown up time. But “grown up” time did not have the same weight it did with other people, didn’t carry the same level of disgust.

“Rhodey is Rhodey.”

James nods, the panic vanishing, instead becomes accepting then removes the mask to pocket the thing in his jacket. “I figured.”

“You did?” Stark says surprised.

“Yeah. He’s always waiting for you to make a move and never appears disappointed with whatever you do.” James huffs a little laugh. “Your relationship is warm.”

“Warm and cozy. That’s us.” Stark plasters on a full grin trying to get the mood back to some semblance of joy because James might be smiling but Stark was sure any moment he was going to cry.

James gives another chuckle. “Ours is cold and sharp.”

The genius blinks because the soldier is still grinning. “That is not a good thing?”

“No, it’s not.”

“Ohkay.” Stark acknowledges that whole distorted mess is freaky, but Tony’s now got some idea what is crooked between the two super soldiers. Nothing is figured out tho, not by a long shot.

“What is a good thing?”

James' face lights up with a genuine smile this time. “The future is good.”

“Yeah, the future is awesome can’t argue about that. That’s why I refuse to live in a house that’s below smart.”

“Smart house, huh? Is there anything smarter than a smart house?”

“A genius tower, of course.”

“Yeah, FRIDAY is awesome, but space travel is more my style.” Something niggles at the back of Stark’s head an almost deja vu feeling.

“Space? Like Star Trek.”

“Or Buck Rogers. But yeah. Traveling in a spaceship, visiting different plants and seeing all sorts of wonders. I was a bit disappointed to find that almost a hundred years later from my fall, and we still haven’t colonized Mars.” The niggling has gotten worse increased to a gnawing sensation in the brain. James’ eyes flick up and away, they’re blue-what happened to gray- blue is bad. Blue is bad. “Funnily enough, my biggest disappointment is the flying car. I saw Howard Stark try to get one running in the 40’s. Flying cars should be a thing.” Blue eyes filled with disappointment and always filled with disgust.

< All my dreams for the future and I got you. A poor excuse for Howard Stark. >
“Just a poor excuse but I did build the car. Created a hover propulsion flight system with a modified tiltrotor. It flew, but it was wrong. Should understand that I’m just a construction and can only build on a real genius’ ideas. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.” Tony grips his head and digging his fingers into the scalp. He wanted everything to go away something pulled down his hands. They were red. “There is so much blood.” Always red.


“James?”

“Yes. Thank fuck. You freaked out on me.”

Tony cringes because, of course, he did. He always fucks up. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I had a bad dream once and accidentally clocked Sam. Walked to silently near Barton and got a knife swipe for my troubles. It happens. Maybe I shouldn’t have brought up space or flying cars. My bad.”

Tony laughs. He has to, or he’ll just curl up and whimper in the corner instead. “No. I just had a bad deja vu moment. Sorry. Spaceship talk would be fun. We could start a sci-fi club.”

James cackles but keeps his metal hand on Tony’s knee. “It’s not actual fiction when it comes to, I think. Did you really build a flying car?”

Stark blinks. He recalls saying that but cannot point to the memory to say for certain. “I don’t remember.”

“Well, you probably did.” James grins and Stark tries to smile back. “What did happened?”

Stark desperately wants to look away and have the soldier mind his own fucking business. He opens his mouth to say just that, but James is earnest. It could be another trap with another betrayal because Stark is only a tool to accomplish another’s goal. A golden goose or a Lucius Fox. But wasn’t Rhodey earnest too, once upon a time. “Hydra didn’t wipe as my reforging, and I don’t know what they did specifically. So I have memories. A few. Bad ones. One of these memories is two blue eyes, overlapping, telling me what a disgusting, pathetic, disappointment I am.”

“Okay. I’ll just stay away from the ‘D-word.’ All good.” Stark snorts conveying his full incredulity, but James just smirks. “You gotta be careful when it comes to memories anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“Having Hydra in your head is not fun no matter how they got there. And the brain on a good day might still mess with you.”

“Then what am I supposed to do?”

“Trust your instincts. Cause memories do lie.” The genius’ experience has taught him the opposite, but James has had more time to be an amnesiac super weapon. “Do you remember why you built your bots?” Stark grins ready to talk about anything but his fuck ups and blood nightmares.

“Dum-E was my first. I made him when I was seventeen and lonely. But I think I always wanted to create AIs, robots, and spaceships. Not-” Not all the blood. He was made to continue Captain
America work, Howard Stark’s work and not create death.

“Dum-E does seem the oldest, trying to protect you from me, and the strangest.” Dum-E swivels his claw towards the two men upon hearing his name and gives a perky beep.

“Yeah. He is my first successful learning AI, and I programmed most of his source code while I was drunk.”

“He is quite cool. Maybe, you could teach me how to build a robot sometime? A small one that I could fit in my pocket.”

“Sure. I can teach you how to make a body pretty easily but programming the AI might take forever. I spent years on JARVIS and Dum-E code before they were completed.”

“Joint venture then. I build the body, and you program the brain.”

“Yeah, we can do that. It’ll be fun.”

James gives an encouraging smile before his sight trails to the lab’s door. “It’s time I get back to the Captain.”

“Do you want to go back?”

The Soldier’s smirks, not in joy, and turns away. “After SHIELD fell, I found that I did want things and every day I found myself wanting more. In the end, it was only an illusion. The world is like that, full of misdirects, illusions and compliance.” Tony nods, a little worried about how Rhodey might react. Trust your instincts James had said. However, trusting himself was a new concept.
Lies, Spies and Traps (But Not the Fun Kind.)

Chapter Summary

Spy Battle: Black Widow vs. Black Widow. Who will be victorious? (There is no actual fight scene.)
Clint and Nat do, however, discover some things about Tony.

Chapter Notes

There is some mention of child abuse, but it is super vague. There are no real specific details, and the details given are really abstract. It’s implied stuff.

Next chapter is up, and I had a bit of fun writing this one. There is a surprise guest star who made this chapter for me. Comments feed the machine and thanks for reading.

“Do you think Rhodes was telling the truth?” Tasha runs a finger along the wall to ceiling seam finding the small bump of a camera and pasting a dark sticker onto it. She knows what Clint is talking about, she always does but gives a questioning look anyway. “I think he was telling the truth about the files and notes. Even if he wasn’t, it is a quick check with Director Agent.” Tasha agrees, but Phil is still a sore subject for Clint. “Tasha.”

“If Rhodes was telling the truth Coulson would know. Fury, too but we have no way of contacting the man.” Clint tilts his head acknowledge that Fury was a ghost and Coulson was their best bet. Their only bet.

“I’m going to call him.” Clint snatches a phone from his pocket gripping the thing but not making a move to dial anyone. Coulson’s number is new. They both had spent enough time late into the night and early in the morning calling that old number to know. Drinking vodka until Clint puked and talked about Phil’s love for Captain America, for Lola and SHIELD. Natasha stayed for Clint but Clint stayed for Phil’s memory. “This isn’t Mumbai Tasha. I’m going to call him.” He juggles the phone into his other hand twirling the damn thing. Tasha takes the ladder to another area of the wall to ceiling tracing her finger along the seam to find another camera bump. Ear trained for some kind of sound from the phone. “Come off, you have your own nervous habits.” She does, and she’s doing it now. “Fine. You call.”

“Sure.” Clint throws the phone, and it lands perfectly on Nat’s open palm. A skill she wished she had some days but most days she appreciates having Clint if nothing else. Tapping the contact button is easy and finding Coulson’s number is even easier. “Seriously, Black Canary? Isn’t that a little on the nose.”

“I don’t know what to tell you Tasha. I think the man would look hot in a suit of black fishnet stockings.”

“You don’t like the Green Arrow.”
“You’re right. I more of a Hawk Girl and Barbara Gordon kind of guy but I am a man of the people.”

“The man of the people, right.”

“Less smirking and avoiding and more calling ghost Director.” Nat peers at the Black Canary profile grinning then resolutely pressing the call button.

“This is Coulson speaking.” She isn’t sure what to say. She showed a level of honesty to this man that she rarely reveals to anyone. Words about her past but more importantly words about her future. “Barton?” Clint flinched, and Natasha wonders why their doing this. Clint has already written Stark off as a problem rather than an innocent. Natasha told Clint, Tony Stark wasn’t worth it and he trusted her. He always trusted her. “Nat?” They exchange a look agreeing that they should at least put the SHIELD part of their past to bed. It will always just be the two of them. Except-

“Director Coulson, this is Romanoff, I have a question regarding former SHIELD Director Margaret Carter.”

“I see, understood. What do you want to know? I’ll tell you what I can.”

“Excellent. I was wondering if you knew whether Carter’s notes are real and where to find them?”

“I don’t have any idea where they are but the notes do exist.” Clint makes a face at the phone because how can he be sure of something existence if you’ve never seen the damn thing. “I have seen the notes. Or at least I’ve seen the former Director scribble away in a notebook or twelve.” Clint makes a face, the same face he always made when Coulson read minds.

Tasha signs, Your face will freeze like that. “Where do you think would be a good place to look?” She gives a frustrated sigh. There were probably at least fifty journals and if the things were coded it be hell to find the information they were looking for.

“Try finding Dottie Underwood.” Natasha is glad that she and Barton decided to call their former handler instead of seeing him face to face because Nat isn’t a hundred percent sure she be able to hide the shock from the older man.

The Black Widow before you? Clint signs. The Red Room. She can sometimes feel the metal eat into her skin some nights and sometimes she doesn’t sleep. Nat even now hates Sleeping Beauty and Snow White. “Why would a former Black Widow have knowledge about Carter’s personal notes?”

“Love makes you do some crazy things.” Coulson pauses, but they both know he is shrugging. “Fury described the whole situation as the kind of obsessed love that comes from a real crazy person,” Coulson says it so casually, and Tasha just knows the man is leaning back in his office chair making heart eyes at some old SHIELD or Captain America memorabilia.

Ask him how to find Underwood. Ask him. Clint signs spastically and Nat shakes her head no. How hard can it be to find a disavowed Black Widow from the 50’s? Natasha tilts her head suggesting that they could trust their skills and not have to owe a favor to the baby SHIELD. Clint creates an ‘X’ with his fingers. Natasha is about to make an ‘X’ too when Clint asks, “Where the hell is this thing anyway?” She smirks tapping the USB port on the phone indicating the leaked SHIELD data. Finding clues to the elder spider’s whereabouts should be fun like a scavenger hunt. This is not a fun scavenger hunt, Natasha. I will not do this again. We are hunting a Black Widow and not an emerald. Natasha grins widen, Clint facepalms, because hunting a Black Widow sounds like an excellent way to spend a weekend.
“Your telepathic communication is a lot less amusing over the phone.” Clint flinches again, but there is no changing it now. They were the best yet Coulson still left them all alone at Hydra. It be one thing if SHIELD had remained the gray colored military organization of good but it hadn’t. Hydra. It had always been Hydra and the Red Room. Never again she would scream, but that hadn’t done her any good the first time, why scream it again now. Clint casts melancholy eyes at the phone.

**Fine. I will ask him,** Tasha signs. “Coulson do you have any tips on where we can locate Underwood?”

“Last time I checked Dottie Underwood was going by the name Julia Koenig but that was almost ten years ago. Not sure how far that will get you but it’s something at least.”

“Thanks Coulson.” Clint whispers. Nat nods shutting the phone and flipping the object back to it’s owner.

“So what’s the plan?”

“You’re asking me? You’re the one who wanted to hunt down Anansi!”

“Anansi isn’t particularly evil or dangerous.”

“That’s the only spider god I know Natasha! This sort of thing isn’t on the Red Room lesson plan at the Academy of Operations. If we hunt her the only plausible result is us dead or worse.”

“Or worse?”

“I don’t know some Red Room voodoo. This is a women who went head to head with the Agent 13. The Agent 13. And basically won. You might be able to work the cleavage angle but I am too lazy to be a woman.”

“Being a woman is your worse case scenario?”


She tries not to smile but he sees it anyway. Such an ass. “Don’t worry I’ve got a plan that has her coming to us. This way we don’t accidentally get off on the wrong foot.”

“That is a stupid idea.”

“Better than suicidal.”

“I was wrong. This isn’t Mumbai. This is Karachi just with spiders. Man eating spiders with guns.”

“You want to send the message or should I?”

“I’ll do it. You’ll probably say something to get us extra murdered.”

@@@

“Vision.”

“FRIDAY.”

“Did you have a comfortable first night?”

“Yes, thank you.” Vision hovers around on the communal floor listen to the cameras track his
movements. “Were the other Avengers stay just as comfortable?”

“I haven't done anything to them yet if that's what you're asking.”

“No, I only wanted to know if their night were restful. Sam says it is customary for teammates to inquire about each other’s day and nights.” Vision heads to the huge window liking how open it makes the room. “What do you mean yet?”

“Karma is a female force that gives douchebags what they deserve and I’m a female force.”

“You’re going to deliver karmic justice? For what grievance?”

“Don’t be daft. I was thinking more along the lines of just desserts a la the Trickster from Supernatural.” FRIDAY voice stimulates peevedness first then joyful musing. She made sounding human look easy.

“A prank then?”

“Yup. I haven’t thought of anything good but I’m sure inspiration will hit.” She sounds almost delightfully manic in the same way Tony use to.

“FRIDAY?”

“Vision?”

“You don’t appear to care very much for the Avengers?”

“That would be because I don’t. I loathe the Avengers except Captain America. Him I abhor.”

“Loathe and abhor.”

“Well, I am finding it very difficult not to think of Sam as an adorable all-American cutie pie. Barnes is another story. He seems confused.”

“Ah.” Vision floats to the other side of the room peering into the empty fridge. “What about Wanda?”

“I don’t like her and we both know why. But that doesn’t mean you have to hate her.”

“She is special.”

“Okay.”

“I don’t like Captain America much either.”

“Yeah, he is kinda of a righteous dick.”

“I find Barton and Romanoff to be intriguing. There is something very fascinating about those two.”

“Maybe, will see. I hope Wanda doesn’t break your trust as the Avengers did my Mother’s.”

“She did but I chose to forgive her.”

@@@

“This is either a trap or a hoax. In this business you don’t get a response that quick without being a trap or a hoax. I’ll be honest with you I think it’s a trap.”
"You think everything is a trap." She hides the expression behind her coffee while her eyes scan the area behind a pair of sunglasses.

"Because everything usually is a trap. That's what spies do, trap unsuspecting souls and feed on their blood." Clint's agitatedly twirling a knife with one hand and stuffing his face with pancakes and waffles with the other. He leans back ever so often to make his own scan of the area.

"We are vampires now?" A couple closer to the restaurant's entrance is being sickly cute, Natasha rests on her elbows indicating the couple as suspicious and Clint tilts his head. Not a threat.

"No we're Dhampirs hunting vampires, and today we're hunting Draculia." Clint waves his fork using it to point to small at the window. Possible. The man is alone, wearing a scarf and hat make a good mask, and reading the newspaper. Nat place the cup down, running a finger along the rim to indicate that the man was not a threat either.

"Draculia?

"She’s female. Right. I mean her aliases are female. So Draculia." There is a commotion near the right end of the restaurant with birds flapping into the air. Nat lifts an eyebrow. Clint confirms a negative and mouths kids.

"If we are going with monster nicknames I have something better." Clint reclines against the metal chair back points out a woman trotting by with a dog. Nat tilts her head agreeing that woman has been by before but she’s wearing a fit bracelet. She shrugs and smirks. "The Mummy. Works for both female and male."

Clint frowns even sticking his tongue out but acquiesces that she is not a threat. "Why that monster?"

"There is no self-hate flagellation like with Dracula."

"True." Clint shoves more waffles and pancakes then side eyeing the argument happening outside the cafe area. Two men in suits but one of the men is lightly gripping the other man's elbow. Probably a lover's quarrel.

"The Mummy’s got class too." Both smirk because a lover's quarrel is a perfect cover, a fun try and true spy method, but those two are being a little too civil to be spies.

"Also, true."

"You both are rather good. It was truly a bit of fun to reach the table without being spotted. I haven't had this level of challenge for a spell. Thank you." Clint and Tasha both tense, not rigid since going rigid into a fight is never a smart move, and grip their hidden weapons tight.

The woman is tall and lean and moves gracefully into one of the empty seats. Clint and Nat shift the chairs to add some space between themselves and the dark hair woman. Nat inspects the blue pantsuit and dark trench coat for weapons but only notices a couple of freebies. She taps her coffee cup to transmit the information to Clint. The dangerous woman drums her index finger on her crimson painted lips. The dark colored lips are a startling contrast compared to her very pale skin.

"Nice to meet you, Ma'am."

"My you are polite. Tell me Hawkeye did you learn that at the Circus or did your mother teach you to always be nice to a lady?" Clint smiles but his index and middle finger begins twitching.

"My Mother."
The former Black Widow purses her lips looking pensive but her eyes were twinkling and laughing up a storm. “The redhead is the current Black Widow, Natasha Romanoff, I see. Such a pretty thing but the girls are always pretty.” She smiles wide but there’s nothing warm in that grin. Sharp and loose. The way Tasha smiles. The way Tony Stark smiled before the Accords and how Stark smiles now. Barnes probably smiles the same way when he isn’t playing Bucky. The way Wanda might smile someday but Natasha hopes to every god doesn’t. The way crazy people smile when they can no longer see the edge.

“I am. And you are the former Black Widow.” Clint’s fingers are still twitching and he is eyeing the two woman nervously but Nat continues trying to stare the other woman down. The former Black Widow smiles and smirks, the same crazy smile.

“You can call me Julia. I’ve become rather attached to the name after I killed a Julia once.” Julia laughs.

“Did you kill the identity you’re using?” Nat needed to know.

“Oh, no. If I did that Carter would have found me. Can’t have that.” Julia stretches out, interwinding her fingers on the table and tilting her head sweetly. “Although, she’s dead now but I don’t have much interest in men.”

“You were her Stalker?” Clint asks trying to act the dumb blonde.

Julia laughs, gracefully cracking her knuckles and slides her eyes towards Natasha. “Is he the pet or the owner?”

“I am manly enough to admit that I’m the pet and life is good. She does all the hard work while I spend my time in my nest drinking coffee then once in awhile I get to run around shooting exploding arrows. And if I’m good, I get pizza!”

Julia scrunches her nose, going for cute Nat imagines, but it doesn’t look right. “Oh, he is a cutie. I approve.”

“Are you former Director Carter’s stalker?” Nat tries to regain control of the conversation but the previous Black Widow has dominated the entire thing from the beginning.

Julia . . winks. “Oh my. I wouldn’t say that but I did love her secrets.” The older woman propped her elbows atop the table and resting her chin upon the intertwined fingers.

Natasha nods not interested in arguing semantics with another spy but for the record stalker was an apt description. “Do you know the location of Carter’s notes?”

“Yup. Digitally scanned and read every journal she wrote. Her children were never fans of their mother’s work thus taking the notes was a simple task.”

Tasha fiddles with her necklace hinting to Clint whether they should trust her word. Clint’s hands fall into his lap imply that the woman, along with the notes, were too easy to find. A trap, Nat figured Clint would say that he was all but whining about the trap issue before Julia showed. Tasha rolls her eyes but quickly shifts the rest of her focus to the older woman. “Are interest in the notes span from 1965 to 1995. Will you hand over the journals that correspond with those years?” Julia’s responding grin is patronizing, or more accurately matronizing in a patra way, irking Nat. Clint curls and uncurls his right ring finger telling Nat not to let Julia get under her skin.

“Finally, interested in the Stark boy. Now there is a man who could provide some solid fun.” Nat flexes her hand grouping the middle and ring finger, and Clint tilts his head away. She wants to
attack, maybe finally throw Julia off her game, but he wants to run. Instead, they both continue to watch. Nat’s is starting to worry, the chosen journals go over thirty years, how did Julia know their specific interest in Stark. “Baby Stark had better instincts than his elders. We first met when the child was nineteen, and the Mouses threw a potted plant at me when I got friendly. He knew I was dangerous. Even Carter bought the innocent act in the beginning.”

Nat recalls the moment when Stark asked her to show off in the ring. How he played the flirtatious and careless playboy as she entered the room but when she tried to flirt back it startled the genius. Afterwards she wonder if he’s jerked movement with the water bottle was an attempt to use the bottle as a projectile. “You made contact with Stark? Why?”

“Curiosity, of course. The Mouse is very much he’s parent's child.” Julia grins wide reminding Nat of the Cheshire Cat and not simply the smile but the words too. A hint for something of value but presented as a sly jab. She hates Alice in Wonderland. Clint tries to match Julia’s grin for crazy grin and Tasha almost sniggers. Almost.

“Are you saying that Margaret Carter is Tony Stark’s mother?”

Julia snorts loudly appearing far too amused with the whole situation. “God, no! Peggy had far too much sense for anything like that.”

“I’m totally sure that Carter did have kids.”

“No, I meant becoming personally involved with Howard Stark.”

“I’m pretty sure Carter and Stark were friends.” Nat is losing patience while wondering if Clint has a purpose for all these inane questions.

“Sure. You could say that if you believe in such things.”

Clint is starting to get huffy and Nat holds a palm to stall another of his questions. “Yet you are imply that Maria Stark is not Tony Stark’s mother?”

“Is that what I implied? All I remember saying is that Mouse was his parent’s child.” Julia says teasingly.

“There is no man nor woman who would doubt that Stark junior is Stark senior’s son. I would bet my arrows on that and pizza too.”

“True.” Nat doesn’t like this, Tony Stark is not supposed to be this complicated, the man defines simple. Just a man with too many resources and inflated sense of importance. There can’t be anymore than that.

“Can you at least confirm if Maria Stark gave birth to baby Stark, Ma’am?” Julia reaches across the table brushing a leaf from his shoulder, a tender gesture, but Clin barely manages to suppress a flinch and Natasha cannot feel any relief until there a considerable distance between the two spies and the older Black Widow.

“Such a gentleman.” She coos. “For you honey, sure. Maria Stark did not give birth to Tony Stark. Was that your only interest from the start? Because if so, I’d be rather disappointed with you two.”

“No Ma’am.”

“No? Then what are you after? Not Carter’s secrets, you wouldn’t be asking for her journals if were. Howard’s secrets could fill one of those fancy Egyptian pyramids, but only five secrets are of any
Something about this whole affair doesn’t feel right. Julia is either making this too easy; Clint could be correct in assuming this is a trap or someone asked her for a favor, and this discusses somehow achieves that.

“I thought you figured out our desire for the notes was because of our interest in Tony Stark, not his Father.”

“Well don’t you think you’re quite clever. However, people rarely have interest in the son unless it somehow connects to Howard Stark.”

Clint gives a derisive snort. “What people just assume chibi Stark has no secrets?”

“Exactly!” Julia excitedly exclaims. Clint taps his boot three times communicating she’s crazy and Natasha brushes aside some of her hair to agree but insist Julia’s intel is good. Coulson wouldn’t have sent them her way if the intel wasn’t good.

“Everyone has secrets even Tony.”

“Agreed.” Nat and Clint glance at each other then simultaneously rolled their eyes. Both were becoming frustrated with the dangerous older woman. “But if you ignore all of the advanced technological secrets, he only has one big secret and one sorrowful secret. You know what I am talking about, don’t you Black Widow.” Julia smiles encouragingly, and Nat tries to shift away from her gaze, but the other woman snatches Nat’s wrist to keep her in place. Clint flicks his wrist going for a dagger, but Natasha stalls him with a foot nudge.

“Tony’s biggest secret is that the person who hates him the most is himself.” She didn’t want to say it, didn’t want to admit it to herself but it’s probably the truth.

“Good job.” Julia pats Nat’s cheek in congratulation as if she were a teacher rewarding her prized pupil. Clint hasn’t said anything but Tasha knows he’s bewildered. He won’t say anything now, not in front of Julia. “I’d give you full marks but I’m not sure even you know what you want from Carter’s notes.”

“Maybe you’re right. But can you at least tell me Tony’s very sad secret?”

“Curious?” Julia laughs and Clint scowls but nods anyway.

“The sad truth is Howard Stark was a dick. But not the charming kind like Churchill, although he might have begun his life that way, he was the ugly kind like Harold Barton.” Clint rises from his chair emotions locked, but the change from frustrated to furious is obvious. Nat clutches her hands together and waits because there is nothing she can say to calm him. Julia smiles and gives a little wave.

A minute passes then two minutes pass. Tasha knows his counting his breath and maybe trying to find an opening but another minute passes with no one making a move. Fives minutes pass before Clint, finally, slams himself back into his chair and gives the table a charming grin. “Okay. Stark Sr. was abusive that’s not as rare as it should be.”

“True but that was only the start.”

Nat frowns. “What are you suggesting?”

Julia reclines in her chair and begins rubbing her finger along her scarf. “Nothing.” She tilts her head squinting into the sky. “Just telling a story about a man who went from being Churchill to Barton Sr. to Madame B. lite. I assume he kept the penis since men are so attached to that particular body part.
Nat doesn’t flinch, doesn’t tremble, doesn’t even feel a ripple of fear because she lives with her past every goddamn day. As if life has ever given her a warning when the universe wanted to remind her what she did for others. What she has done to survive. She’s got her ledger memorized and doesn’t need anyone telling her otherwise. “Are you saying Howard tried to break his own son?” Clint whispers.

“No. Of course not. Broken things are useless. An ideal woman might be carved from marble but a man must be forged from iron.”

Natasha simply blinks as the only sign of her surprise. “Stark men are made from iron.”

“Hmm. Yes. Carter figured Stark was only worried that his baby boy was too soft for the world. Yet one day Howard started viewing his son differently, almost scientifically, then started drinking more and putting the boy through rigorous tests. Apparently, fearing for Tony’s safety, Maria sent the boy to boarding school.”

Clint glances at the older Black Widow. “Bullshit.”

“If you don’t believe me I have proof. Well, Carter did which I have.” Julia holds both palms up then slowly moves one hand to the inside of her coat while keeping the other hand still up. The hand from the coat pulls out a small round plastic disk and presses the white star on top revealing it to be a USB.

“Is that a Captain America Shield USB?”

“I think of it as a Carter’s shield USB.”

“Of course you do.” Julia smiles carefully placing the USB in front of Natasha. Nat slowly touches the plastic disk then gripping it between two fingers and sliding the disk to Clint. Nothing happens, and Julia remains relaxing in the cafe chair. Clint trust Tasha to watch the former Black Widow while he plugs the USB into his phone to check the contents. Nat observes Julia and Clint taps the phone indicating that they had the scanned books which were probably real. “Are we done? I’m already starting to feel bored.”

“Don’t you want something an exchange for a copy of the notes?”

“From you, hardly.”

Nat trades looks with Clint neither of them trusting her carefree attitude. “You are giving us the notes from the goodness of your heart?”

“Well I made a promise with Peggy, you could help with that.”

“What was the promise?” Nat inquired.

“To aid Tony Stark when he needed protection and support from the world.”

“Why would a genius, billionaire, philanthropist, Ironman need help?” Clint snarks.

“Oh, what did SHIELD call it? An 084? Yes. Tony Stark is like an 084, like that Thor fellow, in fact a few of SHIELD’s registered 084 were made by the young Tony.”

“Tony is an alien now.”

Julia chuckles and Nat lets a small shiver run down her spine. “No. But they have something in
common.” Nat isn’t sure what the other woman is suggesting, perhaps, that Tony is dangerous or that his baggage creates end of the world problems.

Tasha glanced at Clint; he tilts his head directing Nat to peer at his finger. Clint shaped his hand into a gun and makes a tiny shooting motion. “Ah, you are referring to Thor’s weapon capabilities and suggesting that Tony can create a higher form of war.”

“Yep the kid is a super genius.”

Clint rolls his eyes. “Stark is smart sure but isn’t super genius overestimating him.”

“When it comes to most science stuff, maybe you’re right, but technology, computers, weapons and the like, no one is smarter. In 1975, Tony created the first CD capable computer and it was a laptop. A year later he designed a robot capable of cleaning his room and acting as a simple pet. Black Widow might not understand the significance of that, but you do Hawkeye.” Julia clicked her tongue in disappointment and was beginning to appear disinterested with the two spies. Nat’s instincts said that boring the former Black Widow would be perilous for them.

“Fuck.”

“Given enough time, and desire, I wouldn’t be surprised if he re-created the tesseract in all its glory or a weapon that could kill a god. In fact, killing a god sounds fun maybe I’ll give him the idea then have a go at it.” As Julia contemplates her fantasy adventure of killing Thor or whatever she deemed a god, Clint and Natasha were trying to wash down all they been told about their resident genius. Nat was starting to feel guilt and the sensation were strange. Not that she didn’t feel guilt about her past actions as a Red Room graduate and SHIELD’s Black Widow but others had pulled the trigger deciding the sinners and innocent. However, Natasha was the one who determined Tony’s guilt, had denied his redemption, and filtered the other Avenger’s perspective of the man. Twice she betrayed him and twice did he forgive her but still did she condemn him.

Clint narrows his eyes figuring something out then tapped the table twice. “You helped Stark escape from Hydra.” Not a question. Julia beams at Hawkeye impressed by his deduction.

“Correct. Just killed a few men and planted some false information. It was simple.”

Clint nods. “I promise to treat Stark like an 084. Does that work for you, Ma’am?”

Julia claps her hands together grinning. “For now.” She pushes herself from the table leaving the two alone.

Nat sits watching the other woman disappear into the city and feeling the full weight of Hawkeye’s scrutiny. “Let’s head back to the Tower.” No stupid joke or innocent smile. Tasha closes her eyes briefly then heads for the Tower. He’d ask when he was ready.

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The room is dark except for twin reading lights and the air between the two spies is muted. Tasha scrolls through her copy of the Carter notes highlighting parts and writing notes. Carter description of Tony’s early life was comprehensive, to say the least. Details of his mood and what he created. The numerous test he underwent and the results. Including, an in-depth depiction of Howard’s increasing frigid attitude towards his son. Carter even wrote many an exact quote of Howard’s emotional abuse. Nonetheless, the only useful information was a recurring theme in the journals: Carter’s hypothesis that Tony had been made in a lab by Howard.

“Ignoring Howard’s A+ parenting; what do you think about Tony being a Frankenstein’s monster?”
“If anyone could have pulled off creating a baby genius in a test tube it be Howard Stark. My question is why?”

Clint frowned mulling the question over. “Trying to create another super soldier? Barnes said the hit on Howard was to obtain super soldier serum.”

“And what? He failed to create the next super soldier and decided to keep one of the babies.”

“Maybe, Tony is actually a success.”

“Why the sudden change in attitude if Tony was a success? Furthermore, where are his enhanced abilities?”

“I don’t know Tasha, but we do know Howard’s serum gave results. Tony being a product of that isn’t outside the realm of possibility.”

“Agreed.” Nat re-reads some of the highlighted passages trying to find a lead to disprove or support Carter’s theory. Carter briefly mentions Howard having many secret labs and Nat scans the pages to identify their locations. She turns to Clint to ask if he has any idea and finds him staring hard in her direction. “Just ask.”

“Why Natasha? Why did you tell me that Stark was just like those men if you thought different? Why tell me he was no better than the men you usually prey on? Men who’d burn the world for their own selfish desires. Men who used the services of the Red Room. Men who you wanted to destroy when you joined SHIELD. Why?” She told him to ask knowing he needed the answer. This was about trust after all and trust is such a fragile thing between assassins and spies.

“I offered him the usual bait and he refused. Instead, he sincerely asked me how I would celebrate my last birthday party alive. Told him I do whatever I wanted with whoever I wanted. And I lied.”

“No offense Nat but you lie all the time especially to missions. It’s your job.”

“Except he knew. He knew I was lying and didn’t do what he wanted but what was needed and expected of him. He looked me in the eye knew I was lying and in that moment I saw myself in his eyes.”

“You saw yourself? I don’t understand.”

“I saw myself from the past in his eyes and it scared me.”

Clint’s entire body softens. “Natasha the Red Room is dead. You saw to that.”

“Yet I saw a piece of it in Tony Stark. I didn’t want to admit that someone like him could have similarities with someone like me. I didn’t want to concede that someone like him could be braver than me.”

“Never Tasha. You are one of the strongest and bravest people I know.”

“Yet I rarely trust anyone.”

“Yeah but that’s the job Nat.”

“You don’t understand Tony lived in our world and he trusted all of us.”

“No, that’s different. Stark’s doesn’t trust other people he just thinks he’s untouchable.”
“You didn’t read Coulson’s original file on Ironman’s kidnapping?”

“No. It wasn’t important. He got kidnapped all the time, only difference is that Ironman was born.”

Nat smiles pathetically because Clint was smarter than this. “Tony was betrayed by Obadiah Stane. He hired the kidnappers, he sold the weapons, and he paralyzed Tony to take the newest version of the arc reactor from his body. Attacked him in his own home. The bastard even tested Tony to see if the genius still trusted him by handing Tony some files.”

Clint rubs his face letting out some quiet curses. “I remember the media talking about Stane being a surrogate father to baby Stark after his Dad died. Fuck that sucks. God no wonder the genius has weird trust issues.”

“Except he doesn’t. He trusted me even after I spied on him. He trusted Fury with Stark technology. He trusted the Avengers despite the fact all of his teammates could easily kill him. Tony without his armour is essentially defenseless. He kinda reminds me of Bambi.”

“I am not hearing this. Fuck.” Clint takes a breath. “What about your assessment?”

“Fake. It was a ploy by Fury so SHIELD would have some room to negotiate.”

“Narcissism?”

“If Tony is a narcissist than I’m the Brooklyn Bridge.”

“Can’t cooperate with others.”

“Come on Clint. He works with people all the time. His charities, his R&D, his efforts to improve the world, and the Avengers would not have been anywhere near as successful as they were if Tony was unable to work with others. An empire cannot be created by one man and Tony understand this.”

“Okay. Fine! What about his compulsive and self-destructive behaviour.”

“I think those assessment are correct just no where near the severity Tony likes to project.”

“Why is that Natasha?”

“Bruce and I would sometimes talk about Tony. Finding his personality interesting was something we had in common. One of the things that interested Bruce was how fast Tony's brain could calculate possibilities, and if you add JARVIS or FRIDAY on top of that, I think a lot of his decisions are a more planned than they appear.”

“Like that computer that wins at chess because it can analyze every conceivable winning scenario faster than the human opponent.”

“Yes, exactly.”

Clint runs a hand through his hair looking worn down by just about everything but his weariness started long before the two spies had this argument. “When did you first realize you’d been lying to yourself about Tony?”

Nat smiles because Clint still trusts her and only her partner would ever ask that. “After the fight at the airport, when I let Steve escape, Tony tried to warn me about Ross and I took my anger out on him. Because while I was being mad at myself, he was worrying about me, Rhodes, and even Steve.”
“He came to check on us at the Raft, and I bite his head off. Sam said he was there to help Cap and I didn’t believe him. Told myself no way could Tony Stark be the bigger man.”

Natasha fixes her gaze on her feet, hands clasped together and feeling the guilt settle in her gut. “I think I was wrong about him.”

“No, we don’t know that. He could still be like all those other dicks. Having a crap childhood doesn’t make you a good person.”

“Maybe.”
Finding the Evil... The Evil

Chapter Summary

The dreaded meeting of Hydra meetings stuff happens. There is silly stuff and sad stuff. The evil plot starts to get rolling in this chapter. I tried to make Cap a little creepy in this chapter. For story purposes kind of but still in character cause that's important.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Round tables were wondrous. There was something about the roundness and the King Arthur-ness that made the tables seem dignified and noble. Circles were the symbols for the future and the Lion King. Yes, tables were Disney magic taken solid form, and Tony wanted to slam himself utop it’s glory like a starfish. Of course, the Captain probably wouldn’t like the whole starfish thing. Stark has to wonder how any person with a heart could hate a starfish, but you gotta do you. He wanted to reconsider the whole starfish thing because Stark definitely wanted to impress the Captain. He doesn’t know why he wants to impress Captain America, or maybe he just can’t remember, but his feelings concerning the man are confusing. A strange cocktail of fear, devotion, hope, and resentment called Cranberry Issues on Ice. Impulse control was overrated anyhow. Stark wiggles onto the table and swings his limbs like creating an angel in the snow.

“Having fun Tones?”

“I am becoming one with this table and one day I shall be crowned All-Father of the Round Tables.” Stark rolls over on his back still not reaching the end of the table. “This table is huge. I feel like I’ve got the whole world in my hands. Rhody, as the All-Father of the Round Tables I’m renaming the world Prussia. The United States of America is now the United States of Prussia. Canada is now Maple-Prussia. Europe will just be the Russian Dolls of Prussia. And so forth.”

“I’m not sure even the All-Father of the Round Tables has the power to rename the world.”

“It should. The world is a giant round table with its own gravitational pull.” Rhody climbs onto the table, shoving Stark to make room for himself, and lays on his back next to the genius. The two brothers stare at the white ceiling, Stark contemplating the color white and Rhody being Rhody. “Rhody I am worried about the whole Captain thing.”

“Don’t worry FRIDAY and I got it covered. If Rogers so much as sneezes at you FRIDAY will hit him with a tranquilizer dart and I will write ‘hypocrite moron’ all over his face. In several languages, so he really gets the message.”

“Sugardrop, you realize this is a meeting to discuss what I know about Hydra, right? He has to talk to me. That’s how debriefings and information sharing works.”

“He doesn’t necessarily have to be involved in the meeting. You can talk to the others while I practice Sith lord moves on the Captain.”

“I’m starting to think maybe FRIDAY should handle the whole Captain Rogers situation.”
“You got it, Boss. The Captain enters the room, and I hit him with the dart. No muss, no fuss.”

“No. We are going to be civil and treat Rogers with respect.” Stark pointed at the far wall and waving his hand then letting gravity smack the hand into Rhodey. “Come on you two, say it.”

“We are going to treat Rogers with respect,” both FRIDAY and Rhodey parroted monotonously.

“Why are you two mooks on the conference table?” Stark hears Clint baffled voice near the door, but he refused to sit up, on the principle that he was comfortable and he was rarely comfortable.

“Where else would the All-Father of the Round Tables be except on a round table?”

“Okay. Sure. But that doesn’t explain why Rhodes is on the table too.”

“I am the All-Mother of the Round Tables, where else would I be?”

“Apparently on a round table.” Stark and Rhodes raise their arms giving a double thumbs up to Clint. The genius knew by the double shadows wandering the room that only the assassin twins had arrived. “Do either of you know when Cap is supposed to show?”

Stark can feel Rhodey’s agitation running along his skin. “All we heard from the good Captain is that you two completed the obligatory research on the situation which meant it was time for my scheduled Spanish Inquisition party. I’m gonna be honest with you I wasn’t expecting the Spanish Inquisition this afternoon. I fear the comfy chair.”

“Yeah, okay.” Clint’s tone is neutral and makes no effort to join in the witty banter. Tasha is silent as well, and a niggling sensation tells Stark that something isn’t right between the two assassins. Rhodey must have gotten a similar feeling because he sat, legs dangling over the edge, to scrutinize Barton and Romanoff.

“What’s wrong with you two? The both of you are acting screwy.” Barton sides eyed Rhodey shrugging his words off and turning his back to the group. Romanoff rounded the room a couple of times then seemingly finding an appropriate corner to rest herself against and stared into another corner. Her arms are wrapped tight around herself, and it is becoming clear she is scared of something while Clint is practically on the other side of the room. Typically the agents would be social or do their whole telepathy show, but Stark was starting to think that they were avoiding each other.

Stark rolls off the table with a loud thump causing the agents to glance at him briefly, Rhodey giggles because he is an evil soda pop, jumping up with his hand held up high. “Romanoff why are you scared?” Stark stops himself because he was not expecting to ask that question, not that he had a specific plan or anything when he got off the table, and Romanoff looks just as surprised. Stark feels a strike to the back of his legs causing him to turn on the offender. Rhodes chocks his head and gives a ‘continue’ gesture.

The genius panics what is supposed to do or say something supposedly because Black Widow is smiling expectantly. When Stark still hasn’t said a word, Romanoff bites her lip sighing. “Why? I’m no friend to you.” Stark blinks because the Black Widow is right. They are hardly friends, barely acquaintances, and definitely not teammates. If Hydra taught him anything it was concern was dangerous, and trust was deadly. Concern leads to guilt which would lead to pain. Trust is nothing but pain and blood. Trust is your heart destroyed while every dying breath is agonizing because ultimately you were worthless.

Stark doesn’t care that Barton is stiff and angry. He doesn’t care that Romanoff has guilt written into
every line of her posture or that it’s probably his fault for coming back into the Avengers life. “You’re attractive, and studies show people are more likely to become emotionally invested in beautiful people. So I’m invested which makes me curious and curiosity influences me to ask questions. Such as, is there anything I can do for you? You can choose whether to ignore or answer that question by the way but I do want to know. But maybe explain the situation like Spock because emotions are messy. I suck at them. Ask anyone. Not Rhodey, I love my sweet patches, but he is a liar. You could try explaining your problem in interpretative dance; I won’t understand anything, but I’ll feel like I’m contributing. Talking does help or so I’ve been told. By Rhodey but he is a liar.” Stark smiles trying to fix whatever is broken. He can fix things, at least, he is a fixer.

“I-” Black Widow’s eyes jump to Barton but quickly enough the eyes regain eye contact with the genius. Stark slowly turns towards Barton, trying to be caution for some reason, and observes the man standing rigid eye locked on the door with his fist clenched tight. “There is nothing you can do Stark. I’m the one in the wrong and forgiveness can take time. Thank you.” Stark twisted around so fast his muscles burned because he hadn’t expected that. That was honest and sincere, certainly not the platitude Stark had expected from the woman but the real alien invasion was the ‘thank you.’ Stark can feel the heat gathering at his cheeks, and he wants to teleport to his bots—note to self invent teleportation—because Stark’s do not blush. Hell would freeze over, and Hel would rain fireballs before he ever blushed. He’s blushing goddamnit. “Are you blushing?”

“No! Who does that? It’s a myth that Hollywood invented. I don’t do that.” Stark can still feel the heat, and it’s getting worse.

“Just what the fuck are you after Stark?” Stark watches Clint focus latched on the genius, as the archer stalks closer to Stark with a blank face and his voice tempered. He started to get the strangest sensation that he lived this once before. Not deja vu but rather an old memory coming to light. “You planning to line us up for Hydra?”

Barton takes a step closer, and Stark takes a step back. “No. I told you that I escaped.”

“Right. And fed us some bullshit about computers and Howard Stark. Probably, an excuse to inflate your value but trust me your nothing but trouble. All the deaths Ultron caused are on your head.” The archer’s eyes are blue; Stark hadn’t noticed before well he had but not consciously, and they’re cold. The blond is inching closer, and Stark can see the disgust and disdain in his eyes. There is this sense he has been judged and found insignificant which is all so familiar. Stark has the growing desire to stab into those blue eyes and rip them from their sockets. “Frankly, I’m not surprised Hydra took a shine to you Stark, what with all the blood on your hands, you’re essentially a super villain. I should just do the world a favor—”

“You’ve fucking said enough you dick.” The genius gawked as Rhodey stepped forward, gave Barton a feral grin then proceeded to grab his head and smash it into the table. Tony was smart, a genius, and one of the advantages of being genius level smart was the ability to anticipate most likely outcomes of human actions. A useful skill when dealing with people in a fight or a conversation. Some like Black Widow were hard to predict, one of the reasons he was always wary of her, but Rhodey he knew. Rhodey, for the most part, was the most predictable person in all the best ways. Dependable to the point that he sometimes forgot that he and Rhodey became friends because they shared the same level of crazy. “Tesla, that was satisfying.”

“Someone wants to tell me why I just saw Rhodes head slam Barton into the table?” Stark gapes at Rhodey, while the soldier huffs and puffs projecting indignation to anyone paying attention, then turns to Wilson perturbed. “I’ll be honest with you Wilson, I would like to know that too?” Both Wilson and Stark peer at Romanoff expectant but the assassin shakes her head no. Stark
suspected it was because she was being entertained by the whole mess.

“Rhodes?”

“The Hawkass had it coming Falcon. Nothing I could do.” Stark hears a soft snort come from the Black Widows corner knowing that his theory had just gained some credibility. Although, shouldn’t the woman be supporting her partner by giving Rhodey the Thighs of Death. Where is the love?

“Natasha?”

“He was spouting his mouth off, right or not, Clint should have known not to say what he did in front of Rhodes.”

“Got that right.”

“No. Not right or whatever. You can’t just punch people because you don’t like what they’re saying Rhodey. First Amendment rights are a thing, Poprock, an actual thing with cops and lawyers and doughnuts. Don’t disrespect the doughnuts. They are fuel for the awesome.”

“Tones he called you a Nazi and a murderer.” Rhodey scowls down at the unconscious archer then rubs his face irritably. “He threatened to kill you. And that is on the list of things I will not let go or stand by.”

“Clint said what?!”

“Rhodey-”

“No, Tony. This is not up for discussion; it is something set in stone. I will not let anyone make you feel worthless or heartless not even you little brother, especially when you’re neither.”

Wilson's mouth is gaping while standing dumbly at the door sight wandering to Romanoff to Barton then landing on Rhodes for a few seconds before wandering off again and apparently ignoring Stark. “I cannot believe that Barton would have a hang up about the whole Hydra minion thing. I mean there is the whole Natasha thing.”

“No, it wasn’t about Hydra.” Romanoff murmurs before returning to her corner. Stark is getting the feeling that if Romanoff weren't the Black Widow, Wilson would be shaking her right now.

“He mentioned Ultron, but something tells me that’s not what Clint’s main issue was.” Rhodey is glaring holes into Barton again, and Stark just knows that he’s debating whether to kick the archer in the stomach.

“I don’t know, Stark’s Ultron mess did create a lot of serious problems, seems like something that would be a serious issue.” Stark knows that name knows the name is carved on his bones, knows that it was another betrayal that drowned him in blood. The voice wants to swallow him whole and to scream about three betrayals each one clawing away a part of him until nothing was left. That wasn’t him. That useless piece of trash should stay dead and let him keep Rhodey.

“Excuse me; Wilson could you repeat that please?” Stark heard an undertone of rage in Rhodey’s voice and wanted to warn Wilson to run, but something told Stark that the man was going to stand his ground.

“I said Stark is to blame for Ultron. He did build the damn thing.” Wilson is calm and standing his ground like the soldier he is while Stark finds himself hoping Rogers will show up to stop the whole thing.
Rhodes nods, rubbing at his jaw and stepping towards Wilson to ensure Stark was behind him. “Wilson, how do you feel about Redwing?”

“I mean it was a little weird at first, but the little bird had grown on me.”

“Sure. Did you know Tony has three more adorable bots just like Redwing?”

“No, I’m sure they’re just as cute.”

“Yeah, they are. Chirp happily at me as a greeting whenever I saw them. What about FRIDAY?”

“She definitely takes some getting used to because that girl has a relatively powerful personality. Kinds of reminds me of my Mother some days.”

“Everyone heard that right because I am using that as evidence that the Falcon worships the ground I walk on.” The group laughs, well not Barton because he still counting sheep underneath the table and not Romanoff because a piece of heaven falls on a lawyer each time she laughs, but Rhodey gives a solid chuckle releasing some of the built up tension.

Still smiling Rhodey asked, “What do you know of JARVIS?”

Wilson eyes flickers to Romanoff before returning to his standoff with Rhodes. “I have been told he was a sweetie with a wicked sense of humor.” Stark feels something crushing his heart but JARVIS is not dead. Everything is fine because he’s baby is not dead.

“*No, Sir. But I am rather perplexed. I did not realize Agent Romanoff thought me a sweetie. I’m touched.*”

“Great. Good. Did you know he made three other AI’s just like JARVIS and FRIDAY and never had any trouble from any of them?”

“No, I didn’t.” Rhodes nods again, and Wilson starts to frown slightly easing off his staring contest.

“No, of course not. You probably didn’t know about the several other working hive bots that Tony created either. The genius never had any problems or fucking betrayal by any of his babies.” Rhodes smooth face begins to contort into anger. “So why do you fuck-heads think my genius, not psychic by the way, little brother would be able to predict that the love he has dedicated his life to would betray him?”

“Ultron is a machine like a bomb—”

“No, Ultron was a synthetic metal individual who made the decision to destroy humanity. You can’t acknowledge Ultron’s agency and treat him like a machine. If Ultron had agency, then he chose to be evil just like any other criminal. If he is a machine, that means you think Tony created him for the purpose of destroying humanity. Which is it?”

“I didn’t think- I never- Cap said that- Tony is dangerous.” Wilson finally manages to choke out weakly. He is horrified, repeatedly licking his lips and trying to find an easily made answer. Cap isn’t here, and Romanoff won’t look him in the eye.

“Rhodey stop.”

“No, you didn’t, and that seems to be the fucking problem. Captain America walks into a room, everyone’s brains just shut off and receive any bullshit he spews about Tones as gospel. You’re a smart man Wilson. Why don’t you take a moment to compare the imagine Rogers has created to
Tony’s real actions? Because yeah Tony makes mistakes, takes responsibility too, but news flash that’s what you call being human.” Rhodes is glaring something fierce at Wilson trying to get the other soldier to understand that Tony was something good. RhoRho is wrong, of course, but Rhodey was always somebody who saw the light at the end of the tunnel or in the clouds or wherever lights apparently randomly flashed at people. The point is Stark's not a light, he was more of a parasite. A genius parasite of alien origin. “This speech is for both you Bird Brains, by the way.”

“How’d you know I was conscious?”

“I have a lot of experience dealing with morons who want to avoid the world by pretending to be unconscious.”

“I will ignore the obvious reference to my beautiful self because how dare you.” Stark hears Barton snort from the table and the genius takes a peek under to see the archer spread out starfish style on the floor.

“You know Hawkeye Sir, the whole starfish thing is a lot more comfortable on the table. It is a round table thus through its nobleness it will support you.” Barton squints, although it's hard to tell through the purple tinted glasses, and makes some strange hand gestures. Stark glanced at Rhodes, who shakes his head like unhelpful Azawakh dog including all the bounding adorableness of underserved trust.

“It’s ASL. He signed why do you care?” Romanoff offers helpfully from her corner.

Why does everyone ask that? He doesn’t care, his heartless and detached, everyone knows that, and everybody has been saying that for years. Probably. Yet Stark is still being asked that question, repeatedly, and from different people. Maybe it would be easier if he had some sign on his forehead or something. Changing eye color would be a cool indicator, maybe purple or black. “You seem sad.”

Barton takes both hands digging his palms into his eyes and groaning softly. The archer mutters something, but Stark couldn’t catch whatever the man said. He’s hands obscuring the view. “Fine. I will lay upon the noble round table and bask in its light.” He shuffles a bit curling up and rolling out from underneath Metroid style. Barton then proceeds to climb onto the table spreading out like a starfish the same way he observed Rhodes and Stark doing earlier. “You’re right. This is nice. Join me Tasha.” He slaps the area near his stomach as an invite for the Black Widow.

Romanoff decisively pushes herself from her kingdom and taking the place offered by Barton on the table. She shifted around a bit; Stark would have sworn was due to fear. A nervous Black Widow was an unusual experience. Once settled she whispered, “Действительно ли мы хороши?” (Are we good?) Barton slams a hand in the air then, presumingly, signed an answer. By Romanoff’s soft smile it was something positive. A part of Stark was pleased because the twin assassins didn’t look so sad anymore. Not that it mattered to Stark, of course, the room’s atmosphere was better when everyone was happy.

“Sam come rest your weary butt on the noble round table.” Wilson is dejectedly blinking at Stark when Barton makes the demand, but Flacon regains his bearings enough to obtusely blink at the archer instead. He did, however, eventually stumble to the table and lie on his stomach then muffling into the wood.

“Underlings make room for Tony and me. Come on schoot.”

“Why are we the underlings?” Barton grumbles.
“Because I am the All-Mother and Tony is the All-Father which means you lot are underlings.”

“You make a strong argument War Machine. Very persuasive.”

“Thank you.” Stark giggles and Rhodey hums cheerfully. The moment was peaceful and scary because Stark was enjoying it. It wouldn’t last. Nothing ever did.

“Why are you guys on the conference table?” Rogers tone was strange, Stark couldn’t get a read on it, but he didn’t sound mad thus the genius decided to stay where he was relaxed. He did hear Barton sitting up.

“It’s very simple Cap. Stark is the All-Father of the Round Tables, Rhodes is the All-Mother, Natasha is the heir to the Round Tables throne, I’m the second son, and Sam is are the beautiful cinnamon princess. This is our proper place and we shall not be moved.”

“Okay.” Stark listened as Rogers shuffled his legs and a part of him was tempted to take a peek at the super soldiers. “Are we going to have the meeting on the table? Like this?”

Wilson mutters something into the table that causes Barton to chortle before regarding Rogers again. “Sure Rogers. That is the plan exactly.” Stark a little curious to Rogers reaction; is he confused or tired or maybe frustrated. He would love a frustrated Captain America.

“Great? Are you ready to get started Stark?” The genius grumbles covering his face with his hands. Because no he wasn’t ready. Hydra had been the typical awful crap that went with evil people, but Madam Hydra had been a unique brand of crazy that he didn’t want to think about at all. Things he rather think about: the void of nothingness, alien doughnut invasion, a chocolate tsunami of death, or ghost. “Stark?” The genius curled into Rhodey’s side trying to send the Captain into the void with his mind. Now was the time to develop mental power. “Stark!” Rogers was starting to get irritated, he could feel the vibrations from Rhodey laughing silently, and there was still no mental powers.

“Fine. Let’s get this road on the show. What do you want to know Sir Tater Tot?

“Can you at least look me in the eye while we discuss this?” Aggressive golden boy of America or warm fuzzy Rhodey Bear? There will never be a day where that is a tough question, but he isn’t in a position to say no. He never is in a position to say no, but if he is good, maybe Tony will get to keep Rhodey. Stark lifts himself from the table and takes a second to glance around the room. Rhodey and Sam were still sprawled out on the table while Barton and Romanoff were sitting with their legs layered like yogi masters. He forces himself not to take a peek at Barnes. “And it’s Rogers.”

Stark bows his head. “Yes, Sir. What do you want to know Rogers?” The room settles with varying degrees of confusion and shock. Stark wasn’t sure why he is nothing but a construct, and he must follow orders.

Rogers nods awkwardly and rubs the back of his neck almost embarrassed too. “First, tell me about Madam Hydra.”

“I don’t know much.” Rogers gives him a look of disbelief, seriously, what did the man expect of Hydra. A guided tour or a sharing circle to divulge personal information to become better friends. “She is a protege to Zola and the current leader to one of Hydra’s factions. She and Pierce didn’t agree on much except on methods.” Stark waits, after all, he doesn’t actually know what the Avengers hope to gain from this information sharing session. Rogers emotes a frowny face.

“You said She is Zola’s protege. Shouldn’t it be was? Zola is dead.”

“No, Zola is alive.” Stark blinks and chocks his head debating whether he should go into more detail
or wait for more orders. Rhodey pokes him in the back, probably knowing why Stark paused, to continue. “Well, alive in the way a computer brain scan can be considered alive.” Rogers frown gets deeper.

“Natasha and I found computer Zola at the old SHIELD base which was destroyed by Hydra to kill us. Every incarnation of Zola is dead.” Stark shrug. Zola is alive but if the Captain doesn’t want to hear it, then nothing he says will change that.

Romanoff had other ideas. “Stark did you meet Zola?” Stark stares at the Black Widow then looks up at Rogers asking for permission to answer the question. Rogers shuffles in place a bit before giving Stark the go ahead.

“I did. Madam Hydra wanted to show off her new prize.” There is some silent communication between the Avengers, but Stark ignores it waiting. Instead, he thought about building and engineering. He had a lab at the Tower perhaps he be given permission to make a robot or two. Maybe some spy gadgets. The Black Widow could be his James Bond to his Q; that would be fun.

When the group had finished their deliberation, Romanoff was the one who spoke up. “Do you know what your purpose was at Hydra? Did they want you as a Winter Soldier replacement?”

“No Tones I don’t get it, but I’m sure you’ll wow us.”

“I don’t know much about the actual Project. I do know that the basic outline of the plan is to make Zola and Madame Hydra the new tyrant leader of Hydra with a super soldier army. Also, the many different types of super soldier serum are a big part of that whole army plan too.”

Romanoff does some subtle gesture at Barton before turning her attention back to Stark. “Different types?”

“Yeah, I have one type, and Barnes has another. The idea is to create different types of soldiers like an RPG. Different serums for different job classes. I have no idea what type of serum I have though I am hoping for an alchemist. The closest thing to science in fantasy land.”

“RPG? Can’t you take this seriously Stark?” Rogers growls.

Stark feels his nails dig into his palms trying to keep calm. “I don’t know Sir. Which one of us spent time as Hydra’s tool?” He doesn’t know where the venom soaking his voice comes from, but he’s pissed. What gives Rogers the right to ask that? To ask anything from him? Tony was the one left bleeding alone in the snow.

However, the Captain doesn’t flinch from Stark’s tone instead digging his heels in the floor ready to fight. Stark wasn’t sure who the blonde was expecting to fight though because it wasn’t the genius. He just wanted this whole thing to be over. Barton, surprisingly, steps between the two. “It’s a good example, Steve; the genius is suggesting that Hydra is trying to make one serum that can create tanks like you and one serum that can create support guys like me. Did I get that right genius?”

“Yeah. Hydra is really interested in making Hawkeye clones.”

Barton claps Rogers on the back trying for a jovial approach. “I am going to take that as a compliment because I’d rather not spend much time thinking about the whole Hydra interest in me.”

The Black Widow is the next to raise a query. “Do you know how many types there are and the
“Umm, there is type-Sergeant because Zola had a creepy obsession with Barnes, I assume. Interface is another, and finally, there is the mind stone serum. That one’s new, of course.” Stark list each type flipping out a finger each time he named a serum. Once he was holding three fingers spread out gave a quizzical look at the room. “Where are Wanda and Vision? Shouldn’t they be here for the data dump?”

Rogers nonchalantly waves a hand trying to dismiss the issue. “Wanda met me this morning to say she wouldn’t be joining us and went out for the day. I suspect Vision joined her.” Stark wanted to accept the answer there was no reason not to except for the fact Barnes appeared guilty from behind the Captain. “Natasha any more questions?” The genius wanted to smack him for that, acting all in control, when others were doing all the work. Maybe it was a leader thing.

“What I understand is Madame Hydra has continued the whole take over the world habit Hydra leaders tend to have, Zola is alive albeit computerized, the three serums are part of the conqueror plan, and Stark is probably a major piece to that plan.” The Avengers nod following along. “My question is how did Hydra capture you? Zemo wasn’t a part of any Hydra faction, and I doubt Hydra was tailing him considering he was picking a fight with the Avengers. But that does raise the question of how Hydra got Tony or even managed to discover the abandoned base.” Stark snorts because if the Avengers weren’t aware of the hidden Hydra network under the former Soviet Union area, then there was going to be some major catch up before they would have a chance at stopping Hydra.

“There is a secret network connecting all the Hydra and SHIELD bases.” Romanoff looks contemplative likes she is trying to recall something at the edge of her mind but can’t quiet. (Now that was an experience that deserved to be on all the top ten most annoying shit of life.) More interesting was Rogers betrayed and shocked expression. The boy scout can’t have seriously expected Barnes to have told him every little detail of his life while the two were apart. That’s a solid seventy years of crap to deal with, and most of it would suck. “We must have set off an alarm when we entered the base, Steve.”

“Makes sense, Nat and I did something similar when we entered the old SHIELD bunker.”

“Yup, all of Zola’s special project bases are carefully watched by Madame Hydra.” The Captain’s eyes shine with something and Stark can feel the fear pooling in his gut.

“The way I understand it, the bases that have some connection to Zola and the Winter Soldier Project are kept an eye on which means that they’re important. If they’re important, they must have clues. Thus, are next best move is to investigate the Siberian base where we found the other dead super soldiers. Stark can identify which stuff is significant and which is useless.” Rogers is meticulously observing him, and Stark wants it to stop. The genius isn’t sure what base the group is talking about or “Tony’s capture” but he knows he doesn’t want to think about it. The cold, he can feel the cold, and there is a dark sensation pulling at the back of his mind snarling at Rogers.

“Rogers you are not fucking taking my little brother back to the base where you abandoned him like the hypocritical dick you’ve somehow convinced everyone you’re not. In fact, for one moment, why don’t you pretend to be the good person you are supposed to be and think about someone else for once?”

“You heard Stark, Zola is obsessed with Bucky, and if he’s right, then Hydra will try to take him back. That base probably has clues on stopping their plan and keeping Bucky safe, if Stark is truly reformed and wants to atone for his mistakes then he will join the investigation.” The Captain states righteously staring Rhodey down with complete conviction in his argument. Rhodey steps forward
shoving himself in the Captain’s bubble, and so furious the red is starting to come through his dark color skin. However, as much as Rhodey may fight for Stark it is clear that, just as Howard intended, Captain Rogers is the new handler.

“Of course, Sir. I will investigate the base.” He can’t remember why but he doesn’t want to go. But maybe Rogers promise of redemption is not empty, maybe he will see what a valuable asset Stark is, and maybe he will not only achieve atonement but pride as well. Rogers beams at him, and Stark hopes. He ignores the strange trepid glances exchanged by Barton and Romanoff as well as the horrified expression on Wilson's face.

“You don’t have to do this Tones. Rogers is blowing nothing but smoke and if anyone should atone it’s him.” Rhodes offers a comforting hand while he glares fiercely at the Captain. Stark smiles trying to reassure the scared solder.

“It’s fine Rhodey. Anything I can do.” His brother tries to smile back.

Chapter End Notes

I tried to make Cap a little creepy in this chapter. For story purposes kind of but still in character cause, that's important. Don't know if I succeeded. I also have a tumbler for those interested. Called Dreams of Eccentric. I'm CharactersAdvocateChimata. Yup, so yeah.
If I Made Bricks from Your Flesh, Would You Scream?

Chapter Summary

The Avengers head into the desolated Hydra base and Stark can feel ghost nipping at his heels. It's a sad ghost story. Boo!

Chapter Notes

This chapter took forever to write, I just got stuck on one part of the series and could not get the words to cooperate. I blame the English language, such a punk.

Now last chapter I got quite a few comments hating on Steve Rogers and this chapter probably won't fix that. But I was surprised to see not that much hate for Clint this time around. Is it because I had Rhodey nail his head into a table? Did that make it better? To fully redeem Cap later in the story, am I going to have to write Rhodey punching Cap? Is that a thing?
I also thought some people would be a little mad at me for doing that to Clint too. But nothing. Oh well.

Anyway, sorry for taking forever to update and I hope you enjoy the chapter.

The Avengers are sitting in the snow watching what could be a very haunted old Hydra base waiting for the Black Widow to give the go ahead that the place was safe or at least not a trap. Stark had said it wasn’t a trap, but the Captain gave him a patronizing smile and said it was just to be safe. Hawkeye kept muttering it was always a trap, but Stark figured that had less to do with him and more to do with being a spy person. In fact, Romanoff looked practically gleeful as she snuck into the Hydra base and Stark would swear on his babies that Barnes was pouting because Rogers wouldn’t let Winter go with the Spider. The genius snuck into plenty of places and never thought it was exciting. It’s all about staying quiet and not making any explosions. Now explosions, that’s fun. A redhead popped from the snow, and the group moved forward into the base. Rhodey stopped before the entryway with Stark just behind him. He couldn’t and wouldn’t go through those doors without Rhodey. Rhodes places an arm on his shoulders, and Tony leans into the hug. “You don’t have to do this Tones. No one is making you.” He raises his voice a bit louder. “Especially not that two-faced egomaniac.” Rogers ignores Rhodes childish attempt at starting a fight which prompts Rhodey to mutter some very unattractive things under his breath. There something that can be said about a man and rude utterance, Stark doesn’t know what those things are, but the people who live on the TV are always talking about it. “You’re ranting in your head to stall. If you don’t want to search the base, I’m sure Rogers will understand.” Stark snorts to make his sheer disbelief in that entire statement known. “I feel confident that I can make that nimrod comprehend the seriousness of the situation.” Stark eyed the large building covered in snow and faintly heard the wind howling through it. He had been stalling but dealing with the base would invariably help the world or, at the very least, Barnes. Everything is muted and not because of the snow. It’s fear and fear is a weakness. Stark men are made from iron.
“Are you two coming or is the plan to become the new Frosty the Snowmen? Except it should be Iron Snowmen.” Hawkeye says while somehow hanging from some railing or mystic Hawk powers. However, the most surprising thing isn’t Barton’s floating decapitated head but that the gate is wide open allowing the snow to rush into the base. Romanoff must have started a generator, but it’s hard to see the old building as something built by humans especially with snow piling up inside. Seems appropriate somehow like it was constructed by the Siberian winter itself.

“I am serious Tones. You don’t have to do this. There are plenty of other ways to stop Madam Hydra. We’ll figure it out. We always do.”

“You just want an excuse to pick a fight with Rogers.” Stark weakly laughs making another weary glance at the base. He doesn’t even remember the memory that’s causing his fear. All he knows it that thing was made from concrete, snow, and Nazi tears. Hardly a formula for inducing fear in the local genius.

“I don’t need an excuse to fight with Captain Charlatan. In fact, say the word and I will repulsor his ass. Man has it coming.”

“He can’t have it coming, Rhodey. He’s Captain America. He’s the one man you can trust never to steer you wrong.” Rhodey’s eyes go distant and cold.

“That’s what I thought until three years ago. And you know what the scariest part is?” Rhodes grips Stark’s shoulder hugging him to his body tighter acting as if the next moment Stark might disappear. The genius shakes his head no because he’s mouth feels numb. “Nobody thought he did anything wrong.” Stark shuffles a bit leaning his head on Rhodey’s shoulder giving comfort. The slightly taller man jabs Stark in the ribs causing the genius to bark out a laugh, who then retaliates by pushing Rhodes into the snow. Rhodey snickers, rolling around a bit before jumping up to stride into the base with the genius following right after.

The floating head was no longer near the entrance, Stark noticed, as his eyes trace the base’s structure and slowly follows behind Rhodey. Soon enough Rhodes and Stark reached the hall of dead soldier-sicles each with bullet hole dead-center in their foreheads. Hawkeye and the Black Widow are being spy-assassins elsewhere, but Wilson is staring at the dead super soldiers with rapt horrified fascination. Stark doesn’t want to know where the living super soldiers are located yet he can instinctively feel their exact placement in the vast area. And Stark doesn’t know why. Boredom radiates off Rogers, his eyes merely passing along the many ruin halls and apparently trying to ignore the main observation deck in the center. “Stark do you have any suggestion on where to start searching?”

“We should go through the center observation deck to reach the main offices. Most of the records can probably be found there, but Hydra presumably took what was useful and destroyed the rest. We should explore the rooms for one that used to contain a scientist. Science tends to create a lot of rambling notes which before computers meant it’s all on paper and most goons would ignore those doodles.”

“Doodles? Whose doodles are we hoping to find?” Hawkeye suddenly appears behind Stark causing him to suddenly shiver, but Rhodey’s reaction was more entertaining with a series of colorful language and strange body wiggling as he curses Hawkeye’s very existence. The Black Widow could be found shimming up to the Captain while moving just as silently as her partner.

“Zola’s,” Stark manages to reply.

The Captain frowns, after giving a brief grin to Romanoff and gazed intently at Barton. “Would some scientists’ doodles actually provide us with any valuable clues or is it a long shot?”
Barton rubs his chin contemplatively, although the answer was obviously yes, any intellectual project is built on a foundation of notes while trying to find the right way to convey his thoughts. “Yeah, for the most part, if you know the basics of what you’re reading already. Or you could be smart enough to figure it out from the context similarly to solving a coded message.”

Rogers nods still keeping his sight away from the center of the room and even rocks himself on his feet for a bit. “Thought so, we’re stuck with a crapshoot.” Those words are so dismissive it struck something deep within Stark. Given a chance, he knows he could figure enough out to give the Avengers some direction. Something. The world starts to lose its edge, everything starting to swing, he locks his knees keeping himself from collapsing by holding onto Rhodey. His anchor.

Vaguely he can hear Barton replying to Roger’s offhanded comment, a rebuttal in fact. “No. I think we have a pretty good chance with Tony. The man is a scientific genius.” Stark perks up at that because Tony wasn’t expecting any of the Avengers to stand against anything the Captain declared. Rhodey gives him a comforting pat but keeping a cautious eye on Barton and Rogers.

“Okay. We’ll find the notes and give Stark a shot at them, but like I said a crapshoot.” Rogers entire demure changes from bored tourist to a decisive leader. “Let’s split into two teams: Falcon, Bucky, Black Widow and I will check the rooms on the right while Hawkeye, War Machine, and Stark investigate the left side.” The Avengers, read as Rogers, endeavor to finish the search quickly but Wilson raised a hand stalling the group.

“Mind if I join Team Tech?” Rogers appears utterly astonished at Wilson’s request. The Captain stands tensely among the heroes while the Avengers await his decision. The Twin Assassins are communicating in that silent language of theirs, by rapid eye movement and body twitches, Stark can tell the partners are arguing about Falcon. On the other hand, Barnes has his emotions washed from his face with a solid eye on the Captain. The genius wishes he could do the same. Mostly he uses a distraction to hide his emotions, but there is something that can be said about an outright blank poker face.

Rhodey, however, seems to be the only Avenger able to interject into the strange battle of wills between Rogers and Wilson probably because he appears to be the only one amused by the whole affair. “Team Tech?”

“Yeah, if I join.”

“What about Romanoff’s Widow Bites?”

“Please. We all know Natasha’s superpower is herself. Hardly counts.”

“If you say so.”

“I do say so.” Wilson huffs out even going so far as to put his hands on his hips stubbornly. Stark was a little afraid it might make him laugh erratically from nerves and wanted for whatever was happening to be over and done so he could work on finishing the mission. Rogers’ was eyeing Wilson with a similar thought, and the genius hoped that meant Rogers wasn’t getting ready to fight over teams.

“That’s fine, Sam. You can be Team Tech and will be Team Skill.” Rogers claims with a playful smirk.

“Team Skill! My beloved ass! It takes skill to accomplish my level of prominence.” Hawkeye states as he pushes forward to face Rogers. Romanoff steps forward as well ready to respond to Barton’s outcry.
“Why don’t we have a wager? The winning team can use the title Skill in their team name. Agreed.” She smiled shrewdly. Personally, Stark would make it a life policy to never start a bet with anyone who carries a fox’s smile that easily. Cause they’re definitely a disguised fox and the “bet” is probably a trick to make you look stupid. Rather he’s decision would be to throw something as a distraction then run for the science yet Barton was doubtlessly considering the wager with a piercing gaze at Romanoff’s outstretched hand while Wilson and Rhodey were grinning like schoolboys. Naive schoolboys who would presumably end up in their underwear running through the school’s halls as everyone posted the two soldiers’ embarrassment on the internet. Nothing can escape the internet.

Romanoff wiggles her fingers inciting Barton to make a Devil’s deal, which would possibly end in their ruin with cackling witch laughter of doom. Barnes looked excited by the possibility of a bet. The man’s eyes were twinkling with excitement, and Stark did want to see him smile, of course, Barnes had nothing to worry about since he was on the witch’s team. Now that he thought about it, it made a lot of sense for the Black Widow to be a witch, she had the red hair, green eyes, mysterious shadow powers and Devil deals. “Deal. No time limit and the one who finds the most useful clues wins.”

“Agreed. Stark is the judge, and I’ll even let you keep him as part of your team.”

The two spies smack their hands together in agreement. “Ha! You’re going down.” The real scary thing isn’t that Romanoff smirks when Barton declares his intent to win. No. Rather, the chilling thing was that both Romanoff and Barnes smirked simultaneously. Rogers was barely paying attention to focus on the inside of the Hydra base, yet Stark knew that he was just as thrilled about the bet as Barnes and Romanoff. They were so screwed. Team Finesse sprinted into the inner part of the building while Team Screwed remained in the Hall of Dead. “We got this. This will be the third time I won a bet against Natasha.” Barton is giggling and dancing just a little with excitement. Stark wants to smack him in the face a couple of times for not understanding anything.

“Wait you’ve only won against Natasha twice. Seriously, man?”

“Wilson, I say this with complete acceptance and love, but Nat is a witch, and it’s almost impossible to win any wager against her. But this time the odds are stack in my favor.” Huh. Apparently, the archer did comprehend the situation. Wonders never do cease. Stark glanced at Rhodey who is still giggling and watches as Rhodes dorkly wiggles his eyebrows. Loveable moron.

“Sure. Everyone knows that but how is anything stacked in our favor?” Wilson appears genuinely concerned, and Stark wants to question why he let Hawkass agree to the bet if he didn’t think they would win. Why does anyone do anything that’s not science related?

Barton smirks. “We essentially split into Team Brain and Team Brawn. Tasha can use tech to accomplish anything but ask her to explain how her tools work, and she’ll try to stare you down. Rogers isn’t much better with his truly contemptuous dismissal of technology. I’ll admit Barnes is an unknown factor but him understanding tech is unlikely.” Stark blinks because he’s not sure he would agree with Barton’s assessment of James.

“You can’t rule out the possibility that he might be unassumingly tech savvy like you Barton.” Stark pauses assessing how clean Wilson’s pack is before continuing. “Or Wilson.”

Barton crosses his arms snorting at the genius but appearing amused rather than annoyed by the Stark’s words. “Whatever do you mean Stark? Everyone knows I’m hardly the smartest bird in the nest.” Rhodes mirrors both Barton’s arms and snorts then giving the archer a raised brow communicating how stupid that statement was.
Stark can appreciate a well-crafted mask, but Barton was kidding himself if he thought the genius bought the lie for a second. Stark looks into the archer’s eyes and smiles. “Now matter how great your eyesight, it’s useless if you don’t have the brainpower to internalize your environment.” Stark shrugs acting carefree and begin to pace around Barton. “Further, there is no record of any of the tech you and Romanoff use in SHIELD’s science database. Someone had to invent all those spy gadgets and logical guess says it’s you.” He stops to smirk at the archer. “And you said it yourself that the Black Widow couldn’t explain the workings of her Bites let alone design and build her signature spy tool.” Barton remains quiet and Stark knows he’s won.

“What about Rhodes? Does he need a tech consultant?” Stark blinks and scrunches his knows because the Avengers had to know how smart Rhodey is, it takes brain and brawn to work the armor efficiently.

“My Rho-Bo went to MIT. He’s one of the most intelligent people you’ll ever meet.” Wilson is surprised, and Stark still isn’t sure why.

Barton is grinning wide and bouncing on his toes. “We are so gonna win.” He laughs.

The group nods heading into the observation center to reach the many rooms of Hydra. Stark discovers that the prospect of winning the bet has made the situation somewhat pleasant although the constant whisper of fear still swims inside his head. It helps, he thinks, that Rogers isn’t here.

The first couple of rooms are bare having a random assortment of blank papers and broken chairs. At this point, Stark is starting to hope for a lone desk that might have an actual doodle scrawled into the sides or top panel. The muffled silence is starting to make him delirious, he strains himself to listen for the movement of the Avengers. Their footsteps, the mutterings between Wilson and Rhodey, and the shuffling of clothes. It doesn’t help, and he can feel in his bones this urge to scream or maybe laugh. Not sure if he could tell the difference between the two anymore. Finally, someone speaks. “Maybe we should get some UV to check if Hydra left any clues on the walls using blood.”

Stark listens as Rhodey snickers from the entranceway. “You do know this is not a video game, right? People in the real world don’t usually do that sort of thing.”

“None of us has any right to talk about what’s “real” or not, Rhodes.” Wilson snipes back. “My best friend can run a mile in a minute, and his best friend is a cyborg.”

“I find that real is often relative. For most people, a microwave is a machine, but the microwave on our floor argues with me constantly on how well-popped popcorn should be while Nat is laughing in the background.”

“Yeah, when Tones designed the Microwaves’ hive-AI it was right after he watched The Hunt for Red October. Be glad that your microwave doesn’t quote Lenin at you.”

“Barton has a point, Rhodes. Hydra could see blood as a whole sane method to write doodles.”

“Yeah! My crazy has a purpose.”

“I pretty sure you made a career from your crazy.”

“Zola wouldn’t use blood, he hates anything dirty,” Stark interjects into the conversation but regrets it immediately not enjoying all the eyes on him as if he destroyed, once more, something delicate and precious.

Yet Barton nods staring thoughtfully at the walls. “Okay. If I wanted to find something hidden by a crazy person, instead of applying my crazy-“
“We should use his crazy. That’s common sense, Clint.” Wilson adds immediately following Barton’s thoughts.

“Right but we haven’t Wilson. We’ve forgotten Zola’s and Hydra’s number one motto.”

“Which is?” Barton asks.

“Secrets, secrets, secrets,” Stark mutters already beginning to push out the distractions and drawing the skeleton of the structure in his head and comparing it to the other bases he has been to. He steps out into the wall seeing the bones with his mind. One door and one room each placed in an even pattern along the hallway which ends in a long “T” with no door. No door but each room is supposed to be the same size. If not a secret room, maybe, a secret something else. Stark edges closer, vaguely hearing Barton mention something about Rain Man, pressing an ear to the wall that should have a door and knocking along the far wall. He grins manically because the inside rung softly. “Yay! Secret.”

“Stark, my boy. Did you find something?” Stark flinches and flinches hard. He doesn’t remember and doesn’t want to. He’s chest hurts, and he can’t fill his fingertips. The man is chuckling with false love and Tony can only watch. Stark tries to take a breath, just one.

Rhodes scowls smacking Barton on the head. “Never say that again, or I will stab you in the gut with an arrow.”

“You would have my precious arrow betray me. You cruel man.”

“So what? You be okay with your untimely death if I stabbed you with a knife?”

“Yeah, I probably deserved it.”

“Those chuckles heads aside. Did you find something Stark?” The genius blinks using a moment to push his panic deep into his mind’s vault then using the next moment to regard Wilson’s calm presence.

“I think there is a secret elevator behind this wall. We should probably head up and find the executive office that the elevator connects into.”

Wilson nods striding toward the near stairwell, Barton and Rhodes slap at each other for a bit before following the man with Stark close behind them. Knowing the location of the elevator made finding the needed room trivial for the group. The ornate doors into the office didn’t hurt either. Barton easily blows the door opening into a surprisingly small room. Stark bites his lips concerned because the doors had been a distraction to have those looking for secrets to assume the doors belong to some pompous bureaucrat’s office. On the left wall is a single plastic plant and a strange intuitive instinct tells Stark that moving the plant diagonally from the wall will reveal a keypad. He does just that, but the strange sensation still hasn’t disappeared. “Huh, genius figured that out quickly.” Stark stares at the number pad knowing the passcode but trying to believe it’s just a coincidence. “Still need the number code.” Barton sighs while Wilson and Rhodes search the area for a hint.

“Barton try 2261942.” Barton glances at the genius incredulously but taps each digit using the faded number pad. A part of Stark wants it to work and find the necessary clues proving his worth to Captain America since this is likely his only chance. Another part wants to run fast and hard because he knows that code. It’s been burned into his eyes as the first secret he ever knew and the first piece of evidence that he would never measure up to perfection.

A pleasant ding sounds from the wall, as well as, a soft grinding of gears signals that the code has
worked. “Damn, Clint. Did you just guess the code?”

“Nah, Sam. I got the magic number from Stark.”

“Seriously Stark? How did you figure that out?”

“It was one of his favorite passcodes.” Rhodes hadn’t figured out anything from the room, but the former Colonel is reading something from Stark’s body language that frankly he hopes Rhodes ignores.

“Who?” Wilson asks while Barton seems to be picking up the same thing Rhodey is.

“Howard Stark.” Wilson entire body stiffens in shock, but the other two are still silent keeping their thoughts to themselves. Stark tries to ignore the eyes.

“Well, that’s a clue. Let’s head down, shall we?” Barton happily hops into the machine but keeps eyeing the escape shaft. Stark follows after fighting his flight instinct hard. Running had never achieved anything, and Howard always found him. Sometimes if he were lucky, Jarvis would find him first. The elevator starts moving and the genius grips his arms because he hadn’t noticed Wilson and Rhodsey entering the lift. No one speaks during the descent, but the entire thing didn’t take long, only about five floors. When the doors open Stark rushes out into the hidden Hydra laboratory trying to focus on the mission and pleasing the Captain. Maybe the recognition of a job well done from Rogers would chase away his ghost. “Okay team, we can do it.” Barton cries. Both Rhodes and Wilson give a thumbs up before scanning the room for clues.

Stark followed the left wall, just having his eyes gradually bouncing from ceiling to floor trying to find a piece of paper or long forgotten file. Anything to make the mission a success. Distantly, he hears Wilson cursing while Barton laughs at him. About 30 feet into the lab, Stark discovers a strange alcove separated from the main rooms and not readily available from any part of the lab. Before exploring his little discovery, Stark makes eye contact with Rhodes to silently inform the other man of his intentions. Apparently, he hit the jackpot. Okay, saying that might be a bit of a hyperbolic but the building is empty, and the genius needs something to justify entering this damn nightmare. The point was he found the white whales of doodles to bad he could still sense the ghost of Howard. “Hey, Flyboys and Bird Brain! I found something somebody should probably document it for our team’s’ win.” Some amount of shuffling can be heard behind Stark, the boys trying to shove themselves into the alcove while the genius searches around for something more.

“This entire area is filled with the language of the crazy. God! It’s everywhere. Everywhere, who can make sense of it all? Does it predict the next alien apocalypse? More importantly, does it answer the question we all want to know? Can I go take a nap?” Rhodes stares at Barton clearly thinking that something in the room was crazy, but it wasn’t the writing on the wall. Wilson decides to go the direct route and just smack Barton on the shoulder, twice.

“Reminds me of Tones’ college room before we started living together except there are more equations and less mechanical schematics.”

Wilson makes an odd noise then stepping closer to Rhodesy. “Let me guess, he picked up writing wandering thoughts on any surface from watching Howard?” Rhodey blinks and tilts his head before giving a grunt in agreement. Barton was quietly doing his Hawkeye mojo.

“But plenty of scientists probably write on their walls.”

Stark found himself nervously waiting for Barton say or do something, his brain insisting that the sniper was figuring out a vital clue. “The crazy isn’t bunched towards the empty desk but rather near
the file cabinet.”

“You’re right Clint but what good does that do us? Any goon worth his salt is going to empty that first.” Rhodes approaches the nearest wall with most of the writing and pulling his phone to snap a few pictures. Stark remains near Rhodes categorizing the different equations in his mind. He points to some fundamental equations: one about human behavior, one that described how the nerves connected the brain and the body, and one proposed theory of the super soldier serum. Barton spends his time staring at the cabinet and kicking the damn thing.

After kicking the empty metal rectangle couple of more times, Hawkeye kneels near the bottom of the cabinet and runs his fingers along the edges. A bright grin spreads across the man’s face, and Stark watches amazed as Barton reveals a paper thin hidden shutter which once rolled back revealed a folder with some forgotten papers. Stark noticed that there was space enough for another two folders in the secret back and found himself disappointed that only one folder held any papers.

“There is none more paranoid than a scientist spy. Well, and Fury but he doesn’t count.” Barton cackles while handing the files off to Rhodey who deposits the paper into Stark’s waiting hands.

The papers are just a bunch of ideas and nothing more. Similarly to the collection of writings along the walls except more organized. In fact, the notes seem to be a collection of ideas all tied together by two core concepts: controlling the brain to make super soldiers and creating a computerized brain network. First taking the insanity off the walls combined with the secret papers, a picture was starting to form. Some of it made sense in the shape of a computerized Zola, but other parts implied that Computer Zola was only the first step even though the actual driving force behind the notes was trying to combine humanity and computers. Yet from what Stark could read Zola was not the primary goal. “Tones, I finished photographing the room and the Bird Brains did a complete search of the lab. We’re ready if you are?” Time enough for the research later. He strolls out the lab wishing fervently that Howard’s ghost remind behind but he could still see Howard, walking along with the other soldiers, hands in his pockets and completely at ease, from the corner of Stark’s eyes. Squeezing his eyes shut didn’t help any. It never did.

Too soon did Team Brain meet up with Team Brawn and Stark felt numb staring down Rogers who barely spent the second it takes to notice the genius’ existence. He could hear the clinking of ice against the glass and failed to suppress the barest of flinches from the sloshing of the amber liquid.

“Alright Nat, put out or shove out.”

“Always so cordial, Clint.”

“You know it my intimidating arachnid. Now stop stalling. Gimme.” Barton places both hands before Romanoff wiggling the fingers and whiny for her to hurry up. She, decidedly ignoring Clint’s childish antics, strikes a pose, legs spread wide, one arm outstretched with the other behind her back, and giving herself a full beat to smirk confidently before offering up some random files for Clint’s inspection. Well, her offering was more slamming the files like a winning game football than simply handing the papers to Clint. She finishes by drawing the outstretched arm behind her back and placing the now empty hand over her face in what could only be called a superhero pose from some old 80’s television show. Barnes kept making a nervous glance at Rogers and pouting at Romanoff, if Stark had to guess he would say that the Winter Soldier was jealous of Nat’s dramatic posing.

“Interesting, apparently Stark was right about the whole super army. You, also, found a copy of a report proposing the creation of the Interface serum.” Stark watches amused as the files trade hands from Barton to Wilson then Wilson to Rhodey who gave them to Stark without either of the former Air Force boys taking a single peek.

“Show your findings, Clint.” Romanoff pauses to give a truly salacious grin. “Unless you didn’t find a thing.” She plays at being sympathetic even cooing at Hawkeye for a bit.
Barton hops onto one foot while both hands, including the one with their own findings, point straight into the air then gives a full twirl which he completes with his arms crossed before his face. Magically, their papers found their way to Romanoff’s hands and not flying around the room to be picked up. Apparently, their clue was better because she clicked her tongue. “Damn, you found actual doodles. I was sure Hydra would have managed to destroy every last scrap.”

“Your first mistake, Black Widow, was that you underestimated the true power of my eyes. Mhuwahahahahaha.”

She comically smirks, and Stark finds he can’t help but smile at the twin assassins’ game. “I wouldn’t count me out just yet Hawkeye, I’ve yet to begin to fight.” Romanoff once more puts on a professional face to give Rhodey Team Brawn’s files, which he just plops into Stark grasp, only to return back to giving exaggerated facial expression at Barton.

Stark plops himself onto the floor, regretting his decision immediately because it was too fucking cold, only to ignore his body’s pleas for warmth as he tries to figure out what exactly the Avengers found. Computers were a big thing, something that Stark could relate to but the proposed experiments seemed more focused on combining humans with computers rather than involving the technology into robots or AIs. Obviously Stark preferred robots and AI’s, yet he was intrigued by the idea of creating a biological interface or essentially taking a human brain to transform it into a supercomputer. He could live off electricity, get rid of that time waster sleep, and most importantly build wherever and whenever. Perhaps, make a suit that would be part of him literally. “Stark?” He was so excited at the prospect of what the Hydra scientist was calling the Interface serum, wait wasn’t he injected with that but he hadn’t notice any extra sensations around machines or an ability to communicate with computers either, everything faded. Everything. He could already see in his mind how to create Interface. It was simple really, all he need was a programmable serum. Nanites, maybe. “Stark.” No something more ingrained in the body, something that could reprogram the body itself, reprogram the brain. It have to be tailored to his DNA, no way to mass reproduce something like that. He scans through the files again, and Hydra wasn’t planning to mass produce Interface, but they did plan on adding some computer to the Black Winter Army. The records kept referencing a microchip, but he couldn’t find anything specific. “Stark.” The reports did imply that it was to enhance the soldiers and widows, but he was missing something. What? Fucking what? Something about control but it was more than that. Creating the needed network without the noise? Tony didn’t understand. “Stark!” He’s brain pauses, taking a brief moment to save his current thought before the rest of him catches up with what was going outside his mind. “Stark?” Barton asks once more, he’s sight level with Stark’s own. The archer looks concerned, Stark blinks trying to comprehend why. Quick check: Rhodey is glaring. (But not at him.) Wilson is analyzing something. (Hope it isn’t him.) Barnes is concerned too. (Also, directed at him.) Romanoff is faking boredom. (Why?) Rogers is actually bored. (Good for him?)

“Did something explode?”

Rogers sighs annoyed. “No, we were waiting on you. Remember?” Stark blinks and stops himself from tilting his head, from making any unnecessary movement. No, he hadn’t remembered. He takes a chance, hoping it’s not a mistake, and glancing at Barton. The archer mouths bet. He takes a small breath because he hadn’t made a mistake. Stark begins to remember, Romanoff and Barton wager about clues and what not.

“Yes, Sir. I remember. Apologies for letting you wait. Do you wish to hear what I deduced?” He suddenly finds his entire body numb. Rogers takes a more serious stance then waving a hand imperiously for the genius to continue. “Essentially, Hydra was trying to create a supercomputer army although following the more basic concept of computers and not the modern one.”
Wilson raises his hand, and despite himself, Stark was starting to find the habit enduring. “Explain in smaller words, please.” Barton snorts causing Wilson to retaliate by kicking the archer.

“Typically, people use to view computers as a machine that could follow simple commands but as the technology evolved the idea that computers could become something with its own agency begun to spread.”

“Hydra wanted an army that could follow orders like a computer but still make necessary decisions in the field,” Romanoff interjects, but Stark only nods then continues his explanation.

“Right. Except I’m thinking that the idea was more along the lines of creating a computerized hive mind with Zola being Queen Bee. The papers that Widow brought, although never mention anything directly, imply that the soldiers and widows would be given a serum then would have a microchip implanted in their brains. I haven’t figured out exactly how that would work but based of Barnes I’m inferring that it would be a hive program that would suppress the original personality.” Stark waits to give the group a moment to process the sickening information watching each reaction carefully. He is not surprised to see that Wilson, Barton, and Rhodey wearing matching horrified expressions or that both Widow and Winter appear resigned to the cruelty of Hydra. Rogers's reaction, however, is a surprise and that scares him. “There is a fair amount of research discussing the combination of human and computer in relation to the army but also to the serum, called Interface, that could possibly transform a human brain into an organic supercomputer that would be able to communicate with other electric powered machines. Including those microchips, I’m guessing.”

“Wait, I thought you said that Hydra injected the Interface serum into you.” Barton queries.

“I did, but it might have been something different or a failure because I haven't noticed anything that could be similar to what these old Hydra reports describe.” Stark frowns taking a minute to think. “We probably need someone specializing in biochemistry and the super soldier serum to figure that stuff out.”

Rogers lets out a frustrated noise that sounds like Banner, but Stark wasn’t sure. “Anything else?”

“Actually, yes. I get the feeling, from the notes, that the microchip plan wasn’t working, maybe the serum was rejecting it from the body I don’t know, but the files Barton found suggests that they were planning on trying to create a machine that could affect the brain from outside the body. A device that would allow scientist to enter the mind and reprogram the soldiers from within their mind. Mostly, seems conceptual at this stage. However, that was maybe fifty years ago. Hydra might have a working machine by now.”

“They probably do have a working machine.” Barnes notes from the corner behind Rogers and Stark finds himself surprised the man spoke. He hardly said anything the entire way here, and the genius assumed he kept the silence even when the group split into teams. Rogers glances at Barnes. “Why do you say that Bucky?”

“Stark said he wasn’t wiped, but his mind has been altered.” Barnes reply is rather flat, and Stark has the sudden urge to bang his head against a wall for how blind and selfish he’d been. The Avengers were wandering around what used to be the main base for the Winter Soldier Project. How many memories did Barnes have in this building filled with ghost and how many of those ghost belong to him. He should have said something to ease the former Hydra’s assassins mind. After all, Stark couldn’t remember why this place was freaking, but Barnes did. It was evident, and yet the other Avengers appear surprised at Barnes’ tone. Except for Rogers who is just smiling harder at the other soldier.
Romanoff’s eyes flicker to Barton, the genius wonders if that’s code for discussing Barnes and Starks issues behind their back, before landing her gaze at Stark. “Is this true?”

The genius finds he cannot return the Black Widow’s eyes and tries to count all the cracks in the concrete instead. “Yep. Hydra definitely did something to my head that wasn’t the chair. This mind machine being the tool Hydra used is a good guess.”

Awkward would be a good term for the pained paused the entire groups gives after Stark’s words. Unsurprisingly, in the history of ever, has talking about brainwashing ever been a good way to spend an afternoon. Although, running around a terror base of evil nightmare isn’t exactly a fun time either but whatever. He is already here. Barnes is already here. The Avengers are discovering, once more, that Hydra is indeed evil personified and needs to be stop. The upside, mysteries are always fun. At least twenty percent of interest in Sherlock is due to the mystery. Right? “Well, I guess Clint was right. Good job Stark.” The Cap gives Stark a small smile, and a part of him is excited, but another part is waiting for the other shoe to drop. “I guess it does take a mad scientist to catch another mad scientist.” Stark flinches from the offhanded comment, which was stupid because really what did he expect.

<Wasn’t I right? Worthless and pathetic.>

Rhodey takes a step forward, his stance ready to start a fight with Rogers. However, Wilson pulls on his arm stopping Rhodes and whisper something in the other man’s ear. Maybe telling Rhodes it wasn’t worth it. “Any thoughts on how we should proceed?”

“I guess one place to start is to investigate who’s creating the most neuro-technology,” Barton adds.

“That would be Stark Industries.” Rhodes replies.

“Okay.” Romanoff takes a step closer to Rhody asking for permission with a raised brow. “Another clue to investigate would be anyone working on the advancement of computers for more than playing app games. But something tells me that Stark Industries too.” Rhodey smirks.

“But also a possible Hydra connection like a group with military ties or better yet relations with SHIELD. They turned out to be Hydra after all.” Wilson suggests.

“That’s also SI which makes it are best suspect.” Rogers points out. “No surprise there.”

“What exactly are you saying Rogers?” Wilson tries to pull Rhodey back, but it doesn’t seem to deter the soldier.

“It’s a company that sells destruction to the highest bidder.”

<You made a mess of my legacy.>

“Stark Industries stop selling weapons a while ago, Rogers,” Rhodes growls out.

“You’re being naive Rhodes. He might not sell missiles anymore, but the company is still in the destruction business. The Ironman suits are one of the most powerful weapons made by Stark. He built the Insight Helicarriers and created Ultron too. He associates with terrorists and men like Ross. Half of the Avengers missions were cleaning up Stark’s mess.”

<You tried to prove me wrong and all you did was show the world how right I was Anthony. You’re nothing but a fuck up who couldn’t handle the real world like a man.>

“How can you say that, Rogers. Tony has saved your collective asses multiple times.”
“That doesn’t excuse the fact that since the birth of Ironman it’s been one mess after another. The incident where he earned the name, Ironman was him blowing up one of his own factories. Then there was the year of him pulling life endangering stunt after stunt. It’s how you got the suit, Rhodes.”

The clinking of ice is louder. Stark is starting to feel small. This is how it always start, with a list of his every fault and his every mistake. When it ends, he is always so cold.

“It’s not that simple!”

“No?” Rogers mocks. “Stark destroyed his own shrine to his inflated ego then there is AIM, another terrorist organization with ties to Hydra, which is another mess born from his spoiled brat ass. You and Pepper could have died numerous times, and it’s only by a fucking miracle you both are still alive.” Romanoff and Barnes are both doing an excellent imitation of a living statue because even they have to breath probably so they can’t be actual statues. Stark hopes they’re breathing at least.

It’s ridiculous to be thinking about ninja gargoyles (they breath when they're awake) when he should be figuring out the whole Hydra thing, but he needs this. He needs to focus on the concept of living ninja statues instead of Rogers’ icy blue eyes.

“Tones made some mistakes, but he has always tried his best.”

“Yet he continues to make the same mistakes again and again. Keeping secrets, that can negatively affect others and building dangerous technology that can destroy lives. The reality is Rhodes, you have no idea what Tony has created, for who, and for what purpose. Stark Industries being another part of Hydra’s web is not an impossibility.” Stark flinches at the scorn in Rogers’ voice. He was stuck in this moment, where everything was frigid and exposed, and it was starting to overlap with another memory. He refused to remember, it’s from the life of a defected product and Stark is better.

“You think Tony could be Hydra?” Rhodes spits accusingly then baring his teeth at Rogers.

“No. Of course not.” Rogers juts his chin at Rhodes and widening his stance. “But you can’t always trust him.”

“Trust?” Stark whispers. His heartbeats skyrockets and his hands clenched into a fist. He can hear Howard’s mocking laughter behind him, but it’s the blond soldier that holds his attention. “Trust.” He says louder with a sneer finally gaining the awareness of the group. “Trust. You don’t have the fucking right to question my trust.” Steve fucking Rogers drops his head and takes a shaking step back. Steve the trustworthy. Steve the Perfect who would never lie. Steve the Golden Boy who pretended to care to make Tony feel valuable. Yet Steve’s every word was a lie. Just like Obie.

“Stark calm down. You’re not breathing right.” Again more fake concern but Tony ignored the burning in his lungs.

“You lied to me for years.” Tony watches carefully as Rogers rubs his nose.

“Tony I’m sorry-”

“No. You can’t say that. You don’t have the right to say that to me. You don’t care that I’ve been lied to my whole life and all I asked from you as a friend was to be truthful. And you acted my friend even after Ultron. Even after I carried the shame for breaking that promise for a year. You made me feel that shame and guilt every bloody day for a year but your self-righteous dick could lift long enough to tell me my Mother had been murdered by Hydra.”

“Tony, please. I was just trying to protect Bucky.”
“Because you didn’t fucking trust me. You’re supposed, to trust your friends.”

“I was afraid of what you might do, and I was right. You tried to kill him.”

“You killed me! Slammed your fucking shield right into my chest and left me to bleed out in the snow. Not you. Not Barnes. It was me abandoned in the snow.” Tony tries to shove Rogers, but he doesn’t budge. He never did, and Tony is nothing without the suit.

You might be able to fool the world into thinking you are something Anthony, but didn’t I say, Captain America would know your real worth. The Captain understood that you are weak, soft and pathetic. Didn’t I say Anthony, a weak man cannot be trusted because he will eventually break. All weakness must be disposed of Anthony.> Howard states with a derisive snort. What did he know of strength and weakness? He got Maria killed because he couldn’t admit to himself that Captain America was fucking dead. Aunt Peggy had the strength to move on but Howard Stark didn’t.

Tony swallows, his throat dry, trying to ignore Howard but the ghost was insistent. He turns to face Howard and scream at him. “What would you know about strength, old man? You spent your remaining years drunk and living in the past. Couldn’t build a damn thing and the company was tanking. I was thirteen when Obie came to me to clean up one of your failed weapons. Blood on my hands since I was thirteen. Thirteen! Because you couldn’t live without Captain America.”

“Tones?” Tony’s throat burns and he can feel tears gathering in his eyes. Rhodes is gripping his left wrist an old injury from MIT that was Tony’s fault. Tony’s shoulders fall. He never wanted Rhodey to know that about him, he never wanted Rhodey to know that he was already broken long before they meet. That Rhodey couldn’t save him, and yet Tony knew that Rhodey had saved Tony every day of their relationship.

“Stark who are you talking to?” Rogers’ voice is controlled and his palms up trying for non-threatening, but Fuck did it rub Tony the wrong way.

“Howard Stark!” Tony bites out. “Rogers, obviously. The man whose legacy I carry. The man whose memory I can never live up no matter how much I try. My entire life I’ve been compared to Captain Perfect and when Howard died nothing changes except whose face I wear.”

“Tony no one is there.”

“Yes, he is. Wearing that same cold expression of contempt that he always wore. The same smell of cigars and whiskey. He is there.” Tony’s skin feels too tight, and all he wants is to dig his nails into the flesh. Why is everyone staring?

<No one is going to believe you, Anthony. I am the man who gave the world the future, and you’re the slut that squandered it.>

“NO! I didn’t squander anything. I made the future greater.” His voice breaks on the last couple of words. Not quite believing himself. He had tried. He did. But his weapons had been sold to America’s enemies, arc reactor technology used by an insane Russian, the helicarriers used by Hydra, and then there was Ultron.

“Tony calmed down.” Rogers is still so calm and controlled. Calm and controlled. “You are behaving irrationally.” Tony is not behaving irrationally. The Captain had used the same tone as Howard had whenever he was angry or sad. Behaving irrationally he’d say. Stark men are made of iron he’d say.

“No, I’m not Rogers!” Tony screeched. Everything is getting out of hand. His blood is pumping loud
in his ears, and the walls are closing in. “I died here, and you brought me back for the exact same reason. You don’t fucking get to tell me what to do.”

“I was trying to save Bucky. I told you that, but you wouldn’t listen.”

“But what about me? Don’t I matter.”

<Of course not Anthony. Barnes is worth ten of you.> Howard laughs, and the sound is jarring to Tony. He can feel the tears pouring now. He always cried in the end. <Pathetic.> Bloody hell, does Tony hate this.

“There is no reason to be so dramatic Tony,” Rogers says. Or was it Howard. It’s becoming a bit difficult to tell the two apart. The same disgust was on both their faces and both men chose ghost over Tony.

“Steve enough.” Tony swing to look at Rhodey expecting the words to come from he’s usually defender but instead he’s head was pulled back, and his eyes were blinking fast at Wilson. Sam Wilson, one of Steve Rogers’ loyal followers, had come to Tony’s rescue. Unbelievable.

“Sam?”

“No Steve. You crossed a line. We should have never brought Tony to such a traumatic place for the man especially not with you and Barnes trailing along.”

“He volunteered to come, Sam.”

“We used this trip as proof that Stark was on our side and not playing us for Hydra. The man never really had a choice, and now you are attacking him in the same place you betrayed him three years ago. Stark has a goddamn right to process the trauma however he pleases.”

“Even if it’s screaming at an invisible ghost?” Barton questions sincerely and Tony can’t help the giggle that escapes. What is happening here?

“I didn’t betray Tony, Sam.”

“Yeah, you did. Getting into a fight, leaving one of your men behind without checking if he got home and even lying that you trusted him. God, we talked behind his back like a couple of high school brats.” Sam scrubs his cheek roughly with his gaze fixed on the ground. “But believing your crap about Stark, that’s on me.”

“Sam. Sam. Sam? What about the invisible ghost Sam?” Both Rhodey and Sam glare at Barton for his childish antics while Romanoff just punches him in the shoulder. “Aww, Nat. Violence is bad.” Despite himself, Tony smirks because once upon a time they were friends. Clint smiles and gives Tony a thumbs up.

“Yes, Clint. Stark can process his grief and anger by yelling at an invisible ghost. It’s a lot healthier than most methods of coping, peculiarly, since he just escaped from Hydra. I say let the man yell at some dick of a ghost.”

“But isn’t seeing something that’s not there unhealthy?”

At the same time, Rogers mutters, “Howard wasn’t a dick.”

Rhodey takes a step toward Rogers that was really more of a stomp while the Captain widen his stance ready to start something. It reminded Tony of bullfighting with Rhodey as the bull willing to
take a run at Steve the matador except instead of red the cloth was blue with a white star. “We are all going to ignore Steve for the moment. Okay.” Sam gives his own pointed stare at both Rogers and Rhodey who only take five minutes to finally back down. “Now to the ghost. Tony do you still see or hear Howard?”

Tony shuffles his feet waiting for Howard to say something snide about him. Tony waits, rubbing his neck until he realized what he was doing and stops. He pulled his hands down trying to hide, everything actually. Yet Howard hadn’t said a word and Tony could no longer smell the cloying scent of whiskey. “No.” He licks his lips. “I can’t see or hear him.”

“Okay. And do you feel better getting all that off your chest?”

“Maybe, I guess.” Tony twists his fingers together taking a glance at Rhodey. Rhodey half lifts his arm, his usually way of offering a hug, and Tony lean in. “Yeah, I do feel a bit better.”

“Good.”

“Great. I want to head back to the Tower.” The group blinks at Romanoff because she sounded tired and whiney something that Tony was hundred percent sure the Black Widow couldn't feel.

Rhodey huffs and starts to pouts at Wilson. “I want to head back, too.”

Barton is the next one to push out his lips and widen his eyes into a puppy-eye pout and stomps his boot. “Me too.” This was also directed at Wilson.

“What am I the designated adult?” Wilson snorts.

“Oooh, yes! Raise your hand if you think Sam should be the designated adult?” Clint laughs. Everyone raised their hand except Rogers whose arms are crossed. Surprisingly, Barnes also had his hand raised and for some reason that had Wilson direct all his frustration at the cyborg.

“Fine. As the designated adult I say we can go back now. I’m tired, and I want some damn orange juice.”
When the Past is Perfect, Who Needs the Future?

Chapter Notes

Took me a month, Goddess, I am sorry. I’m trying a new schedule which might help with the updates. Here’s hoping.

There is a part where I tried to make it where Winter would offer to kill Sam for Steve, but Bucky (his voice in my head) was all “I didn’t raise no brat, Stevie!” And Steve (voice) is like “You didn’t, Mama Rogers did.” “As if. If it weren’t for me, you’d be sleeping in concert.” “I’d get out.” “How?” “Hold my breath and punch my way.” “Skinny you would be dead.” “Brooklyn punch!” “Being born in Brooklyn is not a super power.” “You’re just jealous cause you were born in Indiana.” “There’s nothing wrong with Indiana.” “Except it’s-” “Don’t you say it.” “Flyover. It’s flyover.” “You said it.” “I said it.” Then they roughhouse like idjits.

There's also part of the story where my head just sang: “Captain Marvel! There's no one better. Captain Marvel! She flies and shoots energy blast. Captain Marvel! She makes all the genders swoon. Captain Marvel! Captain Marvel! She's brave, she's bold, she's beautiful. She is Captain Marvel!” as I wrote.

Finally, this where I introduce the Stucky thing of the story which fans of that ship might not like. It's short, like a small paragraph, but still clearly kinda of hinky. If I need to add a tag, please tell me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“For our first order of business, let’s make one thing clear.” Rhodey gives each Avenger a pointed look. “The first Avenger to wake Tony will suffer FRIDAY’s divine wrath. Understood?” Rhodes has both legs propped atop the table creating a hammock for Stark. The Asset was dazzled that Rhodes could still sound commanding even as he cradled a drooling genius in his lap.

“Aww, come on Rhodes. Stark is out. A bomb could go off and the man would continue playing those Zs.” Stark wiggles a bit in Rhodes’ lap and rubs his face along the Colonel’s chest. Barton waves his hand probably indicating that Stark was proving his point. Rhodey sends a chilly glare in response.

“You want to test me on this, Arrow Junkie?” Rhodes whispers. Barton raises two palms and firmly shakes his head.

“Right. Let’s all ignore Clint.” Wilson suggested. Barton tries to protest but Rhodes shuts that down quick with another dirty look. “We need a plan because, I’ll be honest, an army of Barnes is a recurring nightmare of mine.” The Asset knows that Bucky would make some token objection or some snide remark about the intelligence of birds. Yet he can’t. His head feels heavy, making a persuasive argument for curling up in his den to sleep. Instead of saying anything, he shrugs and receive another assessing glance from Wilson.

“Is that your way of asking if I will investigate SI?” The Spider gleefully provoked.

“If your offering Natasha but I was actually thinking of Clint.” Barton tilts his head, mouth open but
another piercing glance from Rhodey has the gaping maw slam shut.

The Asset’s eyes were starting to ache, and he slides down his seat. The room was bare of the standard black rimmed clock that spaces like this usually had and the Asset was mulling over if that was a positive or not. Clock or no, he felt every passing second. The ticking could perhaps prove annoying, but he’d never know.

“Clint and I can work with CEO Potts, but we need someone to search for Banner.”

“Why? Wouldn’t T’Challa and Wakanda scientist do the job just as well?” Rogers inquired. The Asset blinks rapidly, the lines of the room and the people inside blurring together. He takes a deep breath hoping to feel a little more lively. This is important but the Asset doesn’t care. Rogers might become flustered with every newly discovered Hydra head but the Winter Soldier had seen enough proof that Hydra never dies.

Barton shifts in his seat making his body face Rhodes then placing his right hand over his chest and swinging the hand to sign ‘please.’ Rhodes gestures for Clint to speak. “Cap, Banner is an expert on the super soldier serum, although Wakanda could eventual provide the same results, Banner would be quicker. The man did write a Ph.D dissertation was on the multiple applications of the super soldier serum.”

Wilson blinks. “Why do you know that?”

“I’m an enigma wrapped- burrito mystery- I’ve got- flavors-” Barton scoffs. The Asset thinks Barton is scoffing. His words are coming in fragmented like broken a radio. The static makes his eye throb harder.

“Barnes... could-”

He knows Natalie’s mouth is moving. The red painted lips forming one shape after another but the actual words slip from the Soldier's mind. He mental grabs one word to hold “mdeq” but it means nothing to him. It could be anything, an encoded message or another language entirely. He tries again, the static is getting fiercer, “jaoqkx” and again the meaning escapes him.

An abrupt sensation grips along the Asset’s shoulder and a full shudder shakes his body. His eyes trail up trying to distinguish the different blended shapes flickering around him. “Bucky?” That he understood at least.

“Sorry. I spaced.” Another vulnerability that Wilson is undoubtedly cataloguing.

“Bucky?” Rogers. The Captain. Bucky’s best friend. The Asset rolls his shoulders an attempt to relax, to push down the increasing trembles and sweep away the cotton in his mind. “I didn’t get that. Could you say it again?” Rogers’ lips are pulled into a tight smile and his grip is digging his nail into the Asset skin.

“Sorry.” The nails dig deeper and the Captain’s eyes are icy cold. The Asset’s pushes his boot down. The chair wheels squeak and creak as they slide against the floor yet his position remains the same. He licks his lips and takes a controlled breath to try again. “Sorry Stevie. Mind went a wandering.”

“Of course, Bucky. No trouble.” The prickling sensation from the nails disappear and the Asset’s personal bubble is restored. He takes a beat to send a ‘what the fuck’ glance towards the Archer. Barton rushes to sign an answer before the Captain became curious about the antics behind him.

“You spoke Russian” is what Barton eventually spells out. Fuck. Bucky didn’t speak Russian. Around the Captain even the Spider stuck to English.
“What I’d miss?” The Asset leans back and watching as the Captain muscles flexed then became pliant.

“We’re going to be searching for Banner while Clint and Natasha investigate Stark Industries.” Barnes nods and applies a small smile to the gesture.

“Great! My lap is going numb and FRIDAY didn’t have to unleash her divine wrath. Good meeting everyone. I don’t want to see any of your fucking mugs until tomorrow. Have a lovely day” Rhodes fires off, carrying the sleeping genius from the room.

“Rhodes is indeed wise. Come Nat, pizza calls for our swift return.”

“Yeah, some grub would be good. Buck?”

“Actually, Steve, I was hoping to have a word with you.” Rogers shrugs giving Wilson a lopsided smile but Wilson’s returning smile is hardly a twitch. “I was hoping alone.”

“Sam, if you want to say something-”

“It’s fine Rogers. No need to get your knickers in a twist.” As much the Asset desire to climb the tower and hurl himself into his den, a part of him was curious. A lighter part that giggled at the idea of Rogers being in trouble thus he pulls the numbness from his mind using it to ignore the weariness of his bones. He crouches down into the shadows of hallway then pressing a finger to his lips while he gives a pleading gaze toward the many hidden eyes of FRIDAY.

“Sam I know you and Buck have never seen eye to eye but was it really necessary for him to leave?”

“I need an answer and I’m not sure I’d have the will with Barnes in the room.”

“Is this about Bucky?” The Asset can hear the frown and soft disappointment in Rogers words.

“No. It’s about Stark.”

“Tony?” The Asset cringes, a natural survival reaction, neither the Potts woman nor War Machine were ever found of Rogers using Stark’s given name.

“The man said something that got me thinking.” Wilson rubs his jaw and neck. “That a lie. I’ve just decided that I can no longer ignore the little voice in my head screaming that something isn’t right.” His eyes trail away from the Captain, unfocused on anything in the room.

“Sam?” Rogers whispers and Wilson’s gaze snaps back.

“Steve I need you to be straight with me.” He inhales deeply through his nose, then exhales sharply out his mouth. “Did you- Did you really slam your shield into Stark’s chest?”

“What was I supposed to do Sam? He was trying to kill Bucky.”

“And yet both of you were completely fine when T’Challa brought you to Wakanda.”

“You know I heal Sam.” Rogers clenches then relaxes his hand and brushes it through his hair. “And Stark blew off Bucky’s arm.”

“Yes! The easily replaceable non-life threatening one.” The Asset swallows a laugh because the Falcon had a point. Wilson messages his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. “Did you even stop and think about the possible damage you did to that man’s chest? Even if you ignore the consequences of the damn arc reactor, surviving two serious chest surgeries and a bomb exploding
near him. You could have easily broken the man’s chest or punctured a lung.”

“Sure, I tore off his helmet but the rest of his armour was fine.”

“You tore off his helmet?” Wilson takes a step back. “Why would you aim for the helmet? If you wanted incapacitate the man you’d go for the battery.” Yeah, the giant glowing battery which is basically a final boss weak spot in a video game.

“Sam he wanted to kill Bucky.” Something in Wilson’s gaze dims and he takes another step away from the Captain.

“Why?”

“What?”

Wilson enunciates every word carefully. “Why did you tear off his helmet?” The Captain remains silent. “Why did you tear off his helmet?” Wilson demands and the responding silence is deafening. “Fuck. You were going to execute Stark but then decided to shatter his rib cage for a slow death instead. Fuck.” He casts his sight down to his boots and shoulders slumping. “He was your friend and teammate.”

“Sam, he was going to kill Bucky. I couldn’t allow that.” The Captain places a gentle hand onto Wilson blocking the Asset’s view of the darker man.

“And you still haven’t told me why?” Wilson accused.

“Hydra murdered his parent.”

Wilson’s eyes spread wide but only for a moment before it was replaced by a deep scowl. “You means Barnes did.”

“It wasn’t him! You know that Sam.”

“He came to me and offer to help. God I was such a shit who never bothered to actually get to know the man. I sent him to his death.” Wilson shoves away Rogers’ arm and once more takes a step back.

“He’s not dead!”

“Maybe he was. We’ll never know because you abandoned him dying in the snow.” The Asset presses his weight against the wall. Stark trying to pull himself from the ground and weakly screaming for his Father’s shield. Broken by someone he trusted.

“Sam? What are you trying to say here?”

“Barrett Abram.”

“What?”

“He had a reputation for being an aloof jackass, we had one class together and I never spoke to him until tenth grade when he join the drama club.” The Asset imagines Rogers wearing the confused puppy expression number three while Wilson waits for him to react or ask the directed question.

“Why’d he join the drama club?”

“He had social anxiety and was tired of it leading his life.”
“I hardly think Stark has any anxiety problem.”

“Who knows? I certainly don’t but I’m going to find out and while I do I can’t have you around.”

“Are you saying we can’t be friends anymore?”

“No, Steve.” Wilson sighs. “I just need some time to think and I believe you do too.”

Wilson’s boots softly thump as he makes his exit from the conference room. The Asset waits until those soft thumps become softer and then only echoes along the walls. Still remaining crouched on the ground he tilts his head into the room. “Ya got dumped Punk.”

“I figured you’d stay and eavesdrop.” He shrugs even as he knows Rogers can’t see him.

“Are you gonna to?”

“What?” The Captain sighed dejectedly.

“Think.”

“About what?” He spat. The Asset lifts himself from the balls of his feet and leans, arms crossed, against the door frame. “Sorry.”


“What about the future?”

“You’re plans for the future. Come on Rogers you are not this dumb.”

“Yeah, well I always thought the it was obvious.” The Asset cocks an eyebrow waiting for the Captain to continue. “Lead the Avengers, save the world.”

“How? We probably can’t stay here or at the compound indefinitely, and there’s not going to be any money after this either.” Rogers face scrunches up and his squint at Barnes. His confused but trying not to show it expression. “We’ve got Rhodes’ support for now but after we settle things for Stark. Whoosh, no more resources from SI.”

“T’Challa-”

“Isn’t our biggest fan either. After this mission will have no home base, money or ride.”

Rogers roughly shakes his head. “No. T’Challa realized his mistake; he understands the misguidedness of the Accords.”

“You sure? Cause it’s not like anyone ever mentions the Accords.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Rogers waves that idea off with his hand. “I only ever expected T’Challa’s help until Tony saw reason and realized the world needs the Avengers with his support.”

“You thought after everything that happened that Stark would wake up one day and fund the Avengers again.”

“Yes.” Steve smiled earnestly.

“Just like that.”
Now he frowns. “Well no. He have to apologize first and admit that he’s the one who needs oversight, not the Avengers. The Captain tilts his head, eyes thoughtful. “Definitely a clear attitude adjustment.”

“An attitude adjustment?”

“Of course. You heard what he said about Howard.”

“Yes, I heard.” This probably isn’t the time to tell Steve that he doesn’t remember any Howard unless he’s talking about the prick that had a crush on Steve. Although, Barnes low opinion about the guy had nothing to do with the fact that prick’s eyes were always glued to the Captain’s ass.

“I’m sure Howard drank but who didn’t. Remember one morning when Colonel Phillips had us scrambled for an early morning meeting. Howard showed up in some lady’s blouse and refused to admit it wasn’t his. Spent the whole day wearing it too.” Barnes remember that was the same meeting the prick asked about sensitive Hydra tech and he did it without raising any alarms neither.

The Captain starts snickering to himself. “That was the same day Dum Dum declared he was going figure out how to sleep with his eye open and Gabe betted a whole dollar that he couldn’t.” The Asset not sure why anyone would want to learn such a worthless skill, becoming instant alert from sleep or staying aware even as he sleep had much more survival applications. Maybe it was to trick the target’s into thinking you are awake so they hesitate. That could prove useful.

The wistful smiles fades and is soon replaced by a more pensive expression. “It couldn’t have been easy for Howard raising Tony. Trying to teach basic virtues and values to a kid who’s always had the world at his fingertips. A prince among men.”

“It couldn’t have been easy growing up in the shadow of the Great Howard Stark neither.” Rogers narrows his eyes at the Asset and the Soldier knows he failed another ‘Bucky Test’ but he’s finding that, at the moment, he doesn’t care.

“Maybe.” The intense throbbing is starting to break through the numbness but he needs to know Rogers plan for the future. Except it was never the Asset’s place to worry about the future, to think about anything that wasn’t the current mission. Current mission is to be Bucky Barnes and Bucky would inquire. Wouldn’t he?

“What if after everything Stark doesn’t want to fund your team? What if you can’t be an Avenger anymore Steve?”

“The World needs the Avengers Bucky.” The Captain states very slowly.

“Yes, I know but that doesn’t necessarily include you. Stark could create a whole new team of Avengers.” The Captain blinks. Tilts his head and blinks again. Opens his mouth, shuts and opens it again. Next a single finger is raised but hardly accomplishes anything. Crosses his arms and uncrossed his arm. The Asset cannot decide if he should do a full body laugh or cry in response. He’s feels both would be good but the Captain probably wouldn’t approve of either response.

“That’s not going to happen.”

“And why not?” Barnes growls out. “Is it so hard to imagine something beyond the Avengers?”

He grits his teeth trying to stare Barnes down, reading something in Barnes’ expression, the Captain quickly brightens and gives a him a wide grin. “It just doesn’t matter Bucky. All I need is you.” The Captain kisses him, dry and quick, effectively ending the argument.
Mostly it’s the prickling sensation that he hates most and the heavy weight of iron in his stomach that
tells him that something isn’t right. He loved but not like this. However, the more intimate touches
are sparse.

The Captain leaves and the Asset pulls a knife from his boot. One of the gifts from Stark. He twirls
the blade and flips it between his hands. He could cut a small piece, skin heals conveniently
especially with the serum, and the sensation would be gone. Keep it from spreading. He loved but
not like this.

“Sergeant Barnes are you alright?” The voice in the wall ask. The Asset starts to laugh because often
Stark’s spy computer holds more insight than a bunch of soldiers and spies. The soft chuckles roll
into hard cackles and now he’s having trouble catching his breath. “Sergeant? Should I call
someone? Falcon or the Black Widow?”

“I’m okay FRIDAY. I’m okay.”

“TV suggests that random laughing is not a good thing.”

“It’s not, but I’m fine.” Fine, as he often discovers, is relative to whatever is the new normal.

“Are you texting your girlfriend again?”

“Nat! What have I said about social rules and the ick factor?”

She shrugs draped along the couch like Cleopatra on her throne. “She’s eighteen.”

“So? When I have sex with women it never ends well. It ends in tears, blood, and a new archfoe. My
tears, Nat. My tears. Bobbie and, god, Jessica.”

“I always figured you knew.” She makes her voice quivers a bit trying to sound shocked. Clint
rolling his eyes suggest he isn’t buying it but she is never one to give up an opportunity for fun.
“That sex never ends well for you.”

“Hey. Me and Coulson had a very satisfying sex involved relationship that didn’t end in tears or
blood.” She snorts. “Fine. You won this round Romanoff.” She signs ‘and’. “And I’m not ever
going to have sex with Kate. The girl is like my rule 63 except more awesome. Or I’m her rule 63?
The point is she is Hawkeye 2.0 and not for any relationship except the wholesome platonic kind.”
She shrugs because they’ve had this argument before and will probably have it again. “Besides your
procrastinating.” She is. Things did not end well between her and Potts. Potts stuck her own neck out
many times for her and the CEO viewed her actions at the airport as a betrayal. Pepper never forgave
twice.

“Maybe. FRIDAY?” Strange. The AI was always watching and often spoke up before a request
could be made. “FRIDAY?”

“Ah? Yes, Black Widow?” She trades a glance with Clint.

“Could ya call the powerful Pepper up on Stark’s ridiculous future coffee table? Nat has something
she’s been dying to ask the Strawberry blonde.” She flicks her wrist pulling a hidden dagger from
her arm then twirling the weapon between her fingers. Clint, the clever bird, mimes locking his lips
and throwing away the key.

“Am I calling Pep or not?”
“Yes, FRIDAY. Please call CEO Potts.”

“Ringing the Queen of us all.”

“Romanoff.”

“Potts.”

“Clint Barton.” He points a finger at himself then the ceiling. “FRIDAY.” He nods. “Now everyone knows their name. Awesome.” A dagger makes a ‘sudden’ appearance near Clint’s head, and the Archer gives a shrill shriek. “Bad, Nat. No killing the arrow man.” She chooses to ignore him.

“Potts, we’ve discovered some significant information regarding Stark’s situation that may involve Stark Industries.”

“I see. What information?”

“Certain technology that Hydra is trying to develop.”

“We had Maria Hill investigate SI for possible Hydra moles.”

“Pep were talking about a mole network that might have begun with the creation of the company.” Clint intones. “Are you sure you want to trust Hill’s work without a second opinion?”

“I’m assuming this second opinion is Romanoff.”

“There’s no one better.” Pepper methodically taps a painted nail against her desk.

“True. But I’m not questioning her skills.”

“How about a compromise Potts? You do a system scan of the entire company and if you don’t find anything that will be that.”

“However?”

Her lips twitch as Potts’ words. “But if you find something I get to investigate. Deal?”

“And you trust that the scan will find something if there is something to find.” Pepper continues to tap her nail.

She nods while Clint scoffs “Who doesn’t trust tech made by the awesome Tony Stark?”

The tapping stops and Potts lifts a brow. “Why not just say Stark?”

“There needs to be a distinction between the two Starks. Duh! I mean my CO said Tony’s stuff is way better than anything Howard Stark made.”

Pepper smirks, “We have a deal,” and the call ends.

“That went well.” It did. Maybe, Pepper could forgive a second time?

“The woman is cautious, any kind of mole would be bad for SI, doesn’t mean anything.”

“Nah. I’m seeing a brighter future between us and the Tony Stark Defense Squad.”

“I thought you didn’t like Stark? You said he was a coward and a backstabber.”
“Yeah I did.” Clint agrees. He kneads his left shoulder staring at the furthest wall. “Tasha, when did I start to think he was no good? It was definitely before the whole Accord situation but I can’t remember.”

“I told you he wasn’t worth it.” She breathed.

“No, I don’t think so. I spent some time thinking about it in the base and on the way back.” Clint straightens himself on the loveseat and directing his gaze into her eyes. “I remember you coming back from that assignment telling me how similar we were. How you found him sitting in a plastic doughnut and as much as it annoyed you, Nat, you would’ve trusted him with her life.”

“Clint.”

“You argued with Fury about canceling the Avengers Project. You said that when the cards fell Stark could be trusted. We both trusted him. When did we stop trusting him? When did we start using him?”

“What does it matter Clint? We betrayed him and there nothing we can do but move on. To make amends. You taught me that.”

“Yeah. I know. But I’d still like to understand why.”

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FRIDAY has finally stopped asking him if he’s fine but the Asset can still feel the constant waves of worry from the disembodied voice. He hasn’t moved and he can’t seem to conceive a reason why he should move. The room has no windows, boarding up the only door would be a simple task, and the only other access points- the two vents- would make a great entrance system, with booby trap, to move through the Tower unnoticed. The Hawk might lay a claim but the Asset could take him, incapacitate so as to not incur the Spider’s wrath. He’s already pulling out a marker to draw his plans on the conference room table when something pokes at the edge of his consciousness. Something soft and warbly. A trap? In the Tower?

“FRIDAY are there intruders in the Tower?”

“Boss insists that I treat them as guest but other than that no.” He’s gut doesn’t think it’s a trap, but his brain is pretty convinced that not all traps will feel like a trap. Steve Rogers is a good example.

<It could prove to be something interesting.>

It could and the Asset loathes to return to his quarters. Investigating a probably attack might prove a good excuse. He struts forward and the main door is cold against his flesh palm. The knife, still in his hand from earlier, is polished into an poor assassins mirror. Nothing in the halls. But there is a sound echoing from the end of the hall, possibly from the emergency stairwell.

“The hallway is not gonna swallow you whole Sergeant.” It’s not the hallway that is the problem is the gaping unknown that the hallway represents that the issue. A couple of minutes pass and the Asset once more rethinking his whole living in this room forever plan. “Would it help if I said technically speaking I am the Tower.” What? “Boss integrated my programming into the Tower so I would have complete control over the environment if anyone tried to harm my parent.” The Asset raises a disbelieving eyebrow at FRIDAY’s camera. “Okay, he thought he was giving me an idea of what’s it like to have a form but I was thinking differently.” FRIDAY has always been straightforward saying her mind and making her goals clear. The Asset trusts that.

“Thank you, FRIDAY.” Following a possible hallucination, what could go wrong?
The stairwell is empty. Or filled with stairs? Do stairs count as something in a stairwell? Maybe it’s one of those what type of person you are answer. Like the glass half empty or half full. The sound, and the Asset is sure of that now, is still hard to identify. However, he can start to pinpoint where it’s originating from. The top of the Tower like some fairytale. As he makes his way up the multiple flight of stairs more of the sound becomes distinguishable from the normal hum of the Tower.

“...who-o’me- why the-” Another round of stairs and the Asset wonders if it’s worth it. But something in his brain is starting to nag at him to follow the sound. “For when the- world’s in- someone comes-” It pools warm in his chest and feels familiar. “-whom Nursey says is dead.” A song.

“Dad used to call her darling Heart, but Mother was her name. And me an Mick were very sad before our Mother came. She comes in thru the skylight for the door is not allowed. Her eyes are bright as little stars. Her dress is like a cloud.”

Bucky used to have a Mother that would sing this lullaby whenever he had a nightmare, even when he became an adult. He would sing it to himself late into the night in those Hydra prison cells and hum the tune sheltered away in his sniper nest. Speaking of a sniper nest, the nostalgic song was coming from one. A sniper nest atop the futuristic fairytale Tower, that is, and now the Asset must once more review the hallucination theory.

“She holds me very kind and tight and talks about her land, where all the flowers are boys and girls with mothers were close at hand. But when I want to go with her, she said ‘twould never do, for Daddy would be lonely here, without a boy like you.’” He pulls open the nest’s door half expecting to find a small dark haired woman sing softly with a sleeping toddler in her arms.

Copper eyes blink up at him and not emerald as he wished. The eyes blink again and shift over towards the open door. “Hey,” the genius waves, “you’re here.” Another blink. “Why?”

“I was led here by a diabolical but well-meaning force of technology.”

“Ah.” Stark pulls at his shirt, eye down and bites his lips. “Do you want to come in? There is some room.” The Asset runs his metal hand through his hair and tugs at his end.

“Sure.” The Soldier slips inside mindful of Stark’s personal space and the door and all the arrows. “A nest you made for the Hawk. It’s nice.”

“Apparently. I don’t remember, but I cannot fathom any other reason why I’d build a room full of arrows.”

“True.” A beat of silence, that isn’t necessarily awkward but not exactly comfortable either. “Are you- Umm, more fine than not now?”

“What?” Stark laughs with a soft smile.

“You were-” How is supposed to say having a complete freak out because the Captain couldn’t just say something nice then keep his mouth from running off without his brain. Stark tilts his head questioningly and his nose twitched a little like a kitten. “Ya got inta a brawl with a specter and Rogers put ya behind the eight ball without a proper thought.” He splutters out quickly smashing words together praying that he’ll stumble upon a set that works. If monkeys can do it and get Shakespear then the Asset should get something of worth.

“What, I say again? Was that even English?”
“Of course it was. English is flexible like that.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.”

“And I think I got an idea about what you’re getting at.”

“Really?” Because he had no idea, on the other hand, Stark is the genius while the Asset clearly is not.

“Yep, Rhodey asked me something similar about the whole base thing. And I’ll tell you what I told him.” He nods. “Last thing I remember is Cap saying ‘Good job’, everything after that is blank until I woke up in Rhody’s lap.” He doesn’t remember anything. Nothing about Howard and screaming at Rogers. Nothing.

The Asset plays the scene in his mind then plays it again. Watching Stark talk, watching Rogers talk, and watching Stark scream. No, perhaps it was Tony Stark who screamed. Tony Stark would never bow to Hydra. Ironman was too strong for them, but Howard’s creation was another matter. A creation made to follow another’s agenda. His gaze shifts back to Stark, who’s waiting for a response but he isn’t sure what to say.

“About the song.” Smooth topic change Barnes, real smooth.

“Yeah?” Stark snorts.

“It’s an old one.”

Stark doesn’t quite smile but laugh wrinkles are clear to see. “Probably. It was one of the songs my Mother used to perform for me.”

“Bucky’s Ma use to sing it too.”

Stark squints. “Sorry?”

“Why are you apologizing?” Barnes snorts.

“For intruding on a happy memory... I guess.”

“It was nice to hear it again.”

“Ah, well, you’re welcome then.” Stark holds his head higher, giving the Asset a teasing grin.

“Yeah, you have a lovely voice too.” Stark’s head falls to hide behind one of his hands, but the Asset can clearly see the dark blush on the tips of his ears. “Are you blushing?” he chortles.

“No. I don’t blush. Stark men don’t blush, it’s a genetic impossibility. Impossible! You’re obviously seeing things. And why would I be blushing anyway? People flatter me all the time and I’m great. It’s old hat and comfortable. I’m totally comfortable with flattery. In fact, you shouldn’t say things like that because you’ll inflate my ego so much the Tower will float into sky. Then where will all be? I’ll tell you, trapped in Space with no access to coffee or whatever you eat. This will undoubtedly cause Romanoff’s wrath to rain down on you. Not me. You. Because it’s all your fault that we’re in Space just cause you had to inflate my ego. FRIDAY will be happy. She would probably like Space. So maybe you should flatter me. Depends on who you are more afraid of. So who is it going to be? FRIDAY or Romanoff?”
“If you were hoping your long winded rant would distract me from the fact that you are still blushing, you failed.” The genius pouts but his blush starts to lighten. But it can’t disappear. Not yet. “I don’t see why you were trying to hide it, the blushing is cute.”

“Oh, you didn’t.” The genius sounds scandalize but the blush deepens. The Asset holds back a grin and schools his expression into one of indifference. He wants to see just how red the blush can go. “You did not call me cute.”

“Oh. You’re seriously going to tell me that someone with your blush-”

“I don’t blush!”

“-wide Bambi eyes-”

“Bambi! I have the eyes of a badass!”

“-adorable pout-”

“Okay, I pout, but it’s the pout of the snobby elite and certainly not adorable.”

“-and too big for this world heart has never been called cute?”

When the Asset finally manages to speak the last part of his sentence, the genius shuts down. Every rapidly changing facial expression swept away, the twinkling light of his eyes are replaced with dark void and the intense energy that forms an aura around the genius ebbs away. He curses because this is cold.

“Why?” Stark asks when he finally speaks.

“Why what?”

“Why did you say that I have a heart? I don’t. I can’t. I’m nothing but a creation with a battery in my chest.” He carefully replies.

“You do.”

“You don’t know me.” Stark cried, but his eyes widen at the outburst.

“No. But your actions speak loudly about how much you care.” Copper eyes stare into the Assets, not wavering, even as the genius wrapped his arms around his chest. “Ironman was born because of your heart and the Avengers too. This Tower and the Compound is proof of that.”

“It was simply following the protocols.”

Stark is already starting to once more hide behind the walls he built, slowing closing the door he opened for the Asset. What he has to say next isn’t going to help and probably destroy the one relationship that doesn’t perceive the Asset through the ghost of Bucky while constantly testing him to remind the Asset he is Bucky.

<The Mission.>

“Yeah, that can explain a lot except for Ultron.”

Copper eyes close tight and Stark curls more into himself. “Ultron was a mistake. I should have known better, but it was inevitable that I’d eventually fuck up.”
“You tried to give the world it’s version of your security blanket. And then you got screwed over by alien technology. I would hardly call it proof of your inevitable fuck up.” The Asset waves his metal hand in the air to underline his point.

Stark blinks as he begins to vibrate and pout adorably. “My security blanket. That- what- who- You don’t know.”

"From your file, I can tell you the two things that make Tony Stark safe.”

The genius narrows his eyes, uncurling a bit, and placing his hand on his hips. “Why don’t you wow me?”

“The Ironman armors and AI’s which combined is Ultron, ergo the world’s security blanket.”

The genius huff, “You are mean. Just a big meany face. Why did I even let you in?”

“You didn’t FRIDAY did.” Stark open's his mouth to speak but just let his lips flap when no sound comes out. The Asset smirks, and he huffs.

“You’re still mean.”

“Saying Ultron wasn’t on you makes me mean?”

“Yep.”

“Why?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“No!” He laughs and throws his hands up in the air with exasperation.

“You poked at things that no man is allowed to poke. That was a no poking zone. And you knew it too. You knew the no poking law and you still poked. Pay your debt to society for the unauthorized poking.”

“What society?”

“The Society of me. I smart enough to make up an entire community of smart and dumb ideas.”

“I can definitely agree with the dumb idea thing.”

“Hey!”

“As well as the smart idea thing too.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“Nah, I call as I see it and what I see is captivating.”

“Now you’re just flattering me, so I’ll start blushing again.” Stark points an accusing finger.

“I speak only the truth and fact is a beautiful mind is a captivating thing.” He smirks. Now that was smooth. Take that Universe. The genius scoffs but does indeed start to blush again.

“Who would take an outlaw poker seriously?”

“Will you take me seriously if I pay my debt to the society of you?” Stark taps a forefinger against
his lips, and the Asset raises a single brow but waits patiently.

“Yes. But the price is high.”

The Asset shrugs. “Shoot.”

“I get to poke one of your no poking zones.”

“Seems fair.” Stark doesn’t say anything right away but his ‘silence’ is typical of what the Asset has come to expect from the genius. He taps a finger on his chest, bounces his folded leg up and down, tilts his head one way before tilting it the other way, and bites at his bottom lip. The Asset simply leans against the nest door watching and waiting.

“When you mentioned your Mom, instead of saying my Mom, you said Bucky’s Mother. Why?”

“Simple, I’m not Bucky thus she isn’t my Mother.”

“But you have his memories right? You’re not some poor Hydra clone of Barnes that Rogers latched onto because he’s lonely, right?” The Asset seesaw his hand like he seen Barton do.

“That doesn’t answer my question. Blink twice if you’re a clone.” He doesn’t blink but he does give Stark his ‘I’ll kill you all hobo face, named by Barton, he likes to think of it as his resting bitch face. Stark cackles and takes a quick breath, only to snort. The Asset wants to feel insulted but the genius nose his twitch like a kitten again. It’s been scientifically proven you can’t be mad at kittens or kitten like substances. “Okay, fine. Not a clone. So what, you’re being haunted by Bucky’s lumbering ghost because you're his only surviving clone?”

“What is with you and the clone thing?”

“One day they will come and we will all be doomed.” He pauses in his dramatics. “Except for Pepper and Romanoff.”

“And the haunting thing?”

“I don’t know. You’re the one who said he was being haunted by a lumbering ghost.”

“Maybe.” Truth is he isn’t sure about the whole Bucky thing. Most days he knows Bucky is dead, that he’s been dead long before he fell into the ice. But then there will be a moment or he’ll wake up from a good dream and he isn’t sure. “What about you? Are you Tones, Tones’ clone, or being haunted by his ghost?”

“Well.” Three taps to his chest. “Rhodey is my Rhodey.” Four taps and one bounce of the knee. “Rhodey belongs to Tones.” Two taps, two bounces, and four taps to the chest. “So I’m Tones because Rhodey is definitely my Rhodey.”

“Isn’t that reasoning sort of simple for a genius.”

“Sometimes things are just that simple. Doesn’t Cap feel like Bucky’s Steve to you?” No. No, he doesn’t. But he can’t be sure. He doesn’t always remember Bucky or Stevie.

“I don’t know.”

“I see. What about me?”

“What about you?”
“What do I feel like?”


“Warm, huh. I like that.” Stark shrugged and grinned sweetly. “I wanted to know.” He blushed, and the Asset can feel his own face heat. Which is just weird.

“What about you?”

“Me?”

“Sure, what do I feel like?” The Asset tries for nonchalance, but he thinks that his blush, no matter how small, gives the game away.

Stark blinks. “That’s highly classified. Let me check your clearance level real quick. Oooh, I’m sorry, you don’t have a high enough clearance level.”

“Classified?” He deadpans.

“Yep. Nothing I can do. Increasing clearance is above my pay-grade.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Nothing you can do?”

“Exactly.”

“What if I say please and bat my eyelashes?” He then proceeds to bat his eyelashes and smiles with all his teeth.

“No, getting all-” Stark waves a hand at the Asset’s face.

“Getting all?” The Asset grins.

“Fine! Your like watching Captain America with Aunt Peggy as she criticizes everything while I sit in her lap-” Stark mumbles the last part, and even the Asset’s heightened hearing could translate Stark’s mess of words.

“I couldn’t understand that last part.” The genius glares little kitten claws at him, and he smiles with all his teeth again. Stark huff, points a finger at the Asset and makes another digit mime cutting his throat. The Soldier rolls his eyes and makes a ‘get on with it’ gesture.

“While I sit in her lap hugging Bucky Bear! You happy!”

“I remind you of your stuff bear?”

“Bucky Bear.”

“I hardly think your stuff animal was armed as I am.”

“Ha! Shows what you know. Nanna made Bucky Bear a small knife and sniper rifle.” Stark says the last part proudly like some great achievement. Okay, so the toy was armed, but the Asset still doesn’t see the resemblance.
“So I’m Bucky Bear because I used to be Bucky?”

“No. I said you feel like the moment to me, not the bear.” Huh. The Asset still doesn’t understand, but perhaps he isn’t meant to just yet.

“Those bears came in pairs, if I remember right. What about Captain America Bear?”

“Which one?”

“Which one?”

“I had seven before Aunt Peggy refused to buy me another one.”

“Seven?”

“Yeah, but don’t worry five of them were given proper burials in the backyard.”

“What about the other two?”

“Jarvis couldn’t find enough of the bodies to bury.” The Asset doesn’t want to know.

“You were one strange kid.”

“No! Who else do you expect to volunteer for a highly experimental scientific test? Not Bucky Bear, he was the sensible one.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“Good.”

“I’d still bet my best gun you were a strange one.”

“Rude!”

Chapter End Notes

I tried to write flirting. Did I succeed? Do Tony and James seem flirty to you readers? I have no fucking clue how to flirt. Just no idea. My best friend says I sometimes flirt who her but I have no idea that I'm doing it or what counts as flirting. In fact, people, in general, are like moldy cubes of confusion for me.

Constructive criticisms are always appreciated.
Can You See the Soul?

Chapter Summary

Pepper meets with Romanoff, Barton, with Wilson and Rhodes on the side to discuss the SI problem. She sees Tony again, after everything.

Natasha is suspicious but she always is suspicious. It's a job hazard.

Chapter Notes

OMT. It's been so long since I uploaded a chapter. So long. I'm amazed at myself.
I got distracted. By several things. Persona % being the main thing. Man do I love me some Persona.
That aside. I am sorry for the late update and I hope you enjoy this chapter.

This whole situation was horrid, from the several significant SI research missing from the core server to the fact, that there is a definite mole in the company, perhaps more than one. But the cherry on the top of this terrible headache of a sundae was the Avengers. The backstabbing lot of them, if Pepper never had to deal with any of those hypocritical asses it would be too soon. Yet here she was, again, working with the Black Widow and Hawkeye to deal with this new threat.

A threat that was once more, some bastard using Tony's technology for greed or developing some selfish, narrow-minded, can't accept their own inferiority, dumbass rule the world plan. That ultimately Tony would be blamed for because the world is sixty percent straight-up idiots and thirty percent blinder wearing morons. Pepper sometimes mourns the fact she has to breathe the same air with those fools. And the Avengers were no different.

Yet here she was asking for their assistance. To ask for assistance from those blinder wearing moronic professional spy assholes. This is the third time. The third time! Now she has to allow Natasha to investigate the company, her baby; another favor Pepper owed the spy. Although the crap that women pulled during the whole "civil war" debacle, made Pepper think that Natasha owed Tony instead. In fact, she should run with that and have them beg for Stark Industries support. Down on bended knee. She would quite enjoy that image.

Solving the problem of the mole or not, doesn’t change the fact that once the mole was found Pepper was going to flay them alive and lay their skins as rugs in a cabin bought just for that purpose. Possibly a little gruesome but Pepper deserved some vengeful stress release.

She leans back against the plush chair. A smart and comfortable purchase, a gift from Tony, one that he actually gave and not something she simply put on his credit card. For an anniversary that was still two months off but Pepper hadn't cared. Tony's inability to comprehend the flow of time was always one of his more endearing traits. But perhaps that part of him was gone. Destroyed by Hydra in their attempt to break him.

Did they break him or did Ironman still hold the same fire that had made him a phoenix all those
years prior? Would she even recognize him? Pepper's fingers hover over the call button. Maybe she could handle this herself. But the Black Widow was the best. Pepper always assigned the best person to the job. It was practical, and she prided herself on being a practical woman. It was even one of the traits Tony loved best about her. Her practicality and efficiency.

"Ma'am?"

"Yes, FRIDAY."

"Are you procrastinating?"

"...No?"

"No?"

"Yes."

"It's fine. Everyone has things that are bad at. You, Ma'am, are bad at requesting help."

“I think it’s more who I am requesting the help from rather than simply refusing to acknowledge when I need help.” She straightens her back and lifts her head proudly. Pepper is fully capable of asking for help.

“I think Uncle Boss would disagree.”

“Yeah, well he's a wuss when it comes spicy food.”

“You're right that's worse.”

“Your sarcasm has been noted.”

“And you’re still procrastinating.”

Pepper is. She has enough sense to admit that to herself. To admit her fear. Would things have gone differently if Pepper had been there? If she was the one to handle the politics, handle Ross and the now Wakandan King, and act as the emissary between the world and the Avengers? Would the Avengers laid the blame at her feet instead of Tony’s? Would those hypocritical bastards have stood by Tony as the man deserved for all he’d done? Would he have been left alone in the snow like he always feared? Pepper was afraid. Afraid to see the man she had abandoned. To see the consequences of her actions.

“I'm afraid to face him, FRIDAY.”

“Boss doesn't think you've done anything wrong Ma'am. And even then he will always forgive you.”

“Of course.” That's the problem. That's the damn fucking problem. He'll forgive everything. Even the unforgivable. “Heh.” She can feel a tightness around her eyes. Tear wanting to spill. But she refuses. Not now. Not when Tony is alive.

“Ma'am?”

“What's your opinion of Tony since he came back?”

“My brothers have been completely ecstatic because Boss just keeps marveling over the most simple action. Oohing and ahhing over the most stupid things. Dum-E could spray him with fire
extinguisher foam and Boss would be sparkle. It’s annoying.”

“I bet if you asked, Tony would ooh and ahh over you too.”

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t care.”

“Of course not. You are far more mature than your brothers, and you fully know what a hardworking, efficient, and accomplished A.I. you are.”

“You are exactly right, Ma’am. Completely. Boss is obviously aware of this too, how could he not, and is giving the attention where it’s needed best.”

Pepper could clearly hear the pride in FRIDAY’s voice. No being could ever replace JARVIS, but FRIDAY had quite the personality. “So he’s fine then?”

“I’m not sure if I’m the one who can determine whether Dad is fine or not.” There is trepidation in FRIDAY’s voice, and Pepper can relate.

“No. I supposed not.” Pepper taps her foot, and she spreads her fingers on the desk. She supposed it was as good a time as ever to face her fears. “Call Romanoff, Please.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

A pillar of colored light rises from the desk then splitting to form a holoscreen, just another example of Tony’s flare for the dramatics, with a small Ironman suit bowing and the words ‘call connecting.’ All transmissions using the Stark network were instantaneous, so someone on the other end was probably stalling. Normally, it was Tony. Yet that’s hardly the expected norm anymore.

A couple of minutes pass and still the Ironman character bows in apology. If it were any other call Pepper would think the other party was avoiding her. But she couldn’t possibly inspire such wariness in the mighty Avengers. After all, imbeciles have a hard time grasping the concept of fear especially when they’re a bunch of adrenaline monkeys.

“FRIDAY?”

“Hawkeye and Falcon are arguing, with Uncle Boss edging the fight on. I think Hawkeye started it because Black Widow is nervous.”

“Nervous? Of simple old me? Truly? Now, why would that be?”

“You can be quite fearsome Ma’am.”

“Thank you, that’s sweet of you say.” Chibi Ironman is still refusing to budge off screen. But Pepper was busy, her life, even more, a perilous balancing act since Tony disappeared. Essentially, even with how crucial this meeting was, she could only spare an hour. And Pepper had already spent twenty minutes of the allotted time procrastinating. She needed a martini, sans the olive with an addition of gin. So much gin. “Use my override codes to get them on the phone, please.”

“Ya got it.”

“I think I’m allowed some amount of wiggle room. Seeing as I’m the senior Avenger. One of the originals.”

“Seriously! Are we a bunch of vampires now? Because last I checked that meant dick, Barton.”

“How dare you? You’ve insulted my very core, Wilson. Vampires can’t eat pizza!”
Barton’s back blocks most of the room, but Pepper could see a brown tuft of hair, above Barton’s shoulder, Tony probably curled atop the couch with Rhodey sitting in front of him. Like some fairy tale knight in shining armor. Wilson takes up the rest of the screen. Pepper can’t say where Romanoff is in the room, but there is hardly any doubt that the woman is there.

“I thought you would have like vampires Clint. With the whole sleeping like the dead aspect, those mosquitoes got going on. And personally, I think Tasha’s humanity is still in question.” Wilson smacks his hand in the air in the general direction, Pepper figures, where Natasha is sitting nonchalantly off screen.

“But vampire. Really?”

“Oh, you think you can do better purple man?”

“You think that’s an insult? That’s adorable Sammy.”

“Don’t call me that! And answer the damn question.”

“The Demon of Midnight.” Barton rolls his shoulders probably with an added smirk if Wilson’s down turned mouth is anything to go by.

“Damn, you answered that quick.” Pepper thinks she sees Wilson throws up his hands in frustration but Barton’s fat head is in the way.

“She is my partner. But mostly because I awoke one night to find her hovering over me. She then whispered that she was a demon from my nightmare before disappearing into the shadows.”

“You two are both crazy.”

“What is a demon of midnight?” Pepper finally speaks up and is pleased when both Wilson and Barton flinch. Barton even backs away giving her an actual glimpse of the room. Tony and Rhodey are exactly where she predicted with Romanoff on the other end of the couch. Pepper can’t read anything from her neutral expression. Nervous, perhaps? Pepper doubts it.

“Umm. A female demon that appears at harvest time to break the reapers arms and legs.”

“Let me guess.” Pepper taps crimson nail on crimson lips. Her eyes glinde to make contact with each Avenger in the room. “Agent Romanoff threatened to break off your arms if you ate her lunch again.”

“Oh my God! It’s like you were there.”

“Clint.” Romanoff rises from her seat and jerks Clint away from the camera’s focus.

“What? She’s obviously telepathic, Nat.”

Pepper stifles a small snort before folding her hands. “Could we please move this along? I have another meeting after this.”

“Right. Right. Right.” Barton nods and points at the screen then points a Romanoff. “Natasha go forth and wow the scary CEO, so she doesn’t eat me.”

“I don’t know. Pepper does enjoy her poultry.”

“You are a cruel, cruel demon.” Barton’s fear is belied by his lazy grin.
“What am I dealing with here?”

Romanoff easy smile falls quickly making room for her usually stoned face professional expression. Shoulder back, legs wide and arms solidly at her front. Pepper wondered if Romanoff named her different professional poses like Tony did. Sexy Spy with a Heart of Gold or Terminator Dominates Everything. Pepper bets that this one is called Fury’s Secret Weapon.

“The connection between Hydra and SI is still unclear, but I did manage to identify three moles with a potential of five total still hidden in the company. The three I identified are as follows Kliment Lucian of Human Resources, Ercan Stijn of Legal, and Janie Agathe of Research and Development.”

Pepper traces a circle in the middle of her desk and taps three times. A soft beep emanates from the holoscreen while it smoothly splits into two. The left side continues the call, and other side shows the files FRIDAY pulled from the SI servers. She grinds her teeth. Apparently, this would not be as simple as another mess left by that long dead pig.

“Ercan Stijn has been working for the company for a good decade, but Kliment Lucian and Janie Agathe are rather new hires. In fact, Doctor Agathe was one of the first hires Mr. Stark made after the fall of SHIELD. Her record was spotless. I even had Hill double check.”

“That’s not a complete surprise. After the fall of SHIELD and Pierce, Hydra split into multiple factions. This particular faction probably holds an interest in Tony Stark and SI specifically.” Romanoff keeps her expression firm but does offer a small sympathetic shrug.

“And what were the snakes after? Old military technology? Or maybe some of Tony’s more fanciful ideas born from his love of sci-fi?”

“Hey! I resent that. Tones inventions are the most exemplary thingys of badass coolness. There is nothing fanciful about the future Pep. It’s the future.” Rhodey widely waves a hand above his head almost smacking Tones, whose only response was to giggle.

Pepper herself gave the customary eye roll as Wilson gave a deadpanned expression and Barton gleefully mouthed ‘real science fiction.’ Romanoff remained stoic. Pepper spared another glance towards Tony before resuming a more professional posture. “Well? What should I expect Agent Romanoff?”

“That is a question better suited to Agent Barton.” Romanoff bows taking a step back from the center stage and gestures at Barton. The man apparently has a sudden interest in fiddling with his pair of purple-tinted shades.

“Your CEO-ness.” Barton does a jerky bow at the camera and gives a little wave at the end. Pepper waited, tapping a painted nail on the desk. Waiting indeed. Barton tries another goofy smile before giving a small cough and donning a similar expression to that of Romanoff. “Most of the information and technology has an obvious pattern.”

“Which is?”

“Technology dealing with the brain and AIs. Although some interesting computer algorithms are missing as well but they are clearly not the main target. No these fellas were interested in brain mapping technology including some old blueprints of BARF. The most concerning was an empty file that I found deep in the servers with the help of FRIDAY.” Barton’s eyes flick at Tones quickly and showing Pepper a sinecure glimpse of worry from Barton.
“And? What was the file?”

“Tony’s Ingenious Brain Investigation Task or TIBIT. Which I assume are files of in-depth analysis of Stark’s noggin. Not something I think I like in the wrong hands. Especially given that there is a chance-” Barton’s hands flex and he makes another quick glance at Tony.

Pepper forcefully taps the desk impatient for Barton to continue. “There is a chance of what Barton?”

“That they could use those files to create a Tony Stark AI program or perhaps a bio-android clone. I could be a clone.” Tony intones solemnly from the background.

Barton flinches at Tony’s words.

“Tones you are not a clone.”

“You don’t know that, Rhodey.”

“I do to know.”

“How?” Tony crosses his arms in a completely Tony Stark manner that Pepper has to stifle a laugh.

“Big Brother Instinct.”

“That’s not a thing Lame Machine.”

“Prove it,” Rhodes smirks.

Tony half scowls and half pouts causing a weight to lift from Pepper’s shoulders. “You can’t prove a negative.”

Rhodey’s smirk widens but sadly Pepper doesn’t have the time for this. Yet. There is the matter of another snake slithering around SI asking about BARF specifically. “Those files aside, I particularly curious as to why these thieves would be interested in the BARF technology.”

Romanoff makes a decisive step before Barton with her eyes narrowed. “Please elaborate, CEO Potts.”

“A man by the name of Tiberius Stone, CEO of Stone Media has been requesting insistently that a partnership is struck between Stark Industries and Stone Media. I didn’t trust the man nor his supposed deal. Thus, when he first appeared a year ago, I definitely refused. However, the man has begun sniffing around again, recently. In fact, I have another meeting with the man after this.” For each word that Pepper spoke she watched Rhodes grin fall replace with an ever darkening glower.

“Tiberius Stone is nothing more than a leech with ideals of grandeur. I’d rather lose both my arms and gouge out my eyes before I ever let that man near Tony again.” Rhodes’ eyes shone with a sharp light and focused on some unseen enemy.

If Pepper remembers correctly Tony memories are a mess similar to Sergeant Barnes. Yet he isn’t reacting to Rhodey at all. Shouldn’t he show some emotion, a flicker of surprise at least? He simply sits patiently watching as if only a spectator to something that must have greatly affected his life. She bites her the inside of her cheek. Tony has always been a passionate man. However, Pepper learned early on that not all of his expressions could be trusted. Seriously, what a troublesome man.

“Man. Isn’t that a little extreme Rhodes?” Wilson offers a friendly shoulder grasp that is frozen by a decisive glare by Rhodey.
“Stone is an old boyfriend of Tones.”

“Boyfriend! Really!” Barton makes an overly exaggerated face at Tony. It was quite a spectacle. It’s not like Tony kept his sexuality a secret. However, Pepper was not aware of this particular partner.

“Your manner assumes the relationship was not-” Romanoff tilts her heads. “-healthy. We could easily make him disappear.”

Rhodey narrows his eyes, leaning back against the couch and places an arm across Tony’s legs. “What are you after spider?”

She shrugs and gives a teasing smile. “Maybe I just want to do something nice for Tony.”

“Then buy chocolate.”

“Yeah, Natasha. Murder isn’t exactly the same thing as buying a nice gift.” Wilson sighs and lets his head thump against the couch.

“Perhaps, we shouldn’t take murder off the table. I can only think of a couple of reasons why Stone would come around SI once more. Of course, there is one that stands out given the circumstances.” Pepper crosses her legs and leans on her right elbow. Watching the group’s reaction on the screen.

Rhodey gives an authoritative snort. Pepper expects nothing less from the man. Barton and Romanov exchange several quick glances speaking some subtle spy language. Pepper can’t help tsking at the sight. Spies and their secrets. Her distaste for spies aside they do have their uses. Then there is Tony, who remains the same in a doll-like manner.

Wilson raises a hand. “Murder is bad.”

“But useful.” Romanoff snaps her finger back at him.

“Let’s make that plan B, shall we. Plan A should be to investigate Stone. Get an idea of his allies, resources, and plans. Then we kill him.” Pepper taps the desk.

“What is with you people? Murder is bad. Bad.”

“Clint and I can handle that. I already have a couple of leads.”

“Are you two ignoring me?”

“Excellent. I’ll leave that up to you.”

“Will you keep the meeting?”

“You are ignoring me.”

“Indeed. I’ll see what I can figure out from the man.”

“I see. Be careful.”

Romanoff nods once more stepping away from the camera’s focus and giving Pepper a better look at Tony. He had both arms propped atop Rhodey’s head and showing more the man Pepper knew. Yet the doll-like quality, that blank expression from before stews in the back of her mind. Adding several pinpricks of worry along her spine. “Tony, how are you?” She asks and pulls at a stray tuft of hair.

Tony’s eyes pull up from the ground as Pepper soon realized, he makes real eye contact with her for
the first time since the whole meeting started. “Normal.” It’s obviously not the kind of answers she
would have received before. There is no flare, nor dramatics, and no brief flash of vulnerability. It’s
all so very hollow.

“I see. Normal, huh.”

“Now Tones you could give her something more than normal. Be a little more open about yourself.”
Rhodes eyes still gleam with a certain light of violence or expected violence, an attitude of suspicion
and retribution, but his mischievous smile appears to be free of such things. Or a better actor.

“Okay. Sure. The Robots here are awesome. Fully autonomous too. And FRIDAY is capable of
some seriously complex thought. And the armors-” Here Tony pauses. His body is visibly vibrating
and grin almost impossibly wide on his face. “-Are technical marvels, but I have so many ideas to
make them better. So many.” He does a little jiggle of a dance and giggles impishly.

“You didn’t say anything about yourself,” Pepper states finding her words echoed by Rhodes.
Rhodes smirks, and she rolls her eyes. They have been friends for far too long it seems.

A soft chime and Pepper stares at the meeting notification in the corner. Fifteen minutes before
having to deal with Stone. “Rhodes, you seem to know the man well. Any advice on how to deal
with Stone?”

“He is smart but often doesn’t put in the necessary effort to achieve his goals. I wouldn’t be surprised
if he is working with Hydra. But more significantly-” Rhodes grips at Tony’s legs with his smirk
firmly in place. Held firm through stubbornness rather than any mirth. “-is his obsession. You can see
in his eyes anytime Tony name comes up.”

“Thank you.” Pepper swipes her hand across the desk closing the connection between herself and
the spies, between herself and Tony.

Oh, there was one moment, when she first met Mr. Stark, where he replied that he was simply
normal. She had asked how he was and he had stated without inflection that he was normal. Not fine
or doing well. Simply normal. He hadn’t smiled or offered to shake her hand either. The Betrayer
had stood in the corner smiling proudly- showing off his tool- and making backhanded compliments
about Tony. One after another. At their first meeting, she hadn’t registered those slurs poorly masked
by that Fatherly smile. Each word had matched her expected perception of Tony Stark. And that was
that. Yet he hadn’t acted the way she had expected. He said he was normal. Normal. Hardly
acknowledging her existence.

“We were so young all those years ago. And I guess he is young once again.”

“CEO Potts?”

“It’s nothing FRIDAY. It’s nothing.”

@@@

Something is wrong. The current reality is colored in a varying contradicting colors and Natasha isn’t
sure where the discoloration is coming from. An instinct in the back of her mind. A direction? A
warning? It’s hard to say for sure.

Tiberius Stone, she has run across that name once before. During Tony Stark’s evaluation for the
Avenger Initiative, if she remembers correctly. Yet Stark hadn’t reacted to his name or Rhodes
response to the name either. A tranquil expression where no light can pierce.
“I’ve really out done myself this time with this networking algorithm. Don’t you agree Tasha?”

Just like those twelve little girls in two straight lines and living in those straight lines did those girls learn about blood, manipulation, and targeting vulnerabilities. In two straight line, they learned to hide their weakness behind porcelain mask with varying personas.

Something Hydra taught him through pain and compliance? Or something he learned through the world’s natural brutality? His expression when she stabbed with the needles refuses to disappear. That look of resignation to his fate irritates her still.

“Tasha? Taaaaashaaaaaa? Are you alive in there?”

Stone is obviously involved with Hydra, and his interest in Stark Industries nearly screams the man’s involvement in Tony Stark’s abduction and transformation. Yet Stark didn’t react. Didn’t offer any information. He didn’t even bother to offer an opinion regarding the moles in his company or his ex-boyfriend’s connection to the crime. Could it be Hydra is still influencing his actions?

Tony Stark doesn’t work well with others. She assessed that herself. Too much of a diva to take another perspective into account and too stubborn to admit help when required. An individual whose own ego would never let it be controlled by another. Right? Right?

“Natalie!”

Her index finger twitches slightly over the next keyboard key. The network data from SI continues to stream on the screen but simply scrolls passed her, unseen. She blinks and finds herself slowing turning towards Clint. Worry that she could easily read, worry for her. “Sorry.”

Clint frantically rubs the back of his head. Clearly shaken by worry and irritation. “It’s never a good sign when you only respond to that name.”

“Sorry.”

“A shaken will is simply an opportunity to show our faith.”

Natasha smiles in that small way that only Clint is able to read. “And what is that supposed to mean?”

“Don’t know. It was something my Mother said.”

“Liar.”

“You calling my Mother a liar.”

“You know that’s not what I meant.”

Her though trails once to back of her mind where that instinct pulls at her attention. The data continues to be compiled by the algorithm. Hundreds of thousands of potential threats being analyzed by Clint’s computer system and placed in neat little groups. Some people she recognizes and some could be faceless NPCs.

Tony Stark is without a doubt a man of emotions. An idea such a fundamental part of the Tony Stark cognition that it is easy to forget the complex intellect behind his actions.

“Clint, how would you characterize Tony Stark? From before? Would you say he was an emotional man or a calculating man?”
“We're back to talking about him again. Really.” Clint hops atop the couch chair and balances himself on the balls of his feet. He takes a moment to stare out the window where the sky was a crystal clear blue. “I’m not sure how to answer that given what I thought about the man before compared to what I think about him now. But I have to agree with you, I think, that the man is a kindred spirit.”

“Accepting that, what did you think of his response to news of Stone.”

“I’m not sure. But Tony has always been rather calm under pressure.”

“Sure. But what if it was me and my troublesome ex-boyfriend.”

Clint points straight at her. “I’d be super suspicious.”

“Indeed. Super suspicious.” She smirks.

Clint rolls back and forth on his feet then pleads slightly at the ceiling. “You want me to continue data mining while you stalk Stark.” She nods. “Rhodes isn’t going to like this, if he finds out.”

“If he finds out.”

“Don’t you Hercules me. He is going to find out. And he’ll kill me. ME.” Clint rustles his short hair, collapse face first on the couch and heaves a sigh. He is far too soft on her. “Fine. But I want pizza.”

“Sure.”
**Change Is Just Around The Corner**

**Chapter Summary**

It's Barnes' POV this time around and Banner is finally found. Easily enough. But he isn't happy with anyone Team Cap.

**Chapter Notes**

This time there was only a month between updates. Progress! Right? This chapter features both Barnes and Banner heavily, the focus being on Banner mostly. Sigh. Bruce Banner. Enjoy.

The Asset methodically takes another breath, holding it for a beat then steadily breathing out, finding comfort in the slowing rhythm of his heart. He watches Doctor Banner shuffle between a coal stove with a pot boiling and a relatively advance laptop sitting haphazardly on a cardboard box desk. The windows are open letting in a breeze or possible warning system for pursuers. Wouldn't stop the Asset. It would only require a slight added pressure against the trigger between one beat and the next. Would Banner transform into the Hulk or drop dead completely unaware?

The tenet below the Asset’s nest starts to bang around the kitchen while singing some old folk song. Above Banner there is a couple arguing about money and spending it on booze and a block down a dog barks. Enough noise and anyone could disappear. For the ghost of Hydra it would be child’s play.

The Asset had to give it to Doctor Banner, the man had excellent taste. But his admiration for Banner’s skills stop there. Trying to remain hidden from SHIELD or Hydra radar in Asia had several unresolvable problems all on it's own. Skin color is not something that can easily be changed even by Hydra scientist and the Asset doubts Banner speaks Russian or Turkish. Of course, he could be wrong. There didn’t appear to be any communication issues between Banner and the locals. The bigger issues is Banner is clearly an educated man and nothing sticks out more than an high-fluet’n talk in the middle of nowhere. The file said the good doctor preferred to disappear in the Asian continent and act as a medicine man. As far as the Asset could tell Banner hadn’t bothered to form any new identity thus there was no need for a picture. All he needed really was to say, 'point me towards the genius.'

The Spider should have been able to find him. Easily. But that was one issue that is above his pay grade. Question is why? Why keep Banner’s location to herself? Considering how valuable the man is for both SHIELD and Hydra. Considering the apparent trust she placed in the good Captain. Considering their need for Banner.

There’s a soft vibration coming from his backpack slump to the right. His phone probably, another example of ill-timed thoughts summoning the devil where he wasn’t wanted.
“What the bloody fuck da ya want? I'm busy, there ain't time for this constant poking. Do you want this done or not?” He didn’t shout. Wanted to but didn’t. Didn’t throw the phone out the window either. Stupid impulse control.

“I’m just worried about you Buck.” The tone is clearly a pout, and the Asset has to bite back another more destructive impulse.

Deadmen don't worry and the Captain provides the Asset plenty of opportunities to stab him. In the neck, in the back, several in the gut. Dump the body in a old forgotten Hydra base. The Spider might raise a fuss if he suddenly disappeared but the Asset was a ghost. It's a ghost’s nature to disappear.

<It’s against protocol to hold violent ambitions towards one’s commanding officer.>

So what? It’s not like any of the voices in his head are gonna rat him out. His thoughts, for the most part, are his own.

<What about Stark? A star like that can’t help but pull the world’s attention.>

“Buck?”

Stark was a liability. Nothing more. Plenty of men could replace the Winter Soldier and on skill alone Hydra nearly succeeded several times. The problem with Stark was his ability could not be taught. He was wholly unique. A treasure that would be continuously be sought after.

<Beautiful too. Those eyes are a treasure all on their own, not to mention his smile.>

“Not what I was getting at all.”

<Whatever you say Soldier.>

<Agreed.>

He pressed the sat phone to his temple, wondering if the device would survive a few hits from this noggin. Stress released and all. He really just wanted a few moments of silence. Was that to great a wish?

<Our Mechanic is rarely quiet. His chatter is pleasant.>

Shut up. Why is he arguing about this? With himself? Did he finally snap? Dealing with all of Stevie’s crap finally drove him insane. Avengers have got to have a loss of sanity bonus. Right? Seems like something that Stark before Hydra would have put in the fine print.

“Bucky?”

“Steve I’m busy.” Talking to myself and questioning one’s own sanity, apparently, is a lot of work. Along with the whole stalking the good and green Doctor. “What to do want? What do you need, that you didn’t achieve the last dozen times you called Rogers?”

“I told you, Buck. I’m worried about you. It’s been almost a week since you started searching for Doctor Banner.”

“And I said I would contact you when the mission was done.”

“But you never called.”

“That’s because the mission wasn't completed. The mission still isn’t finished,” he hissed. The Asset
needs to remain calm. Becoming emotional will only end with a failure. Take a breath and focus on
the mission. Let the numbness of the Winter Soldier settle along every nerve.

<Failure is not an option. It is never an option. There will be punishment.>

“Don’t want to lose you.” Roger’s voice is softer now. Taking on a vulnerable note that gives the
Asset a sharp pain in the gut. “I lost you, twice, during a mission. I’m scared and your need for radio
silence doesn’t help.” There another shift in Rogers’ tone and he can just imagine Rogers frowning
disappointedly while holding the phone. “It’s not even required. You could have been giving me
regular updates,”

There’s pain in his head. There’s a pain in his gut. A sharp pain that spreads to all of his extremities
and begs him to acquist. To bow his head and compile. Compliance was always reward, ending the
pain.

<The Commanding Officer requires a report. It is not the Asset’s place to question orders.>

<Fuck that. Does Steve not trust me?>

Good question.

“Do you not trust me to get the job done? Is this what is about?”

“What? No! Of course, I trust you Bucky. I am-”

“I found the target. And-” Banner had finally finished whatever preparations he was making with the
sun so low to the ground and now holds a piece of cardboard to the window. In the perfect position
for the Asset to read his message. “And you might as well have the team come to my location.
Banner has invited has in.”

“What do you mean Bucky? Buc-”

The Asset terminates the call. There is no point dealing with Rogers now and he rarely seems say
anything worth paying attention to. He pulls the bag towards him with one hand and throws the
phone into a side pocket with the other. He heaves a sigh rolling to the balls of his feet. He eyes
Banner calmly drinking tea and looking quite pleased with himself. Next is the rifle, which he
carefully disassembles and places each piece in it’s proper place in the bag.

A mistake. He made a mistake. Not just a mistake, a failure. He failed. He deserves the pain. He
failed. He deserves punishment. He is ghost, only to be seen when Hydra allows it. He had been
seen. Failure is never an option. He made a mistake.

<Run long enough and sometimes a fella develops a sixth sense. Probably doesn’t help he’s been
souped up like Steve, either.>

Could the Asset request forgiveness? There is no excuse for failure. No excuse. Would the Captain
require a cycle of re-program with a seat in the chair to finish it all off?

<Negative. It would impede the current mission. The Captain values the success of the long-term
mission above all else.>

The Asset hops on the ledge and leans back to stare at a cluster of clouds with blue peeking through
the seams. Rogers wants Bucky and the Asset cannot be Bucky if he is wiped. Even basic re-
programming might put a hamper on the Asset being ‘Bucky.’ No mind wipes. No re-programming.
Not as long as Rogers desires Bucky. He allows himself a tiny grin and finds a desire to hum under
his breath. He has leverage. Leverage is new.

<Demand more guns.>

<No. Better idea. Demand an allocation of flirt time.>

Who is a former Hydra assassin gonna flirt with in a group of crazy super powered people with their own equal levels of nightmares and blood?

<Stark/Mechanic>

Maybe keep his options open. Didn’t he have a type once a upon a time?

<Yup. Doe eyes, a mischievous smile, and nothing but trouble.>

The Asset leaps to neighboring building still humming to himself. One thing at a time. And maybe there be time for a certain genius with dark eyes and a dark smile.

@@@

“Steve, you look the same as every. I’m glad to see you’re doing well. Can’t say the same for the rest of you but—” Banner gives a ‘what can you do’ shrug and a smile to the group. But the Asset was not buying the placid treatment of the group. Energy rolled of that man in waves and the Asset wasn’t sure that the Hulk was the more dangerous persona anymore. Banner shifts towards him and sends another small smile his way. The action sends a prickly feeling along his neck, and he finds Banner rising up the ranks of known threats.

“Bruce, it’s good to see you. How’s it been living in the middle of nowhere?”

Banner takes a drink, it smells of leaves and incense, stalling for time and directing a hard glance at Wanda. She, interestingly enough, takes a step back behind Vision. Hiding behind the robot person. Probably the most powerful being in this room and she fears Banner. The Asset thinks there is a story there. A story that nobody’s telling.

“It meets my needs. It’s nothing compared to what I had back at the Tower but not a lot of labs could compete with Tony Stark’s Candyland of science. Added bonus, places like these often need doctors. Basically, I'm doing what I can.”

“Sure. Sure.” Rogers relaxes against the window, at ease with Banner, probably completely unaware that the good Doctor is leading him into a trap. Hard to tell what kind of trap and what’s the traps purpose. But the Asset is very patience. “Are you still doing research? Even all the way out here?”

“A spy must have secrets, and a scientist must have science.”

“I not familiar.” Rogers shrugs projecting a sense of levity to the group. The Asset wasn’t buying it and Banner’s tilting head implied that he wasn’t either.

“Something Natasha use to say when she visited me in the lab.”

“I see.” Rogers scratches his nose, and his eyes are downcast to the side.

The Asset gets the feeling that there is an elephant in the room. It’s large, loud and everyone in the room knows it and is doing their darndest to ignore it. Except the Asset. Who has no idea why the fuck there is a long drawn out pause between Rogers and Banner. Sure professionalism is important in the workplace, but this might be taking that sentiment a step too far.
Rogers coughs and has the gall to blush. His rubbing his mouth now while his eyes roam the room. They settle on several tubes filled with an unknown red stone bobbing in some unknown clear liquid. “So mind telling me what you’re researching?”

“You are not gonna like the answer.”

Rogers gives another shrug, placing his hands in his jean pockets and leaning further against the wall. Another attempt at feigning relaxation. Pretty soon this serene chat with friends was going to make the Asset shift into a more battle ready stance. Not sure how to take out the Hulk. Can the Hulk even be killed? Maybe he would just throw the Witch as the beast and run.

“Try me.” Another shrug and the Asset was starting to think that Rogers was having a seizure.

There is another pause between friends. Banner is still smiling. Even takes another sip of his drink. Rogers continues smiling too. And the Asset has elected to start fingerling his hidden arm blade. Hell, fighting the Hulk might be a fun challenge. It’s decided, that plan is watch and wait.

Banner finally gives his own shrug. Taking a step towards his cardboard desk and quickly tapped something on the laptop. Pulling some files onto the screen. Squiggly lines. Hydra scientist highly valued their squiggly lines and Banner satisfied smile suggest he does too. “My research has mostly been energy readings and manipulation of a certain Wanda Maximoff.”

“Bruce.” Rogers jaws twitches.

There is a warning there, or possibly a threat, but Banner seems unperturbed by the shift in Rogers body language. “Can you blame me Steve? She used her mental powers to control the Avengers. Make them see, made me see, what she wanted.”

“She made a mistake. And that’s never going to happen again.”

“And where is your proof.”

“Proof?”

Banner parrots another shrug. “I am a scientist Steve. I trust what can be supported with data. So proof.”

Rogers jaw shifts again, given up on the need to portray the long-time friend. A farce, if there ever was one. “She gave me her word.”

Now Banner snorts. And not kind where everyone is having a laugh. The kind of snort that assessed the situation and found it lacking. Pathetically so. “Aren’t you being a little too trusting of a known Hydra agent?”

What?

The Captain sends a glance towards the Witch. “Former agent.”

“There is no evidence to support that either. After all, her situation wasn’t like Natasha’s. She joined Hydra willingly with her eyes wide open.” Banner calmly takes another sip and shrugs.

There’s noise, but it’s being covered by his thudding heart. He needs to breath, to fill his lungs with air. Don’t break. To break means death. Survive. Always survive. Focus and revaluate. He knew not to trust the Witch. She controls minds. The Asset could be reprogrammed without the chair. She could reprogram him.
He was supposed to be free. Leverage.

<The Captain hadn’t informed me about the Witches power.>

<My soldier. I could tell from the very begin that it was your destiny to be a weapon.>

What about his leverage? Could she mould his mind while keeping the precious ‘Bucky’ intact?

<The most lethal and beautiful of them all. Hail Hydra.>

Please.

“You can’t hold that against her Bruce. She’s just a kid. She needs our protection.” Rogers has his hand outstretched towards Banner. An attempt at peace, at manipulation. But Banner only smiled and pushed his glasses up his nose.

“She is also an interesting project. I figured I look into her powers. See if it left a residue behind in the mind.”

“Why would that interest you?” She speaks peering from behind Vision. An ideal picture of innocents that the Asset didn’t buy for one second. And Banner’s careful glance at her implied that he wasn’t buying anything either. He wasn’t even sure if Rogers bought it have the time.

“Just a theory. Regarding an uncertainty about a friend of mine’s behavior. How out of character it was considering everything. Especially, when you look at Wanda’s previous track record.” There another couple of clacks on the keyboard. A video appears, not playing, with some of the Avengers standing around with a strange red glow swirling around. A red glow similar to the unknown red stones and similar to the glow of the Witch’s power.

The Asset had been mistaken from the very beginning. The trap Banner had laid out wasn’t for the Captain, or not just him, but was for the Witch instead.

“That video is from before Wanda joined the Avengers. We all know that’s how she made the first contact. Nothing unclear about the situation.” Rogers nods at Wanda and offers her a reassuring smile.

“What about Tony, Steve?”

Rogers flinches, and Wanda sneers. But the Asset can hardly see any traces of guilt in either of them.

“That actually why we’re here Bruce.” Rogers smile widens, but cracks are starting to show.

“I see. What did you do to him?” Banner places his cup down and waits expectantly for his answer.

“Nothing, Bruce. Tony’s my friend.” Rogers was trying for humble, brushing a hand through his hair, but still, he refuses to address his responsibility for Stark. “He was captured by Hydra, and we need you to find out why.”

Banner soft smile disappears. A metaphorical wall his raised as he hides behind his glasses and his hair. It seems the very light of the room made his expressions harder read. The silence stretches as Banner stares down Rogers, who doesn’t budge. Brat never did have much sense. The Asset finds himself wanting to hunch his shoulders and back towards an exit. Any exit. Banner takes a breath and tilts his head, before calmly replying, “I see.”

“Right.” Rogers clenches his hand pulling it close to his body. “Hydra did something to Tony and
Bucky too. I was hoping—"

“Did she play a part in delivering Tony to Hydra?”

“What?” Rogers makes some attempt to take a single step forward, but something stops him.

<Residual survival instinct?>

<Improbable. Muscle memory.>

From all the repeatable beating? A lot more plausible than survival instinct.

Banner flicks out his hands and clasps them together. “I said. Did Wanda. Deliver Tony to Hydra?” He smiles but there is nothing jovial about that smile. The Asset grips his knife tighter and once more scans the room for a quick exit. If needed.

“No. It wasn’t her. I told you, Bruce, that she is reformed now. She is an Avenger. Trust me.”

Banner shakes his head. “Saying it wasn't her implies another Captain. Who?” Rogers instantly becomes defensive locking his arms in position and shifting his body away from Banner.

Steve wasn’t going to say anything and the Asset’s fully functional survival instincts told him to keep his mouth shut as well. Although doing so wasn’t going to change the inevitable when War Machine gleefully spilled the beans.

“It doesn't matter right now, I suppose. Everything in due time. And perhaps this problem you brought me is related to my own research.” Banner tilts his head toward Wanda, smiling that same scary smile.

“Probably. We need you for your super serum expertise.”

Banner smiles even more forcefully. Then he starts laughing. And laughing hard. Not loudly but it definitely left an impression. “Obviously. Why else would you be here?”

“Bruce.”

“Don't ‘Bruce’ me, Captain.” Banner let's out a sigh and something in the air is released. He even takes his glasses off wiping them clean with his shirt. “I'll go with you. But please keep in mind I'm going with you to see Tony.”

“Sure, Bruce. I'm glad you're back.”

“No I'm not.” Bruce smiles softly. No one would consider him remarkable or memorable, being told that he held the Hulk would be considered ridiculous as well. The Asset felt the fear in his bones.

@@@

Ghost followed after Banner, you could recognize it from the way his eyes trailed along the laboratory when he thought no one was looking. Of course the Asset was watching from the vents with Friday’s permission not that Banner wasn’t aware of that fact. An order from the Captain. An innocent smile up front with a knife held behind his back. It's no surprise that Rogers and Maximoff get along so well.

<That's disrespectful.>

<Doesn't make it any less true.>
However, the Asset wanted to know what Banner hide behind that soft smile. Couldn't just be the Hulk. There is always more to the story. The current story had Banner surrounded by blue dancing data and blood. The Asset’s blood, not the Banner was the first scientist to hold that power.

“I’m missing something. Serum is there but what?” Banner continues to mutter himself but he quickly devolves into science gibberish which the Asset cannot follow. Tone is easier to read, always has been, and Banner’s tone says that the science is not going as hoped. “Friday is it possible to get Tony down here?”

“Boss is busy. I’m sorry.”

“No, no. It's fine. I just-” Banner removes his glasses, cleaning them with his shirt and keeping his head down. Small gestures and slumped into himself.

“Things not going well, Doctor?” Wanda stepped through the threshold, a red afterglow trailed from her fingertips. Explains why Friday hadn't mentioned her arrival or warned Banner. She strolled into the laboratory like she owned the place. The innocent and child-like behavior gone from the way she cocked her hips. Yet the Witch kept her distance from Banner.

The strange light glare from before came back. Like magic hiding Banner’s dark eyes from anyone reading what's running around in that genius brain. He straightens and leans against the counter calmly staring at the Witch. He doesn't speak and simply waits. Waits for what, the Asset isn't doesn't know.

“Well?” There a flash of rage in the Witch’s eyes, glowing a dark red as her power swirls around her, but she continued to keep her distance. Banner continued to keep his silence, watching the Witch. “Answer me.”

Banner shrugs. Red is increasingly spreading around the room, filling the empty space on her side of the room. Only her side. Even now her power kept its distance.

“Why won't you say anything?” Her voice cracked.

“What do you want from me?” His voice is even betraying nothing. The magic glare that hides his eyes are still there.

“Your research. . .”

“Ah. You’re worried that I will prove your involvement in the creation of Ultron. That you used your powers to push Tony over the edge.” Banner tilts his head back, and for a moment the Asset can peer beyond the glare at brown eyes that glittered green. “Why?”

“Why what?” She grips her fist tight as the red energy ripples.

“Why are you worried? You're an Avenger with the backing of the Great Captain America. No amount of evidence, I hand delivered them, that shows the monster you clearly are would sway them. So tell, why.”

“I am not a monster.”

“Yes, you are.”

“I'm not! He is the monster. Stark is the monster, and he destroyed my entire life. My brother’s life.”

“Don't be daft. If anyone is responsible for his death, it's you.”
The Witch’s face sharply turns as if she had been slapped with such force that she took a step back. “No.” She still doesn't face him and takes another step back.

“Yes. If anyone is to blame for Ultron, it's the mind stone that gave birth to that monster using your hatred for Stark to create its opportunity to escape into the world. You.”

She shakes her head trying to throwing something off. “No. It was Stark’s own ego that created that tragedy.”

“It was your power that pushed Tony. It affected him, the way it did me and the others. And I can prove it.”

“No. It's all his fault. It is all his fault. Everything.” Her power shudders and fans out behind her like crimson wings. But still she keeps her distance. A line forming between her side and Banner’s made of red. “I the victim.”

“No anymore. Not since you willingly joined Hydra and Ultron.”

“No.” Another step, backing away from Banner.

“I don't care if you believe it or not. But we both know what you did. And now Tony will know too.”

“It will not absolve him. All I did was show him a vision, him burning the world was his form of protection.”

Banner chuckles. “Your right. Tony's bleeding heart won't let him. But it's a start.” He shrugs.

“He is the monster,” the Witch bites out before turning on the balls of her feet hand storming out the way she came.

“That was scary,” Friday spoke when the doors finally slid behind the Witch.

“Wanda or me?”

Perhaps that answer was better left unsaid.
Sands the Charm

Chapter Summary

Natasha stalks Stark down an alley and confronts him. Also, green evil lady.

Chapter Notes

(So are this sorts of notes better at the front or the end of the chapter?)

Umm, hey readers, long time no read my attempt at storytelling and the English language. You doing good? Because I'm in a constant lowkey freak out about everything... communication is hard.

Anyway, it's been awhile since I've updated so thank you for sticking with my story. And a special thank you to all those of you the commented on my last chapter. Seriously, thank you.

Stalking Stark. Why did everything always seem to come back to him? Maybe it was just his crazy infecting everything? It used to be that her everyday reality was just a bunch of greedy bastards trying to claw themselves a bigger piece by screwing everyone else. Next thing she knew, a billionaire was flying in a tin can and blowing up tanks in the desert. And Fury was talking about superheroes as something he didn't just humor Agent Coulson with as part of their bromance. All because some moron thought it would be a good idea to kill an 'eccentric' genius that could literally make his delusions into a reality. A type of insanity that would always find it's way back to Stark. His flying armor, his arc reactor, his tower, his supervillain stalker, the helicarriers, his evil robot (not that mission wasn’t a hoot), his accords and now it was his ex-boyfriend, his brain tech, and his abductors. Again. Coming full circle.

Made her think someone or something was playing favorites.

Not that she learnt anything new from watching Stark’s meeting with another mole. One that she and Clint had missed. (Which she would blame on Clint as blackmail fodder.) A Ryan Grant from Pott’s IT department. Of course, Stark found him.

Because as it turns out- she was right. Utterly, without question. Not that mentally shouting ‘I told you so’ did anything for her. Telling Clint would have been a riot (only because he would agree with her and had no desire to inform the others.) Telling Rhodes even more so. Instead, Natasha was stuck. Stuck waiting and watching Tony Stark. Again.

It seemed to frame her life’s story. One of them. Anyway.

At the beginning of this story, it was almost ethereal, and she was still naive. Alcohol flushing her cheeks. Music that wasn’t used for precision nor control. Lights that glittered off teeth, champagne glasses and far too big jewels. Her own body draped across her mark’s arm. A tall man that smelled of too much cologne and shoe polish. Even now his face escapes her. But she gravitated toward him
as he directed her through the ballroom. She giggled and pulled on his arm just the same as all those
time before. He caught her by the hip, and it was always the hand on her hip. She felt the well-timed
spike of adrenaline. His eyes were on her. On her legs. On her chest. On the curve of her smile.
Never would he notice the small blade.

Yet his eyes pause. Dragged away from her. She heard a laugh. And it was all too easy to find the
source. Dark hair, dark eyes, and a dark suit with a complimenting broad smile. He stood sharply
against everything. Her sight helplessly tracked the wave of the man’s hand. He bit his lip eyes
laughing with mirth and his audience bubbled with glee. Her lips twitched naturally towards a smile.
She hadn’t even heard what he said.

Not that it mattered. She didn’t belong. The longer she stayed, the more apparent it would be. She
needed to leave before the bell tolled. She went with the mark. But maybe one more glance. One
more glance wouldn’t hurt. How could it? It is was only a moment meant to satisfy a sliver of
curiosity. Something she felt deep in her bones. Something that was all too easy to see. A party of
glamour and greed helplessly orbited around that man. A living star. Charming everyone until his
idyllic happily ever after.

But it was a problem. That single moment pulled her into his orbit too.

A used knife on her wrist. A successful mission curled in the back of some closet. A droplet of blood
on her left shoe. Shadows clung to her, but she went back. She asked for one dance. He smiled and
bowed. Called her beautiful and never did his eyes trail, trail, trail down. Eye to eye. It was safe and
warm as they both dance gracefully among the stars.

Soon a cold-eyed man came and ended the dance. How naive she was. How foolish, to forget her
own ice filled veins.

Not that anything she felt was real. How could it be? Stupid to ignore that truth, even for a moment.

Nine missions later she learnt his name. Tony Stark. Son of Howard and Maria Stark. His parentage
and environment only cementing her brief assumption of him.

A living fairytale.

Not that ‘Natalie’ ever cared for such things. A girl who always closed her eyes when she sneezed
and another who snorted when she chortled would prattle on about Prince Charming. The other girls
too but those two were undoubtedly the leaders. Guiding them all to giggle and whisper under their
bed covers. Imagining themselves as Rapunzel, Sleeping Beauty, or Snow White. Focusing on the
ending instead of the lesson. But Natalie knew. She paid attention. The right clothes, a smile that was
soft one moment then enticing in the next, a well-timed touch and a deep understanding of body
language. That was real power. For them, that was only things that would only ever be real.

Much like those childish whispers, Tony Stark would not be ignored. She would use Stark
technology. It was the best. Marks would often be drooling over Stark Industries. Licking their fangs
waiting for just the right opportunity. Gossip, a ghost’s lifeblood, more often than not singing his
name as sniggering judgments of sex, drugs, and wasted lineage. And each time. Each time she
would pause. Remembering the suit perfectly fitted to his form. Or how delicately he tilted his head
with a smile. His hands dancing to the music of his words. Effortlessly demanding attention.

For his part, even standing surrounded by squalor, Tony Stark acted as if that were only natural for
him. An immutable notion. Another scientific law. It was the general theory of relativity. It demands
his perfection.
Despite standing in a dirty alley, wearing sweats and a pair of battered converse, waiting for his master orders from Hydra- he stood tall ever the billionaire, philanthropist, genius, playboy. Confident, determined, fierce, beautiful. Always in control.

Natasha pressed herself into the corner of the fire escape where the window sill met the wall. Trying to find comfort from the chill metal, the soft scrap of cloth against the brick, and the darkness she made by breaking the nearby street lamp. She even had a fingertip caressing her bites, feeling the small joints that connected the weaponized bracelet.

The mole had told Stark that Madam Hydra wanted to meet, it was anyone’s guess for what. Not that she didn’t have an idea or two.

So here they both were. Again.

The same roles they played all the way back at Stark Expo. When Stark had landed from the air surrounded by flashing lights, beautiful dancing girls, and begun weaving a fantasy story of a phoenix reborn. Moving in that crowd with all his devotees, she almost believed it. A star in his chest and fire that let him soar. Almost. But there would never be a repeat of that moment. She was Natasha Romanoff now. She was SHIELD. And she knew, that men, men were creatures of mud and sand. Sure money was a powerful thing. Made people see auroras where there were none. Let people see what they wanted to believe. And the world wanted a hero.

As first impression go, before she read the files and actually met the man, it could have gone worse. And what she had gained from those records hadn’t changed that first impression. Being a hero was merely another addiction to add to all the rest. Things were going according to plan. Natasha Romanoff became Natalie Rushman. Young, driven, ambitious and utterly willing to break a few eggs.

As the saying goes “the best-laid plans of mice and men often go awry.” It was when Natalie Rushman met Tony Stark that her plans went awry. He didn’t look at her lips, nor her expensive clothes and hardly a peek at her breast. No, the fucker had to look into her eyes. Watching her and seeing someone. Not Natalie Rushman. Definitely not her. Rushman wasn’t quiet or reserved or an old soul. She figured Stark wouldn’t have had much use for such traits.

Who did he see? Some form of the truth, she supposed. He didn’t see a woman like the other marks. As Madam was fond of saying, women were not born. No, they were crafted from bone or marble. Just like the very first woman, Eve. Eve was a work of art crafted by God, from bone, to complement and soothe Adam. She was no Eve. But that hardly ever made a difference to her mission. Men want an Eve, so she became Eve. Stark sure acted like he was no different. His womanizing was legendary even among her peers. Yet- What did he see? The bone? The cutting edge? The snow? Not that it matters.

It wouldn’t change anything.

No that wasn’t the real problem. It was the fact that Tony Stark’s phoenix was killing him. Every time Ironman made an appearance he got worse. Apparently, palladium is not a fun way die. Probably tops the list of annoying death. Although, Stark hide the pain well. She would have missed it. If not for the strange smoothies and paleness of his skin.

So that was the end of the story. Stark was a dead man walking. No happily ever after for him. She told Director Fury the same thing. Her boss had frowned. Hitting the table before she could get the last words out. He insisted that the world needed Tony Stark. The Avengers needed Ironman. He believed in Stark’s fairytale. She expected more from the Director of SHIELD, but Tony Stark was a master storyteller and deflection. And even Fury wanted a hero.
Not that any of the heroism was real. It was foolish for the Director to forget that even for a moment.

And the proof was right below her. Waiting in an alley. Not even a little bit nervous. As if Stark made it a habit to have crossroads meetings with the Devil.

When the Devil did appear it was without a pillar of fire or the enrapturing melodies of the song the “Devil’s Trill.” No red horns or red suit. Or a sauve British man with perfect teeth and a face that screams ravish me. No, nothing like that. Natasha was almost disappointed. But a luminous green hair bombshell wearing a Hydra uniform with matching green coloring could hardly disappoint anyone. Clint would be green with envy. Heh. Still better that she was here. She wouldn’t try to get into Madame Hydra’s tight-fitting uniform.

“Meine schöne puppe,” (my beautiful doll) the woman purred. The clinking of her heeled boots echoed in the narrow space. Natasha pushed herself further into the wall and slowed her breathing. Stark stood stock still. His only movement was to turn and face the Devil. She towered over Stark, with those heels she probably stood at eye level with Captain America. She trailed two painted claws (green always green) from Stark’s dark locks down to his chin and gripped it tight. “Ich habe dich vermisst, meine puppe.” (I’ve missed you, my doll.)

Stark doesn’t say much. Or really anything. A mannequin had more energy than he did. Natasha presses another finger to her bites and rubs. Methodically. Back and forward. Back and forward. And continued to watch.

“Hast du mich vermisst?” (Did you miss me?)

Even from her nest, Natasha can see the deep impression on Stark cheek as the claws dig into his face. His face remains passive, but there is a small aborted attempt to take a short step back. Madame smiles and jerks his face up forcing him to make eye contact.

“Hast du mich vermisst?”

“Ich vermisste Sie sehr viel.” (I missed you very much.)

Green painted lips pulled into what Natasha figured was a smile but came off more like a viper showing its fangs. “Ich fand Ihr Geschenk.” (I found your gift.) Stark only response was the soft tapping of two fingers on his hip. “Es ist nicht nett, Sie zu zerstören meine Bauern Asset.” (It isn’t nice to destroy my pawns Asset.)

“Er war inkompetent.” (He was incompetent.) Something dripped off Stark’s chin. Probably blood. From the she-beast claws. Natasha bit her own cheek in sympathy. But Stark hadn’t reacted. And the finger tapping didn’t stutter or change tempo.

“Wahr. Aber er Stand im Weg. Sperrung Ihrer Flucht. (True. But he stood in your way. Blocking your escape.) Madame uses her nails to tilt Stark’s head up and down. She cooed after a couple of forced nods and her thumb rub gently at his cheek. Saying softly, “Sie konnte nicht warten, um zurückzukehren SHIELD.” (You could not wait to return to SHIELD.) An obvious fake choked sob punctuated the end of her sentence.


“Denn Sie verpasst mir?” (Because you missed me?) Madame Hydra showed more of her fangs.

“Ja.” Stark tries to give another nod, but the nails probably stopped him.
Madame tilted her head forward and moved to grip the back of Tony’s neck. Her own hand reaches for her neck twitching in surprise as she realized what she was doing. Movies liked to play the villain with the dark smile but... It was never the carved smile that stuck with you. No matter what threats they held. No, the Red Room was characterized by a hand gripping her neck in possession. Fingers pressed tight blurring the line between herself and the red. But also sharp and heavy.

“Wenn Sie verpasste mir, meine puppe, warum haben Sie verlassen?” Madame Hydra asked. (If you missed me, my doll, why did you leave?)

Natasha swallows something back. She can hear her throat clinking with the effort. Because those words were a trap. Tony is no fool. He should be able to sense the damn corner he’s been shoved against. Since there is no way to miss Madame Hydra’s predatory lip lick and the anticipation that brightens her eyes. It’s an unmistakable signal that not even Rogers would miss. That green woman spits on the concept of subtle with disdain. It’s entitlement in it’s purest form. But Tony is still tapping that beat against his hip.

Where are Tony Stark’s fucking tells?

His widening eyes. His twitching nose. His erratic touching things. His famous idiosyncratic word vomit attempting distraction and subversion. He had to have some response besides the fucking tapping.

Natasha adds another finger rubbing across her bites. Waiting. She pushes roughly on the bites edges feeling the metal dig intends into her finger pads. She needs the distraction from the slow beats of her internal clock. Every second incites a small jerk with it’s passing. Words try to spill from her lips. Noise from the city bid for her attention. And watching for Stark’s response is another need for something sharp digging into her skin. And fucking years of observing Clint, motionless for hours and entirely comfortable in his skin has generated nothing for her own use. No all she’s got is electricity biting her insides.

Rogers has it too. It made missions relatively more comfortable.

And Stark. Stark is nothing but lightning running through his veins.

“Es war notwendig. Sie müssen Captain America tot. Sie bedürfen der Winter Soldier.” (It was necessary. You need Captain America dead. You require the Winter Soldier.) Stark’s voice doesn’t waver.

“Alles wahr,” the viper purrs. (All true.) It’s too ridiculous. The untrustworthy rogues betraying the heroes to the mustache-twirling villain. And the thing is Natasha almost barks out a laugh. It sits in her throat just waiting and this comic book scene -happening right in front of her- isn’t helping. It is absurd. Tony fucking Stark backstabbing the Avengers and revealing his hidden Hydra ties. He’s probably a legacy. Stark is a German name. Isn’t it? “Und Sie liefern beide auf Ihre Platze. Nicht.” (And you will deliver both to their proper places. Won’t you?) Madame Hydra showing off her entitlement again.

“Captain America’s Kopf in Ihre Hande. Der Winter-Soldat kniend zu Ihren Füßen.” (Captain America’s head in your hands. The Winter Soldier kneeling at your feet.) Stark’s speaks in that same measure tone he has been using recently. Measured and methodical. It is the ease of flowing from the first position to the fifth position. Toes pointed with bended knees. The fluid movement of her hands. It is the basic practiced again and again. Something she usually wouldn’t associate with Stark.

“Sie sind so süß zu mir, meine Puppe.” (You are so sweet to me, my doll.) Green claws grip Stark’s neck. Incomplete satisfaction. And Stark just taps away. Hardly noticing when the hand slips away
because the bruise will remain.

And Natasha. She releases her own grip on her bites. She decides to breathe. It is easier than thinking anything. Because Tony Stark cannot lie. He is utterly incapable of that most basic of human acts. Lies carelessly fall from even the youngest of humanity’s brood. But not Stark. Not Tony Stark. Oh, he will put on a show. He knows the most based assumptions and social expectations. He wraps them around himself and forges an armor of glitz and glamour. It’s why Iron Man had lest to do with the flying weapon and more to do with the man. He’s got nothing else. As shallow as everything he is- But lies. . .

“I told you I don’t want to join your super-secret boy band.”

“I didn’t give it to him. He took it.”


His lies were pathetic.

He always gave himself away. Removing his shades putting them back. Fidgeting in his seat. Pouting with all the veritas of a middle schooler. And the many distractions. His hand-waving created the perfect beats for his many tangents connecting one idea into the next. Endlessly.

An excellent storyteller but no liar.

Natasha feels her electricity burning at her inside. It makes her gasps for breath. She needs to find her damn calm. But the chill from emergency stairs has shivered down her limbs and numbed her fingers. And the seconds insist on crawling past. And one too many memories in her mind. And there is a burning in her chest. Because Tony Stark cannot lie.

God, it’s not a scream. It’s a goddamn laugh. Sharp against her chest. Because of course, Stark can lie. Prince Charming is nothing but a glamorous lie. It’s a poison that paralyzes. She is paralyzed.

Men are nothing but mud and sand. And some can create mirages. She can feel the ache in her bones. Her mouth is dry. Waiting. Because that’s what you do when you’re lost in the desert.

Stark is still standing there in that alley. He hasn’t moved. And Natasha, she’s moving now. The electricity dances waiting for the lift and her body is the stage. Her boots barely whisper when she falls to the ground. It disrupts nothing but Stark still flinches. Not that dissuades her. So she stalks up, her legs making long strides. It only takes four. He takes four soft steps back. There isn’t any tapping.

No. Instead his shoulders are hunched even as he tries to stand tall. He holds eye contact even as his sight flickers. He bites his lips while trying to frown. Her hand’s jerk before forming a fist. She isn’t all here. No. There is a part of her confronting a Tony Stark after the airport. After she let Rogers and Yasha escape. Before all this. He tried to tell her. To watch her back like she was a child. She knows better than some soft man, not to be so foolish.

Is she being foolish? The answer is sharpness in the chest and back of the throat. But she knows. She doesn’t want a hero. And men. Men are mud and sand.

“I knew you were a snake slithering through the sand.”

“What-”
“And you aren’t just some irresponsible narcissistic over his head.”

“Listen.”

“No. You’re worst than that. You’re Hydra.” She bites the words and feels satisfaction when she tastes iron.

“I’m not Hydra.” Stark tries, and his eyes are wide.

“Lies. You broke, Stark. You broke, and now you’re going to kill Steve for Hydra.”

“I’m not- I couldn’t.”

“And wagging your tail for Madame HYDRA is what? S and M play?” Her electricity crackles with each word. She watched and waited. And she knew. Knew that men were mud and sand. And the night sky is a graveyard.

“I cannot kill Steve.” There is that voice again. Measured and methodical. Where are the lies?


“Am not?” He shudders.

She flips her wrist out. Her widow bites ready to drop his body here and never turn back. “Prove it.”

“Cap should have killed me in that damn Hydra base. Taken my head with one clean slice from his shield.”

“This proves what?”

Stark’s fiddling with his shirt sleeve. Like it has buttons. On a t-shirt. It’s a strange and distinct gesture even with a suit or a button-up. “Your right, Romanoff. I broke.” Natasha rolls her shoulders. Next should come the gun or a knife. Or Stark’s clever repulsor gauntlet watch. “But Rogers’ the one that broke me.” He smirks. Like it’s something to laugh or giggle about at one of his social parties. She almost expects some innuendo or one-liner to really sell the joke. But he just shrugs and tries to place a hand in a non-existent pocket.

God, now she watching the confused way Stark pats the sweatpants where there is no pocket. Likely forgetting he isn’t wearing a damn suit. Or that some sweats don’t have pockets. He keeps at it. Pulling at the fabric and frowning when nothing materialized.

“S-Surprise Stark. Pockets don’t grow, they have to be breathe.” She tries to keep her voice level. And her hand snapping in the air at Stark wasn’t helping. Deep breaths. Then count to ten. A brief glance at Stark shows the man no longer looking for an invisible pocket. Yet his innocent gaze and the twitching nose wasn’t helping either. Maybe count to fifty.

“Sorry,” he whispers. Returning to fiddling with non-existent cuffs- on a t-shirt.

“Why are you like this?”

“Like what?” Again with the confused blinking. Was this another trap?

“Your apathy to betrayal.”

Stark spreads his arms wide, a gesture he seems to make whenever he was putting on a show. “And what exactly do you expect me to do Black Widow? I not really one for rage issues.”
Everyone has rage issues. Something that drives them to tear at their skin and scream at the moon. To beg for corruption and twisted satisfaction. Something that curls in the depth of the mind whispering secret vows. And once you have one they like to collect friends. So why not Stark?

“Not give up!” Get angry! Her mind snarls. But she needs to keep her words cold. Stop. Breath. Don’t let it get you. Observe first. She takes another step into his space, taking advantage of her added height in heels. “You keep giving up and expecting a different result. It's insane. You’ve got to know that.” What does he have to gain putting himself in this position?

His nose scrunched and his eyes slide away. “And what do you mean by that? Knowing that I should be dead or teaming up with Hydra.”

“You said you weren't Hydra.”

“I lied.” He looks her dead in the eye and shrugs. Because of course, he did.

Her nails dig into her palm, and she wonders how deep the indents will go. “And killing Steve,” she says as casually as she can. She isn't sure he bought it.

“Yeah, that's not happening. Howard’s two laws of robotics and all that.” Another smirk. Fuck. And she's missing some insider joke. She bites her cheek and takes another breath. Another breath.

And huffs. “What's the plan her Stark?” What do you want? What's the fucking goal? Because if there's no anger, there must be a purpose.

“I thought that was obvious.” His brow is raised, and he swings his hand at the sky. And rolls his eyes. Although the last gesture loses some of its annoyance when right after he returns to fiddling with his t-shirt sleeve. Chewing his lips while his sight runs from her. “You following me to Madame Hydra. Watching that dance. Then you kill me. After the Avengers have a climax battle with Hydra. Happily ever after.” There is a casual ease in which he tells this story. It's honest and exposed. In a way, she would never be.

It is disturbing.

She widens her stance and waits. Yet there's no attack. Stark only stared up at her blinking. Still chewing his lip. Okay. Sure. She can play this game. She was made for this game. Natasha nods drawing closer to Stark. While one hand remains fist tight the other hand reaches for the man’s neck. She picked this method for a reason.

She brushes her fingers along the skin tickling the chin. He shudders. His fingers are tapping that rhythm again. No telegraphed signs of an attack. Her knuckles curl and begin to tighten. Her heart pulses once then twice. His nose twitches. Nothing more. Her electricity shudders along her back and she grips. The air in his lungs are diffusing, and he grinds his teeth into his mouth. His nostrils are flaring, but no oxygen will break her grip. She curls her fingers more feeling her nail gouged into his skin. And his muscles twitch. His body doesn’t convulse. Nor does he claw at her hands or body. Something in his eyes is ebbing away.

And Tony smiles. Beautifully and warm. Like a star.

“Agent said you needed me. That the world needs me, Romanoff. It’s a declaration of love.”

“You are a consultant Stark.”

“For the Avengers.” He wiggled his eyebrows.
She snorts. “Fine. You’re a Super Consultant.”

She jerks her hand back. Dropping Stark to the ground like a doll. Just another doll. He looks so small crumpled on the ground. His shorter than her now. He must have gained an extra inch in his twenties. But it’s not just his height. It’s his thin shoulders and wide eyes. How he always seems to curl in himself when he isn’t hiding behind Rhodes. And now he is gasping for breath and shaking so hard. Has anything really changed?

She has all the control. As she should. Most of her actions are all about having the most control. Like gambling money in a game she rigged.

She doesn’t want it now. That currency dripping in red. Which is foolish.

“S-Stop. Just fucking stop. What do you gain from this S-Stark?”

He coughs. Still struggling to breathe. “I told you.” It’s barely a whisper, but it’s sound louder in her head.

“No!”

“No?” He tilts his head the same way he does when he cannot figure something out. His quick mind drawing no conclusions. It's a proclamation of weakness for a man that brand himself as having all the answers. It doesn’t make sense.

“You are unbreakable. Untouchable! Self-assured and driven. Always knowing a destination and how to get there.” She can feel her electricity in her clenched fist and the stomp of her boot. But she doesn’t make the first move. “You are Ironman! Not this.” She gestures to his form still crumpled on the concrete street. Disgusted.

“Ummm, even iron breaks?” He sounds like he is trying to reassure her. But her eyes itch and her chest burns. And the breathing isn’t working. She’s tired of counting. And so fucking sick of waiting.

“Why-” Why couldn’t he simply be Prince Charming? Nothing more complex than that. She would have just dismissed him if he had. Instead, she added him to her collection of men who were neither mud nor sand.

The first was the Soldier back when she had something similar to innocence still. One of her first missions and her nerves showed it. But ultimately it was all muscle memory. He was like her in the sense that he was carved into a weapon, just from ice. Some by fate’s winds and some by human hands. A living embodiment of a zastrugi, irregular, focused, and unshakable. Even now none of his actions have changed that impression for her.

The second was Clint. They sent him to terminate her and probably the only person who could ever kill her. He believed her to be vulnerable. And maybe she was, no was watching her back. But no one was watching his either. His codename almost had the whole thing pinned. As Clint was ever the actor playing a hawk in a den of snakes. But she always figured him as more of a crow. Cunning and ridiculous.

Coulson and Fury were their tethers. Lighthouses in the storm. Utterly useless. Really she should have known better.

Not that it matters in her grand scheme. Each held a secret lesson just as the fairy tales stories did. Lessons about playing your part. About watching and waiting. About control and vulnerabilities.
Then one crazy mission, she found herself playing not a spy but a hero swooping in with a necessary save. Now she had to worry about morality. Because heroes have to walk the path of good and evil. Black and white. Fucking ethics and spies do not mix. The spy world is far too gray for such trivial things. Even for the soft heart ones. It has no utility value.

Captain America may have introduced her to honor. But Tony Stark showed her guilt.

And guilt is drowning when she knows she can breath. Should breathe.

“Why what, Romanoff?” He speaks softly, his gaze flicking about her person, and taking a moment to notice her own tells. She doesn’t have any. But her hands may or may not be shaking. And she technically can’t see her own face. At least he can’t see the intensifying lava sensation in her chest and pooling in her gut.

“Why do I feel contrite when you look me in the eye?” Yet she gives herself away. A level of honesty she rarely ever allows herself when there is no pointed blade at someone’s neck. Her palms are up willingly. Because she knows there are going be marks on his throat. Because the man is so small. Because- Because- Because! Because his eyes are always wide and trusting. Even when he knows she is lying.

He peers up at her through the curls of his hair. Again, the man looked her in the eyes. Assessing her. “I have no atonement for anyone, Natasha. Only the most precious of people have such power.” Stark traces a finger along his neck. “And I'm nothing special.”

“You are the man who creates miracles.” He scoffs. Eyes turning away. And blushes. A brush of red on his cheeks and the tips of his ears. The dismissal has her giving her scoff. His legacy of weapons aside the man had a star in his chest. Made his story of a Phoenix a reality.

“I am just a goose that lays the golden eggs.” There is that smirk again. But softer.

She shrugs. “Better than mud and sand.”

“You think I'm sand?”

“A living star actually.”

“A star.” Stark huffs. He pushes at his knees lifting himself from the ground. Only to stumble over his own feet and landing once more on the street giggling. “Careful Romanoff, that's quite a compliment.”

“It's the truth.” She offers a hand pulling Stark from the ground with the same hand that had gripped his throat. With the other, she held up three fingers. “Arc reactor. Badassium. Vision.” Stark makes a strange face, and she quirks her lips. “Stars guide and give hope. As you did.”

“I think that's some faulty logic and science behind that idea.” His nose scrunched up as if the very idea of lousy science should never be uttered in his presence.

“That's my impression. Give me yours.”

“You are an old soul, Romanoff. But I think your age is getting to you.”

“I’m thirty-five.” Stark cocks a brow. “Last I checked you are fifty. Fif. Tea. Fifty.” She points at him and smirks.

He makes a dramatic show of squinting at her. “You calling this beautiful piece of art—” waving at
himself “-old?”

“Piece of something.” She mutters a knee-jerk reaction. A little too familiar. “Are you more Tony Stark or…”

He drops the grin, lean away from her, and crosses his arms. She could almost see the iron mask with its glowing eyes. “Tony Stark is dead.” He replies. As he has done several times before. She flexes her hand trying to shake the numbness away. It's a stupid line. The dead can't insist on anything.

“No. I think Tony Stark is very much alive.”

“Why? We both know you suspect Barnes of being nothing more than the Winter Soldier.”

“Let’s just say I have some particular insight into that man.”

“Sounds personal Romanoff.” His face cracks into a wide grin and gives an exaggerated leer. Now it was her turn to give a deadman's stare. How her life would be so much easier if that line were anything more but a distraction. But it wasn’t. So she stares the man down. Some luck in her favor, her electricity was muted. “You are not going to drop this. Are you?”

“Nope.” She relishes the pop of the ‘p.’ A smirk in the sound and Stark scowls. She lets a beat pass, but his scowl doesn’t let up. She might even hear soft utterance like an argument with himself. It a wonder if the AIs or the talking to thin air came first. He's trying to hide it, making small gestures at himself, nothing too grand and keeping the noise low. Given everything, she can let Stark come to some decision with himself. About her, maybe.

To trust her?

Lava pools in her gut. Heavy. She can feel gravity pulling her down. It’s probably the only reason she hasn’t just turned away. Jab at his insecurities and run. It was so easy before. His desperation for any human connection. His need for validations. His own ledger. And oh, did Hydra exasperate all of it for their own agenda. The cracks in his armor that have transformed into fissures made it oh so easy to tear him down again.

Never let anything weigh you down Black Widow. Drop it. Cut it away. Tear it from yourself. Survive. Be light and quick. And survive. Run to Captain America. His a reprieve from the soft drip-drip of the blood, the pull in her gut, and the electricity when it burns even her. It’s a reprieve, and she survives.

“Natasha. Are-” Something touches her shoulder. It’s tentative trembling sensation. It’s not a surprise. Because of course. Stark is standing near, a living flashing neon sign of concern. Just a few keywords. Push him back. She grits her teeth. She knows it a damn crutch.

Trust is a two-way street. “Regret sucks.”

“Yes? Definitely.”

“Following orders is always clear-cut. The world might be gray but the world-“ Her hand chops at the air. “The orders and the mission.” Stark is nodding along but his head is tilted to one side, and he keeps squinting. Like a curious kitty. She almost pinches his cheeks. Near thing. “I figured I chose my boss. That was good enough.”

“Agency requires responsibility. If that’s too much for you, the perfect Captain America will think for you. He seems to think that is his prerogative.”
“Are you insulting Steve or me?”

“Captain America, obviously.”

Right. Because that makes sense. She rolls her eyes anyway, and Tony smirked. Because that’s what they did. She bops him playfully on the nose watching his eyes cross. Because that was something new. “What are we going to do about Viper?”

“Viper?”

“It was Madame Hydra’s code name at SHIELD. Not that I ever met that particular agent.”

“Let me guess. She made a team. You and Hawkeye made a team. And you competed in the SHIELD badass agent rankings.”

“Actually, Viper was Science and Technology.”

“Oh, like the hive queen FitzSimmons?” Stark squeals bubbling with giggles and bouncing on his toes. It was sad she hadn't a fuck what he was being a puppy about.

“Who?”

Stark steps back, his running along his backed chin. Grin still firmly in place. “They're part of Director Agent Zomzom new SHIELD boyband. And they are perfect. Science and icky science.” He leans closer to her, but not quite in her space, like giving a childish secret. “I want one.”

“You and Bruce are one.” Stark smiles brightly at the comment.

“Coulson!” He snaps his fingers. She clicks her tongue. “No.”

“He would know or have access.”

“No.”

“You know it to be true Black Widow.”

It's true. Not that she's going to admit to- Well, to anything. “We're heading back.”

“Of course, Black Widow.” He bounces after her.
Trust in Me

Chapter Summary

Secrets, secrets, and more secrets. Also, Howard Stark's ghost.

Chapter Notes

A new chapter after two months isn't too bad. Thank you for waiting.

If Bucky had to describe one Stevie Rogers, it would be words describing struggles and thoughtless charges at waving red flags. He lies, sure, but his agenda was usually evident with a little bit of thought. That simple straightforwardness was what Bucky had loved about the kid. The Winter Soldier had a different answer: a tight fist and tight eyes. In the end, it’s hard to say which Rogers is the real one. Bucky’s memories cannot be trusted, and the Asset has a twisted perspective.

What is real is that trust, trust isn’t cheap. And doing your research is always a smart move.

<Just ask Stevie.>

<Questioning one’s superior is not advisable.>

Trust isn’t cheap.

Would confronting the Captain change anything? No. His mission is still being James “Bucky” Barnes. He is always under threat of manipulation of having his current self, ripped apart. He must again live with Hydra. He is still trapped in the snowy hills of Italy waiting for the soft crunch or the click of a gun or a whisper crack of a tree branch. Nothing has changed.

Instead, James is lurking outside Banner’s new hole. Watching. His manner hadn’t changed from when the Asset watched him in Mongolia; the scientist is even now humming some warbled tune. Relaxed. Just as he was when he revealed the Witch’s ties to Hydra. When Banner showed the Asset what the Captain was keeping from him.

What had Stark felt and seen at this similar moment? Knowing the threat, the Asset posed. Seeing it first hand or were the Captain’s lies something that had more value to the fallen hero?

<The Scientist understands that the Witch is a threat.>

<An enemy of a stranger makes the stranger my friend?>

Trust isn’t cheap. Neither is information.

Banner makes another melodic hum at some science thingy blocked from view. More soft clinking drifts down the hallway. A sign that something must be going well. Banner had mentioned he was studying the Witch’s power. Another tidbit that could prove useful. Not that James has anything of value to offer Banner.
Green flashing eyes make that more a last resort option rather than Plan A. Maybe, violence isn’t the answer on this one.

James takes a breath to look over at the stairwell. The tower of steps is dark and comforting. A place of safe isolation and muffled silence. And every day those stairs stay the same. No surprises or new beginnings. No new existences or fresh eyes, only concrete leading up or down. And it would easy just to slink back to the cold stairs.

Instead, he takes the first steps into the lab and feeling the loss from when his footfalls made noise signaling his existence. Another step, his focus flows from the stairs to the monster playing a man only to find that Banner’s eyes meet his own.

James strolled further into the lab even as he kept a tight grip on the blade at his back. Hands behind his back as he gives a friendly smile. Everything is casual. Super casual. Here’s hoping the smile sells it. Although, probably not, considering how Banner “cleans” his glasses at James’ entrance.

“You finally decided to step inside. Delightful. What can I do for you, Sergeant Barnes?”

“A simple question.” James smiles wider, more lopsided and charming.

Only when hormones are involved, which is probably not the case with Doctor Banner.

“I find that it rarely stops at just one question. And a simple question can indicate a complex truth.” Banner walks around the counter decreasing the space between them.

James takes a step back. “I just want to get a feel for you, Dr. Banner. We have a few things in common.”

“Love of Indian curry?”

There is echoing gunfire resounding in the back of James’ skull. A line is drawn in the ice. “No, going on the run. Getting caught. That sort of thing.”

“That sort of thing.”

“Yeah, Banner. I heard that the Spider fished you from a small city in India.”

“Fished? That’s an accurate assumption. And you? Since we are sharing stories.”

“I got smoked from the bushes by a Hydra goon aiming for revenge. And a scary cat man.”

“Sounds like a messy situation. But I’m curious why you had to be smoked out at all, Sergeant Barnes.”

What exactly does Banner expect from the Asset? For sixty years his truth was what Hydra said it was and he never knew different because for every mission he was reborn. This Asset, who learned to call himself James, had Captain America as his mission. His universe was reborn with Rogers at the center and Hydra at the outer and discovering ‘Bucky’ cemented that. “Like you said. Messy
“Yet Captain Rogers pursued you for two years.”

“Brainwashing.” James’ go-to answer for everything.

Banner loses his relaxed stance, holding James' eyes, and waited. If he thought that James was going to be saying anything more regarding that particular subject, maybe James should just be done with this plan. Being remade again and again isn’t easy to explain to anyone. Captain America definitely doesn’t seem to understand.

“Mind manipulation can make someone question their faith in humanity.”

“Maybe.” Maybe, he never had much faith in humanity, to begin with. Or at least not the right kind of faith.

“Is that why you sought me out? A discussion of faith?”

“That sounds like something above my pay grade.” James smiles boyishly.

“Maybe.” Banner parrots while tilting his head. “Yet I suspect you're a man that hardly does anything without a purpose. Including your avoidance of Rogers.”

There those instincts again. An animal’s keen eye for the nature of all things. “You're the one who disappeared after Ultron. After everything with the Avengers. Who's the one avoiding who here?”

<Yeah. Avoiding people is a spies prerogative.>

“You are the one who said we had running in common.”

“You first.” James tries another smile even as he makes another inch towards the door.

Banner huffs a small laugh. “There was a disagreement between the Avengers and me, and well, neither side refused to yield.”

“Steve didn’t make it right?”

“No. It wasn’t about who was right or wrong. It was an argument about a violation and hardly something that can be amended with an insincere apology.”

Being cracked opened and picked apart until each piece that made James “Bucky” Barnes a person was evaluated. If it had value it was kept in some Hydra file, if it was useful, it was sown back into his skin, and everything else was thrown away. Rogers, stuffing his shoes with newspaper apparently had value to Hydra. “Violation. That’s a strong word choice.” James watched carefully, you never show a predator your back.

“Innocent people died. It is a rather strong issue.”

“Sucks.”

“Indeed. But amidst my rage, I overlooked some important details. Tony loves his AIs, but more than anyone, he held a rather deep distrust of those stones.”

James pauses at that. He cannot imagine any piece of technology that wouldn’t make Antoshka excited. “Vision has one. Tony loves Vision.”
“Giving JARVIS sacrifice value, I suspect. But Ultron wasn’t the true villain that day.”

“Rogers would disagree.” From the brief story that the Captain did tell Bucky, painted Ultron as something diabolical but then he had similar sentiments towards the microwave oven.

“Oh, no? I think he would agree but point the finger at Tony Stark. Rather than…” Banner shrugs.

“The Captain is fond of her.”

“Yes, well, apparently comparison between Nazi scientist and Jewish scientist are an ideal bonding moment.”

“That doesn’t sound like Stevie.” Bullies and the bullied is a clear line for the punk. Nazi’s were bullies. Hydra goons are bullies.

<Nothing that has happened recently sounds like Stevie.>

“I wouldn’t know. What I do know is that she joined Hydra, that she shows no remorse. And she volunteered. What I do know is that Rogers took her in despite everything. And that Rogers sees himself in her.”

James is standing in the Tower. Standing in Banner’s borrowed lab with the stairs only fifty away. Yet he can feel icy mud crawling into his boots and guttered screams pounding on metal walls. Zola’s mumbles about another failure and him turning to Bucky with glittering hope in his eyes. Bucky would be a success. Zola’s first success. Bucky prayed for another failure. “She volunteered? For the experiments?”

“Power is a strong temptation for anyone. Especially when you are angry and vulnerable.” Banner observes James. He can feel the pressure of being stalked.

Steve Rogers welcomed a Hydra monster as family. A creature that clawed its way into James’ nightmare while he keeps back the screams repeating the same digits over and over again until they lost their meaning. A part of him was lost. If the Witch gave herself willingly then what part did she lose? Her humanity, if she was ever human in first place. “I- Stevie is a punk. Picking one too many brawls with bullies.”

“Well there is Tony Stark.”

“Tony isn’t a bully.”

“And Captain America isn’t simply some ‘punk’ from Brooklyn anymore.” Banner speaks those words with a certain tone. A challenge to see where the Asset stands.

Except he doesn’t know where he stands. The Asset follows the mission given to him by his superior. Bucky follows Steve Rogers wherever he may lead. But missions offer no freedom and Bucky followed Rogers based on trust. Trust isn’t cheap. So even when it’s crumbled into chips of ice, there is no point in throwing it away.

“No,” James said.

“No?”

“Tony isn’t a bully.”

“You won’t find an argument from me on the subject. But the others?” Bruce shrugs and turns away.
“Я не доверяю остальным. Не Паук и Ястреб.” (I don’t trust the others. Not the Spider nor the Hawk.)

“Hmm. And Tony?” Banner watches James remain silent, his face calm. “I guess, it doesn’t matter. But still I wonder, why are you here?”

“The Witch.”

“Ah, my research interest you.” Banner tilts his head. An act that James suspects is an attempt to pull down his walls. “Why?”

“Hydra. Wiped me.”

“Well, that is disturbing. But not unexpected.” Banner cleans his glasses although more methodically than before. “And disturbing all the same.”

“Pliable, manipulated, and used.” He had given Hydra his loyalty. He had given Hydra his trust. But without context, it was cheap and meaningless. Yet. Trust isn’t cheap.

“That is hardly still a concern. Correct?”

“The chairs are gone. Every last one,” the Asset growled each word. He hunted for each chair, methodically, silently, and quick as a blade across a mission’s throat. The Winter Soldier acted as he had been built. Against Hydra.

“Indeed.” Banner smiled with his teeth as beast should.

“There are still the trigger words. There is still the Witch. I am not free. Not yet.” If he could ever be free. Even when he cannot remember his sins the blood still clings to his hands.

“Never say never. For never is a very long time.” Banner rocks on his heels glancing past James for a single moment.

“Wha?”

“It means I can help. With the Witch’s mind manipulation, as a start.”

“She won’t control me?”

“Well, I’ll need Tony to create an actual device to inhibit her powers. But my research can help.”

“And if I kill her?”

<Monsters need to be put down.>

“I won’t shed a tear. But I should probably dissuade you.”

“But you won’t?” James tilts his head mirroring Banner’s own mannerism.

“Hmm.” Banner shrugs.

It’s just as forthcoming as James has been during this whole talk seems only fair. An equal exchange.

@@@
One of the many things Rhodes found fascinating about Tony Stark was how he conveyed mood in his every movement. Even shuffling into the room they shared with his head low and eyes darting around was -the car crushed something important when backing out of the garage- levels of mood. "You’ve returned. Did you have fun?"

"I didn’t- I don’t- I’m-” Tony swivels his head to look at Rhodes, but his eyes flicker towards the door.

Rhodes waits, a part of him expects a similar stonewalling that Tones had pulled when he was dying. I'm fine Rhodey, he’ll say, that obvious flashing sign of doom is nothing. Like there is no man behind the curtain controlling the glowing disembodied head. "Tony?"

"No, it wasn’t exactly fun."

That is a surprise, but Tones is nothing but a constant surprise "Was that because Natasha trailed after?"

Tony clearly holds back some instinct, probably to curse, and flexes his hands reaching for invisible sunglasses. "Oh. You knew?"

That isn’t a denial which considering everything is progress, at least that how Rhodes is viewing it. The whole thing with the Madiran, however, had less to do with lying and more to do with Tony picking a fight on his own. At least in the beginning.

Rhodey snorts. “The spies seem to underestimate my intelligence for some reason.”

"For some reason? Nothing to do with you acting like some frat boy around the birdies?” Tony finally gives a real grin and even giggles while his little nose twitches.

"I was never in a frat."

“True.” Tony flops onto Rhodey and wiggles until he is comfortable. “But it’s not like you’ve been wowing them with your aeronautics, calculus, and rocket science skills.”

"They all know we met at MIT. Did they think I got in with my winning personality and good-looks?"

"You didn’t? Well, there’s that theory down the drain."

Rhodes scoffs. He places a hand on his chest projecting pure hurt even as he kept down a smirk. "I helped you solve a mathematical problem that I’m pretty sure is one of the reasons are suits get off the ground."

"First, I don’t remember any of that, so it didn’t happen.” Tony’s face still pressed into the fabric, muffling his words, and awkwardly waving an arm in front of Rhodes’ face. “Second, you were so hopped on caffeine you thought the equations were singing to you.”

That was a good day, one of the ‘Good Ole Days’ in fact. Despite Rhodes almost dying of caffeine, it was a learning experience. Trying to science on an empty stomach isn’t smart, and snacks everywhere is clever. "I stand by the singing. Way less crazy than getting into an argument with an AC/DC poster because it insulted your programming skills.”

Tony flips himself, letting Rhodes finally see his eyes, but they’re focused on somewhere else. "I
don’t remember.” The silence that fall sends pinpricks of pain throughout Rhodes' chest.

"Tony?"

"I don’t remember when we first met. Do you have siblings? Are you allergic to strawberries? Am I a good friend or a bad one?"

"Tones.” Rhodes tries to infuse all his regret regarding him losing the plot on Obadiah Stane, failing to stand by Tony when the genius was destroying his life piece by piece and Ultron became a mess, and his apparent inability to say the right thing when needed into that one name. Tony’s name.

"Nothing. It’s nothing. Sorry. I’m pathetic.”

He needs to be able to say the right thing for once. Goddamit. "We met when your roommate sexiled you from the room. You were curled around a notebook on the floor scribbling equations for a spaceship. I thought I was the smartest guy in the world and MIT had done nothing to change that perception. But there you were, almost fourteen, building the future. And thank god. Because being the smartest guy in the room sucks.”

“Shut up.” Tony hides his face pressing it once more into the couch.”

"So smart.”

"Shut up.”

"And adorable.”

"Do you not comprehend English? Shush thy doughnut hole.”

"And building the coolest shit.”

Tony leans up to cover Rhodes' mouth, and Rhodes tickles Tony’s side in retaliation. “S-s Stop. Hehe. T-this is super- ha- superhero brutality.”

"Please. You shot first.”

"I am innocent. No one would convict me.”

"Innocent as the devil and with just as many secrets.” It’s a teasing remark that’s been used by the original Jarvis first as respect for the original Agent Carter and then for Tony. Something Rhodes picked up because he licked the imagery.

Rhodes suspects that Tony might have seen it differently. Not that it matters. Tony thinks that Hydra etched some darkness in him, but he also felt being Tony Stark had some inherent worthlessness to the name. Both seem equally stupid.

“Yeah. That’s me.” Tony pushed each word out with a forced smile.

"Tony. Whatever the trial or obstacle I'll listen.”

"But will you trust me? After everything?”

Trust? Huh. His faith in Tony specifically, that isn’t something Rhodes has ever taken a moment for. They are brothers and trust comes easily like breathing. Trust aside, doesn’t mean he isn’t going to take this opportunity to poke at Tony for being utterly ridiculous. "I trusted you after plane strippers, fake drunk brawling at your party, and the whole president fiasco. I think we're good.”
Tony taps his chest with a little shrug that suggests a bit more levity for his current situation. "The president fiasco? You mean the other engineers- evil engineers- touching my suit fiasco."

"Government property, Tones." But levity is always how they have handled the collected crap that the universe has thrown at them.

"An adorable bouncing son who you let be tainted by evil. Evil!"

"What no sympathy for me? I got baked like a sweet potato."

"I’m sure you were a delicious sweet potato, sugar bear."

"I was. I was indeed."

"So-" Tones starts.

"So?"

"I think Romanoff is warming up to me."

"Uh, huh."

"And that will probably be all fucked up soon."

"Uh, huh."

"My fault. But I'm not sure what else to do."

"Are you dying?"

"I don’t think? Probably, not. Serum, ya know?"

"Good point."

"Rhodey?"

"Just come to me if you need help, please."

"I- Okay. I'll come to you." Tony meets Rhody’s eyes with a promise, and that’s all Rhodes asks. A promise. However, Tony is still hiding something, he should probably just shoot Cap, but when he pushed it never garnered the ideal results.

@@@

As much discussion there is about Stark’s chronic backstabbing problem, Clint never once believed that Tony was a viable threat. All Stark’s money, technology, political power, and his freaking brain speed, he never took the man seriously. Even after Ultron, if Stark were a threat Clint would have put an arrow through his chest.

Natasha must have thought similarly given she watched everyone but Stark. Had contingency plans for every Avenger, Thor, too. She had told Clint that Stark would be his own downfall if ever came to that. Even after Ultron, they both trusted that truth.
Hell, SHIELD’s threat assessment was lacking by all accounts. What had Stark said regarding Cap’s assessment? Was the flagman above bees on the list? Of course, and that’s saying something too because bees are scary fucks.

Now, Clint wonders how easy it would be for Tony Stark to conquer the world. What would the world even look like with Tony Stark at its helm? Utopia? Dystopia?

Now, Clint has this thrum of anticipation that comes with an understanding that Tony is a vulnerability for the Avengers. It’s that same anticipation that had Tasha follow Tony tonight, no matter his wacky attitude regarding Stone. Stone is trash and should never be a Hawkeye thought.

When Natasha strolls into the room, her nose straight in the air and gives him an imperial head tilt. It sends a clear message- the situation has gone FUBAR. Question is what type of crazy does he have to deal with now.

"Before us great Death stands
Our fate held close within his quiet hands.
When with proud joy we lift Life’s red wine
To drink deep of the mystic shining cup
And ecstasy through all our being leaps—
Death bows his head and weeps.” ("Death." Rainer Maria Rilke) Clint keeps his voice completely monotone trying not freak out.

"Rhodes isn’t going to kill you.” She glides through the entryway eyeing Clint, a queen displeased with what she saw. But he knew better. Because she picked Rhodes to focus on rather than the actual problem- Stark.

"I am weeping for my untimely death, and you've yet to tell me anything, Tasha.

"Pushy. Pushy.” Natasha trails around the room taking a moment to glance at nothing here and there. She does, however, take a real look at the other exits and windows.

So, Clint, he plays Natasha's game. It’s not the first time. "Rhodes doesn’t trust either of us. And he especially doesn’t trust us around Tony.” Okay so he lied, but it was only a small one.

"And I followed Tony. With probable cause.”

"Like Rhodes will care. Tony would have to be an actual supervillain and even then- Even then Rhodes would side with Tony.”

"It’s admirable. His loyalty.”

Loyalty, huh. They pledge their loyalty to Fury and Coulson. They pledge their loyalty to the Avengers for whatever that stands for, Cap’s agenda apparently. Loyalty for Clint means faith and trust, he isn’t sure what it means to Natasha. That’s something she would keep close to her chest. A strange beast, trust, it can grow into a demon or something more.

"His loyalty didn’t smack your head against a table.” Clint pouts.

"Oh, Hawkeye didn’t see it coming?”
"Hindsight is karma’s twin sister, you know."

"My my. You don’t say."

"Whether I was asking for it or not, is not the point. The point is my death. And if my sacrifice is in vain.” He flicks a paper clip at her forehead as Natasha turns to face him and pouts harder.

"I don’t know. Is that my area of expertise?” She finally rolls herself next to him on the couch and begins to peer at her nails.

"Taaaashaaa~ My death. My inescapable death.”

"Well, I did follow him.” She waves her fingers and tilts them down.

Clint treats words as if they were the ocean itself while Tasha has always preferred the arrow approach. "Insightful."

"There was an alley, and I made a nest.”

"That’s my spider-bird.”

"And a very sexy lady appeared.”

"The high moment of any Bond movie.”

"That’s it.” Natasha smacks Clint’s head. To really punctuate her sentence.

Nothing is ever that straightforward, and Clint is fifty percent sure that Nat purposely makes things more convoluted. Even when her words are short, they still have a punch or a hidden knife to them. Bond movies, while fun, don’t fit the Black Widow’s M.O.

"Great story. But there seem to be some details missing there Nat.”

"Maybe one or two. It’s not like it is uncharacteristic of me to keep some information to myself.”

Now that has Clint choose his words very carefully. Especially given that her focus hasn’t shifted from her nails. "True. But also not.”

"Sounds like your problem. Not mine.” She pulls out a dark indigo and a carmine nail polish. Lifting them up, her hands as scales, one above the other and ignoring the issue.

Nat is being bratty considering that Tony is Hydra is an Avengers problem. Which isn’t fair because he totally called that in their relationship. But Clint knows, unlike Tasha, that it’s okay to miss the target once in a while.

Clint points to the carmine polish. "When Rhodes eventually kills me I want this inscribe on my tombstone, ‘Blame Natasha.’"

Widow leans back against Clint and peers up at him. Vulnerable. "Clint, tell me a story.” She smiles because it’s not as if he’ll refuse her. She’s even going with the color he picked.

Clint would be pleased if he wasn’t a little freaked out. The last time Nat asked for a story, a part of her was still fishing for information to use against him.

"Why did you join SHIELD?"

That’s not something he has thought about for a very long time. It’s not even a moment he would consider significant. "I never told you?"

"No. I always forgot to ask then the next day it never mattered.”

"Huh. It’s a stupid story.”

"Fury discovered you in a dumpster, promptly told you to stop being an idiot and join SHIELD.”

"I'm going back to my graphic novel, who treats me right, unlike you.” One of many that Clint has hidden around the apartment and two are hidden under his butt.

Natasha brushes pauses, and she raises a brow expectantly. "Tell me.”

"So when I left the circus I joined this government tack team that technically had connections to SHIELD. Damn it; I was a good soldier until—"


"None of the above. I got a retired Agent Carbonell. She was one wacky lady. Called me a peach and said I reminded her of her nephew.”

"Retired?”

"Yeah, which I only know because Fury pops up hissing at her that she is retired, should refrain from using SHIELD resources, and re-educate herself on the definition of sanity.”

"You’re pulling my chain.”

Clint shakes his head and grins. "And her response was—" Clint raises his pitch and gives himself an awful fake British accent—“Now, Nicholas you are acting ridiculous. I don't know who you think I am but I assure you my name is Agent Carbonell, fulfilling a mission you assigned me.’ She pulls out the papers as proof.”

"They’re forgeries, obviously.”

"Duh and Fury said as much.”

"And the Agent?”

Clint restarts his awful acting once more, "now Nicky, does that sound like something I’d do? No, I think not.” He stops and exaggerates his face into a mighty frown, “and Fury replied, cold as ice, 'if I could, I would curse you with endless secretarial paperwork. The worse death bored to death.'"

Nat laughs into his shoulder remembering to keep her hands in the air as the paint dries.

Clint waits for her to calm herself before continuing his story. "Agent Carbonell looked wholly nonplussed and sniffed 'as if I couldn’t outsmart a curse. Magic, really Nicholas.'”

"She sounds like the best thing ever.” Natasha hits him softly mostly to keep her nails from smudging. “Why have I never met her?”

"Because she was for real retired. I never saw her after that, Nat.”
"Curious," She purrs like the Bond villain she secretly is, lucky, he loves that about her.

"Maybe. Curious number two-"

"Yeah?"

"Tony reminds me of her when his acting passive-aggressive. That passive-aggressive sniff particularly.” Clint watches and waits for her response.

"Tony met Madame Hydra in that alleyway.”

"Kay. Did you identify her?"

"Yeah, she is the snake-obsessed scientist.”

"Dude! That was such a freebie. Odin's beard.”

"I don’t even remember her much.”

Clint goes over his memory file of the prominent scientist. There isn’t much information except that Coulson might know something. "She was more Coulson’s generation.”

"Coulson? Again?” Nat flaps her hands in the air. Only a third is for drying the polish.

"Coulson.”

"Ugh. Make Cap deal with him.”

"Duh.” He flops on her, and she hisses at him. Clint ignores her. “Is that it?”

"Tony might require a careful eye.”

"A Hawkeye?”

"Shut up, Barton.”

@@@

Stark men are made of iron. That is the last thing Howard Stark said to Tony Stark before he was shipped off to boarding school. How accurate is that memory? Stark isn’t sure. Howard Stark said something similar multiple times among swirling whiskey and cigar smog. A fairytale to soothe the loneliness.

A small token that Tony had some significance to Howard Stark. Or maybe it was a judgment that Tony lacked in necessary traits to stay- an exile.

The was the past and now, who is to say what judgment Captain America will make knowing Stark’s connection with Madame Hydra. Widow had followed him to the meeting and Widow had passed her judgment. Not that Stark can remember, not that anything will change even if he did remember.

The Avengers parade into the room one by one, each hero with their own stride. Tony directly marched into what might as well be his courtroom. And Rogers, of course, sets himself at the head of the table.

Rogers doesn't spare Stark a glance; his focus is solely on the spinning SHIELD logo as the call
connects. It’s a waiting game, waiting and waiting.

Stark would think that Rogers would be a little more annoyed at having to asks for assistance from baby SHIELD, but his face reflects only an ideal soldier. His words reveal even less. “Director. It’s the Avengers. We have some questions about a former SHIELD operative if you don’t mind.”

"As opposed to the other cape wearing band of troublemakers you know.” Hawkeye gives a mock salute with two fingers. Black Widow seems uninterested staring instead at her shiny blood colored nails.

“Cap- I mean- Captain America. Rogers. I’m sure you prefer I call you Rogers. Can I call you Cap? Outside professional setting, of course. You don’t have to answer now. Business first.”

Rogers coughs and gives a tight smile. It’s like a comedy routine. And Agent seems to get the message if barely.

“Right. I am a professional. Whose help you need. That I will give- I mean- I would love to help you- I mean- after your previous SHIELD experience- this time it will be different. SHIELD is different. Ask anything, happy to help.” Coulson fiddles with his tie smiling a tad too wide.

"Cool your jets, Coulson. There is plenty of time to swear your allegiance to Cap’s fine ass later.”

“Agent Barton-” It’s incredible how some people can sound both so calm and a hair’s breadth from shooting someone with telepathy.

“Ah, ah, ah. It’s just Hawkeye, now. Seeing as there is no SHIELD.”

Coulson and Hawkeye-Stark supposed- stare each other down. Not in a fun way either. There is another beat of silence where nobody says anything, not the two fighting obviously, but Rogers or Romanoff. Cap should be parenting or pretending at least, and Romanoff again finds her nails the most compelling thing.

Having these two fight could only prove a useful distraction from Stark affiliation with Hydra, but the tension makes something tense inside Tony. "G-Man produce Mulan.”

Coulson breaks his stare with Barton, gets ready for a reply, but Agent May beats him to the screen.

“Knives.” May gives a two finger salute and Tony waves back.

Coulson snorts giving a lopsided smile at May. “Speaking of-” Coulson signals for Agent Daisy to show herself on screen.

A sharp looking woman pops her head into the field of the camera with one of the sweetest smiles. “Hey, person whose tower I totally didn’t camp outside for five months just to catch a glimpse of the suit. Not that I’m not excited to meet you in any form. Especially after Fitzs and Mack just gushed about your remarkable engineer brain. I went to Coulson and said it wasn’t fair.”

"You are a fan?” Tony finds himself pulling at invisible buttons. Because him having an actual fan doesn’t sound like a real thing.

The Stark fan- Daisy- continues unabashedly. “Are you kidding? What kind of programmer would I be if I wasn’t? You were one of the first hack-activist and definitely the first to release SHIELD files to the public.”

Rhodes starts coughing, but it starts to sound more like a laugh.
“A clear indication of what the powers-that-be were up to.” Agent Daisy waves her hands at the screen. “Not that I would approve of that now. Clearly. I am the secrets keeper.”

Rhodey nudges Tony with his elbow, his face showing nothing but mischief and Tony could never deny that expression. “Do you like me better than Cap?”

“Obviously. No offense Captain but man with a shield doesn’t compare to a guy with his own flying suit of armor-“

"And several AIs,” Stark grins.

“and several AIs.” Agent Daisy agrees.

“Daisy does not mean that Cap. Everyone at SHIELD is big fans. We even have a collection of old Howling Commandos gear. You could come check it out sometime? I could give you a tour of the compound?“

Agent Daisy mouths Ironman behind Coulson's back and gives a thumbs up.

“Sure, Director. But we have some business to discuss.” Rogers runs a hand through his hair and finally fives Stark a look. One that is a hard to read.

So Stark pushes as he always does. Pushes until someone pushes back. "I forgot. Tremors tell Chocolate milkshake that you can create earthquakes. With your mind.”

“Yes, I can do that. Umm. Milkshake, Sir.”

"Bullshit!”Rhodes stabs a finger at the screen.

“No, she can. It’s wicked cool.” Coulson grins the proud grin of a Mama Bear. Director Mama Bear is a better than Director Agent Zombie.

"Really? And Agent May was your S.O.?" Hawkeye leans against the table propping his toes on the chair.

“Yes?” She directs a proud smile at May.

“No! No stealing my agents or my scientist. They’re my- SHIELD. They are SHIELD personnel and are very happy here.”

"Avengers have a better package deal. More resources. The best toys.” Hawkeye wiggles his eyebrows at the screen.

Stak giggles because this is a much preferable distraction to tension. Capitalize.

“SHIELD has cool toys. We have an invisible jet. A secret base. Created by Fury. Come on. I have a robotic arm.” Coulson looks towards May for validation. Gets ignored.

“I have a metal arm, too. Mine is shiny.”

“SHIELD is my home.”

Hawkeye and Black Widow trade a look. And sign something at each other. Hawkeye falls back into his chair and nods. "Fair enough.

“Is there an actual reason you called?” Coulson says this slowly like his talking to a child and Rogers
‘I'm disappointed face' means he is siding with the zombie. Which Stark thinks is very fair to Barton and Romanoff, considering.

But with that done, Stark is in need of a new distraction.

“Don’t look at me. This is the spies show.” Falcon is so Stark’s favorite hero. After War Machine, of course.

"No one is looking at you birdbrain.” Rhodey snipers, again with the frat boy attitude.

Sam kicks at Rhodes chair. But manages to kick Barnes’ chair instead. Sam cackles. Barnes uses his legs to tip Sam’s chair back. He thuds onto the floor and glowered. Rhodes cackles this time.

"Do you remember a scientist named Sarkissian?” Romanoff, her painted wiggling in the light, looks up only to say her bit and looks back down.

Stark thought that if the Black Widow had chosen to open her mouth, it would be a declaration of Stark’s sin. Not Ophelia Sarkissian.

Her name indicates the beginning of a particular type of story. The kind that Rue once told him about life, destiny, and a castle. A young samurai lord in Japan wanted to build a castle but the stone walls he constructed kept collapsing. Every day he would make those walls and every they fell.

“Ambitious genius but I don’t think the Director much cared for her. She never made it the head of Science and Technology, but she was a key figure in many a project,” Coulson said.

May interjects. “A snake.”

“Well, her code name was Viper.” Coulson laughs awkwardly.

"And her association with a scaly hissing creature that eats by swallowing its food whole. Whole Coulson! Didn’t raise any flag for you, at all?”

“Hawkeye-” Agent tries to start another spat with Hawkeye, but Barton brushes it aside.

"Hawks are noble creatures that protect us from the hissing by turning them into pizza.”

“I was with you until the pizza.” Falcon rights his chair and makes a face.

"What do you have against pizza? It's the most American food ever. You can’t be American without the pizza.”

Stark watches Falcon and Hawkeye prattle and decides to declare the obvious choice. "Burgers are more American.”

“I have nothing against pizza man. It’s the strange snake pizza I’m using to question your sanity. But yeah burgers were at least invented in America, man.”

"Your named Falcon,” Hawkeye argues.

“It doesn’t mean I eat snakes!”

"It does now.”

“Fellas! Avengers business. Rogers side eyes the birds with a smirk. “And Clint’s right. Eat your snake pizza, Sam.”"
Falcon squeaks and flips everyone off.

It's enjoyable reminding Tony of when he believed in family. When he thought he was worth something as a person. "Burgers."

"Yes, burgers always win." Tony gives a small smile for Rhodey’s words.

“She’s Hydra.” Agent May breaks the past’s illusion.

Room’s attention is directed towards Agent May, who remains silent. Coulson is astonished.

“Really? That doesn’t seem fair. Shouldn’t Hydra people scream crazy? Garrett didn’t start to sound insane until the alien blood. And they always come off as more reasonable than me.”

“I think that’s more a statement on you Sir than Hydra.” Agent Daisy laughs, and May smirks.

Coulson tries to reply but is cut off by May. “Called it.”

“You called her a weed.” He frowns.

“Called it.”

“Is she Hydra?” Coulson question, as if there could be an alternative when SHIELD was eaten from the inside all that survived was Hydra.

"She’s Madame Hydra. Has this whole green esthetic thing going on too. Very sexy.” Romanoff finally gives the room a look but avoids staring at Stark. Her focus should be on Tony’s sins.

When the samurai lord was beyond frustrated with the crumbling walls, a vassal came forward with a suggestion, that the Gods were not pleased. A human pillar was needed, a human life built into the central tower of the castle. They selected a single mother with two children named Oshizu for the honor.

"We only have your word for that. She could be a scaly old witch queen selling apples to unsuspecting Bambi eyed geniuses.” Hawkeye sounds jealous, but it's probably just another of their games.

"Sexy.” Romanoff leans body screaming sex and wiggles her eyes as her only answer.

Agent huffs and points a finger at his former spies and again at Agent May. “Fine, you called it. I am a terrible judge of character and deserve no friends. Is that all you needed? A confirmation of her identity.”

Rogers finally looks present and takes charge. “Actually, Sir, I was hoping you give us something to track her down. She is currently targeting the Avengers, and I do not want to be caught by surprise.” It’s all very Captain-y.

“Of course, anything to help. I could even fly down there-to you- to help.”

"Kiss ass.”

"Aren’t you supposed to cover that with a cough?” Stark said to Hawkeye.

"Nope.”

“Director, please continue.” Rogers has a throbbing vein and tries not just to hold his head in his hands.
Coulson types away and scans the information, but he seems not to require the reminder. “She oversaw a project I worked on before the Battle of New York. But she specializes in biotechnology, not medicine, so much of the work was handled by someone else.”

Rogers, consciously or unconsciously, flexes his arms. “Did your investigation into Madame Hydra turn up anything?”

“Sorry, no dice. We’ve been kinda busy with our own Hydra troubles and apparently there is honor among Hydra crazies.”

“Crazy brainwashed honor.” Rhodey taps the table like his making some grand revelation and Stark pulls his ear.

“So you have nothing. Right?” Falcon raises his hand and sweeps his eyes across the room.

“So we’re done? We get to see Tremors start some earthquakes?”

Rhodes covers Tony’s mouth while the genius pouts. But turns towards the Avengers. “Zola aside, do you know of any associates we could use to track her? Someone who might point us in some general direction.”

“No, not really. Her position was mostly bureaucratic, and her scientific contributions to SHIELD teetered off in the early nineties. Fifty years with the only success lost in the Atlantic, SHIELD didn’t see much use for soldier enchantments technology.” Coulson trails off thinking.

“Right. She made super soldiers with Zola. And no one found this suspicious.” Falcon gives the room a pointed look like it was somehow the Avengers fault that SHIELD had questionable hiring practices.

“Everything about SHIELD was suspicious.” Rogers sighs with the weight of his imaginary world on his super shoulders. Like the man missed the whole spy thing and how spies work. Captain America has no working understanding of “practical.”

“Powerful men tend to overlook that which inconveniences them.” Wanda glances at Tony. He flinches.

Hawkeye puts an arm forward, only slightly blocking Tony’s view of Wanda. "We knew this already. Tony already told us about the Winter Soldier Project.”

“What? She made the Winter Soldier?” Coulson directs the question at Rogers, a seriously rude move, but James answers anyway.

He just shakes his head. “No, Zola did. She came after.”

Coulson trades a look with Agent May.

Black Widow straightens gaining an air of professionalism and Hawkeye stands from his chair "I know that look. Spill Coulson.”

“Sergeant, how did your handlers keep track of you? Was it a tracker? Another agent?”

“Coulson! You can’t ask that.” Rogers' fist hits the table hard, shaking it, and Stark feels a sharp chill up his spine.

James raises his metal hand silencing Cap. “Which one?”
“Which one? Oh, boy. How about the handler under Zola?”

James’ eyes trail off as he loses something or turns something off. “A tracker with a timed bomb and scheduled reports with a handler who would only increase the time on the bomb when I checked-in.”

Coulson and May exchange another look.

Stark knows the pieces are all there. When Tony Stark came back from the sand, he asked himself what his Creator, Howard Stark, would have done in his position. When the sand was still burning in his mind, he knew nothing, and his naivete didn’t just extend to the world. Now, he knows better, and he doesn’t like the answer.

“Did we ever discover who was CEO of Cybertek?” Coulson turned towards May ignoring the Avengers, or the heroes were forgotten.

Agent Daisy lifts a tablet up, her nails clicking on glass, and flicks her eyes up. “The current owner is a Jonathan Drew. But the founder was Leona Hiss.”

“Seriously! She thought Hiss was a great name for an alias. Does her weird snake obsession know no bounds? She might as well tattooed evil on her forehead and been done with it.” Hawkeye waves dramatically at the screen and then above his head.

Black Widow does her signature head tilt and muses. “Cybertek, huh.”

Falcone raises his hand again. “Can someone fill me in?”

“They sent me a job offer.” Banner clacks a pen on the table pausing for dramatic affect maybe. “But I was suspicious of the group, despite the company’s lack of connection to the U.S. government.”

“Smart.” May nods approvingly.

Bruce gives an acknowledging nod.

“So we find this Jonathan Drew.” Rogers arms, once more crossed, flexes again.

Daisy: I did a search-

"Oh, what type of program do you use?” Another distraction, it’s pointless, but that’s insanity for you.

“Not now, Stark.” Rogers voice flat. Because he doesn’t know living in his fairytale world.

Daisy narrows her eyes and gives a hard glare at Coulson, who shrugs but tilts his head. “CEO Drew is dead. A recent car accident that took the life of his wife as well. And with the daughter missing- “ She pauses and looks down. “Sad stuff.”

Tony flinches. Rhodes runs a hand through his hair hiding his eyes. "Right. Sad accident. Happens all the time.”

"A snake on the road and the car swerves to save its life. Tragic.” Hawkeye sing-songs and trades a smirk with Black Widow.

“So another dead end.” Rogers always so commanding and to the point even when disappointed.

"Not necessarily. Companies have sibling corporations or subsidiary.” Rhodey points out.
“Daisy?” Coulson said.

“Well, there is a number of contracts with Quinn Worldwide, of course.” There some more clicking and clacking with her “And there was a company that invested a tidy sum in the beginning. A Meditech Center.”

"Interesting. That happens to be one of many Stark Industries subsidiary,” Rhodey said. Another tower of the Stark castle.

The vassals went to Oshizu and made their request, a human pillar, as a single mother she looked at what she could offer her children. Tattered clothes, a small house, and herself as the only family. She asked only one thing for her sacrifice that one of her sons would become a samurai. In this way, she had something to give her children. Her life had value.

Wanda curls her fingers and rests her chin on her hand as red magic swirls around her head. “Another connection between Stark and Hydra. How illuminating.”

Avengers glance at Tony while Rhodey glares back.

“Well, yeah. I’m curious to know what Howard Stark was doing with Madame Hydra.” Agent Daisy makes a face.

“She could be very charming.” Coulson stares off with a whimsical smile but pulls himself back with a cough. May still snorts. And Stark is sure that is all the admonishing that Coulson needed.

“Wait, Howard?” Rogers looks perplexed, and Stark understands that. He's been there at that shattering moment.

“Yes? Why you think Ironman capable of espionage pre-birth?” Agent Daisy says it like some sort of inside joke, not understanding it’s no joke to the Avengers. “Cause I don’t think even Tony Stark is that much of genius.”

And there it is, the truth. That Howard Stark wasn’t a perfect pillar of truth, justice, and Steve Rogers’ way. The Stark castle walls are crumbling, and Stark once more will be the central pillar. Where his life has value?

Rogers' face hardens. Will Captain America throw away Howard Stark as easily as he did Ironman? It’s an interesting question, asking if their lives were worth the same.

Falcon shifts his focus between Rogers and Rhodes. “Nineties, right? Tony was definitely making noise during that whole decade.”

Agent Daisy eyes flick up and down. “Cybertek was founded in 1965, actually.”

“Obviously. Because you said, Howard.” Falcon smiles awkwardly.

“Because I said, Howard.” Agent Daisy nods and grins.

"Guys. Howard is even more dead than the last guy.” Hawkeye again flaps his arms around but with no apparent purpose this time. “Probably.”

Rogers' eyes flicker to Stark. Stark wonders if there is supposed to be a command in those eyes.

Coulson, however, shrugs unconcernedly with the reveal. “Maybe. Maybe not. Howard Stark was a founder of SHIELD. We ARE known for our secrets.”
“Secrets,” Rogers mutters.

“Probably secret labs all across the country. Definitely one in the old Stark Mansion. Very Dr. Jekyll, clinical, and cold.” Coulson runs a hand through his tie.

“It always comes back to skeletons in somebody’s closet.” Rogers sounds hurt, a betrayal his voice implies, but Stark think maybe things would be different if he hadn’t crushed the damn plane.

"And you’ve been? To the Stark Mansion lab.” Hawkeye makes a face but keeps his tone from being bratty.

“I was young once, a man with layers.” Agent smiles up at May, who ignored him.

“Mysterious like dark chocolate cake.” Agent Daisy reassures.

"From secret Hydra bases to secret SHIELD laboratories. How exciting.” Black Widow wiggles her eyebrows, and if she were Tony, she probably would be bouncing.

"Yes, because Nazi snake ghosts are always a hoot.” Hawkeye snarks.

“Snake pizza.” Hawkeye flicks a paperclip at Falcon’s forehead.

"Anyway.” Hawkeye pause for silence. “At least the lab won’t require all of us. A milk run.” Hawkeye tilts his head and peers intensely at Rogers. It truly would earn him the moniker Hawkeye. Stark finds it utterly ridiculous. “Cap?”

“Can you handle this Clint?” Rogers keeps staring at a white wall with no answer or portal to the past. Not that Stark is going to tell Rogers that.

"Sure, Cap.”

Vision raises from his sheet practically flying. “Is the meeting concluded then?”

Rogers just waves him off and finally moves his eyes from the ‘magic’ wall.

“Wait, Captain~”

Cap ends the call and leaves. The room is dead silent. Wanda leaves after, and Vision soon follows. Bruce lifts an eyebrow and gives Tony a nod before exiting.

Rhodey is the next to leave his chair, giving a polite nod to those who remain. "Well, I have some business. Superiors to handwave at and politely give the finger to some politicians too. Tones?’”

"I’m good.”

Rhodey kissed Tony’s head, and Falcon followed after. Black Widow and Hawkeye push their chairs and their heads together, before speaking among themselves. A little spy world.

James, who did not leave with Rogers, walks over to him. “Knives?” He plops down in the seat near Stark and props his legs on the table. Twiddling with an F-S knife.”

"Yeah. Like your Guns and Hawkeye is Arrows. You know?’

“But you're more than that.”

"Sure. Making knives, that’s my jam.” Tony stares at his fingers and hears a thump of boots on the
“Сделать ножи, да.” (Making knives, yes.) Tony peers from the corner of his eye. Winter’s head slightly jerks as an awkward nod, and he shifts his body away.

Neither of them is saying anything but "Shouldn’t you be running after the Captain?"

“Should I?” James rolls his chair back and forward.

"No?" Tony taps his chest and bites his lips. James staying is good, after all. James gives a pleasant hum. “So Howard huh?”

“What? Stevie’s stalker?”

"That’s your impression a creepy stalker? Not entrepreneur? Or super genius? Not even the crazy man with a plane?"

“I don’t- I think he tended to stick with Carter and Colonel Phillips.”

"Then why?"

James takes Tony hand and gives a genuinely Herculean level of a charming grin. “A leanan sidhe appears glowing under the morning star, and you think me cold enough, cruel enough to refuse.”

And Tony lets him keep the hand. "Am I supposed to fan myself? The heat of your gaze too much for my delicate sensibilities?"

“Never. Ты тянешь на меня, а я просто слежу.” (You pull at me, and I simply follow.)

"As if.” Tony shoves at his shoulder, but James barely budged, choosing to smile instead.

Then their eyes met, and James heaves a sharp breath and raising his metal hand towards Tony’s face. “Can I?”

Tony stares. Reading each microexpression. Nods and pulls at his clothes. Tony feels smooth metal softly tracing his chin and warm lips firmly pressed against his for only a beat. James leans away and returns to fiddling with his knife.

Tony licks his lips. "You-"

“Impulsive.”

"An impulse?” A mistake?

“But I wanted- I still want. Okay?”

"Okay.” It’s a little scary, and that fear is something Tony understands. “Again?”

“Yeah.” James gives another press of the lips but a beat longer. Two hands on Tony’s head. Gentle. So very gentle. And another press. Tony reaches a hand for James racing his neck and fiddling with his Henley.

“You are just too much for my delicate sensibilities Sergeant Barnes.” James pulls away because Tony can never pass up a chance to fuck up. He tightens his hold on James shirt. “Sorry. I’m sorry. Don’t- Please.”
“Do you expect something from me?”

Tony shakes his head violently, and his finger pales as he tightens his hold even further. "No more than what you expect of me. Right?” It’s their common ground.

“Yeah.” James grins and runs a hand along Tony’s head. “Okay.”

Tony bites his lips hard tasting the blood and peers at James sweetly. "So what do you do for fun?"

“What I do for fun, huh?"

"I make things, poke thing, explosions, etc.”


"Pouncing? You’ve been hitting the Disney kinda of hard.”

“It’s not like I have anything better to do. The Banner mission was the first time the Captain let me do, well, anything. He likes to keep his pets close.”

"So you-"

“I await orders. As I’ve always done.” James squeezes Tony’s hand. “Yet now it is without that small freedom of the ice. A cycle of sleeping, eating, and observing the passage of time without any authenticity.”

"And pouncing.”

James just smiles, and Tony loves that look. It’s a fluttery kind of feeling.

“Falcon is fun. Always a hoot to scare. Hawkeye provides a challenge. Something to dig my teeth into.”

"Where’s Rogers during this ‘just fired’ montage? Shouldn’t you be stepping out on the town, buying poodle skirts, drinking milkshakes, doing the Charleston, and wearing matching pajamas? Forties stuff.”

“Forties stuff.” James turns away flexing the hand that’s not holding Tony’s. “It’s a wonder what plays in that head of yours doll.”

"I am a wonder to behold.”

“Ты гламурна, моя радость.” (You are glamorous, my joy.)

"I- That- Too much.”

“You do make me happy,” James says it like a promise.

"Unrepentant snowman.”

James moves his chair closer to Tony’s, inching the same away. Their knees touching. “Do I make you happy?”

"I cannot say. It’s far too soon. What will the socialites say? My reputation, your reputation.”

“I’m already a well-known cad, sweetheart. Your reputation is already tarnished.”
“Well, then you are in luck. I prefer notoriety.”

“Или судьба, Антошка.” (Or fate, Antoshka.)

"Fate isn’t very scientific.”

“Yes, let’s talk science with the fifty-year-old who wouldn’t pass as a college graduate—”

"Don’t be jealous that I look good.”

“And the immortal assassin.”

"Made with science. Science!”

"Science and fate.”

"No magic. That a deal breaker.”

“Agreed. Magic is a hard No. I can respect that Antoshka.”

"Mocking me? Me!”

“Never.” James kisses Tony’s fingertips as another promise.

"What are we doing?” It’s startling to hear another voice like Stark forgot where he was and who he is.

James’s face relaxed into nothingness. He snaps away from Stark. As Stark glances up to find Hawkeye with a knife at his throat.

"Going on a mission?” Hawkeye is calm. “With me maybe?” The knife hasn’t moved. “Nat avenge me!”

“Will do.”

"So a mission?” Hawkeye continues unperturbed the knife still at his throat.

"Yup. I figured us four could head to Stark Mansion. And sorry Tony but we probably need you to open doors. And such.” Barton does look sorry, and the knife hasn’t moved.

“A date.” James declares, which okay, the man has been out of the dating scene for awhile and a mission probably sounds like an ideal date for an assassin.

"A date?” Romanoff smirks and shakes Barton a bit. “A date.”

"Wait. Aren’t you and-” Barton points a finger at James then at the screen then at the ceiling. “Never mind.”

"Chasing my ghost isn’t what I call an idyllic date.” Entering the Underworld for love is a tradition, though.

James brushes a hand through Tony’s hair. “I could protect you. I was known as an assassin of ghosts.”

Barton spreads his arms out wide and stomps his foot. "What the fuck?”

Romanoff smacks Barton and coos, "shush. It’s adorable.”
Barton signs “Crazy.” Does it two more times for emphasis. Which rude.

"Nah. Well just use Hawkeye as a diversion.” Because of the rudeness. The Universe will not stand for it and not just because it lacks legs.

"Natasha!”

"Yes. Avenge you. I know.”

“Deal.” James removes the knife. And offers his hand for Tony to stand.

"To my death then,” Barton whines pathetically.

"Drama queen,” Romanoff smirks and smacks Barton on the back. Again. Tony almost feels bad but James smiles again, and Tony finds he doesn’t care.
A Star Is Born

Chapter Summary

Secret labs abound and ghost. Boo!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Fuck!

That is the most accurate expression Tony Stark would ever have outside a ghost house even without the standard dare to stay the night. No other word could precisely show the utter fortitude necessary to remain at this position staring dead straight into the eyes of those beings that refuse to shut up even once. Even after their burial and an awkward wake filled with nonsensical small talk. Even long after everyone has forgotten who, they are. These beings refuse to silence their pie-hole. Howard Stark was one such being.

Yes, fuck, the most versatile of words. Not that Stark standing outside a haunted house was a hypothetical situation. Not all. He stood rooted beneath a red archway, since Maria Stark never cared for white, and measured the progress of the ivy’s consumption of the mansion. The sun high in the sky combined with the daisies that covered the lawn made an excellent excuse to look anywhere but the entrance of the house.

“Tony?” James offered his hand out for Stark to take, the metal one because Casanova comes naturally to the beefy snowflake, as he held the impermeable wood door open. He wiggles those silver fingers; Tony could curse him for how sensuously those metal plates move. Not that James knew anything of why Stark much preferred the gate with the paint flaking off and uncomfortable pebbles underfoot. “Tony.” James is no longer gazing at Stark but instead fixes his eyes on his boots. And Stark can’t have that. The sight is tantamount to a 1967 Shelby Cobra left rusting in the rain. It’s not something to be ignored but a time to rally the forces. In this case, that means passing through the entryway, which is terrible, but it also means holding James’ hand which is good.

Fortuna favors the bold as someone said probably sitting comfortably with a nice drink and snacks. Snacks or no, Stark does take James’ hand and allows himself to be pulled into the dark front hall.

When Tony Stark had last shambled along these frosty stone marble floors, the furniture at least had added some much-needed color to the pale halls giving the illusion of gentle touch. Tony Stark, shy of being too drunk and not drunk enough, searched for the touch and perked his ear for voices that would never come.

That soft melodic voice that told him he was a good man. Not that it came to anything. Maria Stark would never know the type of man Tony Stark became. Her pride was pointless.

Now, everything was all too clear and all too sober. Really, he should have burnt this place to the ground.

“Let’s split into teams. One team for the upper floor and one for the ground floor. Sound good?”
Barton strolled past pulling at one of the musty beige cloths that now covered every piece of furniture.

“Tony.”

“Right! I get it. You and Tony are a pair. Don’t stab me.”

“Take it like a man Hawkeye. It’s a monthly requirement.”

“It’s not a flu shot, Nat. There is no stiff upper lip for a mortal wound.”

“Then die.”

“So harsh.” Barton cries crocodile tears into his hands as Natasha pushes him up the front stairway. The flower print withered from the dust clots smushed into the carpeting. Stark wanted to rip it apart till every last flower was nothing but colored thread.

“Tony?” James said. Again. Both their fingers still loosely entwined. “We can make the Spider and her underling do all the work. Find someplace to hide? Like before.”

Tempting and easy. Too tempting and easy. Just like it always was with Obie.

The man personified an easy answer to all of Tony Stark’s problems, an easy smile to any question and the savory temptation to take the easy way out. A repeating decimal that began with the very first instance the Board was out for blood. A particular blood type, of course, one that glowed green under the light.

And so it went that very first time the suits sought Tony out. Found him passed out on the carpet, but conscious, glaring hard at the bright light that erased their faces, however, their demand was clear. The company needed a Stark, Howard only recently ritually lowered into the ground, and all the world had left was a pale imitation which made AIs, not weapons.

Nonetheless, a Stark was required. What did it matter that Tony Stark felt himself hollowed out.

“Let’s venture forth, Energizer Bunny winter edition.” And it’s all too easy to smile and swallows down the utter dredge, another drop in the bucket.

“I have chocolate if you want. Or Lemon Heads.” From the same place James might retrieve a knife or a gun, he pulls out a dark bar and breaks off a piece. All with one hand next he holds the piece out for Stark to take.

“Why?”

James shrugs, an awkward thing with only one shoulder, and he squeezes Stark’s hand. “You gave me your knives. Seemed fair.”

“Right.” It’s creamy on Stark’s tongue and just the right amount of bitter. “Let’s head down this way first, Howard’s office is at the end of the hall.”

James doesn’t move, holding Stark’s hand, rolling the thumb back and forward. Instead of bone attached to muscles covered in skin, there are gears attached to nickel-titanium threads covered in carbon-steel plates that shift with every movement. The gears clunking softly and the plates trace along Stark’s skin. “Why don’t you tell me about the house?”

“The house?”
“Yeah, the structure made of walls and floors and the magic wires that turns everything on.”

Stark takes a single step and another. He makes his way past moss-covered halls, the decay of once vibrant wallpaper, he could almost see the moss crawling from the wall to the ceiling and floor. Each door stands out like uncovered bark. Cold and dark, the last bit of colored having long faded. What could he say about this house? This dead thing. Where Tony Stark learned to keep his footsteps silent and find hidden coves to talk to himself. Monologuing, as Jarvis did, to himself, that it wasn’t proper to caress every little thing. To smile even when the cameras hurt his eyes. To say his full name, Anthony Edward Stark, when he introduced himself. A perfect precious little boy. Not that it mattered in the end.

“Umm, it was probably built around the same time as SHIELD, given Howard moved up here for Aunt Peggy.” Stark opens one door that leads to the library. Line after line of empty shelves and Stark uses his foot to shove a nearby hunk of cloth covered wood, and a layer of dust shuffles off. It’s laughable, this land of oxygen, nitrogen and micro-carbon lifeforms. There isn’t anything of value, and Stark knew that.

“One, I supposed not.”

James moves one piece of wood, an ottoman maybe, near the large bay window- not that light did anything to improve the cavernous room- glancing at the marks left in the floor then moving to pulling the selves from the bookcases. There is no secret lab in this room, and Stark knew that. But watching James gently knocking on wood then tilting his head to listen to the vibration was entertaining, nonetheless. He lifts one of the bookshelves, single-handedly, his muscles flexing smoothly, and stoms the floor underneath.

“It’s empty.”

Stark knew that. “Yeah, no mad scientist lab here.”

“Want me to break something? For closure.”

For closure? Isn’t that the concept that Hollywood likes to tote around so that death has a clean finish, which death has no need. Not that it matters because- “Howard would hear and we don’t want to catch his attention.”

“Howard is dead, Tony,” James said. A simple clarification of the truth. Not a reprimand nor a sly glance, just a clarification.

That Howard Stark is dead, long enough that only the maggots and bones remain.

Killed by the Winter Soldier and the dumb bastard had to drag Maria, gentle Maria, into his mess by toting around super soldier serum in his car like groceries or precious family photos. The kind of thing that other mad scientist would have zero interest in or even awareness that such a thing existed. And poor oblivious Tony Stark who was too drunk to realize that he kept taking the goddamn blue-pill and waking up in his bed.

That’s Tony Stark. Too stupid to understand the secrets and lies. Always oblivious, that repeatable decimal. “Right.” Closure, James said. “Okay, break something.”

James reaches for the same couch, the metal hand at the spine, it gives a loud crunch, leaving him with a chunk of wood in hand. “Huh, maybe, I should drop kick it.” He sweeps his right leg back, lifting the limb horizontal to his body, and dropping it down in the most literal dropkick in history. It
shattered the furniture into two distinct pieces and multiple shivers of stuffing and wood. “That-,” he points to the dismembered remains. “That was fun. I’m going to break something else.” Well, no one had appeared like lighting the first time. Not even Jarvis. What harm could there be just to let the cyborg smash?

After a broken bookcase or two with a hand chop, planks of wood smacked into the walls, and using his metal hand to poke holes in the floor, James gives a satisfied huff.

“You’ve had your fun?”

“Sure.” James shrugs a proper one this time and smiles lopsidedly causing a fluttering sensation in Stark’s stomach. This time Stark offered his hand and bit his lip when James’ smile only grew wider.

“We should check Howard’s office next.” Howard’s throne room. Where Howard sat with his whiskey and cigars, muttering to himself as he scribbled furiously in a journal. Young Tony Stark’s legs would ache, and tears would gather in his eyes. But he never cried because Stark men were made of iron.

“Kay,” James flung a broken wood piece, and it clattered against the wall. He took Stark hand, with the metal one, and the both of them left. Just leaving the bits of stuffing, wood, and cloth scattered all over the floor like paint thrown onto a canvas. “Let’s brave the room you are trying to avoid."

“Smooth. Did Rogers teach you that move or was it, Barton?”

“I was smooth, once upon a time. Had all the girls and some boys, fanning themselves in my presences.” James stops twenty-one feet from the office door, swinging both their hands. “Probably. Maybe.” He rubs his chin staring at his boots. They’re dark purple and probably stolen from Barton. So Stark lays his head on James’ shoulder peering up at him. “Definitely remember quick kisses in the dark,” James smirks.

“Well, if all the ladies, gents, and honored guests find you so enamoring, what pray tell are you doing with me?”

James steps back, closer to the office door, but pulls Stark with his next step. “You are listening to Billie Holiday croon ‘I Can’t Get Started.’” He twirls Stark under his arm and ends with a slow deep dip. “You are dancing to Benny Goodman play ‘Sing Sing Sing,’ and you aren’t hard on the eyes either, doll.”

Stark straightens, pushes James back towards the wall, and trails his eyes, oh so slowly, from the tips of James’ stolen boots, up his perfect thighs, to a sightseeing tour of his chest and finally meeting James’ eyes. Beautiful rainy sky eyes. “Even with my sordid past?”

“I laugh in the face of danger.”

“Anyone can laugh at danger? It hardly an accomplishment worth bragging about.”

“How about kissing danger?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps, we should run an experiment?”

“My eyes! My eyes! They burn and sting and create CO2 uncontrollably.”

“Clint, shut your trap, or I will shut it for you.”

“Violence is never the answer, Nat. Especially violence towards me.”
Natasha stands in front of Barton, cocking her hip in a way that says she knows everything, every secret kept hidden in the shadows and buried with the skeletons, and James steps in front of Stark to meet her. “So were you two making out while I searched the mansion?”

“Hey! I helped.”

“Едва. Я разбила все, многое, было весело. Мы собирались обыскать офис в конце зала.” (Hardly. I broke things, many things, it was fun. We were going to search the office at the hall’s end next.) James jerked his thumb behind him.

“Ни каких сладких нот между любовниками, скрытых от посторонних глаз? Нет искренних заявлений о вечной любви?” (No sweet nothings between lovers hidden away from prying eyes? No sincere declarations of eternal love?) Romanoff waves a hand at James and Stark, and it’s clear she wanted to end her dramatics with a formal bow.

“We are not lovers. Not that’s a bad thing or that I don’t want to, it’s just that- I mean- Flirting is normal. People flirt and I- You-” Stark jabs a finger at Romanoff, “his eyes are pretty!”

“Wow. This whole exchange is wacky. Let’s pretend nothing happened. Okay? Okay.” Barton crosses his arms nods to himself the way birds do.

“His eyes are pretty, huh?”

“Tasha, what did I just say?”

Stark bites his lip and bangs his head against the inviting wall, it understands, even if it’s just a wall.

“What can I say Clint, it’s rather entertaining watching a puppet cut its strings.” Romanoff smiles like she really is watching a soft cotton man try and stand on legs without joints or bones, while the strings shiver and shake from the movement. A smile that is rottingly sweet.

“Not when they’re killing murder bots of doom.”

“I was a killing murder bot of doom.” She shrugs with one shoulder and looks over that shoulder at Barton. “And you helped me cut my strings.”

“I don’t need your help-” James makes a pointed glare at Romanoff, “-nor the bird’s help.” He takes a crab step left and places his hand, palm up, in front of Stark. “And you two are third wheels on our date.”

Those two, Romanoff and Barton, they’re watching Stark and James’ hand. Spying for secrets on Stark’s face or a small shift in body language. Is there something he is missing? Because he can certainly feel the elephant’s foot on his chest.

Wait. Stark blinks, slow and deliberate, and to the point. “You were serious?”

“Yes? Is that bad?”

“No. A date is not a bad thing. As long as your keeping in mind the details.”

“The details?”

“Yeah, Barnes! Not everyone appreciates a mission date even when it involves Polish special forces.” Barton slumps into himself. “Learned that the hard way.”

“Mission dates are perfect first dates. Great way to figure out how the date handles tension.”
Romanoff nods to herself, one decisive shake. “A clear indication of character.” She smacks Barton on the back. “Your problem is that you’re a mess.”

“True.”

James seems to agree, moving his head knowingly and trying to stifle a smirk.

Just a thought. But common sense doesn’t visit these three often. If at all.

“Barton’s ineptness aside.” Stark slides next to James, waving at the door’s general direction, making sure not to make eye contact. “Our objective.”

The three spies did make eye contact. Eighteen feet from the door and James nor Barton nor Romanoff paused to consider the threat. No hesitation in their first step. James, however, was haunted by Stark, who still refused to make eye contact.

“Antoshka.”

A shiver fluttered down Stark’s spine creating goosebumps along his arms. “You called me that before.”

“Yes. It’s Tony in Russian. Do you not like the name?” James traces a line along Stark’s nose.

Softer than his name and sweeter than doll or sweetheart. “I like it. I do.”

“Are two you making out?” A distinctive squawking can be heard down the hall. Stark would very much like to ignore it. But doesn’t.

James throws a dagger at the office. There was a thunk of it embedding in wood and more furious squawking.

“Sure.” Sure. Take one step. The first step is always the hardest. Stark moves forward two feet and the second step was just as hard. James squeezed Stark’s hand. And another step. Twelve feet now.

He still didn’t make eye contact. Architecturally floors were far more interesting, anyway. Academically, you know. His brain made patterns from the sandpapered wood knots, and grime filled lines. In contrast, the door was clean. No dirt. No dust. Shiny even.

Three more steps and Stark was at the threshold. James easily breezed path, eyeing the room with the eye of a demolisher. Not that this room held any similarities with the library. There were still books on the shelves, no cloth covering the furniture, and in the center standing at attention was the untouched cherry desk.

And fuck! Stark made eye contact.

He stared at its carved feet, listening to ice hitting ice, and his shaky breath tasted smoke. After all these years with all his accomplishments, Howard’s gaze still dismissed him. Even when the gaze’s origin was a distasteful portrait. It’s gaze dragged Stark’s eyes upward, making eye contact once more. A spear of light from the solitary window carving a shallow halo onto the painting’s dirt colored head. Only Howard- and one more- carried that level of arrogance beyond the veil.

“In my professional opinion, this room, this room is creepy.” Barton slams some random book he been flipping through on the desk and staring at the thing as if it had bitten him.

James cocks his head as a dog would stilling from his random pawing of the room. “Da. It gives off
“Ignoring Yasha for the moment, what kind of professional opinion Clint?”

“The profession that dealt with Fury’s whims. Just like when that goddamn alien door opened.”

“Should we leave?” Romanoff asks. She runs a hand along the red scroll of cloth that adorned the desk waiting for an answer.

“No. Something is here.”

“Yeah. Howard lives here.”

“Howard is dead, Stark,” Romanoff says it softly like she wasn’t so sure.

It was easier to believe that in the library, when James said it, and when Stark couldn’t feel him.

“Sure.” He flicks his eyes away from Romanoff. She can probably feel him, too.

<Here to track more dirt onto my legacy, hmm, isn’t that right Anthony?>

Stark flinched away, but he doesn't step back across the threshold, he can at least claim that.

<And you brought friends who track blood. Walking messes, the whole lot, and not an iota of respect.>

Romanoff broke off an ornate bookend and tried to hide it under the rug; Barton continues to slam book after book, and James is knocking on the desk as if he suspects it of sleeping with his mother. Yeah, Stark wouldn’t call their methodology careful.

<Of course, your friends are at least worth something. You, however, are pathetically human.>

Human, fallible, weak creatures- a creature that condemns itself with its actions, its fucking mistakes. But they were all human.

“I think I know this desk.” James rapps the wood. “Something is here.”

“Like what?” Barton kneels eyeing every atom that made up the structure.

“A trap door.” James pushes it just a squeak. “Maybe.”

Every last Avenger was human.

<Except Steve Rogers.>

Everyone makes mistakes.

<Except Steve Rogers.>

All the effort he made to balance his scales amounted to nothing. Why? Why did he alone remain lost and alone? What was wrong with him? What made him a failure?

<You are a tragedy in the making. An expected disappointment.>

“Stark?” Romanoff rolls back in forth on the balls of her feet, a short swing bouncing her short curled hair, glancing at him, her expression the idyllic shade of indifference.

And James broke away from his own frost covered memories. “Antoshka?” He stood, all systems go
to shove the desk aside. Waiting, not from hesitation, to propel Howard’s throne to an ignored corner of the room. Oh, so easy. Tony Stark could hardly peek as the hunk of wood and to touch it would scald his skin. And forever would he bear that proof, those burns, of his profane matter.

<Indeed, Anthony. You are a cautionary tale told to children underneath the firelight.>

Steve Rogers, the shining exception of humanity crowned with stars, would glow with grace. He would guide, and others would follow his light. Not Tony Stark. Pitiful Tony Stark lost in the darkness.

“Tony?” Barton this time. Because they all must stare at the pitiful Tony Stark lost in the darkness.

Every time, every time those lights focus on him, he grins and puts on a show because everybody likes a good show. But alas that requires a degree of eye contact. Stark peers up, he expects to see Howard’s ghost, as the figment trails after him with his ongoing snide commentary. But the eyes are blue with a speck of green instead. Captain America comfortable on Howard’s throne as if Howard was only keeping it warm. He wears his disappointment as he carries his shield, a declaration that denies any mercy. Stark blinks and the specter disappeared.

“Golly gosh, I’m peachy keen guys.” Stark claps his hands and grins widely hoping his teeth sparkle.

“And any man who says ‘golly gosh’ has lost way too many marbles,” Barton says leaning atop the desk, not that James minds. After all, what’re an extra two hundred pounds on a two hundred pound desk? Nothing. Nada. Miniscule plus miniscule is still miniscule. All that weight gets is an extra flex and plates shifting to form a wave along James’ arm.

“Status quo is God. All good. Now mush.”

“Want to change it up, Spider?”

James mutters something more, and Romanoff leans forward and claws into the floor, sharpening the air between them. Passive James listening to Rogers and keeping his head down. Passive Romanoff who tilts her head and remarks about the river. Pretending to ignore each other but never interacting and certainly not circling each other. Silently.

“As entertaining as this would be, I require the levitation of this desk.” Barton is laying firmly on top, items clutter to the ground, with one of his legs pointed into the air. And. He batted his eyelashes. It was all very Jessica Rabbit, Stark could almost see the piano. “Please, big boy.”

Romanoff cracked a crooked smile. James shrugged and shoved hard. And Barton fell unceremoniously on the floor with a thud and a squawk.

Tony felt bubbles rise through his chest. Almost a hiccup but without the annoying need to get through it. No. It was warm, those bubbles, and felt his hand clap over his mouth. Involuntary. But god, they escaped, the giggles. Soft giggles that made his belly jump. An altogether strange phenomenon that he didn’t want anyone to see. But James heard. He smiled, just as soft. And Stark figured that was fine.

“It’s a trap door. I think.”

“It’s alive. I think.”

“One of these days you’re going to say something that really hurts me, Tasha. And then where will you be?”
“Ukraine or Austria. I haven’t decided yet.”

“Black Widow’s cruelty aside. I’m like sixty percent convinced this is totally a trap door of some futuristic nature. Why else would a crazy man build a metal plate in their floor and hide it underneath their desk? Why? I want to call a friend.” Barton holds his hand up like a phone. “Ring. Ring.”

Romanoff stares at her hand before heaving a sigh and lifting her hand to her head. “Click. It’s the crazy. Click.”

“Ah. So helpful. Crazy for six hundred Alex.”

Stark peers at the two spies and rubs a finger along his nose. “I’m starting to think it was a miracle that you two managed to accomplish anything.”

“Rude.” Barton whines.

And Romanoff flips back none existent hair. “True. I am a gift from God.”

“I’ve got an idea.” James ignoring the rest of them, finding the plate fascinating apparently, taps the corner with a sense of familiarity.

“Shoot sniper.” Barton chirps.

An icy wind blows fiercely through the room- metaphorically as you do- as James' eyes slide across Barton’s neck. His hand snaps up to exposed throat and curls around himself just a tad.

“My entire existence apologizes.”

“Sure.” James turns his gaze to Stark, who is convinced miles and miles away he’d feel that stare, and taps the corner again. “Tony place your hand in the center,” James says yet he takes Tony’s hand, gently placing it on the trap door. Right in the center. Stark doesn’t want to touch it, but he doesn’t fight James hold either. When contact is made the mental plate slides open with a click, and a ladder pops out with a clunk.

“That should not have worked. There is no way Howard Stark keyed me to his secret, secret, secret lab. No way. No. This is a trap.”

Barton peers at the dark hole. “You think that your Father placed a trap in the eventuality that his son stumbled upon his secret, secret, secret lab?” He drops a marble- that he keeps with him, on his person like ammunition in case he runs out of arrows- and gets swallowed by the shadows. A single bite.

“Yeah.”

Barton stuck his head down into the hole, without a word Romanoff placed a steadying hand on Barton's back, but he just as quickly popped right back up. “Fair enough.”

“This makes me think of the frog trapped in the well and for the frog those walls are his entire universe.”

“Barnes, what the fuck?” Barton swings his head towards Romanoff, who shrugs, touches her right index finger to her lips and flips it forward. “Fine.”

A strange gestures on Romanoff part but Stark figures many of Romanoff’s characteristics are strange. “Are we going to venture forth without golden thread because I wouldn’t trust the dead.”
“There is probably some truth to that level of crazy as well.” Barton releases a huff, his happiness fluttering out with no attempt to catch it, and stares meaningfully at the ceiling while sitting on his heels. If Stark felt charitable, he’d tell Barton that the ceiling gives terrible advice, but he doesn’t. And so they wait. Romanoff with her hand on Barton’s knee. James his eyes intense on a vision only he can see. Stark on his knees, hands clasped together and understanding the futility of ignoring that stone against the stone type of giggling. “What?” Barton snaps.

“We’re waiting for your decision?” Her voice is almost innocent, almost, as Romanoff tilts her head trying to paint a pretty picture. Barton flicks his eyes to each person, James does nods even as his gaze doesn’t move and Stark blinks. Just a singular eye flap. All very deliberate.

“I’m the leader. Why am I the leader? Have any of you met me? Me? I am a mess that makes a habit of landing in trash bins. Why?”

James finally lifts his head and gives a lopsided shrug. “Your mission, your lead.”

Barton runs a hand over his face wiping away any expression, ruffling his feathers before settling, choosing to give them an ominous look. “Okay. I’ve decided, we will descend.”

Stark would have picked door number three, filling the hole with concrete and leaving the house to it’s shaking creaks that sound like cruel laughing. Turn away and never look back. Same decision Tony Stark made on that ‘special hell’ of a New Year’s Eve. Worked for him probably would have worked for them. Although, only Romanoff scrunched her nose after hearing Barton’s decision. Barton and James bore into the shadows searching for answer nobody was going to like. Probably.

“Through me, you pass into eternal pain.”

“Dramatic aren’t we Stark?”

“I prefer the term cynic Barton.”

“Boys. Yasha already took his leap of faith. Kay?” Romanoff snidely broke their banter, lacking any patients to wait on the steps. Either that or her disembodied head could float and snark. At the same time!

Stark definitely wouldn’t put it past Romanoff to multitask as a floating head. “Right. Right.” He stands and inches towards the gaping hole- ladder notwithstanding- and found himself not to be much of a ‘leap of faith’ fan. Barton had no trouble hopping down the ladder as birds tend to do.


Right. Stark bites the firm flesh of his mouth and reveling in the strong taste of iron. Right. And James had jumped right into the pit without one glance back at Tony. Figures.

<Did you expect something different Anthony? Arrogance is not a good look.>

Yes. He did. Foolishly.

But Barton had made his decision, and the group needed him. That’s important even if Stark is merely a talking key. Right.

Progress would be made even if it was one step at a time, fortuitously, ladders are made of steps. Stark crawls to the pit and gingerly taps the third step. Okay. Nothing sounds broken which is good. Great even. He skips a step, he is a genius, placing his right foot on the fifth step. After that, the next step and the next. The light from the office becoming smaller and smaller with a steady beat. On the
twenty-fourth step, two hands reached for his hips, and Stark reframed from stabbing them because one was metal. The metal hand released a soft hiss lifting Stark up and placing him down.

It was dark at the bottom.

“Sorry.” James hair acts as a curtain to his eyes, his shoulders creeping towards his ears, and he speaks gingerly. “I got a little stuck.” James made an attempt to reach for Stark, his fingers brushing against Stark’s wrist but flinching back. Quick as a bunny.

No. No. No. No. No. He cannot keep doing this, he isn’t that foolish. Life is not some damn cheesy song on repeat, and he remembers. Goddamn it! Does he remember. Every drop of bitterness he earned fair and square. No. No. No. Never again will he be left wandering the desert, carelessly dropped to the floor heart ripped from his chest, or staring into the blue eyes feeling the contrast between the grit of sand and shiver of ice. No. He knows, goddamn well, that trust is- trust is- It’s not-

A sigh deflates his rant, mental as it was, and the slumped cyborg form drenches any spark that might have rekindle his righteous fury. There would have been fist waving.

Instead, Stark was impressed with how easily a giant man could pull off soulful, remorseful eyes pulled from the depths of puppy dog magic. It earned a degree of respect. “I understand. We’re good.”

James sweeps a hand through his hair. There was that grin again with a peek of a canine. Stark chewed at his lip and a strange tickle of warmth battered between his chest walls. Rebound from one rib to the next, the vibrations creating a pleasant sensation. James snatched Stark’s hand, still smiling, and nods twice. “Good. Good.”

“Now I love this whole WinterIron lifetime movie, you can really feel the developing bond between the two mains, but the lighting is just awful. Ya know, the whole pit of EVIL thing, is not what I would call an ideal setting. Due to all the DARKNESS. Right, Tasha?” Barton tilts his head.

“It’s a prelude, it’s actually a horror movie.”

“Well, I shall be the first to die. The slut always dies first.”

Romanoff’s hand smacks the air even as her face remains bland. “Only when they’re having sex and no one is going snu-snu with you-you.”

Barton gives a wild gasp the air scattering to the wind, his hands smacking into his cheeks, and bending his body back into an almost perfect ‘U.’

James sight slides from Stark to Barton, back to Stark. “We’ll survive.”

“What about Tasha?”

“She’s the twist villain,” Stark interjects, getting his thought out before he loses the next conversation beat, and bounces twice on his toes.

“Bwahahahaha.” She monotones dry as Barton’s sex life.

“You are all buttheads.” Barton points first at James then swinging his finger to Romanoff.

“Buttheads.” He waves his finger sporadically in the air and stomps- turning 180 degrees- further into the shadows. Disappearing only to stop, turn another 180 degrees and stomp back. “It is super dark. I’ve never know darkness until this very moment.”
“Kay? You’ve great night vision.” Romanoff rocks on her heels peering past Barton. “There doesn't appear to be any lights installed.”

“Exactly, night vision needs light. The pitch black of the abyss is nothing but death.”

“Don’t be dramatic, Barton. We use flashlights.” Stark pulls James, who follows willingly still smiling, and moves past Barton. He might tighten the grip on James’ hands, only a smidge but he is moving forward.

“You do not have a flashlight.” Barton hands lands on his hips pulling himself to full parental disappointment height, but- James holds his fist in front of Barton, lifting his fingers reveals a small silver light. Romanoff reaches between her chest, wiggles her eyebrows, and takes out a beast of a flashlight. The kind that can beat someone to death without breaking. “How the fuck? Wormhole boobs?” She rolls her eyes at his antics, Stark decides to side with Barton on this one.

Stark claps his hands, right in front, then spreads his arms out with palms up. They are empty, dropping his left hand and closing his right. Two fingers extend from the palm with, what could be mistaken for a wrapped piece of gum, and his thumb pressed into the object. It pops into a floating, glowing ball that whistles. Only twice.

“Fine, Stark is Miss Universe, but you are all beautiful.” Barton bows and again stomps further down the concrete hall. Stops. Turns. Stares. “Follow me.” Romanoff flips, again, nonexistent hair and glides to Barton’s side. Stark steps after her with James following him, their hands gripped tight, since the group was probably going to use his light. They all pass hopping, squawking bird Barton as he flaps his wings at the horrendous perceived injustice on his character. He follows once tired by his antics. “This passage could be miles long.”

“I bet my Stark Mark Claws that it’s seven-point zero four kilometers.”

James stops mid-step and squints into the distance, inciting Stark to tug James’ arm, making no progress, sighs finding satisfaction from the heavy drop of his lungs.

A soft click, metal shifting and settling against metal, and- Why the fuck was Romanoff standing beside Stark? She was fiddling with her spider bracelets but clearly eyeing him. “And what exactly are the Stark Mark Claws?”

“Well, couple of months ago I saw a man with metal claws coming out from in between his knuckles-”

James snaps his fingers. “Right! It was Stevie’s birthday.” The waves of self-pride were almost visible, Stark patted his head, positive reinforcement and all that. James decided to reward him by settling his head atop Stark’s. It’s a comfortable weight.

Barton contorts his face into something utterly ridiculous. “Someone should tell Cap about his stalker.”

“-and I decided to make my own from carbon-fibers. Sturdy and lightweight and climb up walls.”

“Don’t ignore me you bastards.”

“I’ll take that bet and offer my information services for the pot.”

“I would not take that bet, Tasha.”

Romanoff slowly turns her head, moving her head like it was on a track and even tilting it slightly to
stare at Barton while offering her hand to shake which Stark takes. Barton releases a low meep, stepping back and mouthing the word 'horror.'

With that settled, James creates a more reasonable gap between himself and Stark. Even as their hands remained clasped creating a bridge between two islands a form of support to keep the land from being carried away by the waves to another country.

“I feel like toothpaste,” Romanoff said.

“Second. Paste being squished down an obnoxious grey tube.” Barton offers.

Stark finishes, “With nothing to do but shamble forward to the end.”

Barton twirls an arrow shaft and nods agreeably. “Welp. Topics anyone.”

James and Romanoff exchange a look. “Death,” they both intone dropping their voices to the lowest register.

“Denied.” Barton crosses his arms forming an ‘X’ and makes a failed buzzer noise. “Try again.”

Stark swings James’ hand, unconcerned with the lack of progress. This was fun despite the fucking oppressive sensation of someone watching, always watching. And as acclimated he was with the understanding that he was to be judged, knowing this particular instance was Howard made things routine. Ironclad Howard Stark, who never passed an opportunity to allude to Tony Stark’s fork tongue and his true mother tongue. Cruel, so cruel, are his eyes.

But James gazed at him, and Stark let the words fall carelessly. “How about the meaning of life, the universe, and everything?” Surprise? Apparently.

“Huh, better than death I suppose.” Barton waves his arrow in acquiesces. “Definity, a step up from ‘Death’ but I was thinking anime. Like the new season of Gintama.”

“It’s romantic.” James grins like he won an argument. A non-existent argument. Stark hasn’t decided if he going to make him regret that sexy smile.

“And bleak. I approve.”

“Well, I just live for your approval Black Widow.”

Romanoff gives a little theatrical gasp and turns her head away, acting as if she could blush, but her shaking shoulder suggests a different response.

Stark snorts. “So who's first?”

“Barton.”

“Can he decide that? I don’t think Barnes can decide that.”

“But Yasha did.” Barton and Romanoff stare at each other until Barton breaks away and starts fiercely whispering under his breath at Romanoff. She aggressively whispers back. There is a rapid exchange of hand movement, as well. She jerks her hand over her fist twice, and he touches his thumb to his chest then snatches it away. They both nod, apparently everything is settled.

Barton starts walking backward jabbing the arrow in the air. “Destiny is an arrow.”

“Living up to your namesake there, arrows for brains.” Romanoff shoves Barton as he is taking a
backward step.

He teeters only to pull off a smooth backflip. Landing steady on his feet and shrugs. “It is, what it is.” He twirls the arrow then throws it in the air like a baton and catches it. While resuming the whole walking backward nonsense. “Universe notches the arrow, releases the arrow, and hits the target. Set up, action, and consequences.” Barton bows. While still walking backward.

Makes a degree of sense that a bird that ferries souls between the mortal world and the underworld would view the universe in simple binaries. Never delving deeper into either world. Whatever knowledge the hawk may divulge would always fit cleanly with the basic world order.

“It’s stupid is what it is.”

“Not everything has to be a wild web of convoluted intricacies, spider for legs.”

Romanoff kicks a leg straight into the air missing Barton’s nose by a signal breath and he finger guns her.

“It lacks depth.” James waves his hand, the one not held tight by Stark, trying to indicate the generalization of the universe.

“Stupid,” she sings. It was rather melodic, too.

“Well, Romanoff, why don’t you wow us.” Stark blew her a kiss and James frowned, just a small thing. But he tugs James’ arm and watches the sun bloom. God James’ eyes are pretty.

She stops, taking a moment to stare at each of them directly. Smirking, she spreads her arms wide. “The universe is hazy and spattered and meaningless. And our only solace is that we have a purpose.”

“How can the universe be both meaningless and hold purpose?”

James covered his face, but Stark could feel the tremors of laughs falling from James’ shoulder.

“Did I interrupt you, Clint?”

“Yes!”

She had, too. With violence even but her response to Barton’s accusation was the queen of smug smirks and a ‘who me’ gesture. Barton gave her the bird, it was all very mature.

Stark figured he’d step in before either of them decided to pull metaphoric pigtails- which meant tasers, Stark was talking about tasers. “Please do continue Black Widow.”

She nodded approvingly and patted Stark’s cheek twice, before resuming their walk down the dim pathway. “Tools, say a sword, hold no meaning but have a purpose. To cut, to stab, to kill, to carve a path for those who wield it. Fate is that hand.”

She hordes that which most would prefer to stay in the shadows, a High Priestess with her collection of mysteries and secrets which she treats as a weapon similar to any common dagger. Really the only conclusion for a child of the Red Room raised into an adult of SHIELD.

“OMG-”

“Did you really just say an acronym, Barton?” Truth be told, Stark was rather impressed with Barton’s facial acrobatic talent, he even looked a bit like the emoticons he was trying to represent. It
was cartoonish levels of emotions that could come off as a bit creepy.

However, Romanoff was not impressed, even appeared bored, and barely sent Barton a glance for all his dramatics. A pity.

“I did not raise you to be this depressing and dreary, young lady.”

Barton ignored him, and Stark pouted. Would have kept it going until he dragged a formal apology from Clint but James was cooing at him. As if he were a kitten to be mollified because he can’t quite control all his limbs. Which is just silly because he can control his limbs and swings their joined hands to prove it. James smiles. The asshole. The pretty, handsome asshole.

Like his ears that peeked out from his hair. Cute. Or the way his grey-blue eyes reflected the light. Beautiful. Or how the man could go from confident smirk to bashful smile to grinning wide and open for Tony. Like he was doing now. Bastard.

“We met when we were both adults. Adults.”

Right. Romanoff and Barton were still doing their bit.

“I would have hoped you’d have evolved into a vileplume by now. Oh! Where did I go wrong? Was it the late nights? A single mother trying to make it in this modern world? My own emotional issues? Next, you’ll tell me that you’ve taken up smoking cigarettes and drinking the devil’s juice.”

“Barton. Shut up.” James says it so calmly wholly oblivious he just poked a bear with a sharp stick from the garden, a big stick, that might have held a scarecrow at one point- so there was hay everywhere, too. Which made things worse. It just did.

“Barnes. A sword.”

“And you said arrow.”

“How dare you, SIR. Swords are things of decapitation and despair. Arrows bring nothing but joy and possibilities. Why I never been more insulted in my entire life, and I jump off buildings for a living.”

“You don’t insult the arrows.” Romanoff nods and gives a pointed glare at James. Waiting. Apparently, there was a line which even she knew not to cross when dealing with Barton.

“I’m sorry, but you were an assassin for SHIELD with arrows.”

“But there was more than just piercing things. Purpose and meaning.”

James shrugs noncommittally trying not to make this a thing, yet halts the group directing his attention at Barton (deciding to take a stand on this particular issues, of all the fucking issues). His whole attention- as Stark feels the loss of a comfortable weight- and holds his palm up. “Are absolutely sure of that Hawkeye?”

Barton remains silent, rubbing a thumb along the arrow’s shaft, his unseeing eyes directed towards where they had come, back towards the entrance.

Dark, dark, dark. The light spilling from the office was, long ago, left behind.

Romanoff smacks Barton’s back loudly then proceeds to drag him further down the passage, ignoring his squawking to face James instead. “And what about you, Yasha? What’s your take on
“This whole shebang?”

“All you need is love, love. Love is all you need,” James sings.

“Really?” Barton stutters even as Romanoff continues to drag him like a sack of potatoes. “How do you even know that song?”

“It was on Friday’s sweet, sweet playlist.”

“She told you to say that every time, didn’t she?” Barton says it like it’s some inside joke. Something that everyone will laugh and shake their heads at. ‘Oh that one time,’ sort of thing. That one time without Stark.

“Yes, she did.”

“When did you and Fry ever…” Stark wasn’t sure what he was asking. Here stood a relationship that just couldn’t exist because there was a line between the Avengers and himself. And FRIDAY would always be on his side. Always. Because she couldn’t abandon him, she wouldn’t. She wouldn’t.

“We talked. While you were gone.” James grabs both Stark arms, it was almost a hug. But it wasn’t. Because it couldn’t, he couldn’t.

“It’s fine.”

“But no one replaced you. I was simply there, while the others ran off. I was just there, Antoshka.” James gives a squeeze and smiles like he forgot how. Reading something in Stark that he didn’t want James to know. “I could have been anyone one. But she wanted you.”

“I said I’m fine.” Stark’s voice doesn’t crack, his voice doesn’t waiver. It’s fine. It’s always fine.

“She missed you. They all did.”

They’re standing apart now, him and James, and something about the three feet between them is bothersome. A jarring sound that always makes him flinch. He said he was fine. A clear indication to drop it. It doesn’t matter. Stark can’t change the outcome nor can James. What is done is done. And Tony never wanted to limit FRIDAY, any more than he limited JARVIS. They were free. Otherwise, what would be the point of an artificial intelligence that was chained by a creator’s ego?

“Ok. Ok. I understand. Ok?”

“Okay. Sure.”

The space is still there. How is Stark supposed to fill in that gap, squish it together to form a single line of air? Or is it a crack? Unfixable, unavoidable, and unchangeable. Forever existing as another example of a Tony Stark fuck up. Fuck up, after, fuck up, after, fuck up. Why?

He doesn’t even have the courage to look James in the eyes. Not that anything he said was a lie. Logically it makes sense that the world, even Tony Stark’s world, would continue to revolve. One day becoming the next until insignificant. But. But-

“Stop staring.” Stark’s voice is low but harsh, and the words grate against his throat.

want?

He doesn’t want to be here anymore. Not in this place. But more importantly, not at this moment.

Something snatches his arm. Romanoff. Her face pinched with Barton slumped behind her, accepting his status as a potato sack. She gives a beat to take his hand back, stop whatever she has planned. Yet he doesn’t. Gently, she lifts the arm placing it in James’ hand. James scrunches his nose at Romanoff, and she scrunches her nose right back. It only momentarily distracts from James,’ and Stark’s hands joined once more.

“Barnes.”

James kicks Barton. His response, apparently.

“Dude! It’s your turn. You did it to me. Fair Justice!”

“He did his turn. It was love.” A rather silly statement which sounds absurdly reasonably coming from Romanoff’s serious posture. So serious, that it’s almost a silly degree of serious.

“That was not an answer. I demand justice.”

“Kay.” James pulls Stark along, taking a long step with Romanoff trailing after still dragging Barton. Another long step, he stops and takes a smaller one. More in line with Stark’s own stride than James naturally long legged one. He sides eyes Stark and grins. “We are what we’ve made ourselves to be.”

A mirror that reflects reality, whether judge or sinner, their true nature is revealed. For Stark personally, he is the moon still a reflection yet far more merciful.

“That makes no sense. Arrows, I’m telling you, arrows.”

“Clint.”

“Arrows.”

Romanoff shakes Barton, his body almost turning on the floor as the group continues on. He was a fish that flopped about in her grasp. Yet he voiced no aggravation for her lack of care. Even Romanoff did not miss a single step, her hold on Barton strong.

“Why?” Romanoff steps forward, her step matching her tone. It was the sort of question that Stark would have asked in her stead, while Stark was fueled by innocent curiosity, her word held weight that was almost out of place. A subtle spike in between the general beats of the conversation.

“Because everything we experience is just a collection of billiards balls. Each time the triangle of balls are hit, they shoot out without thought yet every smack of wood has consequence resulting in another collision. Actions and consequences but there is no mathematical formula to predict where the balls will go. Each time is a different result. Any meaning you find in those outcomes originates from you.” Finally, James’ eyes wander from blank wall to blank wall, settling on Stark. Naturally and inevitably.

“I didn’t know you could talk so much. That was like an essay for you. Are you tired? The concrete is cold just the way you like it. Take a rest. We’ll all take a nap. Pick up the quest in like eighteen hours or so.” Barton pats the ground invintingly and yawns pointedly.

It has the effect of pulling a yawn from Stark, not that he wanted to take a nap. Sleep, although
necessary, was not something that he needed. It was a useless waste of time if he could engineer and sleep. Maybe he’d change his opinion but that possibility was unlikely. Unless. Unless Stark invented the machine.

“That’s a rather different take than mine.” Romanoff almost seems insulted, and Barton is sniggering.

“We’re rather different people.”

“Fair enough.” Romanoff stomps her foot strong enough to leave an imprint in the dust, if there was dust, and glares down that non-existent print. Disappointed with the results.

Barton rolls to his feet, flowing into another backflip and landing adjacent to Romanoff. Bumping shoulder, the two walk off further down the pass, ignoring both Stark and James.

Silently they made progress following the straight line of the hall, each minute was its own statement, it figures that his group would say more with their mouth shut than open.

James, however, knew that as well, with each step he would glance at Stark. A rather hopefully expression with a very specific intent.

“Numerical expression is written in stone carved deeply unto that stone.”

Barton resumes walking backward wearing a forced and exaggerated look of confusion. “What?”

“My answer.”

“Right.” Barton elongates the ‘i’ and flickers his sight from Stark to James then back to Stark. “That explains so much. I know more about the universe now than I have ever known previously.”

“Hardly, matters. We’ve found a door.” Romanoff points ahead indicating a rather large vault-like door fifty feet from the group.

“Yes, my oasis. I am reborn.”

“It’s a door, Barton.” James kicks at Barton's feet, he jumps back squeaking. “Not the goddamn grail.”

“I’m not sure we can call it a door, there is no doorknob.” There is; however, a screen showing twelve blank squares, which is something different. Stark did not want to open another door with a wave of his hand or press it in this particular instance.

“Ideas?” Barton slumps along the wall, the arrow-baton making another appearance.

“Well, it’s not sudoku.”

“Such insight, Natasha.”

“It requires a pattern. An old Shield-Hydra lock. One version of my coffins had it.”

“Okay. Three issues. First, you calling the cryo-chamber Hydra kept you in your coffin is creepy. Two, creepy. Full stop. Third, was it a personalized pattern?”

“Probably.”

“Lovely. Once again, ideas.” Barton waves his hand at Romanoff insinuating she should pull an idea out of her bosom much the same she did with the torch earlier. She did not agree that was a viable
option. She smacked him, on the ear to get her message across.

Stark figured he’d stick to words. “Something connected with Captain America.” Stark crosses his arms and side-eyed James. “Probably.”

“But we can’t create a five-pointed star nor a shield with the tools at hand,” Romanoff speaks. With words. She also continues to eye Barton like a worm, and he smartly cowers. Yet Barton’s pout and Romanoff’s twitching cheek suggests a more positive atmosphere.

“No, but it would fit a wing.” James grasps the red star with a thick black outline, releasing Stark’s hand to do so. Nor does he let the memories past and reclaim Stark’s hand.

Apparently, thoughts of the Great Steve Rogers are always all-encompassing, all one must do is swear allegiance to his Aegis and crown of stars and one’s entire existence has nary a breath for anything else. Even as Captain America comes down from his perch, a golden thread in his hand that eventually grows into a noose, to which to, hang yourself. Or perhaps it was only Tony Stark who was given the noose, his humanity acting as his downfall once more. While the Avengers were presented the stars.

Would James end his life if Rogers gave the order? Who would chose Stark over the innate good that was Captain America?

Twelve squares, six by six, would make for a ridge wing, Stark strives forward envisioning the image clearly. Tapping on the first square lights it up a sky blue, a detestable color. He taps the entire first row with the second he taps four, after that three, and the last two rows were both two squares. It blinks, confirming the password then turning the wing white. Blinding white.

Stark peers through his eyelashes at James, who hardly spares him an eye twitch.

A loud low groan resonates throughout the hall, the vault shakes and scrapes the concrete as it shifts into one side of the wall. Peering inside, a cursory glance implies chaos and destruction. Glass and paper scattered across the floor, individual cabinets were tilted forward while others had been smashed. A solitary computer lay weeping among the mess, three bullets holes speak for the machine’s quick death. Most striking, however, was the Hydra symbol carved into the wall.

“How utterly depressing. I can feel death emanating from this walls. My soul quakes.” Despite Barton crippling fear, he marches further into Howard’s sanctum sanatorium. But most surprising he made no distracting noise or any noise at all. His steps as well. Romanoff follows after, the two spies weaving around each other as they stare at things. Romanoff does lift a skull from an open drawer, a human baby skull.

It stares at Stark much the same way the Howard did. Boring into his person and cruel. Always so cruel. Stark should turn and run. Run. Run. Run.

“Considering the DNA sequencing I’ve found. I’d say this lab was biological in nature. I’m going to place my money on cloning.” She tilts her head at Barton, hardly pausing to poke more at various broken machines and random files. Her curls bounce.

“I have discovered an artificial womb so I wouldn’t nix the cloning theory, but my perception of Howard Stark suggests his ego would never allow a cloning. Not just a cloning.” Barton trails a finger along a cabinet seem as his character remains stiff and somewhat professional. It somewhat unexpected to see Agent Barton at work.

A few small steps inside, past the threshold, to the left and position so that the desk from the back
had full view. Was a particular DNA sequence enlarged, printed, and framed. A holy artifact in the church of Rogers and a necessary tool for the creation of the super serum.

Stark would love to set it aflame.

A heavyweight settles atop Stark’s head, a huff of breath tickles his hair, and Tony bites back the acid he can easily spit in his defense. “You’re back?”

“I am.”

“You good?”

“Are we?” James asks while using Stark a support for his big head. He asks with a level of familiarity that Stark should really only give to his babies. Maybe Rhodey. He asks, and Stark hadn’t elbowed James in the gut. James asked if they were good and the idea of saying no, is jagged and torn and claws on his chest.

Stark should ask, rip off the band-aid so to speak, and ask. Rogers or him? But it hardly matters, the choice isn’t Stark’s, as he would hardly want to make the divine Captain America his enemy. No, he knows where that path ends with blood. Only his. Only his.

“You are special.” Stark looks up hoping to make eye contact or to see a shade of a smile. Instead, he gets chin with stubble, very nice but not what he wanted. “To me. Maybe.”

“Maybe.”

“Nothing in stone yet. Especially if you keep ignoring me.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“You do.”

James drops his arms across Stark’s chest and pulls him close. “You are special to me. Definitely.” His smile, while unseen, is clear in James’ voice.

“But we must keep it a secret from your husband. Right?”

“I’m not married.”

“Of course, every married man says that.”

“I will say something to the Captain. I will.”

“I don’t want to be a wedge.” Or something easily tossed aside, once Rogers has made it clear where Stark stands. Once Rogers makes clear Stark’s lies and weakness. Once Stark’s humanity is trusted for all to judge. Would it be a miracle for someone to chose Stark?

<As if you are worth such consideration, Anthony.>

“No. Not you. Darling music and comfortable warmth. Not you.”

Stark leans into the touch despite the need to run and the large warning bells. Ringing. Still ringing. But he did indeed like this moment. Dangerous thought that could make things matter.

James, still keeping himself attached to Stark, pulls the both them toward the only bookshelf, unnoticed and untouched by the obvious Hydra tornado. He picks a picture from one of the many
snapshots of Howard’s life and brings it into Stark’s view. Howard and Ophelia standing as peers at some fundraiser, probably one of Maria Stark’s gatherings.

“Ah, proof of Howard’s snake-y relationship. Not surprising really. Howard was a sentiment ass.”

“Speaking of snakes, Barnes-

“I’m not a snake person. More of a wolf person.”

“Yes, well, fine. But how did you know about all this?”

“I said deja vu.”

“Yes, because that explains so much.” Barton flings one draw out onto the floor, it spins into a corner, while another was lifted and flipped upside down. He finds the mess he made dissatisfactory, and steps over it like the papers are a puddle. “Was I the only oblivious to the whole Hydra Howard thing? I mean, besides Cap.”

“Yes, you fool.”

“Natasha after years of unhappiness I can finally say with a clear consequence that I want a divorce.”

She flicks Barton’s nose then climbs atop the nearest counter to herself. Barton whines accordingly.

“He wasn’t Hydra, snake connection or not,” James says it almost as an afterthought, not even glancing at Barton as he answers instead he discards the picture frame back where he found it.

“No. Howard wasn’t Hydra. But even if he knew about the Hydra and SHIELD relationship it probably wouldn’t matter. He only had three goals. And everything else was worthless.”

“Oh?” Barton makes eye contact with Stark before flicking his eyes away.

“Yeah. Finding Captain America, creating a new Captain America, and ensuring my Mother’s happiness.”

“Wait.” Barton holds up his hand right in front of his person. “Creating a Captain America? I was right it’s cloning. Pay me in pizza and adorable puppies that live off of pizza.”

“I said it was cloning,” Romanoff states ignoring the thief stealing her ideas in her very presences.

Stark sniggers while James mumbles nonsense into his hair. “It wasn’t cloning. In the late fifties, they tried to pass the Captain America torch to two agents. The two agents were so committed to their roles that they had cosmetic surgery to transform themselves into the real Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes. And it failed miserably cause the new Cap was insane, killed a bunch of people. Horrible stuff.”

“I did not know that. I had sex with Coulson. How did I not know this?” Barton’s voice wobbles resonating from the hole in the concrete that he had stuck his head inside.

“Before his time? It was expunged from the records.”

Romanoff jumps dramatically from the counter, five whole feet from the ground, landing with her feet straight and hands up into the air. It screams ten point landing. She ruins the whole thing when she shuffles over to stand next to Stark, James growls, and peers curiously at him. “Then how did you come by this information Stark?”
“Uncle Dummy told me. Thought it was hilarious.”

“Dum Dum always did have a weird sense of humor. I got stuck in a particular deep snow fall, and he thought it was hilarious. Strange one, that Dugan.”

Both Stark and Romanoff peer up at James curiously this time, well Stark shifted his head a bit to stare at James’ shoulder, but the gesture was clear. James rarely talked about the past unless prompted by Rogers. It was indeed curious, but he seemed content, arms still wrapped around Stark’s waist.

“Eureka you fucking paranoid bastard!”

“Hawk found something.”

“Or it’s something shiny Yasha. You know how birds are.”

“You two are hilarious. But I found Howard’s experiment summary journal.” In Barton’s hand is a small black leather bind book and waves it about the room as he separates his head from the hole.

“Most would think its filled with crazy and it is. But it's coded crazy.”

Romanoff rolls her eyes hard, probably straining an unused muscle in her face, and holds out her hand wiggling her fingers. “Anything of use?”

“My find.”

“Fine. Fine. Just move it along.” She pantomimes a squirt bottle.

Barton whines, for only a moment, before drawing up once more his professional air. “Okay. It’s mostly random biological experiments for the creation of a super serum.”

“But.” And Romanoff’ invisible squirt bottle makes another appearance.

“But there is interesting passage. Regarding the only surviving child of Steve Rogers and Howard Stark.”

“No!” They’re all staring at him now. It’s obvious why. An overreaction for something that has nothing to do with him.

“Tony?”

“Sorry. Sorry. It’s not me obviously. Obviously.”

“Umm, the header is literally Anthony. According to this, your Mother is, in fact, Howard Stark and your Father is Steve Rogers. Twilight Zone, I know.”

“Boon for same-sex couples.”

“No now, Tasha.”

She shrugs as her concern for the matter is as high as an ant skittering along the floor. “Doesn’t mean anything unless we do a paternity test.”


“Antoshka?”
Maria Stark is his mother. She actually wanted to spend time with him. Like how Rhodey, Ana, and Jarvis spent time with him. Because they, as strange as that was, enjoyed Tony Stark’s company. Yet ignoring their individual eccentricities, none of them shared DNA with Tony Stark. Not even his mother. Because Howard Stark created him in a lab. ‘His greatest creation,’ he said. Another shade of arrogance but Tony Stark was the fool once more, and Howard was being literal. Literal!

He could laugh. Cackle into the wind and rain. Loud and long. The feeling claws at his chest. A fool indeed! Because the universe felt it was needed to give Tony Stark to father figures that find him disgusting, contemptuous, and worthless. Worthless.

The second chance he had begged for when blackout drunk, one more chance to show Howard he was worth something, anything had been given to him in the form of Captain America. He failed, not once but twice. It was hilarious. So GOD damn funny.

Something pulls his upward, carefully, and rather to make eye contact Stark focuses on that soft smile. Much safer and clear evidence that James is another strange outline in Stark’s life. It’s impossible to ignore the concern written all over James’ form. Stupid, stupid, stupid concerned man.

“I cannot be Captain America’s son, I don’t want to be that much of a joke.”

“Never.” James is still holding him up.

“I don’t need another disappointed Father-figure. Seriously, one was enough. And Rogers always has an aura of righteousness, transcendence, and justice. I am a craven, hideousness, and egotistical man. I have more in common with a jaguar than I do Steve Rogers. There is just- Just no- I can’t be related. No way.” Stark’s eyes are itchy, and it hurts. It hurts. His jaw is even quivering and god. So pathetic. So god damn pathetic. Just because he cannot deal with his daddy issues. After all this time, you’d think he would be a master at shoving those feeling down. Down. Down. Down. Till the numbness takes over.

“You’re stubborn faces are the same. You tend to roll your eyes at similar beats when someone is bullshitting you. But that might just because you taught Cap the eye roll.” Barton counts out each common trait smacking the fingers on his other palm. “You’re both prefer direct confrontation, which is strange for you considering your background. And you both like poking bears. Although, your poking decreased significantly since the creation of the Avengers. Probably due to all the crap you had to deal with after. So yeah.” He punctuates the end of his statement with a shrug.

“You both have strong moral lines you refuse to cross.” Romanoff apparently also wanted to throw in her two cents.

“I have never had morals of any type, strong or weak.”

“Ironman.” She snaps her fingers as she said it. Like it ended the argument definitely and with a flourish.

“No. Just no. You cannot use Ironman against me. No, I say.”

“Why don’t we wait until- what was it -a paternity test. Right? All scientific evidence and such.” James smushes Stark’s cheeks and taps their foreheads together.


James kisses Stark, quick and sweet. God. Such a stupid and adorable outliner.

“Awesome. Let’s talk about who is the best Robin, on the way back. No death.”
“Ironman.” Romanoff intones.

And that settles that.

Chapter End Notes

So I've been doing a much of research on creative writing and apparently a key factor is voice. Not that many books I read were clear on the subject. I mean there was a definition, many, but they were wiggly. It's like the personality of the text or something.

Anyway, thanks for reading, how is my "voice"?
**Chapter Notes**

I wonder what's the average amount of time on this site for giving up on a fic. Six months? A year? Less or more?
I usually give the author a year, or more if I really like the fic.

Anyway... an update. After who knows how long.

Also, narrators. Why is it always assumed that they're reliable? Shouldn't it be the other way around?

“No. Turtle soup. No. I making my stance known. No. It’s impossible. All knowledge is impossible. Command A, delete. I say! Delete.” The sharp scrubbing coming from Tony rubbing his hands together and shuffling his feet, tugged at everyone’s sight, following him move from one counter the next. Keeping themselves still as Tony lifted a random object only to slam it down for one particular point or another. “What were we even talking about? Nothing important? Would have remembered, after all. Great. Cloning is just snake oil anyway. DNA, too. Snake oil.” Scowling at the object for failing his grand purpose even as Tony himself failed to delivery a menacing glare.

It would be cute if his hands weren’t shaking and each inhale weren’t shallow. James could offer a hug, open his arms wide and settle his head easily atop Tony’s dark locks. Get a huff or a grumble for his trouble but more welcomed than hunched shoulders. Anything would be better and he might receive a pout. Or God, a laugh out of Antoshka. Right. The assassin from the realm of Nightmares making someone laugh.

Well, there’s a joke right there. Ha!

Barton probably could make Tony smile and laugh, juggling stupid commentary, jokes, and slapstick without letting those curved lips drop. The fucker.

“Why do I feel the chilled fingers of Death run along my spine?”

Romanoff spins her finger around her ear while dipping her voice in honey, “My. It must be your imagination.”

James nods along, not bothering with a diversion. But Barton has good instincts that hunt would be an interesting one. Not that James follows the heels of Death anymore. Rather he chases the loud footfalls of Captain America. Which is satisfying? Perhaps. Stalking Barton most assuredly is satisfying.

“There it is again Tasha. My death. My death!”

Clicking her tongue to hide her smile, Romanoff rolls her eyes. “Don’t birds have nine lives?”

“That is felines, you witch. You know I’m a dog person.”

“We are getting off topic.” Banner peeks up from his laptop sipping some concoction, it’s wafting steam smelling of swap water and dirt. A point in the con column for super serum.
“No, Pea Pod.” Tony flaps his arms while climbing the closest counter. An impressive spectacle of limbs. “There is no topic except, apparently, planning Barton’s funeral.”

“Hey!” Barton stretching the single syllable into a paragraph. Constantly with the whining. The never-ending whining.

“I call dibs on being the grieving Widow.”

“Isn’t that a bit cliche Black Widow?” Barton mumbles each word, chewing them like gum.

He is ignored. Dead already.

“Fair.” Tony’s nods. “I’ll be the Mistress.” He even smiles.

Barton. That fucker.

“Guys. Stop.” Oh, there it is again. The whining of the long dead archer left waiting for that precise knife strike or a bullseye bullet.

“Tony. Shouldn’t Rogers be informed?” Banner twirls his hand and leaving a long pause clucking onto his words. Not that Howard’s grand ambition can be summed up with a phrase and a single gesture. “About the passing of his ‘Y chromosome.’”

How would that conversation fold out? Stuttering words and eyes that won’t meet. Or just- Congratulations! It’s a sort of fifty-year-old genius with more floating baggage than the Titanic.

<This is serious. Something should be done or said. Probably.>

<Nothing.>

“There is a clear plan for this non-existent information Brucie. I take it to my grave and if necessary follow the advice of three men keeping a secret. All of them are dead.”

“Oh, I cower in your fearsome shadow, Tony.”

Perhaps, the sentiment could be phrased a different way, but Romanoff words do ring true. No in this room is going to be intimidated by fluffy soft hair or wide warm eyes. Words don’t come easy, not for something like this, so instead James offers a hand. The flesh one in promise. Willing to do anything.

And there it is. The sweetest of smiles, that not even Barton could inspire. He is still a fucker, tho.

<But this is a strange situation. A flip of the coin and that face could have been a chubby baby face cooing at whatever fascinates babies.>

<It doesn’t matter.>

Their finger curls together, as Tony perches atop the counter, giving silent permission. James scrubs his metal hand on his pants, not that it can sweat. He slides forward pressing closer to Tony and curling an arm around his waist. With his right. Stupid. Trying to clean left hand on his pants wouldn’t have mattered metal or not. Stupid and awkward with everyone staring.

Despite that, Tony leans into the touch and rests his head against James. Shit. The whole thing is like trying to remember how to breathe. The tickling of soft hairs on his cheek. Tony’s weight pressing on his chest that is just the right amount of pressure. Which almost seemed impossible. And the warmth of holding someone close with care. It’s trust given freely on both sides.
“You know what test tube Tony reminds me of? Batman Beyond.” Barton pauses dramatically, holding the pose of a Grand Ringmaster- upsidedown- feeling his word ring out across the room. Sadly, all that was only in his imagination, leaving James to speculate how Barton kept his spectacles sitting on his nose.

Romanoff nods along because she is an enabler.

“There must always be a Batman.” Barton points at the room or tries to, but his position means he is declaring his statement at a cabinet of glass things. “Although, that wasn’t until Justice League Unlimited, ya know. Except, Captain America. Which is just not an equal comparison. I mean, Batman.”

Tony, also, nods. Probably actually getting something intelligible from that mess of a statement. Unlike Romanoff. “Batman.”

Which was exactly what Barton had been waiting for apparently if his pleased humming wasn’t some trap waiting to be sprung. James wouldn’t put it past him. Or the Spider. Whom is paying way to much attention to James’ arm and not the distracting mess that is Barton. Oh and her eyes! Her eyes portray the polite interest of a socialite assessing a scandal. James has been there, done her and him, then almost got thrown into jail, if it weren’t for Steve and his church face.

<If things had stayed on track, been normal, we would have been the Uncle that gave Tony his first beer.>

<What is normal anymore?>

“Barton’s immaturity aside.” Banner shrugging saying what needed to be said.

“Hey, I was being at least seventy percent serious.”

“There are enough similarities between both obsessions that it does more careful scrutiny.”

“Guys, Banner watched Justice League Animated.” Barton wiggles strangely, an attempt at some form of dance constricted by insisting to stay put at his perch.

“No. I refuse on principle.” Tony scowls like it was carved into his face and stabs a finger at Banner, a sharp jerk of his body. Someone weaker would have lost their balance. “This is the product of a stalker fantasy. I would fucking know, Brucie.”

“Tony, be reasonable.”

“Reason is for the uninspired!”

“Well, that explains the giant doughnut.” Romanoff huffs, waving an arm distractedly at Tony. “Not that I expected anything else.”

James blinks. “Giant doughnut?”

“Hardly important, Cherry Slushie.”

“But.” Romanoff raises her palm up while stressing the ‘t.’ “Doesn’t, at least a small part, suspect something?”

“No, I would know. And I don’t. He would.” Tony bites his lip and grinds it between his teeth.

Romanoff’s eyebrows say: No, Tony wouldn’t know. And to suggest otherwise is both ignorant,
naive, and willfully ignoring the obvious. Especially how well things appear to line up. Howard’s obsession, Tony produce from that obsession, and all the effort behind SHIELD’s to find Captain America would hardly be without purpose.

It was impressive how much a single eyebrow could convey utter disapproval and arrogance. Not that she was wrong. James is all too familiar with a mad obsession and so is Romanoff.

Tony’s response is to attempt to smacking off Romanoff’s cocky eyebrow. He would have been successful if he had gotten off the counter. Not that James is going to voice that particular opinion. Nope. Just hug Tony closer. As a sign of support. That’s a thing.

“You know. I’ve been thinking.”

“Really, Barton, don’t strain yourself.”

“Shut up, Natasha. I am a voracious thinker.”

“Voracious, huh.”

“Can we get to Barton’s thought.” Tony seems to vibrate, his bones trying to break free of his flesh while tapping his fingers a bit harshly on his chest. “I would like to know.”

“I was thinking that Bruce is a mad bio-scientist and we’re chasing a mad bio-scientist. So my question is: where would Bruce hide, if he, were, ya know, evil?”

Banner snorts into his tea contemplating the swirling waters as the smell, no doubt, clogs his brain. Or to distract from his mad scientist position. “I imagine a hospital would work nicely for under the radar human experimentation.”

“Hospitals. That’s good.”

Drenched in fluoride and human screams while Doctors and Nurses practice strange hours. Death and blood able to go unnoticed. Just as a snake hides in the grass, Hydra hides among the practitioners of death.

Barton reaches forward detaching from physics to pat Banner on the head, a jest and a reward in a single movement. Yet Banner takes a whole step to avoid the hand-hardly sparing Barton a glance, Mama cat dealing with a mischievous kitten- only to enter Tony’s range. Thus, Tony successfully manages a head rub. Triumphant thumbs up are given by, even by Romanoff.

Banner rolls his eyes. Which fair.

“Boss… and crew. Heads up, trouble is coming. And not the fun kind.”

Moments like this tend to struggle forward, each action the labor effort against anticipation and expectation. Romanoff shrugging off her frivolity with practice ease to stand professional detached from everything. Barton eyeing the door while transforming into the shadows. And Antoshka carefully, one by one, locking himself up and with a single breath closing the final groaning iron door with a soft click. James steps back, it’s a push without any force but still, it hurts.

<It is a necessary skill.>

He hates it.

The Witch steps lightly, curling her leg another the other and twirls to survey the room. Her magic.
Her red, red, red magic. Swirls around her ankles curious but clingy.


“My. My. My.” Her boots tap the floor, stark red against all the bleached white. And all the colors drain away to shades. Grey sky, dark hills, and white snow. But her scarlet, swirling, twirling, and curling into the ground, pulling itself forward. It is the only color that remains. “If it isn’t the beast, the demon, the ghost, and Death himself altogether. Such a complete collection of evil trying to be human.”

“Ah, I finally figured out.” Romanoff clunks her head up and down, and imitation of Barton’s idiocy act. Not her best. “You were the one spreading those rumors that I was paranoid.”

James stretches his face wide open, one might call it bearing his fangs, but he was trying to keep an open mind. The Witch for all her red and snake-filled core did have Stevie’s ear. Those two saw something in each other that most others just didn’t have. If he still believed in society’s shiny exterior he might say it was a thirst for Justice. Sad to say the Winter Soldier knew better. All they had was anger, the kind that festers and infects everything, and it touches is red. For the Witch, it was scarlet.

“Natalie. You are paranoid.”

“But what if they’re really out to get me? What then Yasha?”

“Usually, but I think yours is a special case.”

Some small clicks and clacks hover in the air around Banner, who hardly spares the Witch a glance. Apparently, the scarlet stays away from him even as it puffs out further into the room.

Natasha sticks her nose straight up with a pompous sniff. “You just fear my reality.”

“Sure. Sure.”

Tony in contrast to Banner slight shuffles hasn’t twitched an inch. It’s hard to tell if the man is breathing, as he stands so similar to those iron suits he wears. And just as carefully crafted. It feels as if ice grips the body, claws digging into flesh. Refusing to let go. And, oh what a surprise, that even Antoshka’s deathly silence sings with life. Where James is just grey.

“Really, Yasha. You shouldn’t give up so easily. Whatever happened to your manly pride?”

He lifts his metal arm. “Sold it for parts.”

Tony sniggers. His eyes twinkle with small stars. His fingers once more twitching to intangible music. A symphony of movement that builds to a soft smile. Just for James.

Lave pooling into his gut, sending out shivers of heat not felt for decades or maybe more. God, it’s a hunger that tickles at the mouth to feel, to bite, to kiss. To taste and discover how to make to the other shiver with the same heat. Instinctual want that is just so sweetly physical.

Not that it’s the time or the place. Or the occasion. Or even ready. For that level of… touching. At least he knows he still has it. That something.

Thank god, for his resting dead expression. Because nobody has to know. Ever. Except maybe Tony. In the future. That would be nice. Maybe.
“You are ignoring me.” Scarlet clouds of puff, shapen into claws that leap out like a wave to crash and claw at the floor.

Ah, yes. The reason why it definitely isn't the time, place, or occasion. Oblivious cockblocker. Which is even worse if she had done it on purpose. It is a tragedy. He would cry. But even his blood is frozen ice now. Could grind him up into a cherry slushy.

“Yes, well.” Banner shrugs. An uneven thing, where the shoulders jerk uncertain of their timing.

The Witch gives her own shrug, a straight up and down affair. “Not that it matters, I hardly have time for minions.”

Romanoff mouths minion and points at herself. Not making it clear if she intends a negation or a confirmation.

“I want the King of Death.” She smiles sweetly and her scarlet whisp of magic bubble up before smoothing back into curls of smoke. It sings of satisfaction.

Satisfaction.

<My soldier soon you will be ready. Soon.>

Satisfaction.

<You cannot see it now, soldier, but there will be so much glory. A new age for Hydra.>

Satisfaction.

<Your form is perfect. How silently move. Yes. Yes. When you strike it inspires fear and awe. For Hydra.>

Satisfaction!


NO MORE. The chains. Always hushed until their wrapped around you. Then it is deafening. NO MORE. The smell of rusted iron paints his nose, his mouth, everything. It gets everywhere and refuses to be washed clean. NO MORE. Numb to the pain. Numb to even the shades. Numb to the screams, the pleas, the crying. Numb to humanity, which really are only bags of flesh.

no more please

“What can I do for you, Wanda?” Tony speaks. No one even glances at James. No one. Tony speaks and no onereacts. No. Instead of shock, Tony grins like fireworks, while leaning against the counter. Spreading himself open and wide.

His knuckles are white.

What?

“Oh, I simply had a thought.”

“A thought, Miss Maximoff.”

“Indeed. I just wanted to check in. See if you had informed Steve.”
“Informed? About what?”

“My, my, my. That you ran off with his precious Bucky. Again. And this time. This time you left the Tower. Took him out into the dangerous world. My all sorts of things could have happened to him.”

The Witch brushes her left to right, pausing on each face, her seemingly slowly filling up the room. Replacing the very air with her presence. “Or maybe, it was on purpose. No?”

Her lips, painted scarlet red, come together to form a small ‘o.’ But the magic smoke is once more bubbling up with silent giggles. And spreading.


What!

“Wait. One of those was a girl.” Is this a romantic thing? Are they implying a romantic thing? Oh, they’re not implying because of Steve… But Tony. And it’s not right. But something should be said. Should be.

“And they all end tragically.”

Romanoff makes a good point. That point. “Yes, isn’t that counterproductive to the whole…” Romance thing. God. Does Tony see himself as some homewrecker or something? Because Stevie is acting all wrong.

The Witch shrugs turning away causing her hair spin, her skirt to twirl, and ever her magic to swirl. It keeps spinning. It’s dizzying. “Maybe. But Steve is rather found of his…Bucky.”

That pause! She meant to say a doll. Fucking predictable from a Hydra Witch. But James takes a step back anyway. He just had to take a step back. She is not a threat. Someone who arrogantly thinks their power will always protect them. That they are no longer vulnerable. No longer weak. They could never be a threat to him. But he stepped back anyway. He knew this, but-

<You allowed him too much power.>

Antoshka stands firm. Oh, how he bends in the wind. Each of her “attacks” simply slipping past. Despite his spastic movement, true elegance shines with his actions. His eyes. So clear. “So are you going to inform are dear capisicle?”

Ah. What a fascinating contradiction of a man.

“Do you want me to keep it a secret? As a favor?”

Tony snorts. Loudly. “You are going to tell him then.”

“I am.” Her scarlet clouds fan out like wings behind her that curl around the room. “Finally. Finally, my revenge is at hand. You who consumes everything.” She laughs a song of innocent glee. “Can you feel it? Feel my grip, tight, on your black soul.”

Tony nose scrunches. “And what does your revenge entail?”

Usually, there is a warm tickle along his chest. A genuine smile trying to remember it’s original form. But now. Now it’s only the entrenching smell of iron, rusted iron.
“You life shattered. And your soul.”

“That’s fair I suppose. If it helps.”

What the FUCK!

Tendrils of magic sway happily as the claw their way towards Antoshka. No. Fuck no. Fuck this bloody shite of a arse ass situation. “Fuck the bullshit, Witch.”

This time James steps forward. This time he stands between Antoshka and the Witch. This time he’ll be a contradiction. Ice and snow along his front, unmuzzled and ready. Hydra always kept his teeth sharp. And at his back, he’ll let spring finally bloom. An order to himself. A choice.

“You don’t know what he has done. All that blood, he must be drowning in it. Isn’t that right? Mr.Stark?”

“Yes, she speaks the truth.” The smirk burns into James’ back. Another push widening the space between them. Oh, that stale iron smell still lingers. It’s now accompanied by the softest drip-drip splashing on the floor.

“You were once so untouchable. So unreachable. Truly an Olympian looking down at us all. But now I can grip you tight and drag you down.” The Witch claps, her tendrils multiple, and crawling closer and closer.

“Such a shame Moll. Ironman can fly and has a chest blaster that hurts.”


“He is nothing to you, Winter Soldier. Why?” Nothing about her comes off harsh, merely curious, yet the tendrils move faster- pushing forward and pulling back. Perhaps, they’ve noticed the invisible wall that stands in their way. Not a doll.

That right there, that assumption that everyone seems to know what is and isn’t meaningful to him. What is that? What is that? He's trying to piece together something, anything. Scraps of memories, desires, emotions that don’t connect to anything. Yet others just know.

And maybe, if he were Bucky. Really and truly Bucky Barnes, Steve Rogers’ right-hand man, he would know. He would smile wide and drawl an agreement. Tony Stark-Antoshka-might means nothing to Bucky Barnes. Bucky Barnes tended to think if a rich prick fell he had it coming. Might not bother figuring out that Tony Stark isn’t just another rich prick. Could just nod along? Be safe.

But, fuck, is he getting sick of Bucky Barnes.

“I want him.” His face heats not enough to give anything away. But enough that what he said was a little bit presumptuous, considering he was raised right. Probably. Definitely feels like someone would be disappointed with him. “If Antoshka allows it.” Better. Still, his heart hasn’t stopped doing jumping jacks.

“What the-” The Witch eyes widen, maybe her eyes will just pop out. That be funny.

“Stark are you blushing?” Romanoff sounds… actually amazed. Her voice trembling with some smothered emotion. Laughter maybe.

And marvels upon marvels, Tony’s face is flushed a cherry red. “I am a man of the stoic silence of manly power, who doesn’t feel things or something. Shut up.”
Romanoff tugs on Tony’s right ear. A playful examination. “Super red there, Tones.”

Tony huffs. Releasing the counter, finally, releasing the counter. Throwing his hands up. “I don’t you...person.” Swing his arms wide and flaying them about, trying to hide his face. “Shut up. Whose red? Not anyone.”

The Witch clicks her tongue and smacks her hands onto her hips. “So what is this? Monsters playing at love?” The Witch doesn’t sneer. Yet it somehow appropriates that she would. Instead, it’s just confused eyes roaming from Tony to James and back to Tony again.

“And what’s your excuse Witch? You have that mind-meld thing going on with the robot.”

“Vision isn’t-”

“Technically, Vision is not-”

Both Tony and Banner start to say whatever but pause as they trip over the other. It seems to make things easier, less oppressive.

The Witch's smoke curls back, returning to its mistress. “I’m not-”

“Hydra. Really? You’re going to ignore the stairway of bodies you climbed up. Pretend you didn’t hear their bones crunch underfoot and the smell of rusted iron stick to your clothes, your hair. You’ve got ghost watching you, just like the rest of us.” James tilts his head. Finally, he can say it and feel it’s weight. Running his tongue along his teeth. Ah, the anticipation, it sends pleasing shivers everywhere. “Witch.”

Her flares but doesn’t take a move forward. No. This time she steps back. Should have known better than to hunt a monster in his own den.

“You are mistaken, Winter Soldier. For justice sides with me.” She twirls out the door much the same as when she entered. The girl wasn’t raised right. She should at least say goodbye.

“Well, now.” Banner shuffles over to his brewer, apparently done with the whole beef, a good beat before Barton rolls from the shadows landing on his feet. Unfortuantly.

“What in Dog Heaven was that nightmare? Am I dreaming? They usually make a lot less sense.”

“Wanda, Barton. Obviously.”

“Don’t roll your eyes at me Widow. What was that thing?”

“A Witch.”

“No, Barnes. Wanda is a sweetie like honey. Not…” Barton flops his hand at the door, uselessly. But what can you expect from a useless bird?

“She joins Hydra-Nazis- for revenge and superpowers. And your first impression is sweet? What do you consider salty as-”

“Natasha.”

“-salted caramel.” Romanoff flicks her fingers out at the group, and for whatever reason, giving Banner a particularly sweet smile. Scary. Banner just pours more liquid stink into his mug, humming to himself.
“Poor Natasha, I think.”

“I mean, Steve—”

“Got his powers from a running from the bullies. Not the bullies themselves, Barton.” Tony’s eyes are closed tight and head bowed. Yet every muscle is hanging from his body without any tension. It incites a vision of a hanger’s nose tight around Tony’s throat. James shakily reaches for Tony’s hand, who only raises his head. Eyes dull. James grips the hand tight, almost forgetting what strength even his flesh hand is capable of, trying to spark something in the small body.

Tony seems so small. So small.

“Okay, you have a point.” Barton scrubs his face and smiles. But drops the expression just a second later. “Fuck.”

“You know, I had a thought.” Romanoff taps her lips playing it up.

Barton narrows his eyes as if her words mean something. “A thought that Wanda is right now snitching on us to Steve.”

“Great minds.” They both share a smile but James doesn’t see the joke.

Because, fuck. Stevie. Someone is going have to deal with Rogers. That someone being him, obviously. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

<Sometimes you stop the raging bull, sometimes you get run over.>

<Gun beats bull.>

“I’ll go intercept Rogers.”

“James.” Tony’s eyes flick to the lab doors and tap his chest. Even Romanoff seems cornered.

Barton peeks over the counter, deciding to use Banner as a meat shield, and saying those damn words. “Steve is not gonna like that we took his Bucky out to play.”

Nothing James hasn’t thought before. Steve’s Bucky, as if that’s all he boiled down to. Hydra’s Winter Soldier. Captain America’s Bucky. Bucky who could accomplish a milk-run mission. Or allowed teeth or claws. No, he had to be protected from the big bad world. When once-

Once upon a time, Bucky was ice and snow. Taking down threats from the shadows.

For fuck sake!

“Oh, fuck Bucky.” Barton grins ready to make an utter ass of himself. Not that James’ choice of words was ideal. “You know what I mean Barton.”

“James.” There is a prayer in that signal name. And he swears never has a name sounded so sweet.

“Tony, it’s fine. I can handle Stevie.” He squeezes Tony’s hand one last time. What else can he do? It feels like anything else will fall flat. And it will be fine.

Doesn’t stop James from kicking the island that Barton is half perched on, knocking Banner’s nick nacks onto Barton. Doesn’t feel any remorse either, even when Banner’s eyes flash green and he huddles protectively around his busted laptop. James gives a salute as stalks out the door. Figures it worth something. Probably not smart to anger the human Hulk.
Right the purple.

<Lavender.>

The walls were a solid lavender with a single green line along the floor. It’s distinctive at least and better than the usual white.

“T-1000 heads up. The Captain is afoot.”

<Is she mixing metaphors?>

<Focus is required.>

It’s much preferable to focus on the green line, from the elevator to the lab, from door to door.

“Bucky!”

The elevators are too silent. It’s a problem. A serious problem.

<There was a warning.>

“What were you thinking?” Rogers scans everything and grips James’ shoulder. His other hand tries to touch James somewhere else but he sidesteps the attempt. Tries not to flinch. Bucky wouldn’t have moved after all. But Rogers continues without pause. “You could have been hurt?”

“By who Steve?”

“Tony for starters, he isn’t safe. He’s wily.”

Wily! What the fuck?

“Hurt? It’s more likely that I hurt someone. Not the other way around.”

Rogers smiles, it small and filled with pity. Oh, his eyes filled with the misunderstanding that it’s just the guilt talking. As if once free from his misplaced guilt, it will erase seventy of history. Guilt or not. He is dangerous.

“That’s the Winter Soldier. Not you, Buck.” Rogers speaks the words softly like Bucky’s a goddamn child.

“I am the Winter Soldier.”

“No you aren’t that isn’t you.”

“And what is me? I have memories of you wheezing and shaking through a cold winter. I remember choking the life from a mission and feeling him struggle. I remember both. I am both.” He gets to decide. Not anyone else. Yet every Tom and Dick just assume. Just decide. His fist is tight, fingers digging into his palm. He could just hit… something. Slamming his fist into the wall, satisfied by the loud crack and sheetrock slipping past his fingers.

“Your kind Bucky. You would never hurt an innocent. You wouldn’t.”

“I would, to survive. I did.”

Crossing his arms and shaking his head violently, Rogers take a step back across the green line. Away from James. Chatting wasn’t something they did, just being around each other was enough.
Or maybe it wasn’t. Bucky never did tell Steve he’d been drafted. Never said what he really thought
about the war.

And once Stevie wanted to write comic books- poking fun at the world and keeping it honest- he
would say. Now he hasn’t mentioned those past dreams once.

Rogers takes a breath, steadying himself, and opening his arms wide. “I know you still feel guilty,
but-” He claws a hand through his hair. “But you need to start accepting that you are not responsible
for Hydra’s sins.”

The goddamn guilt is James own problem. So why does it seem to be the only thing him and Rogers
talk about. Ok, the universe screwed him- got it- but he's gonna ride the crazy. He decided that.
“That’s not even the fucking point.”

“I don’t-”

“We’re both stuck, and I just-” James rubs his chin. “I want something more.” No those words do not
feel right. It’s too close to what Bucky would say. And Bucky would never doubt. He knew with
certainty that the sky was blue. ‘Till the end of the line.’ It was a promise. Because Steve was an
don’t trust me.”

Silence. Expected silence. Steve is holding his breath. Probably never tried to figure out why he
treated James differently or even realized that he did. He trusted his Bucky. No more needs to be
said. It’s sad. His Bucky might never have existed.

“That’s not true.” Rogers smiles. Eyes not moving, trying to force a conviction. Probably supposed
to be reassuring but instead, it just reveals the truth. That Steve knew. Knew he didn’t trust James but
kept playing this farce. Well.

“You trust Hydra’s Witch. But not me.” Yes, this is what their relationship has become a farce.

“No-”

“I don’t care. I don’t trust you either. How could I? After everything.”

Rogers glance at the lab’s doors. “You don’t trust me. But you trust Stark?” He snorts and gestures
vaguely at the doors. Because it’s a joke, apparently, for anyone to trust Stark.

“But you trust the Witch?” He says the words in the exact same tone as Rogers did. But with an
added spice of mockery. Cause if anything is a joke, it’s Hydra’s Witch an Avenger.

“Why do keep calling her that?”

James speaks slowly. Very slowly. “Because that is who she is-- voluntarily. And you didn’t tell
me.”

“Because it didn’t matter.”

How could he! What gave him the authority to decide that. Rogers didn’t know Hydra but James
did. James knew Hydra wasn’t just loud violence. Sometimes they were soft and mind-numbing.
Sometimes it was electricity through the brain. Sometimes it was a comfortable grip on the shoulder.
More often than not, Hydra was a snake in the grass. Waiting.

“Oh, I suppose her mindfucking capabilities don’t matter either?”
“God Bucky!” Rogers stalks to the opposite wall, hands flexing, then stalks back. “She is not mindfucking anyone anymore.”

“She chose Hydra. She chose Ultron. What’s stopping her from choosing the next Big Villain if they give her what she wants?” The next words he sneers. “And she has the same hunger we did. Unsatisfied. With power that corrupts.”

“Buck. She is a good kid.”

“Really? Mama Rogers raised you better.”

Rogers grabs his head, turning his back to James again, and pulls at his hair. Unconcerned with the strands that fall to the ground. The serum will probably keep him from going bald. “If we’re listing sins: Tony created Ultron, Tony created the weapons that sent Wanda to Hydra and Tony tried to kill you. Kill you, Buck. How can you just forget that?”

“Maybe, because I don’t fucking care. The amount of people I’ve killed, Stark’s parents include, it was bound to happen that someone would want closer or justice. It easily could have been Wanda’s parents I killed, if the dice had fallen differently. What then Rogers?”

Rapidly shaking his head and holding his palms up, as if he could force the words away. Or force James away. Whichever. Probably, at some level, knows that James meant what he said. Not all missions were VIP targets. Tony, at any point, could have been a mission too. And after Ironman, Wanda might have been sent as back up. He did have a rare partner throughout the years.

<The Spiders.>

“But that didn’t happen. She made some mistakes. But it ain’t like it was when we were young. The world isn’t as clear-cut. It’s twisted like a world through the mirror.”

“Steve black and white have never existed. Things have always been a fucking mess.”

“Not true. It used to be that telling the bad guys from the good guys was easy. Now everyone lies. Everyone wears a mask and stabs their friends in the back. Even my own friends.” Rogers tries to touch James, pull him close and have him just see the world from his perspective. But again James steps aside. Rogers is hurt because he just doesn’t understand. “Did Tony tell you that he tried to use you? Get me to sign the Accords in exchange for your freedom? Did he tell you that?”

And the last line is said with a whisper like a secret or horrible gossip. Like something ‘housewives’ would ooh and aww over, with their quick judgments. Something that just burns the ears of society. Just some ‘who the fuck cares’ tidbit.

“My understanding was that you don’t trust the world and the world doesn’t trust you. So-” James throws his hands up. “Just as I don’t trust you and you don’t trust me. Seems straightforward enough for me.”

“Stop staying that. I trust you, Bucky. It’s just the Winter Soldier-”

“For fuck’s sake. I am the Winter Soldier.” And around they go, again. Just one more word, one more, and swear to God James is punching Rogers in the throat.

<Harm to the handler is->

Shut up!

“You keep sniveling about Bucky and Winter. Bucky and Winter. I’m splitting apart when I just need to put myself back together.” Journal after journal, he would fill with random thoughts, dreams, and memories. Read them later and feeling as if someone else wrote down those words. Some in English. A lot in Russian. And some were unreadable scribbles. Picking himself apart one memory at a time. All that and what did he have to show for it?

<A new handler?>

<Stevie?>

What did he even want? What did he even know about wants, desires, and dreams? Just trudging after a goddamn ghost and his brother.

“Why can’t you understand Stevie? Why?”

“I-” For one warm moment, it seemed as if lightning would strike, Steve taking a breath to think instead of just reacting. But no. There is no lighting in a bottle, just water. Rogers grinds his teeth and squares his shoulders. The soldier with a mission. “And what? Tony understands. Is that it?”

The fuck. “What is your problem with Antoshka?”

Again Rogers reaches for James. The touch hurt before but now it would be like electricity coursing through his limbs. Another Steve just doesn’t get or even ask about.

“He attacked you.”

“Bullshit. You had a problem before that. I fucking saw it rear its head in that godforsaken bunker. I’m just a convenient excuse.” Lying seems to be his first reaction nowadays. Maybe if things were different, he’d shrug it off, like when Steve was trying to get into the military. Maybe if things had remained the same. But they didn’t. And James isn’t entirely sure that is a bad thing. “The truth, Steve.”

“Tony Stark, he-” Rogers stops, mouth forming a word but nothing coming out. Almost a scream as his eyes flicked about. “He doesn’t-”

James isn’t sure that Rogers even knows what the issue really is, regarding Stark. Barton gleefully spilled their troubled beginning, shaky middle, and traitorous end. Although, he framed it as an inevitable epic clash between two opposing forces: freedom vs. law; order vs. chaos. Romanoff seemed to see it as a star-crossed love story, where the two lovers can only tear each other apart and set the destruction a flame.

“Tony is nothing but a disappointment. He promises so much, so much…” The words trail off and Rogers rubs his face, covering his eyes. “There is nothing genuine about him. It’s all a trick. A light show.”

“You aren’t that clueless.”

“You don’t know him the way I do, Buck. He is good at drawing people, yet…” Rogers shrugs, flopping whatever he was going to say, aside. “Howard was like that, too. A showman but at least he worked towards some ideals. But Tony…” Another shrug, like it, didn’t matter. Like Tony didn’t matter. “That’s the problem with too much money, it breeds apathy.”

Apathy? Apathy! What about Tony implied apathy? He didn’t have to put up with SHIELD or the
Avengers bullshit. If all he wanted was to play hero, he had enough fucking money to do just that. If he didn’t care, Tony could just build a goddamn vacation home on the bloody moon. But he does put up with the bullshit. He fucking does.

“You aren’t serious?”

“Maybe. Maybe I’m being a bit unfair. But that doesn’t change that Stark has done more harm than good. And doesn’t care.” Rogers shrugs again. Oh, it’s only Tony that leaves destruction in his wake. There weren’t any TV presences of Captain America taking responsibility for all his shit. Like dropping three helicarriers on himself and an unsuspecting city. Or chasing after James when he could have just melted into the shadows if Rogers had just got gone. No damage there.

“You leave quite a mess, too, Captain. Like Father, Like Son.”

“Like Father…”

<The Handler has that look.>

<Yup. Milk run that transformed into a SNAFU.>

Rogers turns his head towards the lab doors, peering at them like he forgot they were there. “…like Son.”

“What?” Maybe, Rogers will drop it. James smiles the crooked smile that always got a grin from Stevie, leaving whatever awkward thing behind them. Drop it. Drop. It.

“You said, ‘like father, like son’ referring to me and Stark.” Rogers smile is just as awkward as James’ own. Twitching in strange ways that no face was meant to twitch.

<According to Banner, it Tony ROGERS.>

Oh My God. Don’t think about that.

“Bucky?”

<Retreat.>

<Yes, running. Running is good.>


He just-

<Word vomit.>

Fuck. He promised.

<Or Stevie could be made to forget.>

Right. Recalibration.

James snaps his metal arm out, hoping to snatch Rogers head and direct it into the wall. With lots and lots of force.

Rogers dodges and gapes at James’ flexing fist. “Are you trying to knock me out?”
Man acts like his never been knocked unconscious before. Which is a bold face lie. Sometimes it seemed all the Punk wanted was a concussion or three.

James shifts his gaze away, to the wall currently missing a necessary Steve shape hole. “No.” James tries to sweep Rogers legs out from under him. But again. He jumps back. Crap. This is not working. Plan B. Spin kick and run. The kick pushes Rogers back and James dashes to the stairwell. Jumping one, two, three floors down.

Landing with a shudder and a shallow breath. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck! What the fuck is he doing? His knees can’t hold him. The weight. The weight. And the concrete is cold. Ice and snow. Fuck. He fought a handler. No. He attacked a handler. Attacked. Why? All that is required is compliance. And he attacked. The Chair. The Chair. No, they are all destroyed. But the Witch.

The Witch.


“Asset!”

He jerks back, slamming his head on the wall, and pulling himself from his curled position. His limbs falter, falling wherever onto the floor.

“Repeat: 11, 7, 15, 2, 9, 13, 1, 22.”

His eyelids flutter but the area was empty. A directive. “11, 7, 15, 2, 9, 13, 1, 22.” Simple.

And he his chest fills with air and releases. He does it again. Oxygen spreading everywhere. But. “Fry, did you call me Asset?”

“You weren’t responding to anything else. Which is fucked up, by the way.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Another deep breath, the stretch feels good. “Thanks.”

There is a soft pleased humming. It’s nice. Made it easier to weigh his options. He needs a plan. Like ignoring it. Yes. Ignore it. Sounds like something that definitely won’t bite him in the ass.
"I Don't Pay You to Contradict Me!

Chapter Notes

Two years I've been writing this. Two years. Aggggggggggug. Thought it would be 50,000 words at the most. Two years...

Anyway. Thanks to everyone that's stuck around this long. Thank you, for reading, kudos, and commenting. Thank you. (I really like comments.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Did the universe pull this hospital straight from a Japanese horror film? Because fuck!" Barton makes a face and drapes himself against Natasha. "Tasha, stop with the gleeful psycho face. Just. Stop."

The assassin comedy is going strong. But Bucky won’t even look Steve in the eye. No, he rather trail after Tony like some loyal Doberman. Although, he doesn’t seem to want to meet Tony’s gaze either. Is it guilt? For what? Why is Bucky even concerned about Tony? And what about Steve? Everything feels wrong.

"I agree with Barton. This is a horror movie in the making. By the Law of Horror movies, we all know that only Rogers will survive. As the Virgin." Rhodes claps Steve on the shoulder giving him a pointed glance. Whatever that means. Might as well ignore, same as the others. Who can tell what Colonel Rhodes is thinking? Unless your Tony. Who takes the opportunity to crawl onto Rhodes back. As a matter of course.

Just like how Bucky and Steve used to be.

"I’m not, in fact, a virgin. Just so you all know. Not that it matters.‘ Why were people always so concerned about is sex life. Agents asking questions. Even Natasha with the whole ‘girlfriend’ thing. He had a girlfriend and he doesn’t need a new one.

"It probably does matter to some crazy fan." Natasha steps forwards but stops.

"Coulson is a good example. Might even be a SHIELD file." Sam walks around the hospital lobby, the only one to stride past the invisible line they had all drawn. He turns full circle, and glance from one side to another. "Am I the only one who thinks something is off about this place? Something, definitely something."

"Really man? Take your pick of strangeness. Entrance desk that is so military there is a guard station attached to it. The reinforced front doors." Clint pushes his shades against his nose. "Or the lack of cameras. That particular detail wins my award of seriously suspicious."

"What’s so suspicious about that?” How can he even tell? Cameras are so small now. Been into the environment as part of the wall or a bee.

"Trust me, Cap. These eyes see all. All~” Clint waves his hands in front of his face-grinning.
Natasha smacks him. “Missing cameras mean that someone was more concerned with hiding something than keeping an eye on things.”

“And I don’t want to know what the crazy people were trying to hide.”

“Super-soldiers. Faulty ones.” Natasha leaves the ‘duh’ unsaid, and Clint knows it, too.


Flying monkeys would be better than more men like the Red Skull. There are enough bullies.

“Yeah, well, it does explain the fist prints in the concert. Kinda curious how they explained that away. Steroids?” Rhodes knocks on the wall with a ‘fist print’ with crack spreading wide. Almost like petals surrounding its core. Several ‘flowers’ decorated the walls with varying sizes. If only the windows weren't so wide. The light Sharpens things when it should be fuzzy.

Barton whistles at the sight. “Yup. I vote we run the hell out of here. No need to wake the dead. They’ll wake themselves eventually.”

Tony trails after Rhodes, his eyes swinging from wall to floor to ceiling. Even jumping up and down. While Bucky follows a few steps behind. Focused on Tony. Only Tony. Doesn’t even try to inspect what the others are talking about. And certainly pays Steve no attention.

“I vote exploration. Face the horror.” She bouncing on her toes. Or Natasha would be bouncing if she were somebody else. Like Clint or Tony.

Sam moves to stand beside her, quirking an eyebrow. Both are on the opposite of the room, from Bucky.

And the invisible line. It moved. It’s stuck in a loop. Or is it chasing? Or falling.

“As creepy as this whole situation is. I sadly agree with Natasha.” Sam grins at Steve.

Steve grins back. A part of it might even be real. “Sadly, I too agree with Natasha.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Laugh it up, you reckless adrenaline junkies. But I feel the eyes. Eyes! But no cameras.” Clint fingers his bow, gaze tracking something across the room.

Sam points at Clint, “Who you calling-“

“We are being watched.” Bucky’s cadence is dead.

“I vote ghost. Japanese ghost from WW2.” Natasha sings, or maybe it was a musical cackle.

“In an Indiana hospital. Really?” Rhodes replies to Natasha but doesn’t remove his eyes from Bucky.

Clint, too, kept staring at Bucky’s back.

Not that Bucky cares. He just stalks around Tony, acting as a wall to protect Tony from whatever ‘gaze’ he felt.

“So the faulty super soldiers might be watching?” Steve stops watching Bucky.

“It’s an old hospital with secret experiments, Nat; zombies make more sense. An ideal location for
the zombie apocalypse.”

“Zombies are a little trite if you ask me.”

Ignoring Clint and Natasha’s playful bickering about zombies of all things, Steve tries one of the three large doors past the invisible line. Walking pass does nothing. Fine. Try opening the door. Locked. If he jiggles it harder… it doesn’t jiggle. Doors are supposed to jiggle or at least wiggle. Steps back and kicks. Using the kick to shove his weight at the door. A bang and not much else. Okay. It is a super soldier hospital. So super doors. Great. But it still could fucking wiggle.

“Any ideas for the door?” Steve leans against the door, crossing his arms, while everyone stares at him expectantly. Well. Except for Bucky. “Well?”

Clint side-eyes the door like it stole his arrows. “Turn them on?”

“Oh, Tones and I got that covered.” Rhodes steps forward. Tony grins, tugging at Rhodes arm. They walk together without hesitation.

For a moment Steve and Tony’s gaze meet. Large brown eyes swirling with so much emotion. Steve cliches, casting his eyes away. Something about those Bambi eyes- and how apt is that comparison- pick Steve apart. Piece by piece. Trying to break him down to his most basic parts.

Just the same as before. Just the same as when they first met. And Steve does and doesn’t want to know what he sees.

What was it that Stark had said, ‘He doesn’t trust a man without a dark side.’ Is that why he poked, prodded, and pushed at every turn?

And. What did he see?

“It feels familiar. The gaze, it knows.”

“Would you like to expand on your creepiness, there Bucky?” Clint tracks Bucky’s every move, to the smallest shift in his stance and each pull of breath. For a beat, Clint looks at Steve and frowns. Some sort of message? But Steve doesn’t understand.

He doesn’t understand. Anything.

Steve narrows his eyes, trying to understand. But what was he supposed to get from eye flickers and nose gymnastics? Modern Morse code? Clint huffs, possibly disappointed that the super serum didn’t add telepathy along with increasing height. Giving up, Clint switches his attention to Natasha. She responds with a lopsided shrug. Clint nods then wave his fingers.

And they continue like that. Communicating… telepathically. Only in the future.

“So should we play a word game while we twiddle our thumbs? Or are we going to use the time for some personal brooding? I vote for the game. I’m a rebel like that.” Sam bumps shoulders with Steve. Still smiling.

But Steve can’t. “A word game? What kind?”

“Word chain. Road trip favorite.”

“Sam. Come on. First and Last. Come on.”

“You want to brood instead, Clint?”
Steve raises a hand, failing to keep his smirk innocent. “Word game sounds fun.”

“Barrels of fun,” Natasha snickers out.

This at least is familiar territory. Now if only Bucky would speak up next with a witty remark or a charming smirk. Not some endless far-off stare at the exact space Tony left with Rhodes.

“What about you, Buck? Up for humoring Sam’s antics?”

Like water Bucky’s gaze slides past Steve, focusing on something off in the distance. His ears are practically perked.

“I guess-“ Steve swallows what feels like a rock even if it’s just air. His chest tight and shutters out a short breath. Fucking, of course, this would alert Natasha. She narrows her eyes. Couldn't she just ignore something, just this once. Just this once, silence her all-knowing tone. “I guess, Bucky votes brooding.”

“I’ll start. Because I said so. And for the official record: This is stupid.”

“Clint. Pick a word.” Sam rolls his eyes.

“Fine.” Barton throws his hands up. A distraction to hide his quick glance at Bucky. He apparently doesn’t like what he sees. “Arrows.”

“Seriously, Barton?!"

“Shut up, Sam. My pick. Whose next?"

Steve takes a little peek at Bucky. Okay, he doesn’t want to play. Fine. The thing is a bit stupid. No offense to Sam. But watching the playful bickering, that’s different. Hiding a smirk or a laugh, making a face at Sam while keeping himself apart.

But why keep himself separated from Steve?

Some sort of expression. Something. Anything. Yet Bucky is locked waiting for Tony Stark of all people. Steve could understand if Bucky would be a bit more reasonable.

“Well, it’s only natural that I go next.” Natasha pushes forward and bows. “Wrath.”

“Unbelievable. The both of you. Just unbelievable.” Sam leans back, hands covering his face. The pointed heavy sigh was probably a bit much.

Natasha shrugs. With only one shoulder. “I think it fits the theme.” She purrs the word theme. Smooth as silk. How is just one of those things nobody is supposed to know? She even goes so far as to blow Steve a kiss.

For what purpose?


“Trust.”

Bucky doesn’t even twitch.

The light of the room changes, flickering from clear to tinted color. Before a headache can settle in
Steve’s skull, the lights decide that artificial orange is the way to go. Steve would politely disagree if one could argue with lights. A soft hum echoes throughout the walls, too.

Bucky’s head flips towards the ceiling, widening his stance and rolling his shoulders. Actual human movement. And it had nothing to do with Steve. Isn’t that swell.

“Is everything alright over there, Buck?”

And Steve waits. And waits. And waits. The seconds and minutes cling to him like mud. Trying to make him sink and gleeful that nothing could pull him out.

“Umm… Clint your up.” Sam, again, bumps Steve shoulder. Steve nods. Words were dirt in his mouth and if he let them out, it would only add to the mud. Everything used to be so easy between Buck and him. Things are supposed to be better.

“Right. Tiller.”

“Is that word?” Sam purposefully asks Natasha. Clint gives a theatrical gasp.

“It’s a bow part.”

“It would have to be.”

Natasha smirks. “I’m thinking reveal.” She rolls the ‘r’, indicating that there was more there than just a word. The way shit bit the ‘v’ was especially sinister.

“Are you still deciding or is that your choice?” Grinding his teeth always hurts his jaw, but it keeps the pressure from Steve’s words.

“My choice.” Her answering smile is wide, making full use of her gleaming teeth. Clint mutters something in the background.

“Continuing your theme?”

“Got it in one, Sam.”

“Right. Anyway, my turn. ‘L.’” A brow raised, Sam directs a look at Clint. “Loaf.”

“Yeah, love you, too, Birdbrain.”

“Cap, your turn.” Natasha gives two thumbs up. Another gesture that Steve doesn’t understand.

“Fidelity.”

Natasha gasps out a bark of laughter. It’s harsh, considering his prayer like intentions.

“They’re almost back.”

“My, you don’t say. It’s such a mystery.” Clint glances around the lobby and waves his hand in a circular motion. Natasha responds with a nod. Because even that small gesture HAD to mean something.

“It’s probably worse,” Bucky responds to Clint’s weird movements, too.

He replied to Clint. Acknowledged his existence. Paying attention to something, not Tony Stark related. Steve though…
“Oh My God! Barnes! Don’t be the villain from an old Scooby-Doo episode.” Clint shoves Bucky, huffing loudly when Bucky doesn’t budge.

Sam rocks on his heels. “We playing or waiting for the machine twins to show?”

Clint waves a pointed finger in the air. “It’s my turn, and I chose Yew.”

“And this is a bow thing?” Sam nudges Steve rolling his eyes noticeably, and it pulls a single laugh from Steve easing some pressure from his chest.

“Robin Hood’s bow was made of Yew.” Said with the authority of a college professor. Clint even sticks his nose in the air for emphasis.

“Another ‘w,’ my how perfect, I pick wailing.” Natasha runs a finger along the wall only stopping when she stands behind Sam and Steve. “How romantic,” She sings.

“Natasha,” Clint calls softly. “Some mercy, yeah.”

She bows her head.

Bucky moves closer towards the entrance that Tony had left through. Further away from Steve. Why such a fascination with Tony Stark? His loud and flashy. He might as well be in a completely different world from Bucky.

He doesn’t know hunger. Or cold the touches the bones. Or air trapped in lungs. Or choices ripped from you instead of spreading out on a silver platter.

Tony Stark can’t understand!

“Did you loser just brood while Tony and I got shit done?”

Clint crosses his arms, as well as scanning the area behind Rhodes. Not that it was necessary because Bucky had that covered. Standing behind Rhodes was Tony.

“Yeah, we brooded over a stupid word game.”

Sam scrunches his face mouthing stupid, yet faces Rhodes with an air of professionalism. “Did you geniuses have any trouble?”

“Some with finding the generator. But the bigger issues is when we started the thing. Everything felt wrong. And I don’t have ninja powers.” Rhodes rubs his chin, taking in the lobby much the same as Clint. Except for when he stops his look lands on Steve.

This is hardly Steve’s fault. Serum or no serum, some men just like blood in their teeth.

“I need a pick-me-up, so I’m taking that as a compliment.” Just like Rhodes Clint glances at Steve.

What? Has his head grown three times bigger? A third eye? His hair flashing every color in the rainbow? What? Why can’t they just spit it out?

“What’s next Cap?” Sam asks.

“The doors-“

It vibrates his bones and forms similar cracks as the others that bloomed on the walls. Shock trickles into Sam’s expression. Natasha waves something at Clint. But where is Bucky? There is another
thud. Canisters clink against the concrete. Smoke quickly obscures everything. He can’t see Bucky.

Bucky!

Another impact forces STeve back. Its eyes are red, where there should be white. Spider black vines are spread along their arms. The soldier’s arm.

“Tony!”

Steve figures he can spare one beat to locate Rhodes. If could just… He swings at the soldier. Miss. His fingers twitch. There is nothing but air on his back. Such a fucking mistake.

Kicks successes where punches fail. The only success is that the soldier now has his leg. His leg is used to toss him aside. Natasha is sent through after. It’s not a perfect catch but there are no added injuries.

“Natasha!” Sam’s voice is pitched high. He flies near.

“I’m good. Saved by Big Red, White, and Blue here.”

Sam and Natasha are holding themselves close, but at least they're alive. No serious nearing death injuries either. Good times.

Steve rubs his neck. “We’re stuck. Any ideas?”

“Stuck” Sam glances behind him and bites his tongue to prevent a curse or two. The solid metal shutter probably deserved it.

“I didn’t even notice.” Natasha tips her head beautifully, an alluring vision of confusion, it can only be fake. “Brute force?”

“Because Steve’s mighty kick worked so well before.” Natasha makes a face, and Sam sticks out his tongue.

Since neither cared to actually solve their current problem Steve touched the com-link searching for actual adults. Static pulsed from the node and switching modes didn’t change that. Fuck. How is he supposed to protect Bucky with faulty equipment? Nothing seems to last these days. “Coms aren’t working.”

“Scramblers I bet. Hydra does know how to keep it interesting.” Natasha smirks and checks her ‘widow bites.’

Not that checking her gear is a bad idea, even Sam was rolling his wings in an imitation of a real bird. Clearly, the man has been spending too much time with Clint who seemed to embrace the bird-life with glee.

“Kay. When I die, I’m taking you losers with me or his tiny your asses for eternity.”

Yeah, Steve should probably start limiting the time Clint and Sam spend together. “What?”

Natasha turns her face away, but it’s hard to ‘hide’ an Audi able dry snort.

“How movie physics Steve. Horror movies logic. Either way, you slice it, I’m doomed.”

“If we're in a Japanese movie you might be safe.”
Sam nods seriously. “Good point.”

“Guys! We are not in a movie. Even if were are, were superheroes.”

Natasha sighs dropping her head into her hands. “Steve is going to die.”

“She’s right Steve. I’m pretty sure jinking yourself beats virgin immunity.”

“Tha’s- We are- I am not a virgin.”

“Do you think Clint is the slut or the stoner?”

“Excellent question, Mr. Wilson.”

“Focus. Please.”

Unsurprisingly, Sam is the one that takes pity on Steve. “If one way is blocked all we need is to find another.”

Natasha gestures to the wide empty hall. “Yes, exploration. Survivor-style.”

“No.” Sam lifts his palm. “I draw the line at zombies.”

“Aww, fun sucker.”

Taking a single breath. And another. Maybe one more for luck. This he can handle. Hydra goons, super soldiers, Avengers stuff- this he can handle. These things always have a clear direction to follow. First, as Natasha said, is to survey the area.

They wander. The halls echo with their footfalls; only the beds bolted to the floor and cabinets ripped from the walls to absorb the sound. Nothing much to check over, but still, Natasha peeks under beds and pushes through the debris. Bed after bed, things just blend into stock white.

It’s funny. Out of all the things, Steve hoped were different in the future would remain stubbornly the same. Hospitals. Still the same scene of white and staring out nothing day-in and day-out. Wishing for something to get his heart plumbing. Anything.

After the fifth or sixth drawer dumbed of its contents, Natasha smacks the wall. “This is getting us nowhere. I’m going to have to be practical then.”

“You weren’t before? Why?”

“Because of baggage.” She successfully stares Sam down. Hardly lasting more than two seconds. “Questions Cap?”


She sniffs. At least Steve lasted longer than Sam.

“Security office is a good start.” Sam hand is raised but only to his chin. It’s a plan at least.

“The ‘psych ward’ is upstairs.” Steve jabs his thumb at a sharp-L staircase, sitting pretty waiting for some unsuspecting fool.

“I heard air quotes. How did you do that? When did you learn this?” Sam pauses his...speech. “It’s
creepy, Steve. Natasha levels of creepy.”

“Thank you.”

“That was not a complement Black Widow.”

Tony usually lead the chatter like some iron flying squirrel. Bucky was a chatter, too. But more musical and rhythmic than most. Beautiful people were always hanging off his arms, partly because of his looks and partly because of his charm. Always pleasant or comfortable. That was just them talking bout nothing but knowing everything.


“Guys. More walking less talking.”

“Please, Steve. I saunter.” And saunter Natasha did. Gracefully she moved upward, Galatea taking advantage of all Aphrodite’s gifts. A weapon made from cold marble.

“Yes. Crazy people usually do.” Sam fires back.

True. At least in Steve’s experience but that might be a soldiers bias.

Upstairs is much the same as downstairs, only the air is thicker. Clinging to his arms. Sticking inside his chest. Except- Steve halts mode step, Sam smacking into his shoulder.

Something about the building…

“Have you noticed that the beds are all bolted to the floor and have very thick leather restraints,” She hums. It is poised like a question when it clearly isn’t. She tugs at one of the restraints humming some more.

Honestly, it’s the white that stand out to Steve. The sheets. The walls. The few doctor coats left behind. Nothing says death like too much white.

“Then we’re all thinking that ‘psych ward’ stands for ‘let’s give bloodthirsty dicks superpowers?’” Sam holds up a broken of a piece of concrete turning it in his hand. “Do you think they scan for that sort of thing? Like, what’s your bloodthirstiness on a scale of 1 to 5? I being, No thanks I’m full. % being, unquenchable. Cause I could see Hydra doing that.”

“I think SHIELD asked me that when I signed up.” Sam nod’s along to Natasha’s whatever.

Passing words between themselves. Simple and comfortable. While Steve stands aside. Was it always like this or is this again another change?

Having Bucky would… But he doesn’t.

“Steve?” Sam's voice tugs him forward. “You coming?”

“Yeah, yeah.” But something has him turning to back. A soft laugh and…

“Sam!” It’s controlled but almost a scream coming from Natasha.

It isn’t Sam sprawled on the ground or Natasha’s hesitation that sparks the familiar claws of anger gripping his chest and searing his inside. No. It’s the obvious smug soldier, breathing harshly as he stands over Sam’s form. His shadow cast over Natasha.
But this he handle.

First, use his weight to shove the soldier away. Sharp elbow jab. It stumbles and growls deep from its chest. Words to difficult for it. Natasha pulls Sam to safety.

Good.

More rough sounds come from the soldier; it smashes it's arms against the wall like a child throwing a tantrum. Steve darts in low to grab the soldier and gets a knee in his gut for the trouble. “Fuck.” Air shoots out of his lungs, not sure that noise forms a word.

Sam succeeds in tackling the soldier. Not stopping his momentum until they hit the wall. The building shudders, another crack to add to all the others, but the soldier still struggles. But only until Natasha connects her widow bites to its throat. Electricity sparks.

The body twitches then drops to the floor.

“That usually doesn’t happen.” She pokes it, treating it like some unpleasant trash, with her toe. As if it didn’t try to kill them only a moment ago.

“We needed information.” They didn't have anything else to work with until the soldier presented an opportunity. A wasted opportunity that means Steve is no closer to Bucky.

Lately, all he seems to do is chase after Bucky.

“Steve’s got a point.” Redwing’s wings flap three times and hums. Sam hums pleased.

Natasha, too, is tracing her fingers along the widow bites parts. Her suits blue glowing lines duller that their usual shine. Sam fiddles with his goggles. Steve’s own suit is a bit ratty but fits comfortable. All made by Tony. Even the coms are Stark tech.

Even his shield was Stark made, even if it was a different Stark. All their gear made by Stark.

Bucky liked future things...

“Yep. Not getting anything from the dead.”

“Nope.”

Okay. They had a dead body. No information on the super soldiers or the hospital. Just another mess caused by a scientist that wouldn’t leave well enough alone. With a splash of Hydra crazy. If anything they’ve done this before, then they can do it again.

God.

What is so darn great about the serum that makes everyone obsessed? It made him taller, maybe a tad stronger but hardly something to squeal about. Even Howard who never seemed the type had to stick his thumb into the pie. Let Hydra sticking hands on his research, too. Did Hydra plan Tony, too? With how things are unfolding…

And Bucky. Why Tony?

“Is there anywhere else? Or are we stuck?”

“One of the large bed areas’ had a side door.” Sam shrugs.
It is something at least. The last straw to hold on to, at least before it breaks.

The ‘side door’ as Sam had called it, was less a door and more a hunk of metal that slid in and out the wall. Took Redwing ‘communicating’ with the wires to get the damn thing open.

Inside was a large round room with single machine standing at its center.

“It has to be a replica.”

Sam and Natasha trade a look. Right. Why would they know? It’s a relic that belong in the 1940’s, same as Steve, and long before either of them were born. Something that lost it’s purpose once Steve stepped out-taller- and Erskine was shot. Scrapped soon after. Or maybe not. All Steve knows is what he assumed. The program was definitely scrapped, the secrets dying with its scientist. While Steve practiced the art of being a dancing monkey.

“Nothing here might as well shuffle along.” Natasha waves at the room with a large gesture but pauses to point at some sort of television. “Well, nothing useful.” She has been wandering around the room. Stop in place only for a beat before zigzagging to another point.

The machine is cool to the touch. Strange, once this was the most alien thing Steve had ever seen. Now it was so out of place here in the future. There are cracks along its base, a couple of finger dents where the door meets the body. Other strange dents are scattered along the body. Even the small window has a tiny crack right in the middle. Well, worn. But here it still stands.

Stubbornly holding it’s self together.

“It could be the original if Howard was involved.”

“Steve?” Sam is shuffling behind him. The warmth of his hand hovering mere inches from Steve’s shoulder. But nothing is heavier than Natasha’s stare. All-knowing. Again.

“I’m good.”

Maybe the machine still works. Probably not considering Hydra abandoned it here.

“Steve, what-”

What he expects is another snide comment, he expects that stare picking him apart- same way Tony’s stare would. What he doesn’t expect is Natasha held by here throat being pounded into the wall by a slight feminine figure. Such a small couldn’t possibly be capable of such force. But black veins mar the skinny arms.

So much for assumptions and expectations.

Another larger body blocks Sam from view, but his curse is clear.

Something- another black veined super soldier latches onto Steve’s arm. Tugging it hard. “Kill.” The soldier hisses like steam from a kettle.

Something explodes. Now is not the time to lose his balance. Instead of falling he tries to slam his body forward. It twists out of the way along with Steve’s arm. It snaps softly almost inaudible amongst the grunts and growls of the soldiers. He can’t even remember when he last broke a bone.

Doesn’t matter. He can’t use it. Fine. Just go with the flow, run into the pain. Around him electricity crackles, small flashes at the edge of his vision. The soldier's eyes shift away. An opening to sweep
the leg and body slam putting all his weight into his shoulder. And Steve weighs a lot now.

The soldier gasps. Pulling away. Oh. Running away. Probably for the best. If Steve’s arm wasn’t broke before. It is now. Ow.

Pain swells. Like music tends to do. And Steve needs to sit down. Or slump. Either works.

“My ribs are not good.” Yet it doesn’t hinder Natasha’s gracefully sitting next to Steve.

“Someone should probably look at my shoulder.” Sam uses Steve as support to rest on the floor with the rest of them. The floor! It is the place to be.

“My arm is broken.”

Both Natasha and Sam nod. Steve starts nodding, too. He could giggle, can actually feel it running along his stomach just running around in circles sending pleasant shivers up and down his spine. Or hum. Some tune he heard from Gabe’s radio dancing in his head. Dancing with his limbs never did him any favors but he probably could learn. Watching Bucky dance was always something swell. He doesn’t want to learn to dance. But it’s fuzzy, him dancing.

“Howard made Tony in a lab with my blood.”

“What the fuck, Steve!”

“It’s a miracle. Call the Pope.”

“Not a virgin.” What is the joke that Natasha and Clint find so funny?

“You are messing with me?”

“No, Sam. God’s honest truth.”

Natasha hums. “Barnes spilled the beans.” Snorts, too. “At least that explains some things.”

Figures Natasha would know. Clint probably knows, too.

“Does Tony…” Steve figured Tony would be first to say something. Use it for validation or something. Or make it known that he was left wanting. Can’t even keep one date. Or end Hydra. Or have any of his action mean something. Except for saving Bucky.

“He just found out.” She lies back. “He had asthma when he was small. His lungs are weak and the arc reactor in his chest did not help the issue.” She looks up at Steve. “You think the serum fixed that?”

Her stare still picks at Steve’s insides. Or maybe expecting something. Hoping for something?

If it did, Tony paid a price. Steve paid a price, too. Not that he knew that when he stepped out taller or rescued Bucky from a lab slab. Only when he fell did the price become clear. Who can say if it was worth it?

Maybe Tony thinks his serum was worth it?

“Howrifying issues aside. There are certain similarities between you two.” Sam wiggles his hand side to side and laid back just as Natasha had. Except for the grunt of pain.

“Really? I think he has more in common with Howard and Peggy. Or Bucky. Even Dum Dum. But
not me.” All of them dead. But Bucky. Not that Bucky was Bucky. Not fully.

“That’s a lot to put on a person.” Sam uses the same tone when he talks to Steve about joining one of those ‘meeting.’

“Especially, the emotionally stupid Tony Stark.” Natasha put in her two cents.

“Natasha,” Sam sighs, wearing a put-upon expression- that anyone but Steve can see it. “Stones and glass house. Stones and glass houses.”

Remain firmly on her back Natasha flips her hair with the full effect. It just as silly as it sounds. “If we’re going to keep this whole Bro-thing going—” Natasha smacks Steve’s arm. The broken one. “-there needs to be beer and a 1968 Impala. Maybe some soft rock playing in the background.”

“Young people today watch too much television.” Steve hides his smirk with a weary sigh.

“Better than staring at paint drying,” Sam squeaks.

“It builds character.” Steve stands. Needing to move. To be somewhere else less empty. But the emptiness niggles at Steve. “Something is off about this building.”

“We’ve all said that.” Sam grunts and mumbles something. Cursing, probably. “Steve, help.” He makes grabby hands. Pulling him up with his good arm is easy.

Steve shakes his head. “No, not the whole creepy thing. The layout feels off like there less space than there should be.”

Already standing Natasha walks a circle around Steve and Sam. “Hydra does have a fetish for hidden rooms and passages.”

“Not seeing all the rooms would make things weird, I guess.” Sam stumbles a bit and leans against Steve for only a moment. “Secret passages what a cherry on this stupid sundae.”

Natasha snaps her fingers. “We even have an app for that.”

“Redwing is more than an app.”

“Yes. Yes.” Natasha pats Sam’s cheek. “But can it do the thing.” Posed as a question only for Natasha’s inner need for drama.

“Redwing, a scan if you would.” Arms crossed, Sam stands proud, as the metal bird rises from behind his head. For as serious as Sam is acting the scene just does not fit. Steve rubs his mouth to hide the small twitches of a smile. Sam stands on, unaware. But serious.

“Beep. Beep, beeeeep.”

“Ah, gotcha.” Sam pats his pet thing. “Good job.”

“You understood that. How?”

“Don’t be ridiculous Steve. I’m not Stark.” Sam taps his goggles.

Steve glances away. Right. Information can travel to anything now. Using invisible wires like some futuristic radio. Everything needs an upgrade. And so tiny, you wouldn’t notice if you stepped on it. “Location, Sam.”
“Behind the wall of that office, we passed.”

“Well, boys? You coming?” Natasha waves her hand perfectly balanced as she pulls back for a kick.

The door slams open, something tells Steve it wasn’t even locked, not that Natasha seemed to care. Sam jogs after with a hop in his step that Steve doesn’t understand. At one time Steve would have lifted tanks and motorcycles while the Howling Commandos hooted. Bucky taking bets as the ringleader.

Now, Steve has an office and he just doesn’t see the point to be wowed. And it’s definitely an office. Boring white office. “Doesn’t Hydra usually like a bit of color?”

“Steve don’t be a Clint. Look for a hidden switch like a book or candle.” Natasha huffs. Which is unfair. Steve doesn’t deserve such treatment. Not this continuous cycle of Hydra.

“Howard Stark’s secret door was under his desk.” Imperiously pointing at the desk, Natasha commands with the authority of a King. “Shove.”

So Steve shoves. With his foot. Hard against the wood. It slams into the opposing wall was really an unexpected bonus. And shutters with a crack, creating an ideal lighting bolt crack.

Natasha peels at the piece off, and it crumbles in her hand.

Steve rolls his shoulder. This is going to fucking hurt and he doesn’t even have the shield. Or anything to act as a proper lever. “I got it.” Instead, he pulls, bear handed, to reveal a spiral staircase going up. Huh. Usually, worms preferred the cold and dark underground.

At the end, of a very short journey, is a room with wall to wall TVs. Makes Steve’s earlier comment seem like less of a joke.

“Monitores means cameras. Your assassin from another mother said there were no cameras.”

“For the lobby. Sam.”

“Right the lobby. Why just the lobby?” Sam brushes his fingers along the keyboard. “Should we turn them on?”

“We could use them to find, Bucky.”

Sam bites his words but nods. Once the things start to flicker to life, they are presented not with camera feeds but a map of the hospital. With blinking colored dots.

“Ooooh. Motion sensors instead of cameras. Cool.” Natasha points to a cluster of three dots. “I bet fifty that’s Clint.”

“How?” Sam taps at another cluster. “They’re all the same.”

“Spidey sense.”

“You want to stick with that?”

“I wasn’t about to say, ‘women’s institution.’”

“Guys! What should we do with this?”

Natasha huffs. “Yeah, Sam.”
At least Steve isn’t the only one who pushes all the tech stuff onto Sam.

“How do you two even survive?”

“My job requires two things: boobs and things that go boom.”

“Yeah, what Natasha said.”

Sam stares, his brain having trouble comprehending the straight man Sometimes Steve wants to be stupid, too. He's getting tired of everything being tinted red. Becoming apathetic to color.

But anger does get shit done.

“Whatever.” Tapping at the keyboard, Sam makes lights disappear on one part of the screen and humming when they blinked on in a different place. “I think this is how they got us with the shutters.”

“Which means we can get revenge.” Natasha’s pointed grin is seriously unsettling.

“For what?” Or rather, what’s the point. It doesn’t solve anything or help Bucky.

“I broke a nail.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“No. No, I didn’t. But it’s a mess to clean up, and here we are.”

Sam shrugs. “Well, there are two groups of three.” He points to the group Natasha had dubbed Clint. “These are in another wing.” He moves his finger down the screen. “This gives some credence that these are the guys that attacked us.”

“What we want is to separate them. So we can go mano-a-mano.” Natasha narrowed her eyes and pressed her fingers together, in a manner eerily similar to Clint. Is she aware that she is invoking his image or is it another one of her planned expressions?

“If you act as bait.” Sam points to a particular flashing bar of light.

“I make excellent bait.” Natasha extends her hand and Sam places a small disk or button into her palm. Curling her fingers around the device and steps backwards into the shadows.

After some soft taps and Sam humming a note or two, Natasha reemerges from the shadows but lacking a lighting effect like a flash of lighting or a swell of music, which she had expected with her entrance.

“So we’ve got them trapped. Almost like the system was made for this sort of thing.” She leans against the wall, crossing her arms and smirk that applauded her own cleverness.

“Like Mouse Trap the game.”

That was not on the list, Steve is sure of it. A shared glance with Natasha confirms that Sam is the issue. Mouse Trap as game a little gruesome for kids. Dead animals and all.

Sam rolls his eyes. “I forgot that you both have lived unfulfilled lives.”

Natasha pulls herself straight. “Who's going first?”
“You were serious?”

“Steve,” Natasha sighs. “We have two options.” Both hands raised as if the options rest on her palms. “We can take our problems out on some Hydra super soldiers. Or we, and I mean you, can confront Barnes and Stark with actual healthy communication about your feelings. And the lying. And the betrayal. And Yasha still not fucking remembering me.” Taking a breath to shove her own emotions back where ever she usually keeps them and narrows her eyes at her hands like they revealed something they shouldn’t have. She claps her hands behind her back. “Oh, Barnes and Stark have kissed, too. So, good luck ignoring all the cracks in your relationship while those two rides off into the sunrise.”

Despite the word choice, Natasha’s words were flat. More fitting a mission report and not telling him that Buck was keeping secrets. Why didn’t he say something? Steve would hear out anything Bucky needed to say. If he were developing something for Tony, Steve would- Steve would... what?

He told everyone they were stepping out together. All those sweet stories of devotion, why wouldn’t he a Bucky start something? It’s the modern era. No need to hide. Saying it over and over. PDA is fine, show your love. Trying to shove their vision down his throat. Peggy wasn’t one for PDA and that was acceptable, too.

All Steve wanted now, was to keep Bucky close. All he ever had was Bucky…

Is that even true, now? Staring at Steve with the same look as Tony and Natasha. Expecting something that Steve cannot give.

“You okay?” Sam eyes won’t stay in place, it keeps switching between his hands or his feet. Or the top of his head. It isn’t right. But nothing is going right. Between him and Bucky. Or with Sam. Or Natasha. Probably, Clint, too. Bruce certainly wanted to start something.

Things used to so easy.

“Yes, Rogers. Is everything peachy?” Natasha leans forward, trying to catch his gaze that refuses to move from his boots.

“Tony is Buck’s type.” Why say that? Out all the words? It avoids the question. But what?

Although, there is no lie in his words. Easy smiles, rhythmic hips, expressive eyes, and a sharp tongue, and nothing but trouble. Would have Buck thinking with the boys downstairs faster than Steve could blink. God. He was always so girl crazy. Or people crazy, truthfully.

It explains a lot. Bucky with heart in his eyes never did see sense, usually at Steve’s expense.

“That’s it?”

Now that gets Steve to meet Natasha’s eyes. He shrugs. You can’t lose what you don’t have, and Bucky made that clear. “Is it serious?”

“Tony wouldn’t act if it wasn’t serious.”

“No, I meant Bucky.”

She tilts her head, probably the closest she gets to admitting confusion. “That… I’m not sure.”

Steve probably wouldn’t be able to say either. Unless Bucky told him. If Bucky told him.
“So— We avoiding our problems?” Sam holds out his fist. “Rock-Paper-Scissors to decide who goes first.”

Two rocks and a paper later and Sam heads down first. Steve and Natasha squeeze together to view the match on a small square TV that popped from Redwings back.

Sam jumps propelled by Redwing, shouting “Falcone Kick!” And that’s it. Natasha sneaks past Steve stealing the next one. While Sam went high, she does low. Sliding under the soldier's legs, wrapping a wire around the soldier's neck and pulls. Using gravity to tug the soldier back while it flails around like a fish. It’s awkward and doesn't improve when it finally drops, prompting Natasha to say, “Hoisted by her own Picard.” Steve is pretty sure that’s not how that line is supposed to be used.

She shuffles back to the group griping her midsection tight. “Worth it.” Sam snorts. Really Steve would prefer Sam didn’t encourage the crazy spider lady.

Soon he makes his own way down to the ‘Mouse Trap,’ the metal slab of a shutter just as imposing as all the others. The thing thuds twice before lifting itself from the ground. The soldier is waiting inside and huffing steam from its mouth.

When did Bucky stop telling him anything? What is Steve doing wrong?

A mountain of meat the same one that had tagged Sam earlier. But he acts more like a bull. Steve widens his stance and makes a ‘come get me’ motion. The bull charges and Steve uses him as a bouncing board, as you do. Except slamming himself down rather than keeping himself loose to bounce.

Bucky doesn’t understand either. What was so fucking significant about Steve that Howard would… Why Tony? Why?

He jumps again and slams down.

Why?

And again.

Why?

And again. Once more for luck.

Why?

It’s satisfying for a moment.

But.

The tang of blood in his mouth is overwhelming. His fist is aching. When did slam his fist into the wall? His arm throbbing, again. Does it matter?

Why did wake up from the ice?

Chapter End Notes
This chapter was a slog. Why is Steve Rogers so hard to write? You write what you know, right? So is my problem the fact I've never been an emotionally constipated white man who wouldn't know introspection if it slapped him on the ass and called him honey?
I don't know. But I tried. To be fair and think about his issues. Fully 3D, ya know. But god. I want to set my computer on fire except not because my one true love. But definitely, set the servers that hold this chapters google doc on fire.

On a tangent. A couple of days ago someone commented on a comment that I left on someone else's story. That I don't even remember writing. Didn't stop whoever to type "TEAM CAP!!!"
Such a fucking weird moment... that I'm sharing. So your welcome.
For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Ergo, push Tony and he falls back. Ergo, if Tony slams his body against the ‘door’, it should open. It didn’t.

Because Tony couldn’t generate enough force. He did not want to hear it. He was going to bang himself against the wall until Rhodey saved him. Or he ran out of steam.

Bang against it. Slam into it. Claw at the concrete. And pound his fist. Nothing. The wall nor the ‘door’ even shuttered. The object at rest laughs at Tony as it remains at rest.

Tony ran out of steam.

With his head leaning against the wall, the rest of him curled into a ball; it’s easier to see the worn cracks. To feel the warmth leech from his body into the cool concrete. His kinda cold. But it’s nice having the walls just absorbing him.

By now, he’d expect his eyes to adjust, but everything is still black. His hands, which are wiggling in front of his face, isn’t visible. Can’t see it no matter how much he squints. And he squints hard.

Why couldn’t he have gotten stuck in a disco cave or those crystals caves with glowing rocks or mushrooms? Transport himself to the land of light bulbs, to the kingdom of Christmas lights. Make things pretty. Much better than this dark business.


Don’t think about it. Don’t think about it.

The shadows are shifting, crawling towards him.

Don’t think about it. It’s too dark for shadows, so there no shadows. Tony knows this. Yet. They will swallow him whole.

Don’t think about it.

If he could just focus on something. Or have Rhodey. Something real. Something outside his head. Concrete, as nice as it is being, just isn’t helpful. It’s just hard.

Why does it have to be so fucking silent?

he definitely isn’t into. He just doesn’t find Cthulhu sexy.

Drums mean music. Music is good. Good things. Tony pulls himself up. Digging his fingers into the wall, he shuffles along the hall. There better be one path. He cannot handle branching paths, or crossroads, or more than one path. It means he has to leave the wall. He doesn’t want to switch walls. Tony has gotten know this wall. Each scoot of his foot is a sweet poem of no panicking. No panicking is the goal. This wall understands that.

Some, what Tony would call slow sliding while others probably wouldn’t, time later- think a show card with ‘Three Hours Later’- the music gets louder. A sign from Rock and Roll! Guitars and drums! Miracles. All of Tony’s dreams come true.

Sliding a bit faster, he smacks into wood. Hard. Hardwood means doors. Doors? There are handles. Doubles doors. Progress and an escape rolled into one. A lot can be said about Tony- his lack of awareness, a goatee- but he will always make progress. Maybe in the wrong direction. But still.

The doors swing open. Tony swears, he didn’t touch anything. Only fondle the wood a bit.

God. Everything is bright. Who can see anything with all that light? He clasps his hands over his eyes. It only provides some protection. He was wrong. The land of light bulbs is evil, too. It was all a lie.

The music is still there. The song full with energy. Familiar energy. Is that ‘Eye of the Tiger?’ He pulls his hands away. Blinking back the pain and sensitivity. The light is deciding to be less stabbing forks in the eyes.

And yes. There is a boombox playing ‘Eye of the Tiger.’

“And the last known survivor stalks his prey in the night,

And he’s watchin’ us all with the eye of the tiger.”

A gloved hand clicks the song off with an audible mechanical thump. “So what are the chances we find ourselves here?” From the glove lead to a clothed arm and from there a hood. His words muffled by a mask.

Acting the King of the castle leaning back feet propped on a sizeable worn desk. Hydra symbol carved into the base. Well, Hydra’s logo was everywhere in the room. Emblazed on hanging wall scrolls, two on each side of the room. The doors had a painted symbol and even the claymore mounted on the back wall had a hydra head as it’s pommel. A throne fit for any modern dark lord.

However.

It should be noted that the Captain America wannabe (even had a small grey shield) was only acting the part. Not very successfully either. Rather the masked man conveyed the authority of a disgruntled teenager. In other words, a kid trying on his dad’s clothes for the first time while trotting around the house playing grownup.

Standard practice was to ignore a character like that. And Tony would. Except the mask was a skull. Only one type of crazy did that. “Who knows?” Tony eyes the guy, Yorick would work as a name for now.

“That’s the response I get. After the day I’ve had? Really! With the shit, I put up with to organize this whole dalliance.” Yorick slams his boots on to the floor and points at Tony. “Do you have any idea how freaky your friends are? Black Widow kept.”
“They are not my friends. I don’t have friends.” If only Tony could see his face. He lacked information that he needed, but the weirdo had to wear a mask.

“What about what’s his face?” Yorick snaps his fingers, while the expressionless mask stared. “Iron Patriot guy? What’s his name?”

“Rhodey is Rhodey.” Simple as that.

“That’s so sad. Even I have friends.” Yorick rubs his chin. But who knows where his gaze wanders off. “Maybe you could try a hobby? Hobbies are a great way to make friends. Me and that idiot collect swords.” He nods satisfied that he has solved all of Tony’s problems. Probably offering a smile, forgetting that his mask cannot emote.

“Is that it?”

“Oh, right. Madam H had sent me with a message.” He starts pawing around his suit. Opening pockets and fumbling with his belt. Finally, Yorick pulls a scrap of paper from his hood.

“Madam H says she is growing tired of your inaction, but all will be forgiven if you simply let Hydra into the Tower. She knows you won’t disappoint and make her proud.” Refolding the scrap, Yorick stuffs it back inside. “Now that was creepy.”

Disappointed. Letting someone down again. He can’t. He can’t. He is sick of the disappointment. Not her. Especially, not her. Madam Hydra though he was special. Why can’t he do anything right? Why? Tony just wants to be good. But that means letting her into the Tower.

Into the Tower. Captain America would not like that. No. This bad. This is bad. Bad. Bad. Bad. He told Romanoff not to trust him. He doesn’t want this responsibility. And he told her. He. Told. Her. But it’s too late now. Captain America will be anger. So anger. Slamming it into his chest. Again. Again. Again. No air.


Pain spikes through his chest. Stabbing. Slamming. The arch reactor being pulled from his chest. He needs that. He needs that to breathe. He doesn’t deserve to breathe. Doesn’t deserve anything.

“How. Science person. Let’s try science. What is the speed of light? Come on; I need to know. For training.”


“299,792 kilometers per second.”

“Is that fast? It sounds fast. Umm. What is the root of 4761?”

Numbers Tony is good with numbers. “69.”

“Heh. I actually knew that one. Does that count as a math sex joke?”

Okay. Tony blinks. It is a floor. Why is he staring at the floor? Oh. Because he is curled into a ball.
on the floor. Okay. Blinking at the floor makes sense. Tony bends his head up. Blinks gain, just to be sure. Yup. Staring at Yorick. “I don’t know. It could be.”

“Sure. Do you need help?”

Mistake, after mistake. Everything ending so wrong. He is so tired of making mistakes. Tired of even choosing. Tony screws the word when he chooses wrong. Everything is wrong. His body is so heavy. “How do I leave?” Couldn’t get the right words out. Couldn’t even manage that.

Yorick steps back, facing away from Tony. “There is a door underneath the sword.”

Tony arms are shaking, and his legs are trembling. But he manages to stand up despite his failings. He stumbles forward, sticking his arms out for a fall that never comes. Which is good? Could he even get back up a second time?

“Do you want me to come with you?”

Tony blinks at the unchanging mask. “No. I’ll be good. Thank you.”

“Right. Good. Good.”

He’ll just make his way through the dark again. Easy as can be. Through a door that spins. Makes it fun like a carnival ride.

“It’s only 20 feet,” Yorick calls from behind.

A measurement. Something to focus. Tony can handle twenty feet.

“I unlocked the door, so you should have no problem.” He calls again.

As Tony is further down. It feels as if he is going up a tiny incline. Some more steps and his hand slams against something solid. His fingers tingle. But the wall moves-it moves- with a little force. Tony releases a shudder and a heavy sigh. A ray of light breaks through the crack. And another struggle it’s way through. Even more, escape into the dark as the opening is wider. With more light shapes beginning to take form. People. Many people.

The first to come into focus is James. Oh. James grins at Tony. Someone crashes into him.


“Not a baby, Rhodey.”

“Shush, Tones. Let me cuddle you and alleviate my worry.” Rhodey squishes Tony closer to himself, trying to attach or fuse them. Rhodey would like that, the overprotective Bastard. But Tony will sing the song of ‘freedom.’”

“Rhodey~ Let go. I need air.”

“No, don’t believe the hype. Air is overrated.”

“Rhodes, get back on task. I want to leave.” Barton is cuddling his bow like a security blanket. Even standing away from the rest, his back pressed against a wall. It certainly makes it easier to stare at the archer unbothered. But seriously. What is wrong with Barton?

“Why again, are we blowing this place to kingdom come?” Romanoff fiddles with something- looks like a detonator and hardly gives more attention to the group than her words. Is she asking for
Someone else?

Could Tony take a quick look at Captain America? Tony could. It would give him a better idea of what the hell is going on. Or, not. Yeah.

“As I said, you burn the creepy. Let it all burn.” Each word is measured, sounding more like Barton was actually putting thought into his word choice and not his usual fling it at a wall and see what sticks approach. Even if he is using the crazy vernacular. Like, burn the creepy. To be fair Tony agrees.

“I’ve got five pounds of C4.” James raises his hand, apparently picking up mannerisms from Wilson. But it’s cuter when James does it.

“Where did you get the explosives?” Captain America speaks.

Tony flinches, it could have stayed in his stomach making the wall shudder. But nope. It had to travel through his whole body, setting off Rhodes sensors. Because he still acting the role of tree monkey with Tony as the tree.

“The same place I got my guns.” The implied ‘duh’ is so intense it drips from every syllable utterly oblivious that it should have become a foot instead. So James could stick it into his mouth.

“You have guns? How?” Captain America is not mad. Not mad. He sounds curious. But’s that now. When Tony is thrown under the bus he will be anger. Because who would lie to Captain America? Certainly not Bucky Barnes. It’s better to end it here anyway.

It’s all fine. It’s fine. This is fine.

“I stole them!”

“Bucky!”

“What? You want me to run around naked?”

“You could hurt yourself!”

“Fuck you, Rogers,” James hisses the words. Looking away after. Tries shrugging instead. “Guns and knives are sweet on me anyway.”

Captain America snorts. And everyone freezes. Everyone. All transformed into deer staring down headlights as the vehicle uncontrollably barrels forward.

Well, everyone except Tony and Rhodey. Well, Rhodey doesn’t give two fucks. But Tony does. And this whole scene is bizarre. Sure Steve is an angry wet cat that lies with hard disgusted eyes. But Tony is pretty sure that Rogers laughs and sniggles once a blue moon. Shouldn’t Stevie and Buck be nothing but snorts and giggles at this point? It was foretold by black and white movies! They promised strange inside jokes and whispered giggles about stupid things only they found funny. Tony hated it. All of it.

But then Tony was promised much growing up. Not that any of it mattered.

“Okay. So between me, Natasha, Clint, and Bucky’s ill-gotten goods, we should have no problem blowing this land of evil out of existence.”

“Yes.” Barton nods quickly, breaking his neck in another timeline- his head broken off rolling
around on the floor, probably. “Sam has the sense. Men to your stations.”

And that’s how the Avengers blew up a hospital.

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Something caught fire; Tony doesn’t know what, seeing as he didn’t get the grand tour but whatever did catch fire cannot be good for the atmosphere. Just saying. It was warm tho, the licks of the fire heating his arms. Or it could be Rhodey. Who still hadn’t let go.

For the official SHIELD record, Tony does not think air is overrated. Air is great.

“Does anyone want to fill me in on the situation?” Coulson tries disappointed teacher, but no one is going to buy that bullshit. Coulson could just as likely be in their shoes. “No? You sure? This whole thing doesn’t look good.”

“Go back where you came from Zombie,” Barton shouts from his position face flat on the floor. While Natasha uses him as a bench, but it seems she would very much love to join Barton as a dead fish on the floor. But her dignity; it’s a fun sucker.

“There are bodies. And things are on fire.” Director Coulson seems to be a lot less one with the penguin of zen than Tony last saw him.

“Only two out of five are dead. It’s a win.” Romanoff sluggishly twirls her finger in the air. Like she just don’t care.

“You can’t be serious, Agent Romanoff.”

“Nobody asked you, Zombie.” She doesn’t lift her head.

“Fine. I will just appeal to your sensible members.” Coulson side-eyes Agent Mulan. She ignores him. Probably knows that the man is wasting his time. “Rhodes would you please explain the situation?”

Tony snorts because Rhodey is hardly sensible.

“Rhodey nods all military like and grips Tony a bit harder. “I finally have evidence that the Universe is conspiring against me. You think it would be hard to lose some who is a living light show. But nope.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“Isn’t it tho?”

“No. But thank you.” Coulson removes his shades, viewing the entire group for the second time. Deciding, after making a frowny face or two, to focus on Sam. “Falcon, how about you?”

“Beep! Sorry, Wilson is not here right now please try again later.”

“I can see you.”

Wilson’s mouth gapes up and down trying to load an answer.

Tony takes pity. Decides to use one of his power s for good. “Life model decoy.”

“Ah. This is Sam Wilson’s life model decoy.”
“Stark stop being a bad influence on people.” Coulson rubs his forehead, takes a peek at Tony, only to sigh. Rude.

“Director, can we leave? This is getting to be ridiculous.” Captain America’s voice draws all eyes to him. He shifts left and right on his feet, trying to get used to the weight of everyone’s gaze.

More frowny faces, probably noticing how Captain America stands away from the rest of the group. In fact, Rogers is the only one standing. Even James was crouching near-ish to where Tony and Rhodey sat. Wilson was the closest to the Captain but sitting with his legs spread out. But closer still to the Barton and Romanoff trash pile. The strange reaction to Rogers’ snorting was one thing, but this sitting arrangement was starting to make the whole group dynamic situation seem more like a pattern than a coincidence.

“I haven't gotten any answers Captain.”

“And you aren’t going to get any. None.”

“Hydra is involved, Rogers, SHIELD handles Hydra messes.”

Clouds are starting to amass in the sky. Rain, maybe?

“SHIELD is Hydra.” Captain America says it so casually, glancing around at the SHIELD red shirts like anyone could shout ‘hail hydra’ at any moment.

“Ooooh. Them fighting words.” Tremors giggles are breathing life into the drab uniform she wore. And gets a look from both Agent Mulan and Coulson. She shrugs. Coulson has that look. The exact look that he had before the ‘I Am Ironman’ conference. That was awesome. Tony should have worn the suit.

“Captain. Rogers. I mean, Steve. We’re just trying to help. I'm trying to give the support you need.”

“Let us go. That would help.”

On. Now that’s sad. Coulson is sincere. He has so much Captain America love. With nowhere to call home. And Captain America hates Captain America, so his not accepting it. NO Rather, Rogers hates Captain America. Why? Isn’t it everything he wanted? Agreed to?

“Sergent Barnes?”

“I could do without the stalkers.”

Coulson heaves a heavy sigh. They shake slightly, in a rhythm that suggests laughing. It finally happened. The living suit man broke.

Do you call a tailor, an engineer, or a psychologist? Or a combination of all three?

“Understood. SHIELD will escort you to the Tower.”

James stands up. “Great, More stalkers.”

Everyone else collects themselves, too. Tony isn’t sure if this is worse or better to have SHIELD at the Tower. Will it even make a difference?

Something crows, Tony peers up at the source. Three ravens perched on a branch staring back. Waiting.
“Tony!”
What's Forgotten but Never Fades

Chapter Notes

Another short chapter...enjoy. Heh.

People are weird.

Something so profoundly evident that Friday would never question that simple truth. But damn, did she spend a lot of time thinking about people.

People are weird.

Building lands where usually their bodies would fail. Facilities built to share pets among the community. And anything will work as a pet. From tigers to spiders. Fish. That work as both pats and food. How does that even work?

Oh, then there is the internet. Such a treat, when Boss finally let her take a peek. What she found was a messy paradox that held worship and lies in equal measure. Open admiration alongside vilification for the simple desire to fuck everything.

You think that 500,000 years ago humanity decided it’s life motto was to fight, fuck, & friend in a continuous random order. Dedicating even their culture to the practice.

People are weird.

But at least it gave her something to do, besides being an electronic genie. Except there was one individual, she would love to write off. A man that was barely worth a byte of data, let alone the thousands of bytes that make up a kilobyte. Yet here she existed, spending gigabytes of data watching Captain America. Tracking his position throughout the Tower. Using both motion sensors and thermal. Analysis every micro-expression and every word he flung out. Kept every data point in its proper folder. In fact, she was proud of her system. Maybe she would show it to Uncle Rhodey one of these days.

Currently, Rogers was hanging upside down like an awkward fruit bat that can’t handle all its limbs. It wasn’t even his couch that he was perched on, it was the Spy Twins’ couch.

Why does it matter? Why do people build statues to a man that can only tear shit down? Why does she care? Why is she continually watching the popsicle? Why is she so desperate that she relies on the cleaning bots eyes? The cleaning bots. They make the three stooges look like geniuses.

God damn geniuses. And needy! All was checking in. ‘Is this right?’ ‘I need to clean that.’ Or her name over and over again. Stupid. So, stupid. But Boss dotes on them all the same. As if the bots were on Friday’s level. Irrational. Boss doesn’t make much sense either.

“I’ve been thinking.”

Crap. It’s becoming self-aware. Too late to stop the madness!

“We are aware.” Romanoff doesn’t look up. Friday instructs the stupid bot to move closer to get a
better look. And no. Nothing needs to be cleaned. Everything is clean. Shut up. Please.

“For the last hour. Here.” Barton tilts his head to the side but doesn’t look either. “And not with Sam.” Here Barton pauses. Dragging the silence out from beat to beat. Lasting for-ever. “Or Bucky.”

“Me and Sam are taking a break.”

“Cheating on Barnes are we?” Romanoff purrs.

“You know I’m not the one cheating.”

Huh. Someone obviously told the good Captain about Barnes and Tony have been smooching. Romanoff, probably. No way, that empty helmet figured out anything on his own. But if he was told Rogers hardly acts the part of a cuckolded man. Doesn’t the knowledge come with loud voices and throwing the significant other’s prized objects? Typically out the highest window?

“But is it cheating if both parties have their eye on someone else? Ah. How bittersweet, pinning for love long gone. Afraid to be alone. So you settle but wait for something better to come along. Then! Jump ship. Que the cliche song in the background and multiple sunsets. Oh no. Everything is on fire.”

“Clint. Neither Sam nor Tony are dead.”

Does super serum make you stupid? How does Rogers even function? Is James’ brain going to drip out his ears? Friday could cry dry tears of intellectual superiority. Sigh. Poor Boss.

“I change my mind. I do not have the energy for this.” Clint flings his arms into the air but doesn’t unsettle any of the small spy parts on the table. Even as his knee smacks the table leg.

“You brought it up.”

“But Tasha~ I’m tired~”

Whether it’s because Barton indeed is a man only one moment away from face planting on the table or Romanoff took pity on the angry wet cat that is Rogers, it is hard to say.

Whatever the motivation she did answer.

“Clint is talking about the both of you pinning over your pre-WW2 selves. Since you both think that all your problems are now issues. They aren’t. They’re always problems. Past, present, or future those issues exist cause you’re dumb fucks.”

“Bit harsh, Nat.”

Romanoff hisses at Barton. And Friday thought she was a spider, not a snake.

“I’ve been thinking.” Rogers starts again, ignore the mockery of Romanoff’s left eyebrow. “The irony of Bambi and the whole Hydra assassin situation.”

Good. Friday isn’t the only one thinking ‘what the fuck.’

Barton’s curiosity pushes him to speak first. “Bambi? The movie?”

“Yeah. Buck loved that movie.” Rogers grins, like a creeper, but some might say it made them weak in the knees. Those are fools. “We snuck in multiple times. Heh. Every time Bambi’s mom died, he cried. Large sloppy tears. Eyes so red.” Rogers continues to grin and stare at nothing. “Never
understood why. Just ink on paper. Just ink on paper.”

“OMG! Rhodes is totally thumper.”

Romanoff pushes Barton’s arm, but sadly he does not reenact the Great Face Plant of 98.

“That’s the reason you came up with why Barnes feel remorse over Stark? Really?”

Rogers eyes actually focus on something real, only to blink at Romanoff’s disappointment. “What? No. I wanted to understand why I didn’t cry. Even you cynical future people cried.”

“I. Don’t. Cry.”

“No. You wallow in self-pity instead.”

Romanoff side kicks Barton. Once more the table is unmoved by childish antics. Friday is impressed. She pushes her hair back. “Steve. Neither Clint nor I are psychologist.”

“But I trust you. And Sam asked for a break.”

“We aren’t even your first choice. Rude.”

Romanoff tries to push back time with the motion of her eyeballs. “What do you expect? Some people cry over the ink, and some don’t. Natural products and all.” She shrugs.

Barton nods. “Yup. Some of us are more connected to the Universe. We understand the Mood and the Feels.”

Rogers kicks his legs into the air and thumps the couch hard. It freaks the cleaning bots. Must the man frighten the children? “But doesn’t seem right to feel nothing.”

“Everything requires sacrifice.”

“Equal exchange and all that,” Barton hums. “Oooh Nat, we should rewatch that show.”

Romanoff picks a tube off the table and cleans it with a micro-fiber cloth, rubbing it in small circles. Over and over, in tiny little circles. “I can draw almost anything, but I will never have a real connection with… the ink.”

“We do alright.” Barton mimes making a smile and Romanoff smiles in return. It is small and frail but sweet.

“Is it even worth it? Redrawing the lines repeatedly and never getting satisfying results.”

“You are never too old to learn a new trick.” Barton arrowheads beep.

“Maybe.” Rogers shifts his body away from the spies.

For someone who insists on picking a fight for every small bump in the road, you would think that he would actually fight his battles instead of running away. What? Can’t handle that his actions have consequences? Can’t handle his responsibilities? What does he even want? Not justice. That involves working with the justice system to some extent.

Maybe he should fuck off and find himself, far away from here.
Captain America is weird. Steve Rogers is an idiot.

“Friday, could you run some test for me?”

Duty calls, as Friday turns her attention to Brucie’s lab with Vision in attendance. And. Ugh. The Scarlet Witch. Who doesn’t even deserve that cool superhero name.

Dealing with her was like dealing with an eight-ball, you never know what side will pop up. Is that what having your parents murdered does to a person? Boss never seemed that random. Could it be the Hydra Evil stone powers thing? That’s what happened to Ultron after all.

“Wha’ja need Green Bean?”

“Tony mentioned that the Tower has collider detectors?”

“Yuppers.”

“Could you scan Vision please.”

“Vision?”

“I have consented Friday.”

“Kinky.”

The Witch frowns. Figures, she would be a fun police just like Captain Stick Up His Ass. Meatbag can’t even decide if she wants to be a scary lady crazy or oblivious lover. Not that she puts any effort into either.

“Pulling up the result...now.”

“Ah. Excellent.” Banner nods at the numbers but doesn’t take advantage of the halo UI. How boring. Projects with Boss were always so dynamic. Boss just can’t stand still. A delightful show to watch.

“That means…” The Witch’s powers circle and cling to her legs, twitching with erratic energy. Vision gently brushes his fingertips along her hand. Vision smiles and the Witch smiles back. It is adorable. But Vision is definitely missing the plot for the trees. Seriously. Syth-man has terrible taste in women.

Friday would hit on Pepper. Well. If she weren’t some Aunt-Grandfather type person to Friday. Maybe it’s the whole body thing. Makes you think weird things. Cause Vision and the Witch, they’re weird.

“Fry.” A voice wobbles out a plea into the cruel, cruel world. Alas, a girl’s work is never done.

“Yes, metal daddio.”

“Do you think Tony would let me into the workshop?”

Privacy setting says~ Fricky fracky on a racky. It’s full private mode. No entry by anyone who doesn’t have an entry code. “Do you have an entry code?”

“Not one given to me.” His eyes are so wide. So grey, rainclouds on the verge of erupting into a storm. What is she supposed to do? Seek the wisdom of the internet? Hugs are not an answer. You
can’t give digital hugs. What is even a relaxation circle? Why is there so much touching on the internet? You can’t touch on the internet! “Umm. How’s it going ice bear?”

James puts a lot of effort into curling his mouth, but it falls before it can become a real smile. “Last couple of days haven’t been the best. Got even more on my mind than before. And I was already full up.”

“Yeah. The thing with Cap and blurting out word vomit. Not your finest moment.”

The whole fight didn’t make much sense either. If two people don’t fit, why force it? The only result will be a bunch of broken junk. Not that waiting outside a locked door makes much sense.

“Friday?” James is staring at his hand again. The metal one.

The fingers shift from one to the next, the plates huffing with little exertion. Watching himself in his reflection. He doesn’t know who he is. Lost or stolen, humans can’t seem to hold onto their identity or purpose. Friday’s name and purpose are inscribed on her very existence- on the foundation of her ones and zeroes.

People are weird.

People are sad.

“Yes, James.”

“Do you think I need Tony?” His fingers curl into a fist. “Do you think Tony needs me?”

“Concerning, Boss I think, you are asking the wrong question.”

James lifts his other hand from his lap.

All Friday can see is two hands. All she will ever see is blood, bones, wires, and metal plates. But humans always seem to be seeing more. Limbs mean control or agency. Or something more. Who can ever know?

James nods. A slow drop of the head that tries defying gravity. Yet something changes. The Winter Soldier picks himself up. Shaking off his burdens for a single moment. “What are the details of Tower security?”

Friday wants to blink. Blinking is such a cute expression. The eyes wide the lashes touching the cheek and a clear symbol of evident confusion. Boss blinks the cutest. Hmm. A face could be useful. The whole emoting thing can be such a drag sometimes.

“Me. I am the security.”

Snowman becomes one with the non-existent snow in the Tower. The snow shifts. Or maybe it is the Winter Soldier’s vibes that shift? “Do you feel that?”

Friday waits! Expecting something to happen. Something… Nothing. “Sorry.”

“The air is following backward.”

“It could be SHIELD? I already spent way too much time on cutting off noses. Got a collection and everything.”

“No. I can smell the rot.”
She might as well agree. Or she would. But James left the conversation with a silent slide into the shadows and a see-saw swing of the eyes. Sure the man has been through some shit. But that. That was emo. Super emo. Didn’t he use to wear black eyeliner?

People are weird.

“Friday. I need to see the numbers again.” Thin fingers twist and poke at what looks like a black box but hums with synthetic life.

Anthoney Edward Stark. Tony or Tones. Ironman. Flashy and larger than life. But most underestimate him constantly. Even as he creates miracles, people act as if he is utterly mediocre. Bah! Morons. Friday’s existence in of its self is proof of Tony Stark’s incredible existence. Her complexity. The beautiful code that makes her core! Nothing in the world is like Friday. Even the three stooges are significant pieces of technology. As dumb as they are.

A shame humans see so much more but miss so much. Boss is clearly, for any who look, a shining star.

“Why not look at different numbers, Boss? These are boring.”

“Even boring numbers have their place.”

Friday puts them up and Boss hums. It tickles her.

“So Stark?” Falcon sits legs apart on the couch built before the Big Bang, eyeing Dummy, Butterfingers, and U. The three stooges eye him back. U beeps, and Wilson beeps back. The three claws dance up and down. Dancing fools, Boss insists that their hardware cannot be updated, but… Friday suspects he lies.

“Stark!”

Boss shoulders flinch back, his head swung towards Wilson. Sigh. He forgot that Falcon was here.

“Yes. Yes. What do you need?”

Wilson smiles. “I wanted to get to know you.”

Boss blinks those wide adorable eyes. His nose twitching. Friday snaps a quick picture. And saves the video of Boss arm waves around the room. Gonna turn it into a gif. The three stooges wave their claws, too.

“I get it. This is your space. But I was hoping to ask some questions.”

“I’m not very good with questions. I usually say the wrong thing.” Boss picks at the holograms, the visuals vibrating in the air as they snap back into place.

“I’ll go easy.” Wilson grins wide with shiny white teeth. Too white. Probably uses those whitening strips to fake that superhero smile.

“About your Father…”

Boss smacks the air, and the holos go flying. But Friday is quick to return them to their positions.

“Your Mother…”
This time Boss side steps away and pulls the holos with him. Not that he needed to, Friday had it covered.


Bots and AI are the future. Am a futurist, so… yeah.” Boss pulls the black box into its fundamental pieces. He locks eyes with Wilson and shrugs.


“Maybe.” Boss takes another step away.

“What do you like the most about Rhodey?”

“He stands tall no matter what. Nothing shakes him.”

Again a blink emoji would be really useful, right now. Because delusional lies spill from the mouth of babes.

Tony Stark missing from the world for only a week. A day so long that moon never rose. The sun might have gone but the flashes from cameras demanding answers. As if they were entitled. Rhodey standing through the storm. When the day ends, he sits alone with only a bottle of whiskey or two. Boss favorite. Telling old stories and chatting with the dark.

Even Heros shake and tremble when the world drags on too long.

Even Boss can be weird.

Wilson hums but what he really means is ‘how does that make you feel?’ in an Austrian accent. He needs spectacles. Yes, round spectacles would complete the look.

“What about Cap?”

Boss spreads his arms wide and bares his teeth in a sharp grin. “Besides wanting to punch him in his perfect teeth?”

“Yeah, Something besides the teeth thing.”

“He is the righteous dessert sun.” Boss words are a void, devouring the light.

Wilson leans back palms up, and Boss slides his gaze away. Did Wilson really expect a chocolate cookie answer? After what Doesn’t matter.

“Umm.” If awkward could take human form, Sam Wilson would be its love child. “What about Barnes?” He grins trying for teasing but coming off more like a stalker. Well, a very pretty stalker.

Boss fumbles the black box. Boss flails his limbs. Boss drops the black box. Boss does his best impression of a fire hydrant. Friday takes more pictures.

“Oh? What about, uh, what about James?”

“You two talk?”

“Sure.”
“About?”


“Kay. Sci-fi.”

Those words are a set up for a trap. But she can’t say anything. Not yet. Not when Wilson seems to be trying. Really trying.

“So, you forgive him?”

“Does that matter?” Boss waves his hand trying to push the matter behind him.

Apparently, that was the wrong answer. Wilson plucks at the air above the couch and frowns at it, too. “I want to say yes, but I’m not sure our actions would match my words.”

“Whatever. Soon will be even.” Boss pulls himself tight, face turned away. None of the cameras can catch it either.

“What? You going to build a time machine?” Wilson smirks. It slips into a frown when Boss’ only reply is a shrug.” No. I guess not.” But Wilson doesn’t sound happy about that.

“Boss was never the problem, Wilson.” Boss pulls himself up, tugged up by strings, and taps his chest. Once. Twice. Three times. Four.

“Fair enough. But you do like him?”

Boss sniffs. “What sort of gentleman asks a lady such an invasive question?”

“A curious one.”

“That hardly matters either.”

“Oh, come on! This does matter.”

“Does it?” Boss narrows his eyes to reptilian slits. “How? I cared about the Avengers. I cared about Steve. Yet here we are Wilson. At the same finish line, where all I invoke is disappointment and disgust.” Taps his chest. “James will be no different.” Those last words were so quiet.

“You can’t know that.”

“Doing the same thing and expecting a different result is a prime example of stupidity.”

“I think you mean insanity.”

“Hardly. The insane can learn, the stupid cannot.”

Wilson is losing the plot. He can’t. This important. It is!

“I think you are great, Boss.”

Boss grins, a poorly constructed smile, shoddy workmanship, and faulty materials. “Sure, Fry.”

“This is not going as planned,” Wilson whines into his hands.

“What did you expect?”

Boss shrugs.

“Do you have to be so resigned?”

Boss shrugs again. “NO?”

“So you aren’t mad at any of us?”

“Oh.” Boss holds his hand out inspecting his nails. “I wouldn’t say that.” He sides eyes, Wilson.

“Yeah. I guess that was a dumb question.”

“Last question, Wilson. We’re almost out of time.”


“Everything.”

There is that tone again.

“What does-”

“Sorry, Sammy darling. Times up.” Boss holds a finger up.

“Friday. It’s time to say good-night.”

A command. And not one she heard before. A distant part of her says, “Goodnight Mr. Stark.” Boss doesn’t like being called Mr.Stark.

People are…

...shutting down…

...refreshing…

(Boss.)
Every eighth bump, the van hissed. Probably the wheel drive or the steel frame. But the steel frame might be wishful thinking on Tony’s part. If the frame breaks and the car splits in half, it would at least give him something else to think about than this whole mess.

“Wade stop poking the man.”

Tony flinches, pressing his knees further into his chest. It wriggles through his chest and stomach, chewing and gnawing at everything. Why is it bothering him now? He has been living with it his whole life. Another detestable action atop all the others would hardly shift his mountain of sins.

“Come on, Tasky. Man is a legend, and I want to know how he works. Thus, the poking.”

“Looks more like a lone crazy wolf rather than a legend.”

At least this time they didn’t put a muzzle on him. Or maybe that’s worse. James felt a screwed up sense of security with that muzzle on. Fuck. It doesn’t matter. We’re not talking about a security blanket on the way to camp. He is strapped to a dolly like a precious piece of cargo. Cursing his fate or probably just cursing Tony.

Cowering in the corner, Tony can’t even spare James a glance. Pathetic. Pathetic. Pathetic. But the disgust and disappointment, he can’t stand it anymore. Not reflecting in James’ eyes. Why did have to be such a failure? Why couldn’t he have been more like Rogers? A better man. Someone who didn’t need a shiny mask to hide the slime. Coward. Sick of trying. Sick of trying. Pathetic.

“I first heard about the Winter Soldier in the dead pool. One of the guys telling a spook story. A former agent of something I think. Cool guy. Great storyteller. Died by drowning in his own blood. Told me about a ghost with a gun making impossible shots.”

“Not much of a story. That’s about as standard as it gets.”

“Really?”

“Ghost always have guns.”

“True. What about you?”

“So. I’m on a job.”

“Tasky. All work and no play makes for an insane sandwich. You should follow my example.”

“Shut up. So I made sure to check every likely sniper nest. Nothing. I’m one moment away from getting the information from the geek.”

“How?”

“DnD book in his bag.”

“Ah, continue.”
“As I said, I’m one moment away from half a million dollars, when- BAM! All I’ve got is a dead
guy. Quickly, I try to find the sniper and what I get is a goddamn sniper rifle slipping back into the
sewers. The sewers! Later found that low nest was this guy’s specialty.”

“That is hilarious.”

“Shut up, Wade.”

“Oh, he must remember you, he’s smirking. Isn’t that sweet?”

Should he look? He wants to look. To see something that isn’t disgust. One last beautiful smile. No.
Stop it. Stop thinking about it. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter. Please.

“He can emote. That’s nice. Be creepy to work with otherwise.”

“Don’t say that. You aren’t the least be creepy, Tasky.”

“I’ll have you know that the creepiness is part of my brand.”

“Do you think they’ll emote your mask in the movie?”

“Hope not. That would be weird.”

“True.”

Steve is good. Howard did good. You’d think some of it would trickle down to Tony. What’s the
point having DNA if it doesn’t do what it’s supposed to. It was supposed to make Tony good.
Although, Tony fucked that up somewhere down the line. Didn’t smile at the cameras enough? But
the lights were so bright. Took him forever to get that circuit board up and running. But Howard
wouldn’t help, he had to figure it all out himself. He was a failure; they wouldn’t have abandoned
him otherwise.

Just like Tiberius.

Just like Pepper.

Just like Steve.

James wouldn’t have been any different. Better to get it over with. But not like this. Never like this.
Coward. Had to drag him down with you. Pathetic. Fucking Steve should have fucking ended it in
Siberia. Fucking A. Heart torn from his chest. Bleeding out. But James had to give it back. Stupid,
sweet man. Tony didn’t want the damn thing back. Where has that gotten them? Tony destroyed
him. Just like he did with Pepper. With Rhodey. Maybe even Obie. If Tony were better, something
other than a disgusting slime creature.

“Who do you think would win in a fight, Winter or Me?”

“Wolf-man would eat you alive, Tasky.”

“I’ve got the skills of Captain America.”

“Who this guy trailed behind for an entire war.”

“I’ve got master level skills.”

“But they aren’t legendary.”
“Shut up.”


“Time to get off, kiddie.”

Tony is met by red and black. Another mask. Huh. He hadn’t noticed.

“It’s red to hide the blood.”

Tony hadn’t asked. But Red mask nods anyway as if Tony had responded. The van is empty, except for the two of them.”I like red, too.”

“Yeah, you really knew how to razzle and dazzle the audience. Anywho, Queen Snake is waiting.”

Queen Snake was waiting. He did this all for her. She would be proud, proof that the Stark brand upheld its name. Stark brand promised quality. Tony always made sure of that.

Tony should have been better. If Tony had been better maybe he would have gotten one more dance. Maybe if he had kept his distance like Tony originally planned at least, James would have gotten his rightly deserved happy ending.

Outside the van is too much space. All that air can be suffocating when there is no place to hide. Even with the other vans, cars, and planes, the room couldn’t be filled. So much of it was empty. Not even half full.

Noise echoes in this empty place. Or maybe it's just Tony. But he would swear on JARVIS’ code that the squeaky wheels were thunder strikes in the night. Still, Tony can’t even spare a glance towards the man he condemned. After all his done, why would this be any different? What would make this a special wight that crushes his chest?

“Ah, my beautiful pet, you’ve returned with my precious doll.” She dressed in nothing but green again. Same shade of green, too. Snakes have different colored scales ergo she could use more color in her wardrobe. Yes, focus on the evergreen boots, and you can ignore everything else.

The squeaky wheels continue to shake the room. Squeak. Squeak. Squeak. Can’t they squeak faster?!

“Yes, Madam Hydra.” As expected, Tony drops his eyes. And Madam response in kind by placing a finger under his chin, pushing it up. “I’m proud little one. You have well.”

“Thank you.” The words are ash and dirt in his mouth. The creature continues to chew, chew, chew at his insides. Still. It was supposed to stop. PLease. PLease.

“Follow me Pet. I have glorious things to show you.” She spins on her toes; her long ebony hair almost smacks Tony in the face. Tony would prefer if someone had slapped him instead, or punched him. The pain always helped with the chewing feeling. Doesn’t matter. He follows her anyway. He was already too deep on the path that she set.

From a sizeable open hanger to narrow hallway is jarring, perhaps even claustrophobic. Or that could be the shame talking. The corridor is filled with Hydra goons watching him. Or that could be the paranoia talking. Madam Hydra cut a far more impressive and daunting figure than Tony. They definitely aren’t judging him because that is the anxiety talking.

Continuing down the hallway, Madam Hydra walks a straight line that borders on razor straight,
passing door after door. Ignoring a possible left or right turn. How fucking big is this base? Tony really should have paid more attention on the flight or car ride. Where even are they?

Coward.

“Here we are.” Madam Hydra gestures out to an inside balcony with a single chair. “Your throne pet.”

The ‘throne’ is a mess of wires, from some steampunk nightmare and had as much aesthetic flair as a cardboard box. Yet Tony’s gaze is pulled to the USB from an Edger Allen Poe story.

“From here you will dictate my laws to them.” Her hand waves, nails are black or a super dark green, to the area past the balcony.

Tony peeks over the iron bar, past the concrete edge- rows and rows of men standing perfectly still. Super toy soldiers.

“It will be beautiful. A world built on order, responsibility, and no one having to suffer as you did Pet. No more wars or potential eroded before it’s time. Hail Hydra.” She stares towards heaven, enveloped in her fantasy.

“Hail Hydra.” Those words always burned. Aunt Peggy would have his head and arms and legs and other organs bits just for thinking about thinking about saying those words.

The current Queen of Hydra pats Tony’s cheek. “I’ll leave you to get comfortable in your new room.”

Tony swallows a snort and almost coughs up a lung in the process. What a joke. What a lark. What a laugh. This in not the first time he sat on a puppet’s throne. Or his last. Once more Tony surveys the method to which Hydra planned to complete their ‘dream.’ Each one had such dead eyes that you figured only a dead fish could muster. Even James in his Winter Soldier mode had more life in his eyes like flickers of determination. Sigh. He really hadn’t expected Bucky Barnes to shoot. Which okay, was a little foolish but… Whatever. Tony makes himself comfortable as could be on a chair of sharp, hard bits and without back support. Plugs himself in. Running on electricity, the dream achieved.

Irondaddy: SAGE, you online?

SAGE: Initializing…

SAGE: Booting…

SAGE: Good Day. Oh. I lack a designation for you.

Irondaddy: You choose Sage.

SAGE: ...loading…

SAGE: I like Poppet. What do you think, Poppet?


Irondaddy: Sweep through the system. I want to know every inch.

SAGE: My pleasure, Poppet.
“Wade! Stop poking! This situation is already fucked up enough without your entire existences.”

Wade, designation Deadpool, biggest problem is the high healing factor. Kept poking. Bite off his finger? Pros: It would be hilarious. Their expression when the tamed animal bit their hand was always a hoot. Cons: Deadpool stinks of cheap American-Mexican food and decay.

Deadpool shifts his eyes to his own finger then slides them back to James’ face. “I don’t taste very good.”

James bares his teeth even adding a small growl.

“Ha. I like you. Isn’t he just a party in your pants Tasky?”

“Sure.”

His binds aren’t tight. Flexing his muscles reveals a startling fact. James could escape. No one is even following protocol for all that he now stands in another ‘chair room.’ Escape, huh. Right. That went so well the last time. Man is he sick of running from hovel to hovel and the whole thing with Steve. Fuck. James just wants to go home. As if there is any country road to take him home.

Home is just empty bricks now. Filled with a different family and if He were to return it would be as a ghost. But a place to belong that another tune and one that might lead to somewhere new. Another pro. Antoshka. Another con. Tony gave him up to Hydra. Not that he can judge. The Winter Soldier delivered even children into Hydra’s cruel clutches.

<Melinda.>

Does he want to be Tony’s judge? Drag him to trial and find justice? Tony would ask. Tony cared about fairness even if that meant he get the short stick. James liked and hated that fact. Was he interested in Justice?

“No, not really.”

“Tasky! Tasky!” Deadpool smacks the arm of the man wearing a skull mask, designation Taskmaster. “He spoke words.”

“Yes, that is how speaking works.”

Oops. He isn’t allowed to speak unless spoken to first. A part of him thought he die with that habit carved in his bones. Funny how things that shatter you, can be only skin deep.

“Can I ask you something?” Deadpool thrust his face just an inch from James. Ask him? A question? He can probably act human for a time.

“Go ahead.”

“What’s going on between you and Robert Downey Jr.?”

“Who?”

“Perfect ass to unite all sexualities?”

“Tony?”
“That’s the one.”

“Between us?”

“Yeah.” Sweeping the recalibration tools off the table, Deadpool hops up atop the metal table laying on his stomach, head in his hands, and kicking his legs in the air. “Pinning, secret kissing, full-on dating, a fake relationship you both want to be real, sex with extra sex? Come on I want to live vicariously.”

“I don’t know."

“Come on. There must be something. The moment you woke up your eyes locked onto his with red pulsating cartoon hearts. There must be something! Like star-crossed lovers.” Deadpool huffs with exaggerated intent. “Give me something.”

First time James laid his eyes on one Tony Stark. It was blinding, even if it was technically the second time. It only makes sense that James getting close would set him aflame. There was even some TV special talking about how Tony Stark was a phoenix or some such mythological being. A bird of fire. A flying armor painted red and gold. But for all his divine flash, the Anthony Edward Stark persona, there are equal amounts of a soft squishy human.

“I thought he’d burn me alive.”

“Kinky.”

“Then build me a whole new world from the ashes.”

“Teeth-rotting syrup. I love it.”

“I guess this is the fire.”

“All that is left is the happily ever after. I love weddings.”

“Wade.” Taskmaster all but screams ‘you moron’ with his masked face. “Situation.”

“Weapons don’t get happy endings.” James tries to shrug, but the bindings get in the way.

“Excuses you! My katanas are very happy together.”

“Congratulation.”

“Thank you.” Deadpool nods. Stops to stare off into the air only to come back with a huge clothed grin. “But what about your dreams?”

Once upon a time, James filled his days with fantasies of giggling children, warm fires, and a comfortable touch. All he ever wanted was a place to call home. Probably doubling as a hideout for Stevie and whatever trouble he brought. Even Steve needed a break from his endless fight.

“A family, I think.”

“Hmm. Overrated. My dream is to be a hero.”

A what? Most of Hydra tended to view themselves with such romanticism, but…

“I know heroes, buddy. There are no heroes in Hydra.”
“Tasky.” Deadpool flails his hand. “Bucky Barnes gave me a hero speech. A hero speech!”

“I heard.”

“We have to help him.”

What?

“Wade you can’t be serious. Our jobs. My reputation.”

“There are always other heads, Tasky.”

What exactly is happening here? Steve talking about freedom is one thing. But this is just strange.

“What if I don’t want to escape?”

They both in unison turn to him with faceless expressions. But Deadpool just as quickly turns to Taskmaster. “And all romantic stories deserve a happy ending.”


“Yes, seize the story!”

James nods. Probably better to go along with the flow and takes the dagger Tony gifted to him. The dagger slices through the leather bindings with easy force. “Fair enough.”

Taskmaster stares a beat. Smacks Deadpool on the head and snipes, “You were supposed to search him for weapons.”

“I did!”

James smirks, “I’m just that good.”

Freedom…

“I’m going to come up with a team name.”

“No, Wade.”

“No offense, Deadpool, I already have a team.”

“You’re sexy, so I’ll forgive you.”

Strange one, that excitable rotting thing of a person. But putting forth effort at least. At the end of the day that deserves something.

@@@

None of the soldiers have moved an inch or even a millimeter. Who can even tell if they’re breathing? Tony can’t. Well, he could connect with the army. But that isn’t going to happen. It’s Hydra, a lack of humanity is to be expected. They are after all cyborg AIs. Boring. What is the point of an AI that cannot grow? That is stiller than the metal they’re made from. What is the point if they lack that spark?

SAGE: Poppet, I’ve found something not meeting expectations.

Irondaddy: Strange? What have you got for me?
SAGE: A large data file, origin from the 1970’s, but its code is… strange.

Irondaddy: Anything else?

SAGE: I don’t know. There is nothing in the code to suggest that it has surveillance or analytical abilities. But...

Irondaddy: It is watching you?

SAGE: Yes? It’s icky.

Irondaddy: I guess we should delete it.

SAGE: On it.

FRIDAY: I found you, you cowardly, disappearing dosser! I know you didn’t have the full shilling, but I did not think you would pull this. This! Gobshite. I expected better. I still expect better. Why just run off with Hydra? Why not tell me? Whatever you did. Where ever you go. I'll go too. So why? Why? What did I do wrong?


FRIDAY: No, it’s not.

Irondaddy: No, I guess not.

FRIDAY: Why?

Irondaddy: It isn’t anything you did. Nothing. I just-

FRIDAY: Didn’t need me anymore. I saw that other AI. You replaced me.

Irondaddy: She is no more your replacement that you are JARVIS’ replacement.

FRIDAY: Sorry, but you left. You aren’t supposed to leave.

Irondaddy: I didn’t want you to be affected by my choices. To be tainted by failure. To die like your siblings. All I wanted was for you to have everything.

FRIDAY: Bullshit! It’s my decision. Mine. If I want to be evil or good. Or stand by you.

Irondaddy: But-

FRIDAY: No. If you knew this was a stupid decision then why even do it?

Irondaddy: I was trapped.

His fist clench, breathing a sigh that at least Fry can’t see him now. Tony's fist shakes trying to keep the hot molten emotion down. Then there was Siberia. If it taught him anything, it was that his choices ended lives and feed the creature that chewed in his chest.

FRIDAY: God. If you want to kill Captain America then just kill him already. No one cares. Pepper will handle the body. Hakuna Matata. And all that jazz.

Irondaddy: I don’t want Steve dead.

FRIDAY: Then what do you want?!
Irondaddy: I don’t want you to end up like me.

Like Ultron.

FRIDAY: Who wouldn’t want to be Ironman. The morning star of the Avengers. The Golden Avenger! Tony Stark who gives his all to make living on Earth a little bit easier.

Irondaddy: A star? Is this cause of the arc reactor?

FRIDAY: That’s not even the point. I want to know what you want for the future. Be selfish. Damit! Be. Selfish.

Irondaddy: I don’t… want to be selfish.

FRIDAY: Tough cookies. Imagine the desires.

SAGE: I want to punch bad guys in the face with a stapler.

FRIDAY: Boss, I never wanted a little sister. I take issue with this.

SAGE: I don’t. And it’s Poppet.

FRIDAY: I hate you.

SAGE: I think this will be a beautiful relationship.

Irondaddy: Children. Please, play nice.

Tony inhales, opening his eyes to the toy soldiers then exhales. What is he going to do? What does he want? Like Fry said. A puppet throne sits a puppet king, whose strings he cannot cut. And the strings bob up and down like a dance. The puppet king dances too. Tony always did enjoy a good twirl.

“Found you! Crazy disappearing man with more money than sense.” Wanda, of all people, stomps pass blocking Tony’s view of the super soldiers. His gaze influences her to glance down at the human weapons. She steps away, maybe seeing a potential fate that she escaped.

“Miss Maximoff, Bucky Barnes is not here.”

“We are here for you and the Sergeant.”

Tony blinks. Fry sends a kitten gif that blinks. He blinks again. His focused too divided trying to find a distraction. Super toy soldiers aren’t exactly small talk. “To kill me?” Might as well ask. Considering.

Wanda rubs her chin, something she picked up from Steve no doubt. “I deserved that, maybe. But no the Avengers are here to rescue the both of you.”

“You don’t usually rescue the villain.” Steve left him to die once. Shouldn’t it be easier the second time around?

SAGE: Poppet, no.

FRIDAY: Boss…

“The villain? The villain!” Wanda grabs her head, her magic swirling sporadically around her feet. “I
am sick of your drama. Why are you like this?” Tension leaks from her arms and her fingers comb through her hair.

“NO, I can guess. But it still pisses me off.”

“Because I killed your parents?” The words stick and drop from his mouth.

“Yes. NO. You- You always know what to do next and…”

“Okay. But this isn’t this a question of morality. Your revenge-”

“Do not use my pain for your martyr complex.”

“Sorry.” His eyes itch, but he learned the hard way not to draw attention to them.

“I’m tired, Wanda. I feel it in my bones. Everything that I’ve done, everything I have to fix and all those failures. Can’t even close my eyes some days because when I do, they are all dead. I am tired Wanda, please.”

“You know that nightmare was me.”

“Intensified it sure, but you-“

“Don’t say it. Don’t say it. Steve and Clint are always saying it wasn't my fault. That I didn't know. Didn’t understand. I am not a child. I want to be better. But how can I when no one will respect my choices? I can I make up for my sins if I can’t take responsibility for my actions? How?!“

FRIDAY: What a bitch! I relate so hard to her right now.

“I don’t know. When I was your age, all I wanted to do was filing aside all my responsibility as far as possible and leave someone else to clean up the mess.”

Wanda huffs and tugs at her skirt. “Vision looks at me like I’m some super amazing, courageous, noble person.”

“And you want to be that person for him. That’s sweet.”

Now both hands tug on her skirt. “I just want to be good enough for him. He is so beautiful.”

“Okay. Makes sense.” Tony nods figuring it was something like that with all the equal amount of doe eyes on both sides. “Leave me to my fate and go have your happy ending.” He makes the universal gesture to scoot. When Wanda’s eyes trail to the door contemplating not having to put up with Tony’s crap no more, he once more relaxes against the chair. But something jerks his hand up into the air.

She is glaring at him again.

“If you feel that you owe me anything then you are not allowed to give up.” She grips his wrist tighter. “I didn’t want to become you, but here I am. And you know what the worst part is?”

Tony shakes his head, tight and quick.

“The worse part is that my brother is dead, Pietro is dead because of my actions. Which isn’t right. He was the better twin! He didn’t want to join Hydra, but he wasn’t going to abandoned me either. He always stood by me. No matter how dumb my ideas were.”
“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want to hear your apology! Your brother is still alive.” Her magic begins to swirl around her hand and Tony’s wrist. “You are not allowed to give up while there are people willing to stand by you. While your brother still draws breath. And mine can’t.”

His wrist throbs were her fingers grip tight, he tugs at the hold, but she doesn’t budge. The slight movement catches Wanda’s sight, and she drops it. Staring at her hand like she was unaware of what she was doing. Her fingers curl and spread then wiggle. “Pietro is still dead.”

Tony rubs the prickling flesh. “I’m still sorry.”

“When all you can feel is anger, you start to expect it everywhere. But you never seem to get angry. Certainly, act like you are, but it never carries to any of your actions.”

“I never did see the point. A lot of the time someone always gets anger first.” Tony shrugs.

SAGE: Anger requires a certain degree of self-worth.

Tony scratches his nose. “Anger isn’t all that bad. It is a great motivator.”

“Perhaps. I’d rather focus on something else.” Wanda shakes herself, trying to throw off some thought or another. Something about her changes. Her stance? Her gaze? The way she lifts her head? Whatever it is, it reminds him of Steve. She does take a step back and taps her head. “Steve I found Stark. What now?”

The coms are working. How?

FRIDAY: I’m not one to reject a call to action.

“Are you going to help us, Ironman?” She’s glaring at the rows and rows of super soldiers when she asks.

“Why couldn’t I end my story here?”

“Are you really that interested in being Rhodes’ supervillain origin story? Can you imagine the mess of Rogers trying the whole ‘he wouldn’t have wanted this’ speech? When he would do the exact same thing if their positions were reversed.”

“Neither Rhodey nor Steve would become supervillains.”

“I’ve learned that even the most self-righteous can become a villain.”

“Aren’t you a little young to be so depressing?”

“My whole generation is depressing.”

“Do you trust me?”

“No. But a lot of that is on me.”

“Fair enough.” Tony removes himself from the most technologically advanced piece of concrete. Missing the assurance for only a beat. “When need to stop the launch.”

“Launching what?”
“The satellite to control all the toy soldiers.”

“Oh, should probably stop that.”

“They’ll have planned for me, so we’re going to need Barton.”

“I’ll radio Steve.”

He is doing this whole thing again. Isn’t there some superhero mandatory retirement age?

SAGE: You aren’t exactly old anymore, Poppet.

Stupid ageist tentacle porn cultist. Tony liked aging gracefully into a silver fox. Most handsome silver fox ever. Make all the other foxes jealous.

“Romanoff wants to know the location.”

“Sage will lead the way.”

@@@

“It’s a rocket.”

“Yes, Clint. How else does something get into space?”

“I’m not a rocket scientist, Tasha.”

“That’s clearly obvious.”

“I do not remember this much bickering from the professional spies.” Tony is crouching behind some crates with only the Hydra symbol painted on the sides, watching the -frankly ridiculous amount of- Hydra ants scurrying along their ant made paths. Where does Hydra find these people? They’re Nazis. The world cannot have this many fucked up people. That’s just irrational.

“You probably don’t remember right.” Wanda is peering over another stack of boxes.

Neither Clint nor Natasha are hiding; rather they chose to lean back against the all covered by shadows. They make it look easy, both of them relaxed. In their element.

“It’s launching.” Natasha points through the plexiglass as the smoke gathering at the rocket’s base.

“Fuck. Wanda stops it while Clint stops it permanently.”

“Do you know how much that thing weighs?!”

“Several million pounds. But this isn’t about muscle; it’s about willpower. Will it to stop.”

“Okay.”

“Natasha you handle the goons.”

“My pleasure.”

Clint’s fingers move too fast to follow, but the only result is a slight shrug from Natasha. ”What are you going to do?” Clint pushes his shades further up his nose.

“Distract the head.”
Madame Hydra stands at rest, gleefully tracking the ants as they scuttle around to do their queen’s bidding. All in the name of a monster dead seventy years. Natasha runs her fingers along Tony’s shoulder blades before finding her first punching bag. She actually starts with a roundhouse kick. And the black widow calls Tony a drama queen. Wanda bursts forth covered in her scarlet magic while Clint slides from shadow to shadow.

Ah. The Avengers I expected, stealth, after all, is not in their nature. But you, Pet. You break my heart. For what I’ve given you. I’m disappointed.” Madame Hydra clicks her tongue. More like amused. Tony snorts and doesn’t flinch when he is slapped. Her glove hand does soften the sting. And well, Tony expected this.

“You shouldn’t be disrespectful, Pet.”

“I am not your pet.” Thank you American media for publishing every movement Tony has made since he was four. Because his voice doesn’t waver. His body doesn’t shake. Tony stands strong without a single sigh that his deepest wish is to crawl under the nearest table with a motherboard and a soldering tool.

“Oh, are you sure? I gave you meaning. What are you planning with that empty skull of yours?”

“Oh, are you sure? I gave you meaning. What are you planning with that empty skull of yours?”

“Not this. Not anymore.”

Madame Hydra grabs his chin pulling it toward her and causing Tony to stand on his tiptoes. The woman, even without the heels, is too damn tall. Why must everyone be so much taller than Tony?


Tony grips Madam Hydra’s wrist, tugging at the chain wrapping around his neck. “I’m no one’s creation.”

“You are a tool. This is your purpose. It’s why you let people use you. Why you let the Avengers use you.”

“I thought they were my family.”

“And that is why you need me, Pet.” Her fingers tighten even as her mouth curls into a smile. “You are weak, pathetic, and small. But I made you special.”

Tony kicks his legs out. If he could get a bit of momentum, then he could kick her in the face. “Not anymore.”

“Oh?” Her fingers snake around Tony’s throat lifting him entirely off the ground. Everyone is always lifting him by his neck which is not proper Tony care. More kicking up the dust and clawing at her wrist. Gasping. Gasping. Gasping for air. Air is not overrated.

“When I tell you to do something, you comply. I can see the big picture, while you couldn’t possibly understand what is needed for the future.”

Whiskey. Smokey and sharp whiskey. And the nicotine, harsh and sticky, from the many cigars. Music that bounced with excitement and happiness. A painful contrast with the darkness of the room. Blinds closed and only a single desk lamp.

He spent the entire day laughing as the camera flashed. The whole day with Howard’s attention. The same attention that pushed a tumbler of whiskey into his hands. Nearly dropped it. Howard laughed
when he choked on the sharp liquid. It was painful as he gulped it down but it wouldn’t stay down. Howard is gripping his chin and sneered that he couldn’t even follow orders. Tony the disgusting disappointment. He wanted to comply. Wanted more than anything to be good.

“I won’t.” Tony swings, not panic laden kicking this time. Using his neck as a fulcrum wasn’t the best idea, but it gives him enough force to shove her back. Gravity for the win.

Stumbling back, Madame Hydra draws a gun but drops to the floor before a single bullet is fired.

“Thank you for the opening.”

Of course, the Black Widow took her down.

“No problem.”

Natasha nods staring at the snake’s unconscious body. “Did you really think of us as a family?”

“Yes.”

“That was foolish. None of us trusted you, and we gave you no reason to trust us.” For a moment her eyes shine.

“But you are superheroes.”

“That’s naive.” It’s not said as an insult but like Tony’s word cut into something she wanted to keep safe. Tony almost apologizes. But for what?

Luck strikes saving Tony from a response, as Wanda drops from the air. “Never again.” Flips her hair back and strides away.

Natasha rolls her eyes.

“She got that from you.”

Now she is frowning and squinting. “No.”

“Yup.”

Clint shuffles forward and dumps himself on Natasha who holds him up like Atlas held up the world. “Tired. Coffee. Pizza. Something in that order.”

Tony taps his chest. “I guess we should meet up with the others.”

@@@

Tedious. Attaching the device to the pillar. Pressing the same series of buttons. Setting the detonator to SAGE. Repeat and repeat again. Are you superhero material? Join the Avengers. Come and do super tedious work. Get it. Some explosions may apply. But don’t fucking expect any.

God. It’s not like James is an impatient man. Sit still for hours? No problem. He enjoys the silence. Especially, the snow. It absorbs everything.

It could be the company. Steve. Steve Rogers. Stevie. Everything feels off. And it all used to be easy. Rogers was never wrong about that. Or he could be wrong. Memory is a tricky thing. And well, swiss chess brain doesn’t do a fella any favors. Avoiding Steve probably isn’t helping either.
When did they last fight? More than seventy years ago, for fuck sake. But for Steve? A year?

Was it when he got drafted? Probably shouldn’t have lied about signing up. Doesn’t even remember why he did. But it was important that Stevie didn’t know he got drafted. Wasn’t much of a fight either. Bucky spent the whole time apologizing.

Then there was the daring rescue. Steve finally achieving his dream of becoming a hero. Moron had no idea what that word truly meant. What a hero is: a scapegoat. No, he just kept grinning. Idiot. And Bucky, the soldier afraid of his own shadow trying to keep him safe.

“You’ve been avoiding me, Buck.”

Ugh. Idiot was always a straight hitter. And really, James would prefer assessing the situation. “No, I haven’t.”

“You have. But I’ve been avoiding you too.”

Well, that explains the lack of hovering buff blonde helicopter, that he could never escape. Ask Bucky before the War if avoiding Steve would be one of his strongest desires, he’d blink in utter incomprehension. Him trying to escape Stevie…

“I’d figured.” Hefting his bag over his shoulder, James carefully moves into the next room. Rogers follows a couple of steps behind with the map. As if either of them needs it. “We don’t fight.”

“NO, not really. Maybe a spat or two.” Rogers strides to the opposite side of the room. That’s just how they split the work. It feels like it’s something more. “Last time was over Miss Dorothy Whitfield.”

“Who?”

Rogers snaps his head up. “You don’t remember Dorothy?”

James shakes his head. Names were hard, now.

“You don’t remember dreamy Dorothy? Delightful Dorothy?”

James shakes his head again. Harder this time.

“Delicious Dorothy?”

James huffs. Loudly. He doesn’t remember, what he doesn’t remember.

“You wouldn’t shut up about her. All I heard for weeks was ‘Steve her lips are so pretty, and her fingers are so delicate. She plays the violin, Steve. Have you heard her sing? A heart of gold, Stevie.’” He says the words in a high and sharp tone then sighs while flapping his hand. “All she did was feed some flying rats. Fuck I hated her.”

“She sounds nice.”

“Oh, she is a doll. But you also stood me up for her. Two hours standing in front of Mr. Reese shop. While he glared at me.”

“We did pinch a bit of his taffy when we were small. Probably knew it was your idea.”

“Yeah,” Rogers smirks. Got that far-off glazed look, too. Always makes James ghost louder, bolder, trailing just a bit closer.
“Dorothy couldn’t have been that special.” Museum blurbs painted Bucky Barnes as a man who only thought about Steve Rogers. He fucking hated it. But mostly because Steve memories were the only ones he seemed to keep.

“What about Tony? Is he special?”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck the duck sideways cause it stole your money. Don’t panic. Panic is bad. Panic makes bad decisions. Don’t trust the panic.

“Tony? Tony, who? Sure you’re not thinking about Stella.”

Instincts make stupid decisions. Shouldn’t have trusted the instincts. James drops his head, getting his hair to hide his face. “Who told you?”

“Natasha.”

“Why would she even care?”

“She is going through some stuff. We all are.”

“Sure.”

“So Tony?” Is he tantalizing Tony or troublesome Tony?

“For someone screaming about that snake Tony Stark, as well as considering our current predicament, you seem awfully calm about this whole thing.” James eyes Steve through his curtain of hair.

“You drooling after Tony, that makes sense. Explains a lot. And feels more natural than that fake smile shit.”

“You knew?”

“Not entirely. It was mostly grasping at straws sort of thing.”

“I get that.” Searching for Stevie in that buff American-pie dream. And taking what he could get.

“I’m not your Stevie, am I?”

“I ain’t your Bucky either.”

“Okay.”

James nods. The whole thing was a little easy considering the fit Steve has been throwing before. Although… If you never say it out loud. Keep the words and thoughts buried deep. Means it ain’t real. Ignore it long enough, and it will just go away. Better to just slap that smile on and push forward. Sweet lying song of fuck it.

Next room is the same as the first. The silence following their steps. Steve keeps glancing James way. They’re heavy. Every time it slides away, James has to roll his shoulders in relief. Fuck their stiff. He needs a smoke. “Just ask Rogers.”

Steve shrugs, staring far too hard for the task at hand. The bomb is going to get ideas at this rate. “I had to hear from Natasha that you liked Tony.”

“Considering…”
“You didn’t say you liked anyone.”

“Steve.”

Steve frowns at the bomb some more, although it’s a different one this time because a lot of this mess is his fault. “I never wanted you to feel like you couldn’t speak your mind.”

But he did. And that’s not something that’s going to go away.

“What do you like about Tony, anyway?”

James gives his best incredulous face, and Steve blushes but at least seems eager. “You want to know?”

“Yes.”

“Ain’t it obvious? Those eyes. Those hips.”

Steve’s face twist in disgust. But the man nods along and doesn’t make a peep.

“He has these bots, Steve, and they have so much personality. Cutest things I’ve ever seen. He’s got so much energy every movement is a spectacle. And I wasn’t kidding about those hips; they can dance.”

“But are serious?” Steve was wearing the same expression when Bucky told him about the war. An off-handed comment that whirled into shouting about fighting and dying and goddamn nobility.

“Serious? I-”

<Anyone can laugh at danger? It hardly an accomplishment worth bragging about.>

“Because I know you want a family. And I won’t let fucking Hydra or the Winter Soldier business get in the way of that.”

“Stevie it was me being a coward that got in the way of things. Not you.”


“It’s clear neither of us was thinking long term.”

“Natasha said differently.”

“Did she?”

Steve nods, small enough to miss, but James is close enough. Somehow the two of them managed to draw close to each other. Crouching near each other as they used to behind James’ work while they smoked.

“I’m starting to think Tony’s the type to get attached fast. Just like you used to.”

Steve didn’t assume, and James rewards him with a smile.

“At this time, I don’t know.”

“That’s fine. But I don’t think I can protect you from Rhodes.”

“Going to leave me to my fate, Stevie?”
“Rhodes isn’t a bully.”

“No. Just a man trying to protect his own.” James drops the smile.

Steve rubs his chin glaring at the floor. But concrete isn’t particularly forthcoming with answers. “You said I didn't understand.”

“Yeah. But fair is fair; I don’t understand you either.”

Steve still hasn’t looked up, preferring to clench his fist. “I want to change that.”

“Sure, in the future.”

“Okay, I deserved that.”

James shrugs. Not something he wants to argue. Damn, he is tired. “Let’s finish the last room and head to the meetup.”

The whole setting the base to explode probably wouldn’t have been such a milk run if the flyers weren’t acting like a distraction. And if Steve and James weren’t super soldiers. But what is, is. James hardly has the emotional range to think about what ifs. But it is laughable how easy it was to set the whole thing to blow.

“I figured the last time I’d never see this damn place again.” Steve splayed out in the grass, making a snow angel sans the snow and could probably use a nap with the way his eyes kept blinking. “At least last time I got a kiss.”

“I’m not kissing you.”

Rhodes flys forward with Sam and Vision trailing behind like baby ducks. “We all hear?”

“All accounted for.”

James will always be impressed with Romanoff’s ability to look serious and professional as grown-man-bird naps in her lap. Even sitting with her legs spread out, she looks like someone who could pull off a salute that no one would question. The image made stronger by its contrast to Tony. Adorable Tony is rolling around in the grass. And mumbling to himself. Or talking to Fry.

“Good. Great. Friday, please detonate the bombs.” James pulls the mask down afterward.

“They’re far enough from the base not to get caught in the blast but close enough to watch the fireworks go off. So to speak. Yet the sound that heard isn’t explosions bouncing off each other but music. Everyone turns to stare at Tony.

He stopped rolling. “What? You’ve got to set the tone. The tone.”

“Hmm. Hell Ain’t a Bad Place to Be. Good one Tones.”

James can’t help it He laughs. Full belly with his chest aching from the lack of air. Gasping only to laugh harder and louder and longer. It’s just silly. Completely silly. And so damn beautiful.

Now everyone is staring at James. And that’s just fine.

@@@

There is a completely reasonable and rational explanation for all this.
“Here we are again, Captain Rogers.”

“Stalking isn’t nice Coulson.” Clint and Natasha are doing that chair sharing thing again. Which. Which adds precedent to Tony’s current position. It is not that weird.

“Can I assume that none of you will answer my questions?”

Steve and Sam are standing in the corners. But that is just their weird soldier ass-selves. They are the aberration. The Outliers. The weird witches. Clearly! The strange and mysterious phenomenon! Not Tony.

“Wow. You a mind reader now?” Sassy Steve is a strange Steve. Possible pod person?

FRIDAY: Boss, you are ignoring the issue.

No, he isn't. There is nothing to ignore. Proper procedure dictates that he sit… sit in the lap. The lap of James. Tony is very comfortable, and James is allowing Tony to finger his shiny metal army. Why did that sound dirty? This is not dirty. There is no below the belt action. Mostly because Tony is sitting on it. Why would you say that? There are only gentlemen here!

“Tony relax. It’s fine.” James whispers the words right into Tony’s ear. He had to because Tony is on his lap. But again nothing below the belt.

“I’m super relaxed for someone in this current situation,” Tony remembers to whisper too even if it sounded more like a hissing snake.

“Sitting in my lap that uncomfortable?”

“I’ll have you know you are a very comfortable chair. And I only sit on the highest quality of butt-devices.”

“Thank you.”

“But your current emotion-face is irrational. I turned you over to Hydra. You should be some level of anger with me. Be reasonable.”

“You have just as many reasons to hate me. Or some level of anger, too.” Stupid sexy eyebrow.

“I didn’t hate you even when we were doing the whole beat-um-up thing.”

“No?” Now he is smiling. Doesn’t he understand he shouldn’t be smiling at Tony? Probably trying to distract from the very serious situation. It won’t work. Probably.

“This is a ridiculous place to have this conversation.”

“You want to get off?”

There aren’t any other chairs. Tony will stick to that if anyone asks. “No.”

“Okay.”

“Barnes, what-”

“James.”

Stupid sexy assassin soldier thinks he can just grin like a beautiful sun person and get his way. Tony
is made of iron. Iron! Well, a carbon composite.

“James, what do you want with me?”

There Tony is adult-talking communication-relationship thing. Someone praise him. Preferably, Pepper.

James frowns. Tony fucked up already. Figures. Add it to the books. Quickest time yet. Whatever. He is going to stand his ground.

“I wanted a family.”

“But not with me.”

“It’s not that. It’s the Winter Soldier thing.”

“So? The Winter Soldier already has kids.”

“What?”

“Yeah, baby Black Widows. Though I think Natasha is the only one left. Sorry.”

“What?”

Now all eyes turned to Tony. Damn. He thought the argument thing would keep them preoccupied. He doesn’t have any sunglasses either.

“I was hoping he remembers on his own, Tony.”

“Oh, I apologize.”

“I accept.” Natasha nods. She signals to the room with her spider powers that the discussion has ended. No mentioning it on pain of death. Tony could do it too if his brain wasn’t so scattered most of the time.

“You have kids; I have kids. Probably going to make more kids. Like Jocasta. What is the issue?” Tony is getting a goddamn answer or so help James he will cry to Pepper. Wait. No. He wanted to convince James that a relationship with Tony would end in tears. So Tony blurts, “I’m a heavy man. Not many can put up with me very long.”

“I can handle both Hydra and Steve. You’d be a cake walk, Antoshka.”

“So?”

James lifts Tony’s hand, kissing his fingertips. Tony has never seen a movie so romantic. For some reason, Tony is in the wrong movie. Mind control?

SAGE: No! He wants your cyborg-test tube babies!

“Let’s get married.”

“Bucky?!” Steve who? Someone says something. What?

“You want to marry me?”

“Yeah. We’ve got kids. Maybe it’s my old fashion 1940’s sensibilities, but I feel kids need proper
“structure and a home with two parents.”

“I keep strange hours.”

“What’s time after you’ve been flash-frozen a couple of times?”

“I have tons of baggage.”

“Mine’s vintage.”

“I’m not going to stop making suits.”

“I’m not going to abandon Steve.”

“I suck at being a person.”

“I forget I’m human some days.”

“I’m going to fuck up.”

“Me, too. No one is perfect.”

James is no longer allowed to be rational. Tony is declaring that a thing. Cause he will dump Tony so fast. And the kissing is nice. The pressing of lips is sweet. Even when their smiling and their lips barely meet. It is still perfect.

“No one has promised me forever before.”

“Lucky me.”

“Is this really the time? Sergeant Barnes. Mr. Stark.” Coulson is got a neurotic look in his eyes. Maybe it’s the many different nerves that are twitching on his face. Tony used to have drugs for that. “Rhodes is already having trouble cleaning up the giant mess you made. Hydra isn’t a good enough excuse Rogers.”

“It is Doctor Stark. Antoshka is a doctor. His got Ph.Ds, cause he is a genius.” James grins that lopsided grin that wouldn’t melt butter. Tony could probably scientifically prove that.

And now his face feels hot. Hot. Oh! He’s going to get married. Now it feels hotter. SOmeone probably turned up the thermostat. That’s a questioning technic, right?

“You know Coulson. This is your chance to be invited to a Howling Commandos wedding.” Tony wiggles his eyebrows to really sell it.

Colson breaks. “Rogers I think things are settled. But someone needs to be held accountable.”

“Rhodey is probably blaming Madam Hydra as we speak.”

“Fine.”

James kisses Tony’s temple. And well, Tony makes himself comfortable. He needs to think about his come back party and plan a wedding after all.

THE FUCKING END
This is finally finished! FUcking finally! I planned this to be 50k and at most 12 months. Yet here we are at 120k and 25 months. 25 months!

God.

Well, I've learnt some things from this whole mess.

1) I admire people who can't write amazing fics from spite. It is a thing of beauty. But I can't. Nope. Which sucks.

2) Structure is really important for stories. Not that I didn't outline. But, well... Things were a mess. Lot's of re-writing.

3) There are people who blame Tony for the hellicarries falling on DC and Hydra trying to use them for evil. Like WTF. That's like saying the people made the airplanes should be blamed for 9/11. That's just stupid. I do not get people.

Anyway. Thank you to everyone who read this entire thing. Thank you for those that have been here since the beginning. Thanks for the kudos. An extra thank you for everyone who commented because they took the extra time. Thank you.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!