I’ll never wear your broken crown.

by Triddlegrl

Summary

The Avengers are the governments shoddy attempt to make up for years of oppressive rule and put back the ‘pride’ in being a human-cat hybrid. And fine, Tony will play ball. He’ll fight the bad guys and pose for the cameras, he’ll even let a bunch of misfits move into his tower, and he might even come to call them family; but nobody is crowning him prom queen. We’re all agreed he’d be terrible at leading a pride right? All in favor of dismissing the motion, say aye.

Notes

***Important Rambling***

Okay so this mess is a combination of my love for the paranormal, cats, the weirdness of the a/b/o universe and a need to self sooth after what has been an emotionally traumatic week for
me here in the US of A.

I had other things to do but I said, "Screw it I'm writing kitty Tony because I wanna." And I did.

So there's no grand plan set in place for this other than the end goal of Tony taking that metaphorical crown, making the Avengers a real pride and everybody having lots of kits.

As far as the pairings I listed, in all honesty this bit of self indulgence could go any which way and I'm just sitting here by myself rubbing my hands over the infinite possibility for drama, angst and sweet lovin. lol. So be warned? If you can't read anything else but your OTP I totally get that so I just want to be upfront that nothing is set in stone as of this moment. I know for sure Bruce and Clint help him through his heat and are pretty good bros about it but as far as end game goes I am in debate.

Steve? T'Challa? Bucky? Bucky and Steve (why pick one when you can have both)?

Obviously Steve will always be my favorite *pinches his cheeks* but it will be interesting when T'Challa arrives to get a look at a cat culture that developed freely. And when the Queen dies without an heir what is a Prince to do but search for mate? But how down with that is Steve? And what about poor Bucky?

I've yet to decide how 'bonded' Bucky and Steve were, but I'm leaning on romantically. And it makes for such good story to have another queen pop up and rattle Tony's world a bit. It would be interesting to explore some Queen on Queen action and a shared power system. And should "poor" Steve, caught in the middle. Suffering so. But IDK Bucky and Natasha are so wonderful to explore I'll never turn down a chance to do that either.

Well I guess an abundance of options is not a bad thing.

Anyway, I'm just looking to have fun with this and write relatively fluffy (pardon the terrible pun) fic full of courting, team bonding, followed by more kittens appearing than you can stand.

If you're down with that and have any preference in particular make your voice heard now while I'm still deciding things. And for my fellow Americans and anyone else just having a bad week, cheer up kids. We're going to get through this. Have some kitties.
Tony's just not the cat you're looking for.

Tony had never expected to become part of a pride, let alone head one, so he's at a complete loss as to what to do when Jarvis lets him know that Clint is on his way, and then Barton is suddenly there in front of Tony asking his permission to get collared.

"Excuse me?" Tony blinked up at Barton who had perched himself on the arm of the ratty couch Tony usually collapses on after long binges when he's too tired to make it to the penthouse.

"It's not a big deal Stark," Clint said, rolling his shoulders to release the tension in them and Tony narrowed his eyes and set the wrench in his hand down with a clink.

"It's a big deal when you want to let someone collar you. What happened to that fel you were seeing?"

Laura had been nice, as far as kittens went. Tony had only met her one time in passing and had promptly put her out of his mind because he had better things to focus on than Barton's love life. And okay, collared kats made him uncomfortable. So sue him.

"Her parent got pushy. Phil did some digging." Clint replied with another shrug but his mouth got tight around the words. Tony almost wished he could see his eyes behind his sunglasses. "He was a little too invested in breeding her and way too friendly with senator Stern for my comfort."

Tony winced, because yeah... that was rough.

But maybe he should back up.

Clint's not human, at least not the sort of human that other human beings recognize as human. He's 'Gata' which means that he's homo-catus, which for those without a PHD in biology means he's a human feline hybrid.

They've been around for centuries but they're less than five percent of the population still. Most people don't call them by the politically approved name (Gata) and go straight to pop culture. On the whole Kats are popular possessions for most domestic households though to properly care for them it does take a bit of dough, so primarily they are possessed by the upper middle class and the elite.

They're not human despite appearing so (minus a few cosmetic differences) so nobody raises too much of a stink about their rights to own property, hold jobs, or you know decide whether or not they'd like to date the tom of their choice and have kits.

Laura was a nice kitten (what people call a domesticated female, because it's not completely derogatory or anything) and Clint was a nice tom but she still needed her parents approval to have a relationship.

And no, before you think it. Usually a kat's "parent" is in no way blood related to them. See when young kits are put up for adoption their owners like to feel good about themselves and the whole messed up institution, so they become proud "parents" rather than slave masters. But that's just Tony's opinion. Don't let him influence you.

The exception is of course when a parent gets frisky with their kitty (happens all the time but getting stuck with progeny is the taboo part) and the kit gets stuck with the wrong set of active genes?

Well in that case the parent is still a parent but the kit is definitely not a child.
Tony should know. He's a kat too, and Howard might have been Tony's father but that didn't make Tony his child. Not in Howard's eyes or anyone else's.

But that's not the point. The point is Barton just came into his workshop and asked Tony if he'd be okay if Phil Coulson collard him.

Coulson's already their handler because no way was the government going to allow Fury to organize a pride full of undomesticated wildkats into an elite task force without one.

Officially Pepper is still Tony's guardian (she refuses the term parent even though he likes to tease her with mom) because Tony wasn't about to give up his hard earned freedoms to become Fury's personal kitty; but Coulson is okay. As far as handlers go.

"I didn't know you two were seeing each other".

Clint just grunted and ears twitching with discomfort Tony shifted, reaching for his tablet. He didn't know what to think.

Look whatever feel good propaganda the media liked to push about the wonderful responsibility of raising a kit of your very own, the reality is they're pets if they're lucky; and too many aren't lucky at all and end up objects of their master's sexual appetites. Coulson wouldn't be the first human to fall in love with his charge but it's not like he'd the first to abuse his position either.

Except, This is Clint and (Tony sniffs) he doesn't smell fearful or under duress. He's not a victim and he's far from helpless. Though his claws are in and he looks calm and composed sitting there perched on the couch arm, striped tail curled up against one leg, Tony has seen first hand how 'not a victim' Clint Barton is. If he says he wants to shack up the boss man Tony trusts that he knows what he's about.

"Do whatever you want Feather Brain, if you and Agent want to knock boots and try for kits be my guest. Why bother asking me?"

Tony taped on his tablet, pulling up the schematics for new armor improvements and resolutely doesn't look at Clint as the tom says his name softly.

"Tony."

There was a mild sort of rebuke there and Tony stiffened with resentment.

"Okay so you being a tom and all, the kit thing is probably off the table; but there's always adoption. Do you think Agent prefers the term guardian or parent? Which one makes you feel less like a creepy flesh merchant with a furry fetish do you think?"

Tony's voice sounded cool and unbothered even to his own ears but he could feel the hair on his tail standing on end.

"I'll still share your heat with you... unless you don't want me to." Clint said after a moment, and Tony heard him sliding off the couch arm. Though he didn't look up from the tablet the small hesitation in Clint's voice made him go still.

Clint had never expected to be a part of a pride any more than Tony had. He know how much that meant to someone like Clint, who as a circus attraction hadn't even gotten the illusion of being a part of a family before this.

"Yeah, sure, whatever you like Katniss. It's not like you're gonna get banished from the island."
Unless of course it's for bad taste, because you know, purple." Tony answered with a grimace, going back to tapping on his tablet, happy that neither his voice nor the stupid tail and ears give away the tension keeping his body tight.

He got the feeling Clint knew anyway.

~*~*~

He put it out of his mind but had to pick it back up again when Phil approached him about the collar and later again at the gala at the end of the month.

It's one of those fancy shindigs that the government throws for good press, and so that the rich and famous can feel good about the fat checks they're going to write that night and look fabulous while doing it.

Oh and look a bonus. Come chat up the fiercest, baddest, social experiment since that guy dressed like a tiger spent a month in a cage: the Avengers! Watch out for the Russian. I hear she bites.

The Avengers are a pride and considering that this is America land of the free (unless you happen to be feline) where gata are required to be domesticated (with a few special exceptions) and it's impossible to live without a master, it's safe to say that prides are mostly a thing for the history books.

So the Avengers are the pride. The first in centuries this side of the pacific and it's a pretty big deal. Fury wants his little team of superheros to stay fighting fit and government approved and Pepper keeps on insisting that Tony needs to smooze and garner new contracts for SI, so unfortunately there was no getting out of that nights event.

He'd still forgotten it and would have missed it altogether if JARVIS hadn't shut down all his running projects and powered down all of his monitors an hour before they were to leave.

"Hey, JARVIS, Buddy, what the hell?" He'd cursed as he'd ripped off the welding mask to glare in the general direction of upward (god he was getting as bad as Cap).

"I'm sorry Sir, but Agent Coulson ordered a cut off in accordance with an event you are to attend tonight. I did remind you twice Sir."

"I believe I am your benevolent creator JARVIS not Agent." Tony grumbled without much heat.

Technically as Tony's Handler Coulson could have ordered him out of the lab hours ago, and it was definitely against the terms of the contract that Pepper had drawn up with Shield for Tony to shut his Handler out of the tower or disobey direct orders, but meh. Tony had never been a fan of sticking to the rules anyway.

Coulson put up with it for the most part.

"He's asked if you require assistance," JARVIS informed him a moment later and Tony's ears flattened in distaste. He knew what that meant. Coulson would send Cap down and Rogers would come with his dark cloud of disapproval and attempt to bully Tony into acting like a good kitty.

"God. No, tell him I'm getting ready. It was next on my to do list."
When Tony joined the others on the common floor later he had his second best armor on. His suit was classic black (a perfect match for the hair on his tail and ears because who likes to clash) and tailored to fit like a glove in the sleek sensuous style that people preferred with kats. The neckline of his shirt was designed to plunge to just above where the scars from the arc reactor began. He was proud of the dramatic display of bare skin at his neck and unapologetic of the statement it made.

Steve's eyes widened a bit at the sight, an eyebrow inching up his brow as his mouth tightened (probably in disapproval) but Tony ignored him. So sue him for needing to send a message tonight. Barton might be happy as a kitten on nip, but Tony Stark was no man's pet.

He had vowed he'd never wear a collar again after Howard. The Ten Rings and many others had tried to prove him wrong (put him in his place) and though they'd given it their best shot they'd all failed. Tony had sent them to a fiery grave.

The team was gathered near the elevator, all in their suits except for Steve, who was in army dress (because he got the luxury of dressing however he chose and not as someone's fantasy fetish) and Natasha who had gone with a slinky but elegant evening dress.

She had managed to tuck her tail somewhere out of sight so perfectly in that form hugging number that it had Tony's eyebrows raising in alarm. Ouch. She smirked.

"You clean up nice Stark."

"From you Romanov that's almost a compliment." Tony replied as he joined them, his eyes flickering to Clint who was standing beside Agent, the unmissable new addition to his throat going, well, unmissed.

The collar was simple but fine leather, with an unobtrusive purple plate in the center with an chip embedded that allowed JARVIS to monitor his condition and his location at all times. One could never be too careful.

"Ah Tony, it is good that you have joined us." Thor said, clapping a meaty hand on Tony's shoulder, thankfully with some restraint (not always a guarantee with Thor) "There are congratulations to be had for our valiant archer and the son of Coul."

Thor wasn't gata. He was an alien from an alien planet however, and that was weird enough to earn him a spot on the team. And get this, the gata that populate Midgard aren't the first cat people he's come across.

His mother has a couple of them who pull her chariot or something to that accord and apparently there's a whole alien race up there that's likely responsible for their existence down here.

"Aye, Bastet was once worshiped here by many Midgardians. It made for many pleasant holidays."

Anyway, whatever some alien cat lady got up to back in ancient whatever, had pretty much no
bearing on the here and now so Tony liked to leave that little genetic mind trip to the guys like Bruce and just do his best not to hiss every time he sees that collar around Clint's neck.

He didn't like it, even though he'd agreed to make it.

Not because he honestly felt like Clint was being taken advantage of, or that him wanting to mate with Phil was some sort of rejection of Tony (he knew it wasn't okay, and he can be an adult about this) but because deep in his heart he knew that things weren't quite right.

They're a pride and they should be far more cohesive than they are. They should all be bonded.

Natasha shouldn't be a lone wolf (for lack of a corresponding feline metaphor) and Bruce shouldn't be as isolated as much as he is, and Cap should definitely stop looking at Tony like he'd failed them all and Steve had expected so much better from him.

It's irritating as fuck and Steve can take that superior attitude and shove it where the sun doesn't shine.

Who cared if he was the best looking tom this side of the milky way (visiting alien princes not included).

What did he expect? That just because Fury threw them all together and told them to make like a pride, that Tony was just going to spread his legs and take one for America?

Would you?!

Okay don't answer that and maybe he needs to go back.

When Tony was a kit his parent (and bio daddy) used to tell him stories about Captain America; how despite all his disadvantages he was brave and honest and true.

Which Tony understood right away was everything he wasn’t, and by the time that he was old enough to figure out that the bitterness eating up Howard Stark's world was more about his own failings than Tony’s, the damage had already been done.

Tony was born different, and not just because of the tail and ears. His genius set him apart. The tail and ears only meant that he’d had to fight for everything he’s got now; but right, back. We're going back.

It started before Howard Stark, before Captain America and Project Rebirth, with that afore mentioned ancient civilization. Probably a few of them if we’re being exact here, but it's the Egyptians that everyone remembers.

Back in the twenties, the government became obsessed with the idea of creating (or recreating as it were) the perfect warriors, and it was the legends of the Alurio (or cat-people if you don’t hold as many PHDs as he does) that sparked that particular line of thinking.

The Greeks first record encountering them in Egypt though there were similar pockets of civilizations developing alongside them in Asia.

So anyway the Greeks came across the Alurio which is what they called themselves, but because nobody actually calls anything by its given name anymore, nowadays people generally go with gata or if they were born after the Hello Kitty phase of the nineties Neko-Yokai, or if they're really non-progressive kats; and when you make up less than 5% of the population it’s not like you get much of a say on how these things go.
Whatever people chose to call them, some things remained fairly universal. Genetically they're homo-catus, which in layman's speak means they're hybrids who land somewhere arguably close to a human with some feline genetics thrown in just for kicks.

What makes people wake up and pay attention (besides the obvious) is the fact that they’re stronger and faster than humans could ever hope to be, and once you throw in heightened senses you either get earth's mightiest hunters or in Steve's case super soldiers.

To the ancient Egyptians the Alurio were children of the Goddess Bastet and as such they were honored as fierce warriors. They became protectors of the pharaohs and royal houses and an elite class of soldier in their armies.

Those old pharaohs were wise enough to see that with the strength of the Alurio behind them Egypt could become a neigh unbeatable empire. Which of course it was, for an age or two, but as these things go, it rose and then it fell (to corruption and greed and a bevy of outside influences you can read about elsewhere).

The important thing to note is: everything was fine until the Romans came.

They saw the Alurio as a threat to their rule if they were allowed to grow too numerous so they did their best to wipe them out, and those they left they kept for slave work (and once the heat thing was discovered, grade-A-distractions. Ten out of ten would ride again).

And that's how the next to godlike heroes of the Egyptians became household slaves. Over time they became popular pets for the wealthy but after some rich idiot got his wangle bitten off by an aggressive kitty, it was agreed that something had to be done to properly domesticate them.

For the safety of the public you understand.

Tony could only thank his lucky stars that he'd never had to suffer through domestic training. It is a cruel, invasive and ill disguised torture, that thankfully is outlawed in most states today. Thanks to the sophistication of modern medicine the new mandated injections are relatively painless.

But it all depends of course on who you're asking.

There's a smell to domesticated gata that still makes Tony shudder at times. They were always just that bit sour in his nose.

Howard had taken him once, to watch a kit get his shots. He'd watched the kit go limp in his mothers arms, glass clouding her little eyes while her brain lost a chemical war it had never had a chance of winning in the first place; that sour sweet twang trickling through the room.

Undomesticated 'feral' gata have been illegal in the United States since 1812. Unless of course you're a circus attraction like Barton. "Come see the wildkat, the last of its kind" makes for a gret headliner but there's got to be a show, right?

So when the government got the crazy idea to create an army of super soldiers to rival the pharaohs of old, they started by scooping up gata from local shelters and the like to train them up for the armed forces.

But they quickly figured out that a few centuries of vigorous domestication does a thing to the body. None of the adult gatas they tried to train could develop aggressive behaviors or mindsets and the domestication drugs had fried their ability to grow claws, which I'm sure you can guess didn't fit in well with the grand plan.
So then of course they got the idea to try and train up the kits, forgoing the domesticating drugs.

They had better success with that, but nothing close to what they hoped.

When the drugs had been developed, their far reaching genetic influence had been seen as a plus. It was impossible to find a kit whose sires hadn't been domesticated, so none of these subjects could meet the full expectations of the program either. The conditioning ran too deep, the kits could not develop a hunters mindset and they failed to form anything close to the powerful prides of old.

The scientists been forced to turn their eyes then to creating a combatant to the domesticating serum, which had pretty disastrous (and of course deadly) results for the kits they tried it on.

They'd almost given up hope, until Barnes and Rogers happened. A kid and his kitty, or if Howard's version of events are to be believed, a kitty and his kid.

Barnes was one of the better specimens, braver, more aggressive than the other kits in his batch.

He'd lasted the longest, but after awhile his system began to fail just like the others. It looked like the project was going to die, all funding cut.

They'd brought in a nurse to appease some of the lobbyists who were raising a stink about inhumane treatment. And then it happened. One day the nurse brought her kid along for the ride, and the kid and Barnes had bonded. It wasn't as deep as a pride bond but it was as close as any kat had gotten since the drugs were introduced.

And when Barnes made an unexpected recovery the Rogers had been allowed to take their new kitty home with them, which allowed everyone to feel better about the fact that dozens of kits had been killed in the name of progress, and for the government to know just where to find Barnes should they decide to pick up the experiment again.

Erskine did them one better. He thought: why not try it the other way?

Instead of trying to reverse the effects of the domestication drugs and create pride capable felines, why not find the perfect man and give him the feline gifts?

Sure nobody had ever successfully spliced human and feline DNA in a lab before, but objectively it had to be possible given that the two species could procreate.

So why not?

By the time they were looking for volunteers, another world war had broken out. When the army came back to collect Barnes, Rogers had been just the right combination of good and crazy for old Dr. Erskine to think he was the perfect candidate when he volunteered as tribute.

You already know what happened after that.

Steve Rogers became the first and only American super soldier.

He didn't have the cosmetic differences that set Tony so far apart from everyone else and made it impossible for him to blend in (no furry ears, no tail, or retractable claws) so when you think about it he got the best of both worlds.

He got the strength (extra heapings of it actually, Steve's super strong even for a tom) the speed and heightened senses and a healing factor thrown in for superiority's sake; and to most of the world Captain America is still a human being, still worthy of admiration and respect.
He's free to be his own man and nobody's going to call him a bad kitty for it. Tony is what the public likes to call a bad kitty (in the best and worst way) and normally he doesn't give too much of a fuck, except you should see what certain factions like to do to bad kitties.

Tony knew that Fury had hoped he'd get one whiff of the biggest tomkat in creation and that he'd roll over and ask to be bonded and stuffed full of super kits, but uh no, fuck that.

Steve's not true gata whatever he smells like. And fine, he smells great. Wild and strong and not a hint of sourness to be found.

But wait a minute. This is about Tony. Not about Steve. He can get his own story.

So Steve was Howards greatest creation (whatever else he says) and he never let Tony forget that (even if he seemed to, when he was prattling at video cameras and begging Tony to continue his life's work) even when Project Rebirth was abandoned again after Erskine's untimely death.

And when he wasn't obsessed with finding Steve's body and dragging it up from the ocean, Howard was obsessed with recreating another perfect soldier.

He got himself a pretty kitten, and when she was old enough he began experimenting.

Tony didn't like to think about what his mother was to Howard Stark.

A beloved pet turned magnum opus is the most charitable description he could manage if he were at all interested in being charitable; but fuck charity. And fuck Howard Stark.

Howard never domesticated him for the obvious reason but Tony was still a disappointment.

He's got the claws and the speed and everything else it takes to be a great hunter (a great warrior) and Howard's brains on top of it.

But the real cherry on top (like he hadn't been given enough shit to deal with) and the one thing that spoiled all of Howard's grand plans for him, was the fact that Tony's a queen.

Okay we should probably get a few things straight before we go on because terminology is important, and even if Tony hates the derogatory shit that is mainstream today, it is what is and you should probably get familiar. So here we go.

The Alurio = The Gata = Kats (and just presume that by the time we water down to simply putting the most simplistic form for "cat" in everything that we've progressed to the modern age, and you're offensive. Peachy keen?).

The Alurio divided themselves into territories ruled by feudal dynasties: Prides.

They come in two genders: Fels and Toms. Which is really rather simple, except that humans like to fuck everything up by trying to view foreign constructs under a human microscope.

They decided that the "girls" are the ones who pop out the kits. These are actually fels and if we're talking X and Y chromosomes, gata biology isn't too bothered by either.

Whether you look masculine in human eyes or traditionally feminine makes no difference. If you're a fel you'll get your heat every three months, and if you get down with a viable sperm bank (aka a tom)
you can expect kits in your future.

But according to his birth records Tony is a kitten (a pretty little kitten) because people are jacked up and his masculinity is measured by the size of his dick. Which is average mind you. Just because we can't all be hung like the toms.

For Howard it meant that Tony was flawed. He'd wanted the biggest and strongest that the prides used to offer and instead he'd gotten the pride breeder.

What it actually means is a little more complicated.

Here's the last thing you need to know: among fels there is a second classification, a higher tier if you'll allow. They call them Queen Felinus, or just Queens for short. They're the pride matriarchs, the ones that bonded everybody else together and held absolute authority over pride affairs.

If Tony were in ancient Egypt right now his hunters would be out hunting and striking fear into the hearts of his enemies, and the toms among them would be clamoring for the chance to share a heat or mate with one of the fels and have a bunch of kits to show off their virility and vigor. And it would all be huzzah.

And, if they were super duper blessed, when it was time for heat to take Tony's body and trash it for four days some lucky bastard might get to share his. Tony might even claim them as a mate. That would make lucky tom Queen Consort, which would mean they were the baddest tom in town and got the pleasure of leading the troops. All the other hunters had to listen to what they said or it was bad news bears.

With all that heat sex and claiming going around there should be a gaggle of kits running through the tower, nobody caring too much which of Tony's pairings sired them because kits belong to the pride and pride means family. God can you even imagine?

Thankfully for the security of his tower and the world, this isn't ancient Egypt. Whatever Nick Fury thinks, under no circumstances was Tony going to be responsible for the ramifications when this little social experiment went tits up.

He wasn't going to start dancing to Fury's tune. There was going to be no doling out his favors, no forcing everyone to bond with him (when they don't have a choice) just because it's convenient for the government.

They're all here because they want to do the right thing and stop people like the Ten Rings and Thor's dick of a brother when it's tantrum time, and that's enough. He's not going to burden them further.

Besides, Tony would be terrible at leading a pride (just look at Cap's expression) and does anyone actually think that giving him kits is a good idea?

"Congratulations?" He quips with a surprised eyebrow lift in Coulson and Clint's general direction. "Did you finally win that bid to appear on Supper Nanny?"

"No." Thor frowned in confusion, looking between the three of them. "Coulson and Clint have decided to become mates. Surely they came to you for their blessing?"

Tony winced.

"It was a joke big guy." He sighed, mustering a sincere if somewhat brief smile. "Congratulations you two. Really. "
Coulson looked like he might say something, but he decided against it. He nodded shortly instead and said with a small smile, "Thank you Tony."

"Don't mention it." Tony waved away, and with a pang in his chest he thought, *please.*
Time has let us be brave.

Chapter Summary

In which the Avengers attend a gala and an old friend steps back into Tony's life just in time to remind him why he doesn't do the whole friend thing. But Natasha's got plans, so it's probably all going to go tits up anyway.

Chapter Notes

Hi, I have decided on a posting schedule of Sundays & potentially Thursdays if things stay this steady. With the holidays one never knows so, definitely expect a weekly update on Sunday and if there's time for a bonus you'll know by Thursday.

The warnings are all the same as are the potential pairings. Please see the end for additional notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Was it too early to leave?

Tony hated galas. Ever since Howard Stark had shocked the world by leaving his company to his kat, Tony had been thrust center stage and he'd long since accustomed himself to the spotlight, but he still despised the whole thing (necessary evil or not).

You could say the whole making Tony his son and heir thing had been Howard’s last big joke on the world.

He could still vividly recall being twenty-one and sitting at a table with Obi and the members of the board, everybody eagerly waiting to hear how the pie would be sliced and pretending sadness while the lawyer read the will.

There everyone had been, expecting Howard to finally concede to death and do the only sane thing available to him which was to make Obadiah Stane CEO. Tony had been torn between the unexpected devastation of Howards loss (Howard had never been a good father but it didn't seem to matter any where his heart was concerned) and the much more expected and appreciated rage at the old man; for thwarting Tony's chances at independence at every turn and then having the audacity to get himself killed and take Tony's mother with him.

He had fully expected his ownership to be transferred to Stane, because with as much as Tony did behind the scenes for R&D Howard would never trust Rhodey, a military man, not to take advantage no matter how many times the man asked.

But as everyone knows by know Howard's old friend Obi turned out to be a back stabbing traitor. Old Howard must have gotten wise to something smelling rotten in the state of Denmark because he'd changed his will the week before his death.
Howard’s notarized recognition that yes he had impregnated Tony’s mother, and by golly that might just make Tony his child, didn’t grant Tony the full rights of a human being but it made Tony Howard’s son in the eyes of the law; which meant that technically Howard could leave him control of the company.

The fit the Board had thrown was the kind of epic that would likely never be seen again. They’d contested the will in a long drawn out legal battle, but Tony had poured every bit of the money he had into hiring a lawyer crazy enough to take on his case and sharp enough to win.

When Tony was twenty-three years old the supreme court had ruled that kats were entitled to any equites and properties left to them and could, in conjunction with a licensed handler, control their own estates so long as they were mentally fit to do so.

Was it surreal being at the center of the defining civil rights case of the 20th century? You bet, but Tony would take it all, all the public ridicule and invasion of his privacy, a hundred times over if it meant he could still change things for others.

Bitter as it made him to acknowledge it, he owed a good deal of his success to Howard’s vindictive nature.

If he hadn’t discovered Stane’s double dealing and decided to spite the man, Tony would likely still be Obi’s property; and considering that Obi had organized his capture and torture by terrorists – yeah, Tony would raise a toast to his old man’s sour grapes any day.

But fuck it, Tony went to the galas and the board meetings and all the charity balls for only one reason; because he wasn’t going to let them take away what he’d fought for on a technicality (you’d be amazed at how many times those words mentally unfit have come back to try and bite him in the ass) and he won’t allow any of them to forget that Howard may have opened the door but Tony was the one to blast through the glass ceiling (because why walk through a door when you can fly).

He was he one who never accepted no for an answer and beat the system. He never quit, even when he was strapped down with a car battery embedded in his chest; and the next time some gata kit wants to go to school and they’re told their too stupid to learn or advance beyond menial labor at their job they know they don’t have to believe it.

He reminded himself of the kits once more as Mrs. Keppel ran her hands through his hair, rubbing vigorously at his ears, laughing at some quip he’d made like Tony performed the neatest of tricks.

“You’re such a rascal Tony. What on earth are we going to do with you?” the elderly woman tittered, her chin wobbling.

“I’m sure you’ll think of something Mrs. Keppel, but you’ll have to excuse me. Pepper’s yanking my leash again.” Tony stepped back with a wink, grateful to put distance between them.

“But I’m happy we can expect to see Donny again. Doing business with your son is always a pleasure.”

Actually Donny was kind of a bore, but he was a staunch supporter of gata rights so you took the good with the bad.

Tony was careful to keep the confident smile fixed on his face and his stride easy as he weaved through the crowded room over toward the bar. Something with vodka ought to do it.

It was all a game really, and sure by playing he’d earned a reputation as promiscuous and TMZ had run out of ways to spin the buzz words “bad kitty” but pretty hurts and all that.
“That looked arduous.” Natasha quipped, sliding into the empty spot next to him as the bartender slid Tony's drink toward him. Flashing her a pained smile he tossed about half the glass back even as a voice that sounded like Rhodey’s scolded in the back of his mind to slow down.

Some of the liquor dampened his fine whiskers and he wrinkled his nose, resisting the urge to twitch the moisture loose. The less you reminded people you were different from them the better and sometimes restraint was the better option. The last thing he needed was Mrs. Kepple rushing over to coo at him some more.

“Does she know you don’t like your ears rubbed?” Natasha asked, allowing a hint of amusement to show through her expression.

“Just so long as Donny Kepple continues to invest in Maria's House, his mother can rub what she likes.” Tony answered dryly and the smile in Natasha's eyes disappeared.

"Prostitution is illegal in this country you know."

Tony sneered.

"This softer naive thing you're trying, I like it. It's different." He took another long swallow of his drink.

"But residing in the real world, I recognize the need to let them have their occasional pound of flesh."

"Not for free." Natasha replied and Tony's mouth spread into a vicious grin.

"For everything they've got and lots more besides."

Romanov inclined her head slightly in acknowledgement of his words but apparently had nothing more to say on the subject. Whatever her thoughts on his methods she kept to herself but there was something softer about her when she looked back at him.

"There are over a hundred different ways to break a human hand." she mused, as if someone had asked the weather, and Tony laughed into his drink.

"Aren't you the feral little thing."

She arched a brow and that alone seemed to make her expression go from unaccountably soft to dangerous and (because he liked his balls attached) Tony quickly back tracked with a giggle. Perhaps his inner Rhodey was right and he should slow down on the drinks.

"Sorry. Hugely intimidating, not at all tiny, massive in a perfectly feminine and non derogatory way. Have I mentioned you look fantastic in blue? Is Cap jealous you're wearing his colors?"

"I wouldn't say that. Are you?" She murmured in reply, sipping daintily at her glass of white wine and the teasing grin slipped off of his face.

"Don't get nasty Romanov, we're all on the same side."

"Tony. You can't avoid it forever." Her voice was soft again, almost pitying and Tony bristled.

"Are you sure? I'm really quite excellent at avoiding things."

"We'll never be a real pride until we bond," she pressed and Tony rolled his eyes toward the back of his skull. He chugged the rest of his drink and set the glass down on the bar with a thud.
"You know, I expect this lecture from Fury, Coulson, hell Cap even, but you're the last person I expected to be all about team bonding. Fury must really give out an amazing Christmas bonus if you're willing to push this hard."

"I'm not saying it for Fury, Stark." Natasha rebuked, her gaze going a bit colder. Tony could feel the distance yawning between them though the younger fel hadn't moved. "I'm saying it for Clint."

She gestured with her head and Tony's eyes followed hers across the room to where Barton was standing in a group that included Thor, Bruce, and the gaggle of bureaucrats they appeared to be entertaining with some wild story. Clint looked happy, calm, self assured and Bruce even managed to look more comfortable than Tony would have expected.

Clint hadn't truly been comfortable since the battle for New York and the whole thing with Loki, and Bruce just never was.

"He's mine. I'm his. We sensed it from the beginning. I don't feel it as strongly with the others as you probably do, but you know the potential is there." Natasha murmured lowly as Tony watched their teammates across the floor.

"Whether you bond us or not wont make any difference to me but it matters to Clint." She said after a long moment, her voice roughened by some emotion that Tony would have called pleading on anyone else. The widow never begged. But she did manipulate.

"Family means different things to different people. You're scared of it Tony."

Shame, followed quickly by a wave of anger, flooded through Tony, recognizing the play for what it was, and when he met Natasha's eyes he could see that she was aware, and it just made him angrier.

"And you're not?" Tony snarled at her. "You're telling me that the 'Black Widow' is just going to open herself up to a bond? You know it's irreversible right? No where to go, nowhere to hide, everyone knows every fucked up thing you've ever tried to keep in the dark. You're really sure you want to shine a light on all that red?"

Natasha's eyes flashed dangerously under the bright lights and her face somehow looking even stiffer, and it was the only way that Tony knew his words had hurt her. Because she was right, he did feel the pull between them, between all of them, and try as he might to keep a level of distance between them in the months since the attack on New York they'd all gotten closer.

It was like they were being drawn together by some invisible rope, or better yet, pulled to the center of gravity and too bad for Tony some biological destiny had labeled him the core.

He swallowed thickly, biting back the words that wanted to tumble from his mouth. He wasn't even sure if it would be more cutting remarks or apologies.

She blinked slowly, and there was something very removed about her as she looked at him and said, "I only pretend to never be afraid Stark, but showing them fear gives them an opening. Don't think they aren't coming for us. We threaten the order of a world they've spent fortunes building. They're not letting us tear it down without a fight. They're watching us. Looking for a door they can walk through to take us apart. Don't give them that."

And the thing about Natasha was that even when she was delivering dire omens worthy of a mystic, and even if the KGB had plucked her whiskers in the name of super-spy-dom, she still flicked her eyes over her shoulder in a warning glance and murmured "watch your six" out the side of her mouth, before Tony could even fathom there was a danger.
A moment later Tony felt the tell tale pressure on his whiskers, just before someone loomed over him to press a hand against the small of his back. He went stiff, adrenaline spiking through him, and told himself that if it was an assassin pressed to his back Natasha would have done a lot more than mutter a warning.

Hopefully. Maybe she was that pissed at him.

"Hello Tony." A husky voice whispered in his ear and recognizing the voice Tony went cold, though he forced the tension to ease from his back and shoulders. Plastering on an unbothered expression he turned, sliding just enough to put distance between him and the heat of the larger kat's body, but Tony was rather afraid the smell of the tom was going to cling to his clothing. Ty always had been liberal with his pheromones.

The blond tom hadn't changed much since the last time Tony'd seen him. He was still stall and fit and gorgeous on the outside, and he still hadn't figured out that no matter how expensive the dye, the black roots on his tail and ears gave the game away. The fur there grew fast and was stubbornly hard to dye. Ty had always been sore about the black patches because the judges at the beauty pageants always preferred uniform colors over stripes, patches, and spots.

Tony let the black rope of his tail swish languidly behind him, every line in his body perfectly relaxed and tried not to be too smug about the way Ty's golden eyes tracked the movement.

"Robert." Tony ignored Ty altogether to greet the tom's guardian, whose mouth twisted with irritation at being addressed so informally by a kat before he could school his expression.

When you were a kat everything was mister, sir and mam, and Tony had learned that the quickest way to gain control of a conversation was to establish his own rules. He could practically smell the irritation wafting off of Tiberius at being ignored and that was just a bonus.

Ty was nuisance, but easily handled. His guardian Robert Stone on the other hand, headed Viastone, one of Stark Industries top competitors, and required a more delicate hand.

"I'd expected you to be in Atlanta. Surely you're not through with the show season already?" Tony asked pleasantly and beside him Tiberius tensed. Tony could smell the aggressive edge in Ty's pheromones hike up a notch, and the pleasant smile Tony wore just got that much more satisfied.

"No, no of course not, Tiberius is on track to win Best in Show as usual. We're very proud." Robert assured Tony smugly, clapping Ty once on the back in a possessive manner. "But we couldn't miss our chance to thank the big heroes now could we? You and your team did a mighty fine job Tony, your father would be so proud. Imagine his little kitten, saving the day like that."

"Yes." Tony replied with a tight smile. "Imagine that. It's a good thing isn't it that Dad decided not to 'tame' me or, I'm sorry, I believe domesticate is the polite term. I couldn't possibly have defended myself or anyone else that day if he had."

Robert's smile got a little more tight to match Tony's as he hummed in a thoughtfully disagreeing manner and said, like an adult explaining something to a small child, "As I said, everybody's awful grateful for what you kits are doing, but Howard should never have broken the law Tony. It wasn't fair to raise you up like one of his experiments, and the pressure they're putting on you now with this whole pride thing... Well we're all worried for you back home my boy, and we wanted to be sure and tell you that if you ever need anything you know who to call."

Tony grit his teeth but kept his face smooth. God but he hated how Natasha was right all the time, because that's what this was about of course.
The Avengers leading the way as the first government sanctioned pride, it had opened up the door of discussion for forming other units in other cities in the future and the necessary changes that would need to be made to the strict domestication regulations.

They were changing the game and nobody liked it when you did that.

"I'm touched Robert, but I think it will be alright. After all kats gathered in prides long before they graced the homes of their loving guardians." Tony quipped, gesturing with his glass toward the collar around Ty's neck.

"And while some of us are lucky to land in luxuries lap, I'm sure you'd agree that while suicide rates and wrongful deaths due to mistreatment are still at a staggering high in this country, that finding a solution should be our primary focus?"

Robert's face twitched but a moment later he nodded with a sympathetic hum that sounded perfectly rehearsed.

"Of course. My heart goes out to the poor creatures sold to the heat houses and the fighting rings, but setting you kits up for failure won't help anybody, and frankly I think it's down right negligent of Miss. Potts to have allowed it."

Tony wanted to snap at him to stop calling them kits already, as if Tony wasn't running the company that had left his in the dust, as if Natasha couldn't kill him without staining her gown, and they all hadn't made a commitment to put themselves between destruction and his sorry ass.

"They've opened up talks with Wakanda." Natasha said in monotone and Robert blinked, startled no doubt that a kitten he didn't know and hadn't addressed first would be brave enough to speak to him. Natasha just nodded slightly as if he'd denied her claim and went on.

"Their king may agree to allowing a UN delegation inside their borders. If it happens it will be a unique opportunity for the world to observe a gata society that developed peacefully alongside baseline humans while maintaining autonomy."

Tony bit back a giggle. She must be pissed about the whole kit thing too.

It wasn't news to Tony or anyone paying attention to world politics that the UN had reached out to Wakanda.

There had been a big hub-bub about a group of mercenaries who'd gotten into some hot water trying to invade a country that previously only a very small list of people had been aware. Tony remembered it so well because it had been the winter before Afghanistan and the footage that had leaked of some of the technology coming out of that jungle was so unbelievable he still hadn't forgiven Pepper for canceling his order for a jet.

The Wakandian king had made some statements, including a brief speech explaining why Wakanda had played the political equivalent of hermit for so many years; which had amounted to 'you're all crazy' and 'just leave us alone'.

It was a sentiment Tony couldn't really find too much of an argument for, especially when it was revealed that the African nation still had free gata and they weren't just servants of the royal house as the history books would lead one to believe. The Panther Pride was the royal house.

Tony hadn't known they were as close to coming o some sort of agreement as Natasha implied but it made sense that the UN would want them included in the upcoming summit. With the kind of threats they now knew existed in the universe, the world had just got a lot smaller and a lot more inclusive.
As Fury had predicted, with the stakes this high claws were coming back into fashion.

"There, you see Robert. We're not the only ones who think it pays not to declaw your kat." Tony smiled with all his teeth. He was just fine with that. Let them take their pound of flesh. He'd take them for everything they were worth. And Robert seemed to know, that this time at least, he was beaten.

"Well you might be right, we'll certainly see." Robert conceded graciously but Tony knew there was nothing gracious left in Stone.

Without missing a beat Robert clapped his hand on Ty's back and nudged him forward, on to the real reason he'd come there in the first place.

"I might be a fool for leaving my champion here alone with a feral kitten, but I presume I can leave you two alone without causing a scandal?" Robert winked at him with a knowing smirk and Tony had to clamp his teeth together to prevent a hiss from escaping. "Go easy on him Tony he's a good boy."

He didn't bother saying anything to that, or anything at all as Robert left them, apparently confident in Tiberius' ability to weasel back into Tony's good graces.

Tony caught the bartenders eye and signaled for another drink.

"It's been awhile Tony." Ty began, all confident grin and white teeth, as the bartender slid another cocktail Tony's way and Tony barked a laugh in response.

"That's what you're going with? Not very imaginative but I'll play along. Hi Ty, yes it has been. Not nearly long enough."

The tom's face fell, disappointment etched clear on his face as he considered what to say next.

"Tony you can't seriously still be mad that I -"

"You'll find that I can." Tony snapped coldly, and Ty flinched back. It was the only small bit of satisfaction that Tony was allowed because he didn't believe the agonized expression that flashed through the tom's eyes. Not one damn bit. But there was a tiny, weak, part of Tony that still wanted to. God how pathetic could he be?

Ty took a step closer but halted at Tony's hardening stare.

"Tony, what I did was wrong. I know that, but you know what Robert is like. I didn't have a choice."

A low snarl slipped past Tony's lips and it was only the gentle grip Natasha took of his elbow that halted the vicious words that wanted to leap off of his tongue.

He glanced at her and followed her gaze to where his hand gripped tightly around the delicate stem of his glass. He took a slow breath, loosening his grip. He wasn't going to let Tiberius Stone get to him like this. He wasn't a naïve kit anymore.

"Forget it." He shrugged, downing the rest of his drink. "Water under the bridge. As you said, it's not like either of us had many choices."

But as far as Tony was concerned Tiberius had made his.
"I really have missed you Tony. It wasn't all bad was it?" The tom tried again, injecting an old sort of familiarity in his voice that harkened back to their days sitting in dressing rooms, laughing and poking fun at how stupid it all was.

"Yeah we had some good times." Tony allowed and Tiberius jumped on the opening.

"It's a shame you don't do the pageants any more. You should see the type of inbreeds they're letting in these days." he drawled with a conspirators smile. "Any real competition I had is gone."

Tony hummed, as if he was actually considering it and not his exits.

"That's the problem with running a company and being on the Avengers Ty, so much less time for beauty pageants."

Tony had hated them almost as much as the old man had, but kat shows were a popular past-time in the elite and good venues to rub elbows with other big-wigs, so Howard had entered Tony almost as a matter of course.

He'd never taken it all that seriously, but for some kat's the pageant life was everything. And why not? Kitties with pedigrees and who put trophies in their owners hands lived privileged lives, and were almost guaranteed to be bred with someone equally pedigreed (if not always tolerable).

Tony's mother had been a show kitten. Howard had always had expensive taste.

But Tony willed the thought away and focused on what was important. He wasn't going to think about his poor mother now. He couldn't afford to get sloppy around the Stones. Natasha was right (as usual) if they saw an opening they wouldn't hesitate to take it.

Howard had hated Stone almost as much as the Stone had hated him, but both were businessmen and held to the golden rule of keeping the enemy close.

When Tiberius had taken Tony under his wing and guided him through the often vicious waters of the pageant circuit Tony had believed it was because the other kat actually cared about him and not just because Robert wanted to keep tabs on Stark Industries. Stupid. He knows.

When Tony's first heat had come, Robert had been all for "allowing" Ty to see the Stark kitten, as if he hadn't been pushing Ty to woo him almost before the onset of puberty.

But Tony had been a (stupid) kit at the time and far too trusting. He'd thought himself in love with his oldest friend, and was pretty gob smacked that he was actually being allowed to be happy for once instead of shoved at some strange tom decades older than he was, as was the fate of many of their friends.

And Ty had played him like a fiddle for years, until Tony had unraveled everyone's grand plans by refusing to get pregnant. He'd seen the real Ty then.

"Besides, I'm a bit long in the tooth now." Tony made a show of sighing, knowing he looked damn good thank you very much. "How you manage to keep up with the young beauties Ty I'll never know."

Ty's brow darkened at the subtle insult and Tony's grin widened.

"I like the new nose by the way. What's your surgeons name? It isn't Becker is it? Did you see that botch job he did on TLC? Well I didn't because TLC, but Youtube it."
Beside him Natasha made a considering noise, her own brow furrowing in thought as she scrutinized the blond tom, who, Tony would give him this, stared back at her with the fixed expression of calm only a true showman could master.

"Strallen." Natasha finally stated with a decisive nod. "I'd know those knife skills anywhere."

Tony was going to make her a knife set that shot lasers. He loved that woman sometimes.

Ty's mouth stretched in a pained smile.

"He's very good. But I shouldn't keep Sir waiting. Will you save me a dance later?"

Tony opened his mouth to decline (because there wasn't a chance in hell) but at some point the rest of the team had begun to make their way to the bar, because they were suddenly all there, forming a deceptively unthreatening cage around Tony and Natasha with Ty trapped in the middle. He looked understandably uneasy about this.

"If there is to be dancing later I must claim the first dance with our Man of Iron." Thor said in that declarative way he had. "I have claimed, as you say, dibbs."

Tony rolled his eyes, because he was pretty sure Thor was just being an asshole now and pretending not to pick up their speech patterns.

"Ah..." Ty hedged nervously away from Thor's looming figure, but he'd never been one to back down easily and that hadn't changed. "Then afterward. For old times sake? Don't you think you owe me that?"

Tony hesitated. Maybe it was the miserable way that Ty looked at him, the reminder that for all that Tony despised Robert Stone and Tiberius' compliance with his plans, there was a part of Tony that knew Ty was right. They'd been lovers, a team, and Tony had fucked him over first with his stubbornness.

For an anxious moment that lingering guilt held him in thrall, but then Steve's eyes found his, looked right through him like he'd replaced his eyes with blue x-ray machines and the moment and the spell broke.

Maybe it was the way Steve crossed his arms, all muscle and leath grace, or maybe it was the way he filled Tony's nose with the scent of aggressive tom. Tony's body responded to it like a well tuned instrument, all curious and nervous all at once, the neurons in his brain somehow interpreting safety from a creature brimming with violence. Tony grit his teeth in irritation.

"He's not interested. I think you'd better leave." Steve commanded in that 'Captain America says so' way of his that no one dared argue with, which meant Tony always felt he had to on principle. But for once he bit his tongue, because if it was a choice between Rogers high handedness and rehashing old shit with Ty, he knew which one he'd rather suffer.

And there, for the tiniest moment Ty met his eyes and they flashed a familiar angry gold as the tom nodded and promised with an air of certainty. "Another time Tony."

"I had it guys," Tony grit out as soon as the petulant tom was out of earshot and he tried not to think of it as pouting when Clint slung his arm over Tony's shoulder and he continued to scowl. "No seriously. Hello. Iron Man. Feral kat. I can handle myself."

"Well you shouldn't have to. We're a team Tony, you don't have to go it alone." Tony's eyes flew to
Steve as their team leader managed to make even something that should have been comforting sound like a personal rebuke.

Like how dare Tony think of doing anything without their support! Jesus could this guy get any more self righteous. Had Tony had a team when his old man was trying to turn him into some sort of super tom (into Steve)? Had Tony had a team when Howard was bargaining his unborn kits to his business rival and threatening to make Tony's life hell if he didn't comply? Had Tony had a team when he was in that cave in Afghanistan? No. He'd survived all of that on his own thank you very much why the hell should he cry for help just because his dick of an ex was back in town?!

"I don't need you to hold my hand Rogers." Tony spat, ears flattening defensively; because Steve was giving off that hyper aggressive pheromone charged fight scent that warned every other kat in the room that one wrong move and he'd have his claws buried in their ass; except Steve didn't actually have claws because he wasn't a real kat, just some weird superhuman pseudo hybrid cooked up in a lab. His scent glands didn't seem to know that though.

"Tony, we could smell your distress from across the room." Bruce explained gently and Tony sucked in a breath, stepping back. He felt crowded in the circle of his teammates and suddenly very exposed. His traitorous tail was curling like it waned to tuck between his legs. But this was Bruce, so Tony actually tried to believe when he said that it was probably due to his heat being so close. The scent blockers never could quite keep up in the final days and the weeks before usually required a stronger dose.

"Right... Thank you, I guess. For the concern. But I'm fine."

It was the best Tony could do at an apology he didn't want to make when he wasn't any good at apologies to begin with. He was better with actions. He'd make it up to them with upgrades or in Natasha's case actually coming through with the laser knife. Wouldn't that technically be a light saber? Whatever, he was totally going to make her a light saber.

And because Tony was better at smoothing over awkward emotions than talking about them, he grinned cockily and batted his eyelashes in Bruce's direction and said, "But it's good to know Brucie that you're waiting with such bated breath until my next heat. Counting down the days are we?"

Bruce's mouth stretched in a small fond smile but he just shook his head. Clint was the one who had the audacity to put his hands in Tony's hair and rub at his ears, nails dragging on that one spot that he knew Tony loved.

"Shut up Stark. We all know you have JARVIS remind you a few days before or else you'd forget you even had heats. And you know you wouldn't enjoy DUMMY assisting you half as much as one of us."

Natasha's eyebrows raised as a low rumble began in Tony's chest, the purr escaping him before he could wrench his head away from Clint's very wicked fingers.

"Stop that. No touching. My hair was a beautifully styled work of art before you got your mits on it" he grumbled but nobody was taking him seriously. Not even him really. His damn tail was sill tangled in Clint's for god's sake.

"So you do like getting your ears rubbed." Natasha noted with a smirk. "Noted."

And Tony was very afraid all of a sudden of the challenging glint that had entered the green of her eyes.
Okay so the next few chapters are going to focus on the team and Tony's individual friendships with each member; because the Avengers becoming a family is what this is all about. Obviously, a major change is T'Challa's arrival so early in the game. I felt this was necessary for him to fully integrate within the pride.

Those chapters should take us through the events of Iron Man 3 (though they'll play out a bit different) and into Winter Soldier. After that, we're going to deviate heavily from the canon because they're catpeople and Tony's about to get hitched (and that should have told you everything). I'm projecting 15-20 chapters total.

As far as pairings go I'm keeping the team bond a primary focus, and emphasizing the fact that pride bonds are extremely intimate while being innately polyamorous. Which should be interesting because so much of our literary rhetoric focuses on the idea of one all consuming love that completes you, and I think in reality life is a much more communal experience and humans have a great capacity for love and connection that we stifle.

That said, there will be plenty of romances to go around, but Tony's eventual mate is going to end up being whichever individual (or combination of individuals) serves the family the best, because families are good and these poor guys are overdue for some good. (Looking at you Marvel).
Probability says our chances look grim. (That is to say, lets try this again).

Chapter Summary

In which there is a brief calm before a small storm. Tony's heat is coming which has shaken up the tower but that's kind of a good thing. Bruce gets sad occasionally (okay a lot) so he recognizes sad in others. And Steve is SAD, but Bruce thinks not all heart pains are incurable. He made a graph.

Chapter Notes

To all my fellow Americans, HAPPY THANKSGIVING! As I've said on my tumblr: I'm thankful for so many loving people in my life and that we can be together today in peace and comfort. I'm humbled by the knowledge that not everyone shares that blessing, and that today means something very different for many Native Americans who are dedicated to preserving their cultures and their people. I'm thankful that we can be so different and yet all the same in gods eyes. I am thankful for the love and compassion given me, and for the opportunity to return it. I am thankful for forgiveness, the sharing of hope, and the chance to walk together.

And if you're not American and today is just Thursday lol, Happy Thursday.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Was that Real House Kittens? You need to go back."

Bruce paused, not because he agreed with Tony that it was a show worth flicking back to, but because Tony's nails were digging rather threateningly into the soft flesh of his wrist.

"Boo. Just because your hormones are going crazy don't torture the rest of us." Clint heckled from the other end of the couch and Bruce bit back a smile as Tony lifted a foot and kicked him playfully in the stomach. The smile turned to a wince as Tony turned in his lap, pulling on the hand that Bruce currently held the remote with until his skin was close enough to nip.

"Ouch." Bruce hissed, dropping the remote. Tony scrambled for it, inadvertently (or perhaps not) kneeling him in the groin. Clint tensed, but Bruce just shook his head, a small smile tugging at his mouth. Tony's tail was already curling tighter around Bruce's as if to make up for it, and he didn't feel even a hint of anger at the shenanigans.

Tony's head was warm as it settled back in his lap, the warm muzzy scent of him was thick around them but pleasing, like a spiced drink wafting sinuously in his nose. Bruce couldn't imagine being angry about very much.

"Plebeians." Tony muttered irritably. "Your right to have an opinion Clint was revoked when you suggested Pawn Stars. You've been reassigned to footrest duty. Trash TV opinions not needed."

"Nobody wants to watch that shit." Clint insisted, turning to Bruce.
"My tower my rules Barton." Tony shrugged and Bruce chuckled, stroking the soft strands of Tony's hair, paying close attention to the hair on his ears, and smiled inwardly at the low purr that rumbled out of his chest.

"Who taught you how to be a good host?" Clint grumbled, rubbing at Tony's wriggling feet. The spice in the air thickened with Tony's contented purr. "Bruce is with me on this. It's two against one."

"I don't know. I kind of wanted to see if Amee with two E's was going to hook up with that musician's tom." Bruce offered and Clint moaned, shooting him a betrayed look.

"You're behind Brucie. Her parent didn't like his parent's attitude. And remember, mommy wanted to hook up with that artist guy." Tony sneered as the commercial ended and the show resumed.

"Wasn't his tom old as balls?" Clint asked, mouth puckering in distaste as Amee and her family drama unfolded on screen.

"Yes, but she decided mommy knows best. Keep up Barton." Tony recounted, rolling his eyes and Clint gagged.

"Bet she said she was thrilled about that." Clint jeered as on screen Amee visited the doctor to look into a bunch of hyped up symptoms that the dialogue tried to convince you was something terminal, but any idiot could tell were probably due to pregnancy.

"Of course she did. Mommy gets a big fat check for this scripted shit and Amee gets all the nip she can roll in." Tony snickered, referring to the controversial narcotic.

It was called Nip for the obvious reasons. It had been developed in the early 19th century as a calming drug for aggressive kats. The narcotic was better than the best liquor, lowering inhibitions and muddling cognitive response three times the rate of alcohol in a baseline human. It was also, highly addictive, and for that reason most kat owners frowned upon its use. For at least a decade now there had been grumbling about outlawing the drug altogether.

"Nip isn't bad in small doses. Amee's not as bad as some of the others." Bruce mused aloud, watching as (surprise) the doctor informed Amee's parent that she was expecting kits.

"She has a separate bed for afternoon naps." Clint pointed out, jabbing an accusing finger at the screen.

"She does. How come I don't have that?" Tony pouted and Bruce's hand halted in his hair.

"Because you don't sleep." Clint reminded him.

"But if I had a custom made, nap designated bed, I might." Tony reasoned. "I could sleep more. Everybody says so."

"You should definitely sleep more, but a bed just for napping seems excessive to me Tony."

"I used to hold the monopoly on excessive. I'm losing out to a reality TV star."

"There are eight bottles of cream in the fridge, Stark" they all turned at the sound of Natasha's voice as she and Steve walked into the living room. Natasha crossed over to the couch and tapped Tony's leg, waiting imperiously until he heaved a put-upon sigh and lifted them so that she could squeeze between Clint and Bruce.
"Can't a guy like warm cream at night?" Tony grumbled as Bruce felt Natasha's tail brush against his, tangling in with the knot that he and Clint had already made with Tony's. She brought with her the smell of outdoors and the sweeter scent of fel.

It paired nicely with Tony's heavier smell and Bruce knew that this close to heat how having another fel around could be comforting. Not in the same way as making contact with a tom, but pleasant none the less.

"I think flying it in from a farm in Switzerland is what makes it excessive Tony." Bruce grinned down at him and Tony's whisker's twitched his expression remaining haughty as his nails pricked Bruce's wrist again in chastisement.

"Bruce, light of my life. You wound me. You're supposed to be on my -" Tony hissed as Natasha's hand slid under his shirt and rubbed slowly at his belly, the purr rumbling louder in his throat. " - ssire. Fuck I hate you Romanov."

Natasha didn't bother acknowledging that blatant falsehood, turning instead to where Steve was still standing awkwardly in the doorway, watching them.

"You joining us Steve?"

She and cap had been on a mission for SHIELD as part of a new strike team that Fury had put together. They looked a bit jet lagged but weren't sporting any injuries that Bruce could see with the naked eye. But despite looking like he could use a sit-down Steve didn't venture further into the room.

There was something pained about his expression, Bruce noted, as Steve cleared his throat. Tony had gone stiff under Bruce's hands and he cringed, already knowing that whatever Tony was going to say next wasn't likely to help. Tony was just really good at getting under the captain's skin.

"You really shouldn't miss the mind-numbing trash we put our lives on the line to protect. It's glorious."

Bruce blinked in surprise. For Tony that had been pretty tame. And Bruce wasn't the only one to fix their eyes on Tony as if waiting for the punchline but the other kat had his eyes so firmly fixed on the television the focus could only have been to avoid having to look at anything else.

"No." Steve's slightly panicked expression was quickly replaced by an authoritative snap that Bruce could only wince at. "Thank you, but I'll pass."

"Suit yourself Katsicle." Tony shrugged nonchalantly. He never turned his eyes from the screen but Bruce didn't think he actually heard very much of it after that.

****

Bruce was not a night owl the way that some residents in the tower were. Not that he couldn't get caught up in his work like the best of them, but part of keeping the Other Guy contained was maintaining a balance: low stress, regular sleep, regular meals. That sort of thing.

He wasn't perfect at it yet, but there were fewer and fewer Hulk related incidents these days, and none that had occurred outside an official Avengers call so... progress.
Bruce was behind on his work and had taken the opportunity to stay up late that night, but around the time he started getting seriously irritated at himself for not being able to completely focus he decided to call it quits. Better to not get worked up about something easily fixed by hitting the hay.

He stopped on the communal floor, thinking of making himself the sleep tea he liked, and he blinked, semi-startled to find that somebody else was up, though honestly, it wasn't that unusual.

Steve sat at the table. Leftovers from yesterday's take out (Tony's turn to cook) open in front of him, but he didn't look all that focused on eating.

He was staring through the wall, at something Bruce was fairly certain only he could see with such a despondent expression that Bruce faltered, suddenly cringing at the thought of intruding on the captain's solitude.

He understood the need for solitude, Bruce. He'd always found the quiet of his own laboratory kind of comforting.

Well quiet wasn’t the best word. In reality, laboratories could be fairly noisy places. The beeps and whistles of various equipment running various programs notwithstanding, there was usually the clacking of keys, the occasional rustle of pages and the low murmur of human voices (many of them engaged in intense conversations with themselves as they muttered over their work).

It created a hive like drone. Steady. Meditative with the right mindset. And it was that sound (the soothing ambiance of breathing and mechanical hum) that he found a certain level of comfort in. It was the comfort of isolation, but isolation was necessary for somebody like him.

Of course, since coming to stay in Stark Tower, solitude was harder to come by.

Though the floor Tony had given Bruce came outfitted with all the essential living spaces he rarely did more than sleep there.

When he had the urge for a home cooked meal Bruce went to the common floor; because he’d inadvertantly started that trend when it had just been him and Tony in the tower before the others had moved in.

Tony didn’t get urges for home cooked meals. In fact, Bruce had quickly figured out that when deep in a new project (and when wasn’t Tony diving into something new) that Tony seemed to forget he had a physical body at all.

One day Bruce had made his lunch in the big kitchen on the common floor and gone down to Tony’s lab to invite him up. He’d expected Tony to decline, and wasn’t comfortable with bullying him into it, but to his surprise Tony – after JARVIS had pointed out it had been seventy-two hours since his last night of full sleep and twenty-four since his last meal – had agreed with very little prodding.

They’d talked as they ate. Bruce had asked what he was working on, which had launched them into a long discussion on improving particle acceleration and it had hit Bruce, as he’d sat across the table from the enigmatic kat blinking sleepily at him, how much Tony must trust him, to invite someone like him into his home, to nearly fall asleep in his presence.

The reality of Tony's trust was... hard to grasp. Bruce had stopped trusting people a long time ago. It was kind of a hard thing to do when you couldn’t even trust yourself. He scared people, and rightly so, but Tony handled Bruce like he handled everything (except his own emotions). Head on, free and fearless in a way that was a bit breathtaking. Bruce was envious. Well up to a point. Tony, was
also reckless in a way that was hard to watch when you cared about him.

He’d never thought to have a real friend again, or anything close to a partner, but there it was. He cared and Tony seemed intent on all but elbowing his way past Bruce’s defenses, so when he cooked (and the probability of Bruce making a meal seemed to increase the longer Tony spent locked up in his lab) he did it on the common floor with getting Tony to eat in mind. By the time the others had moved in and established something of a normal routine it had just seemed to stick.

It was the pride effect.

Bruce took a breath, thinking of turning around and just continuing up to his own floor (he was pretty sure he still had some of the tea in his own cupboard) but Steve blinked, drawn by the slight movement and looked right at him. He smiled thinly in greeting and Bruce returned the gesture nervously, slouching past Steve’s chair over to the cabinet where he kept his tea because it would have been even worse at that point to try turning around.

"Couldn't sleep either?" Steve murmured, food cartons rustling as he presumably went back to eating.

"Working actually. Catching up." Bruce murmured in reply as he got the kettle off the hook and crossed to the sink in order to fill it. Smiling a bit, he explained further even though Steve hadn't asked and probably didn’t need the details. "Tony's been extra distracting lately."

Steve made a low sound, a sad sort of half chuckle and Bruce watched him curiously out of the corner of his eye as he put the kettle on the heat.

Tony was close to his heat and the closer it got the more obvious the signs became; which for the residents of the tower (Bruce and Clint especially as the only toms he trusted to see him through heat) usually meant dealing with a lot of hormonal behavior.

Fels were very territorial preheat, queens especially. The last week had seen Tony stalking about the tower seemingly just to touch everything (and everyone) in his space, driven by the biological urge to leave his scent on all that was his.

They all put up with it though. Fels in pre-heat tended to get downright pissy with you for not getting with the program and doing things their way. And truthfully, Bruce didn't know if there was a tom alive who wasn't enthralled with heat scent and would complain about a fel who had plans for them. Mood swings or no.

But Steve wasn't a kat, necessarily, and the expression on his face was the same kind of strained Bruce had glimpsed that afternoon and he wondered if the captain wasn't finding living in such close proximity to a group of kats hard to deal with.

"Kats in heat can be a bit much... " Bruce ventured softly. Tony was a bit much on a good day. Never mind when he was going into heat. "Earlier you seemed, uncomfortable."

Bruce wanted to ask if Tony was the first fel that Steve had ever watched go into heat, but it felt too nosey. He tapped down on the rise in anxiety by focusing on his breathing as he chose a mug from the cupboard.

'Puny Banner' a dark voice in his consciousness growled along with a stab of irritation at his own meekness.

Bruce ignored it as best he could, breathing in and out, letting the anger simmer quietly in the background.
Focusing on the facts helped him accept the anger he felt over the things he couldn't change.

The fact was Bruce Banner had been domesticated by his parent. The destruction of certain neurological pathways in his brain made it very difficult for him to express aggression. In an effort to continue the work of Project Rebirth he with supervision from his guardian at the time (General Ross) had attempted to assist a team of scientist in order to develop a serum that would restore those pathways.

There had been a lab accident. A gamma blast later and Bruce had what Tony like to call a 'rage monster' living inside of him.

The Other Guy had no problems whatsoever getting aggressive or asserting himself.

Grimacing Bruce took another deep breath, licked his lips. He kept his eyes on the counter because he didn't think he'd be able to get the words out if actually looked at Steve.

"Is Tony the first fel you've seen go into heat?"

Steve was a man. A master. Bruce shouldn't pry. But, he reminded himself firmly, Steve was also a friend. A teammate. A potential pride mate and more importantly, they were equals. Whatever else his conditioning made him feel.

"No. My friend Bucky, he was a fel..." Steve replied gently with a wry smile. "Couldn't walk five steps without him hanging on you when his time came."

Ah. So it wasn't unfamiliarity. It was just possibly too familiar.

"I couldn't smell him the same way, before the serum," Steve announced into the blue and Bruce quietly listened, only moving to turn off the heat on the stove once the kettle began to make threatening rattles.

"It was nice, him wanting to rub everything and lay on my stomach..." Steve went on hesitantly, forking at the food in the carton in front of him but making no real attempt to lift anything to his mouth. "But after the serum it was different. I suddenly knew how much he needed me. It was intense but it was more than just physical... When he'd surround me like that I knew he trusted me... wanted me. I couldn't think of anything nicer than wearing his scent and being close to him, you know?"

Bruce did know, and he was fairly good at reading between the lines. Bucky was gone and Tony went out of his way to prove he neither wanted nor needed Steve.

Though Bruce was still wary of SHIELD, getting a chance to study the pride effect on feral kats had been one of the major boons to agreeing to join the Avengers.

Given that Bruce had a feral monster living inside him that threatened to come leaping out every time his adrenaline spiked, you’d think that he would be firmly against the whole living amongst ferals and pride bonding thing.

He wasn’t. Not to say he didn’t have anxiety about it (because he did). He wasn’t completely against it because while he might not be able to trust himself, he’d always been able to trust the numbers and the data didn’t lie.

If Tony hadn’t already wheedled him into weighing in on some special project he had going, or hadn’t busted his head open (or bruised something or another during the last call to assemble) and refused the medical attention of a proper medical doctor, the probability that he’d just come breezing
into Bruce’s lab before the day was out - with some new spark of genius that absolutely couldn’t
wait, in need of some friendly advice, or even just a distraction from dealing with some pressing
problem that he’d work up to asking advice about in his own sweet time - was high and only getting
higher. The probability of a Tony related distraction (sans heat) was currently at 77%. Pre-heat had
increased those probable’s to 89%.

The probability that Clint would have made some sort of culinary disaster and would come whining
to Bruce for help around dinner time was 11.7% based off of the rotation schedule that Coulson had
put together for the kitchen – because feeding them all was a chore, and if shared meals was going to
be the norm, Coulson was all about making it efficient.

Friday nights seemed to be the night when Natasha appeared in the common floor living room to
clean her weapons while Clint watched movies, and the one time Bruce had sat with them to watch
The Sting Tony had joined them and so had Steve. Friday night movies occur at a rate that would
suggest it has become unspoken tradition.

Thor related distractions were at a steady 10% likelihood due to having to split his time between
Jane’s, the tower and Asgard.

Avenger alerts were less predictable but held fairly steady between 32-58% likelihood.

Increased disruption of solitude had stress levels down, blood pressure evening and hormone levels
at a balance he’d not observed since before the gamma blast that should have killed him and had
created his feral alter-ego instead.

And those results weren’t just in Bruce either.

He'd had less opportunity to study his teammates, but with how often they got injured and how little
they seemed to care for actual medical doctors (it wasn’t just Tony, even though he was definitely the
worst) Bruce, being the resident (unofficial) biologist, had all of their files and had gotten more than a
few peeks at what was going on inside them on a biological level.

They were stabilizing one another, and it was early days yet, but Bruce was fairly certain that
introducing a true pride bond would only increase that stabilizing effect by exponential amounts.

It might even be enough to give him some sort of control over the other guy. He didn't dare even
think of completely eradicating Hulk (it tended to make him angry) but with such a strong network of
stabilizing connections in his brain, it was more than possible that he'd gain more control.

Bruce wouldn't have to spend every waking moment consciously holding back and feeling like a
ticking time bomb.

It was a lot to hope for. Bruce was still not wholly convinced that something that wonderful was
possible. No matter what the data said. And even if it was, he didn't think he was the kind of guy
who got lucky like that. The Avengers were likely an experiment doomed to failure.

The probability of a successful pride bond occurring was harder to determine because it relied on too
many very extreme variables, primarily Steve and Tony.

On the surface it might have appeared that only Tony really mattered. Tony was the queen. He was
the one with the ability to tie them all together. But that was the surface for you.

In reality, the 'Avengers Pride' had started with Project Rebirth, with Steve (its first Avenger) and
Howard Stark’s legacy. Whether Tony liked to hear it or not (Bruce wouldn’t suggest bringing it up)
Tony carried that legacy. He carried it well. He'd done more than Bruce imagined his father could
have ever dreamed for him. What they were all doing here was only possible because Tony and Steve had made it possible with their individual contributions to the world.

The history between Stark and Rogers was thick and stickier than mud pie, and there were razor blades baked in just for cheek.

The pride wasn’t going to work if those two didn’t work (because Bruce was pretty sure there was going to be blood if those two didn’t work).

And that was a problem because Steve was the one who still suffered from the most isolation, whose brain map looked like a portrait of depression and post-trauma.

Currently, the probability of a Steve related distraction was at 21%.

A troublingly low number when you considered Steve’s official status as team leader and the need for team meetings, training sessions, and the occasional debriefing.

It didn’t necessarily mean that Steve wasn’t engaging with the rest of the team (because he participated in all of their shared meals and regularly sat with them on Friday nights) but it did call into question his level of personal investment.

Simply put: Steve was not bonding.

And Bruce happened to think Tony was a bit at fault for that.

Not entirely. Steve didn't always help himself where Tony was concerned, and frankly Steve was homesick in a uniquely devastating fashion that Tony couldn't be responsible for.

Bruce suspected that he might be suffering bond loss, which would explain why the bridges weren't building as quickly in Steve's brain as they were in some of the others. It would also explain some of the surplus bridges, the 'dark' areas that undoubtedly only worsened his struggling psyche. His brain was constantly trying to send messages over a broken system.

He couldn't be sure, but if Steve's friend Bucky had been a queen it was almost certain that Steve had been fully bonded previously and what was happening now was his biology going haywire in response to that loss.

The worst part was there was very little credible research out there about prides, so it was hard to determine what exactly was going to happen. Would Steve's serum enhanced brain eventually heal him or would his symptoms worsen? Unfortunately for Steve he was text subject A in far too many categories.

"Tony gets pretty tactile pre-heat," Bruce tried, as he poured the steaming water over his tea leaves. "He has his moments of hostility but mostly he seems to want to cuddle. Have you tried...?"

"Cuddling with Stark?" Steve arched a golden brow with a huff of breath. "I think he'd try scratching my eyes out first. He doesn't like me very much."

Steve's tone was neutral so Bruce found it hard to tell if the feeling was supposed to be mutual or not.

"I think what Tony doesn't like is feeling cornered." Bruce replied, raising his eyes to meet Steve's tentatively. "I think we all know what seems to make the most sense... but people aren't game pieces. Neither of you are ready for a mate."

Practically speaking, they all understood how this should go. Tony as the queen should bond them
all. His focus should be on the pride's unity, daily needs, and future well-being. Privately Bruce thought that while Tony wasn't the most emotionally perceptive fel out there, he made up for it with a surprisingly giving nature. Tony was guarded, and rightly so, but once tapped he was a fountain that gave so selflessly at times it bordered on self-destructive.

Sweet. Bruce would call it, but never to Tony's face. He said a thousand words a minute but the most important language Tony used wasn't a spoken one. It was in the things he gave. The gifts, the AI's, the robots, the habitats, the safe houses, the armors, the clean energy sources, the bigger brighter safer world. The future.

He's going to make a good Queen Tony because it takes a mind like that, a will like that, to push a society into greatness and yank it back from the jaws of destruction. A mind that plays the game ten steps ahead, and understands that to win you have to sacrifice. A constitution that can make those sacrifices and keep going (always).

But they need a balance. Sheer grit sweetened with a strong moral center. Remembrance, faith, and above all else unshakable dedication to the indisputable truth that some things can never be sacrificed.

A queen's consort should be their balance, and typically they're the one to lead the troops. Fury hadn't been subtle when he'd thrown them all together and named Steve team captain. What he wants is obvious but you can't just mash people together like puzzle pieces and expect everything to come together how you like.

Bruce should know.

"You might be right doc." Steve allowed after a long moment with a self-depreciating smile.

"Not that kind of doctor." Bruce reminded him with a small smile of his own. He'd almost not been any kind of doctor since it required a degree, and up until Tony had won a landmark court case that had allowed him to run a mega company like Stark Industries the idea of allowing a kat education was still controversial let alone a PHD. But Tony had a knack for pushing through barriers and turning people's own weapons against them.

The same year he'd won control of Stark Industries he'd sued when he'd been denied entrance into a master's program, pressing the idea that anyone 'mentally sound' enough to oversee a company surely had the constitution for a formal education, arguably a responsibility to it, but more importantly a right to it.

In spring of 1994 the supreme court had ruled that kats who proved exceptional could receive formal education and degrees congruent with their level of aptitude. Of course the early aptitude tests were brutal and unfairly skewed but Tony had beaten them at that game too because there were few people in the world with his level of aptitude and they'd certainly not put any of them in charge of coming up with the tests.

Bruce had been twenty-five when it happened. Working as a lab 'aid' under Ross's guardianship and well aware that it was his mind behind his department's success and that he'd never see a stitch of credit for it unless he pushed.

There'd never been enough reason to push before, not enough hope of seeing anything good come out of stirring the pot and making his handlers angry with him. But when he was twenty-five Tony had given him a chance, and Bruce had taken it.

The pride was just another example of that. A small hope. Terrifying in execution but worth the
potential reward. Just as Steve had been affecting Tony's life long before Tony had ever actually come into it and vice versa, they'd changed Bruce's in some very defining ways. There was a web of connections running between them all that frankly had an element of divine design to it.

Bruce was coming to think being pride meant they all needed to find something in each other. Why else would the pull be so specific? Why these particular people?

"After the war I was going to get us a little house. Something with a big yard. Bucky likes to be outdoors. He wasn't going to have to worry about anything ever again because I promised him I'd take care of him." Steve's voice startled Bruce out of his contemplation. The captain wasn't looking at him, but there was a tension in his shoulders that Bruce thought betrayed his anxiety. There was a faint whiff of it in the air, but Steve was holding his emotions together tightly. "Coulson thinks I should see a shrink."

Bruce shuffled over to the table, silently placing his hand upon Steve's back as he gingerly took the open seat beside him. He didn't attempt to try and say anything to what he'd revealed about Bucky, or what he was missing, because there weren't really any words that he thought would matter.

What mattered was that Steve was theirs... and the loneliness he felt, that cloudy oddly metallic scent (like fresh rain) that tickled at the back of Bruce's nose and fired the impulse in his brain to get closer and give comfort... well probability said that proximity had a 50% chance of providing comfort.

*****

Bruce finally did make it to bed. Once there he was usually guaranteed a full nights sleep. Likely interruptions were minimal once ensconced in his private rooms.

The probability of being awoken for Avenger related calls between the hours of midnight and six am held between 11-28%.

The probability of being woken by a fel's heat calls were even lower in the tower because the walls were reinforced and the only two fels in residence didn't trust strangers enough to risk enticing any random tom off the street into their sanctuary.

The probability of Tony or Natasha crawling into bed with one of the toms they did trust was high, so Bruce just kept a metaphorically open door policy and was grateful that the other guy seemed fond of Tony.

He liked the soft fur on his ears and tail especially but Bruce didn't like to dwell on the particulars too much. He was just glad for it.
Tony was already curled up in the middle of Bruce's bed when he made it there, so after crawling in and letting Tony sleepily entangle their limbs he drifted off to sleep, confident in his chances of a good nights rest.

The alarm that blared through the avengers quarters at 5:50 in the morning decided otherwise.

But that was probability for you.

Chapter End Notes

Next up, the team faces a new threat and Fury has an announcement. Well two, but Tony is formally requesting that the first be taken off the table and that the record should show, Nick Fury is a douche bag.
Please Don't Make Any Sudden Moves.

Chapter Summary

In which there is a small storm involving Rubber Guys, Glowy Guys, and a whole lot of negative press. Some people actually explode, but Tony would like the record to show that the exploding people are not actually his fault.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Some weirdos in rubber hazmat suits had decided to pay a rehabilitation center a visit, which meant Clint was being woken up at precisely 5:48 AM, ten minutes before the Avengers alert went out, because when you slept with the boss you got the early bird special.

Phil’s phone had beeped rather urgently, instantly pulling Clint from sleep. He hadn’t moved in the dark, knew better than to give away his wakefulness, but his hand had slid toward the slit between the headboard and the wall where his bow rested on the specialized hooks that Tony had installed. Easy reach. Being able to be armed within seconds of waking was one of two reasons for him being able to sleep in a proper bed for once.

It took his brain a minute to catch up to the fact that the other one was no longer resting on the bed beside him but getting up to answer the phone beeping steadily on the bedside table. After sniffing out that they were still alone in the room Clint forced his body to relax, sitting up in the bed to watch Phil as he tried to follow the clipped conversation his partner was having with Agent Hill.

“How many? Well, get me a tally. Find out who they are and what they want. We’ll need to blockade the area, nobody in or out without my say so. Including the press.” Phil said, tossing the pants that Clint had abandoned at the foot of the bed over his head and Clint smirked (Phil was tidy and sometimes his hints weren’t subtle) hurrying to get dressed even as he heard Phil warn Hill over the phone, “Watch out for Christine, she’s slippery.”

“Is it dinosaurs in Central Park again?” Clint asked as soon as he ended the call. “Because I’m not getting out of bed for anything less than a cosmic level threat.”

He expected Phil to ignore his griping (the way he usually did) seeing as Clint had already dressed and armed himself by that point. But Phil leveled him with this look, the perfectly stoic expression Clint knew Agent Coulson wore when he was about to deliver bad news to somebody, devoid of all personal empathy, and Clint knew it was going to be a bad morning.

It turns out Rubber Guys aren’t just raiding any old shelter at the ass crack of morning. If they had been, SHIELD would have handled it on their own, because funny looking guys with guns weren’t exactly the sort of threats Fury had in mind when he’d started the Pride initiative.

They’re raiding Maria’s House, which means that if Tony didn’t know about the attack as soon as Phil did, he knew about it before and the press aren’t going to be far behind.

Sure enough, by the time Clint arrived at the jet it was to find Banner and Steve climbing aboard, Natasha already strapping into the pilot’s chair and Tony nowhere in sight. Thor is off world again...
so his absence was pretty much expected. Some protective instinct in Clint didn’t like that Tony wasn’t there where they can protect him, but he shoves that animal voice in the back of his head down because it was a distraction and he knew as well as anybody that Tony could take care of himself, heat or no heat.

“Where’s Stark?” Steve asked, a step behind where Stark was concerned (as usual), already switching on his com. link to ask the man himself.

Clint didn’t think Tony was going to answer but his ears still strained after a reply, tension coiling tightly in his body as the seconds ticked by.

“We’re ready for takeoff,” Phil ordered Natasha, the last to squeeze aboard and Clint gave him credit for giving the cue to take off before he turns to Banner and says,

“Doctor Banner. I want to request you sit this one out.”

It made sense to Clint. Fragile building, a few hundred possible civilian casualties. Confined space. Not the best setting for a Hulk rampage.

“The kats at that shelter are under Tony’s protection,” Bruce answered calmly, his voice echoing a tension Clint knew they all felt.

“Our protection.” Phil acknowledged a moment later and Clint didn’t look away from the windshield but he felt his heart tug at that. It made him feel secure in the decision he’d made.

“Stark are you there? Ironman do you copy?” Steve was still trying on the comm and Clint was resolutely thinking only of the battle ahead and not of the multitude of things that could go wrong before they reached the private facility in upstate New York.

“Focus on the task. You can’t help Stark if your head isn’t in the game.”

Clint glanced down at the soft sound of her voice but Natasha didn’t look away from the controls of the jet, as if to lead by example, and Clint smiled despite himself.

“Don’t worry about me. When am I not a professional.”

“Istanbul. The Stark job. To name a few.”

Clint winced. Okay. She had him on that one. But those were two very unique, very specific jobs that are not likely to ever see a repeat. I mean, how likely is it that he’ll be sent in to either assassinate or double cross a potential pridemate again?

Something pinged on the dashboard and Clint glanced down, frowning at the small blip that had appeared on their radar system, only to watch it disappear again.

A glitch maybe? He was about to ask Natasha what she thought when they were both distracted by a humming sound over the commlink.

“You’re coming in loud and clear Cap, mostly loud.” Tony’s voice suddenly filtered through the comm and some of the tension in Clint’s gut eased. Tony was alright. For the time being.

Cap ground his teeth together so loud Clint didn’t doubt that even Phil’s baseline hearing could pick it up.

“Ironman do not engage.” Cap snapped. “Wait for the rest of the team. We don’t know what we’re
dealing with.”

Clint rolled his eyes. Did no one read the report he did on Tony when Fury’d sent him in on that whacked out undercover gig? Do not give direct orders unless your last name is Potts or Rhodes and even then, proceed with care. He hadn’t even written that part in marker.

The com line crackles, not with interference (Tony’s tech is too good for that) but with the telltale whine of repulsors loading, and Clint’s gut tightened again.

“No. No. And yes we do. A bunch of punks who think they can raid my shelter. So I’m dealing with it.”

There’s a click and then Tony is gone. Steve jerked, like he might throw his ear link but thankfully nothing went flying, even if he did curse vehemently under his breath. Clint could give him a hard time about it but his guts a little too tight and the moment passes.

“ETA fifteen minutes. Get ready for landing,” Natasha announced over her shoulder, flicking controls to push the jet faster; because they all recognized that growl in Tony’s voice for what it is.

It’s feral. It’s dangerous. It’s a queen on the brink of heat who has just had their territory invaded and it means people are going to get hurt. They just had to make sure Tony wasn’t one of them.

“Coulson.” Clint looked up, curious as Steve approached their handler with his brow heavily creased, a pensive line to his mouth. “What are the odds that someone would target this shelter when Tony’s compromised, just out of coincidence?”

Clint felt the hair on his body raise and bit back the urge to hiss.

“I’ve never liked coincidences.” Natasha murmured darkly.

“Me neither,” Clint muttered in reply.

Today was going to be fun. He could already tell.

***

The assholes who think they can break into Maria’s House and not get the full fury of Ironman unleashed upon them, are possibly rethinking that now.

JARVIS had woken him the minute the facility had been breached, and even though Bruce had wanted him to wait for the rest of the team Tony had suited up and pushed the suit faster than was wise to reach the facility in a record amount of time. The others would catch up or they wouldn’t, but Tony couldn’t waste precious minutes waiting.

The kats at the center were his. He’d promised them safety and rest, second chances, and instead he’d put a target on their backs.

That was him, always having to take credit, to stamp his name on things, to push and poke and make others eat their words.

Selfish. Stupid. He should have kept them secret. Should never have bragged about the teachers he’d brought in to educate them, the healers who were helping them see themselves as people and not just
animals. Should never have painted that tempting red X and begged his enemies to fire at will.

“Stark are you there?”

Five minutes out he heard Cap’s voice come online for the first time, but when Steve ordered him to hold back he couldn’t do it, because Tony could see the facility now, the alarms blaring, the gas heavy in the air as it fogs windows and those guys in their stupid yellow suits crawling through it like insects, rounding up frightened residents and staff members alike.

One of the back doors was open, a line of them holding guns were stationed in wait by a loading truck. One glance inside at the cages stacked on top of each other and Tony saw red.

By the time the others arrived Tony had already blasted apart the trucks and left a fiery trail behind him leading into the building.

They shot at him of course, but the armor took their bullets in stride and he didn’t hold back (couldn’t hold back) as he fired back, only satisfied when their trucks lit up and sent gears and metal flying every which way, and he’d sent these masked clowns scattering like the cowardly terrified mice they are.

He heard the jet passing over their heads, heading toward the landing field behind the facility, but he didn’t wait. The frightened screaming of those still trapped inside with the enemy was ringing in his ears and the thirst for blood gripping him.

****

Clint can smell a set up from a mile away.

It wasn’t that he couldn’t be fooled because he totally could. He hasn’t got Natasha’s scary instincts, but he’s had to sail through a lot worse set up by much cleverer people than whoever set up tonight’s snatch and grab, and you develop a certain sense for when someone is trying to fuck you over.

Someone is fucking with them because this whole operation stinks of two words: lame planning.

It’s a cleanup job mostly. Tony had already decimated most of the enemy by the time they’d even landed so that when SHIELD formed a perimeter and Clint and the others came marching in, there are guys in rubber suits literally crying uncle and begging to be arrested.

Inside is a different story. Inside is all smoke and fire and the scent of terrified kats.

“Fan out. Clint head east, Natasha upstairs, I’ll take the back way. Evacuate any civilians. Signal as soon as you locate Tony.” Steve instructed before darting off down the hall and Clint nodded briefly to Natasha before trotting off as well, wishing that his gas mask didn’t take his whiskers out of use.

He wondered how Tony could be so comfortable in the armor. Clint hated fighting without the use of all his senses, and would rather go into battle stark naked than with his natural assets confined.

He picked his way carefully down the hall, peering into empty rooms. There was a lot of noise coming from upstairs, and he figured most of the fight had moved there and that anyone on the first floor had already fled or been evacuated.

“Natasha how’s it looking?”
“A lot hotter up here,” she answered a moment later, sounding slightly winded. “Watch out for the ones that glow.”

Huh? What did she mean by -

But his attention was snagged by a sudden clatter at the end of the hall and a frightened scream.

Clint quickly made his way there, to what looked like the facility kitchens, where a terrified fel at least six months pregnant (or maybe it’s closer to eight, Clint wasn’t exactly an expert when it came to pregnancy) was being cornered by some douch-nugget in a leather jacket.

Douchbag is yanking the fel out from underneath a kitchen island by her tail but he doesn’t look armed so Clint loads quick, aims even quicker and lets fire even as he’s calling out, “Hey asshole. No touching.”

It was a shoulder shot. Enough to incapacitate the guy but not cause any fatal damage.

For the record, it did what it’s designed to do. In one area at least. The fel woman scrambles away from her attacker with terrified whimpers (yay) but to Clint’s surprise the guy didn’t scream, or fall over, or do anything else a person normally does when they’ve been shot through the shoulder.

Dude turned and just looked at him, and oh hey, he’s got these weird spidery veins glowing all over his skin and his eyes look like a lava pit, and oh shit!

Lava Boy packed a mean punch.

He rushed Clint like a linebacker and grabbed ahold of him, and for one terrified moment Clint imagines being stabbed or otherwise impaled, but the guy just heaves and threw Clint clear across the room straight through a glass set of doors. As pain splintered through his back Clint was thankful for Tony’s obsession with glassy things.

You know that old saying, that a cat always lands on their feet? Totally untrue for kats.

Clint has seen inexperienced kats take all sorts of ungainly tumbles. Collarbones are a real (cumbersome) thing. But the great thing about having a really flexible backbone was that when a super-powered freak threw you through a window and you were experienced, you didn’t have to land on your ass like a chump.

Clint managed to twist enough to land and come up in a practiced roll, not giving his body enough time to really register the sensation of impact or to calibrate injuries before he was on his feet again; which was good because Lava Boy had busted his way through the wall and was stomping toward him with an expression of glee that said he was ready to hand Clint his ass.

“Starks on level two and it looks like he’s made some friends. I have visual but I can’t get to him. Got a glow stick I can’t get rid of.” Natasha reported.

“Clint. Status.” Cap called over the com, but Clint was a little busy dodging the speedy, incredibly powerful blows, the human lantern was throwing at him, having to rely on every bit of his own speed and flexibility not to take a direct hit. He was pretty sure when the guy drove his fist straight through a wall that he didn’t want those giant paws coming into contact with his body any time soon.

“The glowy ones suck.” He panted in reply, taking advantage of the moment to land a few rapid punches against the guys side. He leaped back as the guy freed himself with a mighty jerk and a roar, not seeming to feel the blows at all. He felt the arrows Clint sent shooting into both shoulders, his body stumbling backward as he grunted in pain, but the guy just reached up and jerked them away as
if they were irritants. The wounds closing almost before the arrows had been removed.

“Hang tight.” Cap’s voice said in his ear. “I’m coming to you.”

“No” he immediately, barked. “Get to Tony. I’m alright. Right behind you.”

A putrid smell was filling Clint’s nose and as he watched those livid lines of fire growing on the man’s body as he stalked Clint, barely flinching with each arrow that struck him, he realized that it was the smell of burning flesh.

“Clint. Fall back and wait for assistance.” Phil instructed calmly, but Clint heard the tension creeping into his voice.

“Wish I could boss,” he muttered firing another arrow at the guy, backing up further.

The guy’s hair was literally steaming on his skull now. What the fuck.

And weirder than that (if it could get weirder) there was a pulse coming from his chest. Clint had no idea if he was imagining it, if a human’s ears would have been able to pick up that insistent building rhythm, but he’d had enough experience with bombs not to question his instincts when they screamed: BOMB.

Clint ran, using all of his speed and reflexes to scramble over long tables and stay ahead of the guy barreling through tables and chairs behind him, eyes scanning for a bit of cover.

“Don’t do anything crazy Clint,” Natasha warned him and a manic grin twisted his lips.

“Who me?”

There. The buffet block looked to be made of thick steel. It wasn’t perfect but it was going to have to do.

“What’s the matter kitty?” the guy taunted in a gravelly voice behind him, still coming fast. Whatever the fuck was happening internally to light him up like a Christmas tree wasn’t helping his voice box any. “Can’t take the heat?”

God, how lame.

Clint loaded three arrows at once, because even though he hated to lose them, he was only going to get one shot at this. With inhuman speed and grace he leapt over the steel counter, twisting in midair as he went to fire one last hasty shot.

He didn’t see it of course but all three arrows buried themselves in a line down the guy’s chest.

Natasha was going to kill him he thought as he hit the wall behind the counter with a painful thud, barely having enough presence of mind to tuck into a ball and roll closer to the counter before the world around him exploded in heat and flame.

*****

The haze didn’t fade until after Tony’s been cornered by some chick with a bad haircut who has a glowing tattoo eating at her skin. She’s burning from the inside though he couldn’t smell the
wrongness of it through the suits filtered air.

He’s not any better off than she is really. His whole body is hot and all he can see is red, as rage storms through him, swallowing everything.

She made the mistake of grabbing one of the orderlies, just a terrified guy whose only there because Tony had handpicked his staff because he’s someone that Tony had felt genuinely cared and wanted to do good for the kats who stayed there.

She’d grabbed him, held him by the throat and threatened to crush it if he didn’t surrender himself and come out of the suit.

And in that haze of rage all he could think was why not?

Because he didn’t want to blast her into oblivion, he wanted to tear her limb from limb. He wanted blood and some things are just better done with your hands.

“Sir, I highly recommend you remain in the – ” he remembered that JARVIS tried but he was so far beyond hearing.

He was out of the suit and leaping at her before JARVIS could finish and she could even begin whatever monolog she’d had prepared, obviously not expecting him to be willing to risk the man’s life by going on the offensive.

And normally, maybe he wouldn’t, but in that moment Tony wasn’t normal. All he could think about was getting his hands on her, showing her what happened to people who hurt his people.

He doesn’t remember going at her with teeth and claws and nothing held back. He’ll see it later when it’s splashed all over the news because she dives out a window trying to escape him and the news chopper shines a light on them and catches it all.

He’ll remember how strong she was, how each of her blows rattle through him, but he’ll say this for pure rage, it makes him stronger. She won’t beat him because if he has to die it’s going to be with his teeth buried in her throat and that’s that.

He saw the way she kept glowing brighter, how she felt hotter under his hands, and he remembers the way she smelled in his nose, thick and putrid; but none of it, not even the warning pulse that emanates from deep within her body, could have stopped him.

He heard an explosion but it wasn’t what finally made him pause, it was the sudden tingling in his brain, the yank he felt back towards the facility and the sudden certain knowledge that Clint was hurt and hurt badly.

His head had finally cleared enough to realize that someone had a hold of him and was yanking him away from his prey. He had just enough time to realize that it was Steve, pushing him back, inserting himself between Tony and that woman, Steve curling protectively over him as he brought the shield up.

He didn’t see her explode, mashed to Steve’s chest like that but he felt the sudden blast of heat and the force that slammed them both to the ground.

He remembers quite clearly the pain of being crushed by Steve’s limp body over his and the panic that had coursed through him in the din of smoke and voices and with the smell of burning flesh thick in his nose, and Steve not moving.
Oh fuck. Is what he thought. He remembers that pretty clearly too.

*****

Tony’s pretty shot, physically as well as emotionally, when a couple of medics rush up and try and get him to let go of Steve.

He was aware of the fact that they both needed medical attention. Steve definitely did. He’d taken the brunt of the blast like an idiot. Like Tony was some sort of damsel in distress when he –

When he’d run ahead of the team. Ignored good sense and all their warnings to stop and wait. He’d just lost it, and now Steve was hurt. Clint was hurt. It was his fault.

He blinked away the betraying prick of tears, recognizing the new hands on his shoulders as belonging to Bruce which was the only reason he didn’t hiss and spit and try and claw at him like he had the others.

“Let go, Tony, I want to help him alright? I won’t hurt him.” Bruce gently but firmly entreated, and Tony closed his eyes dragging in his familiar scent and when he let go of Steve his whole body was shaking, cold sweeping through him.

“He’s going into shock Dr. Banner,” a low voice said beside him and Tony blinked to find an unfamiliar kat there, wearing the uniform of a medical assistant. More and more kats were working these days. He’d been so proud of that once. He’d promised the kats at the shelter that they didn’t have to go back to the heat houses or to families that would only see them as pets and not as people if they didn’t want to. He’d told them they could learn skills, find a trade, and maybe one day live independently…

He’d told them they’d be safe.

Bruce, still kneeling over Steve gestured to the two SHIELD medics who came forward again warily, to help load the captain onto a stretcher.

“Tony. Tony look at me.” Bruce grabbed Tony’s face and tapped his cheek until Tony’s eyes focused on him. “I’ve got to stay with Steve, alright, but you’re burned. You need to let these people help you. They are friends. Let them help.”

Tony didn’t want Bruce to go, shuddered violently at the thought of letting any of these people touch him, but he bit back his protest and nodded numbly because he had no right.

Bruce left with the medics carrying Steve away and Tony felt so cold his teeth started to chatter but he refused to be reduced to tears and pathetic mewls when he was at fault for all of this.

“Don’t try and touch him.” Tony jumped at the sudden return of that unfamiliar voice, glancing up with wild eyes to see another one of SHIELD’s field medics standing not far from him, hands outstretched as if she’d frozen mid movement.

She gave the aid a severe frown. Whether she didn’t like being given orders by an assistant on principle or whether it was because this particular assistant happened to be a kat, who knew, but Tony was just glad that she didn’t try and touch him again.

“Mr. Stark. Can you stand?” the unfamiliar kat asked in a gentler tone, his dark eyes staring deeply into Tony’s. They were calm and still with an almost discomforting depth to them, that made Tony
think of falling into wells or going through portals into vast space.

Could he stand? Tony wasn’t sure he could even breathe at that moment.

“This ordeal has shaken you. I will carry you.”

That had Tony’s heart jumping in alarm, indignant heat tingling in his cheeks as he shot to his feet with a warning hiss. The world spun a bit and he wobbled but the medical aid was there a second later to provide a steadying hand, a small hint of amusement in his eyes as he murmured, “I see that my assistance is not needed.”

“It really isn’t.” Tony jerked out of the tom’s grasp, heart still clamoring in his chest, skin crawling at the thought of being touched by strangers so close to his heat. Especially a strange bossy tom. He wasn’t used to being bossed around by other kats. Not to sound like an arrogant dick but he was kind of a big deal and most kats were either too star struck or too tamed to be anything but timid when interacting with him.

The guy in the medic uniform though looked like he’d never been timid a day in his life and that was just off. Something was off, but Tony couldn’t think right now, with all the noise and the smells and the trauma beating at his senses. He closed his eyes and tried to block it all out.

“I don’t need your help. Help them.” Tony gestured to the people filling the grounds, most of them the traumatized residents of the shelter. His heart behind the reactor throbbed like that shrapnel was being pushed into it. “Please.”

It was close to begging and he hated that.

“Mr. Stark I really must insist you come with us now and be seen to.” The SHIELD medic snapped and Tony bristled because he could hear it in her voice, the unspoken ‘heel’. And hadn’t these people learned by now, that Tony would never heel.

He opened his mouth, ready to retort but was stopped by movement out of the corner of his eye, his body tensing away from the hint of threat, as the strange kat took another slow step in his direction.

“You’re being foolish.” the tom murmured softly but decisively, dark eyes cool and still too deep for Tony’s comfort. “A leader must learn that his suffering belongs to his people. Heal your body and fight another day Stark. That is what you owe them.”

Tony sucked in a sharp breath, shocked, humiliated, even angry (at this stranger, this presumptuous asshole who thought he had the right to judge, when he knew nothing of what Tony has done or what he’s been through) but then the air punched out of him and he was breathing again, raggedly… because it didn’t matter.

It’s just ego.

Blinking his eyes clear Tony glanced at the doctor and her companion and snapped, gesturing toward the medical vans, “I want all the residents and my staff seen to first. When you’re ready I’ll be with Agent Coulson.”
Phil eventually gets Tony and Natasha situated in the back of a medical van and gets them on their way to the hospital.

There’s someone assigned to fly the jet back for them, and normally Tony would protest at having some SHIELD grunt handling the Avengers private jet, but he let it go on account of the fact that Natasha (who was suffering some pretty serious burns and a sprained wrist) was giving off an unmistakable aura of temper that he wasn’t about to test anytime soon and had glared at him like she might kill him if he said anything.

For a time they sat in silence while the van sped down the highway and the medics saw to their burns and contusions, both of them staring at nothing and keenly aware of their missing teammates.

The pull of them in his mind was stronger than it ever had been as if their pain had somehow hit a panic button and there are signals flashing in his brain going: URGENT.

Natasha as always, kept herself tightly buttoned up but the whiteness of her face and the hollow look in her eyes as she stared out the window said it all.

“Drink this.”

Tony blinked, dragging his eyes from his teammate to find the irritatingly calm ones of the aid assigned to sit with them and make sure they didn’t collapse or something of that nature. He was offering a steaming cup in one hand, an interestingly sweet (but unmistakably planty) sort of smell wafting from it and Tony stared balefully at the offering.

“He doesn’t like being handed things,” Natasha spoke up from the seat beside him, steely green eyes fixed on the stranger in their midst. “You’re new.”

“And you are naturally wary of strangers.” The tom nodded in understanding. “It is a calming tea. Mr. Stark. Heat puts your body under a lot of stress and with tonight’s events you are in danger of overloading yourself. This root is known to provide a stabilizing effect.”

Tony flinched inwardly at the word heat, uncomfortable with the idea of the strange tom knowing, or being able to smell him. It made him feel too naked, too much like he was fifteen again trapped in a room with Robert and Ty and unable to get away, unable to use his head properly as his last line of defense turned to chaotic mush in his skull and left him shaking and vulnerable.

“So it’s a drug? No thanks.” He bit out, lips curling in a snarl.

Agent Coulson, sitting up in the passenger’s seat turned to glance back at them, eyeing the aide momentarily and then the cup in his hand.

“Luke is interning with SHIELD’s medical team. He’s been carefully vetted.”

Tony arched a disbelieving brow, though honestly, he wasn’t sure what if anything to make of the information.

“How progressive of SHIELD.”

“We are putting the first pride on American soil together Stark.” Coulson pointed out, sounding tired, and there was a part of Tony that felt uncharitable (low even) for being such a pill about it given how majorly he’d fucked up that night; but Tony had never been good at holding back and his mistakes aside, it was the truth.

“Ultraistic isn’t a word I would have pinned on Fury.”
He expected Natasha to lash out at him (no better than he deserved) but to his surprise she did no more than stare intently at the interning medic (Luke apparently) as if she could see straight through his skin. Tony would not have liked to be on the other end of such a look.

“Neither would I.” She murmured a moment later, finally letting the poor guy go and pinning Tony with her gaze instead.

“Drink your tea Tony.”

Tony felt his ears droop under her stare, but soldiering himself he reached for the damn cup of tea and hoped that his trust in her ability to vet danger wasn’t about to be misplaced.

Still, he sipped delicately, just in case he broke out in hives or something.

It tasted like a plant, that is to say pretty terrible, but there was a sweet edge to it that helped it go down, and it was pleasantly warm as it worked its way through him. Like swallowing a bit of sunshine, it stayed warm all the way down and smoldered somewhere in his belly in a way that might have been alarming if it wasn’t so damn relieving.

He hadn’t even realized he’d slumped against Natasha’s side until he registered that the hands slowly massaging his scalp were hers.

“You should have trusted us. It was a trap Tony.” He thought he heard her murmur, somebody was purring pretty loudly so it was hard to hear.

He closed his eyes, taking in the familiar (safe) scent of her and savoring the methodical rub and scratch of her fingers. It was a long moment before he was able to answer.

“I know.”

And he’d walked right into it.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Sunday!

I hope you're enjoying this little series as I'd like to keep going. If there is still some interest just give me a holler every now and again.

We're about to dip into IM3 territory here, and I think you'll enjoy the changes. Tony has some lessons to learn about trust and maybe we'll get there without him inviting a terrorist to blow up his house (but it's Tony so no promises). Next chapter we'll get more POV from Clint and learn a few more things about his past, like why Fury sent him into spy instead of Natasha and what came of it. And of course there is Luke. Hmmm. I wonder what his role in all of this is? ;)}
I don't give a damn about my reputation (It's a new generation)

Chapter Summary

Fury's pissed at Tony which is one thing (because Tony's pissed at Tony) but since Fury's been making deals with Viastone, Tony's ability to give a fuck is next to zero. Clint is chained to a hospital bed so he misses the debriefing but he makes an intense new friend and he does mean INTENSE.

Chapter Notes

Suprise! Posting today as I won't have time tomorrow.

A warning in this chapter for mentions of attempted non-con. It's very slight, only spoken of in memory, but the more you know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On screen a clip was playing of the volcanic woman crashing through the upstairs window and Tony leaping after her with feline grace. He's like a missile colliding with the deceptively fragile looking woman and even without the sounds, there's no hiding how ferocious he is as he tears at her, teeth and claws flashing under the chopper beams.

"I think this a chance for all of us to take a step back and reevaluate just what it is we're doing. An outbreak like this had to be expected. I've been told Anthony was in a very fragile condition -" Robert Stone, the self-proclaimed 'close family friend' who'd come out to speak to the media in Tony's defense was rudely interrupted by Christine Everhart, who yanked the microphone away to sneer.

"Stark hardly looked fragile to me. Some are saying his actions may have aggravated the strange condition that led to the unidentified woman's death. What do you say to them?"

"I can't speak on the condition of the terrorists, and it is important Ms. Everhart to remember that those people were involved in an act of terrorism, but as for Anthony's condition, I say fragile because it's a well-known fact that kats in heat are cognitively impaired, and feral kats have been historically known to become volatile without stabilizing influences."

"Are you suggesting that Stark is dangerous?"

"Certainly not. I've known Anthony since he was a kit. I am suggesting that his handlers should be under scrutiny. I think we can all agree that Stark is an extraordinary boy, but he has a history of volatile, even destructive, behavior that can and should be curbed by his owner. This nation owes Anthony a great debt and we should have asked a long time ago why that isn't happening."

"Turn it off." Tony seethed, ears flattening against his skull. There was a black sort of rage
simmering low in his stomach as the news clip continued.

Pepper, who sat beside him, nodded in agreement. Tony could tell she was tired by the way she held herself (too straight) because Pepper wasn't one to droop in public if she could help it. She looked immaculate as always but there were slight bags under her eyes that even the best makeup couldn't hide.

She'd been dealing with the media practically since the alarm had gone off upstate, and doing her usual bang-up job of it too, but they'd both expected Christine to push back like this. She never had forgiven Pepper for that trash jibe. Rhodey kept warning Tony to stop sticking his dick in crazy and one of these days he was going to listen.

Tony sneered disdainfully, turning toward her.

"Where does that shit coated gear stick get off speaking for me? Cognitively impaired. Can you believe that?"

"I don't know Tony. Leaving your team behind. Jumping out of your suit. I personally think cognitively impaired was generous," she responded out of the side of her mouth and Tony thought he saw Natasha incline her head in an agreement.

Fury snapped the screen closed with the jab of a button, mouth set in a piqued scowl as he stared down the long table at those members of the team who weren't currently holed up in hospital beds, which included Thor, who had showed up that morning, angry to have missed the crisis.

"Do you have any idea how many calls I've fielded today because of this mess you've created?" Fury demanded and Tony bristled.

"My mess? Lets talk about how those bastards knew I'm going into heat!" he damned, nails digging into the table.

Pepper gripped his arm in a staying fashion, but a rumbling noise drew everyone's attention to Thor who was crossing his arms and looking very displeased.

"Tony can not be blamed for the misdeeds of the enemy, nor for defending those he has sworn to protect" Thor stated like a king making decrees. "I have had many encounters with the Kǫtrdýr, and none of their mighty Queens would have stood for such a trespass. I can not be certain of her Midgardian children but Bastet would have taken immediate and total vengeance. Once she took the heads of an entire tribe because their leader refused to couple with her, and filled her golden tub with their blood."

Thor was frowning thoughtfully and seemed to realize the other occupants of the room were staring blankly at him and shrugged.

"Kǫtrdýr are known for their prickly temperament when they are in season."

Fury opened his mouth like he might say something to that disturbing bit of imagery, but he paused mid breath at the sound of Bruce clearing his throat down at the other end of the table.

"I'm interested in knowing how Mr. Stone knows Tony's going into heat. That's not public knowledge."

Tony, reminded of why he was pissed, turned with everyone else to glare again at fury, a muscle in his jaw working as he clenched his teeth. Fury's expression remained stony but he hesitated, which told Tony that he definitely didn't want to answer that question and didn't appreciate being backed
into a corner over it. He hissed low, and Pepper squeezed his arm again.

"Director Fury, I'd like that question answered as well" she demanded.

"SHIELD is in the middle of taking out a contract with Viastone." Fury let drop.

"Un-fucking-believable." Tony growled.

"For weapons?" Pepper asked and Bruce, green flashing in his eyes, barked a laugh.

"What else?"

"Just because Stark is no longer in the business doesn't mean we stopped needing weaponry. We need to get them from somewhere and I'm not happy with Hammer's technology."

"That's because an unconscious baboon could build better." Tony couldn't help but sneer, even if it only helped prove Fury's point. Hammer Tech sucked. "You could build a time machine and abduct my five-year-old self and he'd be able to out class Hammer Tech."

"I wouldn't suggest that." Coulson returned calmly from where he stood beside Fury at the head of the table. "Time travel is not as far outside the realm of possibility as it used to be."

"We're missing the point." Natasha, speaking up for the first time, stared coldly at Fury. "What was the deal you made with Stone?"

"Not a damn thing." Fury snapped. "Stone expressed concern for Stark's role in the Pride Initiative and the stress it is putting on him. He suggested gentling therapy and offered his tom as a stud, but I had to inform him that a request of that nature had to go through Ms. Potts. I don't think Stone realized how specific his contract gets in regards to what authority SHIELD does and doesn't have over him."

And Fury didn't even bother to hide how frustrating he found that.

Pepper's lips spread into a sharp smile.

"I find that being specific helps prevent any misunderstandings. Why wasn't I informed of Mr. Stone's request Director?" She asked in a no-nonsense tone that demanded an answer.

Tony almost didn't want to hear it. It was taking everything he had not to lose control of the terrible anger brewing inside him. The fact that he was terrified of the thought of being given over to Ty, to have the disobedience fucked out of him, only made it worse.

That's all "gentling therapy" was code for. The asinine belief that socializing fels with toms and breeding them a few times was all it took to make an unhappy kitten all smiles.

"I'd like to know that as well." Phil piggybacked onto the question. "As Tony's handler within SHIELD I should have been informed."

"Can we remember that I didn't take the deal. " Fury reiterated forcefully, as if the more forcefully he said it the quicker they would understand. Tony was shaking. His heart was pounding too hard and his blood felt hot as it rushed to his head, leaving him with the strange feeling that he was literally about to combust and blow his own head off like one of Clint's cartoons.

Pepper stroked his arm but her eyes didn't leave fury as she stared him down, her words clipped and equally forceful, "You didn't take it because you couldn't. I expect to be informed if Mr. Stone or
anyone else approaches you about Tony. If Stone so much as looks at Tony I expect to know, or our legal team will show you just how tight that contract actually is."

Tony sucked in a slight breath. He knew how badly he'd fucked things up, and what a hard time she was going to have facing the trouble that Robert was stirring up. She was always cleaning up his messes. Shielding him. Loving him even though he was probably the least deserving person on the planet.

Suddenly it was just all a little too overwhelming: the rapid cycle through rage, terror, and unspeakable gratitude. Unless something had gone dreadfully wrong with the arc reactor he was pretty sure his body was rattling. He could use some of that nasty tasting tea right about now.

Tony tensed when he felt finely boned fingers slide into his hair, rubbing at his skull, but he relaxed as Natasha's scent washed over him and he felt the familiar tingling in the back of his skull.

He'd let Bruce strap him up down in the lab and take scans of his brain while they connected once. It had been strangely beautiful to watch their brain maps light up like twin cities after dark, the impression of Bruce's wonder growing within his consciousness like a flower in bloom.

Tony could feel his connection with both Bruce and Natasha pulling tight now, and more alarmingly he could feel Clint and Cap too, as if they were somewhere close by instead of in an entirely different building.

The impression of them all was so strong like they were just waiting outside a door in his mind. If he could just find it and fling it open they'd be there with him inside his head and he didn't know whether he wanted to scream at the realization or sob in relief.

Though Bruce wasn't touching him he'd followed Natasha so that the team was no longer spread around the table but clustered together, Thor on Tony's left and he and Natasha standing behind, with Pepper on the right.

The message must have been clear because Nick sighed deeply like a confession was being dug up from the recesses of his soul and dragged out of his mouth.

"Look." He began, wiping a tired hand down his face. "Believe it or not I'm on your side here. My goal has always been the pride. If you think I'm about to throw it all away by giving Viastone the kind of leverage that Robert Stone is angling for. Think again.

"But unfortunately last night's shit show has only reinforced people's fears that kats with claws are dangerous and can't be allowed immunity to govern themselves. I intend to show them otherwise, but it would help me out if the next time you feel like bathing in the blood of your enemies, you got a stress ball instead."

"Yeah. Right. Of course whatever you say Blackbeard." Tony agreed, still seething quietly as he stood from his chair, though the reinforcement from the others had helped calm him so that he didn't quite feel like he was existing inside a pressure cooker. He wasn't quite ready to forgive Fury and he'd never fully trust the man.

"If we're done here."

"Wait."Fury interjected before Tony could get very far. "Before you go, you should know that we've been negotiating with the kingdom of Wakanda."

"For the big U.N. meeting. We know."
"Not just for that, but for access to the country itself. We'd send a group of delegates in along with a
team of chosen experts to observe the Wakandian way of life and prepare a special report, for our
own government as well as to be shared at the world summit. I don't need to stress how important
this is."

He really didn't. There wasn't anyone standing there who didn't know what a game changer this
could be. It could blow the game wide open.

"So why are you?" Natasha asked with a red eyebrow arched.

"Because Wakanda wants to observe us first before they break their code of isolation and invite us
across their borders. They'll be sending people to asses you."

"When?" she asked, eyes narrowing.

"Well when they do Ms. Romanov I'm sure you'll be the first to know." Fury sneered and then he
rolled his eyes to Pepper and said dryly, "I'm only telling you this much because I've been reminded
that I'm contractually obligated. Now all of you, get the hell out of my office."

---

"You've been hanging around Stark too much."

Clint, eyes glued to the television screen above his hospital bed, didn't reply.

“Didn’t you call this show, ‘mindless post-liberal apologist bullshit’?” Phil asked, leaning over the
bed to adjust the corner of Clint’s blanket, which had become twisted in the guardrails.

“Sources or it's fake.” Clint grunted and Phil's mouth twitched toward a smile.

“Ms. Foster had recently visited. I did think that had something to do with it at the time.”

On the screen Amee was sniffling into a napkin, having just been scolded by her guardian for not
keeping her doctor prescribed diet and possibly endangering the kits she was carrying.

'The truth is… I don't want to be pregnant right now.'

The fel on screen was young, pretty and mostly plastic, nothing like Stark, but something about
hearing those words reminded him uncomfortably of Tony.

And as he watched Amee’s mommy come in and tell her what a wonderful privilege it was to bring a
child into the world and how happy she was going to be to give another family such a special gift,
the feeling of discomfort only grew.

Clint reached for the remote and flicked the television off and he could practically feel Phil’s
questioning look.

“I hope Tony isn’t watching that shit" he mumbled darkly.

The smile that might have blossomed on Phil's face had disappeared now.

“It’s unlikely. He was hovering by your bed until I kicked him out. Instead of going home to sleep
like I told him to, he's camped in Steve’s room.”

Between Thing One and Thing Two exploding, Steve had been caught with less cover, and had some intense burns to show for it. The serum meant he was healing faster than the average human and truthfully faster than Clint was, but even Steve’s body had to take some time.

“Sure you’re comfortable leaving them alone?” Clint asked, surprised that Tony would even make such a move.

“Natasha’s there.” Phil replied a bit noncommittally and Clint scowled. Natasha wasn’t exactly a diplomat and he still wasn’t sure how much she put up with Stark for his sake. And she had to be pissed at him for running off like that. Tony was a pill but he was more fragile than people gave him credit for and Natasha wasn’t known for pulling her punches.

Clint twitched, aborting the urge to sit up and get out of bed when Phil gave him the look of ‘don’t even think about it’.

God, he just wanted… no, Clint swallowed thickly, he needed this whole pride thing to work out.

She knew that. He reminded himself. Natasha knew and that meant she’d do whatever it took to get them functioning like a real pride, even if it went against all of her training (even if she was scared) because that was what he’d asked her to do.

Yeah. He could be a selfish asshole sometimes.

Security had never been a big part of his life. He’d been born on a breeding farm somewhere in Europe and the kats that were born in places like that were destined for one of two things: the heat houses or the fight rings.

The fels, they were almost destined for the heat house unless they were lucky enough to be considered too ugly for brothel work and then it was off to the labor camps. The toms were lucky if they got the camps but if they hadn't had their domestic shots it wasn't likely.

Although it wasn't mandated all over Europe like it was here people were still leery of feral kats. Many of the less reputable farms preferred to sell to the guys who came looking for fresh fighters because they were willing to shell out top dollar with more and more countries cracking down on unlicensed farms and illegal fight rings.

Clint and his brother Barney had gotten luckier than most. They’d been bought by Carson’s Carnival and shipped to the US of A almost before their eyes fully opened. The circus life hadn’t been so bad, when you compared it to getting chewed up and tossed away when your body was too broken to fight anymore.

He and Barney went hungry a lot, got whipped their fair share, but it taught them how to fend for themselves. They learned the rules: Stay ahead. Sleep with an eye open. Always be useful. Play them before they play you.

One day this crime boss named Marko had approached Barney and made him an offer too good to be true. No more masters. A cushy pad. All the girls a guy could ask for and an endless supply of nip besides. All they had to do was run jobs and do security detail.

They were an obvious catch for Marko. Feral kats were rare stateside and as such they were faster and stronger than any of his other hired guns, and he'd already seen from their show of course how skilled they were at hitting a target. The only one who was a better shot than Clint was Barney.
They’d taken the job because at the time it had seemed like freedom. The only freedom guys like them were ever going to get.

They don’t tell you upfront, what it does to you when the boss says ‘go to this address and teach so and so a lesson’. There’s no instruction manual for living with yourself when you’ve got to put some guy’s family in the river because he owed the wrong people.

But it was too late.

See? You were the stupid fuck who signed your soul away, thinking you were going to be free or some shit. Of course you’re not. You’re still just an animal, only good for tricks or sic’ing some poor sod when master says ‘sic em, and if you out live your use… well just make sure you never make that mistake.

He’d walked that road for years until the night he finally got picked up by SHEILD when one of Marko's jobs went bust. It was the run of the mill black market op. Transport goods across the city and if the feds show up take care of them.

Only that time, the goods in question had been humans. No one had told him that Marko was dipping into the flesh trade, but why the fuck not? At least that’s how Barney had seen it. What the fuck did they owe a bunch of pink ears anyway? They’d been sold, just like this. Nobody had ever stood up for the likes of them.

If it’s not them it’ll be you. Everybody knows that.

Only there had been this kid. No older than nine and being sold for god only knows what, and of all things (picture it) he’s wearing a Captain America T-Shirt.

Clint couldn’t stop thinking about whether or not he had a family somewhere still wondering what had happened to him, if the comic books he’d probably worn thin were going to gather dust in a box somewhere or get thrown away, and if he still believed in heroes now that he was there in a cage.

Well, the short version is Clint decided to play hero and fucked the whole job up. He got his ass beat by his own brother and left to take the fall when the suits showed up.

SHEILD had been watching the ring for a while and Fury had been just impressed enough to offer Clint a gig as a spy in exchange for sparing his life. They called it contracted rehabilitation service. Clint didn’t have much of a choice about it because they don’t bother putting kats in jail.

Why waste the tax dollars? Defective animals get put down. Period.

He’d been grateful not to be dead, but he never made any mistake that to SHEILD he was just a tool. A good operative. Useful. He had new masters but the golden rule still applied. Never outlive your use.

Phil had been unexpected. The first human being that Clint had ever met who didn’t ignore that half his DNA was human and treated Clint like he was worth more than his service. He never seemed to have a hair out of place even on the most dangerous of missions but he went home to watch bad tv with the rest of America ( or good TV as he insists, shit like M.A.S.H and Happy Days). He drove a vintage car and collected trading cards and even got Clint to admit that he’d always kind of liked the Captain America comics as well.

Pro Tip: Phil Coulson acts like he's a professional but secretly he's still a kid in a beaver hat somewhere in bum-fuck Wisconsin and it's 1974. If your name is Steve Rogers he IS watching you sleep. You're not imagining it.
Phil had been the one to push for registering Clint in the federal database. Clinton Francis Barton (he'd spent longer than he'd ever admit to anyone going over the registry books that Phil had borrowed for him, trying out a hundred combination of names) officially came into existence on paper July 18th 2001.

Clint will always be 'Hawk' somewhere deep down, and Hawkeye is better than Spot or Fluffy (he's met some kats with some SHITTY names) but having a real name almost made him feel like a real person, and now that he's officially a resident of the United States with tags and a proper owner and everything, he can't just disappear. Not entirely. He existed somewhere and there's a record.

So yeah. He never would have predicted Phil, but Natasha had completely blown his mind. He’d never encountered anyone like her. He’d been sure he was going to die on that mission and kinda okay with that outcome because he was tired, and truthfully going out against someone like her could only be epic and at least he would have had the adventure of it. Phil would have been sad but that’s the thing people don’t get.

Clint had never hoped to have anything like a last name or someone to miss him. That was gold to him back then.

But Natasha couldn’t kill him. Well she totally could have, but she hadn’t because she’d felt the same pull he had. The same utter certainty that they belonged to each other.

Instead of taking out his mark he’d gone AWOL. They’d been prepared to die together between SHIELD and the KGB hunting them down, but Phil had convinced Fury they were worth more alive than dead; and Clint really got it then, that Coulson meant what he said about standing behind him, making sure he had what he needed to succeed and evaluating his performance with fairness. He hadn’t just been talking shit when he called Clint a person and said that people needed to take care of themselves and be taken care of to be an effective part of a team.

Coulson had gone to bat for him, and Clint had never been under any false impression that it hadn’t cost him. Phil had never told him what deal he’d struck with Fury and part of Clint was grateful that he didn't know and couldn't add that weight to his conscience.

He'd started to fall for him then, but since even Clint could admit he had the emotional maturity of a teaspoon, and next to zero trust in humans, he'd ignored it for another two years.

He and Natasha worked like a dream together and after some pretty heavy shit started threatening the planet and talking to a bunch of experts, Fury realized he had a good trick going with them. If he and Natasha had sparked the beginnings of a bond, it was possible that they could bond with other ferals like themselves and form a complete pride, which given their performance record everyone could only agree would be bad ass.

Phil had given him the details, the research (what little there was of it) and had asked Clint what he thought.

Clint still didn’t trust SHIELD the way he trusted Natasha, the way he trusted Phil. There was nothing he could do to get rid of the fear in the back of his mind that everything wouldn’t be taken away (that Natasha or Phil wouldn’t one day walk away like Barney had, or be taken away).

He read those old files about prides and one thing above all others had stuck out.

Prides can’t be separated, or at least not easily. The members are all connected mentally, psychologically, telepathically. There was a lot of mystic mumbo jumbo shit that scientists haven't had much opportunity to weed through and pick out the myths from the facts, but there have been
cases of bonded kats healing faster, learning faster, and even finding each other across oceans.

They kill for one another, die for one another, and prosper together. They’re sacred. They’re home.

It's clear that if they do this, they'll never be alone in their own heads again.

Natasha was scared of it but she wouldn’t say so. She'd sat there staring at the file, only speaking to say it was up to him.

If he wanted this, they’d do it. And he wished he was strong enough to walk away from it. But he wasn't. Not even for her.

Clint had admitted he wanted it and before he could blink Fury was all like “Barton, you’re going under cover” and the giant shit storm that was the Stark Job had begun.

It had been a toss up between sending him or Natasha and Clint had wondered at first why he'd won out over her, because Clint was a good spy but Natasha was the spy and it was clear from the beginning that The Stark Job was too important to fuck up.

Anthony Stark might be the only known feral queen in the United States but he was not the only option out there in the world.

But Stark was well Stark and getting him under SHIELD control was a no brainer as far as gains went. Clint was being sent in to assess not only compatibility but do whatever it took to acquire a major asset for the team (for SHIELD).

He'd gone deep under cover, starting with a fake name and a padded backstory on the steps of Maria's House. The backstory was the easy part because enough illegal breeding and selling of kats occurred on the black market that plenty of the shelter's residents had next to no paper trail.

At the shelter he was just Charlie and that was good enough, so long as he didn’t cause trouble. He hadn't even needed to lie that much. If he'd never been arrested he might very well have wandered off the street one day just the same way.

He'd spent eight months building that cover before it had finally paid off in the form of a prized apprenticeship at Stark Industries. Maria's House prioritized teaching all willing residents a form of trade and finding them job placements with trusted handlers when they were ready to reenter the world.

There were still many limits to the types of jobs kats could do and still a lot of prejudice in the work place, but more and more industries were allowing them to work as assistants and aides. No organization had made greater strides than Stark Industries and the kats at the shelter held a special place with Stark. It was as close to an open door as anybody was going to get with a man as guarded as Tony.

His first day on the job he'd been greeted personally by Pepper who'd apologized for Tony's absence and explained that he'd be working with her as a second assistant and that if he did well, the placement could become permanent, as she was looking for someone to take on some of the more menial tasks in order to help free up her schedule for more important things.

She'd been giving him the tour when Tony had finally appeared, and it was only when Clint had felt the first spark of their minds connecting and that pull, that he'd finally realized why Fury had chosen him for this gig instead of Natasha.

It's easy. Clint's a tom. And at his first sight of Tony, his first smell, it was like a flip had switched on
in Clint's head and his body had woken up after years of slumber and remembered it had a programmed function.

Now Tony had a reputation you'd have to have been taking a seventy-year ice nap not to have heard about. He's slept with men, women, kittens and toms alike. Picky isn't what Clint ever would have thought to call him.

But it's all a game, see, and it hadn't taken Clint long to observe that Tony was an expert. It was about control. Tony slept with people who gave easy pleasure, or easy votes, contracts and donations; people with the least amount of personal threat to him. They could have the surface, the physical, but there was no danger of anybody getting beyond that. Nobody got in or under, and those who tried to get over eventually learned the error of their ways. Most of them are dead.

Tony's a feral queen in a nation of house kats and it shows. He's the black cat, the merchant of death, and people can't get enough of it. The establishment can't decide whether it wants to fuck him or kill him more (but he's a kat so what else is new) and for years Tony had left them all in his dust, aloof and seemingly above it all.

Because he just is. His biological purpose is to build a pride. He was never going to settle for something tame. He can't settle, and Clint's biological purpose is to make sure he doesn't have to. Clint has to be the strongest, the fastest, the best, the hunter, because he has to protect his pride and his queen. And one smile from Tony is all it takes to make him feel like he's the fucking Terminator here to wreck everyone's shit. It's high as anything.

So there they were, both crashing into their biological imperatives for the first time, and the media can say what it wants but here's a pro tip: Tony Stark is a huge nerd who can't handle his own emotions for shit, and sure he's pretty slick and flashy when he wants to be, but if you bought that dog and pony show more the fool you.

Because even now, Clint could still see him like it was yesterday. After months of dancing Clint had finally pushed them over the line into the realm of lovers. It cost him most of his secrets. Nights full of bare confessions with only scant parts omitted for professionalism's sake, because Tony wouldn't open for anything less than 'I'll show you mine if you show me yours'.

They'd been sleeping together for under a month, only that night Clint couldn't sleep because he was royally fucked and he knew it. Tony had wandered into the kitchen in those ridiculous sweat pants and that holey tank top with his hair all mussed, and asked him if he'd like a mug of warm cream.

"It helps you sleep" he'd said, and Tony couldn't sleep because his body had begun preparing for heat, his scent already deepening with an edge of spice that Clint just wanted to close his eyes and roll around in until the end of his days.

"It's bearable on my own... Sometimes I invite some fel to stay the week and I even enjoy it, but I can't do that with you. I know how it goes for us. We're bred but we're not parents. Our children are gifts for our masters. We don't get a say in how they're raised or where they're sold.

"My mother told me... when my father tried to breed me... she told me she regretted she couldn't be brave, like I was. She couldn't stand up to him, but she knew I could. She made me promise to protect my children. I can't risk bringing a child into my world Clint. I'll burn it down before I let them do to it what they did to me."

Pro tip: Clint's the guy you shout at not to be a hero who ignores you. Every time.

Fury never outright told him to sleep with Stark or take him through heat but Clint wasn't raised in a
shoe box. He was supposed to fuck Tony and get him prego so that they could do it for the kids.

You did what you had to sometimes, to get the job done. Sometimes you convinced yourself it was for the greater good. But when Tony had told him about the Stones, the bastards who'd strapped a fifteen-year-old to a mounting block and told him to think of what a gift he was giving them – he couldn't blame Tony for not trusting people, and not wanting to bring a kid into a world this cold.

Clint got another case of the hero bug and decided that he couldn't sleep with Tony, even when he was dying from palladium poisoning and his heat had made him forget all his reasons for holding back; because Tony didn't know the truth and Clint couldn't be one more person who used him.

He couldn't force Stark to make them pride, to give him the promise of security he needs sometimes just keep his eyes closed at night. Those are Clint's demons and he's got to deal with them.

So Clint had broken cover and told Tony the truth, which had effectively lost him his job, his boyfriend, and also meant Fury losing his shit, but Clint couldn't be a hundred percent positive that Fury hadn't figured he might pull something like that to beginning with. Because he wasn't sacked like he should have been and the gamble had paid off in the end.

Tony eventually came around, and Clint didn't think that would have been possible if he'd learned the truth any other way.

Clint wanted to get up now, make sure Stark and Cap weren't doing the verbal version of a knife fight, and to make sure Tony wasn’t ingesting that reality TV shit (not today) but he couldn’t do any of that because he couldn’t fucking move. God he hated hospitals.

“Can I ditch the mummy act or what?” Clint whined a few moments later, scratching at the bandages on his forearms. They had him on some good meds so his pain level was down but he itched like a mother.

“How about we have a look here,” Phil made a humming sound of consideration, reaching for the chart hanging beside the bed and Clint groaned, rolling his eyes. He already knew where this was headed but he let Phil play it out.

He actually pretended to read the damn thing, even flipping over to the next page before he finally settled back in his chair and announced, “The doctor is still projecting two to three weeks for your burns to heal. No miraculous change. Bandages stay on and physical activity will be minimal, Barton.”

Clint groaned dejectedly just as there was a knock on the door. It beeped and swished open a moment later and one of the SHIELD medical assistants wheeled in a tray with a fresh IV bag and what looked like supplies to change his bandages. At least that might mean a bit of relief from the itching.

Clint was surprised to see that he was a kat though. He could count the kats on the payroll on one hand and he was pretty sure he knew all of them. Taming drugs doing what they did, most kats didn’t have the constitution for SHIELD work.

"Good afternoon Mr. Coulson," Luke, according to his name tag, chirped amiably in Clint's direction as he began changing out the IV bag. Clint scowled.

The guy had to be fresher than compost if he didn't know who Clint was.

"It's Barton."
"Oh" the man raised dark eyebrows in an expression of surprise, eyes flicking to Phil. "But I thought you were collared."

"He kept his own name." Phil informed the other tom matter of factly, with no judgment. He'd asked Clint if he wanted to keep it because he'd known how important it was to him.

"I see." Luke the newbie made a slight humming sound and Clint stared at him for a long moment, but he couldn't detect any judgment in either the sound or his expression.

Luke calmly went about his work, finishing with the pain drip and moving closer to the bed in order to begin unwrapping the bandages from around Clint's neck and shoulders.

Just about when Clint had lost himself to his own thoughts, out of nowhere the guy murmured almost distractedly, "But in America it is custom, isn't it? You take the name of your masters."

"Phil is my partner. I don't have a master." Clint responded tersely.

"But you do." The tom insisted quietly, not taking his eyes off of his work as he slowly peeled the bandage away from the healing skin on Clint's torso and he hissed, not entirely in pain at the inevitable pull on his skin.

"I understand that Mr. Coulson is your lover and perhaps as such he grants you a certain illusion of equality, but he is still your master. Isn't he?" The aide asked.

"Who is this asshole?" Clint asked Coulson instead of answering, looking past the aide and pinning Phil with a frank look because come the fuck on. Was this guy serious?

Glancing coldly back at Luke he sneered, "Maybe that's what you and all the other conservo-nazis on the planet think, but for your information, I chose to belong to Phil and he chose to belong to me. That is how a relationship works."

"Mr. Debar is apprenticing under Dr. Debar." Phil explained with a slightly apologetic turn to his expression. "His uncle."

Clint could only arch a brow at that. He didn't know the medical team as well as some of the strike forces, only that he was originally from somewhere in the Congo. That explained the faint accent the guy couldn't quite suppress. He was doing a fair job of it all things considered but Clint was a spy after all. Fair wasn't good enough.

"So your uncle got you a cushy gig. Nice. Your father must actually have claimed you."

It wasn't unheard of, just rare. Even Howard, who had been wealthy enough that people might have looked the other way, hadn't bothered to claim Tony while he was alive.

"I am his son" Luke answered as if that should explain everything.

He efficiently cleaned the burn site with careful dabs of the towel he held. Clint wouldn't have called his grip gentle but it was certainly practiced.

"I didn't mean to offend you Mr. Barton. My country is very different from yours. You and your pride are very interesting to a lot of people. I'm only curious how it works."

"How what works?" Clint asked warily, not liking the feeling of where this might be leading.

"It. All of it." Luke grinned at him with some of the whitest teeth Clint had ever seen, completely shit
eating and Clint relaxed, rolling his eyes at the lame joke.

"You probably know better than I do. There are still prides in Africa right?"

"In all of Africa?" Luke was the one rolling his eyes now. "Yes. But it is not like the old way. Masters raise families of kats, often for farm labor, and allow them to bond. They mimic the prides of old but thy are nothing like them."

There was a deeply laced disgust underlining Luke's words now, a barely controlled sort of rage that made what hair hadn't been singed off on Clint's body raise.

"The Alurio are not slaves. When my uncle told me about the Pride Initiative I had to see it for myself. I knew that America was too cowardly to ever bring back true Alurio."

"The Avengers aren't slaves either Luke." Phil spoke up, drawing the eyes of both toms. "They are under SHIELD supervision but they have been granted the freedom to form a pride body and to govern themselves accordingly. There is preliminary talk of providing them with political immunity but more would have to be observed of pride function and dynamics for the World Security Council to even consider granting something like that without precedent."

It was strange. Clint got the feeling that Phil was saying more than he'd actually said. It left him with the feeling of having missed something vital in the conversation. For his part Luke just finished rewrapping Clint's bandages, and stood once more.

Nodding professionally in Phil's direction he began wheeling the tray away, only pausing a moment as he passed between Coulson and Clint's hospital bed to say, "a man is only free when he can live his life as he chooses without obstruction. Anything else is a form of slavery."

The door shut smoothly behind him and Clint whistled low.

"I take it back. He's not a conservo-nazi. He's anti-establishment and he's got balls of steel." Clint's mouth spread into a wide beam of excitement, because his favorite sort of kat was the kind of kat who could flip Uncle Sam the bird.

"Maybe you ought to recruit him for active duty."

Phil gave him an unimpressed look.

Chapter End Notes

I really hope you enjoyed and am excited to hear what predictions you might have. Next chapter Rhodey comes to town and we're going to get to hear from Natasha, who is going to be very busy trying to figure out who is behind the 'exploding people' while Senator Stern and the government goonies try and take the Ironman armor for themselves. Clint's still a terrible patient and Steve's not much better but at least they're back at the tower. She likes her boys where she can keep an eye on them.
Chapter Summary

In which the plot thickens. Tony might be warming up to the medic, which is too bad because Natasha knows he's not who he says he is and she's coming to the creeping realization that if they're really going to make the pride work, they're going to have to start showing each other their hands. That's hard for her. Here are the reasons why.

Chapter Notes

Posting early again due to it being another busy Sunday. Moving is the WORST. Don't do it. ;) I hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was dark and cold as Tony trudged through the snow covered wilderness of who even knew. The weight of Natasha heavy on his back provided meager warmth against the chill of the wind as it whipped snow against them both.

Neither of them were dressed suitably for the cold, though Natasha was slightly better off in her insulated uniform. Tony was still without a jacket in the torn in the clothes he'd been taken in, before he'd woken up in the AIM lab with the crazies.

'We need to find shelter.'

The wind gusted and Tony shuddered. There was an alarming sensation of heat thrumming through his veins even though the elements quickly leeched it away. That might not be a good thing. He had the bad feeling that his body was trying to compensate for the chill and the strain it was under and he'd seen already where that could lead.

He could actually hear it humming in the center of his chest and was tempted to laugh. Guess there was no escaping the whole heart made of meta and gears thing now.

Natasha, shivering, pressed closer to his back and more of her warmth leeched from her body to his. There was something not quite natural about how steadily he could feel that warmth, how purposefully his body seemed to take it from hers and he knew that she had to be giving it to him somehow.

He knew he was right when she sagged again, the strength seemingly gone from her, and her skin felt like ice pressed against his. It didn't help that that ominous humming in his ears had quieted.

Tony closed his eyes, limbs shaking with fatigue, and grit his teeth.

"Stop that! We've already got one team icicle. I don't need you freezing on me."

"Keep walking Stark." She finally murmured so lowly that he doubted someone without kat ears
would have heard her before her words were whisked away by the wind.

But her message was clear. Either he left her behind or he kept walking for the both of them. Only one of those was an option as far as Tony was concerned.

Tony sucked in a harsh breath, the cold stinging in his lungs, and with a pain-filled grunt he kept walking.

~*~*~*~

~*~*New York City 42 H ours Earlier *~*~

~*~*~*~

A government court hearing was nothing compared to six weeks hiking through a Siberian winter, but there was no exhaustion like the exhaustion brought on by being forced to listen to hours of stupid people beating at the same point in hope of different results.

Following the attack on Tony’s safe house an “investigation” had been launched into his care and the contract between Potts and SHIELD. Nobody expected them to get very far proving that Pepper was abusive as an owner, and though they’d likely argue negligent until they were blue in the face, it was obviously just a smoke screen to hide their true goal.

Far from giving up the old chase, they were trying with renewed vigor to gain control of the Iron Man armor. They were pushing the angle that leaving a highly lethal weapon in the control of an unstable being was by definition negligent, and that the obvious solution was to appoint a human handler from the military to supervise. To sweeten the poisoned apple, they were suggesting James Rhodes for the job.

“Tony, I didn’t know, okay.” Rhodes was saying as Happy pulled the car away from the courthouse. He was sitting opposite Tony and Natasha, looking tense and somewhat apologetic in the face of Tony’s deeply annoyed expression.

“We’ve been here, danced this dance Rhodey Bear. How many times are you going to play that old song?” Tony snapped but Natasha wasn’t overly worried. Rhodes was in the car with them which meant that Stark had every intention of forgiving him and only wanted to make him suffer.

Still, she kept half an eye on them as she continued her work on her StarkPad. She had at least six ongoing investigations going at the moment, but top priority was figuring out the minds behind the attack on Maria’s House and figuring out how Robert Stone and Senator Stern were wrapped up in it. Because they were. She just had to figure out how.

“They asked me to write up an honest assessment. If you’d read my report—“

“I did, kind of a boring read, skipped to the end where you called my suit a weapon of mass destruction in the hands of a megalomaniac.” Tony interjected and Natasha raised a challenging eyebrow.

Rhodes displayed the patience of a saint, though he had to close his eyes and speak very carefully to do it.
“That’s not what I said.”

It really hadn’t been.

“I said that the suit is potentially a weapon of mass destruction that logically should be prevented from falling into the wrong hands.”

“When are you guys going to get it? I am Iron man. The suit and I, we’re one. There are no hands safer than mine.”

“Then we’re in agreement. You know we are. But there’s a system of checks and balances. There has to be. You can’t expect to just go out there and do what you do without answering to somebody.” Rhodes insisted, leaning forward to make sure that he had Stark’s complete attention. He had Natasha’s.

“Look Tony, a man just blew up in a public shopping center. Fifteen dead, including a mother and her two children, multiple people in critical condition. People don’t feel safe, and they need to know that the same rules that apply to them apply to everyone. You can’t be special.”

Natasha’s fingers had stilled on her tablet, pulling her eyes away from her work to stare at the Colonel because that hadn’t been a lecture. It was a warning. The incident at the shopping center had been all over the news that morning. An unidentified man had entered a shop, gotten into an argument with someone inside and exploded with enough force to destroy the store and blow out a section of the building. Police had suspected a terrorist with a homemade explosive until salvaged security footage had shown the perpetrator self destruct the same way their attackers at the safe house had.

Tony’s distress was tugging quietly at the back of her mind but she let it be for the moment, the line between being somewhat touch starved and touch resistant was thin when it came to Stark, but she could appreciate it. She had trouble finding her own lines when it came to letting others close.

“What aren’t you telling me?” Tony asked, proving once again that no matter what his weaknesses he would never be someone to underestimate. “What do you know?”

“Nothing.” Rhodes heaved a small sigh. “Officially, everything is talk at the moment and Tony if I did know more than that I couldn’t tell you.”

But he would, Natasha thought even as Tony’s mouth curled into a smug grin.

“But you totally would or you wouldn’t have gone all ‘Wise Dragon’ on me just now.”

“Wise what?” The Colonel put his throat on display by taking the bait, not because he didn’t understand Tony’s games, but because they held an unspoken understanding that he would play them in exchange for the temporal institution of intimacy.

For a blip in time they agreed to a mutual blindness of each other’s greatest faults and cannibalistic tendencies, agreeing to enjoy the best of each other. It was the madness of Alice, and that was why she’d been taught that love was for children, because only a child put faith in such willful fantasy.

She’d done everything she could to carve out the girl who had knowingly sipped from the bottle marked poison but she’d not succeeded and denial was fools bread.

Natasha was infected and for people like her love was always terminal. The bottle would disagree with her one day, but before then there was work to be done and apples. Always apples.
“You know, omnipotent lizard,” Tony was prattling beside her. “Speaks in riddles and tells you just enough to make you fear your imminent doom, but never actually says or does anything that could help you prevent it? Wise dragon.”

Natasha rolled her eyes and went back to her tablet.

She now had seven projects in the works.

~*~*~

Steve looked up as Natasha walked into his room without bothering to knock.

"How's the search going?" He asked, pausing in his ministrations and Natasha bit into the skin of the apple she'd snagged from the kitchen on her way in (she'd made herself hungry in the car) pointedly staring at the pile of ripped bandages at Steve's feet.

"Did the doctor come back early?" She asked, knowing very well that he hadn't. Steve didn't even have the grace to look mildly guilty about it, the line of his jaw going stiff and stubborn as he went back to work unwrapping himself. Stark would have some witty innuendo for that, but she'd leave it to him. She was content to watch and enjoy her apple.

"Serums' done most the work already." Steve said, finished with his arms and bending awkwardly to start on his torso. "Once we figure out who was behind the attack we'll need to be ready to move. We should get as much team practice in as possible while we have the chance."

And of course, Steve had to be the one to lead them, never mind whatever condition his body was in. Sometimes his noble streak was insufferable, but lucky for him mostly it was charming. Crunching on her apple Natasha sauntered toward him and he stilled, watching somewhat warily as she took a hold of his bared arm.

"Does that hurt?" She asked, putting pressure on his wrist, forcing his arm back toward his knee. Even wounded Steve was capable of resisting that pressure but they both knew that wasn’t the point so he allowed it.

Steve grunted, smiling through the discomfort of thin sensitive skin stretching for the first time, to come back with, “Could do this all day.”

Natasha rolled her eyes, releasing him.

“You’re full of shit Rogers.”

Steve just kept smiling at her as he resumed awkwardly unwrapping those bandages still around his torso.

He'd been chafing to get up almost the minute he'd woken up at the hospital, despite looking like some horrendous version of two face, with one side of his body still healing from severe burns. Between him and Clint they'd been driving the hospital staff crazy.

By the time that Stark had arranged for them to be transported back to the tower for home care the staff had all but pushed them out the door.
While Clint seemed fine with lazing in his bed now that he was in the comfort of his own space, she'd known Steve wouldn't be. It hadn't even been two days and according to him he was healed enough to lose the bandages and get back to work.

Even though he was being an idiot Natasha swatted his hands away and helped him.

“You know you’re setting a bad example for Clint.” Her hands were gentle as she slowly unwrapped the tender flesh. It was soft and pink with newness, a stark contrast to the angry and blackened blisters that had marred him only days ago.

His flesh jumped beneath her fingers as she trailed them down his ribcage, chasing away the disturbing memory with the solidity of the present. The past could not haunt you if you stayed in your present.

Steve gripped her wrist and pulled her hand away, and Natasha thought on all the strength in those hands. How easily they could be turned against flesh to crack and bruise, and yet they could touch now with such deceptive gentleness.

Steve was like that. Deceptively wholesome. Seemingly harmless. He wasn't.

Nothing was certain in the world at all.

"What's with the grin?" Steve asked and the faint smile on her lips twisted into a smirk.

"As soon as he sees you walking around all fresh and pink, he's going to want to play too.” She offered instead, unsurprised when Steve's brow furrowed in displeasure, because it was okay for him to be a fool and take risks but it would never be okay for the others. That was just the way he was wired. His weakness, the part of her that was red and always would be recognized, and perhaps it was also his greatest strength.

She was coming to realize that too, but she was unsure if the woman who thought such silly things and craved what she'd already tasted and found to be poison could be trusted.

“I heal faster. Doc says it should be another week for Clint.”

She tensed, reminded of the doctor scheduled to come every couple of days for home care and the tom who assisted him. She didn't like unanswered questions, and Luke Debar was definitely an unknown, his presence an anomaly and his sudden appearance within their carefully maintained social bubble suspicious. More tellingly his SHIELD file was thin.

"Tell him that. I'll let him point out the hypocrisy." She stripped away the last of the bandages with a firm pat on his side and smiled at his flinch. Served him right.

"The trail is cold on the terrorists. The parts salvaged from the trucks traced back to a company in Tennessee that sells to just about everybody. Nothing to narrow down the list." She finally answered and Steve listened intently, rising to his feet.

"And we're not any closer to figuring out what they wanted with the kats at the shelter?"

Natasha shrugged.

"Without a calling card it's all guess work."

"What's your instinct?" Steve asked so simply. She blinked slowly, surprised at the level of trust he seemed to be granting her.
"It's unusual for terrorists not to leave a calling card. They are by nature exhibitionists, but these guys attacked under the cover of dark and have covered their tracks."

Steve nodded, the furrow in his brow deepening with thought.

"And if they wanted the kats for profit how come there haven't been any other attempted thefts on this scale?"

"If it was for profit they wouldn't have gone after damaged goods." Steve's eyes narrowed in censure and Natasha almost smiled. "Fact of life Rogers."

"So we agree then that Tony was the target." He let it go, but not without making sure she knew he didn't approve of her talking like that. Natasha's lips curled around the skin of her apple before she took a bite. Steve sighed. "I don't like it. Why go to that length just to get a reaction?"

"Well, it led to today's hearing. They want to push a military handler on him."

"Do you think the military is behind it?"

It was amazing to her how wounded he could manage to sound around those words, and still have the courage to ask them. But perhaps it was easier for him than for a man like the Colonel. He wasn't a company man, despite the uniform. Steve's faith was in people.

He knew you couldn't count on the bank not crashing or the man in the suit promising you things would get better, but you could count on your neighbor for a bottle of milk and on your men to have your back. He depended on the goodness of others so fundamentally that unraveling him would be as simple as waking him up to the reality of the world around him, a place she knew to be populated by monsters.

She wondered what it said about her that she felt so innately protective of his slumber. Perhaps it was what Bruce was calling the 'pride effect'.

"Natasha?" He prodded and she blinked, chastising herself for losing track of the conversation like that. She was getting sloppier and sloppier these days.

"It's possible." She allowed and Steve watched her carefully.

"But you don't think so?"

She didn't.

"Too early to know." She answered with a small shrug. "It's easy to see why they'd have a vested interest in pulling Stark away from Pepper. They could force him to make weapons again."

"We won't let that happen." Steve promised, his jaw set, his gaze interestingly getter softer the more conviction he felt. Softness turned the corner into defensiveness as he shifted, uncomfortable with her stare. "You know when you look at me like that, I start to think you don't believe me."

She huffed with amusement, mouth tilting slightly upward despite herself once more.

"I believe you Rogers. That's what baffles me. You don't even like Stark, but you put yourself between him and what amounts to a bomb. Is that because of the bond that nobody wants to acknowledge is growing between all of us, or are you really just that noble?"

Steve's mouth made a too familiar self-deprecating twist in answer.
"From what I've read Ms. Romanov we're not much of a pride."

"I know." Natasha leaned against the door and Steve looked at her, contemplating.

"You sound relieved."

She was. Every day. Keeping gaze with him she took another bite of her apple.

Swallowing she shrugged, turning to make her exit. Over he shoulder she hot back, "So do you. And yet, we're both still here."

~ * ~

Tony ventured into the kitchen late the next morning, yanked from the fitful sleep he’d dropped into during the early part of the morning before the sun had risen. He’d spent the night digging through the files on the trucking company Natasha had traced the vehicle parts back to. JARVIS was a big help but even so, without much to narrow their search window they were forced to weed through the company’s financial records from the last ten years, hoping to spot something helpful.

Maybe a payment from TERROR R US, his inner Clint supplied and Tony hated himself just a little bit for having an inner Clint at all. He heard Clint yammering away in the kitchen even before he’d walked through the door but he came to a complete stop when he walked in and realized that their resident archer wasn’t alone.

He relaxed only marginally when he realized that Rhodey was also there along with kat-medic (because Tony couldn’t remember his damn name, just that he made amazingly gross but calming tea) who was sitting with a steaming cup of coffee set before him. Tony frowned. Shouldn’t he be assisting the doctor instead of making small talk with Tony’s friends?

“Stark,” Clint called out in greeting as Tony entered and Tony grunted, blearily making his way toward the refrigerator. He’d had his first and second cup of coffee down in the lab, and since Rhodey was already giving him the stink eye he figured he’d better grab some food to chase down the third.

"Good morning Tony." Rhodey called pointedly to his back and Tony couldn’t resist jabbing back.

"Good morning Judas."

He could practically hear Rhodey's internal prayers for patience.

“Hey Tony, tell this guy how fast the average kat heals.” Clint said, and Tony could only presume he meant tell medi-kat because Rhodey definitely knew already, what with how often Tony managed to injure himself. Not that it made much sense for the medic not to know either.

“I’m sure he’s got it covered. Being a medic and all.” Tony muttered as he rooted around in the refrigerator for his specialty yogurt, the one made on that Swedish farm he liked. He only really got a craving for cream once every three months or so (coincidently right around his heat) so sue him for liking what he liked.

Finding the last tub of it, Tony made a mental note to bug JARVIS about ordering more and eyed Natasha’s fruit salad speculatively. She’d threatened to stitch his fingers together in his sleep if he
picked all the blueberries out again. Her level of seriousness had yet to be determined.

"JARVIS, have someone get rid of all the thread in the tower," Tony barked, decisively snatching up the tupoware.

"I shall do so Sir, but if it is your intention to prevent Ms. Romanov from making good on her threat, might I suggest an impromptu vacation? You do enjoy the Malibu house." JARVIS answered as Tony plopped down in the open chair beside Rhodey.

Clint snorted rudely as he watched Tony begin layering his yogurt with the small dark berries.

"She's going to kill you Stark. There's nowhere she won't find you."

"I live dangerously." Tony picked out a strawberry from the mix and threw it in to his yogurt for emphasis. Tub piled high with fruit he spooned a large spoonful into his mouth and chewed happily with a blissful moan.

"Do you intend to eat that entire tub?"

Tony stopped, eyes flicking to the medic who was staring intently at Tony's mouth where he was prepared to shovel more yogurt. He was tempted to feel self conscious at the intense regard in those brown eyes, and they were brown, despite how dark they had looked that night at the shelter, reminding him of the black vastness of space. Here in the kitchen with the sunlight splashing over them it was easier to see the layers of deep maroon in their depths and the flecks of burnt gold near the iris that seemed to glow brighter and brighter the longer that Tony looked at them.

Weird. He stamped down on that bit of ridiculousness because this was his home, his ridiculously expensive yogurt, his achy body and his life imploding around him, so he'd damn well eat six tubs of the stuff if he pleased, and he didn't care what some nobody medic thought about it. It wasn't like he had a girlish figure to watch.

"Hey, I'm just happy when he eats." Rhodey mumbled and Clint rambled something in agreement, but Tony ignored them both.

He stuffed another spoonful of yogurt into his mouth, chewed and then licked the creamy residue from his lips with a dainty flick of the tongue just to make his point, before he gestured at the medic with his spoon.

"Shouldn't you be 'aiding' the doctor?"

Luke (oh look, the guy's name was floating around up there after all) shook his head, sipping serenely from his mug of coffee.

"We are short staffed, so my uncle has been pulled away but I have sufficient experience to take it from here. The Captain has all but healed and Clint is right where he should be."

Convenient, Tony thought. Maybe he should tell JARVIS to hide the silver.

"I hope you don't mind. Mr. Barton has been sharing stories of your exploits. You Avengers seem to live an exciting life." Luke explained and as the tom took another sip from his mug Tony sniffed, recognizing the rich scent of his best Columbian coffee. He turned and gave a grinning Clint the hairy eyeball.

"No. Make yourself at home. Everybody else does," Tony answered between swallows of his breakfast. "And don't believe half of what this asshole says, unless he was telling you what an
amazing person I am and how fantastic I am in bed, then by all means."

"Why do you always gotta make it weird man?" Rhodey groaned. Clint for his part just stuck his
tongue out in Tony's direction, but Luke seemed curious about this.

"You were lovers?" He asked, and Tony felt a curious pang somewhere he refused to identify as the
region of his heart because love hadn't had anything to do with it, clearly. He'd been a mark, which
yeah whatever, he got it, and he gave Clint props for being decent and not taking advantage of the
whole 'bang me until I can't think cause I'm dying and this is probably my last heat' thing.

So it was fair to say that Cint liked him well enough as a person but he'd never loved Tony. Which
was great, because Tony had never loved him either and Clint was with Agent now so all is well that
ends well.

"Lovers? Jesus you sound like a bodice ripper." He sneered. "We had a fling. The best fling of his
natural born life, but a fling nonetheless."

"Stark!"

Tony jumped at the sudden sound of Natasha's voice close to his ear, sending his spoonful of yogurt
falling to the table with a plop. How the hell she moved so damn quietly he didn't fucking know but
it was creepy!

"You're home. How was the spy game? Catch any guys in rubber hazmat suits?" He smiled
winsomely at her, hoping she was glowering about something else and hadn't noticed the fruit gone
missing.

Her expression didn't change but he saw the way her eyes widened the tiniest fraction and nobody
spoke. Tony wondered for a moment what he'd said to get that sort of reaction before it hit him.

He'd called the tower home. Well of course it was his home, and he'd invited the others to live there
so technically it had been theirs too for months now, but somehow that hadn't been quite true until
suddenly it just was, and Tony wasn't even sure when it had happened.

He swallowed thickly, waiting nervously for something to happen. Caught between feeling like he
should be saying something about what he'd just said and running for his life.

Natasha's glower had evened out to something far less readable, that Tony hoped meant less danger.
He was somewhat wrong, because a moment later her hand darted out and there was an unholy
pinch in his ear that had him jerking up with a yowl, baring his teeth at her.

She was already moving away to sit beside Clint, snatching the rest of her fruit, her mouth curled in a
smirk. Rhodey was chuckling into his coffee and Clint was outright howling with laughter.

"Was that necessary you she demon?" Tony grumbled, holding his ear tenderly as he sank back into
his seat.

"I went easy on you." Natasha said, popping a strawberry into her mouth.

"You remind me of my little sister." Luke chuckled, seemingly unperturbed by Natasha's menacing
stare. White teeth flashed in a wide grin as a laugh rumbled in his chest. "Now you definitely do. I
was not sure at first what to make of you Avengers, but I have some hope now."

"What, the lauded Avengers Pride is not as feral as you'd hoped it would be or something?" Tony
asked, curious what it was that other kats were thinking about this whole project. Most probably
thought it was crazy and too far outside the envelope to be comfortable, but he knew that some must
see it as an opportunity. Hope for the future. At least he hoped so. It was the only reason he'd caved
and agreed to give it a shot.

"Nah, Luke's from the Congo" Clint yawned widely and smirked in Tony's direction. "He's heard all
the stories about the old prides. He was probably expecting us to walk around with our claws out and
have heads hanging off the mailbox or something."

"Your knowledge of Alurian history leaves a lot to be desired Clint." Luke was shaking his head, a
bite of disapproval in his tone. "The purpose of a pride is not to conquer as you westerners seem
so eager to believe, but to build and protect what is built. But from my observation you and your
teammates are barely a team, let alone the seed for a mighty civilization. You haven't even won the
heart of your queen yet."

"They were builders?" Tony's ears twitched with excitement. He was going to ignore that whole bit
about winning his heart because no. Just no. Not going there.

"I always wondered how much of a role the Alurio played in the development of ancient Egypt.
The technological boom that occurred in the dynastic period has never been fully explained, but the
things they invented and what they built changed the shape of civilization as we know it! I've always
thought the Alurio were too close to the pharos not to have played more of a part, but it's not in the
history books."

Luke's eyes widened marginally, probably taken off guard by Tony's level of enthusiasm but he
should really get with the program because Tony was an inventor. Of course he'd studied ancient
Egypt and of course he'd never bought the line about kats not contributing much to it beyond brawn.

An appreciative smile was pulling at the medic's mouth as he answered.

"The great dynasties would not have been possible without the Alurio. We are the children of the
panther god. We share her gifts, and many of us her brilliance, and through her we are given the
ability to become one. The great civilizations were built in a time of prosperity,
when the Alurian queens still sought their mates among the royal blood, and were woven into one
heart along with their human brothers."

"You think they bonded with humans?" Natasha asked slowly and Tony's mind raced with the
implications even as Luke nodded with a certainty that boarded on grave.

"Of course, Ms. Romanov. Do you think a queen shares his heart and opens his house unless he
is sure of absolute fealty? It is the way of man to befriend another in sunlight and betray him in
darkness, but to bond in the way of the Alurio is to agree to walk in the shadow of
another's heart where nothing can be hidden."

The tom's dark eyes moved from the other fel and landed on Tony like a ton of bricks, piercing and
so full of heavy meaning that Tony had to fight not to shrink away from it.

"To win the heart of a queen you must have the courage to present your own in its entirety, knowing
that to be found wanting is to die."

Wow. Okay. Tony blinked. That was pretty intense. They must take these legends pretty seriously
where Luke came from but holy cow. Thank god this was 2013 and not 492 BC because what the
actual fuck.

Clint seemed to agree with him, whistling low as he too gapped at the medic.
"That's pretty heavy man."

Luke shrugged, reminding Tony suddenly of Thor as he said far too casually, "The bond is a connection between minds on every level. The binding has been known to cause death if started but not completed, and if Tony were to open your mind and find himself repulsed, he could not complete the melding. So you might suffer an aneurism and die."

"Or so you've heard." Natasha drawled, and there was something poignant there in her tone but Tony was too busy still reeling from the little gem of insight that if he started unscrewing digging too deeply into his teammates heads he could actually kill them. What the fuck?! Who had thought messing around with biology none of them fully understood was the smart thing to do here!

"Sir, there is a visitor down in the front lobby that I believe you may find of interest."

JARVIS interrupted Tony's mild panic to project security feed from the ground floor. The video showed the woman who ran the front desk speaking to a tall blond that Tony immediately recognized as Ty. He was accompanied by a younger woman who was gesturing frantically as she spoke.

"What does that bastard want J? And give me a better angle."

"Mr. Stone and his companion insist on seeing you Sir." JARVIS answered, switching to a better view so he could see the faces of both Ty and his female companion and Tony sucked in a breath slowly through his nose.

"Someone else you know Tony?" Rhodey asked and Tony slowly nodded.

"More flings?" Luke muttered beneath his breath but Tony was too busy to check for judgment because there was the mystery of Maya's sudden appearance and the fact that he didn't give a shit.

"That's Ty Stone and Maya Hansen, and yes I've slept with both of them and no, it wasn't really your business but there you have it. I haven't seen Maya in about twelve years. What the hell is she doing here with Ty?" Tony mused aloud, watching them both move on screen with apprehension tightening in his gut.

"Perhaps there's a twelve-year-old kid you've never met." Natasha offered helpfully and Tony shuddered, not just at the horrifying nature of learning he might have a kid he'd never met but because it might mean that there was some poor kid out there in the world suffering god only knew what without the protection of Tony's name. If he was ever crazy or selfish enough to actually have a kid he could at least grant them that. They'd be his children. Never pets.

"I believe I can shed some light on that Sir," JARVIS, good old JARVIS, interjected saving Tony from his private nightmare. "She's here claiming to have information regarding the attack on the safe house."

"Bring them up JARVIS, and have Cap and Bruce meet us in the living room" Tony instructed calmly, his gaze hardening on the frozen images.

"I should go." Luke suggested, moving to rise from his chair.

"Actually, it might be better if you stayed."

Luke paused, uncertain he had heard correctly. He wasn't the only one surprised at the suggestion. Tony was rather surprised himself that he'd made it.

"Might be better to have a witness. I'm not a huge fan of Ty and Pepper's threatened to castrate me if
I cause anymore incidents. If I do get the urge to start filling my bathtub with blood, I don't trust the others not to just help me."

Tony expected to have to explain the reference, but it was his turn to be surprised because the tom seemed to get it immediately, one dark eyebrow arching high as he asked with an edge of wariness, "You would do to this man as Bastet did to the lords of Nhemia? What has he done?"

Could Tony even find the words to begin explaining what Tiberius Stone had done to him, and why the grisly thought of ripping off heads got decidedly less grisly the longer he contemplated the two together?

"He's done enough." Natasha saved him from having to come up with an answer and an answering growl rumbled in Clint's throat.

"Tony's right." Rhodey said through tight lips. "Stay. We might need a medic."

"*~*~*~*~

"I was working for Aldrich Killian at AIM... Advanced Idea Mechanics. Cute acronym, really lost its charm when I realized that I was working for a lunatic."

Maya Hansen masked her nervousness well with dry humor and minuscule expressions besides the occasional sardonic twist of her mouth, but her scent gave away her fear. Natasha knew the woman was deeply afraid, though it was hard to tell what made her more uncomfortable: being in a room with the hostile Avengers, or sitting next to the target of their hostility.

Tiberius Stone for his part looked completely unruffled to find himself sitting in the Avengers living room, all six members plus Colonel Rhodes staring at him and his companion with varying degrees of contempt and mistrust.

"Tony, you met Aldrich at the party in Switzerland, the same night you met me." Maya went on, fingering the hem of her skirt. "I showed you my research but my formula was still flawed."

"Happy blew up your tank." Tony remembered, pulling his eyes away from Stone who Natasha noticed hadn't looked anywhere else besides Stark since he'd sat down. The tom's air was confident unlike Hansen. The contrite way he held his shoulders and the imploring looks he kept giving Tony were just dressing. He was very sure of himself and his purpose there. It was irritating, but Natasha kept her peace, mindful of the explosive tempers of her teammates.

The room was thick with fight scent, enough that even Maya's anxiety seemed spiked by it. It was easy to tell that most of it was coming from her teammates, who were not at all happy with Stone's presence there. Tony had never exactly been candid about his past but Clint's report had minced few words and they'd all read Tony's file. Thor didn't release the same kinds of pheromones as a tom so the smell wasn't the same as the others. His had more ozone, not dissimilar to the smell of an approaching rain storm.

Bruce was a worry, because the domestication drugs had destroyed the functions in his brain that produced the chemical mixture that pushed a tom into fight, but the faulty serum and the gamma blast had obviously changed that. Anytime Bruce started smelling like fight, property damage usually followed.
He would say he was less himself at the moment because instead of slouching or trying to blend into the background he was standing straight, ears erect as he listened for every sound, arms crossed, and tail straight and stiff behind him as his eyes tracked their visitors with a green glow. Natasha knew that he was scared of this part of himself, and not without good reason, but privately she thought that this was closer to the true Bruce Banner than the stripped down and shackled version that his masters had created.

If God’s were real and perhaps kinder, he would have been a hunter in one of the prides of old. She wondered sometimes if that might not be the source of the deeply seeded rage that had given Hulk life. Perhaps like her, inside Bruce there was an innate understanding of the brutal and violent nature in which he had been broken and then remade. With an understanding like that there was no soothing. No redemption. Just a violent revenge.

She felt the light touch of concern brush her thoughts before she even lifted her eyes to acknowledge Steve staring at her.

Now there was a man who had asked to be rearranged, but he still had no idea that he was as dead as the rest of them. Nobody created soldiers for peace. Whatever life Steve Rogers would have had would be buried under the refuse of war and rust. Blood would color his landscape until death finally swallowed him.

‘Are you alright’ his eyes asked, and she let her brooding slide away for the time being. She was getting awfully maudlin lately, and sooner or later she’d deal with the root cause, but now she needed to focus. She nodded slightly in answer to the unspoken question and turned her attention back to their guests.

“After that night I contacted Killian, he seemed impressed by Extremis even if you weren’t.” Maya was explaining. There was a light sort of bitterness in her words that hinted at old wounds. It wasn’t just the product of a one night stand that hadn’t gone anywhere, but the rejection of her ideas (her mind) and that was far more dangerous.

"He offered me a job, gave me a team to continue my work on the virus.”

“And you say this virus is regenerative in nature?” Luke asked with his brow furrowed deeply. “Why do you feel then that it was used by the terrorists?”

“Because we were never able to stabilize it. When we began testing on human subjects some of them reacted negatively. There were casualties… the government shut us down. Killian didn’t want to accept that answer, he wanted to keep going. When I refused he fired me.”

“That doesn’t explain how Viastone got involved.” Clint pointed out, tone brusque and waspish. Natasha noticed that his claws were starting to show. She could see them beginning to poke painfully into his clenched palms but Clint of course didn’t even flinch. Both of them knew it was better not to alert the enemy you were armed or to waste precious seconds getting there.

“Viastone has launched into therapeutic technology, Robert offered her a job in the hopes that something good could be scrapped from Ms. Hansen’s research, she is a bioengineering expert.” Ty explained.

“Which I was very grateful for, considering my life’s work had just gone down the drain. When I left AIM I thought I took everything with me, and I didn’t think Killian was reckless enough to try and continue without me.” Maya looked at Tony. “But when I saw you fighting that woman on the news I recognized her symptoms. They match the test subjects who failed. All of them eventually self-destructed the same way.”
Tony nodded along as if he were following keeping his thoughts closely guarded as he asked, “Why come to me then? Why not go to the authorities if you suspect Killian?”

“I tried.” The woman immediately insisted.

“She ran into a brick wall.” Stone filled in. Licking his lips in a show of anxiousness he leaned forward, encroaching into Tony’s space in a subtle way that made Natasha’s hackles raise. There was a low, intimate quality to his tone as he continued.

“Tony the authorities aren’t interested in investigating AIM and you know that means a great deal of money must be exchanging hands somewhere.”

“That’s all very interesting, but, and pardon me if this comes off as rude, why should I believe you?” Tony rose from his seat, the movement deceptively casual but Natasha couldn’t miss how it put distance between him and the tom. “Like at all? Seriously. Give me a reason to trust a single word. I’m dying of curiosity over here.”

Stone’s golden eyes flicked warily around the room before he asked, “Tony can we speak privately?”

“No.” A chorus of voices, including the Colonels echoed Tony’s reply, it was almost comical.

“They really don’t like you do they?” Ms. Hansen muttered under her breath.

Stone heaved a deep sigh and made like he was going to get up and step toward Stark but a threatening glower from Thor who mirrored his motion by rising from his own seat changed the toms mind.

Still he stared at Tony’s back, every word he spoke laced with earnestness.

“Tony I can’t change what happened in the past, but Maya thinks these people may come after you again. I hope you know I’d never let that happen.”

“That’s heartwarming coming from you Stone. Is there anything else you or Ms. Hansen can tell us about AIM?” Rhodes asked and Hansen dug in her shoulder bag before extracting a small flash drive. She got up to give it to Stark but Natasha intercepted her, extending her hand with an acceptably friendly smile to ease the exchange along.

“He doesn’t like being handed things.”

“Really Tony? You’ve always been a bit of a diva but that’s a new one.” Stone rolled his eyes with a bit of a sneer. His scent was sour with frustration and pent up displeasure. Something about it struck Natasha as wrong, but she couldn’t figure out why it bothered her.

“When did you stop liking being handed things?”

“Around the time those things started to hurt.” Tony quipped, accepting the flash drive that Natasha extended in his direction with a winsome smile at their visitors. “Thank you both so much for dropping by. Come again. JARVIS, show them the door please?”

“Of course Sir,” the A.I. answered even as a path of tiles on the floor began to emit a subtle glow leading to the opening doors of the living room. Natasha almost smiled. Leave it to Tony.
A bead of sweat rolled into Tony’s eye and he blinked it away. It was a dreary gray winter day in the middle of New York City but Tony’s body didn’t seem to know it. One of the unfortunate side effects of heat was a literal jump in his (already hotter than the human average) body temp. He was hot, achy and uncomfortable, making the idea of taking a long soak in a nice pool very appealing. The Tower had at least two of them that Tony had never even been in (preferring the private pool at his Malibu home) but there was no time for stripping down and floating his discomfort away.

He had people to take care of, villains to hunt down, and Maya’s research to pick through. He and Bruce had been in and out of each other’s labs the last twenty-four hours and not for the first time Tony was grateful that he was no longer the only resident genius in the tower. Tony was a quick study but Bruce had a stronger background in the squishy sciences than he did.

While Tony wouldn’t go so far as to call them experts he felt they had a fair grasp on how Extremis was supposed to work and where it didn’t, even if they were no closer than Maya to figuring out why it didn’t and how to fix it. He’d taken a break briefly to receive a call from Pepper, who had sent over the personnel list he’d asked for.

“Temporary housing for the residents has been set up at the lodge, but this isn’t going to work long term Tony. Besides the space issue and the priceless antiques your mother stored up there, there’s the issue of security.”

On the hologram screen Pepper sighed, tucking a flyaway strand of red hair behind her ear.

Tony snorted, minimizing her screen and waving it off to the side in order to enlarge the screens he had currently running multiple searches.

“They can keep the family jewels if their pockets are big enough. I’m more concerned with the millions of acres of wilderness.”

“It’s a lot of land but we can make the compound itself defensible.” Agent Coulson moved in the square just on the edge of Tony’s peripheral vision.

Good. If the shelter staff or any of the residents felt like they were better off robbing him and striking out on their own then trusting him to keep them safe, he wasn’t going to blame them at this point but he was going to throw everything he could at it.

“Until we’ve got a handle on the situation with AIM I want round the clock security, and not the usual SHIELD yahoos Fury likes to throw at me Coulson. You guys know my procedures. Personal interviews. Full background check. I want to know what size their first booties were and when they lost their milk teeth.”

Tony paused one of the searches to zoom in on the scowling profile of a Matthew Beavers. Mid-forties, bald, a strange looking tattoo peeking out of the collar of his shirt. Ex-marine. Twenty years in private security. Records suspiciously tidy.

He couldn’t say what it was about the guy that put him on edge, it could be blamed on his ‘sensitive’ state and the guy’s unfriendly company mug shot, but whatever. He wasn’t going to ignore his instincts.

“Nix the Beavers guy Coulson he gives me the willies.”
Bruce, over at the lab station he used when they wanted to cut travel time between personal labs, glanced up curiously, head tilting as he examined the photo.

“He looks mean. But perhaps you want that in private security?”

Tony made a face.

“I’ve already got foxes guarding the hen house. No need to add a shark.”

“Sharks have not been known to eat hens, Sir. I believe a wolf would have done better.” JARVIS sassed and Tony made a low sound of displeasure, hair rising on his tail and ears.

“Are you guy’s hearing this? I get no respect. My own creation.”

“Sounds a lot like his creator.” Bruce mumbled distractedly, already back to concentrating on his work.

“Sir, I have located the information on the victim of Tuesday morning’s explosion. Would you like me to summon the rest of the team?” JARVIS announced before Tony could come up with a biting reply and the cloud of irritation hanging over his head briefly cleared at the prospect of finally getting somewhere on the AIM front.

“Thanks Buddy, bring in the cavalry.”

“You’re sharing sensitive information with your teammates?” Pepper sounded pleasantly surprised by this. “I’m impressed. Does this mean I can count on you keeping your head down and letting someone else take the risks for once?”

“Did you get ahold of Killian?” Tony asked instead of answering that, his eyes flicking back to Pepper’s hologram square. She looked decidedly less impressed with his non answer.

“Yes. He was surprised but eager to schedule a sit-down. Do you really think it’s wise, scheduling a meeting with a potential terrorist?”

“I think that luring the boss to upstate is a perfect opportunity for a super spy I know to take a look around the crib. See what he’s been up to.” Tony said, just as JARVIS alerted him that the team was on their way.

“I’ll see you up at the lodge?” Tony’s eyes met Pepper’s holographic ones and she nodded.

“Be careful Tony.”

“For you? Always.”

Pepper didn’t even dignify that with a retort, making a droll face before her screen blanked out and JARVIS stopped the projection.

A moment later the Avengers were crowded around his workstation staring up at the holographic files that Tony had spread above the table.

“What have you got Stark?” Steve asked, and Tony gestured to the largest screen directly above the table.

“JARVIS found the name of our human bomb from the shopping center. Andrew Schulz, former marine. Deployed home during his first tour in Afghanistan due to getting a leg blown off. Mission reports are full of black tape but JARVIS is awfully sneaky.”
“I’ve a good role model Sir.”

Tony grinned.

“No connection to AIM, but, get this, there’s a long sad story of jumping in and out of therapy, unemployment, and rehab for substance abuse and then he just disappears only to resurface again when he gets a job at a construction company, and not behind the desk either.”

“How does a guy without a leg work at a construction company?” Clint asked and Tony’s grin widened.

“Extremis.” Bruce answered with a bit of an awed gleam in his eye. It was always nice when other people understood how awesome this kind of thing was.

“Got it in one Jolly Green.” Tony waved Maya’s flash drive expressively as he explained to the others. “We’ve been through the research backwards and forwards. The amount of energy it would take the human body to generate that kind of self-repair – to regrow an entire limb – we’re not built for it. It’s no wonder these guys are lighting up like fireworks.”

“They’re going to want proof Tony.” Captain Killjoy reminded everyone. “How do we prove that AIM continued the project after it was disbanded and that they were the ones behind the attack at the shelter?”

“Does Schulz have family, someone who would know if he signed up for any test trials, any risky new procedures?” Rhodey asked.

“Already ahead of you honey bear. He’s got a mother here in New York and a brother in the air force.”

“I’ll speak to the brother before we bother mom. He’s likely to talk to a commanding officer.”

“Good.” Steve nodded, like it had been his idea or something and pinned that intense ‘Captain America is depending on you’ expression of his on Tony that always made him feel like he was five again and in danger of disappointing his father. “Any luck locating where they might be working?”

“We’ve narrowed it down to four possibilities.” Agent Coulson answered. “AIM owns a mega facility in Switzerland that can’t be discounted. There are a couple smaller buildings in New York registered under a dummy company called Nater Mechanics, along with a vacant warehouse in Tennessee that is registered to an Alex Mathers who previously worked for Nater.”

As Coulson spoke JARVIS projected images of each of the properties along with the information they’d compiled on the number of employees and other stats.

“And it just so happens that I have a budding interest in medical science, bad heart.” Tony gave the arc reactor a tap. “Mr. Killian’s pretty eager to sit down with me. I’m headed up to the family lodge but he’s happy to meet me at the Stark Warehouse up there.”

“So you invited the man we think is behind all this to walk into your house for a chat?” Cap demanded incredulously, the air already getting peppery with fight scent and Tony wrinkled his nose, flicking his tail in irritation. Rhodey sighed and somehow looked like he was about to pass out from how not surprised he was.

“I do not think this is wise my friend,” Thor ventured to say, tone suggesting that he was sure Tony just hadn’t thought it through and a nudge in the right direction would have him going ‘whoops’.
“What if he were to attack you or the innocents you have moved to that property?”

“Fair point,” Tony allowed. “But that is why it’s an official meeting within Stark Industries. Pepper will be there along with the hired guns. And the lodge will have all the security I can throw at it. I’m having JARVIS installed up there as we speak. If Killian is stupid enough to attack either me or the lodge in broad daylight with dozens of witnesses he’s welcome to but he won’t get away with it. Besides he has no reason to suspect I suspect him or even know his name beyond his public work.”

“Only if you trust Hansen and Stone aren’t in on it with him,” Clint growled. “You can’t trust Stone Tony.”

As if Tony didn’t already know that.

“I don’t.”

“But do you trust us?” Natasha had kept quiet, but Tony looked at her now trying not to flinch at the hard stare she was giving him. “Because it looks like you don’t. You’re ripe with heat. By the smell of you I give it two, maybe three days if you’re lucky before you can’t function, and you want to go off on your own again.”

“I already told you Romanov I won’t be on my own.”

“Pepper can’t stop an enhanced enemy and it’s not the point.”

“And just what is the point Natasha, because I’m trying –”

“No you’re not Tony and that is the point.” The other fel snapped, eyes flashing dangerously and Tony swallowed what he’d been about to say. “Pepper isn’t pride. We are. We all agreed to this, but you refuse to try. You’ll take every risk in the book but the one that’s actually important.”

“Stop!” Tony heard himself snapping, pain shooting up his arms as he slammed his palms against the table. “Stop pretending like you don’t hate this more than I do. Stop acting like you want to be tied to me when you don’t!

"Thor wants to make up for his bat-shit brother and Cap wants to spend five minutes with me like he wants a bullet to the head, but he’s lost everything else and hey, at least I look like my old man even if I don't measure up. Bruce doesn't want to be afraid of breaking a city every time he goes into fight and Clint wants a family that can't abandon him. I get it. I don't even blame you half the time but I can't!”

~*~

And that was when Natasha finally saw. She'd known Tony was afraid before, but the particulars were harder to grasp. The why behind the strength of his resistance had remained elusive despite every indication that the pride bond is only growing stronger. But Tony is right. There was still something in the way, a thin barrier that might as well be made from diamond for all that it refuses to bend or break.

They sit poised at the beginning, ready for Tony to break down that barrier... but none of them want to entertain the notion that he possibly can't.
She realized slowly that she was just as afraid as he was, though for different reasons than she was yesterday. Because Tony is right about this too: she hates the thought of the pride with an intensity that frightens her. Because that desire to sink her teeth and rip, to draw blood before she lets any of them any closer is her weakness and her greatest protection.

But she owes Clint so much more than she can properly name, and she won't repay him by taking away his only shot at what he needs so fundamentally.

She was afraid now because she already knew. Tony won't tie them together. He won't open the door of his mind and invite them in, only to know for certain that he's only good for what he can give them.

It was quiet in the room except for the sound of breathing, some harsher than others, and Natasha watched silently as Tony swallowed back his emotions, drawing inward behind walls that seemed all the more glaring now for how close the touch of his mind had been only seconds before.

"Tony." Natasha winced at the sound of Steve's soft entreaty. Tony stepped backward, as if Steve had tried to touch him and Rhodes shook his head firmly at Rogers.

"Don't force it, Cap."

"Yeah, I mean if we're honest..." Tony sighed, running his hands tiredly through his sweaty hair.

Natasha noticed that his face was still flushed from the surge of temper, but she knew his oncoming heat was partially to blame.

"I might be feral but I still come from a long line of genetically fucked up kats who can't properly bond. I can feel you guys in my head sure, but there's a barrier. I mean we all feel it right? I might not be cable of taking it down. Can we just stop pretending like that isn't real? Because it is and it's likely."

"Sure Tony." Bruce agreed gently, placing a hand on Tony's shoulder. Tony's smile was grateful but tired. When he looked back up at her his mask was back in place, his voice ringing with the confidence the world was so familiar with.

"We need to get evidence that Killian is our guy and put him behind bars before he can kill more innocent people. You're right. I like to handle things on my own, and every time I look at the news, or the footage from the attack, I want to find this guy so bad my teeth hurt. But I can't do that this time. I'm trusting you all to do that for me, and that's hard for me to do. I need you... okay? Pepper and I are a distraction while you guys get the pay dirt, nothing more."

Tony's eyes flicked back to Bruce.

"Bruce, if I haven't chased you off for good, you're welcome to come with me. There are only four facilities to infiltrate and I know I'd feel better with you at my back."

At Bruce's nod the tight knot of tension coiled in Natasha's chest began to release. It still wasn't ideal but at least one of them would be there with Tony if something went wrong, and perhaps even more pressingly (given the bright flush in Tony's cheeks) it was good he'd have a tom he trusted nearby.

Natasha was not one to waste time with denials and resistance. Even her own.

First things first.

"I'll take the property in Tennessee. It's the least obvious and therefore the most likely."
Beside her Cap nodded, already grasping the thread of her thoughts and taking charge.

"Thor, you take the lab in Switzerland. As their public face it's not likely they're doing anything illegal there but we can't discount it. Clint and I will handle the two facilities here in New York. Let's agree that this is a stake out only. You see anything that looks like what we're looking for you find a hole somewhere and call the others in. Understood?"

As Steve's eyes roved over the team making sure that each one of them understood how pissed the others would be if they got themselves in a fix without backup, not for the first time Natasha was glad that Steve was as sharp as he was. It was nice having him already know what they had to do without having it explained to him.

Somehow they had to convince Tony that they were mad enough to want his heart, in both light and shadow and they couldn't focus on that until AIM was taken care of.

Unbidden, what the SHIELD medic had said to them earlier came floating back to haunt her.

'To win the heart of a queen you must have the courage to present your own in its entirety'

Natasha needed to decide once and for all if she would do that. If she was even capable.

~*~*~*~

~*~*Tennessee Two Days Later, *~*~

~*~*~*~

It was cold. Natasha had stopped being able to feel the pain in her knee awhile ago, and she knew the numbness that had stolen through her body and the sleepiness that now dogged each passing minute were not good signs.

She'd given most of her warmth to Tony, because the knee was completely busted. Tony carrying her gave her body time to start mending. When AIM caught up she'd have one good fight left in her. As it was, Tony was sweating bullets, his body shaking under hers with more and more fervor.

Those were the tactical reasons for giving him warmth. There were others, and they were all tied to seeing him chained up and at the mercy of that mad man. If those who had trained her could only see her now.

When Natasha had been a kit training in the red room she'd had many handlers, but the Madame was the one that the others had answered to, the one that everyone had known to fear. Natasha used to call her Red Queen in the privacy of her own mind, before she'd realized the foolishness of believing her mind was impenetrable. Natasha could still summon the exact tone of her voice and mimic the imperial way she'd given commands.

Off with their heads Madame used to say, of foes and friends, and her little widows complied.

Of all Natasha's handlers Ivan had been her favorite, because even in that nightmare there had been glimpses of sanctuary.

She'd fallen down the rabbit hole but made the maddest of friends. It was Ivan who found her in the burning house when she was a small girl mewling with terror. Ivan the soldier.
Ivan, who had taught her that she was more than an animal (who gave her books and who told her that she would never find a monster as terrifying as the one within her in the pages of one).

It was Ivan, the patriot, who had looked after her and eventually led her to the red queen and then to the white, who was supposed to put ice in her heart.

It was Ivan who had picked up all her pieces when they carved a heart enflamed with passion from her chest and reminded her not to drink poison, even if the bottle said 'Drink Me' with a face hard to resist and eyes that reflect her own misery.

It's cold out here... but it's beautiful too.

She'd always liked the winter. The beauty of the ice and the prisms contained within at the touch of sun. It's honest. One of the few honest things in the world.

"Hey." Tony's harsh voice broke into the cloud of her thoughts, the older fel shaking her roughly with a violent twist of his back. "Don't fall asleep! I think I see lights."

'When I plan on dying Tony, you'll know' she slid the thought into his mind, to conserve the energy that speaking would have wasted. Lifting her aching head to peer through the snow, searching for whatever it was that Tony had thought he'd seen.

Yes. Natasha's eyes jerked back to a glimmer of light and the shadow of a barn shaped structure in the distance.

'It's a ways off. Can you make it?' Tony asked. His concern was deep and soft in her mind, like the impression of a blanket. She wondered if he knew how soft he was, this man of Iron. This man whose body might even know be on the brink of explosion.

'Natasha, please don't... just don't fall asleep.' He thought, groaning as he pushed himself forward, moving again with lurching steps. She smiled at him, though he couldn't see it.

He was worried, but she knew he'd get them to the barn. Because Tony wasn't going to die alone and gutted in the snow any more than she was. That wasn't who he was.

She watched the swirl of snow and ice and felt her mind drift.

Dangerous, she could almost hear him warn.

'He's dead and gone, said little Gerta.' Natasha thought to herself, lips moving around the memory of the old story.

'I don't believe it, said the sunshine.'

“He is dead and gone,” Natasha murmured, the wind grasping the words and whisking them away in a flurry of snowflakes as if to answer.

We don’t believe it.
*ducks* I'm sorry for the cliff hanger. But at least you know you only have to wait a week to figure out how Tony and Natasha got where they are and how they're going to get out of it. Thoughts? Feelings? Predictions? Any guesses as to what happened to Tony and Natasha? I hope you're enjoying the trip into Natasha's head. The decision to make her a secret literature enthusiast came purely from imagining kitty!Natasha snuggled up by a fire with the kits and a giant book. Too cute to resist and I promise we're getting to the fluff and cute part, but you know they all have to come together first and they like to take their time about it.
Neck open wide (begging for a fist around it).

Chapter Summary

In which Bruce gets it right and everything promptly goes wrong. Natasha saves the day with a little bit of help from an unexpected accomplice. But getting Tony free is just the beginning of their troubles... Good thing Natasha loves trouble.

Chapter Notes

Thank you guys so much! You give me life, and I'm really sorry this is so late. I moved this weekend and one thing after another popped up and it just didn't get done. On top of that the holiday is coming and I'm flying to my parent's place for the holidays so this was never gonna get done unless I split up what was originally going to be a thick chapter completing the IM3 arc. Which means another cliffy. I'm so sorry. But I do plan on posting the rest on Sunday on schedule. (*cross your fingers*)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Natasha was preparing to depart on her mission when JARVIS asked her to hold take off because Tony was on his way up to the hangar.

After the disastrous way the team briefing had ended Tony had holed himself up in his lab for the rest of the night. Relying on his previous pattern of behavior Natasha hadn't expected to see him again until after she returned from her mission; when he'd perhaps not be ready to talk, but would feel at least fortified enough to face her in order to pretend as if nothing had happened for as long as she'd allow.

But there he was, coming toward her against the odds proving once more that the only certain thing was uncertainty.

She met Tony on the stepping stairs of the Sting-Jet, because while not as roomy as some of the bigger jets in the Avengers arsenal the Sting made up for it in speed and state of the art cloaking technology, which she preferred on stealth missions. Officially it was called Sting because it was small with bite, like a bee, but really, Tony was just a nerd and couldn't resist the Lord of the Rings reference.

It was obvious to anyone with eyes in the elegant design and silver detailing. But then again, if Natasha was more free with her own passions perhaps a few people would be tempted to suggest she had her own nerdish tendencies. She did threaten Clint with bodily torture when he'd tried to call dibs on the craft, after all.

It was one of Tony's new models, and it was amusing in its own ways to watch his eyes flicking over the sleek body of the aircraft, like a fretful parent before sending a child off on their first day of school. But she arched a challenging brow at him anyway, hoping to deter him from suggesting she take one of the older air crafts. She loved to fly, though she rarely indulged in it purely for pleasure's sake, and she did threaten her best friend's life for a chance to fly the thing. It would be a shame to
waste a perfectly good threat.

"JARVIS told me you were taking Sting out for the maiden voyage. How're we doing buddy, everything look good in there?" Tony directed the question toward the open door behind her and Natasha glanced over her shoulder into the cockpit where several lights were flashing on the control station.

"System diagnostics look good Sir. All systems currently operating at 100%"

Natasha turned back to Tony and waited for him to get to the reason he'd come. She knew as well as he did that Sting would never have left the shop if she wasn't ready to fly.

Thankfully Tony didn't keep her waiting. From his pocket he produced a square metal device, small enough to sit in the palm of her hand, which she caught easily when he tossed it to her.

It was warm in her palm and with the pressure of her grip she heard the mechanical whine of mechanisms shifting and releasing. When she opened her palm the little metal box had opened down the middle where a soft blue light was now emitting from the crack in slow measured blinks.

"I call it the Expulse Tracker," Tony explained, something in his voice tight despite his outwardly relaxed posture. "It should work even if they've got a signal jammer. It's like a sleeper cell, see, it adapts to the jamming signal and manipulates it, dropping a series of notes on an alternate frequency. JARVIS can detect the alterations and use them to pin your location."

That was pretty ingenious, Natasha had to admit. But Tony's brilliance, when it came to matters of code and mechanical parts, had never been in doubt. She'd marveled at few things in her life, but she could honestly say that there in that moment, Tony made her stop and wonder at his design.

He was a dark well of untapped potentials and even so, even without daring to test his limits and race against the gods of their imaginations, he outpaced all but one or two minds in the world.

He'd never push the way he could. Natasha knew he would never stretch himself open and see just how far he can go because he was burned by his own apathy and the memory festers. He says he won't be the Merchant of Death and therefore opens himself up to continued disappointment and self-hatred; because there's no ending it. He'll always be the black cat that crossed somebody's path because he is who is.

That's the cost of forward momentum. Everybody blamed him but Natasha knew better. The death that followed Stark was just a consequence of nature. Matter destabilizes. Everything breaks down. You can't go forward without loss and for better or for worse, Stark meant future.

It meant 'and boldly we go into the black'.

You don't do that, thinking you're not going to become intimate with death. But Tony tried to. With his heart open and soft, thinking he can usher in brave new worlds without losing anyone. He seems to think that's his responsibility, to make sure nobody suffers the cost unless it's him. Worse. Everybody tells him it is.

Forward, forward, but don't let us fall.

As if he were the god of their imagination. All seeing and knowing and existing only with their progress in mind.

He's still a child in some ways. He is like Hansel, relying on cleverness to keep faith in an ideal that
has already betrayed him in the hopes of one day returning home.

In the story of Hansel and Gretel the children outsmart the witch and find her treasure. They get to go home to their father who is free of the wicked woman who forced him to forsake them.

Natasha had always hated that ending.

But Tony she knew was different. He was clever enough to outsmart the witches of the world, but fool enough to forgive the father who abandoned him (every time). His bitterness on the subject couldn't fool her; because Tony Stark was not bitter at the father who had led him into a wild wood and left him to die. He was bitter because he'd never found the right treasure to bring home.

And that's what this little gadget was. More love. More madness. A child presenting treasure.

"E.T." Natasha remarked, gently squeezing the little device and watching it close. And Tony's nervousness melted away, seeing that she understood.

"Yep." He popped the P with a smile. "Just give him a squeeze and he'll phone home."

Tony Stark's problem -Natasha thought as she pocketed the gift - was that he'd never had any sisters. No Gerda and no Gretel. No one to push witches in fires or don her red shoes on the way to the river. No one to cover his ears and tell him over and over again until he believed.

Don't you know, the bells do not toll for you?

~*~*~

She had the strange feeling that she was being watched, though no one from the facility had shown any sign that they were aware of her presence.

The abandoned warehouse was a part of an old logging facility built in the middle of a rural farming town on a private reserve, and it turned out to be not so abandoned as it looked. She’d watched the facility now for a full day, marking the rotations of people who went in and out. Though the wood was largely quiet and undisturbed, she’d observed three different people coming and going throughout the day. It was impossible to determine who else might be inside without more time or getting inside herself.

It had begun to snow. She’d checked the weather in preparation for the mission and heard the predictions for an unusually heavy snowfall and had come prepared. She wasn't worried about it too much, she’d brought her warmest suit and she was Russian. Ice was practically in her veins.

She was more worried about the signal coming from the roof top that was jamming most of her tech and preventing her from keeping tabs on her teammates, which probably meant she was the one lucky enough to have found the golden egg, but she'd have to go in alone and blind to get any evidence.

And it wasn't even her birthday.

It said something she wasn't ready to think about that she hesitated at the thought that Cap wasn't going to be happy about the risk she was taking. Poor Steve, whose loved ones refused to live quiet lives and let him take all the bullets and come home to dote on them. She wondered briefly if this
was the mission that would do it. Every mission could kill her, she wasn't naive or arrogant enough to believe otherwise. That was her strength. She accepted the possibility of death without fear. She must trust her skillset. Her body. Her aim. Her determination to push harder and go farther than her opponent.

She'd live only if she was better than her enemy.

Natasha touched the small lump where E.T. was secreted away in a pocket of her suit, and smiled to herself. She settled into her perch to wait. She'd watch for a few days, make certain of their routine, and then she'd infiltrate under the cover of darkness.

~*~*~*~

“Mr. Stark, what’s a clatter?”

Tony paused mid-read, glancing down to meet the curious pair of yellow eyes belonging to… uh. Okay so Tony didn’t actually know the kids name, but to be fair there were a lot of kats at the shelter and no matter how important Maria’s House was to him, the reality of running a major corporation on top of the growing list of other things he managed meant he didn’t have a lot of time to put faces to names.

So the pile of kits who had claimed his stomach and legs as the resting spot of the day were fairly unidentifiable.

The one asking the question had hair almost as orange as his fur on his tail and ears with the signature tabby stripes, so Tony was just going to call him Stripes and be done with it.

“A clatter is like a big noise.” He explained, “It's a super stuck up way of saying something heavy hit the roof, only don’t say it like that unless you want people to think you’re either a tool bag or a geriatric citizen.”

“What’s a geriatric citizen?” a kitten with a tattered ear asked shyly, and Tony frowned as a chubby little tom snickered at her until she curled herself in a tiny protective ball.

“Don’t you know anything Tink? It’s obviously some kind of dinosaur.” Tubby said.

“Well you’re not completely wrong, but since you were an ass about it I’m not going to give you any points.” Tony scolded, grasping the chubby little tom by the tail and tugging gently until he lost his kingly perch on Tony’s stomach and flopped to the floor with an oof of breath.

“Oh look, and there came a great clatter.”

The other kits giggled and Tubby’s ears drooped. Tony gave him a consoling pat on the head, then noticed that Stripes was eyeing the prized location on his stomach speculatively. A look from Tony made him think better of it as the older fel nudged the one Tubby had called Tink until she got the hint and climbed aboard.

“A geriatric citizen is an old person, usually someone from the last living generation. Or you know, Captain America, although he cheats by being ridiculously young and fit. It’s not very fair to the rest of us.”
The kits giggled again as Tony sighed dramatically, flipping the pages of the storybook noisily to find his place again.

“Okay so the kid was sleeping, the house was quiet, and Santa had set out to deliver presents with the help of his cyber elf squad and had nearly broken the roof coming in for a landing, which you know could be avoided if Santa weren’t stuck in like medieval whatever still riding a sleigh around. What’s wrong with a jet? So Santa’s going to be in a jet from now –”

The sound of someone clearing their throat stopped Tony mid-rant. Tony and the six kits who’d bamboozled him into reading a Christmas story all turned and looked up to find Bruce standing in the doorway, looking down at their pile with an expression that was part wary and part amused.

“What’s with the face? This is not the worst thing you’ve caught me doing.”

It really wasn’t.

The hint of a smile tugged at Bruce’s mouth as he stepped into the room.

“Ms. Cook has been looking all over for these guys. Sorry if they bothered you. They were warned these rooms were off limits.”

Tony waved the words away dismissively.

“They were curious. Plus, Patches here reminded me that with the big scary men and having to move they didn’t get their story this year.”

“My names Winky!” Patches insisted indignantly and Tony scoffed.

“That’s unfortunate. I’d stick with Patches.”

Seeing Bruce’s curious look Tony waved his hand again, explaining offhandedly. “Every Christmas someone comes and reads to the kids. Big event for the tykes, great PR for the celebs.”

“Last year it was Brad Pitt,” Fluffy said with a dreamy sigh, her fluffy brown tail swishing. She gave Tony a judgmental look as she muttered, “and he did voices!”

“Yeah and he didn’t make things up like you do!” Tubby grumbled and Tony rolled his eyes.

“I liked the part about the elves in the chopper.” Stripes rebutted. “It makes sense that Santa would need a strike team.”

“I think you have a very nice voice Mr. Stark.” Tink mumbled against Tony’s chest, rubbing her soft cheek against his shirt and Tony felt a rather alarming melting sensation in the region of his heart that he was going to have to have JARVIS look into.

Okay. Tony swallowed thickly, trying desperately to reign himself in. So this wasn't rocket science. Tony’s body is dropping him into heat and when he isn’t hot, achy, and getting irritated at every foreign smell that wafts past his nose, he’s pretty much thinking about these fluffy little balls of snot and curiosity that some people call children.

Normally the idea of parenthood is enough to send him running for the hills, and then thoughts of realistic application is enough to have him researching ways to sterilize himself, because under no circumstances will he have progeny in a world where he can bring a life into it, but that life will never belong to itself.
Tony’s kits won’t belong to him, they’ll belong to Pepper and sure he doesn’t have it bad. Pepper’s amazing and she’d never sell him or his kits and she’d probably even let him parent (but maybe not because even he can admit he’d probably be a terrible parent and Pepper probably should intervene) but they’ve got enemies and Pepper is only human, so Tony knew how fragile it all was.

How easily he could find himself alone again, in another Afghanistan, getting fucked over, and maybe next time he won’t make it out. Maybe they’ll eventually find the grounds to take him from Pepper, or god forbid it’ll be her home under attack next time and he’ll be too late to save her.

He’ll never bring a kid into this kind of uncertainty, so it doesn’t matter that allowing these little fur balls to climb all over him and invade his space was the only thing to give him relief in days, or how right the smell, or how much some ignored part of his biological imprint just lights up and aches when he thinks about abandoning their pile of warm little bodies.

The little voice that whispers this is what he wants, what he was made for, can just go fuck itself because the truth is he can’t have this because he can’t protect it. Someone had almost taken these kits and he knew he’d never survive it if it were a child of his own. And if Tony Stark Genius Billionaire Avenger had a child, they’d come for it. They’d never stop coming.

“Tony?” Bruce’s soft voice drew Tony out of his dark contemplation and he realized he was squeezing Tink to his chest rather tightly, but the little girl hadn’t made a sound, grey eyes watching him solemnly as they peeked through her white blond bangs.

There was a knowing look on Bruce’s face, a sadness that seemed to hang over his shoulders as he gestured with his head towards the door and said with an understanding little half smile, “duty calls.”

Tony took a deep shuddered breath and let it out quickly, plastered a smile on his face and sat up with a groan sending Tink and Stripes rolling to the floor with giggles.

“You heard the man. Miss Hannagan is looking for you little runts and I have work to do.”

“Who’s Miss. Hannagan?” Fluffy asked with a wrinkle of her button nose, the little tom latching protectively onto Patches who shrank at the mention of a stranger looking for them. “You aren’t going to sell us, are you Mr. Stark?”

Tony winced inwardly, feeling like a heel. If the kits were here it was because they’d been rescued from somewhere else, and after last week they had to be unsure of the stability of their situation.

“She’s a nasty woman from a movie, but she isn’t looking for you because I’m an asshole and it was a bad joke. Sorry.” Tony apologized. “And you guys aren’t going to be sold again. If you want to go live with a nice family we can arrange that, but it will be your choice.”

Tony’s watch beeped threateningly, a warning from JARVIS scrolling through the screen that Pepper and Happy were waiting in the car. He somehow managed to get to his feet without stepping on a child and grumbled at the protest of his bones (because floors were for the young, ouch) and waded through the shifting pool of little bodies dogging his steps until he was standing in front of Bruce.

“Brucie Bear, you wouldn’t mind escorting the dust mites back to where they belong? If I’m not last to the car Pepper can’t be mad. It’s in the rule book.” He smiled winsomely at Bruce, who he expected to look exasperated but agree anyway, only he’d forgotten how fucking ripe he was for half an hour while he’d been soothed by the presence of the kits because Bruce’s cheeks actually flushed a faint pink and he nodded somewhat dazedly, grinning like Tony had asked him to the prom.
“Sure Tony. I’d be happy to.”

Tony's stomach churned, the smile becoming more fixed on his face.

“JARVIS tell Pepper I’m on my way out, I just need to change.” And douse himself in sent blockers.

Killian wasn’t a tom so he wasn’t going to be effected by Tony walking in smelling like heat and an abundance of kits, but Tony wouldn’t feel comfortable (safe) until the scent was wiped away. He hated others knowing he was in heat, hated the way their eyes followed him and the way their bodies responded to his pheromones. Okay not always... sometimes it was nice when Bruce and Clint wanted to cuddle and when they looked at him like he was the best thing since Netflix and a smile from him was what made the sun rise.

Only, Ty had been like that too, the first time Tony's spindly teenage body had started pumping out heat pheromones Ty hadn't wanted to let go of him and they’d had so much reckless rebellious sex it's only a wonder that Tony never figured out that he was playing right into everybody's hands.

He'd been so sure that Howard would want to breed him with some ancient tom in some old as balls family with piles of molding money, and would never agree to let his (not) son mate with a Stone. He'd loved the idea of running away with his first love and when Ty had been holding him possessively and yaking away about the kits they were going to have, Tony had felt amazing in a way that he hates to remember now.

Because it wasn't always sleepy cuddles and dopey smiles. Sometimes it was lustful eyes and gripping hands, and "Strap him down Boy. it's not unusual for a kitten like Tony to be anxious their first time, but once you warm him up you'll see how he takes to it".

He had never been able to shake the memories of his first disastrous heat and the events surrounding it.

And every three months he was forced to relive the steady feeling of losing control and watch as the heads turned and the eyes fixed on him with greed. So he didn’t really care much that pheromone blocking was frowned upon and medically wasn't the best for his health, he wasn't going to walk around with his pheromones begging someone to strap him to a mating block.

But because Tony’s heat was so close completely overpowering the pheromones he was dishing out was next to impossible. He did his level best, putting on as much of the strongest cologne he owned that he dared without smelling like a teen with his first can of Axe.

He injected himself with the strongest suppressant he’d yet to develop and hissed under his breath when he took in a deep drag of air through his nose and thought he could still smell the lingering notes of heat on his skin. So he’d taken a quick peek at the one that was still in production and argued with JARVIS for a few minutes before relenting that it probably wasn't safe to give it a go just yet.

"Tony?" Bruce's voice came through the door along with a hesitant knock. He poked his head through a moment later and eyed Tony as well as the syringe in his hand warily, "We're still waiting... what are you doing?"

"Suppressants." Tony grumbled, putting the vial back in its case and locking it away. "The new formula I've been working on."

"Ah. I know I've said it before, but you do know that - "
Tony interjected before Bruce could really get going.

"Messing around with my hormones can be bad. I should let my heat naturally progress. I know Bruce, we've covered it."

Bruce stared at him for a long moment and Tony felt like the toms eyes were trying to see through his skin. Just when Tony had decided he couldn't take it anymore and opened his mouth to divert Bruce's attention to some other shiny problem, like his inability to be on time for his own meeting, Bruce drew himself up like he was gearing to confess something profound and Tony kind of wanted to jump out the window.

"Tony, I'm sorry." Bruce finally said, and there was such a gravity to his tone that Tony couldn't pretend not to understand what Bruce was talking about.

"What, for not wanting me to jack up my hormones? That ship probably sailed when I was a teenager. I was working under a lot of pressure with far fewer resources. Then there's the arc reactor and palladium poisoning. I'm surprised I can even still get heats let alone a fairly regular cycle. Anyway. Not your fault."

Bruce winced as Tony rambled through his list of reasons why 'Tony's problems with heat are not Bruce Banner's fault' and shook his head.

"No, Tony not for that... I don't think I've been a good friend to you." Bruce pushed a hand through his hair and sighed, looking tired but soldiering himself up despite it. "I know you don't like hearing thank you, but I don't know if you understand what it meant to me, everything you've done. Giving me a place of my own and a lab in your tower..."

Bruce looked so shame faced that Tony had to bite his tongue to keep from interrupting with distracting chatter, because his own dislike for gooey conversations aside, he knew how uncomfortable confrontation made Bruce and clearly saying what he was saying was important to him.

Still, Tony didn't like to see him looking so hangdog or feel the weight of his guilt hanging over them, especially over the ridiculous idea that he'd somehow been a bad friend. Did Bruce have any idea how much Tony enjoyed having him around? What it had been like rattling around in that tower all by himself after losing Clint to finding out he'd never really had Clint to begin with?

"Bruce it's nothing."

"No it isn't." The denial came quickly, Bruce's tone perfectly level but there was something so firm in it that any response Tony could make died on his tongue and Bruce's lips tilted into that familiar half smile of his.

"Being here with you, and on this team, I guess part of me started to really believe that the future I'd imagined was gone might not be, and I got ahead of myself. It's been a long time since I've had anything like real hope in that area.

"And I'm not saying that to put more pressure on you. I'm sorry I lost sight of what's really important to me. I just wanted you to understand the why part."

Tony swallowed, feeling an odd sense of falling. He thought he had a pretty good idea of what Bruce was getting at.

"Bruce..."
“You're a good friend Tony, and I'm really happy to call you that. That's more than enough for me, and if you never want to be more the only thing I'll lose is a maybe. I'll still have you, as long as that's what we both want... It's what I want. I just thought I should tell you that.”

A laugh bordering on hysterical bubbled up in Tony's throat before he finally let it loose, letting the tension drain out of him.

Of anyone, Bruce had the least to apologize for and it didn't surprise Tony that he was the first, if you discounted being surprised that anyone would bother. It wasn't like Natasha was wrong. He had agreed to join the Initiative and he was lagging behind the others in enthusiasm despite that, and Tony would have to be a particular kind of insensitive not to care how much this could mean for Bruce, who had pushed yeah but nowhere near as hard as Tony would have if their positions were reversed.

And truthfully, Tony was almost dizzy with relief because for a horrible moment there he'd thought that Bruce was telling him he was sick of waiting and that he'd given up on the idea of bonding with someone like Tony, because really when you think about it that would probably be the smart thing.

Bruce has given up, but not the way that Tony thought. He's not so emotionally stunted that he can't see the difference.

Okay maybe that's giving himself too much credit because if someone like Natasha or Steve had just said that to him Tony could admit he'd probably assume the worst. Maybe it's just Bruce. He trusts him, and Bruce knows how Tony thinks so he made sure to say it in a way that Tony would understand and not jump to his own conclusions.

Whatever it is, the point is, Bruce is his friend and that's more important to him than the whole Pride thing, and for Tony that's everything.

He crossed the short distance between them to grab the tom by his shoulders and pull him in for a kiss. A chaste kiss by Tony's standards but it was warm and sweet, and it made it easier to nuzzle against Bruce's chest and make sure he smelled like Tony's just in case anybody was in danger of forgetting.

"Thank you. And while it occurs to me that kissing you might be sending you mixed signals, I just want to clarify that was a best friend kiss. Is that a thing? Whatever, it's our thing. As long as you think you can handle it?"

Bruce chuckled and hugged him tight.

"I think I got it Tony."

Grinning against Bruce's shirt, Tony purred.

~*~*~

From the get go, Tony should have realized that it was bound to happen. Something good didn't happen in his life without kick back. He hadn’t been lying when he’d told the others that he didn’t trust Tiberius Stone. But the attack on the safe house had put them in the unfortunate position of having to rely on the man’s words if not his intentions, because they had absolutely nothing else to go on and all evidence did in fact point to AIM.
So far, the infiltration into AIM hadn’t dug up anything noteworthy and to all appearances, things were quiet for his teammates. Natasha was a worrying blip in the back of Tony’s mind because she’d been dark for twenty-four hours and had yet to check in, but he reminded himself that technical interference was always a possibility and if she were in any sort of real trouble she would have activated her E.T.

Rhodey had managed to throw his weight around and pull enough strings to get an interview, and the conversation they’d had was pretty demining all things considered.

“I had JARVIS run a background check on the company Travis said his brother volunteered with and they’re a front. We haven’t found a link to AIM yet but Tony, the money leads back to Viastone.”

Rhodey had been catching them up to date, his frowning face looking out at them from one of the cars many portable screens. “Tony are you sure about what you’re doing?”

And the answer to that had been fairly straight forward. Of course not. It didn’t change anything. Tony hadn’t been lying either when Meeting with Killian was still the best way to draw AIM’s attention away from his teammates and it wasn’t like anyone had actually expected for Robert Stone not to be tangled up to his eyeballs in the whole mess.

Tony had opened his mouth to say so when it happened.

One minute the car had been moving smoothly down the mostly empty mountain highway and the next Happy was calling back from the driver’s seat that something was going on ahead of them.

“Looks like somethings blocking the road ahead Boss, maybe an accident?”

But JARVIS was already searching the local reports and chimed in with a negative as the car rounded the curve and a long line of familiar trucks came into view.

"Tony, do you need back up?" He heard Rhodey's tense question but his eyes were glued on the line of trucks ahead. Tony’s gut clenched as Pepper glanced nervously outside the window, and in the seat across from them Bruce’s eyes met his.

“Stay calm everyone.” Tony urged, because holy cow did they not need Bruce to hulk out right now. “Could be a gas leak.”

“This doesn’t look good Tony. Happy, can you back up?” Pepper asked, gripping Tony’s knee tensely.

Happy put the car in reverse just as JARVIS called out a warning.

“SIR, there is an incoming – ”

The car rocked as something slammed into its right side, pushing it squealing across the lane toward the rock face of the mountain.

Tony only had a split second to think. Car hit by something. Dent in roof suggesting someone or something had landed there. Enough time to get in briefcase suite before -

There was a horrible screeching sound as a pair of glowing hands suddenly punched through the roof of the car. Pepper screamed as they began literally peeling back the metal like it was candy wrapping and Tony's eyes flew to Bruce, curled against the door who looked like he was doing everything in his power to keep from Hulking out but Tony already knew there was no stopping it
when the danger was this close.

All he could think about was Pepper and Happy, and what was going to happen in moments if he couldn't neutralize the situation.

"JARVIS" Tony shouted, and he was never more thankful for his beautiful, smart, intelligent A.I. because almost before he'd finished shouting the syringes full of 'goodnight juice' that he and Bruce had cooked up for just such emergencies popped out of the refrigeration unit of the minibar.

Tony'd grappled for one and dove for Bruce, apologizing profusely as he jabbed the needle into his arm and trying not to piss himself when Bruce's face contorted with rage and his eyes flashed a violent green.

"Tony!" He heard Pepper scream, and he didn't have time to turn around or even to see if their sedative cocktail was actually going to work because suddenly he was being wrenched up through the gaping whole in the roof by a guy who was either superhuman or jacked up on so many steroids he might as well be.

Tony struggled but the guy's meaty arm around his throat was super tight and had him clawing at it for air. He let out a gurgled cry as the guy leapt off the roof of the car - if launching oneself at least twenty feet in the air could still be called leaping – and caught the end of the swinging ladder hanging from a low-flying chopper.

Tony stopped struggling if only because he was dangling in the air secured only by a single mans arm and he wasn't suicidal.

He could hear gun shots and the squealing of tires below him but he wasn't in a position where he could look so he could only hope that the goodnight juice had done its job and that now that his abductors had what they clearly wanted Happy was getting Pepper and Bruce the hell out of there.

A moment later Tony was pulled inside of the helicopter, and not that he had any real plan but he came up hissing with claws extended, but whatever fight he could have put up he'll never know because something crashed against the side of his skull and after a moment of blinding pain everything went black.

~*~*~

There were a pair of guards on the roof but they were either amateurs or too comfortable in the silence of the woods because they stayed facing one direction for long stretches of time as they chatted with one another, only bothering to do a routine sweep whenever it seemed to occur to them.

This was an easy job, Natasha could already tell. The people who worked here relied too heavily on the secret nature of their operation and their defenses would be as easy to cut through as warm butter; but despite that she found it hard to relax.

There was something niggling at the back of her consciousness, an insistent warning bell ringing long and thin under each breath that had her itching to reach for her communicator and check on her teammates, certain that something somewhere had gone wrong.
That wasn't an option with the interference from the tower and unless she took out the guards and disabled the jamming device disrupting her tech, there wasn't much she could do about it. Taking out the guards was a last resort option. She'd have to get in and get out before someone either noticed they were missing or that there was something wrong with their signal tower. She told herself to stop being paranoid and that this was why it wasn't smart to form connections. They were distracting.

Close to nightfall when Natasha was going over her strategy to infiltrate the facility one last time, there was a sudden change in the routine. She heard the sound of the chopper before she saw it fly overhead and lower what appeared to be a person on a stretcher down to the guards and the pair of lab techs who'd come rushing out to the roof to meet it.

She got several photos of the event but she couldn't see enough from her location to capture any clear faces. Perhaps it was a wounded comrade but it was more likely that she'd just witnessed the transport of another test case. Getting inside the facility tonight had just become a top priority. She had a feeling this was pay dirt.

Natasha bunkered back down to wait out the setting sun but she became uneasy when she felt her skin prickle, that sense of being watched returning. She was distracted when a moment later a line of black trucks came through the trees, bringing more people than Natasha had seen visit the facility in days.

She didn't recognize many of the men who poured out of the vehicles but she did recognize the face of Aldrich Killian because it would have been the height of lazy not to memorize the man's face before invading his property.

Alarm shot through her at his unexpected appearance, her thoughts immediately going to Tony and wondering what had gone wrong with the plan. Maybe Killian had canceled and Tony had tried to warn her, but with her coms out it's not like she would know.

But a moment later Natasha's alarm turned to dread because two more familiar faces stepped into view.

Tiberius Stone and Maya Hansen. Their presence here with Killian whether willing or forced could only mean things had gone very badly. Just how badly she'd have to wait and see.

*~*~*

Under the cover of dark Natasha had scaled the building and slipped through a vent with such ease they might as well have left the front door open for her.

She crept over the long metal ceiling beams, her booted feet silent and swift as she slunk down the rafter and closer to the center of the room, unconcerned for the great height or the nasty fall that could be the result of a slip in footing. She knew her body intimately and had confidence in its ability to remember each needed movement. Hesitance could mean death so she never hesitated, timing each leap perfectly so as to hit the beam at just the right angle to get a solid grip and create the least amount of sound while doing so.

The modern obsession with metal made keeping silent more difficult. Her claws when fully extended were sharp enough to dig through some of the softer types but metal had a tendency to tell tales when
struck. It meant having to move through the rafters mostly claw free, which was challenging, dangerous, and all the more thrilling for it.

The loss of her whiskers should have put her at a disadvantage, but there was more than one way to detect changes in air pressure and she was an expert in all of them. Getting them plucked had been agonizing in ways that few tortures have even scratched at, but it like a few others had been a necessary loss. Ears and tails could be strapped, taped, and tucked away if need be. Whiskers could not.

She was wearing the uniform that allowed her to move with her tail out even though normally she liked to work tucked (one less appendage for an enemy to grab) because when it came to climbing the tail really did help, and she was confident enough in her ability to get in and out of the facility without being seen that she opted for the luxury over comfort.

Even without a building map it was fairly easy for Natasha to navigate her way around. The facility was mostly deserted and they'd only bothered to light the areas where stations for lab work and other necessary functions had been set up.

With such a light staff Killian's arrival had made a splash, curious bodies gravitating to the center of the warehouse and Natasha followed them, a silent shadow above, capturing photos as she went and trusting Tony could get something out of them in the horrible lighting.

Down below her Killian was standing over an operating table and there was someone strapped to it, though Killian was blocking their upper half.

She'd just leapt to another rafter to get a better angle when Killian raised his hand and slapped the body on the table, not harshly but solidly, and the body jerked to life with a gasp.

The sense that Tony was in pain and needed help slammed through her, nearly causing her to lose her balance and go tumbling from the beam.

That was Tony down there. She knew it with every fiber of her being.

Natasha clung to the metal support beam, claws scratching lightly against the cold metal as she watched the scene unfolding below. Sound bounced off the walls in the largely open space of the warehouse so she didn't have to strain her ears to pick up the thread of conversation.

"-said you weren't going to hurt him."

Maya Hansen was standing near the operating table, a pair of security types on either side of her, clearly there to prevent her interference as Killian leaned over Tony who was conscious now and cursing furiously at Stone, who was standing at the edge of the table closest to his head watching the proceedings with a dark expression.

"You can't damage him Killian. That wasn't part of the deal." The tom said, ignoring Tony yanking at the restraints on his arms and legs and demanding to be let free.

"Relax, it was a love tap." Killian turned his head briefly toward Stone. "He'll do more damage to himself tugging against those restraints. You should get him to take it easy."

"You heard the man Tony. You should relax kitten." she heard Stone say and watched coldly as he slipped a hand into the soft strands of Tony's hair, the way she liked to do because it always made him go soft and warm and almost pliable in her hands; because she knew Tony liked it and such
gestures were rarely given to him and Natasha rarely found herself in a position to offer them that wasn't a hundred percent about manipulation.

It was their intimacy. Their mutual agreement to accept the worst in each other for the temporal institution of closeness.

She was going to bite that hand from its wrist.

"Like hell." Tony was cursing. "What the fuck do you want Ty? If you're trying to breed me again it's too late. I don't know what daddy told you but my heat already passed."

A lie; but Stone couldn't know that for sure and knowing Tony he'd taken suppressants before his meeting with Killian. They had to be ones that he'd developed for himself because this close to heat his body would have burned through anything available on the market and she couldn't smell heat on him from her perch. There was no telling how long they'd hold up but for now they seemed to be working.

She heard Stone laugh, the sound echoing despite its softness.

"I know you're lying Tony." The tom clenched his fingers and tugged warningly on the dark strands of Tony’s hair. "You were mine remember? Did you think I could forget how you smell when you’re ripe for it, and what it smelled like when you ruined our future together?"

“You’re still selling that melodrama?” Tony sneered, the burning bright edge of his fury prickling the air around Natasha’s skin. “Poor Ty, couldn’t make daddy happy because one little kitten figured out he was a dirt bag.”

“You always have to be the victim don’t you Tony? You can’t even admit to yourself that it might have been real for me, that I wanted the best for both of us; but you decided I just wasn’t good enough for the great Tony Stark. That’s why you went behind my back and made those blockers.”

“You’re damn right you’re not.” Tony hissed through sharpening teeth. Natasha breathed steadily through her nose laboring for calm.

“I told you why I didn’t want to get pregnant Ty but it didn’t matter to you. I made those blockers because I knew you and Stone were the kind of bastards who don’t hear no! And guess what asshole, the answer is still no!”

“Really, then why did you say yes to your little team of freaks?” Stone snarled yanking Tony’s head back against the table by his hair, and Natasha finally realized what she’d sensed that day at the tower was so wrong about the man’s scent. She hadn’t been able to pin it before because it wasn’t a matter of what was wrong with his scent but what was right.

It was there, simmering under layers of discontent and growing anger: the bitter beginnings of fight scent.

“Ty please,” Hansen pleaded. “We’re not here to hurt him.”

Stone released his grip on Tony’s hair and straitened up, the bitter whiff of fight scent dissipating with the smoothening of his expression so quickly she was tempted to think she'd imagined it.

“She’s right Tiberius, and it isn’t his fault.” Killian said and Natasha’s eyes tracked him as he moved around the table. Mentally she tallied the number of security guards she’d counted plus those gathered below who might present a threat. She might be able to disable Killian, Stone, and the two closest guns and still have enough time to free Tony but she didn’t know what condition he was in
and doubted even if he was healthy enough to walk that they’d be able to make it out of the building unscathed with the number of guns she’d counted.

With Clint she might have risked it, but she didn’t have enough experience with Tony fighting outside of the suit to be certain of what he could and couldn’t handle. She was keenly aware of his vulnerability now, smelling the blood oozing from the lump on his head, eyes flicking between the thick metal restraints leaving bruises against his wrists and the pale glowing light of the arc reactor shining from the center of his bared chest.

“You are an exceptional rarity in the world Mr. Stark. But you’re not perfect. None of the gata are. You’ve been broken down, chipped away at over the centuries, and now you are not even capable of fulfilling the purpose of your design are you?” Killian was saying as he leaned over Tony once more, hand trailing down the smooth plane of his chest and lips curling into a smile as Tony tensed, the acrid smell of fear filling the air as the man’s fingers brushed against the edge of the arc reactor.

“How could our friend Ty or any tom hope to win the heart of someone like you, when he had no teeth? No way to fight for you? No way to fight for your progeny? It’s a crime Tony. You come from a beautiful masterful people, but you’re all broken.”

“What’s your damn point Killian?” Tony seethed flinching as Killian’s finger tapped the rim of the reactor.

“The point is, I understand you. I was broken once myself, too broken in fact for the great Tony Stark to even look twice at, but I found a way to perfect myself. I can help you and the other gata like I’m helping Mr. Stone.”

Tony blinked slowly and barked a laugh, ignoring Killian entirely, he twisted his neck to stare at Stone.

“That’s why you’re helping him. You’ve realized his virus is unstable. You were always willing to do anything just to save your own skin.”

Killian was moving and Natasha tracked him, keeping one eye on Tony as best she could. Killian was reaching for something on a nearby tray, a vial of some sort.

“How long do you think, before you become my personal Fourth of July miracle?”

"I was worried you might take that attitude Stark."

Movement from Killian had her eyes snapping back and when she saw what the man held she made a snap decision. Time to move.

At that very moment, someone else had the same idea.

~*~*~*~
One minute Tony was sneering up at Ty elated by the thought that even if he was tortured and killed here, that at least he was fairly certain that Tiberius Stone was eventually going to get exactly what he deserved, when the sound of gunshots burst in his eardrums.

Killian screamed, dropping the needle in his hand as a bullet went through his arm and Tony's heart slammed in his chest as the warehouse erupted in screams, the lab technicians either ducking behind tables or making a run for it as the hired security drew their weapons and began returning fire at a dizzying blur of black and red that Tony's stunned senses didn't put together as Natasha until she had a beefy security guy locked between her thighs and was flipping him to the ground.

Relief threatened to drown him for a moment as the fear that had gripped him since waking up exposed and at the mercy of his captors finally had its way with him, so grateful to see the face of a friend that he could almost cry.

But fast and deadly as she was Natasha was also severely outnumbered, so Tony shook off the stupor and began struggling at his bonds anew. He was stronger than the average human but the metal restraints seemed to have been made with gata in mind because they didn't so much as budge.

In the midst of the commotion he saw Ty stalking toward him just as a black shadow darted through the corner of his vision. For a moment he thought it must be another one of his teammates, but nobody on the team moved like that he realized as the black-clad figure clashed with the tom.

Ty was not a small man but the man in the literal cat suit was menacing. The long powerful line of his legs encased in the strangely supple metal - that if Tony didn't know it was impossible he would have sworn was vibranium – made it seemed like he could tower over anyone, and the black material (whatever it actually was because it couldn't be vibranium) hugged every ripple and dip of muscle on his body without taking away from the litheness of his frame. And all that aside, he had the thickest, sharpest, looking claws on his hands and feet that Tony had ever seen and they were stained with blood.

It was no wonder because every movement the strange kat made was viciously quick and brutal in force. Tony had no doubt that the tom could cut his way through six more rounds of security forces and not so much as need to take a breath. And he was sure it was another kat that or the equally swift and cutting motions of his tail, which seemed to be lined with metal barbs, were some of the best robotics Tony had ever seen in his life and he wasn't actually sure which one he'd prefer.

Even hyped up on extremis Ty was no match for an experienced fighter, let alone this completely terrifying display of pantherlike strength and motion going on in front of him. Tony wasn't actually sure he would have pit an actual ass panther against the guy.

He cringed at the deep bloody gashes that seemed to magically appear across his once friend's torso and the gurgled cry of pain Ty let lose as the other tom spun and his barbed tail whipping his barbed tail across his enemies neck almost dismissively.

In what seemed like a split second the confrontation was over, the black-costumed tom already sprinting to Natasha's aide, unworthy opponent left to crumble behind him.

Natasha was struggling, because whatever version of extremis Killian had been dousing himself with he'd obviously saved the best stuff for himself because his skin was glowing and the strength he was displaying was incredible.

Tony watched with horror as he grabbed the metal bar that Natacha had been beating him across the face with and it bent in his hand, the metal smoking where his skin touched it. He used it to yank her toward him and though she quickly let go and attempted to knee him and dart out of his reach she
wasn't quite fast enough.

"Natasha!" Tony called out fearfully as Killian blocked the move and back-handed her hard enough to break something. She fell to the ground with an agonized cry that Tony felt all the way down to his bones.

The costumed tom rushed at Killian's bared back where his shirt had burned away and Tony's eyes widened in shock as the stranger sank those sharp deadly claws into Killian's flesh without so much as hesitating, stabbing directly over the man's vulnerable organs and wrenching.

Killian dropped to the floor but Tony could see even as he struggled to get up, slipping in his own blood, how his body was already closing around the ghastly wound.

"Go. Get Stark and leave this place." A rough modulated voice growled from the guy in the cat suit as he tossed something long and thin in Natacha's direction. "I will hold him as long as I can."

Natasha didn't wait to be asked twice, catching the object effortlessly as she rolled onto her feet and staggered toward Tony with impressive speed when he could tell just by looking that something was terribly wrong with her knee.

Then suddenly she flicked the object in her hand, revealing the object as some sort of switch knife, a ferocious flame burning in her eyes. Tony flinched away until he realized she wasn't looking at him but just past him, where he couldn't see no matter how he turned his head.

A moment later he felt a violent prick as a fist slammed against him, plunging the syringe that Killian had dropped deep into the fleshy part of his shoulder.

Tony sucked in a harsh breath at the sudden pain but didn't make a sound, shock flooding him as the plunger emptied into his bloodstream and Maya, who had gone unnoticed in the commotion, fell to the floor, Natasha's knife buried so deeply in her chest it looked in danger of disappearing.

"Now you have to help..." She wheezed through stuttered breaths, hunching as her hands weakly gripped the hilt of the knife. "We can save... so many lives."

Green eyes glowing dangerously Natasha stalked silently toward the woman and without so much as speaking, pushed Maya's hands away to grasp the hilt and yank it free, effectively ending the woman's chances for survival.

Tony was still gasping in shock as Natasha grasped the metal chain of one of the restraints sharply ordered for him to keep still and slashed through the chain like she was cutting string, the vibranium (Tony would know that particular song anywhere) singing as it cut through the steel.

She moved to his feet and he was free a moment later.

"Glad you dropped in," Tony managed to get out through chattering teeth as he hastily got up from the table. His legs weren't quite ready to support him and he nearly slid to the floor, but Natacha was there bracing him against her good side and Tony wondered how she could stand it. He righted himself, ignored the way the room swayed and his skin prickled with sweat as his temperature spiked. His body was rapidly switching through waves of hot and cold as the extremis virus worked its way through his bloodstream.

Tony and yelped as Natasha grabbed him hard, yanking him out of the way as Killian, still struggling furiously with catsuit man nearly slammed into them both.

"Who's your friend?" Tony asked breathlessly grabbing a gun lying near the hand of a fallen guard.
"I didn't invite him and I'm not sticking around to ask. Can you run?" Her voice was low and strained, sweat beading against her brow the only sign that she was in a severe amount of pain, but Tony felt it hammering against his mind. Even now he could feel the barriers that had always stood between them crumbling away, thoughts that didn't feel like his own whispering in the back of his mind.

"Can you?" he returned skeptically, eyeing the way her knee was turned.

Killian managed to knock Catman loose by literally punching him into the floor, the cement cracking beneath their feet. He raised himself up with a triumphant smile, muscles bulging and veins glowing with every movement.

"You see To-" but Tony wasn't in the mood to hear it and slammed a couple of slugs into the guy's chest. It probably wouldn't kill him but it would slow him down.

"Lets go." Tony suggested, though Natasha had already turned to run. As Tony ran behind her, covering their back by emptying a couple more rounds into Killian's staggering body, only relaxing when he saw that Catman was back on his feet and leaping on the lunatics back.

Tony turned to bolt after Natasha who somehow managed to cover a lot of ground even with a gimp leg. His ears picked up the sound of booted feet running toward them that could only mean the backup was coming. He hoped she knew the way out of there.

His head was clamoring with noise and he cursed under his breath as a wave of dizziness struck him. He'd studied Maya's research enough to know what was coming and that it wasn't going to be pretty. If his body didn't reject the virus outright and kill him, too much adrenaline at any given time could finish the job. He didn't know how long he had before he wasn't able to move.

"You any good with that gun Stark?" Natasha asked, widows bites flaring to life as the first pair of hired guns stormed through the doors.

"I've held one once or twice." Tony answered, and Natasha grinned, rushing at the guard on the left with a running leap and Tony took aim at the one on the right and shot him straight through the heart.

If anyone asked he'd say that wasn't the time for mercy (and it totally wasn't) but honestly, he was just nowhere near a bathtub.

Chapter End Notes

Next up in part two: Extremis kicks Tony's ass and Natasha bites a poisoned apple, AIM is pretty desperate to find a kitty they lost. Oh and there's this kid. Just Tony's luck.
In the game of chess, don't you know to beware the Queen?

Chapter Summary

Natasha bites a poisoned apple, there's no prince to kiss her awake. Tony takes a shitty hand and shows AIM why this isn't checkers (They thought it was). Harley's house gets blown up, but Tony's pretty okay with that because it was falling down anyway and he's pretty good at building things.

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas! I know it's late but the sentiment remains. Thank you once again for your patience.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony collapsed almost as soon as they staggered into the barn, his body sweating and shaking as his body fought a battle it would lose against a virus that was either going to rewrite him or kill him.

Natasha, who had reserved her strength in preparation for when Tony could inevitably no longer protect himself, pushed the pain in her leg to the back of her mind in order to drag him onto an old ratty couch at the back of the cluttered barn. Which, judging by the layer of dust on everything and the distance from the house, was likely not very much used.

Not that it mattered. They weren’t going anywhere. As quickly as she could Natasha had braced the door by pushing a heavy table laden with boxes against it.

She’d been drawn back to Tony’s side as he began to thrash on the couch, his thoughts running wildly through her head with frightening magnetism, every brush of emotion and wave of pain dragging at her like riptide.

He looked at her with glazed eyes and Natasha didn’t think he could see her through the haze of pain, but something in him must have known she was there because he felt his mind reaching for hers.

There was a moment of hesitation. She’ll never lie and say there wasn’t, because it wouldn’t do it justice.

She stood over him, numbly terrified in a way she’d not experienced since she was a kit watching the house burn down around her.

She saw now what Luke had meant, about the bonding being deadly, because there was no way she could get caught in that and break free. Tony would either take her in or take her down and she knew better than to put faith in his abilities just then, because he wasn’t in control of this. Maybe extremis was working in some ways. Maybe it fixed whatever was blocking Tony’s reach before, but now his mind might as well have been an open nerve. This was his subconscious grabbing at anything in reach, begging not to die alone.
Inside Tony’s head there was nothing but raw agony. The virus was going to kill him. She was certain.

Natasha did hesitate (she looked at the bright red apple held in the cradle of his hands and she knew what it promised). She hesitated, but only for a moment.

Then, she crawled onto the couch and entangled their bodies together, holding his thrashing arms and legs to prevent him from injuring himself and crooning into his neck.

“Shh. Prosti kotyonok. Derzhis’”

She decided there were worse ways to die, than in the arms of someone you love.

Tony’s world is waves of white. Brilliant lightning forking through a storm of ice as the world factures under him and the sky splits open above him.

He has no concept of wanting to die, only of a desperate desire to stop (for blissful nothingness) even as the barrage of ice and fire continue in relentless assault.

And then there’s someone else, another mind, and he’s falling into it, or taking it in, and he can’t tell which but it doesn’t matter.

They’re a small kit, small even for their age and the man who is father (but isn’t) takes their blood and says their veins would be easier to find if (he) weren’t such a runt.

They’re still small but they’re somewhere else. Somewhere cramped and dark and there is smoke filling their lungs. Their Mistress is dead. They are going to die staring into flames as red as their hair. Only, there is a figure looming out of the shadows and smoke and he turns at the sound of their mewling cry and fixes them with eyes so pale a blue they could be ice.

They’re fifteen. There are ropes around their legs. A larger body is pressed down against theirs and they’re choking on tears and rage because they Do Not Want THIS – but their body has betrayed them, their mind a haze of twisted impulses and cravings that defy all reason. It’s not long before the others realize the well has run dry, that they took a chemical torch to it in a fit of defiance (a knife to their own flesh) because they’ll always burn the field before they let it succor their enemies. They are struck over and over, so they curl into a defensive ball and wait for the storm to pass, the devils screeching in their ear.

“How dare you do this?! I could kill you boy!”

“He was jealous. You were always going to surpass him.”

Forward. Forward. On into the black and they’re dying again, poison leeching their body of strength. An old tape shows the projection of the man who gave them life but little else. He tells them they’re the best thing he ever created. He tells them they are going to do more than he could.

They burn the tape. Maybe some other version of them could hear those words and find peace but they can’t.

“Fucker didn’t make me.”

“Yes kotyonok, he did. But you made the difference.”
The pain swells and Tony hears screaming, tastes bile and blood in his mouth. His head is a consuming storm of memories that rather than distract from the pain only seem to add to it.

They grow and they are forces of reckoning. Merchant of Death and Black Widow. Comprised of jagged edges and brittle parts they cut a bloody swathe through the world and dance with the worst of themselves, they do not hide their leper’s spots (because they can’t). Especially her. He sees it all. He doesn’t flinch.

“It has to come out kotyonok. I’m sorry.”

Tony follows that voice, away from the burning in his chest and the sensation of being cut open – dimly aware that somewhere in the world he is sweating blood and screaming around a chest gridlocked in pain as his body attempts to heal and reject itself at the same time. He feels fingers and nails grappling at his chest. His heart hammering like it will burst –

“Shhh. Kotyonok. I have you.”

Ivan pulls them from the flames and won’t say why. He tells them he was watching the rebels before they attacked the village, and they know he must have passed by the academy before and seen them there with their mistress, who taught young girls the art of dance. Ivan saw them dancing once, and asks now if they know the story behind the dance of swans.

They tell him that they only know the steps because that was all that mistress cared to teach them.

Ivan says that they are tools in a grand machine, and that their purpose is to follow their directive. There is no good to be done that isn’t for the motherland, and therefore they must empty themselves of everything else. He says this with no conviction. He is like a machine.

He defies his own code and tells them the story of the White Duck and many others. He teaches them to read even though he has no memory of how he learned himself, and holds their small hand as they learn to write (her) name in the dirt. He is cold and dangerous, like a man whose heart is made of ice, but they do not fear him. He feels like home the way that nothing else ever has. They know that they are his and that if he asked, they would offer their life to him.

And then he can’t delay any longer. His mission has ended. He says they will send people after them if he does not return to his masters. He rises, gun in hand, blue eyes blank and dark. They know he means to kill them. They don’t cry.

Ivan does not shoot them. He takes them to the castle of the Red Queen who orders the guards to take their head because she doesn’t believe they are useful, but Ivan protects them. Bodies drop around them in a spray of blood and bullets but the Madame simply stands there in the midst of it, watching until the last man lays bleeding on the floor at their feet and the soldier is standing before her, blood in his teeth and defiance in his eyes. And then she speaks.

Longing. Rusted. Seventeen. Daybreak...with every word spoken he twitches and moans, like there’s someone driving nails through his head but there’s no shaking them loose.

When the soldier is still again, silent, deadly and compliant, Madame orders him to kill them once more.

They don’t cry. Instead they bow their head and hug their knees, offering their neck. They don’t want to see Ivan hurt like that again, and they know already that the Madame is cruel.

But the shot never comes.
“Interesting.” Madame says. “Very well. We shall see if the girl is as valuable as you say.”

“He saved you.”

“But I couldn’t save him.”

The soldier isn’t always their handler. He is like a ghost, sometimes disappearing for months and years at a time and Madame has others teach them while he is gone. Each time he returns he does not seem to remember them but they do not mind this. There is a connection between them so strong that no matter how little Ivan (Nikoli, Patrik, Alexi, whatever name he goes by this time around) remembers he seems to know they belong to him.

They know (even if he doesn’t yet) that he likes to read (science fiction and fantasy) and they know all his favorites: stories, foods, colors, sights sounds, and they don’t know why he always forgets or seems to be discovering them for the first time, but the hunger in him calls to them and they bring these things to him. They hold these pieces for him because they are holding them for themselves.

Ivan says that it’s a mistake to fall in love. But (she) was always going to love the one who saved (her) saw (her), the one who needs them more than they’ll ever need him. The soldier gave them life before they ever thought they deserved it, and now that they are damned and know they definitely don’t, they can only treasure the gift of love all the more.

The soldier holds their body like they’re going to ascend any moment without him, like they have the divine in them when really, it is he who is so terribly beautiful. He is fallen, but still an angel. They know it even then. Perhaps that’s why they fall as hard as they do. Angels are for redemption.

“I’m not afraid.” They whisper against his skin, pressing kisses, biting with possession. “They can’t stop us.”

But of course, they can. They do. They kill him and put his body in ice.

They carve out her heart in front of her (them).

“I was such a fool.”

“You were nineteen.”

“I was a child. Love is-”

“Human, Natasha. Love is human.”

“I’m not sure we’re human, kotyonok.”

“Maybe not. Maybe we’re better.”

The waves come, another rush of pain that seems unbearable. They hold on to each other and vow not to break.

**~8~**

When Tony woke it was daylight, the sun filtering in through the dirty windows of the barn. For a moment, he just lay still watching his breath plume in the air above him as he took stock of the situation. He felt like day old dog shit, but considering what his body had been forced to undergo he didn’t feel nearly as bad as he knew he should. It was because Natasha had been in his head, Tony realized with a lump forming in his throat. She’d shouldered half the pain and talked him through
every second of agony.

She was laying on him, body limp and skin cold to the touch in a way that made him shudder (like a
dead fish). Quickly, he sat up with a groan, flinching at the aches and twinges of his exhausted
muscles but ignoring them in favor of checking Natasha for a pulse (it was weak and fluttery but
there, thank god) and arranging her in a more comfortable position on her back.

There was dried blood on her hands he realized with alarm, but his eyes roved her whole body and
didn’t see any evidence of injury that could produce that amount of blood. It was only when he
 glanced wildly around that he noticed the familiar object on the floor. It was his arc-reactor, along
with its casing and wires.

Panic slammed through Tony and his hands slapped to his chest in what would have been a comical
fashion if he weren’t staring at the device that was supposed to keep him alive lying in a pool of his
own blood like it had been cut right out of him.

And though Tony was currently finding it hard to breathe and there were twinges of pain in his chest
as he gasped for breath, mentally he recognized what the smooth flesh under his hands had to mean.

He wasn’t in cardiac arrest, he was just having a panic attack. No Biggie.

“I had to take it out.” Tony’s head snapped up as the gentle thought brushed through his mind,
turning to see that Natasha was awake watching him through heavy lidded eyes. Relief washed
through him at the sight and he remembered how to breathe as he sagged down before her, legs
giving out on him.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t want… you know I didn’t want-” Tony’s airway was closing again. He closed
his mouth with a gasp, shivering as he gulped desperately for air, cringing at the thought of Natasha
witnessing him cracking this way. It was strangely more invasive then having her share his
memories, even some of his most terrible. Maybe it was because there wasn’t anything truly wrong
with him. He wasn’t being tortured. He wasn’t under fire, he was just falling apart after the fact
because he wasn’t strong enough to take it.

But why was it always him? Some dark petulant part of his psyche wanted to know. Why was the
world always demanding pieces of him and taking them with or without his leave?

Tony didn’t realize he was still speaking until he recognized the lingering echo of his own voice in
the barn, choked on a sob. Natasha had lifted a hand and was stroking it through his hair, and he
shouldn’t be so damn needy, especially when she was injured, but he couldn’t help but sink into her.
He let the gesture soothe him until his breathing had evened and the unspilled tears had dried up and
he could blink the fugue of misery and panic away.

He’d never seen Natasha looking so done in. It wasn’t helping his panic any or the sharp twist of
 guilt in his gut as he felt realizing that she’d placed herself at risk for him and if she died it would be
–

“My choice kotyonok. I'm sorry they took your choice away from you, but to be with you was
mine.” Her thoughts interrupted his as her mouth pulled into a disapproving frown.

“Why?”

Tony, for the life of him could not fathom why someone like Natasha would have chosen to die
either with or for him.

She looked like she wanted to hit him but the frown was all she had strength for. “They took Ivan
Tony released a shuddering breath, blinking away the threat of tears because she’d thrown herself on the wire. For him. She can’t hide how scared she is or how much she needs him right now. How much she wants him and yet doesn’t want to. It didn’t sting like it once had. He’d seen her now.

“They’re coming after us.” Her eyes were more sad than fearful, heavy with the knowledge that she was vulnerable (never helpless) and forced to rely on someone else in hope for survival. She felt guilt for leaving him alone in this crisis and a lingering sense of shame for putting herself in that predicament in the first place. But it was all surface, all trained impulses and instincts. What mattered was what was at the core, the truth she couldn’t hide from either of them anymore.

“I don’t regret it, kotyonok.”

Neither did he, Tony realized. Now that it was done there was only forward (the truth of Tony’s whole existence) and he had to make sure that things changed, that the future was better for all their sakes as well as those coming behind them. It was who he was, but he couldn’t do it alone and while he never would have predicted someone like Natasha at his side, now that he knew her he’d never change it. They’d been meant to walk the road together.

He cleared his throat of the curious lump that had gathered there (because he’d never been good with the mushy shit and nobody gave it permission to hang around anyway) and pressed a soft kiss to her cool cheek.

“Did you phone home already?”

Natasha responded with a slow nod.

“I left E.T. in the ceiling back at the warehouse. Just in case I wasn’t able to get you out.”

Good Tony thought. JARVIS had to be combing every net available for a sign of him, eventually he’d come across the frequency with E.T.’s pulses so it was only a matter of when really. But there was no telling how quickly AIM would be after them. Tony needed a way to contact the team and send them their exact location. It needed to happen fast but Tony was good with working under pressure. With the right materials, he could get a message out to JARVIS.

“How long will it take Jarvis to locate E.T.?” Natasha asked.

“Depends. He’ll be looking for signs of where they might have taken me but you haven’t been dark long enough for him to think about looking for E.T.’s distress code… you’re our eyes on the facility and without being able to contact you it’s guess work. The could send someone as a scout on the chance that I was taken here. It’s what I would do.”

“So we’re on our own until then.”

“Yeah. Looks like it’s up to us.”

“You’re unstable, Tony.” Natasha responded lowly, voice strained with fatigue, her eyes searching his with deep concern. “The virus…”

Yeah the damn virus. He could tell with only a sweeping glance that he was more fit than he’d ever been, the familiar aches and scars earned in a lifetime absent, replaced by a foreboding sort of thrumming in his blood stream, a hum at the back of his mind as his brain tickled and sparked on the verge of… something. Hopefully not an explosion.
“Don’t worry about me. I get back to the lab, I’ll figure out a way to lick this thing no sweat but first things first. Right?” Tony flashed her a confident grin, even though he knew that she’d see through it.

At that moment there was a rustling sound behind him and Natasha’s eyes snapped to something over his shoulder.

“You’re Tony Stark, aren’t you?”

Tony leapt a literal foot in the air at the soft sound of the unexpected voice, whipping around to face the threat even as he positioned himself protectively over Natasha, tail arched and teeth bared.

The kid – Jesus it was just a kid – scrambled back fearfully, pointing the barrel of... some sort of toy, threateningly down at Tony as he shrunk back into the hayloft. Several questions raced through Tony’s head at once but he went with the most important one.

“How the hell did you get in here?” If there was another entrance to the barn he needed to find it and secure it before AIM found them.

The kid didn’t answer right away, though he did inch forward again until he was at the edge of the hayloft and Tony noticed that there was some form of box fort behind him.

“Do you live out here?” he gaped, putting together the cluttered but well used looking space with the fort and the boy’s sudden appearance from above. Extremis had already been kicking his ass by the time they’d pushed inside, he doubted it had given Natasha an opportunity to properly scope out the place.

“What’s it to you?” The kid scowled with the kind of stepped on pride that answered all of Tony’s questions. The kid looked small and thinner than he should be even from here, but it could be the obscene number of layers he was wrapped in. Like he was preparing to spend a lengthy amount of time in the middle of a falling down shed freezing his ass off.

Great so they were stuck in here with a homeless kid, who’d likely been scared out of his wits when two strangers barged into his hidey hole and spent the night throwing up and ripping machinery out of their bodies. He was surprised the kid hadn’t tried to make a run for it as soon as they passed out. Then again, Natasha had done a good job barricading the door. He’d probably been too afraid of waking them to risk trying to move it.

“Absolutely nothing,” Tony answered him, already turning his thoughts away from their unexpected new addition to peruse the barn looking for things he could use to help see to Natasha’s wounds and go on the attack when it became necessary. What he wouldn’t give to have his suit right now.

“There’s some pretty nasty customers following us so you might want to scram Small Pint.”

God this place was a dump, but thankfully it was practically a treasure trove of odds and ends, little homemade devices that were obviously childish in design but rather ingenious in execution if Tony said so himself.

“Watch your back.” Natasha’s warning sounded amused, which didn’t make much sense given the situation.

“huh-ouch!” Tony cursed as something whacked him in the center of his back. He turned and snarled in the direction of the boy who had mustered the courage to climb down from the hayloft and was pointing that barrel thingy at him. Tony glanced down at his feet to find a dark wrinkled potato.
“Did you just shoot me with a potato gun?”

“Trespassers will be shot, it’s on the sign.” The kit shrugged, and this close Tony could see that he was in fact a kit. He might have been able to smell it before even with the wooly hat covering the kids ears if he hadn’t been so distracted by you know, his teammate in medical duress and the potential for supped up super-villains to come barging in any moment. There were no medical supplies but the good news was someone clearly had enough interest in machines that there was enough stuff here that Tony was confident he could jury-rig a low grade repulsor together with his arc-reactor as a power source, but he’d need to fix the reactor first.

“It’s supposed to be stronger, but I can’t get it to work right.” The kit finished despondently, like all his dreams had died with it as he frowned down at his creation and Tony resented the flash back to being of similar age and height, wilting as Howard criticized his work.

“What mark are you on?”

“uh…”

Tony rolled his eyes.

“When you’re an engineer you’ve got to learn that half your job is realizing what a shitty job you’ve done and making it better. Iron Man mark one is a pile of sheets and bolts somewhere in the Afghan desert. Do you think I should have just stopped there because the first model wasn’t perfect?”

“An engineer… that’s like a mechanic, right? You fix things?”

The kits whiskers twitched as his eyes lit up with excitement, his honey brown tail swishing behind him and over on the couch Natasha made a small sound of amusement.

“He’s just like you.”

Tony ignored her in favor of the excitable child in front of him and focusing on their pressing predicament.

“Yes that’s a part of it. We’ll go with that. Listen kid, you got a name?”

“It’s Harley.”

“Harley. What’s your deal? You live out here by yourself?”

“In the barn?” The kid shook his head, mouse brown hair flopping as he shrugged. “Only when Mom’s not home, otherwise I stay in the house with her and old Mrs. Keener. Dad used to stay with me so I didn’t get scared but when grandpa died Mrs. Keener sold him. That was six years ago.”

“Yeah, sorry sometimes that happens. Here’s what I need.” Tony raised a hand and began to tick off on his fingers before that despondent expression and the weight of loss could settle over the boy. “Warm blankets, medical tape, gauze, a laptop, a cell phone, a digital watch, a pneumatic actuator from your bazooka there, a map of town, a mirror, a pair of tweezers and the largest tuna-fish sandwich you can make. Can you get me those without getting into trouble?”

“What’s in it for me?” the kid’s tone had turned mulish which didn’t bode well for not wasting time and Tony really wished the barn had been occupied by someone older for half a moment before he acknowledged that perhaps he wasn’t being as careful with this small being and his feelings as he could be. Literally anybody else would have been better equipped to deal with this than he was.
“Salvation.” Tony answered, aiming for a gentler tone. “Mrs. Keener. She’s your grandmother, right? I’m guessing Mom got herself in the family way and when Granny got wise to your parents romance she wasn’t too happy. Eventually Granny ships dear old dad up the river and kicks you out to the barn.

“Mom puts up with it because she depends on Granny’s money and doesn’t want to risk the altogether insane and unfair custody battle that would ensue because, per article twelve of the Breeding Ordinances, she would have to pay a huge fine for her unlawful use of your grandmother’s property, and since your father was in fact someone else’s property, that in turn begs the question of who does Harley Keener actually belong to. That about right?”

Harley looked up, blue eyes searching Tony’s.

“How did you know that?”

He could have said that even when other kats couldn’t necessarily tell the difference that he always could, because people tended to carry their parent’s signatures and perhaps it was an aspect of Tony’s biological imprint, but he’d always been adept at unraveling the parts of a scent and understanding the code therein (when he bothered to that is, he is distracted often by bigger things like Stark Industries and saving the world from alien invasion).

Tony could also have said that he was familiar with the subtle differences in scent produced by ‘mixed’ breeds because he’d lived with the knowledge of his difference his whole life and still subconsciously searched for it in others, but that was a direction far heavier than he wanted to go and they still didn’t have the time.

“I’m smart. Listen, Harley,” Tony knelt down until he and the half-pint were eye to eye. “My friend here really needs to get warm and I need to get her to a doctor and me to a lab. There are some very bad people chasing us so we’re low on time here. I need those supplies. You help me get them and I promise you won’t have to sleep in the barn anymore.”

“How? Mrs. Keener-”

“Sounds like a bully.” Natasha murmured from the couch and Harley turned to look at her. “We don’t like bullies.”

“Is she really the Black Widow?” Harley whispered on a bated breath and Tony just about gave up. “I mean, she looks like her but-”

“But she’s definitely had better days.” Tony interjected. “And on that note, do you know what keeps going through my head? Why don’t I have blankets yet? Where is my sandwich? I thought I gave a detailed list and yet…”

Harley rolled his eyes but there was an excited grin beginning to stretch his mouth.

“Okay, okay. Come on. I know where we can get that stuff. We can go to my house, but it’s a hike. Grandpa owned a lot of acers.”

“I shouldn’t involve him.” Tony thought as Harley began helping him to take down the blockade, still chattering. Tony looked to Natasha, anxiousness coiling in his chest. He was just a kid, after all.

“He’s what we have.” Natasha’s response didn’t exactly absolve Tony of his fear or his guilt, but its simple practicality did resolve him to the necessity of it.

“I’ll make sure he keeps his head down.” He almost thought more to himself than to her but Natasha
heard it anyway. Tony and Harley removed the last of the objects blocking the door. It would be useless anyway against extremis powered agents. They’d just have to be quick about this and hope AIM didn’t track them to the barn before they had time to get a defense together.

“Kotyonok.” Tony turned at the soft entreaty and caught the object that Natasha, struggling to sit up, had pulled from somewhere on her person and tossed his way. It was the switch knife he realized, the hilt small and disarmingly delicate looking but heavy in his hand. The release button for the blade responding to the slightest bit of pressure from his thumb before the sharp end slid free of its sheath in one smooth silent motion. There was an energy locked inside. Tony could feel it humming against his hand, his brain tickling once more with that strange sense of awareness. He had the strange feeling that if he just opened his mind a little he’d be able to see the complex inner workings of the little knife and know exactly what technology was inside.

He stamped down on the sensation, not trusting it not to be some weird and potentially deadly side effect of the extremis virus, and arched a brow at Natasha, preparing to ask what she would use to defend herself in the worst-case scenario but the woman waved the unspoken words away, slowly lowering her upper half back to the couch with a pain filled sigh.

“I prefer my own knives. That one is yours.”

Tony and Harley hiked through the snow across a wide field to the back door of what some might have called a charming little farm house, but Tony just called an ageing dump in the middle of nowhere that didn’t look like it even had running water let alone a satellite Tony could rewire; but never judge a book by its cover and all that because peeling paint and rotting floorboards on the back porch or not, the house did get cable.

He’d known even before they hit the back porch because that strange tickle in his head had kicked up again and he’d just sort of felt the presence of the satellite dish, and the television someone had left on in an upstairs bedroom and the coffee maker which was sitting on standby in the kitchen. The connection was getting stronger, Tony realized fearfully. It was becoming a battle for which was harder to ignore, the humming of the machines or the minds of others.

It was easier to get caught up in the bright whirlwind nature of the kid’s thoughts, but it wasn’t safe to get inside the kids head. It was bad enough Harley was involved in their mess as it was, Tony couldn’t further screw up his life by accidently screwing with his head in ways he might not be able to repair.

“My mom should be at the dinner. Mrs. Keener always falls asleep to the soap operas, so I sneak in sometimes when I need something.” Harley explained on a whisper as they crept through the back door of the house. His mother left a key for him there under a pot just in case he ever needed to get inside, as his grandmother tended to lock him out and forget to feed him.

Most of the medical supplies that Tony needed were easily found in the bathroom off the kitchen, and Harley quickly rounded up everything else. Tony was throwing what food supplies were immediately available in the kitchen into a grocery bag when Harley appeared again, a duffel bag almost bigger than he was strapped to his back.

“We can use this to carry the stuff. It was my grandpa’s so nobody will even know it’s gone.”

“Thanks kid, you’ve been a big help.” Tony took the bag from him and began loading it up with the supplies they’d gathered. Zipping it up once more he hefted it easily onto his back, surprised by how light it was. “But I want you to stay here until your mom gets home. Don’t open the door for
anybody but her. You understand?"

“You want me to stay here?!” The boy demanded incredulously. “But what if the Keener wakes up?”

“I guarantee you however nasty your grandmother is she has nothing on the guys that I’m dealing with, so you’re going to stay here and keep out of trouble.” Tony responded, already headed for the back door.

“But you need me! I’m supposed to go with you, I can tell.” Harley insisted, lips pouting stubbornly. “We’re connected.”

That was what Tony was afraid of actually.

He’d opened his mouth to tell the kid once and for all to stay put when he felt the enemy approach. That mechanical hum in the back of his mind that he’d been persistently ignoring had grown steadily louder. Suddenly his brain seemed to catch onto some of the bits and pieces of the digital conversation passing around him until he could access the data as easily as if he was holding his StarkPad.

There were four trucks coming up the highway towards the farm, heavy with tech. There was a chopper in the air sweeping in from the opposite direction. With the amount of chatter being tossed back and forth over their radios Tony felt himself slide into their frequency more than he consciously tried to tap it.

“- stopped somewhere close. I want everything in a five-mile radius covered. We need to recover him fast. Shoot who gets in your way.”

Tony staggered, dizziness overwhelming him as he blinked his head clear and shoved the noise back. He couldn’t fail to notice the return of energy building in his chest. He grabbed Harley by the shoulder and the kit tapered off mid-sentence.

“Are you okay Tony?” Harley’s worried eyes looked up at him as the kit laid a hand tentatively against his side.

Not remotely, Tony thought with a grimace but no use scaring the kid any more than he had to.

“Yeah. I’m good, just in the middle of an evolutionary crisis. So, okay. New plan. I need a tiny screwdriver. The tiniest one you can find. Be fast. I’ll be upstairs.”

When Tony said he had a ‘plan’ what he actually meant was he had a basic idea of what they needed to do in a short amount of time (it wouldn’t take that chopper long to spot the tracks they’d made from the barn to the house and for the armed foot units to come sniffing) and just enough desperation to try it.

That list included commandeering the nearest cell phone (which was unfortunately Granny’s) and parts from the ancient computer in the den which in turn meant barging in on a snoring Mrs. Keener. The woman choked on a startled scream at the rude awakening and took a moment to get herself oriented but once she seemed to understand that she wasn’t being robbed and that the strange kat riffling through her purse and yammering about getting in her car and calling the police didn’t seem to be armed, she got furious (and nasty).

“Oh you bet I’ll be calling the police, you vile creature. How dare you come into my house! Put down my purse this minute- oof!” Her tirade fell off when Tony, having located her cellphone shoved the purse into her chest as requested and Harley came running back into the room,
brandishing an eyeglass repair kit.

“Will this work Tony?”

“Perfect. Thanks kid.” Tony caught the plastic case one handed, ignoring the violent intake of breath coming from Mrs. Keener or the way the woman followed them as they rushed back toward the den where Harley’s mother kept the old computer, screeching all the while.

“You’re responsible for this, Boy? I told your mother you creatures were nothing but trouble.”

“Quiet! I need quiet.”

Tony having already worked open the back of the phone and cracked open the casing on the system unit to get to the motherboard, glanced up sharply from his work to pin the woman with a glare. The kit’s distress washing through him like a wave made his hands shake and he tried to blink away the sensation. He needed steady hands for this. He needed to get a message to the team and put together a working repulsor and he only really had time to do one of those things, unless he took some major risks.

Getting the message out to the team was as simple as connecting to JARVIS’ server, which was only a matter of accessing the internet with his brain. Crazy right? But stranger things were already happening. But AIM would find their tracks long before the team would get there. So he needed that repulsor and he didn’t have time to properly fix the mangled reactor in order to use it as a power source.

Here’s the truly crazy part (the part Steve is probably going to flip his shit about). It had already occurred to Tony that besides connecting to machines, he was producing an excess amount of energy (energy his body wasn’t equipped to handle or contain that could have explosive results). Using himself as a power source was risky (okay yeah crazy) but it might just be enough to keep the kid safe and protect Natasha. Long enough anyway.

Just because Tony thought it was possible didn’t mean opening his mind up to the web was anything he had any sort of practice with or knew of any precedent for. This shit was literally developing in his head as he went along.

He tried to quiet his mind and sink into the mechanical hum, rifling past the input of every random machine in a twenty foot radius and tap into just the connections he wanted.

The net was everywhere so it was pretty easy to find (thankfully) but, oh hey, turns out the world wide interweb is also mind-numbingly loud. Colors and sounds and codes rushed in all at once and Tony’s head felt like it split open. God it hurt. But he tried to think past it, tried to concentrate on just the parts he needed, traversing at lightning speed looking for just the right hub… And suddenly there he was in all his intricate beautiful code.

For a moment he wasn’t noticed but then Tony took a breath and -

“Hello, you are a foreign system and this is a private server. Please explain your presence.” The familiar voice of his A.I. filled his head and Tony was speechless for the first time in his life.

He’d never thought it would be possible to see his creation like this, from the inside. A living breathing network of codes that he could almost reach out and touch.

“I do not know your origin, therefore I must eradicate you from my servers. Goodbye.”

“No wait. JARVIS!”
“Sir?”

Splitting pain blossomed in the center of Tony’s mind once more and he slumped over the desk with a moan as his head went blessedly blank, like someone had cut a circuit somewhere. He lay there, breathing shallowly, hoping the pain would fade.

He came back to his surroundings an undeterminable amount of time later when small hands gripped his shoulders.

“What’s the matter with him?” he heard Mrs. Keener’s muddled voice demanding fearfully. “I’ll send you to the work house for this, mark my words Boy.”

“He’s sick! I think somebody poisoned him, and the people that did it are coming here.”

“Kid’s right.” Tony sat up with a groan, wiping at the trickle of blood beneath his nose. God damn. So that hadn’t been his best idea, but at the end there, he was sure it had worked. He’d touched JARVIS.

“I’m giving you a chance to save your ass, so I suggest you quit with the threats, take your knock off purse, get in your car, and drive as fast as you can in the other direction. How’s that actuator coming Harley?”

“Who the hell do you think you are?” Mrs. Keener who was visibly shaking with fury spat, pointing one wrinkled finger in his direction.

“He’s Iron Man.” Harley piped up bravely, finished harvesting his potato gun for parts, he handed them over to Tony. “And if you don’t want to be here when the bad guys get here, I’d do what he says.”

Tony grit his teeth. Harley’s words and actions were brave but the kid was terrified. Tony could feel it buzzing at the back of his mind but the kit wouldn’t let the fear stop him. He was determined to help even if it risked his life or ended up costing him everything. He was bright and good, and so damn eager to prove himself it was painful to look at.

“You’re going with her small pint.”

“What?! Tony no!”

“Tony yes. Stand back.” He ordered with a snap, lifting the guts of what would (with better materials and a few more hours work) have passed for the core of a repulsor glove. Now it just looked like a mess of wires entangled around a metal disk attached to a microchip. Tony hastily tied some of the wiring around his wrist and his index finger to keep the firing ring nestled in the cradle of his palm. It wouldn’t afford his body much protection but given what he was trying to do he thought skin to skin contact would be better anyway.

Focusing on the heat simmering in the center of his body he took a deep breath and thought about pulling it forward channeling it through his body and into his hands, through the chip and – Mother fucker! That hurt.

Mrs. Keener screamed and Harley ducked as Tony was pushed back over the table sending the harvested computer crashing to the floor as the bright burst of current crackling in the center of his palm was pushed forward in a bright beam that scattered furniture in the small space and blew a smoking hole in the opposite wall.
“Tony. Tony come on wake up. There’s someone knocking at the door!”

Tony’s head was splitting with pain when he came to. Harley was leaning over him anxiously his small hands tapping insistently at Tony’s cheeks. Tony gingerly picked himself up off the floor with a groan. His heart hammered furiously as his chest clenched tightly in pain, his body flushed with heat, but he took deep swallows of air and tried to compartmentalize. The pain could go in this nice little box here and he’d deal with it later. Glancing blearily around he didn’t see Mrs. Keener anywhere and suspected she’d finally decided to make a run for it. He wondered if she’d even tried to take the boy with her.

A moment later he heard the sound of someone pounding on the front door and one quick sweep with his mind (headache slicing through his skull for his efforts) was all it took to confirm the worst. The foot soldiers were here and if they were here it meant they might be at the barn as well.

“They’re coming.” Tony reached hoping that she’d hear despite the distance. He didn’t hear a response but he felt her moving in his mind, a light caress of comfort that seemed to him to say she knew.

“New plan.” Tony rasped aloud, clutching his chest for a moment more until the pain had eased to something manageable. He gestured for Harley to come and the kit scampered closer wordlessly. “Get upstairs. Lock yourself in your mothers room and don’t come out until I tell you to. Got it?”

“But-”

“No buts. I need to take care of these guys and I can’t do that and worry about you at the same time. If these guys are still here when your mom gets home what do you think is gonna happen to her?” It was a low blow maybe, but the only thing he could think of to get the kid moving and make him stay where it was safe. Tony wouldn’t have in the kid’s shoes, not for anything less. Predictably Harley’s eyes widened with fear.

“But what if they take you away? What if she sells me like she said she would.” he asked in a meek voice that actually might have hurt Tony’s heart to hear but it was hard to tell in his current condition.

“Then I’ll come find you.” He promised. “I’ll always be able to find you. You know how I know?”

“We’re connected?” The kid sniffled and maybe if Tony was somebody decent like Cap, he would have given the kid a hug and said something appropriately affirming, but he’s Tony Stark and awkward emotions are not his thing.

“I have an extremely advanced A.I. who could find a needle in a haystack.” He patted the kids back stiffly in what he hoped was a comforting way. “Now move. Trust me to take care of it.”

Tony would take care of him. And though he didn’t say it expressly like that the kid seemed to get it because he turned and ran from the room, and not a minute too soon because a second or so after he disappeared from view Tony heard the front door being kicked open.

Well that was just rude. He was very tired of these AIM assholes fucking with his people. He thought of the kats at his shelter, of Harley Keener hiding somewhere upstairs who’d never been given a chance and hadn’t seen his father in six years because of a bitter old woman’s prejudice, and he thought about how their lives intertwined with his, how they’d been pulled into his orbit. He could bring them stars.

Unbidden, what that medic had said to him the night of the attack on the safe house came back. It wasn’t right, what AIM had done, what they’d taken away from him. But what was he going to do,
curl into a ball and moan about how unfair it was? Wait for someone to produce a miracle cure so he could go back to his life and not deal with any of it?

Because the truth is, he’s not special. His wounds, his tragedies, they’re not because the world has it out for Tony Stark, it’s because he’s gata and he dared to push back. Of course they come for him. They’re always going to.

He doesn’t have to push, but if he doesn’t… what happens to the Harleys, the Natasha’s, the Bruces, the Clints… who are coming after them?

A leader’s suffering belonged to their people.

Resolved, Tony let the rage he’d kept contained for hours (days) free, let his thoughts slide away with another deep breath, giving himself permission to feel the thirst for vengeance and not to fear the consequences for his body.

Calm settling over him he walked toward the front of the house, senses focused on the sound of the booted feet and harsh breathing of his prey.

It was almost comical how dumbfounded the mercenaries looked when he appeared in the hallway walking toward them as casually as if they were expected for a Christmas get-together, only seeming to count him belated as a danger when he raised his palm, but by then it was already too late. Blasting a hole through something had never felt so good.

There was shouting and gunfire as the mercenaries not blown out the door by the blast ordered him to stop, and, seeing that he wasn’t going to, opened fire. Tony was never going to be Natasha or Cap, but he’d sparred enough with them both to have learned a thing or two and besides that he didn’t need to be. He was Iron Man.

He was already naturally quicker than these rats could ever hope to be. He didn’t worry about the bullets, counting on what he’d observed of the extremis virus in the enemy. He felt the occasional sting of a hit but it was just that, a sting. They might as well have been bees. They did piss him off however and the claws came out with a growl and he was happy to teach the guy trying to slam the butt of his gun against his skull the error of his ways.

A slash across the face and a blast to the chest later and the guy wouldn’t be getting up anytime soon. His partner thought better of being so closed and backed up, firing wildly as Tony rushed toward him, wrenching the gun out of his hands and punching hard. There was something satisfying about doing it with his bare hands, about watching the red lines appear on their skin, about knowing that even if they lived through their encounter with him they’d carry his mark for the rest of their days. They’d know better than to touch what was his. Everyone would know.

When he stepped outside to face the rest of the unit standing beside their signature black trucks with guns raised, there was blood splattered on his cheek. He wiped it away without taking his gaze away from Killian standing in the center of his men.

“You’re out numbered, Stark.” Aldrich grinned triumphantly.

Tony smiled back.

“Never stopped me before.”

He didn’t give Killian any more warning before he went on the attack. And yeah, Tony was out numbered, even with the repulsor beam blowing holes through their ranks. At least two of the mercenaries were clearly on the extremis juice because they kept coming back for more long after
their companions were decidedly not getting back up. Three against one weren’t good odds for anyone. But Tony wasn’t just anyone.

Stark. Avenger. Queen. He wasn’t stopping until they were dead.

Blasting one of the mercs back with a repulsor blast he reached behind him and slashed at the neck of the asshole who’d thought it was a good idea to try and grab him from behind. Twisting in the cage of the guy’s arms to claw through his shirt and vest, digging into vulnerable flesh.

The mercenary grunted and cursed until the pain became too much and Tony’s claws dug too deep, and he finally released his hold with a guttural scream. Tony rewarded him by springing away from his reach and firing a repulsor blast straight into his chest with a snarl. The force of the beam drove the guy through the snow and about half a foot into the ground before he combusted, sending up a plume of smoke, snow and dirt.

He only had a moment to savor the victory because Aldrich chose that moment to breathe actual ass fire at him, and Tony had to duck and roll to avoid becoming barbeque.

Killian was quick though, leaping to land next to Tony before he could scramble back to his feet and crashing a heavy boot down against his chest.

“You can’t deny it Stark. Didn’t I tell you I’d make you greater?” Killian leaned down to crow, while Tony struggled beneath the crushing weight on his chest. The guy looked crazed. His clothes were mostly burnt through and his skin looked like a lava lamp, pulsing and glowing dangerously, but he either didn’t notice or didn’t care. Tony hoped he blew sky high.

“Look at you. Didn’t I tell you you’d be perfect?”

“He was already perfect.” A heavily modulated voice growled unexpectedly as a feline scream ripped through the air. Killian straightened and Tony sucked in a breath as the weight on his chest relieved, but Killian wasn’t quick enough to defend himself from the dark shadow that passed over Tony as a familiar costumed (friend?) leapt through the air, wrapped his powerful legs around Killian’s neck and arched backwards, throwing the villain over his shoulders and lashing him smartly with that barbed tail of his for good measure as he fell.

Tony knew he was in danger of sounding like a broken record going on about how damn graceful the guy was, but considering that little maneuver left him with only Tony to land on top of, he felt it was warranted to note that not only did the guy stick his landing, caging Tony only momentarily with his arms and legs, he did it with an inch or two to spare between their faces and Tony only briefly felt the brush of a firm chest against his before Catman was leaping back to his feet. So Tony gave the guy props and everything for not crushing him and for badassary.

He didn’t waste time mooning over it though because crazy Killian was getting up. As soon as Catman was clear and Tony had enough room to sit up he did, firing two repulsor blasts viciously into the villain’s chest, screaming in pain as the chip nestled against his palm crackled and burst as electric current exploded from his palm.

He was vaguely aware of Catman throwing himself back over him and rolling them away, but he heard when Killian exploded clear as day and felt the wave of heat that passed over them.

Slowly, silence settled over the yard and Tony, panting for breath over the dizzying amount of pain he was in, pried open eyes he hadn’t even realized he’d closed.

He couldn’t see the man’s eyes through the dark lenses in the mask of his costume but the guy had to
be looking at him, pressed as close as they were and… staring right at him and all.

“Hi there.” Tony managed to grunt, wincing as he lifted his arm to get a look at his hand, which felt like he’d stuck it in a campfire. Ugh, and it looked like it too, bloody and raw with violent burns, his repulsor a smoking ruin of twisted wiring and metal. He took a deep breath and let it out slow as a low chuckle emitted from his masked accomplice.

“Hello, Ayeba.”

Okay, that wasn’t his name but whatever. Tony shifted with the intention of untangling his hand from the ruined repulsor and take better stock of his injuries, stiffening in alarm (and okay a healthy dose of indignation) as a gloved hand pressed against his chest in unspoken demand for stillness, a strange chittering sound emitting from the masked man. Catman began delicately stripping away the mess of melted wires and metal, murmuring, “Forgive me Ayeba, but you are in pain and I fear what will happen if we do not settle your heartrate.”

Huh? Did he mean that jackhammer in Tony’s chest? Yeah it was probably bad, but Tony was kind of used to cardiac trauma, so this didn’t even scratch his top ten. But oh hey, look at that. He hadn’t even noticed the glowy lines moving through his veins or how hot it was, until cool ungloved hands were pressed against his skin and something warm and soothing was pushing against his mind.

Relax, it seemed to say. Which sounded great, awesome.

Only, what? No. Tony couldn’t fucking relax! There was the barn and Natasha and Harley, where the hell was Harley and –

“Tony.” That low modulated voice came through the mouthpiece of Catman’s mask (helmet?) in soft but firm demand, accompanied by a low rumbling purr that Tony realized he should find alarming but his senses weren’t in on that bit of intel. He wanted to close his eyes and sink into that sound. All the more reason he should be fighting right?

Tony’s eyes widened suddenly, another realization sinking in. Guy knew his name. Catman released an exasperated sounding sigh.

“You must relax or you will be joining our fallen friend.”

Tony snorted.

“No friend of mine.”

But even as he said it the tension was draining out of him. This time he didn’t fight it.

When his heart rate had slowed and a curious glance down at his arms revealed no more glowing veins, he started to feel awkward because, thanks for the assist and all but, he wasn’t comfortable being held by an actual ass stranger.

Thankfully Catman decided to move, releasing him slowly as he climbed to his feet, offering Tony a hand which he largely ignored.

If the guy was offended he didn’t say so, which was just fine with Tony because again, stranger, and Tony had no idea why he’d helped either now or back at the warehouse and what he wanted. He could very well have turned around and decided to take up where Killian had left off.

He hissed when the guy moved suddenly, but it was only to present his hands toward Tony, wrists up and fingers fisted together.
“For my trespass, I offer you the hands that made the offense. May your teeth strike true.”

Tony’s eyes bugged out and he could feel his hair fluffing in alarm. He was joking right? But he was just standing there looking ridiculously serious about having his hands bit off, Jesus Christ.

“Yeah so, hands to yourself and all, but you can keep them. I’m not in the business of biting off people’s hands.”

Catman lowered his arms, releasing a low breath of air that sounded suspiciously like a suppressed chuckle.

“So… thank you.” Tony narrowed his eyes, watching the costumed kat closely. “But who the hell are you?”

“I am at your service, Ayeba.” The guy answered, dipping into a graceful if shallow bow, which answered nothing by the way, and Tony got the feeling the guy knew it and there was a shit eating grin happening under that mask; but he didn’t get the chance to do anything about it.

That was the moment one of the Avengers jets chose to come speeding overhead and by the time Tony had pulled his eyes away from the incoming jet to glance back at him, the man in the Cat suit was gone like some sort of freaky Houdini.

A moment later Cap and Bruce appeared running down the gangplank toward Tony in various states of distress. Bruce, still in the clothes Tony had last seen him in looked haggard and twitchy, like an addict who hadn’t had seen a bed or a fix in a dangerous amount of time. Steve looked less unkempt, but there was something brittle about his expression as his eyes flicked over Tony and the damage he’d left in his wake.

Normally Tony would have gotten defensive about that expression, about how necessary it had been to leave a trail of destruction behind him (as always seemed to be the case) but today he just didn’t care. They’d gotten exactly what they’d deserved (what anyone who dared try it again was going to get) and he didn’t regret a single moment of it. Tony met Steve’s gaze unflinchingly, unrepentant for how feral he must look in his blood stains and battle scars. For the first time that he could remember it was Captain America who looked away first, eyes flicking downward before sliding toward the hole where the front door used to be where Harley had appeared, calling Tony’s name anxiously.

“Looks like you had the party without us.” Steve commented neutrally, eyes turning back to Tony as the kit rushed to his side.

“You bet.” Tony replied simply, swaying slightly as Harley collided with his side, the kit clutching on to tight as he tried to steady Tony’s larger frame, murmuring a quick apology. He was putting a brave face on, but Tony could feel him trembling.

“You need a doctor.” Bruce stated, anxiousness tightening his voice. He looked like he was holding together by a thin thread, the thin thread of productivity (Tony was very familiar with that). Tony laid a hand on Bruce’s arm and gave it a consoling pat.

“You know for once in my life Big Green I’m not going to argue with that, but we need to get to – ”

“Clint and Thor followed the team headed to the barn. They’ve secured the situation. Natasha’s fine.” Steve assured him, reaching tentatively for Tony’s other arm, presumably to help him walk. Tony stared balefully at his hand, tail arcing in warning until he decided better of it and withdrew. It wasn’t that he didn’t get that Steve was trying to help (because Tony’s body was just about done and any idiot with eyes could see that he could use some help).
But he needed to set the score. Tony needed time to think through the future when his life wasn’t being immediately threatened and he wasn’t a firework waiting to happen, but he was certain that whatever path he chose it was going to be on his terms. No more playing by Fury’s rules.

He and Steve, they needed to talk.

*~*~*

Natasha was exhausted but she couldn’t close her eyes not until she knew he was safe.

Clint had ducked into the cockpit to pilot so Thor was carrying her into the jet, which was a humiliating position to find herself in but as far as rides went arguably wasn’t that bad. Still, it was very damsel in distress. Oh well, if any of them was stupid enough to take it to heart she’d correct them. She kind of hoped they did. It would be fun. Thor carried her into the waiting jet and over to a medical cot, depositing her gently.

“Are you comfortable? These cots are not known to be the worthiest of beds.” Thor hovered over her a moment until Bruce nudged him out of the way, instructing the pair of SHIELD medics who’d come along with Coulson to get her set up with an IV and barking for JARVIS to turn up the temperature in the jet. She tried to reassure Thor with her eyes, but it was a battle to keep them open.

“Hey there, Sleeping Beauty,” a tired voice called for her attention and then Tony was there leaning over her, his presence slotting some missing piece back into place and she sagged in relief, the fingers of sleep grasping at her. He should be on the cot beside her. He was blood stained, bruised and burned, but somehow he looked better for it. A dangerous beauty in the wildness of his look and smell. A rightness. There was something awake in him that hadn’t been before.

Tony had always been a warrior. That wasn’t the difference.

Perhaps it was just a consciousness. The little duckling who kept his eyes open while his brothers slept chanting to the witches at his door.

*We cannot sleep for the thoughts that chill us;*

*We dare not sleep, for they mean to kill us.*

Tony smiled tiredly down at her, leaning close to nuzzle her brow with a soft contend purr.

Natasha closed her eyes and drifted into sleep, content in the knowledge that they would die no sooner than they chose.

Chapter End Notes

And that concludes a major arc of this story. As always, please let me know what you thought. I so enjoy reading them and they keep me from being lonely while I wait for my writing partner to return to me lol.

Tony sics his lawyers on AIM and Viastone and meets Harley's mom. There's a cat-costumed vigilante hanging around that SHIELD seems curiously unconcerned with and a certain medic keeps popping up to be annoying observant and kind of amusing. Meanwhile Tony's struggles to stabilize extremis lead Thor to suggest a trip off planet to commune with the cat goddess herself. In other words, welcome to the Thor flavored
chapters. Magical shenanigans ensue.
Can you hear the horses? (Here they come).

Chapter Summary

As Tony and Bruce struggle to find a solution for extremis he makes some bold plans for the future. The Avengers Pride started with Fury's ideas but Tony's going to make it his own. He never does anything small.

Chapter Notes

Tony's Island is roughly around the size of Nantucket MA, and geographically located in the same area. There isn't another body of land out there that size besides Martha's Vinyard but this is where we use our imaginations ;)

Also Darren's comments about Google Maps on zoom is entirely relevant to my actual life while plotting this element of the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony woke as Bruce snuffled in his ear and right on que, JARVIS was there to help him great the morning, “Good morning Sir. The time is 12:30 PM in New York City. You are in your private quarters. Ms. Romanov has started a pot of coffee for you in the kitchen.”

Or early afternoon. Whatever. Thank God for scary mental connections that allowed his teammate to monitor his bodily condition even at a distance. Her reach must be getting stronger if she’d known he was waking from several floors down.

Tony had fallen into an exhausted sleep in the Bruce’s arms after a two-day work binge in the lab had been interrupted by another sudden flare of Heat. He’d been having them off and on for the last two weeks, ever since his cycle had been interrupted first by the suppressants he’d willingly taken and then by the virus he’d been forcibly injected with.

He’d felt the first wave of Heat not long after they’d returned to the tower. It had come on quick without repeating the usual build up, and had hit hard enough to make Tony fear for his life as his temperature spiked and extremis went into overdrive due to the adrenaline rush. Bruce had kind of freaked out because all their tests indicated that Tony would in fact go KABOOM if he didn’t limit the level of stress on his body, and Heats could be anywhere from a three to seven day event.

Thankfully, that Heat had passed within hours, sated under Bruce’s close watch and careful menstruations; but another flare up had returned only days later and they’d been coming off and on ever since.

Tony hadn’t thought his body could be any more of a disaster, but extremis had proved him wrong. Sure, the regenerative virus had ‘fixed’ some areas. His organs were in prime condition (his ticker hadn’t been this whole or this healthy since he was fourteen years old). Basically, all the wear and tear he’d put on the old machine had been fixed by an ace mechanic and given a fresh coat of paint to boot; but out of the frying pan and into the fire and all that, because he’d traded a bum heart and a
shitty auto-immune system, riding a hormone imbalance and several deficiencies, for a nano-virus that was determined to evolve every last inch of him or destroy what parts of him would not comply.

He may as well have traded his healing factor for the world’s most annoyingly overactive antivirus software. Feeble tissue alert. Puny mortal detected. Delete this threat?

Sighing, he squirmed, wincing and wrinkling his nose when he realized there was still a medical issue dildo up his ass – which, let me tell you, is by far from the most unusual way he’s woken up, but it wasn’t the most comfortable (or pleasurable feeling) the morning after when he was stiff, sore, and hungry on top of it.

The intensity of the flare-ups kind of made him needy and in the thick of it he disliked the feeling of being empty, so the whole dildo thing was Bruce’s way of accommodating him and also nabbing some much-needed shut eye. Didn’t make it any less awkward on the flip side of things.

“You think too loudly.” Bruce mumbled, nuzzling closer to bury his nose against the side of Tony’s neck, subconsciously rooting out the lingering notes of heat scent. Tony huffed.

“My thinky thoughts are but sage whispers Brucie, everybody knows that.”

“uh-huh” Bruce opened his eyes with a tired yawn, blinking slowly before he focused on Tony who was squirming in the universal signal of bladder related discomfort and chuckled, untangling their limbs. He watched as Tony sat up, removing the dildo with a low hiss of displeasure, ears twitching when he noticed Bruce smiling at him. Bruce didn’t look all that concerned with his irritation.

Probably because he knew when Tony was truly flustered or indignant all the hair on his body, especially his tails and ears, tended to floof out in a humiliating manner that he’d hated since he was a kit. Nobody took you seriously when you started to resemble a fluff ball and they tended to get grabby too. He’d been thankful when good old age and poor nutrition had given him a hand with making his hair less… just less (because his hair had not been thinning thank you very much. Not everyone could be Cover-Girl Thor their entire adult life).

But anyway, the point. The point was now he was programed with the world’s most annoying regenerative virus so he was back to square one.

Grumbling as he hobbled out of bed toward the bathroom on sleep stiff muscles, laden with a full bladder and a grumbling stomach (his body producing ten times his usual energy output seemed to mean eating a lot more) he called out, “Throw a couple of sandwhiches in with that coffee order would you Jay?”

“Perhaps you would like a change and I could order a steak for you this morning Sir? Perhaps with a side of salad?”

Tony wrinkled his nose.

“More in a fish mood Buddy. Lets go with the smoked tuna and fries from Han’s Fish Fry, skip the green stuff. Order extras for the moochers.”

JARVIS responded with a touch resigned, “Right away Sir.”

“Hey Bruce,” Tony called out after a moment of thought as he finished up his bathroom business. “Do you think the fish cravings are an extremis thing, or am I just turning into a walking stereotype?”

Bruce was sitting up in the bed, hair still sleep mussed but glasses perched at the end of his nose, when Tony poked his head out of the bathroom to look at him. He appeared to be contemplating it
rather deeply.

“Well, the stereotype comes from somewhere but your increased craving for it might very well be linked to extremis,” Banner pondered with a thoughtful frown. “Could be because they’re high in amino acids.”

Which were essential for growth and healing in living tissue. Made sense.

“Do you want to run some tests? There may be something we’re missing. Something that could help us with formula six.”

Yep. You heard that right six. They’d tried five other stabilizing formulas and besides making Tony violently ill before the virus could wipe the thing out of his system they’d not gotten any results. It was exhausting, and terrifying, because if they couldn’t stabilize the damn thing then he was no better than a ticking time bomb. One of these days, the virus was going to get the better of him.

“Later,” Tony answered with a sigh, turning on the faucet with a thought (it was easier now to access the technology around him without pain) ducking back inside to wash up. “Got a meeting at one, and Harley’s coming this afternoon. If you wouldn’t mind taking over the lesson for the day while I talk to mom.”

When Jarvis had initially contacted Jena Keener to inform her that her son was safe and being watched over by the Avengers she’d been frantic, but probably less so than she would have been if she’d caught the news story featuring her mother screaming into a microphone and visceral footage of the carnage outside her home first. She’d seemed torn between relief and alarm that the Avengers had taken him out of state without permission but Tony could hardly have left the kit in the middle of all that and frankly, he hadn’t trusted the elderly Mrs. Keener not to make good on her threats.

Sure, even if she’d been crazy enough that night to drop the kit off at the local workhouse Tony could have found him, but the thought of Harley having to go through even a minute of that kind of trauma made him sick. So yeah, leaving him had never been an option.

Anyway, once Jena got to the tower and got a chance to see that he was okay things had calmed down. Tony’s offer to pay for the damages at the family home and put the kit and his mother up in a cushy condo at the tower away from her mother had gone a long way towards smoothing things over; and Tony’s legal team had spared a few minutes from the feeding frenzy surrounding Viastone to make elderly Mrs. Keener think twice about doing anything hasty before Tony could talk to Jena about Harley’s future.

The future was the purpose of his meeting today.

Once again, Tony had found himself at a crossroad with limited life expectancy and there were certain ducks he wanted to put in their rows.

“Don’t be so morbid. You will find a formula that works.” Natasha thought towards him as he entered the kitchen. Thor was there with her, along with Steve and that Luke guy.

The medic had been assigned officially by Coulson to monitor all their new injuries, (as well as old ones in Clint’s case) but with Natasha and Tony both back on their feet now he pretty much just came to hang out with Clint and laugh at the other tom while he kicked his ass at Mario. For a super spy, Clint hadn’t seemed to catch on yet that Luke was full of shit and he was no more from an (increasingly) underdeveloped “village” than Tony was.

Or maybe he did and they both just enjoyed poking fun at the others presumptions. Weird tom
bonding aside, it didn’t matter to Tony. Just meant one more mouth to feed when Thor was around.

Speaking of, the blond giant perked up as Tony shuffled into the kitchen, grinning broadly as he hailed Tony bombastically.

“Friend Tony! You’re just in time. I was in danger of eating all of lunch.”

Indeed, Thor had a large bowl in front of him and was happily shoveling what looked like some sort of stew into his mouth.

“JARVIS, what’s this?” Tony asked petulantly as Natasha tried to hand him a steaming mug of coffee and a bowl of the stuff. “Where’s my tuna?”

“Mr. Debar came with lunch Sir and he agreed with me that your diet is suffering from a lack of variety. I bowed to his medical expertise.”

“See how he sasses me?” Tony grumbled taking the offering from Natasha who pinched the fleshy part of his arm in an affectionate manner before returning to her favorite spot by the window as Tony continued to grumble. “I told you Jarvis that I was in the mood for fish.”

“There’s fish in it Tony.” Steve pointed out, and Tony attempted not to bristle as Cap arched a blond brow at him pointedly, like a mother imploring a child to mind their manners. They’d not talked much since returning to the tower. Natasha’s wounds and dealing with extremis had claimed Tony’s focus, but there was an unusual tension even for them running beneath their limited actions. It made Tony think of festering wounds, but there was little he could do about it right at this moment. His answering smile was full of teeth.

“Is it made with tuna fish, Cap? Because I don’t think it is.”

Thor, perhaps to prevent the brewing squabble, swallowed his mouthful with a warm chuckle before commenting, “Jane complained that I smelled strongly of tuna fish last evening. It is a nice enough snack in moderation. I much prefer this…” Thor glanced toward the medic who was watching their interactions with a faintly amused glint in his eyes. “What did you call this dish?”

“Epeja.” Luke answered readily, dark eyes settling on Tony as the fel sniffed at the bowl of orangey looking stew, whiskers twitching. It smelled nice enough.

Okay, kind of amazing actually, like creamy peanut butter and spicy chilies with a hint of ginger. And fish! Not any fish that Tony was familiar with but buttery and tantalizing in the best way.

“I am not much of a cook but the dish is old and very popular among Gata in my country.” Luke was explaining as Tony took his first bite, eyes closing in bliss as the rich and warm spices flooded his mouth without compromising the light, almost nutty, taste of the fish.

“Among the Alurio it was custom when invited into a foreign Queen’s territory to come with offerings. One had to step very carefully. An offense could easily result in a loss of limbs or a war between Prides. So, as a symbol of admiration and willing submission this dish was prepared to bring with the offerings. It can take weeks to fetch the right ingredients, and it was thought that the rarer the fish caught for the meat the more honor given to the ones it was served to.”

“So Tony should be insulted that you most likely scored this fish from C-Town.” Natasha remarked sounding unimpressed and Tony wondered at it. Something was bugging her.

“I must confess I am unfamiliar with your C-Town. But from a young age I learned at my father’s knee the importance of the courting rituals. So, naturally when it became clear that I would be
spending a lot of time under the roof of a Queen, I called my sister in a panic and had her ship me some of our best Chelia. They are incredibly delicious but swim in piranha infested waters so our fishermen do not often pursue them.”

That little joke had even Tony looking up from his bowl to stare at him (because it had to be a joke). Luke just continued to eat, taking an almost dainty bite as his mouth curved upward in amusement. The spoon clinking softly against the bottom of the bowl seemed twice as loud with everybody’s focus on him.

He seemed comfortable with it, like he was used to having others eyes on him and his words carefully considered. Tony knew a thing or two about commanding attention, but it was never truly natural to him. He could put the show on effortlessly by now, of course he could, but that wasn’t his true skin. His true skin was an oil stained pair of jeans and a ratty band t-shirt.

This medic was in Walmart clothes but he wore them like a king would. Easy as breathing.

“Courting?” Natasha asked dryly, green eyes assessing the tom closey and Luke, apparently unbothered, smiled wider.

“Yes. The Alurio believed that whether one came to a Queen with personal, political or romantic whims, that they must be courted. It would have been an insult not to. I am nothing if not traditional.”

Tony snickered around his spoonful of stew. Luke’s shit eating streak was kind of amusing, he’d give the guy that. And weird tribal customs or not, if he wanted to bring Tony offerings that tasted this good he could court him till it went out of style. Which it had, probably not long after the invasion of Rome.

“Aye,” Thor raised his mug in hearty agreement. “The mighty Queens of the Kǫตรðýr are much the same. My mother has become well versed in gift giving since befriending Bastet –”

Luke, whose attention hadn’t already been on Thor for some reason, whipped his head around, his arm falling nosily to the table as he stared at the blond Asgardian with a surprised expression edging toward disbelief.

“Your mother worships Bastet?”

Tony looked up again from the quickly disappearing liquid gold in his bowl to laugh.

“Didn’t SHIELD brief you on the team? Thor’s not from around here. His mother knows the original cat-woman who probably helped get the Alurio started.”

The medic blinked slowly at him and said, even slower as if he were testing the words, “So you’re saying that his mother actually knows Bastet. The Panther God?”

“Don’t you mean Goddess?” Steve asked, but Luke was already shaking his head.

“There is no feminine distinction for God in my language. A god is a god is a god, and my people believe there is only one worth worshiping. She is life giver and protector. Our power and our strength come through her. To my father’s shame I have never counted myself as very spiritual,” Luke turned back to Thor, a look of stunned awe beginning to take up residence as he finished. “But you say you have met her.”

“Aye my friend. Though she may indeed seem a god to you Midgarians, she is but one of many from a race called the Kǫตรðýr. We came across them many earth centuries ago. There was a brief war, which my mother helped to end. As a show of good faith that our two kingdoms would always
be at peace, Bastet presented her with a pair of kits.”

“Your parents were big on adoption weren’t they.” Tony noted, thinking of Thor’s brother who had been taken from the Frost Giant’s for similar purposes.

“Aye, it is a common practice among the royal houses that is true. Though I see now how it can bring much more trouble than it avoids.” Thor answered with a grave tone and Tony knew for sure now that he was thinking of Loki and all that they had suffered and lost between them. After a heavy moment of silence he appeared to put the weight on his shoulders aside and smiled to lighten the mood.

“The kits have grown into a fine pair of trouble makers but Mother dares not punish them too harshly lest word get back to their Queen. She makes them pull the chariot when they have misbehaved but strong as they are it’s hardly a punishment worth mentioning.” Perhaps in an attempt at levity he sounded abundantly surly about that in a way that spoke of jealousy and Natasha’s eyes met Tony’s from across the table in bemusement.

“I take it she was harsher on you?” the redhead guessed and Thor let out a gusty huff of a laugh.

“Aye. She was. My brother and I would be made to clean out the stalls when we stepped out of turn. Do you have any idea how much waste a volstag can produce?”

“A lot, I assume.” Steve responded, grinning at Thor’s despondent grumble. Steve didn’t smile much. Or if he did it wasn’t around Tony which to be fair was kind of a given when they couldn’t seem to agree on anything. Kind of a shame, Tony mused wistfully. Steve’s smile was wry and fleeting, but it suited him.

“I only met your brother briefly on my way out the window,” Tony quipped, scraping the last bits of sauce from the sides of his bowl noisily. “But he seems like kind of a shit starter. Spending an afternoon knee deep in stag shit actually sounds fairly fitting. Go Thor’s mom.”

“If I may interrupt?” Pepper interjected as she came sweeping in on her towering heels, halting Thor who was gearing up to reply.

“Good afternoon everyone,” She addressed the room at large before rounding in on Tony with narrowed eyes, thrusting a freshly laundered suit still wrapped in plastic into his arms. “Darren will be here in five minutes and Miss Keener will be up here at three with Harley. And while I’ve been up since early morning dealing with the legal team, the Board and the Broker, the least you could do is be dressed when he arrives.”

“How did Robert enjoy prison?” Tony asked, knowing that it was likely to bring a smile to her face. And sure enough.

“He’s out on bail, but our lawyers got the judge to sit a while before posting.” Answered Pepper, looking every inch the kat with cream. “I’m sure he and Hammer had a lot to talk about. He wants to plea bargain.”

“Oh he can plead.” Tony’s tone edged toward a snarl. “But we’ll see if I’m in the mood to bargain.”

“You may want to consider it.” Pepper reminded him as she handed him the second bundle in her arms, a large stack of file folders. “If you’re serious about this whole island thing you need senatorial sway and Stone has more than a few in his pocket. Twist his arm a bit. Try not to snap it.”

Satisfied Tony stretched up on his toes (damn the woman’s stupidly high heels) and smacked a kiss on her cheek, grinning as she squirmed under the tickle of his whiskers. “Thanks. You’re the best
mommy.”

“Don’t be a brat Tony.” She glared heatlessly at him. “You know that makes me feel like I need a shower.”

“Island?” Steve, ever perceptive at the worst times, questioned curiously from the table as Tony laughed. Pepper shaking her head ruefully at Tony, waved at him to get going before turning to Steve with a pleasant if bland expression and fobbing off some bullshit vagueness about charity ventures. He loved that woman.

“Bye kiddos, it’s been real. Sorry I was an ass about the stew, Luke. I don’t want to say it was better than tuna, but the body is weak. I may have to hire you on as my personal chief. Pepper has the paperwork.” Lifting his stack of files in salute Tony departed, only glancing back when Natasha’s thoughts followed him.

“How are you going to tell them?”

He knew she didn’t just mean about the island. She meant all of it. The island, his struggles with extremis, the fact that he’d bonded with her and was thinking of building a Pride (on certain conditions). Yeah all of it.

“Not yet.”

He needed to get those ducks in their rows first.

~*~*~*~

When Tony had been twenty-one, newly orphaned and suddenly independently wealthy, his first thought had been not how to run a multi-billion-dollar company but getting as far away from his childhood home as he could. He’d gone to a dozen brokers, each one of them smarmier and more condescending than the last. Despite the fact that the meeting had been booked in Tony’s name for Tony, they’d all greeted Obie first and had cute things to say about how they were sure they could find his dream home for him and his kitten.

Darren Hardy had been the only one to walk in and shake Tony’s hand, bitching all the while about the traffic in Malibu. He’d gotten as far as “Sorry I’m late Mr. Stark” before Tony had decided he was going to keep him for life. Tony had offered to pay him an obscene amount of money to be on call for all of his real-estate ventures and Darren had been all too happy to accept.

After twenty years he’d dropped the Mr. and Tony didn’t mind it a single bit when the flamboyantly expressive man called him kitten. Darren called all his girls gata or otherwise kittens.

“Tony, kitten, be reasonable. You have to give me something to go on here other than private island.” Darren clicked his tongue in exasperation in the face of Tony’s disapproval. The files that Pepper had given him were spread open on the table before them in conjunction with the halo-screen displays that Darren had come prepared with. None of the properties that the broker had shown him had seemed right so far.

“I mean, are we talking everybody look at my cute personal island and the insane number of drunk models I can cram onto it kind of private, or virtually undiscovered floating chunk of land with no name I discovered with Google Maps zoom at two hundred percent?”

“Something more like the later. You know I don’t party like that anymore.”

“I know.” Darren heaved a wistful sigh and cast Tony a reproachful glance. “And now my life is so
dull. Why did we have to get old and settle down? I mean whose idea was it for me to get married?”

“Yours, when you threw up all over that rug Pepper loved in the Malibu house weeping into your champagne glass about how much you couldn’t live without him if Charlie took that job in Manchester.” Tony chuckled.

“Don’t be sensible Kitten you know I hate that and you’re already on my short list.” Darren replied with a sniff and Tony just rolled his eyes. Hardy was still a little miffed at Tony for having the audacity to show up to the meeting looking years younger and not sharing his secret, even though Tony had assured him that he didn’t want any of what he was currently on.

Darren tapped away on his tablet, flicking through the files on the halo-screen. “Okay, in review you want ultra privacy, easy access to the mainland without compromising security, and room to stretch your legs. How much room are we talking?”

“I’m thinking enough room for an air strip away from the housing.”

“An air strip.” Darren repeated him blankly. “Tony when you said find me a private island I can build a shelter on I presumed you were talking about rebuilding Maria’s House.”

“I was. I am.”

“Really? Because this is starting to sound a whole lot bigger.”

Tony deliberated for a long moment before answering.

Well, Darren wasn’t wrong. Was he really going to do this? If he was, then he’d need Darren’s help and he’d have to be candid about it.

But did he want it?

If he lived long enough to see it all through this would be astronomical. He’d only really discussed this part with Pepper, and Natasha only knew as much as she did because the emotions surrounding that conversation had been high and he was still learning how to filter things through their bond.

What Tony wanted was big, utterly insane, nearly impossible and really quite simple at its core.

He wanted to be able to close his eyes to sleep without worrying that Pepper was going to come running in telling him that AIM, Stone, or some other bastards had broken down his door and stolen his people while he slept. He wanted a government that wouldn’t just sit idly by if that happened and dish out a check to his assistant for her property loss.

He wanted Harley to go to school with Tink and the other kits, because nobody questioned whether or not they could learn and the necessity of an education. He wanted high walls and thick doors and nothing but blue skies for miles in a place where he could entertain the thought of raising a family without a sick twist of dread and the ash of despair in his mouth.

He wanted liberty.

“Truly? I am thinking bigger than just rebuilding a facility.” Tony began, reaching for his own tablet to command the holo-screen and bring up the designs he’d been working on. “Think rehabilitation community. That’s how we’re going to get it under their radar Darren, a fancy place for society to toss their broken-down toys where they’ll live out the rest of their days in comfort relearning how not to flinch at every sound.
“But what it really is, is Pride. Welcome to a little healing center I’m calling Resilience. In Resilience, you’ll find comfortable living in a safe clean echo friendly environment focused on community growth and development. They’re not just going to have schools, they’re going to have health care, they’re going to have jobs. Jobs that help sustain their way of life where they aren’t going to be demeaned. Even the lowest janitor is going to know that they’re valued and have a voice on the community council. They are going to sustain their own way of life. What the island can’t do for itself I’ll handle, but the less we have to get from elsewhere the better. Because once we have this, we’ll need to protect it.”

They might get away with adding new additions for a year or two but sooner or later some asshole in Washington was going to realize what was growing under their noses, but by then Tony will have tied them up in so much red tape they wouldn’t be able to scratch their asses without his permission. The best part was it was going to be their own greed, their own desire for more and more weapons that was going to path the way.

“The Avengers will need space to grow. I’ve started with a training facility and a barracks but there should be space for other additions as they become necessary. Surrounded by water we’ll need a port for fishing and trading, as well as some sort of naval force. All of that means production Darren, which means we’ll need room for another major project. I’m calling it Stark Resilient. It’ll be an independent subsidy of SI. It will provide thousands of jobs for those who live in Resilience as well as generate revenue. What we produce on the island won’t be produced anywhere else in the world and we’ll only accept contracts from organizations and governments who prove their interest in protecting ours. So the people across the water are just going to have to play nice if they want a piece of the pie.”

As he spoke Tony flicked through the designs he’d drawn up, draft after draft, becoming more confident with each word spoken as he watched his vision unfold and Darren’s mouth slowly drop open. Of all of it, he was most excited about the company, if only because it meant building from the ground up. A company for Gata run by Gata. Scientists like Bruce and engineers like him who had been regulated to background roles or who never expected to receive credit for their contributions would lead the way. There were already a good number of them working within SI as it was and he was confident he could wrestle a few more token minds away from his competitors with enough time. And most promising of all was the generation of young hopefuls who hadn’t grown up with the status-quo unchallenged. Kits who had fought hard for their educations who would jump at the chance at real meaningful work. You know what they say. If you build it they will come.

“Tony… this is a city.” Darren gaped. “You want to build an entire city?”

“I want to build a nation.” Tony finally admitted out loud, throat tightening as the images circled above their heads. It had to be if the Gata who lived there were going to truly be granted freedom and keep it. It would not be an uncontested freedom, but Tony was going to give them all the teeth and claw they’d need to maintain it.

Darren stared at the circling image of a towering island kingdom with shock, slowly closing his mouth as something frustratingly close to pity crept into his eyes as he searched for a response.

“Tony…”

Tensing, Tony waved the man to silence.

“Honestly Darren I know it’s crazy. A free state ruled by Gata yeah right?” he swallowed through the tightness in his throat and clenched his fists under the table.

“I’m not expecting it to be easy and the truth is, I’m not all that certain how much time I have
before… well before I’m out of time in any event. So I know it may never come to full fruition, but I’m going to give it everything I have left in me, because everything I have isn’t worth a damn thing Darren.

“Do you know that I am not even allowed to name my own heir?” Tony barked a humorless laugh at Darren’s disbelieving look. “Yeah. Pepper gets Stark Industries if something happens to me and if I had a kit she would have to sanction my choice to leave my own possessions to them. It’s all dust Darren. Our lives might as well be dust but I can change that. I can start with giving the shelter kats a safe place to live out their lives in comfort. But I need the land first, so help me out here Dare. Find me the right soil.”

“You never do small Stark.” Darren reached up to remove his trendy glasses, pinching the edge of his nose as if to stave off a headache and puffed out his cheeks like a chipmunk before releasing a slow heavy breath.

“Alright. That significantly narrows down your choices because you’re going to need a LOT of growing room. Lets talk location. The Caribbean has a number of private islands for sale that could fit the bill, but you said you wanted close. There is a private island off the Atlantic coastline, not far off of Martha’s Vineyard. Big developer tried to buy it awhile back to turn it into a resort town but the guy who owned it refused to sell. Wanted to keep it in the family for his grandkid or something but the kid died doing a tour of Iraq. The fellow is ageing, and from what I hear the money’s not what it used to be. So, he may be interested in selling to a good cause. 125 square miles. Thriving vegetation and marine life. It’s a three hour flight to New York city by chopper but you can half that with one of those fancy jets of yours. But there’s a down side.”

“What’s the downside?” Tony asked warily, heart sinking because the pictures Darren was showing him were perfect. Lush and green, low slopes, sandy beaches, crystal blue waters.

“Until this whole free nation thing becomes a reality anyone living there will officially be residents of the state of Massachusetts. You might prefer indentured servitude.” Darren replied with a shudder, and this time when Tony laughed it was genuine.

~*~*~

“Tony I figured it out!”

Harley barely slowed down as he darted into the Avengers living room toward the couch where Tony sat, in the middle of snarking through a Star Trek rerun with the rest of the team. Even Coulson had found a minute for a breather, and Clint was curled up contently in the man’s lap. At the sight of the boy and his still timid looking mother following behind him he had the grace to shift a bit so his position was a little bit less intimate.

“You figure out how you’re going to replace the controller you broke yet Minion?” the tom called out. Clint’s pet names for the kid included minion, Igorling, and mini-me. All not that clever (in Tony’s opinion) pokes at how the kid followed Tony around, because Clint was a giant child. Which of course meant the two got on well. Harley spared a moment to turn his head and stick out his tongue at the tom.

“What? No way. You broke it. Steve was there! He saw.”

From his chair, without taking his eyes away from the screen Steve nodded.

“You yanked it and it flew.”
“Ha! Told you.” Harley crowed even as Clint was crying lies, but the kit was having none of it. “Captain America doesn’t lie. Right Tony? You said he was fundamentally incapable of lies and that he was delightfully paradoxical.”

Tony had to fight a blush as the kit stumbled over the words. Steve’s eyebrows arched as the kid blathered on.

“I didn’t know what that meant but I looked it up on the tablet you gave me, and it means sometimes that his values create contradictions. Like why is it okay to swear at home but not on the comm lines? And why does he still let women and fels walk through a door first when he almost punched that guy outside Planned Parenthood? Well I figured it out!”

“Did you?” Steve asked dryly as Harley waved his StarkPad emphatically in Tony’s face until the older fel grabbed it and took a look at what was on screen. Which turned out to be a complicated looking hand drawn graph that he must have uploaded. Tony was going to have to teach him how to use a Smartsheet.

“Yes. Everybody jokes about how you’re an old man, but that’s not true. Mom says life experience is what makes somebody old not age. She helped me figure out the variables see, here’s major events, good choices, oh and bad ones.” Harley eagerly pointed out the different bars on the graph while Tony fought to keep a straight face, nodding along seriously as Steve’s cheeks pinkened.

“I started with your physical age Cap, and deducted about fifteen years because it was cool, but mom says volunteering for that experiment was pretty stupid and she’ll kill me if I ever do anything like that. So that made you about five.”

Clint outright cackled at that, and Tony had to cough into his hand to avoid joining him. Even Coulson was battling a smile as Steve just shrugged, that slow barely there smile of his appearing once more as the kid steamrolled on.

“But then you crashed that plane into the artic which was pretty awesome, so you actually got ahead for a little bit, and then like a bajillion years passed and you should have gotten one point for each of those years but you were asleep so you missed them. And, this is the good part Tony look, the first thing he did when he woke up was join the Avengers and fight those aliens.” Harley looked over at Steve but didn’t seem to notice how stiff the atmosphere had gotten or the way the captain’s smile had faded.

“That’s important because everything that made you you was gone and you didn’t have any time to miss your friends or to figure anything out. I mean what if America had been taken over by Nazi’s or something while you were asleep? How would you even know you weren’t being used? And you were, right? Because it was really unfair when you think about it. Kind of like they knew you’d say yes so they asked, even though you’d already served your time and probably just needed to go home and rest. So that’s why more and more paradoxes are popping up; because the old you can’t exist anymore but you’re not allowed to rest and find the new you. You’re like, Captain America forever now, all the time, and that’s like huge because according to my math you’re just going to keep losing points and hit the bottom of the - ”

“Harley!” Jena Keener hissed, seeing that nobody else was going to halt this train wreck, and placed a hand over the kid’s mouth, muffling the end of his sentence as she drew him back, apologizing profusely with nervous glances between the captain and Tony. Tony rose from his chair with a meaningful glance at Bruce who quickly followed.

“I see you worked hard on this Kiddo and it’s good, very in depth. A plus. But I need to have a talk with your mom and you have a lesson with Bruce.”
Harley was young but he was far from an idiot. He’d picked up now on the tension in the room, his shoulders hunching defensively as he realized he’d done something wrong. He shifted uncomfortably on his feet, ears flattening as he made himself smaller.

“What? What did I say?”

“It’s good work kid,” Tony assured, scratching between the boy’s ears. “But just a thought, it’s probably a little embarrassing for the captain being psychoanalyzed in front of everybody. I know it’s easy to get excited about new ideas but you’ve gotta consider people’s feelings too.”

“Oh.” Now Harley looked embarrassed as he sought the captain’s eye, posture full of apology. “Sorry Steve.”

“It’s fine,” Rogers immediately returned, though anyone could see it wasn’t.

Yeah, better all-around to get this wagon train moving.

“Alright, short-round.” Tony clapped a hand on the kids back. “I gotta talk to mom and you’ve got a lesson with Bruce. No more stalling. Hop to.”

Lab time was enough to perk Harley up and get him chattering again as he followed Bruce out (thank fuck) and Tony took that opportunity to exit with Jena who apologized again for the incident as soon as they were in the hall.

“Harley’s always been so smart, but the only thing that works faster than that head of his is his mouth I’m afraid.” Jena remarked, tucking a strand of her dark hair behind one ear nervously. Tony held back a flinch. He’d heard that sort of thing said often, about himself, and never with fondness.

“He’s a good kid.” He stated simply, keeping his pace slow as they meandered in the general direction of the elevator. Jena nodded and silence descended. She was young for a mother of a ten-year-old boy, and showing all the signs of being over tired and over worked. Her clothes probably hadn’t been new in years and hung off her in a way that suggested she’d lost weight since they’d been bought. There were stress lines appearing prematurely on her face and her hair didn’t look like it hadn’t seen anything but a five-dollar cut in years. She couldn’t have looked farther from him, but it was hard for Tony not to imagine his father standing in her shoes making excuses to his friends for Tony’s big mouth.

“Thank you again, for letting us stay here and for well... everything. It must be a burden.”

“It’s not a problem. That’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about.” Tony withdrew the thin bundle of folded documents from the pocket of his suit jacket and placed them in the young woman’s hands. “It’s the deed to the condo you’re staying in. I’d like you and Harley to stay there, indefinitely.”

“Indefinitely?” Jena’s voice lilted upward toward shocked. “I thought it was just till the house was renovated?”

Yeah, about that.

“The renovations on your mother’s house will be finished in a couple of days and if you really want to go back to Pit Stop Tennessee to wait tables, you’re welcome to. If that’s what you want you can sell the condo. It’s a million dollar residence so do me a favor and put that money to good use and move out mom’s house.” Tony squared with her.

Jena, bristled at the clipped tone and bit the edge of one pale lip nervously. Tony sort of felt bad
about it until, crossing her arms over her jacket, the woman halted to turn to him and say, “I’m a waitress Mr. Stark not a child. I’m a single mother. A college drop out. A social outcast. Do you think Harley or I ever dreamed we could live in a place like this? Or that someone would offer to pay his exam fees? I did the best I could, homeschooling him. He’s so intelligent… but I never would have been able to pay the fees for those tests. If he can go to school he’ll have a much better life than I ever could have given him. Don’t think I don’t know that. I may just be an overprotective mom but I can’t figure out why you’re doing any of this.”

“Maybe it was better than the alternative.” Tony shot back coolly, hands remaining in his pockets so she didn’t see the way they fisted. He couldn’t help but bristle at the implication in her tone, like he was only paying attention to Harley because there was something in it for him. As if anyone could have walked away knowing the kid’s situation.

“You mean leaving Harley with my mother.” Jena stated evenly, Tony would give her this, she had grit but that just made him angrier truth be told. Because where was that grit when it had mattered?

“It’s not really my business, but yeah, leaving your kid with an abuser.” Tony sniffed, turning to pin her with a frank stare. “I’d ask if you knew how she was treating him but we already know the answer to that.”

“I don’t have to justify myself to you. But I couldn’t even if I wanted to.” Jena wilted, and Tony blinked in surprise as the fight leaked out of her so suddenly. Silence descended heavily as she twisted her hands, and Tony didn’t know if she was searching for words or for an exit. After a long moment, she looked up again, blinking back the threat of tears.

“I wasn’t prepared to be a mother. One minute you’re having a forbidden romance and you think you can take on the world, the next you’re staring at a pair of pink lines as your whole world comes crashing in. Daddy’s family always kept kats, horses too back in the day. That’s how they made their money. In the hey-day they were some real prize winners. We were the talk of the county.” Jena’s eyes danced with a hint of self-depreciating humor but Tony found it hard to join in on the joke, having been on the other side of that curtain.

“But things went south during the recession and Daddy had to sell a lot. The one thing he couldn’t sell was his prize kitten and her kit, and after his mother died well I guess Scotty just felt like he couldn’t abandon Daddy. So we stayed. My mother was furious when she found out I was pregnant with Scotty. She accused him of forcing me. But it wasn’t force and I made sure Daddy knew that, but Daddy… I don’t think he would have believed that anyway. He was disappointed, but he never treated Harley poorly… even when all the neighbors talked and called us the worst names. He loved my son.”

Jena took a shuddering breath and squared her shoulders, eyes leveling with his in determination.

“I know my father died with a broken heart Mr. Stark. Not because his daughter was a deviant, but because at the end I think he realized that his grandson was never going to have a real life and that we all helped in our way to make that possible. I don’t know if you know what it’s like to watch your parent die, begging you for forgiveness… making you promise not to lose your child, but Daddy was so afraid that Harley would be hurt one day. I’ve lived with that fear since the moment I decided to keep him and you might think I was a coward, towing to my mother’s line, but I’ve looked outside my window Stark. I know what can happen to Harley and I couldn’t risk losing him. Not for anything.”

Turning away from him Jena jabbed the button to call for the elevator and Tony swallowed, thinking over what she’d said. He didn’t know if he’d ever be in a position not to resent the woman who could let her child suffer neglect and abuse, but those were demons he faced every time he looked
into his own past and thought of his own poor mother.

Of course he understood how little power she’d had, just as he could see how powerless Jena Keener had felt in her own way; but he couldn’t forget that however she had felt, Jena had always had more power over her life and the fate of her son than Tony’s mother ever could have hoped to have, just by virtue of her birth.

But beating the point to death wasn’t why he’d asked her there or even something he was interested in really. He didn’t think Jena Keener was a bad person, or even a bad mother. He truly believed she’d done the best job she’d known how to do; but that was it wasn’t it? Jena Keener couldn’t know the struggles that Harley had ahead him and she couldn’t path the way for him the way that Tony and the Avengers could.

“Look, Jena…” Tony began with a small sigh, letting out his pent-up frustrations to try and start again. It was important to him, he realized, to make sure that Harley wasn’t left behind. Especially if Tony wasn’t there to see it all come to life. “Harley’s ready to take his exam and he’s going to blow these guys away. I guarantee it. You have a great kid, with a real brain on him, and New York has some of the best schools in the country and when he’s ready for college I can get him into a good program, the right program, with teachers who aren’t going to harass or side-line him because he’s not like the other kids. I’m offering him a chance here, a chance to be more than he thinks he can be right now. More than anyone has ever told him he could be.”

A soft ding interrupted the moment and the elevator doors opened silently. For a moment both of them just stared at the open doors, not speaking. Finally, Jena answered in a soft tired sounding voice.

“I’ll think about it. I promise I will. Is that all Mr. Stark?”

“Tony.” He replied slowly. “My friend’s call me Tony and yeah that’s it. Just know you and Harley are welcoming up here. Anytime.”

Jena smiled slowly, tucking the deed to the condo into her purse as she stepped into the elevator that would take her back down to her floor.

“Thank you Tony. But you’re wrong, about Harley.” She began, placing a hand on the door to hold if from closing. “Someone told him a long time ago he could be more. He’s wanted to be Iron man since he was seven.”

With a small wave Jena released the door and Tony watched as they closed behind her.

Chapter End Notes

HAPPY NEW YEAR!!! Thank you so much for all the comments and well wishes. I was so blow away by them. *hugs all around* I can't thank you enough for investing in this crazy little world. Thank you for your continued support and inspiration.

So this chapter didn't have a lot of Thor in it because Tony had some important pieces to push into motion but next up : It's Christmas and since Tony's fairly certain it's his last he just wants to spend it in peace, but Harley wants to build a snowman and the villains seem to be doing Holiday overtime. Catman keeps showing up and the only one more depressed than Tony this Christmas might actually be Steve. Turns out that 'Yule time' is
a pretty big deal for a certain thunder god and none of it will do. If ever Tony thought Thor was more brawn than brain, well he'd stand corrected.
To the old man sitting on the throne. You probably shouldn't have been so mean.

Chapter Summary

The countdown to Christmas has begun with Tony no closer to finding a formula that works and the team still in the dark about just how dangerous Extremis really is. Things are heating up between Tony and the captain (and not in the sexy way Tony might prefer) and Thor is determined not to repeat past mistakes (or let his friends repeat them either).

Chapter Notes

Happy Sunday!

Somebody asked in a comment on one of the chapters about the titles. Yes, it was lyrics from Hasley's Castle (as is this one). I take the titles from song lyrics and pieces of poetry that speak to what I feel is a major theme or element in that chapter. Because I'm a dweeb like that :) Aaaand if you haven't figured out, Castle in particular is like Tony's theme song for this fic. Pretty sure my roommate thinks I'm organizing some sort of revolution by how often I'm playing that song and furiously typing on my computer.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There were many things about Midgardians that Thor appreciated. They were small creatures, with lives that lasted the span of a rain drop, but for all that, he’d never met a species who could cram so much passion (and so much misery) in a single lifetime.

Those who lived long tended to take their time about things, and perhaps it was because of that, that his kinfolk and those who populated the nine realms grew so recalcitrant toward change. The cycles of life and death were unending (even for so-called gods). Whether you experienced them in a few short decades or ages upon ages, death waited for everyone in one form or another and the road there held the same scenery for all. The rising of kingdoms and the falling of them. Battles upon battles for the sake of greed and love in turns.

Once Thor had lived for the revelry of warfare, for the presumed glory of foes vanquished. He knew better now, and had lost much in the learning. Yes, much indeed, but, he had his Jane and the Midgardians who had sheltered him in a time of great weakness for companionship and comfort. For that was the true point of it all, what even his father Odin in all his wisdom sometimes forgot in the passing of ages.

These bonds they made with their beating hearts. They were more precious than any sacred gem to be found in all the realms, and they should be protected and cherished as such. There was no time for that like the Feast of Months that followed the Great Hunt for celebrating with your brethren. Thor had always done so with style and reckless abandonment but always, Loki had been there to watch over him and on his most favorite (and the most legendary) of occasions, to join in.
He was unerringly proud of their Midgardian friends of old who had taken up the tradition for themselves, their Yuletide a charming (if tame) imitation of the Asgardian customs. Though there was not enough beer involved and a shocking shortage of Giant Boars to be hunted, the Midgardian goose was not unpleasant fare. Thor was sure Loki would have enjoyed the bird garnished in a wild berry sauce that Jane’s assistant Darcy (who was a surprisingly deft hand in the kitchen) had prepared for the Midgardian Feast of Thanks.

Thinking of his brother never failed to ignite a hollow ache in Thor’s chest, the throb of a wound unhealed, but it would have done them both dishonor not to think of him at Yuletide, so it was not a pain without some sweetness. He hoped that Loki would relent some of his bitterness and allow their mother to visit him in his cell. If he would but show a little remorse, Mother could perhaps convince their father to allow him to join the festivities.

For a moment Thor let himself imagine it and found himself smiling. He could so clearly Loki’s aloof expression (so practiced) the grumpy bite to his words as he expressed his resentment at being forced to play the properly chastised youngling, not unlike an irritated cat kneading claws into the upholstery, because even in defeat Loki was never truly defeated. He was too patient for that, too quick and clever and mercurial in thoughts that always carried him miles ahead of the rest of their peers. Too resilient.

Loki would never admit it but he was twice as stubborn as Thor, and though Thor loved Loki all the more for it, he feared that it meant it might be very long before the wounds they had inflicted upon each other could heal and the distance between them breached. More years than his Midgardian friends would ever see, but he had faith the day would come (always).

Until then.

“Thor, what the hell is going on?”

At the sound of Tony’s interruption Thor smiled, glad that there were still some rewards in life he could count on enjoying more immediately. He suspected that Good JARVIS, Tony’s faithful artificial friend, had had a hand in Tony’s sudden appearance there. JARVIS was what Darcy would call a fretful wart, though without a body Thor wasn’t sure where she drew such a comparison. Nevertheless, the computer did worry and Thor was not above a little manipulation in the name of friendship.

“Ah! Friend Tony,” he greeted the smaller man as he turned, the boy Harley wobbling somewhat precariously from his perch on Thor’s wide shoulders. “You have come up from your forge. Young Harley and I are decorating for Yuletide. Though there is a sore lack of proper decorations to be had.”

“JARVIS says you have boxes in storage at a mansion but we couldn’t go there so Thor brought some of his.” Harley offered helpfully. He was helping Thor to line the hall in fresh garland made of weaved evergreen.

Once another section was pinned carefully in place he stuck out his hand expectantly for one of the little carved wooden ornaments from the large chest at Thor’s feet, laughing as Thor stooped (carefully) nearly unseating him. Thor had a sure grip on the child, but JARVIS of course worried.

“It’s as I said Sir. An accident waiting happen.”

“I can see that.” Tony sighed, glancing around at the area of the hall that they’d finished which was dripping in evergreen and sparkling tinsel, but Tony’s eyes were narrowed on the ornaments hanging heavily from the bows, their polished surfaces gleaming under the lights. “Mind explaining why the
hell there are goats all over my tower?"

Thor sniffed, a trickle of irritation winding through him. Typical Midgardian. The ornaments were little characters of the volstags that pulled Thor’s chariot back home, carved by Asgard’s finest woodsmith and they were treasures. The actual beasts had been a much-beloved gift from Loki when they were just old enough to start adventuring away from home and which made their likeness all the more precious.

“These are mighty volstag. Very fierce and noble creatures Tony. How your Midgardian historians confused them for goats I do not know.” Thor shook his head sadly, inwardly amused at the perplexed way that Tony continued to stare around the hall at the walls decked in evergreen, tinsel, and a delightful assortment of ornaments that included Thor’s, and the handmade ones Harley had spent the afternoon constructing out of old popsicle sticks and pipe cleaning devices.

“Okay.” Tony was pinching the bridge of his nose now and Thor wondered if he was staving off another headache. Their man of iron was suffering them more than usual and the circles around his eyes did not suggest that he was sleeping well. His struggle with the foreign virus in his system was ongoing, the toll it was taking on his body becoming more and more obvious. Thor was not the only one who worried about his condition.

Tony was waving his hand expansively as he reiterated, “but what are they doing all over my tower? And why are there six dozen empty boxes of popsicles in the living room?”

“Thor helped me make the ornaments.” Harley offered. “Mom taught me how to make a sled once, but I figured out how to make other stuff too. This is a manger for the Christmas goats.”

“Volstags.” Thor corrected the boy with a jiggle, frowning with a censure he did not truly feel that made the kit on his shoulders giggle. “If you offend them, they may not bestow any gifts upon you.”

“Did you know about the volstags Tony? Thor says that on Asgard they’re like this big,” the boy raised a hand above his head to indicate their towering height.

“And they have horns on top of their head that can crush armor! And he says they’re magical, like unicorns, and that if you leave food for one and it comes to your house it will grant your wishes; but they usually only show themselves at Christmas.”

“Aye, volstag are particularly fond of mistletoe berries and chilled evergreen needles.” Thor added, grinning as Tony’s expression got more and more finished (as Jane liked to put it). “Here on Midgard there is no time a year for them like Yule.”

“Have you thought about how Santa is going to get in here when there is a giant hairy goat eating the walls?” Tony asked, archly and laughter rumbled in Thor's chest.

“They will not be eating the walls but the garnishing, and they are not all that hairy compared to other beasts. They are very slender, beautiful, creatures with pelts as white as snow and long red beards.” he corrected him once more, because really the comparison between the two just couldn’t be made, and Tony’s expression was well worth it.

“And I’m too old to believe in Santa Clause Tony get real.” Harley rolled his eyes from atop his perch and Tony scoffed rudely in response.

“Oh but a bearded Christmas goat is not out of the realm of possibility?”

“Thor’s real.” Harley answered with a shrug. “I’ve already made like a dozen wishes. You need to hang up one or it won’t know what to leave you.”
“Thanks but I’ll pass.”

“Is there nothing you want this Christmas Tony?” Thor asked gently and something flashed through Tony’s eyes. It was quick, almost mercurial, a fleeting glimpse of deep yearning leaching into a bleak resignation.

“Don’t think my wish is something that will fit under the tree Big Guy.”

Ah, Thor nodded slowly. He understood the nature of such wishes. He hung his ornaments this year with the same wish in his heart as the last, and he would continue to do so until fate saw fit to grant it. Loki might be lost to him for many more years to come, but Tony was not lost. Not yet.

The little man of iron did not like the comparison, for an understandable reason, but the similarities between him and Loki provided Thor with bitter sweet comfort. He did not mind the bitter parts, for life was naturally bitter and sweet in turns and you could not fully appreciate one without the other. Though it came with painful reminders, he enjoyed spending time with his Midgardian friend.

He appreciated Tony's sly, sometimes dark humor, his silver tongue, and sometimes duplicitous strategy in warfare.

While Thor had never had his brothers gifts when it came to subterfuge he'd never resented or feared them the way that some had. Wars were not won with brute strength or numbers alone. It took a marriage between minds like his and minds like Loki's (like Tony's).

That was why together they had been so strong.

Thor had spent many years wrapped up in himself, blind to the wounds his brother had kept buried. Too self-interested to even entertain the thought of digging or interceding in a slowly developing disaster.

He would not make the same mistake with his new friends.

Firstly, something must be done about this virus. Secondly, something must be done to balance the team. The Pride would fail if its two key components remained at such volatile odds.

A Pride was built around a marriage of many minds yes, but it was not without a center, and if the core was weak, then the body would be weak.

"I see." Thor murmured thoughtfully in answer to Tony's statement. "Then we must find a bigger tree. We shall cut down the largest we can find in the nine realms and have a gathering the likes of which would put my younger self to shame!"

"You mean like a Christmas party?" Harley's eyes opened wide in excitement. He clutched on tightly to Thor as his vigors nod threatened the eager kit's seat once more, turning to pin those round gleaming eyes on Tony as he pleaded, "Can we? Just like in the movies. I've never been allowed to go to a Christmas party."

And that, Thor knew, was the end of any protest that Tony might have offered.

He was a good man, their Tony.

~*~*~

Half the problem was - Tony thought as he was hit with an energy beam and slammed against the nearest surface, armor against steel screeching violently as he scraped against rooftop – that Tony
and Steve had never managed to have that talk.

In Tony's defense, he's had a lot on his plate what with dying again and trying to fix everything so that his people are taken care of if he croaks before he's ready. And Tony was so not ready to die, but it wasn't like fate ever bothered asking him when it came knocking.

So yeah, not a lot of time for heart to hearts with Cap, even though he'd been meaning to after that bit of embarrassment with Harley (because ouch) and even Tony recognized that some form of check-in was in order after an incident like that. You know, just to make sure the kid's data was wrong. Because if Steve was suffering some form of post trauma fueled depression, it was the decent thing to inquire, and if Tony didn't it was going to come down on his head.

Everybody look at the failed experiment that got Captain America killed, or some variant of the same. Wasn't he supposed to be their Queen? How could he let something like this happen? Figures.

And yeah, okay, when he was willing to be honest with himself about it, it wasn't just because it was decent, or because it was expected. He might care a little bit. If only because Steve was a human being. Okay fine. There might be the tiniest bit of Tony that still remembered being very small running around in Cap footies. And even if the man failed to live up to all his dreams and said dreams died a fiery death when he realized that if Howard could have erased Tony's filling and colored him in with all that made Steve, Steve , he would have before Tony drew his first breath, Steve still doesn't deserve the shit hand he's been dealt or to go it alone in a crowd.

The other half of the problem was super villains don't take holiday.

The Holiday season seemed to bring out the worst in people, including the local population of crazies. Tony wished the worst thing he had to deal with was a crazed Manhattanite at a door buster sale, but with A.I.M. fallen and SHIELD tearing their ranks apart, it's been nothing but midnight facility raids and daytime retaliatory style hiss-fits for the last week and a half.

They weren't the worst battles that Tony had ever been part of but they were time-consuming, aggravating and dangerous in his current condition.

So after that last one when Tony got a little hot under the collar (literally) and almost blew his own hands off firing one of those strange electro energy pulses out his palms, still in armor mind you, he'd thought that maybe Natasha had a point about becoming a liability.

Because yeah, Tony totally would have been burnt toast if their friendly stray Catman hadn't shown up to distract the baddy long enough for Tony to get airborne and deal with the fact that there was a supernova building in his chest, he'd just blown through his gauntlets, and his hands had looked like butcher meat.

Yeah not good.

So Tony, like a good genius, had done something about it, working in his lab without sleep until the solution had finally presented itself (in the form of Thor playing some silly game with DUMMY) because sitting on the bench wasn't an option; but Steve had tried to take him off the roster anyway.

They'd been in the middle of fighting about it actually when another alert had gone out.

With everyone running low and an extra wait estimated for SHIELD backup Steve had begrudgingly relented, but warned Tony to stick to aerial support and hang back.

But screw that. Tony was ready to deal with these A.I.M. losers once and for all.
As it turned out, A.I.M. had another trick up its sleeve. Because now that Killian is dead some quack calling itself (Tony didn't think the giant head with toothpick legs is really a person anymore, if it ever was one) M.O.D.O.K appears to be running things and the guy packed a punch.

"Iron Man! Status?" Steve's voice snapped over the comm, tense with fury and worry and no clear winner between the two.

"Still kicking Cap," Tony groaned as he got to his feet. The previously peaceful stretch of Manhattan that M.O.D.O.K and his cronies had attacked was a mess. The villains didn't seem to have much of a goal in mind besides making as much damage as possible in as short amount of time as possible, firing canon guns and energy beams into anything standing in their way as they carved their way through the streets.

M.O.D.O.K was at the center of it all, giving orders, directing the yellow suited A.I.M. insurgents with cackling glee from atop his hover chair like some twisted version of Santa Clause, as he flew between buildings.

Observing the flow of the battle, Tony was sure he was the key. Take off the head and the body will follow.

M.O.D.O.K.'s fragile little body was heavily armored however and thus very well protected. But Tony had a few surprises left up his own sleeves yet.

"You need to slow your heart rate down." Natasha's warning was devoid of all emotion in tone but her concern wrapped around Tony through their bond almost in spite of how professional her mask was.

"I said do not engage Stark!" Cap growled like a broken record. "He's got something that interferes with our tech-"

"Yeah, I noticed." Tony cut him off, engaging thrusters once more and wincing as they sparked and sputtered ominously.

"Sir," JARVIS projected the reports on the HUD display with a hint of worry. "Agent Romanov is correct. Your current BPM is 190, and your body temperature is at 102 degrees and climbing. It would be wise to cease your current activity."

And then because JARVIS knew Tony better than that, he continued, "Armor integrity levels currently reside at sixty percent, however there is a some sort of magnetic interference. I believe it is a result of the hit from the energy beam. You may be in some trouble."

Great, Tony thought. But what else was new.

"Thanks J. Any sign of our favorite guest?"

"I've been scanning Sir, there was a small blip a few moments ago but it is difficult to say whether or not it was an error caused by the hit that compromised the suit."

"Natasha can you cover Tony?" Somewhere on the ground Steve was barking into the com as Tony nodded, thoughts racing as sweat trickled down his brow and into his eyes.

"I've got trapped civilians in a crashed bus and six heavily armed insurgents. Clint?" Natasha reported and Tony heard the sound of rapid gunfire followed by a low hiss of pain which he felt faintly echo across their bond before Natasha had the wherewithal to put up a wall. They were both getting better at them. It wasn't comfortable blocking each other out but for focus' sake it was
sometimes necessary.

"Negative." Clint's response was breathy and strained. "Got chased into a bit of a tight spot. I could use a pick up myself."

"Thor, get to Ironman and get him off the damn field! I'm headed to you Clint." Steve snapped as he hurled his shield, Tony could see him moving below, almost as much of a blur as the vibranium disc that sliced neatly through a line of A.I.M. soldiers. The shield sang when it moved, as if it was paying homage to the beautiful display of power and competency that was Steve Rogers in motion.

And okay, he and Steve weren't on the best footing, but the whole package was like his kryptonite (a sexy guy who knew what he was about and an even sexier deadly weapon comprised of one of earths most rare elements) so he would have enjoyed watching Rogers kick ass down there if not for the way he just literally ordered one of their teammates to carry him off like a disobedient child (or worse, some helpless damsel) when Tony can see very well that Steve won't make it to Clint in time and he's pretty sure he's the only one who has figured out how to beat these assholes.

"No! Thor, cover Clint." Tony snapped out in reply as he worked his way to the edge of the roof, mind calculating distances as his eyes tracked the motion below. Any moment now M.O.D.O.K. was going to pass below him. "I'm gonna get M.O.D.O.K."

He needed to get airborne, and if the suit was compromised he'd just have to improvise.

He reached inside the suits controls with barely a thought. With a series of clicks and groans the suit locked into place like a knight standing guard, plates parting like doors to let Tony step through, clad in the skin tight under armor he'd developed for the sentry capable suit.

"Sir, you have engaged the suits sentry mode!" JARVIS noted in alarm even as Steve shouted.

"Stark, are you nuts?! Get back in the suit! Thor!"

"Aye Captian, I hear you. I am -"

"On your way to help Clint." Tony interjected forcefully, because he could hear Clint's panting as he struggled to hold his ground in the corner he'd been backed into and screw Cap and his need to control everything but they didn't have time for this shit. "Do it right now!"

Tony didn't think about it as he ran for the edge of the roof. His focus was on M.O.D.O.K streaking ever closer on that hover chair of his, and the narrowing window of opportunity he had. He shoved years of experience as a CEO, fighting every form of prejudice imaginable, into that single command, and then he leaped, thinking all the while about blips on the radar.

"Sir!"

"Tony!" Natasha and JARVIS' voices seemed to melt into one panicked cry as he plummeted, but the jump had been necessary because he was too open on that roof and he'd seen how wide a range M.O.D.O.K.'s energy beam had.

And Tony knew that as soon as he opened up his mind and wrested control of the technology powering the little creeps hover chair and wrangled it to a stop, that those white eyes in that fat head were going to turn to him in rage and he wouldn't have time to attempt to get control of whatever was powering that fancy headband before it shot at him.

So Tony was already falling by the time that M.O.D.O.K.'s energy beam blasted through the top of a building and sent heavy debris hurling after Tony's falling form.
There wasn't anything Tony could do about it except pray not to get struck so he completely ignored the pieces of New York real estate falling around him and the screaming coming from below as he kept a firm grasp of control on the hover chair and spread his palms wide.

"How! How are you doing this? Release me!" M.O.D.O.K. was screeching as he streaked past, and Tony praying that his lab work would pay off, gathered that hot pulsing energy in the center of his chest and cast it toward his palms.

For one moment the light surrounding Tony's hands pulsed so bright that he was blinded and then the energy building there pulsed and shot forward, pushing Tony every faster towards the waiting ground with the force of the emission; but in that moment he could only feel a brilliant sort of elation.

It worked. It burned almost as bad as if he'd taken a blow torch to the center of his palms but it did work.

The nananorobots had done their job, reinforcing his tissue, building a bridge for that electromagnetic energy to travel down and conducting the wave to two single exit points.

He no longer needed the armor in order to open fire at his enemies. He was the weapon now. As Tony's heart pounded in near manic elation some mad part of him had the thought that the only thing better would be if he could become the armor too. Then he'd be... well then he'd well and truly be Ironman wouldn't he? The cocoon finally left in his wake. The metamorphosis he'd started in a cave long ago in the desert sand finally complete.

He is Ironman.

'If you force me to watch you splatter on the pavement Kotyonok I'm going to kill you. Ironman or not.' Natasha's voice hissed through his scattered panicked thoughts and Tony laughed out loud, smoke and rubble and windows and terrified faces rushing by him.

You might think he should be more concerned about his imminent death but there were two reasons that Tony was okay with this.

One, he just shot energy beams out of his fucking hands, so not bad for a single lifetime.

Two, JARVIS noticed a blip and Tony trusted the math; he'd run the numbers and knew the probabilities.

Sure enough there's the unmistakable sound of the mechanical humming of an approaching aircraft and a few scant feet before he was about to become a pancake, a black, winged, creature swooped in like a bird of prey and hooked him around his middle to snatch him up like a fish out of water, one sure hand cradling his neck to prevent this whole thing from ending with a broken neck.

As relief flooded through him Tony's startled shout turned into a feverish laugh and he whooped out loud as they banked hard, skimming along the roofs of abandoned cars in the street at breakneck speed until suddenly they were pulling up, Catman's giant silver wings flaring outward with tips glowing a dazzling electric blue.

Oh wow. Tony had no idea who makes the guy's gear, because he thought he had the market cornered on wing packs what with the little beauties he'd created for the F.A.L.C.O.N. project, but these things out classed his baby birds ten to nothing.

And normally he'd be all sorts of angsty and competitive about that, but he was about to be a splatter on the concrete a second ago so he was kind of in love with them instead; he resolved himself to finding whoever was behind their design and send them a fruit basket. Not to mention offering them
loads of money to come work for SI.

"Are you often suicidal Mr. Stark?" Even with the heavy modulation from his mask Catman's tone was chastising. It was probably just his imagination but Tony thought he could feel the man quivering against his chest, locked as tightly to it as he was, as if the guy's nerves hadn't quit jumping yet.

The guy's tail, having a mind of it's own like most, was trying to curl tightly around Tony's legs like an extra arm, the metal barbs catching on the thin material of his under suit.

Tony giggled gleefully, still high on the thrill of being alive and the dizzying spike of adrenaline that had accompanied the whole ordeal.

"I heard you were in the area again and decided to drop in."

A muffled groan eked out of his rescuers (non visible) mouth.

"That was awful. Even for you Stark."

Tony laughed the whole way to the ground. He was laughing significantly less when Natasha got her hands on him awhile later.

The battle had died down, the A.I.M agents seeming to lose the will to fight as soon as Tony had blown their fearless leader sky high like someone had flipped a switch (one of them was even blathering about mind control).

Catman had touched them down in the middle of the throng of SHIELD agents in the midst of arresting A.I.M agents and helping with the clean up effort currently being conducted by local police and the Red Cross.

Natasha who had been kneeling beside a dirt streaked and blood stained Clint had crooked her finger imperiously in his direction and Catman had wordlessly pushed Tony into the woman's dangerous hands. Which she'd dragged all over him, muttering what he was sure were curses in low angry sounding Russian as she examined all of his injuries down to the smallest cut. Frankly, it was a bit stifling and he was very eager to get a chance to interrogate Catman before he pulled his Houdini act again.

"You. Don't go anywhere." Tony tried to warn the black costumed vigilante even as he tried to wiggle out of Natasha's grip. "I'm fine, Natasha really!"

He went still when her claws jabbed into his tender skin in silent warning.

"Just let her do it." Clint had advised him with a tired shrug, wincing in discomfort at the motion. Despite having her back to him Natasha seemed to know.

"Don't think I'm finished with you either Barton. I see the way you're moving that arm."

But Clint wasn't looking at either of them anymore, his gaze fixed somewhere in the crowd as he tensed, muttering lowly.

"Incoming."

"Stark!" A sharp forceful voice barked, and Tony stiffened, ears going erect and hair-raising as the air clouded thickly with the unmistakable scent of pissed off tom about to lose his shit.
Next to him Catman had gone perfectly still.

Tony turned slowly as Steve, battered and blood-stained marched toward him, Thor not far behind.

If you’ve ever had a pissed off Captain America coming toward you like a long black train then you know exactly how hard it was for Tony to stand there doing his best to look unbothered. He’d never seen Steve look this furious, even when they’d been pushed into all but duking it out on the Hellicarrier by the tesseract.

"What the hell was that!"

Tony bristled, the burning edge of Steve's fight wreaking havoc on his senses. There was the one part of him that wanted to curl up small and appease, to soothe and gentle the volatile forces surging within Steve because he was fel and he was good for this, good for bringing a tom back from the edge; but no dice. Because he's not just some fel, who is going to tuck his tail in and mewl every time a tom gets angry at him.

He's Tony fucking Stark, Queen of Pride Avengers. It's stamped on the fucking paperwork and everything and yeah, maybe he wasn't so keen on it before but now that he is, they're going to learn what that means. Every last one of them. They're going to regret the day they ever thought of handing him their broken crown. They don't know it but he's going to crush their empire and build his own from their bones.

"That? That was me vanquishing our foe, as Thor would put it." Tony responded with a sharp smile that he swore made Steve see red.

"Is this a game to you Tony?! You know how unstable that damned virus is and yet you just put countless lives at risk, especially yours!" Steve pressed closer, lips curling in snarl as he got in Tony's face. "You had no right to challenge my orders!"

"I have every right." Tony snapped viciously, stepping equally close, hands curled tightly into fists. "Did you forget what we're all doing here Captain? This is the Avengers Pride isn't it? Pretty sure I read the label and it named me Queen."

"You think that's what it's about? Doing whatever you feel like doing when you feel like doing it and ignoring us when you can't be bothered? We've been trying to bond with you for months Tony and it's you who has kept everybody at arms length!" Steve accused and Tony, proving once again he was incapable of growing a filter laughed dismissively in his face.

"Really? Because I bonded with Natasha without much of a problem. Maybe because she's not such a self-righteous asshole."

Natasha closed her eyes and sighed in the sudden heavy silence that followed.

"What? When?" Clint was the first to demand looking shocked and slightly hurt, likely that he hadn't been told before now.

"The night Tony was abducted." Natasha explained slowly. "I thought the virus was going to kill him. It must have fixed whatever was blocking his reach before because I felt him reach for my mind."

"And you let him have it." Steve summarized almost tonelessly but there was something in his eyes, something deep and almost stricken, but it was quickly hidden away behind a stony stare.

"Yes." Natasha replied simply without guilt or shame and Tony could have kissed her.
"So what does this mean? Are we like official now?" Clint asked, hope creeping into his voice as his gaze bounced wildly between the three of them. "Are we all going to bond?"

"It's in Tony's hands." Steve responded flatly. "But frankly, knowing how you and Natasha are connected what you did today... it's even worse. Did you think of her at all? What it was going to be like for her watching you fall!"

"You forget to whom you speak." A low growl ripped out of Catman's throat and Steve's heated blue eyes flew to him with barely checked rage.

"Actually I have no idea who I'm speaking to right now. Just a guy in a costume with some fancy gadgets who likes to show up late. Thank you for your help, but stay out of this."

"If I may, Captain," Thor interjected before Tony could finish taking the breath to retort. Tony was staring daggers so intently into Steve's blue eyes that it took him a moment to register that Thor was even speaking.

"When I agreed to align myself with the Avengers Pride it was with the understanding that Mr. Stark had been named Queen. I was also given to understand that as he has no mate, you were appointed Captain until such a time as your title is made permanent by a mating bond.

"You are a worthy Captain, and a warrior of distinction Friend Steven. I am honored to fight beside you and under your command; but Anthony is Queen. It is a truth we must recognize. You most of all, if you are to have a successful union."

It was like watching someone slash the air from his tires, the way that the color slowly drained from Steve's face as he stood before Thor who stood before them both in his princely alien armor, his tone more grave and sure than any of them had ever heard it.

Steve... Steve just swallowed thickly, before turning and stomping off, as if someone had shouted 'get thee from my sight', and the look on his face was so lost (so haunted) Tony didn't have it in him to enjoy a second of what he knew was a necessary victory. And even if he could have been that much of a cold hearted bastard there was always the looming prospect of Coulson and Fury to deal with. The debriefing was going to be a shit show.

Without warning, low urgent whispers of warning entered Tony's mind and he knew somehow that the strangely familiar voice belonged to the tom standing beside him in the cat costume (wicked wingpak addition).

"It is good for a Queen to take control, Ayeba. But do not forget that your true power is your people. How they are strong is where you will be strong. How they are hurt is where you will be hurt. Your captain is bond-bleeding. If the wound is not cauterized it will eventually cost him his mind."

"What?" Tony turned to gape at the man in alarm, only for him to take so suddenly to the air that his wind blew back the hair on top of Tony's head. Damn it! One of these days he was going to pin that guy down by his tail and get some answers out of him!

"I will see you soon, Ayeba." The tom called down to him before soaring away, and Tony tried not to pout that he didn't even get a chance to inspect those gorgeous wings to see what kind of metal they were made out of.

"That's not my name!" Tony shouted back.

"It's not a name."
Tony tore his eyes away from the quickly disappearing figure of the tom to stare at Thor, one eyebrow inching upward.

"I do not know the specific language, but the AllSpeak allows me to understand all that is spoken to me, and for me to speak to all in return." Thor explained before returning his eyes to the dot in the distance that was their strange new (almost) friend. "What he calls you is difficult to express in your English, but it is not a name but an endearment. It means Queen in my heart."

Silence reigned supreme again while Tony mulled over that particular piece of interesting fuckery and Thor smiled down at him like he'd won something.

"Okay, now what the hell does that mean?" Clint asked once more, throwing his hands up in exasperation.

"It means he's a flirt." Natasha answered deadpan, but Tony got the feeling she believed it and that she disapproved.

Well, the guy was a literal unknown whose motives were up in the air, with highly advanced tech that screamed that whatever his agenda he was no one to cross.

That was probably good enough reason for Natasha to get scowly and start flexing her claws.

Tony was less concerned with the flirting (because people flirted and it didn't always mean anything, he's the prime example) and more concerned with figuring out who the guy was and what he wanted, because that little bombshell he'd dropped about Steve. That did not sound anywhere near good.

"Great. Merry Christmas to me." Tony grumbled and Thor looked at him, brow furrowing deeply.

"You do not sound pleased."

"Christmas isn't Tony's favorite time of year. Can't say it's my favorite either," Clint explained with a groan as Natasha did something with his wounded shoulder (presumably something good, though it was hard to tell by Clint's miserable expression). "All that focus on families you'll never have and those sappy commercials of happy couples getting kits in baskets with red bows under their trees, completely glossing over the fact that some fel out there is never going to see her kid again and that happy couple is probably going to get tired of a crying baby in a week and ship the kid off to the Center for Unclaimed's in a cardboard box."

"Aye, I have observed this." Thor answered with a very somber expression. "This year I think should be different."

"Different?" Natasha asked warily, pausing to look between him and Tony as Tony heaved a heavy sigh.

"Thor and Harley are planning a Christmas party."

"Sounds fun." Clint decided after a small beat.

"Sounds like expensive property damage." Natasha countered with a small smile and Thor threw back his head and laughed.

God help them, everyone.
Chapter End Notes

So there was originally a scene between Tony and Thor in his workshop that I cut, because while entertaining and informative, that same information will be covered again in the next chapter and it was very different in tone from the other two portions in this one, making the chapter longer than it needed to be. But if you'd like to read fun times in the lab with Bruce, Tony, Thor and Tony's robots I can always post it as a separate piece.

I hope you enjoyed this and thank all of those who have taken the time to share their thoughts with me. It has been so encouraging. All my love. -T

Next up: Fury is pissed but has news from Wakanda, Thor takes the Avengers on a trip, and Tony and Steve finally have that talk.
Drinks in the dark before the dawn.

Chapter Summary

The birth of a Pride Part 1, otherwise known as Tony lets SHIELD know the score and is determined to find a way to survive Extremis with help from his friends, just in time for the wedding.

Chapter Notes

Hi there, so after further developing the "trip to Asgard" portion of the plot I need to split this portion into two chapters. Which just means more story for you in the long run. I'm so sorry I haven't responded to comments yet. Work life is picking up and I'm using my spare moments to keep up with writing. Thank you for leaving them. They're great fuel for a hectic week. next week is shaping up to be just as busy but once more into the breech!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Thor's companions had been given rooms near his in the north tower of the citadel, where they could look out over the great city and the plains of Íðavöllr beyond it.

He had not been as keen on stars in his youth as his brother, but Thor had often joined Loki on the roof of the turret to provide him company. He'd seen how often alone Loki was, even amongst their many friends and admirers. One could not call themselves a Prince of Asgard without acquiring a constant stream of hangers on, but with hindsight it was easy to see all the ways in which Loki had been subtly ostracized and made to feel the difference of his birth.

Of late, when he was home Thor found himself going to the top of the tower once they sky had darkened. There was a comfort in being under the stars of their youth, and a perhaps silly part of Thor that knew that down in his cell Loki would be casting his illusions and was further comforted by the thought, that even if Loki refused to see him they could still stand under the same stars.

But that night when he made his way to the rooftop he was surprised to find the secluded little spot already occupied.

The captain was standing next to the roof edge, staring not up at the stars or even out over their great city.

His eyes were blank and dull with undisguised pain, staring into a great nothing. Thor took a step toward him, mouth opening instinctively to reach or to call out, but then he hesitated.

To understand why he turned away and did what he did next, we will have to go back.

~*Three days earlier *~
"Why was Stark even allowed out on the field?!!" Fury decried from his usual seat at the head of the table. "He was a known liability. The last thing the world needs is to watch Tony Stark splatter his guts all over Manhattan!"

As Tony had feared, the team had been dragged before old one-eyed wonder before the ink had dried on their medical discharge papers, and the lecturing and posturing had commenced without so much as a hello upon their entry.

"Thanks for the concern, it's touching how much you care." Tony sneered and Fury gave a derisive snort.

"I don't. You want to get yourself killed, fine. One less pain in my ass. But you can't do it on my watch. I'm not answering for why your stupid ass fell off a building."

"He didn't fall, he jumped. Most heroically I might add." Thor amended and the look Fury threw him could have curdled milk.

"Somebody explain this idiocy to me. Start talking now!"

"If I may, Director Fury?" Coulson spoke up before any of the others could, which was probably for the best all things considered. "Captain Rogers did bring his concerns to me regarding Tony's declining condition."

That was news to Tony but hardly a surprise. Still, there was all sorts of bite in his voice as he laughed and muttered, "Of course he did."

"I'm team captain Tony. It's my job to -"

"Run and tattle? Well you're ace at it."

"I don't know if that's fair Tony," Bruce interjected hesitantly, clearly wary of stepping into the argument, but he was quickly backed by Natasha who sounded bored with the whole thing but unflinchingly certain.

"It's not. And it's not about picking sides."

Tony who had opened his mouth to accuse her of just that, faltered.

"Natasha is right, this is about you taking risks Tony that you shouldn't take and bucking the chain of command." Steve decided and Tony could have rolled his eyes right out of his head.

"Oh is that what this is about? Cause I thought this was about you and your need to be in control, but sure we can talk about me. We've kind of been there, done it a lot, but hey, talking about me never gets old."

"Stark! Shut up." Fury barked. "Coulson, if you were kept up to date on his condition why was he cleared for duty?"

"The Captain insisted that Stark was still fit for battle and assured me that if there reached a point where he felt that was no longer true that Stark would be benched until such a time as a cure for the virus could be found." Coulson answered in his usual calm way but Tony turned and blinked at him as if he'd stood up and shouted.
Steve had been fighting to keep him off the bench this entire time? Huh.

Well then why the hell was he always threatening to bench him? Talk about mixed signals.

"So it was your call." Fury rounded on Steve in a way that suggested he'd found someone to blame and that's all he cared about, and Tony bristled but Steve wasn't exactly a wilting flower. He met Fury's hard stare with one of his own and answered with a stubborn set to his jaw.

"I assessed Tony when the alert went out and found him battle fit. I regulated him to aerial support and civilian rescue. I stand by that call. I'm not happy with his choices, but it should be remembered that without him we may not have won that fight, and certainly not with fewer lives lost."

"Aye, it was Tony who figured out that MORDORK was the center of the hive and that disabling him would halt the battle and -" Thor halted as next to him Clint snickered, only to try and cover the sound with an unconvincing cough. Glancing around at all the twitching faces he raised an eyebrow in confusion. "What have I said that is so humorous?"

"It's M.O.D.O.K buddy, MORDORK is just something I say because he was an idiot." Tony waved away the explanation and tried to get them back on point as Fury heaved an aggravated sigh.

"Why is it always you at the center of trouble Tony?"

"Maybe I'm just popular?" Tony replied in a bored tone, examining his nails with a lazy flick of his tail. Fury was going to have to get some way better material if he was hoping to get a rise out of Tony this time.

Standing a few feet to his left, Roger's made a derisive sound and shook his head muttering lowly, "everything's a joke."

"Funny things usually are, we've covered this material Captain," Tony sneered in reply.

"And what exactly about putting yourself and others at risk is so funny to you?" Steve demanded to know.

Tony rolled his eyes and ignored the question to ask. "Remind me, what are we doing here?"

Fury let his fist thud against the desk and snapped.

"Don't get cute Stark. If you think I'm about to let you threaten the integrity of this operation, you better think again real hard. You are not the only Queen out there. As of this moment you're off the team, only to be reinstated once either myself or Coulson has cleared you for duty. That clear?"

Tony laughed. Ignoring Fury entirely he turned to Steve and that frustrated expression of his, underlayed with that token earnestness that Tony found ten times more frustrating than Steve would likely ever understand (the one that said he wanted to understand, he wanted to help, if only Tony would be more reasonable) and jerked his head toward Fury.

"That's the funny bit. I'll tell you what we're doing here Rogers, but first, do you want to know how they sold me on this gig to begin with?" Tony continued on before Steve could answer. "They sent Clint in to get my measure. You know, figure out what my pressure points were, what made me tick. But knowing Cyclops here, he already had a fair idea where to start because it's obvious he did the reading."

"Agent Barton was sent in purely to observe." Fury started for what sounded like the hundredth time and Tony held up a finger to halt him, pushing forward with barely a pause for breath. He couldn't
"He sends me something broken knowing that I won't be able to resist trying to fix it, he knows me and he knows more about my biological imperative than I even do at that point, and he's banking on the fact that once Clint is in here," Tony tapped his chest emphatically, "that I won't be able to walk away from what they're selling. And he's right. I take the bait, even when I know there's a hook.

"They say we are here to right the wrongs of the past and to protect the future. They call it Pride and they say it's a chance at freedom, a chance to break away from a system that has all but destroyed us, and all we have to do is be willing to fight the battles we were already fighting; but here's the thing you gotta remember about a deal that seems too good to be true Cap. It is. Every time."

Steve looked shocked as Tony spat out the words with vehemence, keeping unusually silent as Tony rose from his chair to jab his finger in Fury's direction.

"He doesn't want a Queen, he wants a puppet because they're not building us a Pride. They're trying to build themselves an army. Maybe you can't see the difference, or maybe it's just not personal enough for it to matter to you, but it matters to me. It matters to them!" Tony gestured to Bruce, Clint and Natasha who were sitting silently, watching the confrontation intently with no small amount of tension.

Tony unhooked his sunglasses from where they hung on his shirt collar and placed them back on as he prepared to make his exit, because this was all he had to say and he wasn't sticking around for more when he was finished.

"I have no idea what drove you to sign up for this gig Rogers. Maybe you just want to support a good cause or maybe you just want to defend the delusion of American moral superiority, whatever, it's your prerogative. Mine is to fight for Gata." He finished with finality. There wouldn't be any mistake from now on about what his intentions were, and if Fury or Steve failed to take him seriously and get the hell out of his way that was their own problem.

Smiling cheerfully Tony swaggered past him on his way toward the door, clapping a hand on Fury's shoulder along the way despite the frankly dangerous nature of his scowl.

"So yeah, I'll figure out how to stabilize my little condition but think again about knocking on my door the next time you need me. Because if you're looking for a figurehead who you can prop up while you develop more and more creative ways to exploit us, then you're going to have to find another sucker. But I think we both know that I'm the one you want most." Tony fluttered his eyelashes at Fury who looked at him in a way that suggested he wouldn't mind choking him and Tony laughed once more before continuing toward the door.

"Wait a minute Stark! We are not done here! You walk out that door and I'll consider it your permanent resignation from the Initiative." Tony heard Fury's chair topple behind him but he didn't let it phase him, didn't show any weakness, only turning his head enough to blow the man a kiss.

"Oh I want you, I need you oh Baby I do, but a guy needs a breather every now and again. Even I can't get fucked all the time."

Tony let the door shut behind him with a snap and only then did he let himself release a slow shaky breath.

He'd done it now. But that had been the plan, he reminded himself. He'd been terrified of taking this step when he'd been obsessing over the future in his lab designing his idea of Pride, but that little display of temper from Fury had gone a long way towards confirming his suspicions.
Whatever else he might threaten, Fury needed Tony more than he was letting on.

Which was great. Good. When he was willing to play ball (and of course he would be) he knew where to find Tony.

~*~Two Days Later~*~

"Queen Anthony. I desire an audience with you." Thor all but bellowed as he entered the lab, deftly avoiding stepping on Dummy as the robot let out an excited stream of beeps and rolled off of his charging station, making a beeline for the Asgardian Prince with pinchers open.

Just like the last time Thor had journeyed down here for a word with him he was carrying a tall steaming mug, and just like last time Dummy seemed to take his presence there and the offering as some sort of threat to Tony's safety.

Which was hilarious considering that Dummy's smoothie making abilities would have killed Tony long ago if not for careful vigilance from JARVIS.

"Ah, I see our small friend is still irate with me." Thor chuckled, easily stepping over the robot with his long legs, narrowly avoiding a vicious pinch from his pinchers as Tony, who was over by his workstation looked up from his work just long enough to snap his fingers in a scolding fashion at the bot.

"Hey, don't be a brat. You don't own a monopoly on bringing me beverages. He's just jealous." Tony explained apologetically to Thor as Dummy wilted with a sad sounding beep. "Quit the crocodile tears. You know you were wrong. Back to your station."

With a spin of his wheels that screamed huffiness the bot begrudgingly complied, gears whirring just loud enough to make his feelings on the matter known.

"He is a valiant protector." Thor looked fondly after the bot and Tony smiled. "As I said before, would that you had many such as he and I would not so often fear for your safety."

Thor had said exactly that during his last visit, while playing keep away from Dummy's pinchers. The seemingly simple comment had sparked an idea in Tony's thoughts, something he was convinced was the key to solving his issues with Extremis.

The virus had not only revitalized the damaged and underperforming portions of his body, it had unlocked many of the dark areas that the human brain (Catus or otherwise) did not use in the first place. The effects on the brain had been different with each of the test subjects the virus had been used on, with many developing strange "super powers" across a wide spectrum.

They'd not been able to discern a pattern, but Tony was skeptical that it was purely coincidence his brain just so happened to turn into some kind of living computer.

Well, a higher grade of one anyway.

It wasn't exactly popular in any school of thought but Tony had long held to the thought that human beings were basically computers anyway. Not the almost laughably simple systems they've managed to invent in copy, but nevertheless advanced computing systems.
Though people didn't like to think of themselves as machines for some (stupid) reason, the truth was they just were. The human brain was made up of highly orchestrated sets of fundamental building blocks, computational primitives for constructing sequences - sequences which when experienced in constant repeat built what they understood to be life.

The brain utilized a unique blend of serial as well as parallel processes to perform those sequences, the complexities of which were only augmented by the transmission and transformation of signals from the amygdala (the emotional center of the brain).

Sure, they weren't machines but even the most mysterious and erratic piece of themselves, their oh so sacred emotional center, could be boiled down to a series of functions (of inputs and outputs and coded responses).

God, people had no idea how simple it all was.

Tony had been able to create the worlds first true artificial Intelligence because he'd never been afraid of the code, of finding out that there was nothing at the bottom of the well but numbers and more numbers. Why fear it? It wasn't like boiling things down to the math made them less powerful, strange or beautiful. It's not like it stripped them of mystery, because god knew compared to even the most advanced computer system human bodies were still a universe barely tapped into.

Just look at JARVIS. He was living, and growing more every day, and Tony was more than aware of how dangerously (tantalizingly) close he'd come to creating something (someone) whose programming mirrored his own, performing functions one would have to call a form of feeling and thinking, begging the question of when does simple mechanics become something more (something sentient).

He was always tempted to push further with JARVIS (to touch the bright center of the sun and report back to the people watching below what it felt like) but he'd read his Mary Shelly. He could no more bring himself to carelessly create a being with his mind than he could his body, because once life was given he'd always be responsible for it.

There was little place in the world for a child of his body right now, and perhaps even less so for whatever JARVIS would become if they broke that final barrier. Maybe one day they would, because Tony's brain was so much better connected now, so much faster and more efficient than it had ever been, and he saw the way now.

But none of that would come if Tony couldn't figure out a way for his body to keep up.

The most common effect on the brain after being injected with the virus was a ninety percent success rate at recoding the center of the brain responsible for healing.

From what he and Bruce could figure, Tony's brain was sending out new commands, for new processes that his body was struggling to comply with, the way a company might flag under a management change. Simply put Tony's new Extremis wired brain expected too much too quickly and there was no way for the rest of him to keep up.

His body was trying, which was why he had such a strong craving for fish all the time now. Bruce had figured out just how much energy his body was putting into self-management every day to figure out the kind of nutritional intake he'd need to sustain that kind of performance and the results spoke for themselves.

Tony now needed three times the daily nutrition recommended for an adult male of his species, heavy on those amino acids, or else his body was going to break itself down all the quicker (and
they’d all seen what that looked like).

But Thor had made him consider another possibility. If Tony’s body couldn’t meet the new demands on its own, then it could use a hand, or maybe a couple thousand little helping hands.

The research into nanorobotics was so young it didn’t even have its milk teeth, but hey, no time like the present to revolutionize medical science. The answer was so obvious Tony was upset it hadn’t occurred to him before now. The successful creation of a nano-sized machine that could pluck, pick and place atoms on a molecular level, able to pull apart any kind of material atom by atom, and use those atoms to re-construct anything (even armor); that was the answer to more than just Tony’s problem. It was the answer to a great many problems for mankind.

Medical science was definitely not Tony’s expertise, and Bruce kept reminding him he wasn’t that kid of doctor either, but Tony always kept at least one spoon in the pot. As soon as the idea had taken root he’d called in a favor from an old friend, who’d been happy to share the work she’d been doing and critique theirs in order to fill in the gaps in their knowledge.

Since Fury’s ultimatum Tony, Bruce, and Helen had been working non stop to take the basic design for a bot that Tony had initially rigged together to help Tony safely expel the energy build up from Extremis and make their code more complex.

Extremis, recognizing them as foreign bodies, destroyed them almost as fast as they could create them so if this was to be a viable long term solution, the bots would need to be able to self duplicate.

So not light work, by any means. Helen had passed out on the couch sometime early morning with Bruce (the white ear twitching as she slept while her black one remained curiously still) but Tony had used the sleep break to keep working on another little project he had going.

"What's up Buttercup?" Tony looked now at Thor as he continued his work, hands flying across the console in front of him.

"I have been thinking long on your work." The Asgardian began, sliding the mug of warm milk Tony's way, which he snatched up gratefully as Thor continued. "If your tiny robot friends can truly do all that you say, then I believe that is the answer to your worries."

"The code is not the part I'm worried about. The code I'll figure out, it's their damn bodies that are causing the trouble."

Thor arched an inquisitive brow and Tony sighed.

"They're janky as shit. Building robots this small is... harder than I'd expected. They either break down on their own, or Extremis forces them to. Also the silicone isn't biodegradable so I keep flushing them out like toxins which means spending more time on the pot than I'd like."

"Can you not use something other than silicone?" Thor asked and Tony shrugged.

"Sure in theory, but it's about what is easiest to manipulate on a nano scale, what isn't going to trigger the attack of white blood cells while also not poisoning my body. If there's another material on earth it's not coming to mind."

For some reason this made Thor's mouth split open into a broad grin.

"Then we are in agreement. It would be best if you accepted my mother's invitation to the wedding."

"Come again?" Tony gaped at him, because he couldn't have heard that right.
MiKall, one of the kits that my mother fostered in Valhalla. She is to be married and many celebrations to be held. When I told my mother I could not attend I was forced to also tell her of your predicament. It was her suggestion that the Avengers attend the feast as well, as honored guests. Thor explained in a quick fashion that Tony suspected was meant to make him feel less nervous about the prospect of venturing off planet to dine with actual gods.

He must have seen the coming refusal in Tony's expression because Thor's tone got very somber and cajoling.

"I assure you that the Bifröst is quite safe. And my mother tells me that Bastet is to be in attendance. She is the mother of your line Tony and a Queen like you. She will know much that may benefit your efforts here to form a Pride as well as your research."

Tony closed his mouth, unable to come up with a proper response for that because, crazy as it was to even consider, Thor was right. There was so much about the Alurio that had gotten lost, that might never be recovered but this Bastet, she'd been there at the beginning. The extent of what she could tell him was invaluable, but Tony was struck suddenly with a bitter feeling that after several seconds of thought he finally placed as abandonment.

Thinking about her as some sort of abstract myth had been one thing. Thinking about her as a flesh and blood being, a mother, who had given life to his species and then left, was entirely another.

But fuck it, Tony swallowed past the lump in his throat, he was a grown ass man. She was nobody to him. He owed it to himself and the others to get what information he could out of her. He wasn't going to start mewling and crying over the ancient past.

Tony opened his mouth again to speak when a shrill beeping filled the lab. Tony's eyes flew to the wide screen in the center of the lab where JARVIS had been helping with the other part of his side project. The screen was flashing big red letters: SIGNAL LOST

Sucking in a breath Tony pushed past Thor with a curse.

"JARVIS! What’s happening?"

"I’m sorry Sir,” JARVIS said regretfully as the words continued to flash. “It appears we suddenly lost contact with the unit."

Tony watched as JARVIS attempted to restart the device, the screen blinking through the seconds as they waited in anticipation for it to connect to the tracking device he’d slipped it onto Catman’s suit during the fall when the tom was sure to be nice and distracted by keeping them both alive.

Look, Tony was a great multi-tasker, and he was all for having an extra helping hand around on the battlefield but it was about time they ended this game.

There was nothing right about the whole scenario. Really, there was so much not right about Catman’s whole deal that the very lack of SHIELD response told Tony they already were involved in some way, up to their eyebrows, and that if he wanted answers he better go digging.

That part had been easy. Tony could, thanks to Extremis, literally crack open SHIELD in his sleep if he wanted to- but sadly, going through all of SHIELD's files had provided little information.

There were plenty of agents with thin files deployed on suspiciously vague missions. But none of them were Gata and the ones deployed close enough to do a few side gigs weren’t feral.

Tony was sure of a few things: Catman was a highly trained, expensively outfitted and one hundred
percent feral operative. No, Tony hadn’t been able to smell him through that suit of his but he was
certain just the same, and before anybody accuses him of thinking with his hormones, it should be
remembered that he watched the guy slice up his ex-boyfriend in under thirty seconds. Domesticated
the guy is not.

So given that there was a feral tom running around outfitted with foreign tech, making minced salad
out of Tony's enemies, you’d think there would at least be a wanted poster stuck somewhere; but
here they are in America, land of "the domesticated kat is a happy kat", and there are nothing but
crickets from SHIELD and strangely none of the press has so much as printed a word about the guy.

Tony knows an under cover gig when he sees one and he doesn't need JARVIS to bring up the
visual map of the guy's activity to know that. The guy's tech is too advanced not to be funded by
someone very rich and very powerful, but if his backers aren't SHIELD that leaves only a few, far
less friendly options.

"I am unable to reestablish connection, there is something blocking me." JARVIAS sounded a bit
peeved about that and Tony almost smiled. He was sure that JARVIS like him, was used to being the
biggest fish in the pond. Running up against systems beyond their scope was definitely out of their
ordinary.

"That's alright J, thanks for trying. We knew he'd catch onto us sooner or later. Show me what we
got before we lost contact."

JARVIS replaced the blinking screen with a detailed map showing the guys movements over the last
forty-eight hours and Tony didn't know whether he wanted to curse or laugh.

The first day's movements had no clear pattern or significance, except that when looked at from an
aerial view the route reads: Hello Tony.

The following day is a telephone number. And that decides it.

Tony started laughing. Okay, one point Catman, zero Stark.

"JARVIS, hook us up." he prompted and JARVIS, sounding faintly amused himself responds almost
as quickly.

"Putting you through Sir."

"Make sure our walls are up. Safety first kiddo."

"I always practice safe hook ups, Sir."

Tony was still snickering when the call connected, a familiarly modulated voice greeting him
warmly.

"Hello Ayeba. I see you got my message."

"How did you know about the trace?" Tony asked, no beating around the bush; though he didn't
expect a straight answer so he was surprised when he got one.

"My suit absorbs energy. I could feel the vibrations when you placed it. That and you seemed more
willing than usual to let me hold you."

Ah, there was that teasing streak that Tony had been expecting. Not missing exactly, just expecting.
"I was falling to my death." He pointed out and Tony couldn't see the guy's face but he could hear the smile in his voice.

"If you had not wanted to be in my arms Stark I have no doubt you wouldn't have been there, and I am not vain enough to pretend you would have any other reason to want such a thing unless it was to uncover my identity. More is the pity."

"I admit to some curiosity about that." Tony allowed with a shrug, though the tom couldn't see him either. "Sorry to disappoint you Catguy. They were very nice arms, but I have this rule about not jumping into bed with undercover operatives. Especially ones from foreign governments."

Tony's words were met with gratifying silence and his mouth spread in a victorious grin. One point Stark. Though honestly, if the guy still excepted Tony to assume he was from around here he shouldn't have brought his toys to the party.

"Alright so listen up Lamb Chop. I don't know who you're working for, whether it's the KGB or friendlier waters, but frankly it doesn't make much difference to me. I don't like games when I don't know the rules and I don't play any when it comes to either my tech or my people. Right now you need to convince me you're not a threat to either."

"Or what?" The response had a curious ring to it but Tony didn't mind. You know the old saying about curiosity and cats.

"Or I find you and I end you." Tony promised. "Don't bet against me."

There was a long pause in which Tony could hear his own heart pounding unusually loudly in his ears and a faint sound on the other end of the line that might have been a purr but could also have been the hum of a machine before the tom responded.

"I don't make a habit of making foolish bets. You know that if it had been my goal to harm you or yours I could have done so already, many times."

"That's true." Tony allowed. "And it's the only reason I'm giving you the warning. Also just so you know I don't like it when the other kids have fancier toys than I do. Unless they share."

The voice on the other end of the line outright laughed, but it was neither villainous nor mocking. The sound of it was friendly, Tony would even go so far as to say genuine.

"Perhaps if you are very good, I'll consider it."

The guy did velvet tones really well. A plus. Tony was sure it made all the kittens knees go weak.

"Oh I could be very good for you," Tony purred in response, because he wasn't a novice over here and two could play at that game. And then with a dismissive click of his tongue he went on. "But, here's another freebie, I'm not all that patient. Waiting around has never really been my style. So I'm going to dig up all your secrets and figure out how to beat your tech by Tuesday."

"I'd be disappointed if you didn't try." the tom replied warmly. There was another moment of pause and then suddenly the man's voice had changed, all traces of warmth replaced by unflinching certainty. "My secrets are quite safe, even from you Mr. Stark. This time around you will just have to learn patience."

And just like that the line clicked dead and Tony stared at the ceiling in affront, as if it were responsible for his being hung up on.
A quiet feminine giggle reminded Tony of the fact that he had an audience. Helen had raised herself up on her side and Bruce's eyes were open, blinking sleepily at him. Thor too, was just staring at him in amusement and it made Tony feel itchy.

"What?" He snapped and Helen giggled again.

"That was some pretty heavy flirting," Bruce murmured, eyes tracking over him as if he were looking for clues to a riddle. "I'm so used to you just being you, I completely forgot what it looks like when you're actually interested."

"That?" Tony scoffed, though he felt a curious heat prickling in his cheeks. "That was nothing."

"Just be careful Mr. Stark." Helen ventured softly. "He sounds like a dangerous man."

He was. And all the more thrilling for it.

"He is dangerous." Tony reminded himself as well as the rest of the room. He'd witnessed multiple times just how dangerous. Helen had a point; he ought to check himself before he wrecked himself. "Which is why I'm going to figure out just who he is and how to deal with him."

"How?" Thor asked dubiously. "He knew you were watching him. You can not trust any of the information you gathered."

"Not quite true." Tony turned back to his console, instructing the program he'd been working on while Helen and Bruce had slept. "See I figured, once I got a close look at that knife, that his suit if made of a similar vibranium alloy could absorb energy like Cap's shield. I also figured for the fact that toms will be toms, and this one in particular likes playing with his food."

Tony pressed a button and without warning the lab was filled with the echoing sound of the conversation they'd just had.

"It's been recording him. Even if the tracking chip was destroyed shortly after it was planted I knew I could get him to talk to me before he disappeared again. Cute kitten like me, falling right into his arms? Of course he was going to talk. But I didn't get much and I was worried it wasn't going to be enough, so these additional soundbites are a gold mine. JARVIS and I have been working on a deconstruction device for modified sound bites." Tony explained waving a hand at the mess of his work station.

"His tech is good so it's going to take me a bit of effort, but I'd say within twenty-four hours I should have a clear data sample for JARVIS to run through the search. I should be able to find not just him but his closest living relative if they've ever used a cell phone or spoken near some other digital recording device. You know Uncle Sam records everything right? That's why I only ever use a phone I've made." Tony finished with a shrug.

Thor blinked at him for a moment and then started to laugh heartily and Tony's mouth split into a grin.

Stark two.

"That is very well played Tony, very well played."

"Would we call this checkmate?" Helen whispered in amusement to Bruce, loud enough for them all to hear.

"Only if it actually works." Bruce responded wryly with a fond smile. "It's just check. It's not
"checkmate till it's over."

"Aye." Thor agreed. "But I have complete faith in our friend Tony's ability to check his mate."

"See Bruce, I totally have this guy," Tony stuck his tongue out at Bruce. "And Thor we're not talking about literal mating. It's an expression from chess. It's a strategy game."

"Indeed." Thor agreed with the same beaming grin, and Tony narrowed his eyes at him because there was something suspiciously cheeky about it. Whatever. There would be time enough later to educate Thor on classic board games. Right now he had more than enough on his plate to handle.

"When is this wedding by the way?" Tony asked, before he could get lost in his work.

"Tonight. Hemdel should be opening the Bifröst shortly." came Thor's cheerful reply and Tony nearly fell over, turning so fast.

Bruce blinking in confusion and staring between the two of them asked, "What wedding?"

TBC

Chapter End Notes

As you may already have guessed the end of the Thor flavored chapters will carry us into Steve's playground which brings us to Stonyland!

Steve and Tony are going to usher us through the Winter Soldier arc, and then Tony and Bucky are going to dance us through Age of Ultron, and finally T'challa and Tony are going to take us through Civil War. I really like what I've planned for Pride Avengers and Tony's development as a Queen through those arcs and of course hope that you do to.

Fair warning: hearts are gonna get a bit messy here on out. No way around it. Expect many changes from canon. The only promise I make is that the Avengers Pride comes out strong on the other side, there's another wedding and somebody has a baby.

Coming soon: Birth of a Pride part 2, AKA the Avengers do Asgard and Tony and Steve reach an understanding. There are fireworks.
And I know it's true that visions are seldom all the seem, but if I know you... I know what you'll do.

Chapter Summary

Tony and the Avengers do Asgard and for a wedding it's not nearly as cheery as Tony thought it would be. There are dragons for one thing, and to even get an audience with Queen Bastet the Avengers have to prove themselves worthy. Tony's getting real sick of this bullshit. A glimpse into futures maybe and the unforgotten past leaves the team on shaky ground. They were all warned that visions are seldom all they seem but Tony's not giving up, and a surprising confession from Steve may just path the way toward a future he'd never dreamed possible.

This is how the Avengers Pride begins.

Chapter Notes

I am so sorry for the delay. Been super busy as well as stressed with everything going on right now and needed some time to regroup. But have a double sized chapter early for your patience! I needed the relaxation of writing so I finally got back to it. Stay encouraged friends.

Also be warned. Herin there be Winterwiddow, Stony & Stucky and massive amounts of foreshadowing because everybody's shit is about to get fucked up. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As soon as Tony's brain recognized that he was once more standing upon solid ground he collapsed to his knees and hurled as cold shivers seized his body.

Okay. So he may have misjudged his readiness to go through another portal in space, and as it turned out "bridge" was just a fancy name for portal in Thor speak. Note for self. He totally hated portals. Would not recommend.

He immediately felt Natasha surrounding him, soothing and steadying his breathing as his body immediately began to sync with hers, but Steve was standing closer and when the captain placed a steadying hand on Tony's back and knelt down like he was going to assist, Tony clamored hastily back to his feet.

Because the last thing he wanted to do in front of Captain America was have another fucking panic attack. Thanks but no thanks.

He was good. Solid. Thank God for Natasha because his heartrate had already slowed to match hers.

"Are you okay?" She asked only with her eyes, but with their bond she might as well have spoken.

"Yeah. Thanks... not my favorite way to travel."
“Tony are you alright?” Cap asked, unaware of the silent exchange, hand reaching toward him like he might gently grip his elbow and Tony shrugged out of range. He couldn’t handle being touched just then.

“Yeah Cap. Wasn’t prepared to ride the big coaster I guess.”

“Neither was I.” Bruce groaned and Tony thought he looked very green, but not at all for the usual reason.

“This was a bad idea.” Clint grumbled, and he didn’t look much better off. In fact, Thor was the only one who looked unruffled by traveling through the BiFrost. At some point during the physically taxing journey he’d traded his earth clothing for his Asgardian armor and was standing there looking well... mighty.

“Thor!” a feminine sounding voice called, pulling their attention to where a horned figure in golden armor was standing on a raised dais with what could only be one of the Kǫtrdýr.

So in all those little stories Thor had told them about the Kǫtrdýr, he had totally neglected to mention how short they were. Every time he’d shared anything about them he’d thrown the word mighty around enough to give Tony the impression that they must be similarly built to Asgardians, perhaps with more fur, but generally all around huge and intimidating.

But the woman who bounded over the railing of the platform she stood on was the shortest woman Tony had ever seen.

Okay so she wasn’t exactly a midget, but she was definitely under five feet tall because she didn’t quite reach Tony’s chin and he’d never been the tallest of individuals to begin with.

“Thor! You’re just in time.” The woman exclaimed as she threw herself into the blond’s arms in a single leap, achieving an impressive amount of air.

She looked a lot denser than Tony would have expected for a woman of her size, with solid bone structure. She was angular in a distinctly feline fashion was mostly naked except for the skin-tight armored suit she wore. The scales moved with the suppleness of leather but had a distinctly metallic sheen to them. Tony found himself fascinated by the small delicate looking scales and wondered if she’d let him examine them if he asked pretty please.

“I knew that you wouldn’t miss the hunt!” The woman was saying as Thor, grinning broadly, swung her in a wide circle as if she weighed no more than a pillow.

Tony and Steve had to duck to avoid the sythe-like blade at the end of the woman’s tail as it whipped over their heads. He couldn’t tell whether the blade was a natural part of her anatomy or a part of the battle suit she wore because the suit molded to her frame so seamlessly it might as well have been painted on.

Tony’s fingers literally itched to touch it and he had to bite back all the questions he had (what kind of metal was that, how did it work, what kind of alloy had that kind of flexibility without compromising integrity) because Pepper kept telling him it was rude to ask someone about their tech before you knew their name.

“I am ready as ever to prove my skill in the hunt little MiKall!” Thor was saying as he placed the woman, (who must have been the blushing bride) back on the ground, not before allowing her to nuzzle him with her fur covered face. The room filled with the loud sound of purring.

That was the other really big difference. Though she walked on two legs like they did, if she’d
approached them on all fours Tony might very well have mistaken MiKall for a large jungle cat. She was covered head to toe in fur. Her eyes were big and round, her pupils green and yellow and slit in the feline fashion. Her fingers were thick and heavily clawed and her feet shaped like paws.

Tony noted that she wore no shoes on them, but there were decorative gold rings snaking up her ankles. That along with the ears and the tail made it seem very much as if a lioness had learned to walk on two legs and wear clothes. Her silhouette reminded him distinctly of Catman Tony realized with a start.

The longer he stared at her the more sure Tony became that the Kǫtrðýr had to be the inspiration behind Catman’s costume, but it only opened up further mysteries. Like how the tom even knew they existed.

“Don’t annoy me Thor or this time I will take your head.” The woman hissed, the air thickening with the sweet notes of her affection to betray the lie in her warning. Tony wiggled his nose at the strong scent, noting to himself that these guys were liberal as fuck with their pheromones. The motion caught the woman’s attention and her eyes fixed on Tony and the other Avengers who were standing awkwardly behind Thor watching the reunion.

To their shock the woman’s mouth fell open, revealing sharply pointed teeth, and a loud chittering noise erupted from her throat.

Kind of like the sound his mother used to make when she’d been lulling him to sleep as a very small kit only much much louder, Tony thought, and he was so busy gapping at the woman wondering if he’d interpreted that sound right, that he didn’t even think to get out of the way in case it meant she was about to go on the attack; but Steve must have thought of it because he’d grabbed Tony by the arm and hauled him backward by the time the woman had leapt forward.

“I’m sorry.” The woman apologized profusely as Clint stepped in front of Tony with a docked arrow and Natasha had a gun leveled at where her heart should be (the jury was still out on that one).

“Peace friends. MiKall, is sometimes exuberant but she means no harm.” Thor assured them, placing a staying hand on Clint’s arm. The wary tom slowly lowered his bow but Tony noticed that he kept the arrow notched.

“It is only that I’ve never seen halflings before." MiKall explained. "I’ve heard of you but I never thought I’d get a chance to see you. Thor why did you not tell me you were bringing guests? They are such darlings. I am overcome.”

“Oh good.” Tony sagged in relief, glad this trip wasn’t going to end with them shooting the bride before they even got off the bridge. "We're a little overcome ourselves so I guess it's a party."

"Oh aren't you a funny little thing." The woman giggled in a distinctly patronizing fashion that Tony was very familiar with (and quickly annoyed by). "Of course your presence here will rile my mother-in-law, but all the better for that. You've made it just in time for the hunt!"

"Hunt?" Steve asked warily, eyes flicking to Thor in question and the prince nodded eagerly.

"Aye, it is a wedding tradition among the Kǫtrðýr to hunt for the Benu... it is like a type of bird, native of their homeworld Múspell. I believe our sorcerers have worked diligently to open up a window between our great forests and attract some of the beasts inside."

"All that trouble just for a bird?" Clint scoffed and MiKall's furred brow furrowed into a frown.

"Perhaps the AllSpeak has failed to translate you correctly. The Benu is no mere bird. They have the
ability to see beyond the folds of time, above and beyond ones self.” MiKall explained, a gleam of awe in her eyes. "Their psychic abilities make it hard to hunt them, for they are always warned when you are close and are likely to corrupt your mind in order to kill you with ease."

"Er... So, why hunt them then?” Clint asked what was on all their minds and MiKall's gay laughter returned.

"Because their meat is tasty and consuming their bone broth expands the mind temporarily. It allows the Pride to see what blessings or omens the new union may bring.”

“She doesn’t expect us to hunt these things does she?” Clint demanded, what some might consider rudely, but considering that Thor had brought them there with next to no preparation Tony considered it a fair enough question.

As much as he still believed getting a chance to meet the Ætrðýr was an opportunity he could not pass up, he had the growing feeling that nothing about this trip was going to be easy on them.

Worse, the sheepish way that Thor was looking at them all made him certain the answer to Clint’s question was yes.

Sure enough.

"Aye, my friend." The big blond nodded. "If you desire a place at the table a representative from your house must participate. And certainly, if you wish an audience with Queen Bastet you must prove your valor. It is the Ætrðýr way."

~&~

Their archer was not in a good mood, but Thor hoped that in time, surrounded by the beauty of Valhalla and with the excitement of the Hunt that he would forget his worries.

It had not surprised Thor that Clint had put up the heaviest amount of protest when Tony had invited the others to accompany them on their journey.

They had all suffered in their way from Loki’s actions, but it was Clint who had been made to turn against those he loved.

“You want to go off world? Just like that? No preparation and no plan, just hop into a wormhole and travel to another planet?!” Clint had demanded upon learning of Tony’s plans and Thor had resisted the urge to remind him that Asgard was not only his ally, but they had graciously lent their very prince to his cause; but he could see that there was more to Clint’s reaction than just anger at the presumed danger Tony was willing to put himself in (yet again).

Loki was imprisoned on Asgard and Thor did not imagine that Clint welcomed the prospect of being close to him, or that Clint was all that trustful of other Asgardians besides Thor himself.

All the better then, for it was better to build alliances than to hold grudges, and Midgard was a vulnerable place. More fragile than any of his young friends yet realized. They would need powerful friends in the future, Thor mused to himself as he watched them get suited up for the hunt.

MiKall hadn’t exaggerated when she’d claimed they’d arrived just in time. They’d barely had time to
board her Skiff and journey to the edge of the great wood where Thor’s parents and Queen Bastet were camped with all their guests, before the hunt was to begin.

Thor had been forced to attend more than a few weddings in his adolescence to pay honor to Asgards numerous allies, and thus had witnessed any number of strange traditions, but he enjoyed few of them as he enjoyed the Kǫtrdýr bonding ceremonies.

They were a warrior culture not unlike his own people and put a great deal of importance on the hunt.

Traditionally the Benu were hunted in teams led by queen-fels and their mates (symbolic of the way the entire pride functioned as well as practical in a fight against enemy like the Benu). An equal number of teams were selected between the Fel and the Tom who were to be bonded and a contest was made of it.

Whosoever caught the first and successfully brought it back to the waiting couple was given great honor by the Queen and was bestowed splendid gifts by the houses of the losing teams.

Furthermore, if one of the Fel’s hunting teams won, the members of her entire house received the seats of honor at the feast to be waited upon by the Tom’s house, and vice versa. Between the bride and groom, the one with the mightiest hunters sat upon the high chair and the other the low, to feed their mate their fill before they could begin eating themselves.

Generally these contests were undertaken with good humor and boasting, but it wouldn’t be a wedding without a brawl (or seven) and the competitive nature of the Kǫtrdýr was only bested perhaps by those of Asgardians. It was not uncommon for blood to be shed, or occasionally for a hunter to lose their life in pursuit of the powerful Benu. It should be a rousing evening indeed! It could only have been better if Loki were by his side once more, for once he had trusted no one at his back in a hunt so much as he.

“Well it’s the best I can do on such short notice Thor. You did not tell me you would be bringing your halflings with you.” RaTu (the sister Thor's mother had raised along with MiKall) tsked, the toms tail flicking as she looked over her handiwork.

RaTu had been placed in charge of managing the armory tent that had been set up for last minute repairs and emergencies just such as Thor’s arrival with unprepared guests.

The Asgardian armor she'd attempted to outfit his friends with was loose on Steve in places but some creative cinching and buckling made it do well enough, but Clint and Bruce were not fairing as well.

“How bad is it?” Bruce asked and Sif, who had followed them from the edge of camp to help, along with Fandral, laughed not unkindly in response.

“You remind me of a child, playing in his father’s armor.”

“Maybe we’d be better off using our own things?” Steve suggested, adjusting his loose breastplate. “I'm not sure I could throw my shield in this thing.”

“Why would you throw your shield?” Fandral asked with a shocked scoff. “While they are not so big as dragons, they still have powerful magic and are capable of breathing fire. You would be a fool to throw away your shield.”

“Our Captain has made a weapon of what others would only use for defense,” Thor explained grinning with excitement at Sif’s slightly disbelieving look. She would see soon enough. “I assure you he is quite formidable with that alone.”
"Dragons?" Tony looked up from the weapons table where he was unabashedly examining anything he could get his hands on. He was the only one of them who had been allowed to decline the offer to be suited up on account of already having his own armor.

Natasha, already outfitted in some of Sif's training gear, was beside him, similarly taking stock of the weaponry on display but for entirely different reasons. She didn't stop her work, but her ears lifted betraying her curiosity.

"Aye, many strange beasts dwell on Múspell. The fiercest of which are the fire giants - " Fandral's sentence was cut short however when RaTu batted him over the head with an annoyed swipe of her hand, a low growl rumbling in her throat.

"Ouch woman! Why must you always beat at me so?" Fandral whined and Sif smirked at him. Thor just laughed, for if Fandral had not figured out yet why their Shield Sister was always so sore with him then he never would. Kǫtrdýr had strange ways of showing their affection.

"The fire giants are not the fiercest creatures on Múspell." The little tom rebuked with an angry flick of her tail. "The Kǫtrdýr have lived there for ages and we are neither so big nor so heavily scaled."

"Well if we're hunting baby dragons I'm not going out there trussed up like an idiot. I'm good with just this." Clint grumbled, shrugging out of the armored plates and letting them clatter to the ground. RaTu watched him curiously as he reached for the bow he'd set on the long table beside him.

"And what will you do for cover if one of these things decides to breath fire at you?" Natasha asked pointedly, and the archer shrugged as if the thought did not cause him much worry.

"Duck."

"What about that armor you're wearing? Any more of those?" Tony suggested almost too causally and Thor laughed under his breath.

"The blood armor?" RaTu shook her head. "Nay, for it is a living part of us."

"Come again?" Tony questioned and Thor watched as RaTu came around the table to demonstrate, the engineer's eyes going wide as the dark shining metal that covered RaTu's arms slowly peeled away, absorbed back into her skin to reveal her fur covered flesh.

"How?" He immediately asked, because for Tony it would always be about how.

"It is old magic. The secret to its beginning lost, but each of us are born capable of wielding it. We spend many years teaching our kits and they can not be considered true adults until they have learned."

Observing the stunned expressions of Thor's teammates RaTu cocked her head at Tony, eyes narrowing. "Have you not successfully learned the art of bludweild? Thor led me to believe that you are a Queen, though you still smell as a child to me."

At her words Tony's smile went stiff.

"Must be one of those halfling things. Not currently capable of pulling my armor out of my bones, pretty sure I'd have noticed by now, but I've got a work around I'm kind of proud of."

"Ah yes, this iron armor you mentioned." RaTu blinked slowly at him. "While I am sure it is perfectly serviceable on Midgard, I really do doubt it will hold up against the combined weapons of Asgard and the Black City."
Thor grinned as Tony's smile got sharper.

"Well you've done it now." Steve muttered under his breath and Thor laughed.

Tony perhaps hadn't realized it yet, but since Extremis sometimes his eyes glowed like bright honey when he used a lot of energy. So even though he didn't say a word Thor knew what was coming and he watched with pleasure as the latest version of Tony's armor unfolded from the bracelets on his wrists and ankles, smooth as silk as the almost impossibly thin plates moved fluidly over his under armor and hardened into place with soft mechanical clicks.

He'd known that Tony was upgrading his armor since the battle with M.O.D.O.K. had damaged the mark he'd called the sentinel, but he was impressed by what he'd managed to accomplish in such a short amount of time.

This armor was smaller, sleeker, and closer fitting, which likely allowed for a greater range of motion and was the reason why for the first time that Thor could recall, the portion covering his head included the shape of his ears rather than sticking to the shape of the human head.

It struck Thor – struck them all really – seeing it for the first time, how suited up the differences between Tony and RaTu were far less noticeable.

The only thing that hadn't changed was the color scheme. As always it was painted brilliant shades of red and gold, and Thor wondered what RaTu and the others would think of it. He did not have to wait long.

Without warning the tom struck, whirling in a tight circle as her bladed tail lashed out in a movement that would have decapitated an unarmored foe and Thor's whole body clenched but he kept still, watching as Tony raised his arm to block the strike and the tent filled with the loud echo of metal striking metal.

"You crafted this?" RaTu asked, blinking slowly as her yellow eyes took in the scratched but otherwise intact plates as Tony lowered his defensive stance.

"Every last inch." he replied with a snap to his tone. "It's still in beta phase right now, cause when Thor said wedding I wasn't expecting to have to fight off a dragon, but I'd still bet it against anything you've got."

"He flies too. I noticed you don't." Clint remarked deceptively casually, but Thor couldn't fail to notice how his teammates had drawn together in protective half ring around Tony, like Queensgaard. Smiling to himself Thor strolled closer to Steve, which coincidently completed the arc. Sif raised a dark eyebrow at him.

RaTu noticed it as well but didn't comment, inclining her head in acknowledgement of the unspoken.

"You clothe yourself in the colors of the Benu and fly toward the sun. Perhaps the stories I've heard about halflings were not entirely true. " She mused to herself and noticing the confusion on their faces her lips split into a toothy smile.

"Aye, the Benu's wings are the colors of sun and fire. Some say the first was born at the creation of the world, in the mountains that spit fire into the sky; and that when it dies it is only to be born again from the ash. Surely you knew this?"

Thor very much doubted Tony had. He did not think the Benu had ever journeyed to Midgard but all things were possible.
But the comparison certainly made him view his young friend in a new light. He'd never thought anything of Tony's obsession with the colors before, but then again he was not Kǫtrðýr and the Benu was not a sacred symbol to him.

"...You mean like a phoenix?" Tony asked after a telling pause and Thor imagined him blinking at her behind the faceplate.

"Phoenix?" RaTu frowned at him, then looked to Thor for help. "Is this Halfling speech?"

"No. It's a Greek myth. A Midgardian-" Tony began to explain, only to give up partway through with a deep sigh of aggravation. "You know what. Just forget it. The Greeks ruined everything."

"I thought you said that was the Romans." Natasha pointed out, lips twitching toward a smile and Thor grinned.

Whatever comeback Tony would have made was not to be, for at that moment the horn sounded, signaling that the hunt was about to begin.

"Come friends, that is the signal for the hunt," Thor gestured for his teammates to follow as he turned toward the mouth of the tent.

~*~*~

There were nearly a hundred people gathered at the edge of the field facing an impressively creepy looking wood (lots of draping branches and mist) but there was no mistaking which one of the many Kǫtrðýr amongst the crowd was Bastet.

Two Asgardians (that Tony had to presume were Thor's parent's by the crowns and the giant staff the one eye'd king was holding all kingly) stood on the deck of a large hovercraft that to Tony resembled a viking longboat, but he knew better than to try and tell Thor that. Beside Odin and Frigga there was a slender fel, panther-like in appearance, wearing a surprisingly understated circulate crown.

What made her unmistakable as the Queen was the impressive collar around her throat, for while Tony could spot a few sporting the startling Egyptian looking fashion, hers was well... fit for a queen.

It was silver and blue, strung delicately with precious stones. It climbed up her throat and draped almost lovingly over her shoulders in glistening threads. It swept across the top of her bared breasts to flow just between them where a large shimmering stone sat in the center of her chest, appearing to hold the ornate collar and the shimmery fabric of her skirts together.

Much of her sides and her back were bare, and if Tony were more of a prude he'd point out that her breasts were a shift away from a wardrobe malfunction but he's not (and for the record, it should be noted the woman had nothing to be ashamed of in the breast department).

Oh and it should be mentioned that she had a bracelet full of actual teeth and claws. Like, body parts she'd clearly taken from somebody else.

"Remind me why we're doing this again?" Clint hissed under his breath as Thor led them up the gangplank but either it wasn't quiet enough or Kǫtrðýr hearing was even better than Gata's because four pairs of furred heads turned sharply toward them and suddenly there were four menacing looking tom's in full armor standing between them and the royals standing at the edge of the Skiff.

"Whoa," Tony grunted as he collided into Thor's back. "Who are these guys, and why don't they
"look happy to see us?"

"They are Queensguard," Thor answered even as Odin moved away from the edge with a frown of displeasure and called out to the guardsmen.

"Peace my friends. It is only my son, back from his travels."

But if Odin expected this to make some sort of difference he was sorely mistaken. One of the guard's (who heavily resembled a tiger in Tony's highly inexperienced eyes) gave Odin, the All-Father himself, a withering eye and growled, "he is in the company of halflings. They are not fit to approach our Queen."

"Excuse me?" Steve gaped incredulously, like he couldn't believe the audacity of what he was hearing. Truthfully neither could Tony but for vastly less annoying reasons. "We've come a very long way and she won't even speak to us?"

Tony snorted. Speak to them? The fel hadn't even turned to look at them, staring out over the throng of hunters preparing to go into the woods as if none of this was even happening.

The anger that had been quietly simmering within Tony since they'd arrived hiked up a notch. He could deal with being talked at like he was in nappies. That wasn't any different from the same old bullshit he got back home. But if this woman thought he'd come all this way just to be ignored she had another think coming. Because now that Tony had seen how their armor worked he knew they had the answers he was looking for. If he could just get a few samples he was sure he could figure out the rest from there.

"Queen Bastet," Thor called out, beseeching the woman's back. "My friends have indeed traveled very far to seek your wisdom. Surely on this merry occasion an exception can be made?"

The woman's tail swished lazily and at first it did not seem as if she would answer, and Tony wasn't the only one pissed off by that.

"Wait so we're good enough to spawn but not good enough to talk to, is that it?" Clint scoffed loudly in the woman's direction, only Tigger (Tony was calling him that from now on) really didn't like that because his gold eyes bugged out and a hair raising snarl ripped through the air.

"She would never! How dare you besmirch my lady's name!" He lunged forward with curved claws extended and Tony had only a split second to process before he'd jumped in front of Clint and knocked the guy over the edge of the Skiff with a repulsor blast.

A hearty cheer went up from the guests gathered below, because apparently watching someone get knocked on their ass was just considered good entertainment.

"Do not touch. These are mine." Tony growled just in case the other three got any ideas, and he didn't have to look to know that the others were armed and had taken up defensive stances behind him.

"This was a bad idea." Bruce muttered and Tony could hear him taking deep practiced breaths, fighting for calm.

And then a very pretty and very bored voice asked, "Is there a Queen among you?"

Thor did not waste time, pushing past the two muscled tom's who glared after him in order to approach the Queen who remained with her back to them but had her head turned toward her shoulder now.
"Milady," he greeted her with a short bow before rising to his full imposing height and gesturing proudly towards Tony and the others. "I present Queen Anthony Stark of Pride Avengers. They hail from the New City of York and they have come to pay honor to both our houses on the day of your son's marriage."

"And to seek a favor, I imagine." The woman purred dangerously, and Tony stepped forward. The guardsman hissed threateningly at him and he rolled his eyes, raising his hands in a gesture of surrender.

"Aye," Thor acknowledged with a grave nod. "Our queen was injected with a treacherous virus and even now he fights to overcome it; but much of the knowledge about his kind has been lost. It is his hope and mine that you would lend him the tools of your people."

"Are you his Consort then, Prince of Asgard, that you speak so readily for him?" Bastet asked with another bored flick of her tail and Odin looked like he was going to have a stroke even as Thor's mother bit back a smile.

"My son's tastes have run towards Midgardians of late, but I do not believe the Jane he so often speaks of shares your blood dear Bastet." Firgga murmured and the feline glared at her with intense blue eyes.

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"I'm sure you don't. But it is so very sad isn't it, how some of your kin could be so reckless as to leave progeny abandoned on a hostile world? Won't you now show them the kindness their ancestors forgot?" Firgga asked with a pleasant as pie smile, and Tony was beginning to really like Thor's mom.

Bastet sniffed haughtily, tail raised high and nose in the air. Frigga just continued to smile.

"Blood alone does not make a Queen." The woman sneered but before Tony could even finish opening his mouth (to say fuck this, because he was so done with this) she went on. "Queen Anthony, if you believe your hunters are up to the task, you and your Consort bring me the feathers of the Benu. If you can do this without the aid of the Prince of Asgard I shall consider it proof enough of your worthiness."

Well then, Tony blinked at the unexpected turn. That was just fine, catch the stupid bird, get the materials and go home, except...

"I don't have a - " he began, only to be stopped by Steve who coughed and shook his head as covertly as he could, eyes boring into Tony's in a way that pleaded with him to just let it go.

Fine. He would, this one time, because he was probably right anyway. They'd not come all this way and put up with all this bullshit just to get disqualified from the race.

*~8~*

Thor walked with his friends off the Skiff and saw them to the lineup, trying to keep the worry that plagued him off of his face. He'd anticipated Bastet using the hunt as a test but he'd not expected her to ban him from assisting his friends. It was very worrisome indeed.

"You will join the lineup of houses who wish to participate, and if you are not selected by either the bride or the groom you will not be allowed to hunt, but fear not MiKall will select you and the Captain as a favor to me." He rushed to explain to them in low tones as the selection was about to begin. "You will then be allowed to choose which hunters from your Pride you would like to
accompany you and the hunt shall begin."

Tugging Stark and the Captain aside, Thor ignored the pressing stare coming from his parents to impart one last urgent piece of advice.

"My friends, I know that there are many differences we have yet to overcome, but I must warn you that this test is not merely about your strength in battle. The Benu like the Kötrðýr is a creature of the mind and can only be overcome by the unity of strong minds. Any division will be used against you, any weakness in one will be exploited to distract the others. You must rely on each other, for it is the responsibility of Queen and Consort to hold the others up and guide the way."

She would be watching them closely, Thor warned, hoping that Stark and the captain would heed his words. He could not fix the ills of the past or change the horrors that had already occurred but he could help perhaps, return something vital to his young friend.

Stark was meant to be a Queen. What was more, Thor believed that Midgaurd needed the kind of Queen he knew Stark would be; but a perfect man Anthony was not and Thor was not unfamiliar with the hard lessons of humility.

But there was little to do now but have faith in them all, to be the men and women he knew they could be, the ones he was proud to fight beside. The ones he'd stand against his own father to defend. They deserved to take back what was stolen from them.

He hoped they would.

~*_~

Tony was adding large mist covered wooded areas to his growing lists of do not likes about Asgard. Even still it was a list significantly shorter than the growing one he had against his ancestral biomama and her cronies.

"Ho. Ho. Ho. Do we now allow children to participate in the hunt?" Clint crowed in a fair imitation of the toms who'd sneered at them when they'd joined the line-up for selection. "Their fur hasn't even grown in yet. As if being a great hairy bastard means anything."

"Easy on the chatter guys." Steve warned from where he walked ahead, pushing through branches and ferns, directed by Tony and Natasha who had both gone high in the hopes of being able to see farther than a few feet in front of them through the mist.

Off world their comms shouldn't work without satellite connection, except they had Tony and his Extremis powered brain which untested theory said could do anything a satellite did and more. He should be able to direct their signals between their devices over short distances without too much of a problem.

So far so good, only the now familiar headache that came with expending his brain power in untried directions was pounding behind his eyeballs so he was grateful for once that Steve was so uptight about mission protocol.

"We don't want to frighten these things off before we even spot them." Down below Steve was reminding them as Tony weaved through the trees, light beams cutting through the mist. Natasha was a shadow, leaping and crawling between branches, darting in and out of his beams in quick flashes.

"He said there was a way to draw them closer didn't he?" Tony remembered. "That's how they got them here in the first place. He didn't mention what bait they used did he?"
"Will it make much difference?" Bruce asked, trudging along behind Clint, his ill-fitting armor clanging as he moved. "Thor said these things are physic right? So they have to know we're coming. Won't they all have flown away?"

"No, but he did mention they'd try and corrupt our minds. I suppose when you can make what hunts you go insane there isn't that much to fear." Natasha said and a fretful silence descended for a moment or two.

Their progress was slow going but slowly but surely they pressed forward, the mist growing thicker around them the deeper they journeyed into the wood. It was also getting hotter as they walked, the moisture clinging to their skin with the mugginess of a swamp and Bruce thought they must be getting closer, because fire breathing birds and heat.

After awhile though even Tony's high beams weren't cutting through it and he was in danger of flying into a tree George of The Jungle style and was forced to call a halt.

"Alright, stop guys. Visibility is shit. Let's regroup and figure out a way to get rid of this soup." Tony called out and the fog seemed to swallow his voice. There was no reply.

Carefully he lowered himself toward the ground, hoping he wasn't about to land on one of his teammates, but he didn't run into anything as his boots touched the soft surface of the forest floor and there was still no answer over the comm.

Concentrating harder, thinking that perhaps his fatigued brain had simply dropped the message (and trying not to think about the ominous silence that had descended around him) Tony tried again.

"Guys, we need to stop or were going to lose each other."

Silence, was the only return and Tony cursed beneath his breath.

Fuck. So this wasn't good.

"Guys?" He called again, not expecting an answer; he nearly jumped a foot when a voice readily replied.

"They can't hear you."

Tony whirled around, repulsors raised in the direction of the voice. A breeze had kicked up, clearing some of the mist, enough to reveal the slender man lounging ever so causally upon a low hanging tree branch. Even unkempt in a plain tunic and trousers and partly shrouded in mist Tony recognized Loki and the haughty way in which he spoke.

"Where are they?" He didn't bother mincing words nor did he lower his repulsors, because he had no idea what the hell was going on but he knew better than to blink when this guy was around.

"As lost in the fog as you are I imagine." Loki responded calmly as if discussing the weather. "None of it's real you know. The fog is their way of creeping inside your head. You don't notice it until it's too late to do anything about it. Once they are in, your mind does the rest. Rather amazing creatures aren't they?"

"Yeah fantastic," Tony grumbled because if he didn't know any better, he'd think that Loki had just told him he was hallucinating him. But if he was why would he trust the word of his hallucination?

"So why are you here then?" Tony couldn't help but ask. "Thor said they'd play on our fears, and hate to break it to you Rudolph but I'm not all that afraid of you."
"No. Just of becoming me." The Asgardian smirked. "Nobody likes a God who plays tricks, anymore than they like one who courts death. We are of a similar shade you and I... That is why I have come."

"What, to try and win me to your side or something?" Tony scoffed because that was too arrogant even for Loki. Tony had no idea whether he was real or not, or how he's gotten out of his cage if he was, but he couldn't discount Loki's powers of projection either.

"No." Loki replied and the kick of it all was Tony could swear there was a deep wound underneath that single word. "To see my replacement."

Tony’s heart sank. He’d not realized until that very moment how hard he was trying not to dwell on Thor’s reasons for sticking around. Sure there was Jane, but Jane could hardly be the reason he’d agreed to become an Avenger.

It was obvious wasn’t it? That Thor needed to replace what he’d lost? Wasn’t that what they all wanted? Howard searching the seas endlessly for the one good thing he’d contributed to the world and resenting the shoddy replacement? Clint stripped of family. Bruce of control. Natasha of self. Steve of everything.

And all of them resenting the replacement.

Guilt was a powerful motivator (Tony should know) but he couldn’t play that game. He had far too many guilt games of his own to take on somebody elses.

Besides. It wasn't even true. A woman like Natasha didn't choose to die for a shitty replacement and his friendship with Bruce meant more than anything else Tony could buy or give him (even control over a monster he feared). Two out of five wasn't perfect, but it was a start and he was damn well gonna take it.

“Alright we’re done here.” He decided, firing without further warning and though he was not surprised when the blast shattered the tree branch and sent debris crashing to the forest floor with no sign that Loki had ever been there, it didn’t stop relief from making his legs feel weak.

It hadn’t been real. He told himself. He’d been talking to a damn bird, and if the heat making sweat stick to his skin was anything to go by it was still close and his teammates likely weren’t far.

As lost in the mist as he was. The (not) Loki had said. Yeah well, bad news for the cuckoo-bird but Tony didn’t need to rely on his eyes to find his team.

Closing his eyes he blocked out everything that wasn’t his own heartbeat, and then he opened his mind once more, reaching for his team.

Immediately he was assaulted with the sensation of sinking, of his head filling up with fog and nightmarish faces.

For a moment he’s Clint, and they are a child in a cage, reaching for their brother, but the tom just snarls at him. Blames him for betraying his only family.

And then, almost faster than the breath he can’t seem to take, he is Bruce, and a beautiful woman in a lab coat is crying and begging them to try harder (be better), to find a cure.

Then he is Natasha and they are facing off with a man in a mask with a gleaming metal arm who is determined to kill them.
They were close enough to touch Tony realized as the swirling visions threatened to send him to his knees, but he couldn’t pull them out of their nightmares with so much stimulus at once. He needed help, and even if it was high on the list of things he didn’t want to do he knew that was only pride talking.

And while he could appreciate the cruel irony of losing Pride over a thing like pride, he wasn’t going to play that game either.

He shut the others out, seeking that particular bond he always ignored, the familiar signatures of Steve’s brain patterns that both attracted and haunted, and allowed himself to sink within them.

“Don’t kid yourself Steve, you were sick of me. Was probably easier for me to go when I did. That way there was nothing stopping you from shacking up with Carter. The house, the kids. Everything you’d have to give up to stick with me.”

The voice fills Tony’s head, achingly familiar but he can’t concentrate on it with how heavy his heart is (Steve’s heart is) and the grief that is ripping through him.

“That is not true. Buck you know that’s not true”. He can hear Steve now, and the mist is thinning, he can see Steve, standing at the roots of a giant tree, facing a man Tony barely recognized as the one from old photos and video reals because this vision, this is all Steve, and the James Buchanan Barnes of his mind is too beautiful to be quite earthly. His skin was fucking glowing and there were flames in his eyes.

Fitting Tony thought, because he’s getting the idea that he’s looking right at all of Steve’s demons.

“Steve?” Tony called gently, stepping forward slowly with gauntlet raised because it was way past time to intervene.

Demon Bucky looked toward him and asked, “Howard?”

“T-ony.” Steve sputtered and blinked like he was coming up for air, and Tony took it as a good sign. It was a less favorable one when he turned back to (not) Bucky and tried to plead with him. “His name is Tony. He’s Howard’s son. If you just tell me where you are he can help. I can find you.”

Tony was sure his expression was all sorts of alarmed just then, because he didn’t know the whole story but he knew that Barnes was dead.

“Steve. You know he’s not really here.” Tony ignored Barnes altogether to gently but firmly grasp Steve by the elbow.

Though he attempted to draw him backward Steve stayed firmly planted, refusing to be pulled away from the apparition.

“Cap!” Tony slapped one hand hard against Rogers shoulder, and this deep inside his head Tony could feel how that blow hurt but Steve barely even winced. It was enough however to pull his unfocused gaze from Barnes and Tony kept a tight grip on him as he tried to knock some sense back into him.

“It’s an illusion. We’re all trapped inside our heads. I can pull us out, but you’ve got to help me.”

“His Son, huh?” (not) Bucky mused behind them. “Trust you to spit in your own eye and land
yourself a hundred years in the future, Stevie. Is it how you said it would be? Is it better, like you promised?"

“In some ways…” Steve began, eyes still searching Tony’s for answers that he didn’t have. Something he saw there must have made him lose heart for it because he choked on the end of one sentence and began another. “But not the way it should be. People haven’t changed as much as they should have. You were right.”

“I’m glad I’m dead.”

“Bucky don’t say that!” Steve’s attention snapped back to Bizzaro Barnes, voice cracking like his heart was breaking all over again (it is) but Bucky just talked over him.

“You’re only free when you’re dead.”

Okay fuck this.

Since plan A wasn’t working out Tony went for plan B which was to blast the place where Barnes was standing the same way he’d blasted Loki.

“Tony no don’t hurt him!”

To Tony’s shock Steve jumped in front of his repulsor fire, shield raised, breath coming rapidly as the blast resounded off the surface and Tony had to twist in order to avoid being struck by his own shot.

“Have you lost your damn mind!” he thundered, nerves still jumping because he could have seriously hurt Steve and Steve didn’t seem all that concerned about that blast potentially hurting him.

“You could have killed him.” Steve insisted, stubborn and fierce but eyes still as lost as any child’s and Tony wanted to throw something (preferably at him).

“He’s not fucking real Rogers!” Tony snarled, and maybe it was harsh but sometimes harsh was all there was. He ripped down the barrier between their minds and the others, let Steve feel their pain and terror for a moment before he threw it back up.

“Me, the team, that’s what’s real! You wanna be our Captain? Then move!”

Steve couldn’t have both. That was the long and short of it.

“So those are your terms?” Not Bucky looked right at him, eyes a glacial blue and so suddenly strikingly familiar it sent a chill up Tony’s spine. “All or nothing?”

Tony was aware that what he was speaking to was a hallucination, dragged up out of Steve’s subconscious, but nothing had made more sense to him then the realization that this was what frightened Steve the most.

Letting go of the past. Giving it all to a brave new world (brave new Queen).

His voice was softer than he’d ever thought it would be, aimed at Steve, but it wasn’t a plea.

“It’s the way it has to be.”

Tony knew it was and in that moment he could see it in Steve's eyes, the slow acceptance of that very truth.
“You’re right.” His voice was so thin it was near a whisper but when he turned back to the vision of Barnes, jaw clenched tight, and spoke next it was stronger.

“You’re right. Let’s go home Tony,” Steve rasped through a tight throat and Tony shuddered in relief as he felt Steve’s presence seem to get bigger all around him, and with it came a feeling of strength and safety like being drawn into trusted arms. Needing no further prompting he sank into the vicious nest of nightmare visions that were his teammate’s brains, sure now that he was tethered to something strong enough to keep him from getting swept away.

The wind kicked up and the ground shook under his boots as he pushed through the fog in their minds. They appeared slowly, one by one, on either side of him and Steve as if they’d formed out of the rapidly churning mist, all of them looking shaken and blinking dazedly as if waking from a dream. A bead of sweat rolled down Tony’s brow and he fought to stay standing as dizziness overwhelmed him, but Steve was there a moment later to hold him up.

“I’ve got you.” He assured and Tony smiled shakily even though he was the only one aware of it.

“And I’ve got them.”

The phantom snarled, and it truly was a phantom because with all a five of them there its form was rippling and warping, as if it couldn’t decide which form to take. It went from resembling Barnes to looking like a stern faced woman with dead eyes and the next it resembled Howard, and following that Loki.

“Do you really think you can bury your past that easily?” It snarled at them.

“No idea. “ Clint’s voice was raw and trembling but his arm was rock steady as he lifted his bow. “But we can sure as hell bury a bird.”

He fired and the phantom dived into the mist, but the wind was blowing such that a few heartbeats was all it took to clear as if it had never been, and then they could all see it: a large shape descending from above, eagle-like talons outstretched with wings spread wide.

The wings of the Benu were a vibrant gold stained in streaks redder than blood Tony noted with awe as it opened its wicked looking beak.

“Cap!” he shouted and Steve was just in time to raise his shield while Clint and the others bunkered behind him, making themselves as small as possible as a thick jet of flame roared from the creature’s mouth. Tony took to the sky, trusting his suit to protect him.

“Hey Moltres! Nobody likes a sore loser,” Tony jeered, firing at the thing more certain of distracting it then he actually was of damaging it because up close he could see that it’s feathers had a strange scaly sheen which in their line of work usually didn’t mean soft and easily destructible.

His repulsor blasts struck and let up a bunch of sparks and smoke but true to his prediction it did little more than cause the thing to drop a few feet in the air before it collected itself and turned all of its pissed off in Tony’s direction.

But that was okay, it would give the others time to get into more defensible positions.

As the thing came after him with a violent shriek Tony grinned.

“Alright. Let’s catch ourselves a turkey.”
“Who comes before the assembled today?” Bastet asked in a ceremonial fashion and all eyes in the hall were on the bride and groom. MiKall had chosen to dress in the Asgardian style and was decked out in the finest that his mother’s dressmaker could produce.

Her groom of course wore the traditional dress of the Kǫtrdýr, sporting a kilt made of rich colorful fabrics and draped in the ornaments of his house and station, including a bejeweled collar. A more simple design than the one Queen Bastet wore of course, but it was a beautiful bright gleaming silver and looked dashing sat across his puffed breast and wide shoulders.

“MiKall, daughter of Frigga.”

“T’Sia,” Son of KaResh,” Came the replies and Queen Bastet nodded regally in acknowledgment.

“Does it please the houses gathered here, to see these two bonded?”

A completely expected but no less enthusiastic for it cheer went around the hall and when the rabble had died Bastet turned to Thor’s mother who was standing with his father a ways behind the bride.

“Are you the mother of this child?”

“Aye. I am Queen Frigga, and this child was given to me to raise as my own.”

“And are you pleased by this union?”

Tony, who was standing g on Thor’s right leaned toward him to whisper.

“If she says no is the wedding off? Do we still get to eat?”

Thor chuckled and leaned downward to whisper his reply.

“If either mother should dissent to the union then the decision is left to the Queen after hearing their case. So it is a formality more than anything, because the union would not be happening if they had not already sought the blessing of the Queen.”

Frigga was smiling tearfully at MiKall as she assured Bastet that she was well pleased by the union, but when it came time for the grooms mother to give his blessing, there was a cold warning not easily missed in Bastet’s stare and the tom’s mother, a waspish looking fel with white striped fur all but bared his teeth before giving his consent.

“Trouble with the in-laws already?”

Tony had caught it too apparently.

“Aye,” Thor grumbled, worry for MiKall twisting in his stomach. “Though my mother loves her as her own and anyone should be honored to align themselves with the house of Odin… the Kǫtrdýr do not approve of mixing blood. Not all compatible species create offspring capable of bonding and this is highly undesirable. A kit unable to connect with the Pride is an abominable thought to the Kǫtrdýr. It comes with much stigma”

“Ah.” Tony murmured. “That explains why Tigger the tiger freaked out when we called his Queen our Bio-mommy, but MiKall is full Kǫtrdýr isn’t she?”
"Aye, but she was not raised in a Pride and to many that is reason enough to think her inferior. She
will have a road ahead of her to prove herself to her kin."

"Seems highly unfair," Steve grumbled, and Thor winced as he added, "Wasn’t her idea to be a war
hostage."

No, it hadn’t been. But MiKall had been treated well, loved dearly, and what heaviness there must
have been in her heart from being separated from her kin she’d kept between herself and her sister.

She was in love with her groom Thor was sure – she’d talked of nothing but the tom since her last
journey to her home world and had whined incessantly at Mother until she’d approached Bastet
about the union – and therefore was excited to begin her life as a part of a mated pair, but she would
make that life far from the home she knew, among many strangers.

And though he was nervous for her she looked so very sure of herself hand in hand with her chosen
mate, regal and proud as and Princess.

"They will learn quickly not to underestimate her." Thor was sure. "Just as they learned today not to
underestimate the both of you."

Tony seemed pleased by this, but Thor noticed that the Captain's expression was pained until he
turned away.

On the stage MiKall and her groom were trading their vows in answer to the question of whether or
not they would be pleased by their union and then as was tradition the couple turned to Bastet and
asked if she would be pleased by it.

The Queen gave her blessing and a short speech about the honor this would bring both their houses
and the years of peace and prosperity that were sure to follow in the wake of their union and then she
bid them join hands with her.

None of the guests besides the Kǫtrdýr could feel it happening of course but the hall grew eerily
hushed as Bastet wove the two together. Of course mating was possible without a Queen's
involvement but the Queen brought her power and the power of the whole Pride behind her. Only a
bond reinforced by the Queen was unbreakable.

It was a beautiful thing to watch, the dawning of awe in their eyes as they saw each other in their
entirety for the first time, as their eyes filled with tears and their lips vowed to be one with each other
and one together before claiming each other in a kiss.

He was glad his friends could see it. One day, Thor was determined that they should have it for
themselves. It was only right.

"My children. Our noble friends," Bastet raised her arms to encompass the entire hall. "Let us dine
together in celebration of this new union. And as reward for their valor, and being the swiftest to
bring us the sacred Benu, I invite Queen Anthony and his consort to dine with me at the high table."

A great cheer went up, mostly from Thor's countrymen who were probably just happy it was time to
feast and that they were on the bride's team so they would be served by their guests. The Kǫtrdýr
naturally grumbled, but Thor saw the one Tony had nicknamed Tigger glaring venomously their
way.

Thor smiled winsomely at him. He would be sure to ask for many rounds of seconds.
Asgardian's ate like wild hogs and drank their booze like dwarves Tony discovered as the party in the Great Hall went forward full speed ahead. Though Frigga did her best to be a gracious host and keep drawing their Midgardian guests at the high table back into conversation, Tony kept finding himself distracted with the Kǫtrðýr Queen and Steve as it turned out was absolutely rubbish at small talk, especially the high handed sort that was traded at a royal table.

It wasn't much different than the kind of blather Tony suffered at a charity ball but unfortunately that just meant that he was already out of patience with it an hour in and without Pepper there to glare him into submission it was becoming increasingly obvious to his hosts that he wished they'd all go jump off a bridge.

"Are you bored little halfling?"

Tony blinked as Bastet's voice, low and smooth interrupted his thoughts.

"Cute." He said in response and the woman's furry brow arched. "But you know, if I were in your position I'd remind people way less that my blood was half Kǫtrðýr."

"You dare much Anthony of House Stark." She warned him lowly biting delicately from the meat she cradled between her claws. "But thankfully for you, I admire your audacity."

"Great, then two things. One: stop calling me Anthony, and you can drop the House Stark bit because it makes me feel like you're about to make me Hand of The Queen or something and if that's your intent, no dice. I like my head attached to my neck."

Bastet blinked at him slowly and Tony got the feeling she was confused as all get out but unwilling to show it. He grinned.

"Two: you're going to tell me the secret to the blood armor."

"I am?" she scoffed with a bright little laugh, like he was a child who'd said something ludicrous but endearing.

"Yes." Tony took a slow sip from the literal goblet at the edge of his plate without breaking eye contact. He knew she'd see it as weakness. He lowered the goblet back to the table with a thunk and finished.

"Stop me when I'm wrong. You didn't want to be Queen. You were raised for it but you always wanted different. It made you rebellious. Probably drove your parents nuts insisting on galivanting through the galaxy sowing your wild oats. You had a string of conquests but he was different. He was the real deal, only mommy and daddy didn't approve. Probably threatened to cut you off if you didn't come home and start taking your responsibilities seriously. You left him and the kid behind the same way you found him, on a whim, and you never took a consort in all this time because deep down you know nothing else is going to compare to what you turned your back on."

Bastet did not stop him, rather she listened until Tony was done, the picture of attentiveness as her blue eyes watched him, mouth nibbling away at her food. Finally she lowered the half eaten morsel back to her plate and stated with poise, "You are very clever for a halfling. Your suitor must count himself a very lucky man."

"Steve and I aren't-" Tony began but the woman laughed again, interrupting.
"I do not speak of your Captain, though you truly are a child if you think him cold to you. I declared him your consort because no one would dare refute me. Only true Prides may participate in the hunt. We make exceptions for our Asgardian hosts. My people would not have made an exception for you."

"Then what did you mean?" Tony asked with gritted teeth and she smiled at him, all fangs.

"I suppose your sense of smell is inferior." She answered with a dramatic sniff and Tony tensed. " Didn't your mother ever teach you what happens when a tom meets a fel little halfing?"

She batted her long eyelashes at him in a coquettish fashion.

"Not really." Tony wasn't going to discuss his mother. Not with this woman.

"When you meet a compatible tom your mind begins building links and it changes much, including the chemical composition of your sweat. In essence you begin to smell more like one another. So you see I, as well as every unmated tom in this room, can smell that there is someone in your life. Likely as drawn to you as you are to him."

Tony was going to tell her she didn't have the slightest clue what she was talking about, but for some reason Catman flashed through his thoughts. He was the only tom besides Steve that Tony found even remotely interesting (now that Clint had taken himself off the table).

But speaking of Clint, Tony knew far better to fall for an undercover agent in a mask for god's sake. Catman got major points for cleverness and the second sexiest tech Tony had ever touched (his babies would always be first for him) but he didn't even know the guy.

No doubt reading the storm of thoughts passing behind Tony's eyes the Queen smirked.

"Surely as your bond grows your inferior nose will pick up the changes. " Her long pink tongue came out to wipe the area around her mouth and then as if they'd never dropped the subject at all she stared right through him and suddenly her voice, fierce and dark, filled his head, "You were right on all accounts but one Stark. Nothing about leaving the man I loved or the children I bore him was done on a whim. It was revealed to me what would become of my people if I did not return, and when you are a real Queen, when you are both mother and father to a nation, then you may judge me but not before."

She rose silently and even as she signaled for the servers to sweep back in and they came, bearing large steaming cauldrons of the bone broth that MiKall had described to them so many hours ago, her voice went hissing through his thoughts like a cold wind one last time.

"The answers you seek lay in the scales of the Benu. It is believed that after centuries of hunting and consuming them that our ancestors developed similar abilities. I have already had one of my men collect the scales of the beast you felled. Sure hands, Queen Anthony and may you prove worthy to be called such. "

To the suddenly hushed hall she said,

"My friends. We thank you for graciously inviting us into your home, and for participating in our sacred traditions today. There is one yet, which we will now partake. Age after age our people have partaken of the 'benubro ' a broth made from the bones of the Benu bird of our home world. To drink from these bones is to invite visions.

"Some of you shall peer into the folds of time and glimpse futures yet possible, while yet others will see the past. More alluring, and more dangerous for that, is the possibility of seeing all that might
have been. Sight has saved many Prides over the years, and destroyed others. The wise know that the benubro is a guide, and not a given. Destiny is in the hands of the builders. I wish you all sure hands."

A serving boy was ladling a spicy smelling broth into the bowl at the edge of Tony's plate as a resounding cry took up through the hall. Sure hands. That was kind of funny, considering that Tony's hands weren't at all sure about picking up that little bowl and putting that reddish substance in his body.

But Thor had assured them it was safe and was even now swallowing down his portion, and Tony got the feeling he couldn't refuse without either losing face or horrendously insulting everyone.

Well in for a penny in for a pound, Tony thought darkly to himself as he raised the bowl to his mouth. He just prayed he didn't go back to his childhood. Anything but back there.

The thing was. The visions didn't come all at once or even that quickly. The broth was surprisingly tasty, hot with a sweet edge that reminded Tony of Thai food. It left a warm muzzy feeling in his head in its wake, and it was like trying to operate while stoned out of his mind after that.

He'd be sitting listening to whatever rambling conversation was going on around him, usually about shit he didn't understand or couldn't see because the person talking to him was zoning out, and he'd be trying to count all the hair on their head or something (because wasn't it amazing how many there were?) and the next he'd be on a beach somewhere with six playboy kittens because those girls were awesome and they knew how to ask before grabbing, and they loved cuddles as much as he did. Serena liked to play with his ears.

"They published a picture of us you know. Pile of nubile young kittens curled up on a blanket with margaritas in hand. Sold out in minutes. Howard was furious." Tony giggled, the taste of sour liqueur and salt lingering in his mouth. He blinked as the warmth of the sun faded, replaced by the low lights of the hallway. Wait why was he in a hallway? Where were Serena and the others?

"That is very nice Tony." Thor, who had a giggling Clint thrown over his shoulder for some reason, beckoned at the end of the hall. "But it grows late and I fear your Midgardian constitutions were not prepared for the strength of the broth."

Oh right. They were going to bed. Which had made him think of sinking into a pile of soft blankets which had made him think of that day on the beach. Yes. On to bed. Amazing idea. Thor had all the best ideas.

Everybody should- wait where was everybody?

Tony whipped his head around owlishly, counting his teammates one by one and having to start over again when he started counting stone steps instead; because there were so many in the tower and so expertly constructed. Good job Asgardians. He wasn't an architect in title but architecture and engineering went hand in hand often enough it was like a.... like a good date really. Always showed you a good time and let you come first.

Giggling Tony went back to counting. Clint was hanging upside down over Thor's shoulder. That was one and two. Bruce was trudging along behind them, eyes wide and a blissed out little smile on his face. That was three. Steve and Natasha were bringing up the rear, with Steve largely supporting
Natasha who looked white as a sheet and in danger of losing her dinner. Four and five. Yay. Oh shit weren't there six? Where was number six?

"You are the sixth Avenger, Tony." Thor grumbled as he opened the tower room and Tony breathed a sigh of relief.

Oh good.

He was asleep as soon as his head touched a pillow.

* *

This dream was stranger than the others. He was nowhere that he recognized and yet there was something achingly familiar about the shimmer of nearly too blue water shimmering under summer sun and the wind tossing the waves.

This section of the beach was largely deserted but down the shore there were pockets of people. Families enjoying a warm summer day, watching the boats go by, fishermen hauling their catches to the docks, calling out to those who waited on shore.

Seagulls shrieked and the wind tossed Tony's hair, bringing with it the taste of sea against his lips and the trickling scent of something soft and sweet and so precious it sat like a weight in Tony's heart.

Part of it was coming from the fat lump of soft baby skin and sweet smelling red wisps of hair that was in his arms, white ears tickling his throat as they twitched, taking in every sound as the infant gurgled happily.

Her blue eyes watched the area where three older kits played in the surf, all relatively close in age. Tony's eyes were drawn to the only girl in the trio. There were wet clumps of sand drying in the little girl's frizzy ringlets, largely because she and an older boy were engaged in a war that seemed to involve trying to shove sand down each other's throats and god was she lovely. Her warm honey brown skin was only getting darker under the bright sun, which was beginning to streak her wind-tossed mass of curls.

His heart swelled at the sight, too big in his chest, too much, and Tony blinked back the sudden onset of tears.

"Should they be this close to the water?"

Tony turned to Steve, who was standing beside him watching over the group of children, the glistening windows of the city towers rising behind them.

"Jaime isn't the best swimmer." Tony saw himself admit with a rueful grin before whistling for the attention of the kits. "Right gang. Not so far out. Not until you've mastered the doggy paddle."

"Jaime quit trying to make Nyota eat sand!" Steve added and a kit with sun-streaked brown hair and indignantly flattened orange ears groaned like he'd just been ordered to his room without dinner until college.

"She started it Daddy!"
“Did not,” little Nyota stuck her tongue out at Jaime, with a shit starting grin if Tony had ever seen one, who glowered at her and made like he was going to try and shove more sand in her face. The third kit, a shy looking boy ducked out of the way before he could be trampled in the middle of the squabble.

"We better intervene before mini-you commits murder." Tony chuckled and Steve's eyes were dancing with affection and mirth as he scoffed.

"Mini-me? He's only half me."

"Yes. The stubborn half."

"The best half, I still think we're both equally stubborn." Steve rebounded and Tony laughed, leaning up to plant a kiss against his cheek with a soft purr and transfer the gurgling infant into his arms.

"Whatever you say soldier, but we both know you'll be taking that best half part back later."

Steve's cheeks filled with a soft pink blush and Tony cackled.

Then, pain splintered the wonderful dream, the soft hazy summer sun was swept away by darkness and cold artificial lights flickering dimly in the wet and dark of a small cramped space and there was unbearable pain storming through his head.

He was screaming his throat raw as blistering cold crept through his veins, freezing everything it touched until blessedly all consciousness was gone.

*

Tony woke with a sharp gasp, lunging up in bed, the strange nightmare still holding him in its grip for a heart-pounding moment until a whimper pulled his attention away from his slamming heart and the panic of going from that brilliant wonderful dream to whatever the hell that had been in the end.

He wasn't the only one to have woken either. The large plush bed they'd been given was more like a giant feathered cushion and best that Tony could remember the six of them had piled onto it and fallen into drunken sleep.

Thor and Steve were nowhere to be found and Tony was still tangled up with Bruce who was blinking dazedly in the darkness trying to make sense of what was happening.

Clint's tail brushed Tony's face rather rudely as the tom shimmied past him to reach Natasha, who was curled in the center of the bed in a tiny ball, shivering and hollow eyed in a way that Tony had never seen before.

As alarm shot through him, Tony realized it was her powerful vision that had interrupted their dreams and yanked them all from sleep.

Wordlessly he and Bruce crawled closer, lending Clint their aid in warming up her chilled skin, none of them speaking except for Clint who murmured soft soothing things in her ear.

"It's alright. You're not in that place anymore. You're here with me. With us. We've got you Tasha."

Tony leached warmth into her body and her distant eyes slowly turned to meet his with recognition.
as their bodies began to sync, her breathing slowly evening.

"It wasn't me." Her raw voice was so low they almost couldn't make out what she said.

"You mean it wasn't..." Tony hesitated, not wishing to upset her again but pushing forward at the narrowing of her eyes. Even now (especially now) she didn't like to be coddled. "It wasn't the Red Room?"

She shook her head, sweat-damp hair curling against her skin.

"It was. But it wasn't me."

"Ivan," Clint realized, and Tony started, only because he hadn't realized that Clint knew about Ivan but then in retrospect, of course he did. Bruce looked confused but he kept his questions at bay.

"He couldn't remember me because they scrambled his brain like an egg." She whispered into the dark. Her breathing had calmed and she was no longer so cold to the touch but fear lingered in her eyes when she looked at Tony. Fear and grief.

"He knew if he lost sight of his purpose he'd have to be recalibrated. Those were his rules of operation. Each time he let me... each time he let me distract him he knew. He knew what they would do."

Natasha shuddered and Tony's arms tightened around her protectively.

"Good for him." Clint growled. "I'm sorry for what those bastards did, but I'm not sorry he took care of you."

"I wouldn't be here, if not for him." She acknowledged and on anyone else, Tony thought the constriction in her voice might mean she would cry. "I saw them resurrect him, in my dream. I know they killed him, but in the dream he woke up. He called for me and they -"

"It was a nightmare. They can't hurt him anymore, or you." Tony insisted when she fell silent. She gave him a look.

"Don't say stupid things Kotyonok when you are far from stupid."

Tony laughed, mostly at himself, just happy to see some of her fire returning.

"I think what Tony means is it's in the past." Bruce offered tentatively. "Right now you're here and you have all of us."

"There is an us?" Natasha asked poignantly arching a skeptical brow in Tony's direction and he rolled his eyes but decided to let her have it because it was a fair enough question considering he held the keys to this wagon train.

"Yeah..." He heaved a tired sigh. Why were emotions so fucking draining? "I have some things I want to run past you guys but, there's an us. Not like capital US yet, but I figure we needed little us before we could get big US anyway."

"Does it involve an island..." Bruce hedged and Tony frowned at him, wondering how he'd known that, figuring with Bruce in his lab so often he must have picked up something but then Bruce said, "I was on an island in one of my dreams. I think I had a mate and there's no way she could... well no way a lot of it could have happened without you."
Even speaking quietly Bruce couldn't hide the fearful awe in his voice, the near unwillingness to hope for something he'd always considered so far out of his reach. A mate. A home. Freedom.

Tony licked his lips as he decided what to say in answer, because the truth was so much still stood to chance and he didn't want to hurt Bruce with false hopes if the things they'd seen never came to pass.

It was almost too much for him to even fathom. Steve and him so happy... children. A son.

"She said the broth could show us any possible future." He settled with. "So if you were on an Island with a mate, then it's possible."

It was possible but god was it not probable.

"Destiny belongs to those who build it?" Clint echoed Queen Bastet's words from earlier and Tony opened his mouth to reply when the door opened, Thor hurrying inside the darkened room.

"I am sorry to disturb your rest my friends. But Tony your presence is needed."

"In the middle of the night?" Tony questioned and Thor nodded.

"The Captain is upon the tower roof and I do not know if he has slept. He does not look well. I fear his mind may yet be unsettled by the broth and that he may come to some injury."

"Like walking off a tower while in a stupor. Jesus Christ who even let him up there?" Tony grumbled already untangling himself from the others and crawling from the bed.

How had his life become an episode of Super Nanny?

~*~*~

When Tony made it to the roof Rogers didn’t appear to have moved any from the spot Thor had told him he'd be. He was still standing at the edge of the rooftop, his elbows braced against the edge staring out at the great city with a rather disturbingly unblinking gaze.

“Hey Cap.” Tony was careful to keep his tone easy but announce himself clearly. He didn’t want to startle Steve in this kind of state.

And by god was Steve in a state. His aura was still inky and black, roiling like a pot on low boil on the edges of Tony’s consciousness – a pool that no sane man would step into, but no one had ever accused Tony of complete sanity.

This was not a drunken stupor. This was the aftermath and whatever Steve had seen it had rocked him.

Tony couldn't shake his head of those visions either, not the one he'd had in the woods nor the one he'd had in his bed – when love had flowed so strongly between them, when Steve had looked at him with such warm regard.

That was all Tony had ever wanted from his childhood idol once. From anyone.

And Jaime... those other kits, who must have belonged to the rest of the team. Spunky little Nyota had to belong to Bruce and his mystery mate because he was the only other person Tony could think
of who would name their daughter after Uhura besides himself. God he'd never be the same after seeing that.

“Cold night to be outside like this.” he tried, emptying his head of that line of thinking because he wasn't an idealistic child or a moony teenager, and nothing about that future had been certain. Don't get attached.

“Been colder. We used to sit on the roof of our old building, Bucky and I, to look at the stars. Was the only place in the whole building it felt like you could get some privacy.”

Steve’s voice was surprisingly smooth, if quiet in the dark. He didn’t turn around to look at Tony as the fel approached but he didn’t seem adverse to his presence there either, so Tony slowly made his way across the rooftop to join him at the tower ledge.

Because while Tony didn’t know much about Steve’s personal life he knew that the subject of James Barnes was usually a closed one, and that if Steve was willingly talking about the past it could only be important to listen, however inane the subject matter might appear on the surface.

“When you looked in my file. Did it say I was a degenerate?” Steve still hadn’t turned to look at him, but there was something hard in voice now, a force that brooked no room for evasion, and Tony wouldn’t have insulted him by trying either way.

“No.” He answered. “You were squeaky clean. Little too clean. So naturally, I assumed you probably ran a Heat House when you weren’t punching out Hitler.”

Steve’s mouth tilted upward in an almost smile, a smile that didn’t quite take off.

“Never could stand those places. Some of the guys in our unit would go. I tried not to think too harshly of them...it can get lonely out there. I knew guys who didn’t even pay for the sex, they just wanted to lay their head somewhere that wasn’t on the ground and imagine they were home. But Bucky…” Tony watched as Steve faltered, the words sticking in his throat.

It amazed Tony, that someone so physically intimidating could look so small. His posture hunched, hands tucked under his arms, Steve took a forceful swallow. He finally turned and looked at Tony and when he did, it was like a punch to the gut.

There were unshed tears in his eyes, but it was the naked grief in them that helped Tony finally understand why Catman had called it Bond Bleeding. Steve couldn’t have bled more if someone had shot him and held the wound open.

“Those places. You could smell them a mile off. The drugs and the sick and the despair was a stench that was hard to get rid of. Bucky would get kinda crazy whenever we got near one. He hated everything about them. So did I, but it was different for him. It was…”

“Personal.” Tony filled in quietly. He thought he understood where Steve’s mind was now.

“Yes. Tony what you said in Fury’s office-

“I was harsher than I should have been.” Tony heard himself blurt. In the naked face of Steve’s grief it was very important to him that Steve know that. “You’re trying to help, and I appreciate that. I do.”

“You were right, Tony.” Steve declared staunchly, mouth thinning stubbornly. “This is your fight. It always has been. It was Bucky's too only... I didn't want it to be. I didn't want him to get hurt. Tony I dreamed... I saw..."
Steve's voice cracked and he swallowed and Tony let him try and gather himself a moment before he asked, "what did you see?"

Not because he didn't want to know but because Steve needed to tell him.

"In those days they’d have taken him away if we got caught. If they thought we were too close, or he was too dangerous. I had to be the one to speak up, to draw the attention of the bullies, to order the raids on the Heat Houses, to make sure that no one forgot that he was mine and I’d never let them take him away or hurt him without a fight; because they always could. Because there was never much separating him from the little boy I first met who was in a cage hooked up to machines.

“That’s all I ever wanted to do, from the first day Tony, was get him out of that cage and away from all those people who had hurt him. I promised him I’d keep him safe, and when we were kids I think he really believed I could. But we got older and things changed. He changed.

"He got angrier, more withdrawn, and when they showed up to send him to war it really messed with his head. He was so pissed when I told them they’d have to take both of us, when I told them I’d let them do their experiment on me but I was just happy we could stay together. Bucky got more and more reckless as the war went on, volatile, picking fights with some of the rougher guys in the unit. They started to call him a Biter and that was dangerous because if they thought you were a danger to humans they put you down.

"I thought it was just the war. All the things we'd seen, that maybe he just couldn't deal. I thought if we could just finish the damn thing and go home, that I'd get us a house somewhere quiet where we could just be happy and leave the war behind us.

"Then one night we liberated this hospital in France that the Germans were using as a base. When they heard we were coming they sent all the women and children out in front because they knew it would slow us down.

“Some were nurses and maids, but most of them were kats that the Germans had kept. Just there because their masters were there or because the soldiers needed entertainment. They were sent out to shield the Germans while they shot at us.

“We didn’t have a choice but to return fire, to shoot through those people, and they all died, Tony, every last one. There was this tom, not much younger than we were, fifteen maybe… The battle was over. I was looking for our wounded, but Bucky was holding this kid who was choking on blood, crying in German as he struggled to breathe.

“Please, the kid cries. I only knew enough German to get by with a few barked orders, but there are certain words you learn quick because you hear them so often, you start to hear them in your sleep. Please, the kid chokes, And Bucky jest holds onto him, repeating the same thing over and over. 'You’re free. You’re free'.

“We said that whenever we liberated any Nazi occupied territory, but from his clothes it was obvious that the kid had been some Nazi officer’s pet. Pampered, well taken care of. Loved maybe, like I loved Bucky. I thought, ‘he must think we’re monsters’ and I couldn’t figure out why Bucky would say something like that to him when we’d shot through him like he didn’t mean anything… later, when I asked Bucky why, he asked me what he should have said instead…”

Steve couldn't finish. It doesn't matter because the memory is haunting him, so strongly that Tony almost doesn't even have to reach, it's pushing itself forward, begging to be looked at.

Bucky whirls on him, teeth flashing in the dark as he growls.
“Should I have told him he was going to be alright Stevie? Huh was that the last time he was going to have to swallow his own blood? Was it?! Only when you're dead. That's when you're free. Only when you're good and dead.”

The memory faded, leaving Tony feel drained in its wake, hollowed out. He didn't know whether the aching emptiness in his chest was his alone or a reflection of Steve... he didn't think it mattered. Not after what he'd seen.

“I was losing him before he fell. I could see it but I didn’t understand it and I think that’s why I couldn’t save him…” Steve confessed on a choked breath. "When he picked up my shield, he picked it up like he wanted to take on the whole world, not just the Nazis but every last one of us, and I knew why. We weren’t better than them Tony. We told ourselves we were. We called ourselves heroes and then we went home to our slaves."

"Steve..." Tony's hand reached for his arm but the words wouldn't come. He'd never expected to hear something like that come out of Steve's mouth. His knee jerk response was to absolve him, to point out all the ways that he privately knew Steve to be wonderful and loving and so achingly good it was hard to stomach in the face of his own shortcomings.

He swallowed the words because they weren't right. He wouldn't do that to Steve (to either of them) when it had taken so much out of Steve to voice these thoughts and say those words.

“This is your fight Tony." Steve finished softly, hands clenching the roof edge as he dropped his head, the gesture almost uncomfortably vulnerable. "I understand why you have to fight it this way and I won’t stand in your way. I’m with you, because it’s right, and because I don’t want to watch you fall again and wonder if I was part of what pushed you. I can’t. I can’t Tony-"

Steve’s voice cracked and he bit his lip, stifling a shuddering sob and Tony grabbed him (because fuck if he could just stand there after that) pulling him close. For a moment Steve froze, but then with a quiet moan he buried his face against Tony’s neck, where his scent was thickest, and dragged in a deep desperate breath.

“Listen. I wasn’t there, but I know one thing. You were the best thing to ever happen to Barnes.” Tony’s hands clutched tightly to Steve’s back when he thought the soldier might try and move, his head shaking in protest at the words, but Tony held tighter and pressed on. “Yes! Steve, I mean that."

"You didn't even know him." Came Steve's muffled response, his body continuing to shudder against Tony's.

"Don't have to, Rogers. You gave a shit, and you tried. I can count the people in my life who have tried for me on one hand Steve, on one hand, and you bet your ass they don’t always get it right either but they mean everything. Pepper, Rhodey, Happy they're absolutely everything to me. I wouldn't be here without them. That's how I know he didn't blame you."

"Not even for being human?"

Steve looked up, face blotched red and eyes wet with tears that only started to spill when he blinked at Tony in dazed confusion, expression caught somewhere between hope and hunger.

"Especially not for that.” Tony rasped through a tight throat. “You hear me Rogers?”

Steve’s hands tightened around his shirt and Tony only had the barest moment to note the sudden change in his scent before Steve’s gaze fixated on his mouth and his intentions became clear.
“Tony?”

His name had become a plea on Steve’s lips and Tony could have stopped it, he even had the frantic thought that it would be the smart thing to do, but he didn’t.

He was good with physical. Comfortable. He didn’t always know the right thing to say but how you felt didn’t always have to depend on words. Sometimes it was better that it didn’t.

Tony didn’t stop Steve’s mouth from coming down over his because he knew what this was and was okay with it.

Emotions got overwhelming (too much too often) and sometimes you just needed to lose yourself in something or somebody else. That didn’t make it less. Not to Tony, not by a longshot.

Steve’s lips were as unfairly perfect as the rest of him, because the serum took care of the day to day annoyances like dry lips. It kind of messed Tony up a bit, how soft the kiss was, how much it tasted like a plea (like so many beg pardons) so when he grasped Steve’s face between both hands and deepened it, it was for preservations sake (though whose it was hard to say).

It was permission for them both to let got. To stop thinking and dwelling in places that hurt and simply feel one another.

Tony will say this. Give Steve Rogers an inch and he’ll take a mile.

Tony took them deeper, taking more, coaxing with every movement of lip, and Steve’s hands gripped his waist and held tight; and just like that the kiss went from something controlled to something desperate burgeoning with all their pent up emotions.

There were fireworks going off in Tony’s brain and not just the sexy kind. The sexy part - the part of him that lost his breath as Steve pushed him back against the roof ledge and practically purred at the hard press of muscle against his – that part almost made it impossible to focus on anything else.

Because Steve kissed like he was waging war, like he didn't know how to do anything else, and thrilling as that was Tony wondered what it would be like to make him go slow, to teach him how two bodies could dance without touching the floor.

But even as he thought it, the light show going on in their heads chased the thought away. It wasn't something Tony had words for, though he'd try his best later to describe it to Bruce. All those neurons and pathways in the brain, all those billions of cells carrying information across millions of bridges.

Steve's head was a graveyard, full of dark spots and broken networks. Watching the lights slowly power on in brighter and brighter bursts was one of the most beautiful and humbling things Tony had ever witnessed.

To think something as simple as forming a connection with someone (with him) could produce something like that in someone else.

Oh boy... this was, this was heavy. Suddenly it was hard to breathe. Tony just had not been prepared for the weight of this. Not at all.

Take care. Some prophetic little voice in the back of his mind was warning. Take such sweet care.

And if there was one thing Tony wasn't all that good at, it was taking care of peoples emotions, not even his own (especially not his own).
He pulled back, not necessarily because he wanted to or even because it was smart. Honestly he just didn't want to hurt Steve, or to be hurt anymore, and he knew if he didn't heed that voice and give stepping with care a bit of try, then that was exactly what was going to happen.

Steve pulled back slowly, breathing labored to match Tony's. They stared at one another under the light of the moon, starlight twinkling in their eyes like something out of a song.

"Tony, can we... can we, try this?" Steve asked after a long moment, too blue eyes searching his with fearful hope and Tony closed his eyes because if he kept looking at the man he wouldn't use his head, and he definitely needed a moment to think.

"Steve," he began with a slow breath, opening his eyes once more. "I don't regret kissing you. Not one bit, believe that when I say I think we should take this slow. I'm not going anywhere, and I don't care what everyone thinks. We're not mating just because it's the easy answer. We both deserve better. Don't we?"

They deserved to find a little happiness after everything didn't they? They deserved to be sure. And Tony wasn't at all sure that when Steve kissed him he wasn't seeing those flashing blue eyes he'd witnessed so briefly in his memories.

Tony couldn't compete with ghosts, and he didn't want to.

"Maybe he won't ask you to." Natasha's voice whispered and Tony swallowed thickly.

And maybe some things you just couldn't help.

"Yeah. We do." Steve answered decisively. After a long moment of thought.

"Great, Can we get off the ledge now?" Tony asked with a shiver. "It's cold as fuck up here."

Steve's smile got soft, and if Tony wasn't mistaken, almost fond.

"Yeah, I think we can."

Chapter End Notes

So its been a shitty two weeks, but I enjoyed so much of writing that. Especially my boys together *pinches their cheeks* But please tell me what you thought and distract me from how shitty next week is already shaping up to be. I wish I had six cats to snuggle with lol.
Babe, there's something wretched about this, so precious about this (Get closer to me).

Chapter Summary

Christmas finally arrives at the tower as Tony and Steve get closer. A new year is just around the horizon, and with it comes the first winds of change.

Chapter Notes

*Important. I apologize that these chapters are taking twice as long. I am trying to make up for it by keeping their length nice and meaty. Good news! My beloved writing partner and all around best friend is back from boot camp! With jumping back into our Sound Of Music fic, and still going to work and class I think updates for this story are going to stay at a once every other week pace for the time being. But as long as there are people expressing interest my promise is to keep at it until I finish.

Until next time enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The 22nd Of December

*The soldier is stalking down a dark hallway, a trail of bodies behind him. The security was painfully easy to disable. Poor training and laziness signs their death certificates. With the hired guns dispatched killing the general and his family will only take moments.*

*His steps are slow, silent and measured, as he approaches the bedroom he knows is occupied by the general and his wife. The couple are asleep in their beds, the deaths of their security guards occurring so quietly there was nothing to wake them from slumber.*

*He knows both of them intimately. Has watched them for weeks. The general is well liked by his men, but stupid. The family he adores is paraded proudly for the entire world to see but he can’t see that his dedication to the throne keeps him out of their bed too often. The wife is having an affair with a man she doesn’t love.*

*If the Soldier were cruel he might slit her throat first, just to see the look in the general’s eyes when he is forced to accept that he has lost the game with the highest stakes; but the soldier is never interested in cruelty. Only efficiency.*

*It was efficient to seduce the general’s wife and let her husband’s secrets fall from her loose lips, pushed by the bitter wind of each lonely breath. Now it is efficient to silence her first, because a woman’s scream will bring people running.*

*He knows how to stand so the blood doesn't stain him as it sprays. No clues of any kind will be left*
behind except the ones that he wants. He has the evidence ready to plant but he almost doesn't need it, so rife is the civil unrest in this country.

The blood spray wakes the general and he gasps in horrified shock at the sight of his wife, gurgling and gasping for her last breaths. Sick horror twists up his face when he realizes what has been done, what is about to happen, and he does not scream.

His eyes carry the familiar hollowness of a man who knows he is already dead and wants to be.

With a practiced motion of his wrist, the Soldier sends the man to join his wife in the gurgling throes of death and almost envies the peace that steals over his features as the life bleeds from him.

It is not his place to feel envy, but the emotion ripples through him nonetheless. He will need to tell his handlers so that he can be recalibrated.

The soldier leaves the bedroom the way he came, his mission not yet fully completed. There is a child asleep in the bedroom down the hall. His orders are clear. No witnesses.

The little girl is asleep on her stomach, one stocking foot poking out from underneath her rumpled covers, her arms wrapped tightly around a stuffed toy. Her inky black hair is covering part of her face and neck, but hair is no real obstacle.

He means to strike, but he has frozen. His thoughts, usually so focused, are scattered.

Strange impressions keep coming into his mind like wisps of smoke, stealing his attention away to piece together their mysteries.

Why is he suddenly reminded of creamy skin and bony arms, gripping him tightly in the dark?

He wonders what color the girl’s eyes are. There his no practical purpose to this. It is not an aide to his mission therefor-

He sees laughing blue flash before him and yearns.

It is not his place to yearn. He is broken. He must return to his handler to be recalibrated.

Now they're green. Green and sly and his heart slams in his chest with recognition.

He is no one and nothing, and yet he knows those eyes. He does.

He blinks, sweat breaking out on his brow. Those black tresses are turning yellow right before his eyes, yellow as summer wheat, and even as he tries to blink the vision away they are darkening to burn a bright vibrant red, and his head splits with pain.

Someone is watching him. They're close. He can feel them, taking up space in his head when there isn't room, where he's been stuffed full of codes and directives. There isn't supposed to be anything for him but the mission. The pressure in his skull grows and he backs up with a groan.

In the bed, the little girl's eyes flutter open. Her eyes take a moment to adjust to the dark but when she sees him, a great looming shadow, she opens her mouth to scream.

*~*
Steve jerked free of the dream, the echo of the little girl's scream lingering so tangibly in his mind that for a minute he thought his ears might actually be ringing. It was far from the first time that Steve had been subject to a disorienting dream. He'd had nightmares fueled by the horrors of war and bittersweet dreams of being back in his own time surrounded by familiar faces that left him devastated come morning. However, he wasn't entirely sure he wouldn't have preferred even those dreams over ones like the one he'd had since they'd taken that soup on Asgard.

Finding out that his teammates were still having powerful dreams they’d approached Thor about it. His best guess had been that their bodies might not be able to shake off the effects of the Benu's magic as well as Asgardians. Steve had given him an earful. He had a lot to say to Thor about giving the team proper warning before throwing them into potentially deadly situations, without all the necessary information. Even Tony had backed him up on that one, and Tony wasn’t exactly the kind of guy known for caution.

Steve lay in his cooling sweat, shivering in the dark as he calmed his breathing. Tony's face floated to the forefront of his mind and his chest pulled tight with longing.

Stark was still a puzzle, and Steve wasn't confident he'd ever put together all of his pieces but Tony had really taken him by surprise on that rooftop.

He'd offered comfort and support when he didn’t have to. He'd touched Steve when Steve hadn't really been touched in months, not since crashing in ice and waking up almost a century later. Not that he’d been looking for it or anything, it was just something you took for granted when you had it and missed more than you thought you would when it was gone.

It shouldn’t even have been that big of a deal, except when Tony had touched him it had felt like finally taking a breath after nearly drowning.

That light show that had gone off in his head... Steve didn't even know how much he'd needed that until it was happening. His eyes stung, like he might start crying and he grimaced at himself.

Time to get up, he ordered himself as he pulled his body out of bed. He wasn't going to get back to sleep and there wasn't much sense in laying in the dark feeling sorry for himself. He was lucky to have survived and wallowing in self-pity was a sorry way to repay the ones who hadn’t.

For a bare second he thought about Tony asleep in his bed and he twitched, the want deep in his muscle and bone to press close to him, closer even than they'd been on the roof, and his cheeks heated with the intensity of the sudden stab of need. His mother would have had all sorts of things to say about the bent of his thoughts, but truthfully it wasn't even really about wanting sex.

Steve took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

Not that he didn't think the sex would be good. Tony was an attractive guy, Steve didn't see a point in saying otherwise, and the kiss they'd shared had been dizzying. But the ache he felt... That was about finding a way to blow away the darkness that kept swallowing up his head. These days, it was like he only really felt alive during a fight. That and when he’d had his tongue down Stark’s throat, but Steve didn’t need to be a head shrink to know that probably wasn’t a healthy coping tactic or very fair to either of them.

Grimacing he pushed the crazy thought of going to Tony’s room aside and reached for the abandoned sketchbook on his nightstand instead.

Steve had been awake in the twenty-first century for about ten months and the voice in his head that yearned for Bucky so badly (so darkly) had not gone away. It had gotten so bad that Steve couldn’t
even eat without remembering how Bucky would never enjoy another meal because Steve had failed
him, so that the food started to taste like ash in his mouth.

He didn't know how to make it stop, knew that when you were this broken you were supposed to
see a head shrink, but even if all the material he'd read said it was different these days (less shameful)
there was a terrifying amount of certainty sitting quietly in the back of his consciousness that no
doctor could close his wounds.

And it felt a lot like being wounded. Like he’d been stabbed in the chest and instead of getting
stitched up he was trying to walk around like nothing had happened, losing blood with every step but
nobody but him could see the gaping hole in his chest.

He needed help, he knew that. But unless there was a doctor out there who could raise the dead,
Steve didn’t know what anybody could do for him.

Fury had suspected he wasn’t right, because when he'd asked Steve to join the initiative he'd said so.

Tony had asked back in Fury’s office why Steve had joined the initiative, and the truth was more
selfish than Steve was comfortable with sometimes.

"You're human Cap, and you'll always be human but you were given a unique set of gifts. But
sometimes getting a gift you don't fully understand can be more of a curse?" Fury had said, sliding
Steve a stack of files regarding the initiative its purpose, and his potential teammates. "What you built
with Barnes you’re never gonna find out here and truth be told, we don’t fully understand how it
was even possible. When it comes to losing a bondmate we’re fresh out of ideas but maybe his
people have a few."

Something about hearing Tony and the others referred to as Bucky's people had broken something
inside of Steve. In all that time when it had just been him and Bucky against the world, he’d never
stopped to think that maybe Bucky’s world wasn’t so narrow. Maybe Bucky had people he couldn’t
leave behind and still be the man Steve knew he was.

He’d agreed to join the initiative because it was the right thing, to help the Gata regain a measure of
what had been stolen from them; but more selfishly, it was a way of saying what he’d never get to
say to Bucky now. Your people are my people. Your fight is my fight. I’ll follow you to the end of
all there is.

Bucky had been a Queen like Tony. Steve still didn’t completely understand the full implications of
that any more than Tony or Fury did for that matter; but he knew what his feelings meant. He knew
what he’d have done if there was any way to go back. But there wasn’t, and more than anything
Steve just wanted to do right by his memory. He couldn’t do that if he was too broken to function.
Which was what made the whole thing so frustrating. Until that night on the roof.

Tony had been in his head, had touched something inside him, and it had been the first time that
insistent voice inside Steve that sad he wanted Bucky, needed Bucky couldn’t (shouldn't) live
without him, had been forced to recede.

Steve smiled, thinking about it as he wandered into the living room on the common floor. He paused
to stare at the glowing lights on the tree, thinking fondly of Harley's excitement as it had been put up
and decorated and the man who had made that possible for him.

Stark was a complicated man but a good one, and he was doing a good thing here for all of them.
Maybe they wouldn’t agree on everything but now he was certain that they truly shared a common
goal. Tony wasn’t Bucky, but nobody was ever going to be.
Steve’s mother would have told him he still had to live. Hell Bucky would have told him that, and Tony… Tony was a good man. Bucky would have liked him. This could be a good thing.

Steve sat by the tree and let his mind wander back to the past, reveling in the fact that he could even do that now without feeling hopelessly lost or depressed.

He still remembered his first Christmas with Bucky. Steve's mom couldn't afford a big fancy tree, but the guy down at the lot had taken pity on them and given her one of the duds for a quarter of the price. It had been one of the trees that came off the trucks with twisted trunks and mangled branches.

His Ma had said the same thing about their less than perfect tree that she said about every cough or illness that Steve had ever came down with.

'Nothing a little love can't fix'.

So maybe Steve was always going to see the boy lying in the incubator with tubes and wires sticking out of his appendages struggling for each breath, and feel kinship.

"What's wrong with him Ma?" Steve asked, eyes widening with fright at the small child behind the glass, hooked up to several big bulky machines.

"I'm afraid he's very sick." His mother murmured in answer, something unfamiliarily heavy and sad about her voice that Steve didn't like. "But we're going to help get him comfortable, and hopefully he'll be less afraid."

She squeezed his hand and he felt marginally better, but Steve didn't like this cold room with all of its beeping machines. It wasn't like any other hospital his ma had worked in before.

"Why's his nametag say 26Barnes?"

"It's... Barnes is his handler's name, and he's subject number twenty-six."

Steve frowned.

"But what's his name?"

"Well, I don't know that he has one besides that."

"That's stupid. I'm going to call him Bucky, cause he's got furry ears like my bear."

"Stevie, he's not a toy like your bear. He's a very sick kit who won't be with us very much longer. Maybe."

"Of course he's not a toy! He's a boy like me, and none of these people even gave him a name! No wonder he's... well no wonder!" Steve stamped his foot, unwilling to voice aloud what was so obvious even to his young eyes. The boy in the incubator was dying. Turning from his mother he pressed his hands and face to the glass between him and Bucky and swore with vehemence, "You're gonna be alright Bucky. Ma's the best nurse in the city and this aint nothin a little loving won't fix."

Steve blinked the memory away and sighed. If only that had proved to be true.

But, staring down at the picture forming of a bright-eyed kit with an evergreen sprig clamped playfully between his teeth brown tail knocking against a low hanging ornament, a sweet ache filled his chest.

Maybe it had, in the ways that counted.
Tony woke in a cold sweat, his heart pounding. The dreams had plagued him almost nightly since he and the team had returned from Asgard. Well, more accurately speaking they were Natasha's, and when they held her mind in grip while she slept she couldn't always keep her walls up. Her distress called to him, so thanks to their stunt in Asgard, Natasha was all messed up in the head about Ivan and Tony had a front row seat to the horror show.

He didn't resent her for it, really. He just hated the feeling of helplessness that followed each event and the emotional exhaustion it left them both in.

"Do you need me to come down?" He asked as he had each time before. The first time she'd had a particularly gruesome nightmare about Ivan the night they'd returned, he'd gone to her room and climbed into bed with her but the next time it happened she'd all but flinched away from him. She'd never admit it, but she'd hated that he was there, seeing how badly shaken she was and that the bond told him everything he'd ever needed to know about how to hurt her.

God help him them both but he hoped he never did. She'd been hurt by so much already.

Her response was slow in coming but it came with a gentle wave of real affection that helped chase away some of the chill lingering in Tony's bones.

"Thank you. But I'll be alright. Go back to sleep."

Sighing, unable to be of use and knowing full well that neither of them were going to be able to get back to sleep Tony got up with the intention of going down to his lab to get some work done. The nano-bots were just about ready for a test run, but Helen and Bruce were insisting that Tony bring a doctor in and get a medical professional's input before he injected his body with an alien organism.

And it was an organism. There was no earthly equivalent for it but the metallic like material that formed the Benu's scales and likely its entire skeleton was in actuality a highly adaptable (not to mention complex) living organism.

They were calling it Benadin-X, or BX for their shorthand notes.

Studying BX and harvesting it for use in the nanobots had forced Tony to put several other projects on the back burner though. And if he was going to keep to his word and discover Catman's identity by Tuesday he only had three more days to do it.

When Tony wandered onto the communal floor it was with the thought of grabbing a glass of his favorite cream from the kitchen to take down with him, but he stopped short when he realized he wasn't the only one up.

Steve was sitting in the armchair nearest the Christmas tree, what looked like a sketchpad open on his lap, a thin pencil slowly scratching across the paper as he stared down at his work with the look of someone lost in their minds eye.

He looked soft in the glow of the Christmas lights. Soft, and strikingly lonely in a way that tugged at something in Tony's chest until he heard himself clearing his throat softly. Steve looked up startled, but relaxed when he saw that it was Tony approaching.

His lips turned up in a tentative (Tony almost dared to say shy) smile as he murmured in greeting, "Hey Tony."
God it was pathetic how something as simple as a little smile could set Tony's heart racing. Steve was more than just a childhood crush turned whatever; he was the apex of every hope and every wish Tony had ever had for himself put to flesh. He wanted, down to a hungry ache in his bones, to feel what he knew Steve must feel every day, to feel good and to believe deep down that he was good.

And maybe he'd never be as good as somebody like Captain America, but having someone like that (like Steve) look at you like they were just holding their breath until they saw you? That might mean maybe he'd gotten there in his own way.

Fuck. He doesn’t need anyone to tell him how pathetic he is. How stupid it was to even think something like that, when they were only just beginning to explore this thing between them, and Steve was sure to discover all the reasons why Tony Stark was not worth ten of him and not cut out for relationships. But he was a selfish asshole and it was a hungry hungry ache.

Shaking his head clear of the fog of yearning he reminded himself that he had been the one to ask that they take things slow and that his inner Pepper still insisted that it was a good idea to do that. Pepper is usually right about these kinds of things.

"Couldn't sleep?" Tony asked, already suspecting the answer and Steve nodded.

"Bad dreams."

"Barnes again?" He asked gently, but to his surprise Steve shook his head.

"Not this time. Kinda thankful for that." The wry twist of his lips didn't quite make it to his eyes. "Though I can't say I enjoyed what took its place. Not sure where my mind dug it up from."

"I'm sorry about all this. Thor's not sure when our minds will stop reaching into the netherworld, or whatever, to pluck out nightmare visions." Tony offered in apology, guilt twisting sharply inside his stomach as he thought of Natasha, no doubt lying awake in her room even now.

Steve frowned.

"It's not your fault Tony."

"I dragged you guys up there with me," Tony felt the need to point out, because it was the truth. He was the one with a deadly virus taking over his body, the others shouldn't have had to suffer just because his life was once again in shambles.

"Tony, we're a Pride." Steve chastised, but unlike so many times before the words didn't carry with them a bitter sting. Maybe it was the damnable lights, still making him look soft and bed rumpled with a dash of holiday glow just to fuck with Tony's emotions. "We wanted to have your back. I don't know much about them but from talking with Luke I get the picture that we'd be a pretty sorry bunch if we just let our Queen risk his life and didn't try and help him. And even if none of that were true, we're your friends. You have a problem, then we'll tackle it. Together."

Friends. Tony swallowed tightly.

It was strange, because on the one hand, they've been teammates for months and living in the same tower, so of course they've all been building towards something easily slapped with the label of friendship and put away on a shelf.

But on the other, real friendship was so much more complicated, so much more unexpected. It wasn’t just the product of two people sharing space, or common goals even, it was a million moments of
peeking behind the curtain, seeing the bests and the worsts, and sticking together despite all.

It was give and take, and push and shove, and finding the same face looking back at you when all was said and done.

The Peppers. The Rhodeys, the Happys... he can count them on three fingers; but the way things stand now with the team, and the way Steve looks at him and says 'together' made Tony believe that might be changing.

Friends were good. So much more than he'd ever expected. So much more than he deserved, a familiar voice (sounding a shit ton like his dear departed not-father) whispered. Only that wasn't right was it? They wouldn't all be here, weathering out his moods and respecting his conditions if they didn't want to be. Steve definitely wouldn't be. Not unless he saw something worth sticking around for.

And maybe regardless... maybe Tony just deserved to be happy and should try to be. No fears and no strings. Maybe just once.

"You deserve so much more than you have been given, kotyonok." Natasha's thoughts echoed his, a strange feeling of sadness to them that he could only wonder at.

"Friend's huh?" Tony murmured, letting a soft purr of pleasure rumbling behind the sound as he lowered himself onto the arm of Steve's chair, leaning close his tail sliding against the bare skin of Steve's arm. "You kiss all your friends like that Rogers?"

Tony watched Steve's pupils dilate and purred again as the enticing scent of aroused tom filling his nose, his heart beginning to pick up speed in his chest.

"Just the lucky ones," Steve replied almost deadpan except for the mischievous glint in his eye he couldn't quite suppress, and there was just something about that expression on the face of Captain America, Mr. Apple Pie himself, that made Tony laugh in delight.

"I'm shocked and appalled at how open that leaves you to making out with Fury. Help, I need brain bleach, I need -"

Steve surged forward, mouth covering Tony’s and Tony surrendered to the hungry pressure of his mouth with a groan. The voice in the back of his head that whispered a man like Steve couldn’t really want him (couldn’t really need him) went mercifully silent in the wake of the evidence. Steve held on to him like he might drown if he didn’t.

~*~*~

Christmas Eve was one of the few days of the year that guaranteed that come morning, Tony could be found rising from his bed at a decent hour and well rested on top of it. Well, as well rested as a guy like him could get when regular sleep was a distant dream his body had dreamed in time gone by.

Tony always let JARVIS harass him into bed early the night before and resisted the urge to drink his weight in alcohol (that was saved for later) because he knew that if he gave in to the desire to just lock himself in his lab all night and crack open the bar, that he'd be in no shape to do what he'd done every December the 24th since he was twenty-eight years old.
This year he’d had to improvise some because of the destruction of the Shelter, but Pepper had made arrangements to see the lodge properly decked out and that the residents would have as fine a Christmas as Tony’s money could buy them.

And since Tony was still uncomfortable with inviting more strangers than he had to into the shelter kats temporary home, it meant having to improvise on some of the traditional entertainment for the kits.

Which explained why the morning of the twenty-fourth found Tony up at seven in the morning, freshly showered, nursing his third cup of coffee, eyeing Steve Rogers critically as the man in question buckled on a pair of authentic reindeer hide boots, his mouth frowning as his hands examined their gold buckles.

With his red coat hanging open revealing the white undershirt he wore and the straps of his suspenders, Steve looked far closer to December’s poster boy for a firehouse charity calendar than jolly old St. Nick but Tony was far from complaining. Steve wouldn’t be Steve though if he didn’t balk at the thought of wearing thousands of dollars’ worth of costume.

“Tony this feels like real gold.”

“Mmh, well technically it’s platinum coated in gold alloy, but since it’s the cost I know that’s turning you that particularly pallid shade of disapproving, we’ll concede that point.”

“Pallid.” Steve’s mouth was still scowling but Tony was getting better at reading his particular brand of dry humor and spotted the hint of amusement that flashed through his eyes before he turned to Harley, who was decked out head to toe in a green and red elf costume/flight suit. The ten-year-old had balked at first at the embarrassment of dressing up like one of Santa’s helpers, but once he’d learned that a condition of flying in Santa’s Jet was to get on board with the holiday requisite of looking like an idiot, he’d happily conceded.

“That’s a good word. Keener, give me a spelling.” Steve prompted and Harley, who was currently polishing off what looked like the last strip of black peppered bacon from the early breakfast Bruce had whipped together for everyone, mumbled through a full mouth.

“Pallid. P-A-L-L-I-D.”

“Definition?” Natasha asked, passing on her way to the fridge, the tiny silver bells strung through her hair jingling as she walked. In her red and white fur lined coat, white body suit, and slinky thigh high’s, she made for a very battle ready Mrs. Clause; and Tony was pretty sure those were miniature flash grenades nestled in with the bells in her hair, but hey. Festive!

Tony had expected her to put up more of a fight about dressing up, but she’d been surprisingly game for the whole affair. Granted she’d insisted on coming up with her own attire and had threatened to disembowel him if he argued, but never let it be said that Tony didn’t know how to pick his battles.

“It means he looks pale and gross, kind of like a slug.” Harley explained confidently with all the tact of his ten years. Swallowing his mouthful he perked up in his seat looking toward Tony for confirmation. “Is that right?”

Harley was scheduled to take the federal assessment exam in early January and he was particularly nervous about the English portion that was well known for throwing complicated grammar rules and arbitrary words at young kats that even graduate students would struggle with, in order to leach points away from their overall score.
“Got it in one.” Tony raised his mug to him in toast and the kit pumped his fist in the air in victory. Steve was wearing a particularly hang dog look that Tony suspected was half bullshit, but he was a sucker so he sighed and said, “A very hot slug. The hottest. Not at all family friendly. Not all that plushy either. You need stuffing. I volunteer as tribute.”

Steve predictably turned an embarrassed shade of pink while Tony grinned into his cup. Natasha rolled her eyes at him while Clint made a gagging nose.

“Here’s a word for you Harley. Spell nausea.”

“How about spelling constantly late?” Pepper intervened just as Harley had opened his mouth, her high heels clicking smartly on the kitchen tile as she waltzed into the room to survey all their costumes critically.

Bruce and Clint were both sporting reindeer antlers on top of their heads to match their fuzzy brown sweaters and Thor wore a matching costume with Harley. Tony meanwhile was sitting comfortable in a pearly white suit, his customer designed white shades tucked artfully into his hair.

“T-O-N-Y.” Steve offered with a seemingly innocent expression. Tony cast a withering glance his way but Steve just grinned at him.

“How come you’re not dressed Tony?” Pepper asked and in reply Tony reached up and pressed the button on the side of his custom glasses. A pair of metal wings slid out of the nearly invisible slits in the back of his suit jacket while above his head the holographic image of a halo appeared.

Clint snickered loudly at Pepper’s unimpressed look. Tony just smiled.

~*~*~

Steve hadn’t spent a great deal of time thinking about having children. Truthfully part of it was because he hadn’t been able to picture a dame wanting to hitch her star to a wagon like his, but mostly because he’d been in love with Bucky almost longer than he could remember. That had made things complicated.

Least of all for Steve’s poor mother who had the difficult task of trying to educate two young morons about their bodies and the differences in their biology. What Steve in all his twelve-year-old wisdom had gotten from the conversation was, "So you're a girl?!"

Bucky had socked him in the eye, but that hadn’t stopped either of them from whispering in the dark later how they were going to get a house together when they grew up, with two kids and a yard. They’d learned pretty quick though that what the courts meant by preventing abuse and sussing out 'Degenerates' was not cleaning up the kennels, the work houses, or scraping out the heat dens lining the underbelly of the city, but making an example of those who threatened the status quo.

They knew that if the love between a human and their kat was legitimized it would bring their whole system down like it had for Steve.

So he’d given up the hope of having children with Bucky – too risky, and Steve would never be rich enough to pay the fines to avoid prison – but he’d never really needed that anyway. Just Bucky.

But Bucky was gone, a reality that must be accepted, and even though it had been nearly a year
Steve still felt like he'd only just taken a breath since watching him fall. And now that he was surrounded by over a dozen of them, it was hard not to look at the kits and think about the future. Having the life he’d never thought he and Bucky could have… If he and Tony took their relationship further well, Tony would have heats. They could take precautions but there was no fully predicting these kinds of things. And Tony was really good with the kits. Steve could see he'd be a great dad.

Mother? In his day it was mother but he had no idea what was considered correct these days and didn’t feel like opening up an argument with Tony if Mother was considered horribly offensive.

The thought of being a dad himself was kind of overwhelming for Steve. He didn't know a lot about kids, and it was completely different from managing troops. Would he even be any good at it?

He was having a hard time just keeping up with the kid tugging on the coat of his costume, asking the millionth question about all the bad guys he'd fought and if he could see the shield.

"Alright you wildlings!" A sharp whistle cut through the excited voices of the children who had crowded around the team, who were currently sat in the middle of what looked like a wrapping paper apocalypse. The gift giving had gone relatively smoothly, with only a few mild rebukes for grabbing, impatience, and attempted biting.

It was heartbreaking to see how territorial these kits got over things that other kids took for granted, like new clothes and funny pairs of thick socks. It wasn't that far from what Steve remembered from being a kid growing up in the depression. You learned to guard what you had because you never knew when you'd lose it.

But Tony and Pepper had kept things running along smoothly and the mood had stayed happy and light despite the unavoidable reminders of how the residents here were used to going without. The adults had gotten as much of a kick at seeing the Avengers dressed up as the kits had and everywhere he looked there were rosy cheeks and laughing eyes, even on the shiest of them.

All eyes turned to Tony, who pulled his fingers from his mouth to gesture for the kits who were clambering around their heroes to pepper them with questions and play with the bits and pieces of their costumes, to take their seats again.

"There's one last gift that Pepper and I want to share with all of you." Tony announced to the room and Steve perked up. He was curious about what the big surprise was, because Tony and Pepper had been talking about it for weeks and having private meetings and all he or any of the team really knew about it was that it had something to do with the shelter. Something that Steve had gleaned also involved an island.

He watched with the others as the lights dimmed, unsure what to expect as JARVIS began a projection show and Tony began to talk again.

"I know it's been a rough year for us, and particularly a rough couple of months at the end; but my promise to you is that none of you are going to lose your home here. In fact I've been thinking a lot lately about the rebuild, about all the ways that we can make this place less of a pit stop between where you're going and where you decide you want to go and more of a home."

Not for the first time Steve caught himself looking at Tony and thinking he was really something else. The things he'd made possible were amazing (he was amazing) and what he was doing here with these Gata... Steve was proud to be a part of it.

"Because lets be honest, the choices of where to go from here aren't that great right?" Tony went on, his eyes meeting children and adults alike as they swept over the crowd. They paused on a little girl
in the front, the quiet one with white blond hair who Steve kept hearing him call Tink, and the kit lit up from head to toe like someone had lit a candle inside her.

"Some of you have decided to try and find a place in a family that needs you and I respect that. Stark Industries has and will continue to support cross-community rehabilitation by providing stipends to the veterans and low income families who desire true companionship and mutual growth in partnership with the Gata community and have a place in their homes for you.”

A polite round of claps, mostly from the staff Steve noticed, followed and Tony waited for it to die down before continuing.

"Others have decided to prolong their stay in pursuit of an education, in the hopes of becoming public aides or working in a trade. I commend your efforts. Stark Industries is dedicated to providing you with the tools and recourses in order to achieve your goals, because all of you are capable. All of you can shape your world for the better, but first someone has to give you a chisel."

An older fel woman let out a cheer and a more jubilant round of applause followed it.

"But lets talk about the realities for a moment. The reality is that no matter how carefully we vet these families, it is a leap of faith we take with every placement we make. We have been given no choice but to rely on a system that says we are not the masters of our own lives, or our own bodies. We are told never to ask ourselves how we can rely on the good character of the same people who see no issue in owning us, and when that character fails the law does not protect us.”

Steve tensed as someone in the room growled low, and the sound picked up, the discontent spreading like a wildfire.

"Their tests are designed to stop you from ever reaching the gate, and when you do walk through the doors of their classrooms you will be marginalized, ostracized, and unfairly scrutinized. No one will wonder why your scores are lower, your attitude always labeled combatant, and when you are dropped from their programs they will say it was because you never had any business being there in the first place.

“If you do make it through, you'll suffer the indignity of low wages with few opportunities for advancement while you watch others take credit for your years of work. You will do three times the work of your peers and watch them pass you, year after year. Maybe one of you will have a name tag that says Dr. So-and-So on it one day, but it will not be because the others were less deserving.”

The room had gone deathly quiet as Tony's words resonated with his listeners and Steve swallowed back the lump that was forming in his throat. He’d never heard Tony sound so impassioned or look so dangerous as he looked just then. There was a wildness in his expression, in his scent, that had every hair on Steve’s body raising.

"It's bleak... when you lay it all out like that." Tony was saying in a softer tone. "But we're not going to give up. When they put the lights out you light a fire. Then you build a six bulb with 100,000 watts and tell them to do their worst. So that's what we're going to do. Ladies and gentelkats I am proud to announce that Stark Industries has recently purchased the land to begin our rebuild. I give you Resilience."

The room was suddenly awash with holographic images of a sandy shore, as the sound of waves filled all their ears. Steve was not the only one whose face registered shock and wide eyed amazement as the very realistic looking computer simulation took them from the beach through the streets of what looked like a pristine seaside town out of one of the science fiction magazines that Bucky used to devour.
He listened as Tony described the center as a privately owned and privately funded rescue community for Gata. He watched the wonder and excitement on all of their faces when he explained that the teachers, doctors, therapists and disciplinary enforcement would all come from gata like them perhaps even some of the adults listening in the room right now. They wouldn't be a drain on government recourses because they would play a role in sustaining their own community through farming and trade.

That ought to make the people on capitol hill happy Steve thought, because it was just the sort of thing they liked. The chance for big press and to look like the good guys when really Stark Industries had done all the work and would foot the bill while the community got its feet under it. They'd see it as harmless. Why not let the discards go off and play at being Quakers when they got free economic production out of it. They'd probably want to take advantage of it once they realized, like they did with the labor camps, but Steve knew Tony would never allow that to happen.

It was trying to figure out what was going on in that head of his that made Steve so nervous.

He knew a call to arms when he heard it and couldn't shake the feeling that Tony was planning something bigger. He was holding things back, not showing them all of the cards he had in his hand and that meant leaving Steve to operate in the dark.

He didn't like when his teammates kept making moves without being upfront with the team, or the thought of the shelter kats being used in a fight they didn’t fully understand.

They’d been through enough as it was and they weren’t soldiers or pawns to be used in anyone’s vendetta.

"He’s up to something." Steve murmured under his breath. Natasha didn't turn toward him but he could tell she heard by the amused slant her mouth took.

"Tony usually is."

"I don’t like that he’s keeping the team in the dark." Steve insisted lowly, anxiety twisting in his stomach as the implications of what he was seeing in all those fancy displays slowly sank in. He wasn't a brain like Tony but he wasn’t just a pretty face ether and he could see what was behind the bones of this and the risk was high. Maybe too high.

"Tony's Queen. If this is going to be real he needs to build his pride his way." Natasha murmured lowly in reply. "He doesn't need our permission."

"I didn't know Tony being Queen meant that he called all the shots. I've seen what that kind of leadership does and that's not what this country is about."

The bells in Natasha’s hair jingled quietly as she turned to look at him, a single brow lifting just slightly in a micro expression of incredulity that he was becoming used to seeing the more missions they took for SHIELD together.

Even though it meant she was finding him irritating he almost smiled because he appreciated that she called things how she saw them.

"You know the difference between a democracy and a monarchy as well as I do. You read the file Steve. I'll admit I was surprised at first when I heard you’d agreed to sign on, but it makes sense." At his incredulous look the curve of her mouth just deepened. "You don't like authority, because yours is the only authority you really trust. A guy with that kind of chip on his shoulder only really has one option when it comes to governing trust: marry the Queen. ”
Steve drew back at her words, stung jaw clenching tightly but there was nothing even remotely apologetic in Natasha’s expression. She just looked like she was patiently waiting for him to deny it and it was that certainty he saw that made the words die on his tongue.

It wasn’t exactly a great feeling, but he respected her enough to give the idea proper consideration. She was right about one thing, he’d gone into this knowing how a Pride worked. He couldn't very well kick up a fuss because he didn't like it now.

Even though he hated swallowing his craw as much as the next guy it was worth it to watch the brief flicker of surprise on her face when he didn’t say what she was expecting. Though that amused slant did return to her mouth as he bit out, "Fine. But I don't think you're any more for being a pawn for a dictator than I am, so how do we get him to talk to us?"

Because they definitely needed to talk about it as a team. That was for damn sure.

"We wait for him to come to us."

That really didn't sit well with Steve.

"Can we really trust that Tony's going to tell us everything there is to know?"

"Steve." She looked at him again. "You should always expect that Tony’s going to be thinking ahead of you. Stark will hold something close to his vest in one hand even when he’s showing you something with the other."

“But we can’t work like that!” Steve hissed under his breath. One of the staff nurses glanced nervously over his shoulder at them. Steve did his best to level his tone as he continued to whisper. "Tony has to trust us, and we have to feel like we can trust him or this is all going to fall apart. None of us are the blind sheep kind, Natasha. That's just how we operate."

"You're not hearing me Rogers.” Natasha said very slowly. "When he trusts you, Tony will give you everything he thinks he can, but he will never give it all. Because he believes he is supposed to be the thing standing between you and the bitter end. You throw your shield to stop the bad guys. Tony will always throw himself."

He couldn't help flashing back to a time when he'd assumed the exact opposite of Tony and had been proven so horrifyingly wrong sometimes he still had nightmares about standing below, helpless, watching Tony disappear into the black of space. Sometimes it was watching him fall from the sky, too high for the impact not to be deadly, nothing to slow his fall. Steve felt a rush of anger and a strange surge of protectiveness as his eyes flew back to Tony, standing at the head of the room to give his speech.

That couldn't be true could it? Tony couldn't think he deserved to live less than they did, could he?

Natasha seemed to read his thoughts because her eyes were knowing as she shook her head at him.

"Don't make the mistake of thinking he's just a brain without a heart Steve. Stark is going to die of empathy just like the rest of us. He expects to be standing alone when it happens."

Steve considered what she'd said, wondering if it was really true that he might never really know all there was to know about Tony, that Tony would always be doing something to sabotage the trust they’d built because Tony would always be trying to throw himself away.

Hadin't he already seen that? Some part of Steve asked himself. There had been a moment during the battle of New York when Steve had paused on the battlefield, cowl lost, slowly raising his bruised
and battered body to survey the senseless destruction and loss of countless lives happening around him when he'd realized they weren't going to win this one. They didn't have a hope against creatures like the Chitauri, and even if he and his shield were right where they were supposed to be - between the innocent and the forces that would consume them – it was not his hope to die on a battlefield with the knowledge that the people he'd tried to protect were doomed.

And they had been. Their leaders had seen the outcome of the battle just as clearly as Steve had and decided they were all expendable. It was Tony that Fury had gone to when they fired that Nuke because he knew what Tony would do and that he was the only one who could.

"We'll things are different now." Steve meant it, with every fiber of his being. "He's not alone, and if it takes him all the time we have left to realize that so be it."

"That's a lifetime commitment Mr. Rogers. Make sure you're up for it." She nodded gently toward the crowded living room stuffed full of kats of all ages, colors shapes and sizes and finished gravely. "You can't split the kids in the divorce and in case you haven't already noticed, the people who break his heart don't live long."

The crazy thing was Steve couldn't tell whether she was warning him for his sake or Tony's.

~*~*~

The crowded living room was dripping in lights and evergreen bows, and Bing Crosby was crooning at full volume about snow and hollying his jollies; which was timely because Clint was standing suspiciously close to the eggnog bowl which was now sporting an equally suspicious hand written note stating that it was for adults only. Not that it mattered a great deal because the only child in residence was busy flying the drone Tony had gifted him over everyone's head.

Tony had held his reservations about it but after a full day at the shelter they were back in the tower and the Avengers Christmas party was well underway, and was thus far a roaring success. By some miracle, (or maybe just because everyone was just as big a sucker for Harley's big blue eyes as Tony was) everyone that Tony considered family had been able to make it. Even Rhodey had managed to get leave and had brought a friend along (though Tony smelled bullshit on the just friends bit, and not just because Carol had tits).

Pepper and Harley's mother were discussing the finer merits of custom jewelry. You wouldn't know it to look at her that Jena had a been studying Fashion Design before she'd dropped out of school to have Harley. Tony knew by the calculating look in Pepper's eye that some lucky bastard was going to being paying out a favor pretty soon. Probably Mel over at Darlings. Pepper practically kept the boutique in business with her obsession with their jewelry line.

Tony was currently sitting in the circle of couches in the center of the room with Natasha curled at his feet, listening to Thor entertaining his small captive audience, including Jane and her assistant Darcy. Helen and Bruce were there as well listening attentively to the highly animated retelling of the Avenger's battle with the Benu bird.

His feet were nice and toasty what with a rather contented looking Natasha claiming his legs as the perfect resting post, but Tony's back was getting chilled what with all that glaringly empty spacy behind him.
So the good thing about kinda sorta seeing another person, was how in those early stages it was all "gee Tony, let me get that door for you" and "hey Tony I'm getting up. Are you hungry?" And "Golly Tony, your ears look so soft. Can I rub them?"

Tony might be a feral Queen and the CEO of a billion dollar company, as well as one of the leading voices on Gata rights, but every now and then a fellow just wanted to feel a bit like Scarlet Ohara and have someone who made their stomach do the wibblies turn a bit pink while asking for permission to touch them. So sue him.

Yes he would like another helping of food and of course his fur is naturally that soft.

Okay usually that's a bald faced lie that anybody in their right mind who'd ever seen a shampoo commercial would know the truth of – buy PantineProFe for long, soft, one hundred percent beautiful hair; because every kitten deserves to feel like she's a show kitten – but Extrimis pretty much meant he was never going to have to worry about dry or thinning hair in his lifetime, and he was fine with clearing up some space in his bathroom for an in shower coffee pot anyway.

Steve was an attentive almost-boyfriend and Tony had taken him up on the offer of a fresh plate of grub, even if it meant losing Steve's firm body against his back and warm hands stroking his head.

But it looked like Steve must have gotten delayed because Tony could see him now comfortably chatting with Rhodey and Carol at the food table near the almost certainly compromised punch bowl. Coulson was in the middle of trying to warn Happy who was ladling himself a liberal amount of eggnog into one of the giant reindeer shaped mugs that Harley had insisted on picking out for the occasion. Tony had protested very vocally but he'd been overruled by big round watery kitten eyes because he was a marshmallow.

"I did not think the creature appreciated being likened to a turkey.” Thor was chuckling, at the part in the story when Tony's attempts at diverting the Benu’s attention had nearly gotten him turned into baked beans in a can.

"My father in particular I think would be scandalized to hear someone called it that. I shall enjoy telling him.” A warm voice above Tony said with a chuckle, and Tony glanced up to find Luke Debar leaning against the back of the couch smiling down at him. Jarvis hadn’t announced his arrival but then again with a party in full swing and an unusual mix of people coming and going it made sense to drop the formalities.

The tom must have come directly over to the couch upon arriving because he was still in his winter coat, a monstrously puffy thing that looked thermal enough for an expedition to Alaska. Tony had to bite back a grin at how ridiculously closely he resembled an animation from South Park. The reports all agreed this was a mild winter for the city but he supposed for someone from the Congo that didn’t matter much.

Enough jangling to announce Saint Nick's arrival in a reindeer led sleigh, announced DUMMY's presence as he zoomed across the room to collect the tom’s winter gear. He and YOU had been brought up to help with the party and were taking their hosting duties very seriously. Harley had strapped bells to DUMMY’s sides so that he jingled with every movement and YOU, who was dropping food onto plates over at the food station, was sporting a big bright red Christmas bow.

As usual Luke held himself proudly and Tony looked on as he somehow made the act of shrugging out of that atrocious coat look graceful and choreographed.

He perked up a bit when he noticed the very tailored looking (aka very tight) red sweater the tom was sporting and the way it lovingly clung to an unexpectedly well-muscled chest.
Shield Medical uniform Zero. Hugo Bass One, Tony thought as he raised his drink to his lips.

Natasha’s hand had somehow crept up Tony’s pant leg and her vicious little claws were digging into his ankle.

“Ouch.” Tony hissed glaring down at her.

“Aren’t you betrothed? Don’t ogle.” Her reproachful stare would have made her thoughts clear even without the bond, but the bond was handy for trading private little quips. He grinned wolfishly at her and thought back with a wink.

“First, nobody in this day and age gets betrothed. Second, Steve and I agreed to get to know one another which does not strike either one of us mysteriously blind to good looking people. And lastly, is that jealousy I hear? Looking to bag yourself a doctor Romanov?”

“While you were licking your chops, did you happen to notice the bling he’s wearing?” Natasha nodded covertly in the tom’s direction and Tony bit back the urge to indignantly insist that he had not been licking his lips, he wasn’t a complete ingrate, in favor of giving the tom another once over until he spotted whatever it was that Natasha was so caught up on.

Tony almost didn't see it at all, tucked as it was under the tom's shirt, but as Luke knelt down to unlace his boots at DUMMY’s insistent nudging it slid forward. It, turned out to be a glossy blue stone hanging at the end of a thick golden chain. There was something about it that didn't sit right with Tony. He knew precious gems when he saw them and though he couldn't bring forward a name for the stone, something about it tugged at his memory. He'd seen it before, or something like it. He knew he had, but the where and the when was the question.

“Luke!” Clint crowed, abandoning the group by the punchbowl, had loped his way over to the tom and swung an arm around his neck in the universally understood language of Bro-dom. “Come remind my anal retentive partner how high the tolerance level for an adult Kat is.”

“About seventy five percent over an adult humans” Luke answered by route and Clint turned to give Coulson an ‘I told you so’ look which the Agent politely ignored.

Chuckling into his glass Tony suddenly had the most brilliant idea.

“Hey, look at that Bruce,” he said, capturing the tom’s attention and nodding toward Luke. “Turns out we do have a qualified medical professional in residence.”

“Tony,” by his sigh Tony could tell Bruce had guessed where he was going with this. “No offense to Mr. Debar but when I said you need the opinion of a real medical doctor I meant someone with a medical license.”

“Nah-uh Brucie, you said medical professional. Your exact words. Jarvis?!”

“Sir is correct Dr. Banner, you did not specify what sort of license was needed.”

“Ha.” Tony crowed. “See. Luke is a licensed aide and given how hard it is for Gata to pass those exams, frankly I think you’re being a bit elitist Bruce by insisting he’s not qualified. Think of all those years you spent as an aide when you could have had six doctorates to your name.”

“I heard doctor. Who needs a doctor?” Pepper called from the other side of the room and Tony hollered back with a bright grin.

“Nobody needs a doctor. Who needs a doctor when we have a perfectly good medi-kat.”
“Maybe someone should ask Luke if he feels up to it? He might have valuable insight on the subject.” Natasha suggested dryly.

“You’re up for it, aren’t you?” Tony turned on the dewy kitten eyes because no one ever said he didn’t know how to get what he wanted. “Smart tom like you probably knows more than half the quacks at SHIELD, don’t you?”

“Yes?” voice cracking as he tapered off. the tom snapped his mouth shut and Tony swore he blushed.

“Was that a question?” Tony had to ask, because Luke was more flustered than Tony had ever seen him before and it was so far from his usual calm confident demeanor that he couldn’t help but wonder if Bruce was right and he was asking too much.

“No. I’m always happy to help you T- Mr. Stark, I just I don’t know what I’m agreeing to help with.”

Oh right. Sort of an important detail.

“Tony would like to plant the nano-technology we’ve been working on inside his body.” Helen explained and the tom's ears arched in surprise as he looked toward Tony speculatively.

“Only the material I want to use is a tad bit alien and Bruce went crying to Pepper who says I need to get a medical opinion, which is just plain – “Tony’s grumbling was aborted by the sudden appearance of a plate laden with smoked fish in front of his nose.

He’d not realized how hungry his amino acid ravenous body was getting until just that moment, but the smell of the fish was so divine that his stomach gave a painful twist of need and he groaned at the sight of it.

“Come here gorgeous.”

"You talking to Rogers or the fish?" Rhodey asked with a laugh as Tony all but yanked the plate away from Steve, who just looked amused by it.

"Why not both?" Tony mumbled around a forkful, gesturing for Steve to reclaim his position on the couch. Steve had even remembered to spoon extra capers into his portion of sauce so Tony figured a reward was in order and there wasn't a tom alive that didn't like a lap full of kitten.

"Lucky for you Rogers I am an excellent multitasker." 

"Gross man," Rhodey complained even as Pepper was shaking her head and muttering with a long suffering sigh.

"Unfortunately finding my boss mixing his food and foreplay wouldn't even be on the top ten list of things I wish I'd never walked in on." 

Tony was snickering, until he caught the faint but unmistakable whiff of a very pissed off tom.

At least he thought he did. But when he looked up and glanced around at the room to figure out just where that scent was coming from, all he saw were the completely unbothered faces of his teammates. Bruce was Zen, Clint was toasted and Steve seemed as predictably happy to have a lap full of cuddly kitten to pet as Tony had expected him to be. Which left Luke, who was looking rather stiff backed as he stared intently at Steve (who was making some joke about needing to read up on foreplay) but he didn't look at all as murderous as that bitter whiff had seemed to suggest.
Huh. Tony sniffed, but all he got was a cocktail of fish, evergreen and several brands of perfume.

Bruce cleared his throat pointedly, nodding toward Harley who was entertaining himself by teasing DUMMY with his hovercraft, the little robot whirling around in circles trying to catch up to it.

And this was why Tony had no trouble believing Bruce would make an excellent dad. He didn't have a shameless bone in his body and already had that 'in this family we hug it out' rumpled dad look going for him. Tony had been thinking a lot about the vision he'd had and what Bruce had told him about his. Imagining Bruce with a mate and kits of his own just did funny things to Tony. Nobody deserved it more and Tony wanted so badly to promise that it would happen.

He knew it wasn't a promise he could make but he would certainly do everything within his power to help it along. Bruce refused to give any details about who he'd seen himself with because he was no fun and possibly embarrassed, but Tony had enough to work with to do his own sleuthing.

Which led him to eyeing Luke with new speculation. There had been four children in his dream and only two of them easily identified. Jaime had been spoken for, and it was a safe enough guess that Natasha had a hand in the little redhead Tony had been holding- though Tony for the life of him couldn't imagine what kind of a tom could steal her heart, because the poor bastard who had previously fit the bill was long dead, and not the sort to fit in such a domestic scene as that had been in the first place – which left the shy little boy and the little girl Tony had called Nyota in the dream.

Given her clearly mixed heritage it was harder for Tony to suss out her parentage with only a single vision to go on, but it was the name that gave the game away. Tony couldn't get past the fact that besides himself he couldn't think of a single person other than Bruce with a big enough nerd streak and a love for Star Trek to name their daughter after the brilliant and just generally awesome Lieutenant Uhura.

And that changed the game completely because it meant having to keep an eye out for whatever lucky fel was the potential mother of Bruce's children, and not letting him escape destiny by being all shy and 'I could never' about it.

It was possible that their mystery woman was a Rhodes but the likelihood that she was another kat was higher and Luke, even if he wasn't the right gender, was the right ethnicity and had already mentioned having a sister.

"There are more than two black people in the world, Tony. It's possible that she's not related to either of them." Natasha teased. Tony had been thinking so hard he must have let his guard down. That or the eggnog was getting to him.

"You think she's related to Fury?" Tony thought back just to be a dick and grinned around a mouthful of fish at the blank stare she gave him in return. "Bruce, like the rest of us, has trust issues a mile wide. The chances of her not being connected to somebody within our bubble are small."

"Not smaller than the chances of me bearing a child. You didn't see what you think you saw, Tony." Natasha's voice floated quietly through his mind and Tony frowned in worry as he felt her pulling away from him.

"The alien substance you wish to place in your body..." The sound of Luke's voice drew Tony's attention back to the tom. "Is it from the Benu you faced in your story?"

Tony nodded and noticed he didn't seem at all shocked by that.

"You weren't surprised by Thor's story. You've heard of these things before." Natasha pointed out
with a deceptive casualty to her tone that didn’t hint at any of the suspicion she felt, and Luke nodded in the affirmative.

“Of course. The Benu is an old African myth. Any textbook would have told you that Ms. Romanov.”

“I guess I’m just curious, how an alien beast made its way into African mythology is all.” Natasha shrugged.

“Likely the same way Asgardians did among the Norse.” Jane speculated, a glint of excitement in her eye. "Though the implications of that are pretty astounding. It begs the question of how they got here. Are they capable of traversing through dimensions themselves or were they brought by someone else?"

"All I know is the more we know about these things the better." Steve said, crossing his arms over his chest, his gaze fixing on Tony in that 'I'm worried about you so I'm going to start acting like the worlds most overprotective dad' kind of way, that even now that he understood it better still crawled up Tony's back the wrong way. "I still don't think it's smart to put something in your body you know next to nothing about. You have no idea what it could do to you."

Tony opened his mouth to tell him how wrong that was because A, learning about it was exactly what he Helen and Bruce were doing down in the lab non stop, and B, Tony was 97.353% sure of how his body would take to BX; but Natasha beat him to the punch.

"What do your people say about them Debar? I'm sure there is a lot you can't learn in a history book." Natasha pressed and Tony didn't know what beef she had with the tom but there was definitely beef there.

Curiously there was a long moment of silence where everyone looked to the tom with interest and Luke appeared to be weighing his words very carefully. Tony wondered why that was, his eyes flickering to the spot on his chest where he knew the tom's shirt covered the necklace he wore.

After some thought Luke finally took a breath and answered, his eyes meeting Tony's with a level of gravity that seemed off putting. "There is a legend among my people, about the first Alurio. Prince Narmer, unlike his father the Scorpion king, was a man who coveted neither power, nor an immortal life. The Scorpion king dabbled with magic he had no business with and tore a hole in the sky which is what they say brought the Benu here. Namer sought only a way to save his people from the sun giants who had killed his father and who were sweeping through the land like a plague. He was able to unite all of the clans together against their common foe, but the Benu seemed as powerful as gods and none who came against them lived to tell the tale.

"Their numbers dwindled, their kingdoms scattered Namer called all of the clans together and asked who among them would be brave enough to journey with him into the heart of their enemies nest.

"None were brave enough except for a young woman known as Neithotep. She was called a demon because she possessed half the parts of a human and half those of a cat. She'd been visited by a Goddess at birth and given a strange stone with many magical powers that our legends call the Nehe stone.

"She told Narmer that she would go with him to fight the Benu and the only thing she asked for in return for her service was the promise that when he rebuilt the kingdom, that she would have a home in it. Taken by her strange yet undeniable beauty Namer agreed to her terms and together they set out to destroy the Benu. They fought for many months until finally the last of them flew into the great tear in the sky and Niethotep cast a spell to close it forever."
"The people rejoiced and Namer fell to his feet before her, and asked her to become his queen. This made his first wife very jealous but Namer loved no one so much as he loved Niethotep and the children she bore him. She was queen in his heart. For herself, Niethotep was no longer thought to be a demon but was called Alurio, a child of the gods, and it was believed by the kings of Egypt who followed her husband as well as those of the surrounding lands, that so long as the Alurio were welcomed into their houses then their kingdoms would never fall to any enemy. Even one so mighty as the Benu.

"So you see Tony, the Benu has always been a great enemy of the Alurio. If half of the stories I was raised on have any truth, I would advise you not to do as you are planning." Luke finished his story and Tony fought not to let his shock show, his eyes flying around the room to connect briefly with his teammates who wore (he was sure) similarly bewildered expressions.

"This is strange to me," Thor was the one with the guts to say, face setting into a pensive frown. "The Benu are held as sacred among the Kǫtrdýr."

"Mommy wasn't there." Tony realized almost as his he said it. His brain was working fast through everything Luke had shared with them and recalling the conversation he'd had with Bastet at the wedding.

'**Nothing about leaving the man I loved or the children I bore him was done on a whim**, she'd told him. And Tony remembered just the way she'd looked. He remembered now where he'd seen the stone around Luke's neck before. Hers had been larger, but Queen Bastet had worn a stone just like it in the brooch at the end of her collar.

"She doesn't know just how closely tied her people's evolution is to the Benu and their regular consumption, just that they're dangerous. How can she? So she goes on a suicide mission because there's a chance that she could finally be at home somewhere, like she's never been before. She drives them out and doesn't even realize that she's weakened the evolutionary track of her entire line."

A line that had something to do with Luke Debar, because it was no coincidence that he was carrying around a replica of Bastet's stone. The Nehe Stone.

It was always possible that it was just some sort of Afro- Gata pride thing, where it was just a fad to wear replicas from the legends of Alurian heroes, but Tony's instinct said that it was more than that.

"That might be so," Luke allowed with a small nod, peering deeply into the middle distance as he pondered. "It is still strange, to think on the legends I was told as a boy, not just as stories traded by old men but as a part of history. I am realizing that perhaps I do not know as much about the world as I thought I did."

The tom blinked and his focus snapped back to Tony, those strangely enchanting dark eyes with all their different flecks of color and hints at gold, boring intently into his with purpose, and damn him but Tony couldn't help but feeling a bit like prey cornered by something wild.

He didn't know what it said about him that there was a part of him A-Okay with that.

"But I am not someone who fears a challenge. Even the challenges of the unknown." Luke stated decisively, his familiar confidence back in full force as he smiled down at Tony, practically oozing that particularly special brand of arrogance reserved for toms who thought they were all that and a bag of chips (or Captain America as the case sometimes was). "I'm at your service Mr. Stark. Use me however you'd like."
Here's the thing. Tony knows how to flirt. He can flirt with the best of them. He flirts statistically almost as much as he breathes and doesn't take half of it to heart.

So the only explanation he can give for why that unexpectedly bold pass makes his cheeks flush and nearly causes him to choke and die on his dinner, is that the ball came out of left field.

Luke doesn't flirt. Luke is a sober and serious professional at all times when he and Clint aren't yanking each others chain. Hell if you'd have asked Tony for his opinion seconds before now he'd have said that the guy was kind of judgy.

The only one less judgmental of Tony's general sluttyness was Steve and-

Well Steve had stuck his tongue down Tony's throat a few nights ago like it was going out of style.

It just goes to show you doesn't it? You never can tell with people.

Chapter End Notes

Up Next. Luke helps Tony, Bruce and Helen finish the nano-bot project and Steve is still not so sure this is the best idea. Tony and Steve go out on a date and Steve pops a very important question (somewhere Fury is popping a champagne bottle). Tony discovers that Luke and Catman are one in the same just in time for Tuesday, but Luke's got one final card to play that not even Tony sees coming, but you know what they say. It's just check.
I have been a fool for lesser things.

Chapter Summary

Tony's family is coming together just in time for him to possibly die on them. Coming to grip with his mortality is not a new experience, but it's different when you have family. There's so much more to lose. In little ways his teammates show him how much Tony has a lot to live for and all of them involve chances of the heart.

Chapter Notes

Another update. Doing my best to keep this alive. :) Thank you for your kind words of encouragement and your feedback. I hope you enjoy it. If you're looking for some mood music, this title's chapter and driving inspiration is taken from Billy Joel's "For the longest time".

Also a bonus appearance from Kitty Pryde in this chapter. :)

And I have high hopes for his MCU characterization but I've borrowed a lot from comics here for T'Challa. Did you know that he is ranked number 7 on the list of top minds in Marvel comics? Just two minds below Bruce at number 5 and five below Tony at number 2. I mention this cause I like to brag on my faves, and also it reiterates why Steve's whole 'real doctor' comment is just ... (-_-) Anyway, I do so hope we get to see the genius side of T'challa in the films but you'll definitely see it at work here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

SUNDAY MORNING

"The compound will have to be strategically injected into thirteen key areas of bone in Mr. Stark's skeletal structure. This step is critical, as it will allow the nanotechnology Mr. Stark will receive in phase two to pass through the body uncontested by the Extremis virus, and to successfully complete their self regenerating programs." Helen finished, looking around the table where Pepper and the Avengers had gathered in the tower medical ward.

With the machinery nearly completed for the complicated surgery Tony and his crack team of scientist had determined they were as ready to perform the procedure as they'd ever be. If Tony had his way they would have done it already with no one the wiser, because the last thing he wanted was to spend days building up to it making everyone anxious and facing their worried pitying looks. It was bad enough that legally he couldn't keep Pepper in the dark about it and he had to see the fear in her eyes every morning. He didn't want to magnify that by a half dozen.

But as Luke kept so helpfully pointing out. Tony was building a Pride, and that meant no more slinking off to a dark corner to (possibly) die in privacy. His team (his family) deserved to know the details, especially because of the high risk.

"Are there any questions?" Helen prompted and Tony wasn't all that surprised when Steve, who had
watched the presentation with intense focus and pursed lips throughout, was the first to speak up.

"What happens if his body rejects the compound." He looked meaningfully at Tony. "What if Extremis decides it doesn’t like you drilling holes in your body end injecting yourself with alien biotech?"

"All of the tests have shown that BX can successfully bind with hydroxyapatite ions, so there is minimal chance that the organism won't be able to fuse itself to the bone, which is calcium rich." Luke ventured into the tense filled silence to explain, but Steve was anything but mollified.

"No offense," Cap said slowly and Tony saw Clint roll his eyes. He bit back a huff of laughter, because he agreed with the sentiment. Anytime someone started a sentence off with 'no offense' the chances of something offensive following increased by at least ninety percent.

And sure enough.

"But I would still feel more comfortable if we had a real doctor consult, before we go any further."

Okay then.

"By real do you mean someone qualified or someone human?" Clint asked nonchalantly, tossing what looked like a Hawkeye themed hackey sack between his hands, orange ears twitching. Tony was glad to someone had said it before him, because contrary to popular belief he wasn't all that keen on being president of the 'Give Cap a hard time' club, but you know what they say.

Somebody has to wear the crown. Maybe it will be Clint today.

"I mean someone with a medical license. They could be blue for all I care." Steve insisted stubbornly, meeting Clint's gaze evenly and the tom shrugged, either appeased or just unwilling to insinuate that Captain America was in any way blind to human privilege. Guess that crown still belonged to Tony then.

"Born in Kinshasa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo he received a certificate in minor education via the American School of Kinshasa, later went on to receive a high school diploma from Harvard - Westlake in a two year cram study, followed by an eight year work study residency at John Hopkins double specializing in physiology and medical engineering. All of this cumulating in a 'Class C' medical license which enables him to assist in the highest levels of biomedical research under the frankly insulting designation of 'Aide'." Tony rattled off, ticking off Debars educational landmarks on one hand as he went.

Luke's eyebrows raised in surprise at Tony's intimate knowledge of his background and the engineer heaved a sigh of irritation as he stood up from his chair, shoving his hands in his pocket.

"Look Cap, I don't let people into my space, let alone my lab, unless I know everything there is to know about them. Debar's public records, besides being squeaky clean, just happen to be some of the more impressive I've seen." Tony stopped in front of Steve, trying to impress his point without the conversation degenerating to their history of finger pointing and name calling.

"He's a genius, and you know I don't say that lightly. He had to be to get this far, and to get snapped up by SHIELD. So the real problem here is personal bias. Despite all logic, the only thing that will make you feel better is if you hear it from some Dr. Round Ears. And while I get that, it's just something you're gonna have to get over."

It was silent for a long moment, with Tony staring at Steve and Steve staring at Tony, the captain stubbornly working his jaw as he worked through his thoughts until Natasha broke the
silence.

"We've got four geniuses working on this, but even so there will always be a margin for error. I'm with Steve, I'd still like to know what happens if your body rejects the compound."

"You're with Steve huh?" Tony asked her with a silent smirk and she stared back at him in a distinctly Pepper like fashion.

"Only if you keep making it about sides."

And speaking of Pepper, that was the moment the original bossy red head in charge of cramming good sense into his skull, decided to put in her two cents.

"I think we're all together in the fact that we'd rather go into this knowing the worst that could happen."

And just to kill any opposition Tony might have been able to come up with she turned those big blue eyes on him – that were twice as effective because they were hers – and went for the jugular.

"We care about you Tony. We need the facts, even if there's nothing we can really do if something goes wrong."

"I'll second that." Bruce murmured with an apologetic smile in Tony's direction to which Clint raised three fingers in silent agreement and Thor slapped the table enough to rattle the fixtures on top and declared loudly, "Well spoken, Miss Potts."

Damn. Tony swallowed thickly, suddenly finding himself unable to meet anyone directly in the eye until his gaze was drawn by a warm chuckle from Debar.

"Is a fifth required?" The tom asked, all white toothed grin and Tony huffed, letting his tail swat him as he turned back toward the coffee cup he'd abandoned on a counter. He was going to need the caffeine for this.

Okay so it's like this. In the event that Extremis decides it's not about BX, it will try to eliminate the compound from my system entirely. Which given that the compound will have fused with my bone structure means... well it means at best there's a likelihood of complications brought on by severe osteopenia along with a high chance of total paralysis."

They were all watching him with heavy gazes, the weight of their concern pressing against his senses and Tony took a deep swallow of his coffee for a brief moment of respite.

He reminded himself that he'd well and truly signed up for this. Sometimes knowing what you wanted and being ready for it were wildly different things, but they were past the point of balking about it now. Tony had made his demands of them, and they'd done their best to meet them. He had to meet them half way.

"Worst case and honestly most likely scenario, is total system failure resulting in death before I ever leave the cradle." He admitted, steeling himself against the barrage of emotions at the edges of his mind, demanding focus and connection. Not yet, he thought with gritted teeth. The middle of a crisis was no time to go foraging irreversible bonds that none of them could take back. Well maybe except for one.

"Obviously we've done everything we can to be as sure as we can that the compound is compatible. The numbers look good but, like she said. There's always a margin for error." Tony shrugged somewhat helplessly, leaning back against the counter to survey his teammates. "Honestly guys this
is kind of it. There's no scenario where I walk away from this without putting it all on the table. There's a timer on how long I can self-sustain Extremis and we've literally exhausted all other options previously known to man.

"So either this works or it doesn't, and in the event that it doesn't I've taken care of certain things. The new shelter on the Island will be built and sustained with company funds, as will the Avengers so long as you all still want to be Avengers."

Leveling with Clint, Natasha and Bruce, Tony continued apologetically, "the independence clause in your contracts are dependent on a successful completion of a Pride bond. Natasha has the legal grounds to play hardball with SHIELD. Clint belongs to Agent Coulson who despite my bag of issues and personal bias, has proven to be the exception to the rule. So it turns out, good call on that one."

Tony tapped the side of his neck where a collar might go with a rueful smile and Clint looked away, silently clenching the rubber ball in his hands.

"But our boy Bruce here would go back under the questionable authority of whoever wins the ongoing custody battle between SHIELD and Ross and frankly Buddy I just can't have that."

Bruce, no dull knife, seemed to have guessed where Tony was going and slowly began to shake his head.

"Tony... I know how you feel about bonding. I meant what I said. You don't need to sacrifice anything for me. I'll be fine."

"I know you did," Tony acknowledged crossing the room to stand next to Banner who somehow managed to look the saddest Tony had ever seen him look and yet painfully hopeful. Sighing, Tony gave in to the need to be close and leaned down to wrap his arms around the brunette, resting his chin between Bruce's furry ears and letting his comforting scent surround him.

It gave him the peace of mind and the confidence he need to admit, "Knew I was going to bond with you then, just waiting for the right moment."

And they might be running out of moments. So hey, not Tony's ideal scenario but when had his life ever gone completely according to plan?

Bruce didn't say anything but his hand reaching up to grasp Tony's arm was all either of them really needed.

"But hey, Positive thinking right? I'm gonna be fine and when it's all over, we're all going to sit down and have another one of these great family talks." Tony squeezed him encouragingly and Bruce chuckled, somewhat thinly.

Looking up at the others once more, his gaze caught Steve's and stayed there as he took a breath before the plunge. "I have something I want to share with you all, but it's... Later. It's for later."

Nobody said it but Tony could see on their faces that they all understood. They could worry about the future of their Pride when Tony knew whether or not he was going to be a future.

~*~*~
Steve had been all but ordered to consider Tony as a potential mate when Fury had first presented the Initiative to him, but Steve was not the sort of guy to follow orders blindly and that fresh from losing Bucky the idea had left him feeling sick. In those days just getting out of bed in the morning without wanting to slip back under the ice took most of his energy; but he’d told himself he had to keep going for Bucky’s sake, and that Bucky would have wanted the Pride, would have jumped at the opportunity that Fury was offering and that it would mean so much for the Gata.

He’d stared at Tony’s picture frozen picture on the computer SHIELD had given him. Against Coulson’s advice he’d asked for Clint’s help using Google in order to look Tony up. Steve didn’t like to think of himself as a judgmental person, but he could see why Coulson had tried to warn him off it.

There had been good things. Of course there had been. Tony was a hero in more ways than one and he’d done too much for people, and for Gata, not for there to have been positive voices out there, but they were perhaps intentionally drowned out by the bloated cancerous tumor that was Tony’s celebrity image.

They liked to call him a black cat. America’s favorite, but a black cat none the less. In Steve’s day, the hey day of the domestication drugs, black kats were the thing your mother used to scare you into coming home before it got dark.

The history on them was spotted even then. Drugs don’t affect everyone the same, and even though ninety-nine percent saw successful results, there was always the one percent that just didn’t turn out like they were supposed to. They got stamped black and legally those ones were supposed to be put down, but things happened. Kats slipped through the system.

It was well known that the ones whom the drugs had failed would eventually go rabid, and every now and then you’d read a story about some guy getting chewed up and left for dead by one. Usually right next to an ad for half priced domestication shots at your local clinic.

The fact that they called Tony that (something monstrous and deadly) like it was somehow cute had angered Steve, but it was hard not to let first impressions get tainted by such a barrage of negativity at once. Hard not to instinctively judge the sheer excess of wealth and hedonists waste that Tony so casually indulged in when last week (last week seventy years ago) Steve had been on rations.

Once he’d actually met Tony his confidence in the whole thing had wavered because it had looked like his worst fears had come true, Stark was all the worst parts of his father and none of the good.

It had been jarring to see him in the flesh, to almost have Howard standing there, but not be able to pretend even for a moment that he was home again because the physical differences between Tony and his father were unignorably there, in the marks of a woman Steve would never know.

Almost a year later, and he had come to realize that Tony wasn’t anybody but himself, which probably made him the best and the worst of both his parents and more besides.

Steve really decided for himself that he wanted to step out with Tony (and all that it would mean to do it) Christmas eve when they’d been sitting on the couch, the remnants of the party all around them. Most of the guests had either gone to find their beds but a few had simply dropped wherever it was comfortable in the living room, on couches or in Harley’s case curled up on the floor next to DUMMY one arm hugging the powered down bot as if to keep him from rolling away.

The lights had been dimmed for better TV watching and the glow of the television had been almost pretty as it splashed over sleepy faces. Tony had been soft against Steve’s chest, contentment in every languid line of his body as another Star Trek episode played and Tony tried to explain to him
why something called a Gorn is one of the most terrifying creatures in possible existence (it’s really not) and Steve hadn’t really caught most of it, but he’d been looking down at Tony and thinking how sweetly ridiculous Tony was being and how happy it made him.

How happy they’d all helped to make each other, he’d realized as his eyes had strayed to Natasha head resting on Tony’s stomach as she appeared to doze, and Pepper with shoes kicked off using Happy’s thigh as a pillow while the bigger man drooled on Coulson’s shoulder. Coulson didn’t seem to mind, happily stroking Clint’s ears, the tom resting in his lap as he bickered sleepy with Tony.

Steve had thought that if this was Pride, if they could all just stay exactly as they were right in that moment, then he never wanted to let it go.

He had never expected to be happy again after losing Bucky. But he was with Tony and the team, so even if none of them knew what the future would bring, Steve refused to consider any alternative but that Tony’s operation was going to be a success and they were all going to come together and build their Pride. If he was wrong he’d deal with it when it happened, but at least Tony would know how he’d felt.

So Steve wasn’t up to date on how people were getting together these days but he knew the basics. He couldn’t just assume that he and Tony were dating because they hung out and talked more now, even if it often felt like dating. They’d agreed to get to know one another and try and sort out if a relationship was something they both wanted. Well Steve was pretty sure he did, so that meant he’d have to get up the courage to ask Tony out officially.

But asking a fella to get serious with you was much different than asking a dame and Steve had never been good at the later, so he was at ground zero when it came to the former.

And Tony wasn’t just anybody either. He could admit that it was a little intimidating trying to think up ways to impress Tony Stark. All of his ideas felt silly when he considered that Tony could buy himself something a hundred times better than any bouquet Steve could afford and that Tony had eaten with the President at the White House so good luck trying to find a restaurant to top that.

The longer he wrestled with it the more uncomfortable it made him. A museum of some kind would feel like trying too hard and would probably only highlight how much smarter than everyone Tony was and how Steve barely even finished school and had certainly never gone to a fancy university.

He’d gone back and forth over it all weekend until he’d finally been desperate enough to throw in the towel and ask for help.

“Where do you take a billionaire who also happens to be your Queen, when you want him to agree to be your… well yours, I guess.” Steve pushed the words out in a rush as he stepped into the common room and the chatter from the rooms occupants instantly died.

Clint and Luke were playing one of Clint’s video games (one of the Ninja ones that he liked because he said they were old school) and Bruce was in an armchair pouring reading something with Japanese writing plastered on the front (Steve had no idea he knew how to read Japanese) while he sipped from an oversized mug.

The three toms blinked at him in shock and Steve crossed his arms to smother his urge to fidget.

"Is that Japanese?" Steve asked, nodding towards Bruce's book, doing his best to ignore the smug smile on Banner's face.

"Korean, actually. I'm learning." Bruce explained but he wasn't about to let Steve deflect the
“You and Tony are gonna make it official?”

“I’d like to.” Steve acknowledged. “But… I don’t know. I wanted to take him on a proper date and ask him there, but I can’t decide what he’d like. Everything just seems so… I mean he’s probably done a lot.”

“Stark’s done everything twice, backwards, and probably naked the second time.” Clint agreed, unhelpfully. "And just my advice, don't try and get him naked on the first date. He'll probably let you since he's crushing on you, but you'll spend the rest of your relationship trying to unfail a test you had no idea you were taking."

Bruce and Luke shot the other tom a look and the dark skinned tom asked Clint with a slight air of judgment, "Is that what you did?"

Clint shrugged.

"At the time he was a mark, and for most people sex is the quickest way toward intimacy. By the time I was trying to convince him I actually gave a shit the damage had been done." Clint looked directly at Steve again and thrust a controller in his direction like a teacher might a chalk stick. "Trust me man, Stark's already told himself that all you want is his money, or his brain, or his body, or some other damn thing. He's just waiting for you to prove it. Everyone else has."

"I wasn't planning on either of us being naked on the first date." Steve replied tersely, fighting back the urge to growl. Had everyone really treated Tony so poorly?

"I don't think it matters where you take him Steve," Bruce segued the uncomfortable topic. "It’s the thought that counts. Where were you thinking?"

"I was… thinking of maybe someplace sentimental? There are a couple of spots in my old neighborhood that are kind of special… to me anyway. I don’t know if he’d appreciate it the same way. Maybe it’s a bad idea.”

Maybe the whole thing was a bad idea. Steve hadn’t felt this inadequate about anything since he was a ninety-pound asthmatic and it wasn’t a feeling he enjoyed.

“I’m sure he would.” Clint assured him with a surprising touch of gentleness, but then again the archer had very good eyes. “I’m shit with relationships but even I know Bruce is right. It’ll be the thought that counts.”

“This might not be my business…” Steve blinked in surprise as Luke, who no one had really expected to have much in the way of advice on how to go about dating Tony Stark.

Steve ad grown used to how seriously the SHIELD medic comported himself when he wasn't joking around with Clint, and more recently in the lab with Tony, but there was something very intent about the way that the medic was looking at him now. Like a foe across a battlefield assessing an enemy for weaknesses.

He told himself that it was a stupid thought. Luke had never been anything but civil toward him before and there was no reason for that to have changed.

“It would be a mistake to start your courtship in a graveyard.”

“Pardon?” Steve grunted, not taking his meaning and unable to help the trickle of offense he felt at his old neighborhood being reduced so bluntly to something so inherently negative. Was this about what he’d said at the meeting this morning? Whatever the others thought, Steve hadn’t meant it the
way it had sounded. Maybe he and Debar should talk about it.

“Don’t misunderstand me Captain Rogers,” the tom continued diplomatically. "Your past is important and Tony would no doubt be touched by your willingness to share it, but you would be wise not to forget that Tony is a man of the future. If he is anything like the Queen’s of old, in his blood is the desire for the kingdom of tomorrow. If you are to stand at his side your heart can not belong to yesterday.”

“Excuse me?” Steve bristled. It was hard not to when a guy you were just getting to know said something like that about you. It was obvious to Steve, if not to the others, that Luke Debar thought he knew something about Steve's heart.

The way the tom was looking at him felt like a challenge. There was judgment there, as if the tom knew something Steve didn’t and was holding it over his head. And Steve's nose was good. Better than most kat's even, and there was something caught in it that kept buzzing at his nerves, like he'd stuck his nose in a spoonful of pepper.

He didn't like it.

“What King Mufasa over here is saying I think,” Clint pondered aloud, jostling the other tom playfully in the ribs. He didn't seem to notice any bad smell. ‘Is that you gotta be in the moment. You gotta find a way to tell Stark ‘Hey, I’m here and it’s you and me’. You know? Buy a house. Adopt a dog. Something that says you're looking forward and not back.”

“I don’t suggest doing either of those things,” Bruce mumbled as he took another sip of his drink. “At least not on the first date. But the sentiment sounds right.”

"Again, it may not be my business.” Luke chuckled and Steve had the strange urge to snap at him that it really wasn't his business. He bit his tongue, cause that wouldn't have been very fair. He'd come in here looking for advice, he couldn't really be upset at the guy for offering it. Even if he knew Tony the least out of all of them.

There was a knowing glint in the dark eyes that met his as Debar finished his thought.

"But if I were you, Captain I'd move quickly. Opportunity is a narrow window."

*~*~*

“I can’t leave you alone for a minute can I?”

Tony jerked at the sound of the unexpected voice, unintentionally slamming the back of his skull against the underbelly of the machine he was currently under, fine tuning some of the more delicate wire work.

The low chuckle of amusement told him who had entered the lab without his knowing even before the grinning face appeared, the tom bent over to pear under the legs of the Cradle.

“JARVIS!” Tony hollered, sliding out from under the machine. “Are you just letting people sneak up on me now? What if he’d been AIM?”

“I alerted you exactly five times Sir that Mr. Debar was on his way. Perhaps if you were better rested
you would not so frequently zone out your surroundings.”

Tony made a face at that and rolled his eyes for Luke’s benefit because somebody other than Tony should realize that his A.I. was the biggest worry wort in existence.

“I slept yesterday.” he grumbled in explanation. “Had another heat flash.”

Luke cocked his head curiously but had the tact not to openly sniff him.

“The scent doesn’t linger on you. You use scent blockers?”

Tony’s answering smile was all show.

“The best I can invent. Haven’t gotten it perfect on the lead in but they do the trick for the cleanup; but enough about my jacked up reproductive cycle. Let’s talk about something really sexy, like this baby here.” Tony patted the gleaming side of the Cradle and let his hand run over its smooth metal surface.

“Did you get a chance to look at Helen’s specs?” he asked.

“Yes I did.” Luke answered with a nod. “I can find no fault in either her research or her test subjects. The machine should work exactly as you expect it will.”

The tom’s expression flickered somewhere towards fondness as Tony’s face lit up in an eager grin, fist pumping in victory before he moved to slide back under the machine. But Luke’s hand, suddenly appearing on his shoulder halted him and Tony looked to him questioningly.

“But does Helen know you are changing the design?”

“Changing it?” Tony asked innocently. “No just some minor upgrades.”

Luke glanced around at the tools littering the floor around them with an expression that cried bullshit and Tony sighed. Debar being the one medically trained engineer who was able to tell what Tony had changed in the last hours just by the tools he was using was both amazing and unfortunate.

"Fine," he relented. "I may have deviated slightly from the plans Helen and I drew up together, but in my defense Cho is the top of the line geneticist not the engineer on this team. She’s being overly cautious. I know I can increase the Cradel's productivity without compromising the integrity of the womb, and as chief engineer on this little project I gave myself the greenlight."

Tony's nose twitched, the small space between them filling with the scent of worried over protective tom. It wasn't as strong as Steve's but then again Steve's pheromones thanks to the serum were rather on the 'I say everything at a shout' side.

There was something rather beguiling about Luke's sleepier variant. Kind a siren song actually. Tony was well aware that the distant urge he had to curl up beside the man all lazy like and allow himself to be petted and protected was a biological throwback that could kindly shut the hell up.

"You realize that if your calculations are off by even a small margin, you increase the margin for error? The machine itself could cause irreparable damage to your internal organs that neither I nor Helen will be able to save you from." Luke warned softly, not in the same dire fashion Cap was so good at but nevertheless it reminded him too much of Steve and their ongoing argument over Tony's plans to embed his bone structure with BX and flood his system with nanobots. Which really only sounded insane when you said it like that.
"Yes. So I made very sure not to be wrong." Tony tossed the tom a confident smile and batted his hand away and slid back under the machine.

Or at least that's what should have happened, because he made all the right moves to make that happen; but then he felt a firm grip around his tail and a firmer tug had his creeper seat rolling backward.

"Hey! The hell are you doing?" Tony seethed, perplexed that he had somehow or another ended up under the smugly grinning tom, pinned between his body and the machine.

He wasn't scared of Debar exactly, and the scent rolling off him coupled with the body language was openly playful rather than threatening, but Tony wasn't used to people trying to touch him without trying to get something from him.

"I am utilizing your American obsession with the democratic process." Luke explained in a tone that was somehow one hundred percent serious even as he was grinning down at Tony like the cat that got the canary. "My vote, is no."

Normally Tony would have told any asshole who tried to tell him what he could or couldn't do in his own lab to fuck off and provided them with a detailed listing of the highest bridges in New York state; but the thing was it didn't feel like Luke was throwing his weight around actually trying to make him quit. He got the feeling that if he really did tell the tom to fuck off that he would.

This was... playing. This was nibbling on ears, rubbing whiskers and twining tails because it felt good. The sort of kittenish behavior that fed the dark belly of the porn tubes, and that Tony had abandoned long ago outside mutually beneficial one night stands when he realized how quickly a purr was construed to mean asking for it.

You were purring up a storm when I got started Tony, I can't read your damn mind.'

But whatever. People were assholes. What else was new? Normal healthy Gata liked to play. Tony could be a normal healthy adult instead of a basket of issues for five seconds.

"I'm sorry, did you mean to dial Steve?" Tony began, gaining confidence as he went, swatting his tail against the tom's side.

It had been a light strike but Luke took the hint and rolled to the side and something in Tony couldn't help but uncoil with relief.

"He's the one in love with the democratic process. My lab my rules. This is a Tonarchy."

Luke groaned as if Tony had shot him and Tony barked a laugh.

"Are you in pain? Did I hurt you? You've gotta grow some thicker skin Debar if you wanna win in the big leagues. You should hear the stupid jokes I throw at Rhodey."

"The man deserves a medal," Luke grumbled and Tony clapped a hand on his shoulder, using it for leverage to push himself up off the floor.

"He has several, two of them I'm almost certain are almost literally for putting up with me."

"Almost literally?"

"There may have been some mercenaries involved and something about saving the presidents life, but mostly it was for putting up with me."
Luke laughed lowly, shaking his head at him.

"I'm sure he would not want anything different."

"What, something different other than dealing with my stubborn ass?" Tony asked skeptically, because let's get real, there were a million other things Rhodey could be doing with his time. Deserved to be doing with his time really.

Now, Tony was used to being corrected when he made self-defacing comments like that. So used to it that they typically rolled right off his skin like water on a duck's back, but he'd never had someone turn and look at him the way Luke was.

Like he'd been caught pissing on a national monument and was standing before some tribunal court about to be voted off the island for sheer stupidity.

"You understood me perfectly Tony, do not pretend otherwise. It is demeaning to both our intelligence and more importantly to the bond you have formed with the Colonel. He doesn't deserve that."

Wow. Ouch. For the first time he could remember in a long while Tony had no idea what to say, the instinctive jolt of defensiveness quickly banked by the stark truth in the other man's words.

He might still have rallied himself toward defensiveness, if only for his own pride's sake, if not for the gentle way the tom added, "Your loss would be a terrible thing for a great many, myself included. I hope you will reconsider consulting with Miss Cho and Dr. Banner before making further changes."

Tony wanted to insist that neither of them were as qualified as he was in the field of engineering and that if anyone was capable of safely stretching the limits of the cradle it was him, but the protests died on his tongue in the face of Luke's silently patient demeanor.

Tony had no idea how he managed to look so certain of getting his way and still sound so damnably diplomatic about it.

Maybe that was just it. Luke had simply told the truth and seemed very confident that Tony's own good sense would lead him to the same conclusion, all the while churning out pheromones that were probably somebody's ideal of security.

But Tony was above that, it wasn't the toms biological perfume that got him. It was that other part. The part where he believed Tony had good sense to begin with, that he had some sort of head on his shoulders that wasn't stuck in some juvenile stasis that needed constant adult supervision.

That wasn't fair, he berated himself. Pepper and Rhodey did the best they could with what Tony gave them. They weren't to blame for patterns Tony himself had set. But this was a fresh slate. Luke didn't know yet just how much of a wreck Tony was and hadn't spent decades of his life keeping Tony together when he refused to do it himself.

"Fine, I'll run it by them. But only because you asked so pretty. Nice touch with the pheromones back there by the way. Bet the kittens back home just love you." Tossing his tool kit aside on the workbench, Tony's mind was already turning toward the next big thing. "I've got a project on my back burner I should get back to."

"Is that your way of asking if I'm attached?" Luke asked, following him over to the computer console and watching as he worked. Tony smirked, though with his back to him he doubted Luke caught it.
"Is that your way of dodging the question Debar? It's not very good. JARVIS how are we on the CAT-MAN algorithm?"

"Scheduled adjustments have been made Sir. Test samples have produced results with consistent nintey-seven percent accuracy." JARVIS promptly answered and Tony hummed in displeasure.

"I was hoping for at least ninety-nine."

"I'm sorry Sir, but I could not defragment the audio samples further without compromising their integrity."

"Not your fault Baby Boy." Tony assured the A.I. as Luke stepped closer to better observe what he was doing. This close Tony could feel his body heat, which could have been disconcerting if not for the slightly chilly temperature in the lab. He'd have JARVIS turn the heat up later.

"What are you doing?" The curious tom asked and never one to pass up a chance to show off his babies, Tony motioned to the rapid series of numbers flashing over the holo-screen and explained.

"JARVIS and I are on the hunt to solve the mystery of our cat-costumed vigilante. JARVIS did most of the coding himself for the audio defragmentation device. It strips the sample down to pure notes and then we put those notes through our algorithm which mathematically matches them to the closest matching digital sample, within a margin of five percent difference. Which is what allows us to also catch family members who may help us narrow the search. So in theory if Catman or any of his direct kin have ever so much as used a cell phone, we're going to find them."

"Currently we have not achieved one hundred percent accuracy." JARVIS' tone carried the computer equivalent of a sigh. "But given time we could improve it."

"It's good work Jay, don't be so hard on yourself." Tony admonished with a wink in the tom's direction but Luke was staring up at the holo-screen in deep concentration. "You okay there tom-kat? I'd call a medic, but you are the medic."

Shaking his head Luke tore his eyes from the screen to meet Tony's gaze once more, the flecks of color in his irises glinting in the pale blue light as he smiled at Tony, something very soft in his tone as he said, "I am only remembering that my father warned me many times, that pride often comes before the fall."

"What, are you saying you don't think it will work?" Tony asked in confusion and not a little bit of indignation and Luke chuckled, shaking his head again.

"No. I am certain it will. You are a man of many marvels Tony..."

He couldn't pinpoint why but something about the way Luke said his name made his chest feel tight.

"I wanted to thank you for coming to my defense earlier. I'm sorry if it put you at odds with the captain. And, well, I only wish I was truly the man you think I am."

"Now who is selling himself short? I know how hard it is to do what you've done and never get the recognition you deserve." Tony shrugged, self-consciously, looking away to fiddle with some dials on the console that really didn't need fiddling with. "And I wasn't kidding about the paranoia thing. I'd have looked you up either way... I don't trust easy."

"Your world isn't one to be trusted."
"It's your world too. Things aren't much better in your neck of the words." Tony pointed out.

Luke shrugged, a glint of mischief in his eyes as he replied.

"You've never been to my neck of the woods, but I'd like to take show you."

Tony grinned as pleasure at the blatant little flirtation blossomed in his chest and had to laugh at himself.

"God, listen to you. Does that work on the fels back home? Don't answer that. You're sickening."

Luke join him in laughter, and Tony was high on the thrill of anticipation, proud of what he and JARVIS had accomplished and happy to be sharing it with his unexpected new friend. True friends came by Tony slowly but Luke was shaping up to be one of them. And as seemed to be Tony's nature, he wondered if there wasn't some way to keep him.

Surely it wasn't Luke's dream to work for SHIELD the rest of his life? He wondered what Luke's dreams actually looked like, what had driven him from his home in the Congo in pursuit of the next to impossible for their kind. Tony wanted to know, and if he were honest, there was a growing part of him that hoped there was room in there possibly for a few new dreams.

Like a medical practice on an island. Just to throw one out there.

"Sir, Captain Rogers is asking for access to the lab," JARVIS interrupted, and the A.I. waited until their laughter had died before asking. "May I allow him in?"

"Sure JARVIS." Tony answered and Luke shifted away from the console.

"Good luck Tony."

Tony nodded distractedly as the tom turned to make his way to the exit, passing Steve with a nod of acknowledgment as the super soldier made his way toward Tony.

"Tony?" Steve beseeched, eyes searching Tony's no doubt for some sort of sign of where their earlier disagreement had left them.

Any earlier in the evening and Tony wasn't a hundred percent sure how things would have gone, but he was still riding the high of achieving mature responsible adulthood so he viewed the situation like this: Steve was worried, that was the important point (that he cared).

The second important point to remember here was that however unpleasant coming to grips with ones own prejudices could be, realistically it was bound to happen on both their ends, so it wouldn't be helpful in the long run to hold a grudge.

Working through this shit was just the price of a successful interspecies relationship.

"Hey Steve," Tony greeted him and the tension in Steve's shoulders relaxed as they came toe to toe.

"I wanted to apologize for earlier. I didn't mean it how it sounded." Steve faltered, probably noticing how wildly unimpressed Tony was with the start of said apology and blundered on. "But I think Nat's right and it doesn't really matter what I thought I meant."

"You've been talking to Natasha?" Tony asked, poking at his bond with the Russian just to remind her that he had her number. Interfering matchmaking grandmother that she was trying to be.

"I prefer big sister." Her laughing thoughts trilled through his mind and he audibly scoffed, to Steve's
obvious confusion.

"Sorry. Bond talk." Tony explained, waving his hand as if he could wave the situation away. "But for the record I'm older than Romanov which makes me the big brother."

"Okay." Poor Steve looked lost before pointedly deciding to ignore that bit of unexplained weirdness and moving on. "I'm glad you two have bonded. I don't know if I ever told you that. She's a great gal. I'm happy she has someone."

"I care about her. I think we have that in common." Tony resisted the urge to dodge the compliment completely knowing that Natasha could still likely hear and thinking about what Luke had said, about not demeaning his relationships.

Steve's answering smile was just this touch surprised and a lot radiant, like Tony had just done something particularly brilliant, and his heart squeezed dangerously in his chest.

Thank god Cap had no idea how absolutely lethal his brand of Golden Boy good looks could be when coupled with seemingly simple gestures of approval or Tony would just have to throw the damn towel in.

"Tony I'm sorry for letting my worry get the better of me." Steve began again, confident this time as he slowly reached for Tony's hand and Tony allowed him to take it. "You've been careful with this and you've gone to people you trust for help who know way more about it than I do. So on this one I'm just gonna trust your judgment. I'll even hold your ice chips for you when you wake up."

Tony laughed, touched by the words and more relieved than he could say that Steve had come around to Tony's decision to go through with the surgery without the battle that Tony had been expecting. Look at that! Communication. Compromise. Maybe this whole finding a mate thing wasn't as difficult as he'd imagined it was going to be. Look at them go.

"Just on this one?" He teased. "You do know that I'm always right? I have the math to prove it, seriously I made a chart once."

"Stark," Steve began in that 'captain's' tone of his, a teasing slant to his lips as he spoke ruining the effect. "If I let you think you were always right we'd all be outfitted with rocket boots and you'd be on the phone with the president trying to convince him that Metallica would make a better national anthem."

"Ride The Lightning is an American treasure Rogers, and our anthem is rooted in oppression and glorifies the government of our oppressors."

"Yeah... you're probably right about that last part." Steve huffed a laugh, looking away for a moment. When he turned back to Tony there was a pink flush to the back of his neck and a nervousness to him that was kind of a lot endearing if Tony were honest.

"Could you tell me more about it?"

Tony blinked in surprise. He could give an entire history lesson truth be told but it had just been a stupid joke. He honestly hadn't been expecting it to go any further.

"Uh.. Sure?"

"Tonight." Steve clarified, stiffening his jaw and stepping toward him like he was taking command of a rowdy unit of troops. "I'd like to take you on a date tonight, is what I'm saying."
"Tonight? It's like... What the hell time is it, even?" Tony demanded and his A.I. helpfully filled in.

"It's just ten after seven Sir."

"There we go, ten after seven. Too late to get a reservation anywhere." Tony pointed out and Steve just smiled.

"The place I have in mind is open late. So how about it? We can even catch burgers after. I know you like burgers."

Well that... that was not where Tony had expected this day to end, he thought as something like a net full of butterflies was let loose in his stomach. Could they really do this? Should they do this?!

They were so different from one another, too different maybe, and Cap was bound to realize sooner or later Tony would never be as good a person as he wanted to be and then what?

Don't do that. He reminded himself. Don't demean the people who care about you by demeaning their choice to care about you.

Swallowing back the ball of nerves lodged in his throat he squeezed Steve's hand affirmatively.

"What should I wear?"

Steve's answering smile was brilliant.

~*~*~*~

Those butterflies in Tony's stomach had turned to galloping horses by the time he met Steve in the garage just a little after nine pm that night. Per Steve's instructions he'd dressed down in a very date appropriate sweater and jeans (Balmain because he was one of the few designers who accounted for no two tails being exactly alike when designing pants for Gata, that and Pepper always said the black pair did fantastic things for his ass).

"You look like Natasha got her hands on you." Tony commented as he took in Steve's unusually rugged ensemble of well fitted jeans and bomber jacket. There was just a touch of gel in his hair that had Natasha's interfering lady fingers written all over it, but Tony wasn't really complaining when the result was a couple hundred pounds of all American gorgeousness leaning up against a few more hundred pounds of sleek American made machinery.

The blond laughed, ducking his head somewhat bashfully as he admitted, "She ambushed me."

"Remind me to send her a fruit basket. Any chance you'll let me drive?"

If there was anything Tony loved more than a good looking guy and a fast ride, it was driving said fast ride.

Steve plucked a gleaming black helmet off the helmet bar and tossed it Tony's way, swinging one leg over the seat as he mounted, laughing over his shoulder, "Not a chance Stark."

Tony wasn't too miffed about it. He still got to have Steve Rogers between his legs as they roared out of the tower garage, so whoever said he couldn't graciously concede defeat was a damn liar.
He'd seen Steve drive a number of times on Avengers calls, but for some reason he'd expected that outside of a mission Steve would drive more like... well more like a speed limit obeying citizen and not a thrill seeking adrenaline junkie but hey, it was great to learn new things.

They sped through the city traffic like mad things and in the back of Tony's mind he said an apology to Pepper, who was sure to be miffed when the traffic cams crashed the party; but for the moment he couldn't care less. He let himself enjoy the speed, the feel of Steve's body shifting beneath his and the rumble of his chest as the blond laughed at Tony's loud whoops.

He didn't realize that he was purring by the time they finally rolled to a stop in front of an unassuming hole in the wall in the middle of some borough that was decidedly not Uptown Manhattan, until Steve cut off the engine and the sound suddenly seemed glaringly loud despite the low thud of music coming from the basement of the building.

"So the motorcycle was a good idea." Steve deadpanned and Tony rolled his eyes nudging him in the back.

"Like you ever doubted it. Where the hell are we?" Tony glanced around, trying to get a feel for the neighborhood by the people passing by and the cars lining the street, but honestly this had to be the most non-descript strip of New York city in existence. Blue collar, lots of pleather and cheap stockings. A couple of paint jobs and a hipster bar or two saved it from being downright seedy.

"Brooklyn," Steve answered with a half smile as he dismounted and extended a hand to help Tony up.

Tony nodded wordlessly, accepting the hand, not wholly surprised by that. Made sense. It was the part of the city Steve knew best and there was probably a lot still here that meant a lot to him.

"A lot of what I remember from when I was growing up is either gone or has changed so much it might as well be." Steve hadn't let go of Tony's hand as he meandered toward the door where the loud music was coming from. Up close it looked to be a nightclub, though the sign out front reading Belles wasn't exactly forthcoming. The beefy pair of dudes guarding the door was what gave it away.

"I was kind of surprised at first that this place is still standing but the more I think about it the more it makes sense." Steve mused and Tony glanced at him curiously. He hadn't really taken Steve for the nightclub kind.

"How come?"

"People need safe spaces." Steve answered still looking up at the glowing sign. "Belles is a kennel club. I'm not sure if you know-"

Tony drew back in surprise, their hands tugging until Steve drew to a stop. Tony knew very well what a kennel club was. With the advances that Gata had made in society and the new wave of more public interspecies romances, they weren't as notorious as they'd once been. They were even legal now in more progressive states like New York, but they still came with a certain stigma.

There was an old saying that at the kennel club everybody looked the other way. Humans who wanted to take a walk on the wild side could without judgment and Gata weren't asked who they'd come with and nobody cared too much who they left with.

Of course Tony's parents had warned him away from such 'wicked' establishments, but Tony knew by now that half the negativity was really just to put pressure on interspecies unions. But still. Pepper
really would bite him a new asshole if he was photographed in a kennel club again without warning her.

He could just see tomorrows headline. "Look whose got their claws in Cap!" Oh and the classic, "American Icon catches feline fever!"

"This isn't my first rodeo Rogers. You're not the first guy I've been with who wanted to walk on the wild side." Tony eyed the sign with distaste.

"Don't say that." Steve was frowning, maybe at Tony's choice of words, or maybe just because Tony's reaction hadn't been what he was expecting. But really what had he expected? It was 2013, even if interspecies relationships weren't legally recognized nobody was going to harass them in New York for being together someplace normal. Someplace not a fetish joint.

Steve tugged Tony closer, his thumb running over the inside of Tony's palm as he entreated, "That's not what this is about. The thing is, in my day the only place a guy like me in love with a guy like you could feel safe to show it was a place like this. But if they raided the place and caught you there it was a one way ticket to getting stamped and Bucky never wanted to take that risk. When he died, I regretted it. I regretted never taking the chance."

"Steve..." Tony squeezed reached for his other hand, at a loss for words and Steve shook off the cloud of grief.

"I can't get the past back and that's okay, cause the future gives me a lot of hope." Smiling shyly at him now he squeezed Tony's hands. "I'd like to make a couple of new memories, if you're up for it."

It occurred to Tony then that Steve might just be as uncertain as he was, just as nervous to be going out on a date with Tony Stark as Tony was to be with Captain America. But he wasn't the captain right now. He was just Steve, some kid from Brooklyn who wanted a night with his date with no regrets and Tony was just Tony.

He didn't want them either, Tony realized slowly. He didn't want to walk away from this without knowing where it could have gone.

"One condition?" Steve's face lit up with hope and Tony laughed. "Just let me call Pepper. She'll have kittens if I don't and well... they'd lock us up for scientific study considering."

Steve pulled him into a tight hug, chest rumbling with chuckles against Tony's as he murmured, "Thank you, Tony."

*~*~*

"You're a dirty rotten liar Rogers!" Tony shouted breathlessly over the music, coming neatly out of a spin the way one did when they'd spent gruesomely dull hours in their childhood training for pageant shows. Call him vain, but Tony had expected to have to drag Steve through the ropes and fight not to get his feet stepped on, but Steve Rogers was a dirty liar brimming with lies, because he was actually a rather good dancer. A little out of touch with the times, but whatever. Swing was fun.

"How have I lied to you?" Steve laughed over the music pulling Tony back in tight, grinning down at him all smug and Tony would be pissed if he weren't having such a great time.
"I met Agent Carter you know. She told me stories about you. Never danced before my ass."

"Peggy told you stories about me?" Steve looked startled and somewhat abashed by this and Tony just shook his head, too happy to be embarrassed about it.

"I was kind of a big fan boy. I was five shut up." Steve chuckled when Tony poked his chest. "The point is you're full of shit."

"I never said I'd never danced. She asked me how many dames I'd danced with a dame. Answers still zero." There was a sad edge creeping into his smile and Tony was sorry to have mentioned it.

Because it was obvious to him who Steve must have danced with if not pretty girls. He could picture it well enough two boys goofing off in the privacy of their room, mimicking the popular dances they saw on the television. Maybe slow dancing, wishing they could be somewhere like this, with low lights and surrounded by warm bodies. In the open.

"Come on Soldier," Tony squeezed Steve's hand with a gentle smile and tugged him toward the bar. "I'm tapped out. Let's get a drink."

Belles wasn't the most glamorous club Tony had ever been to in his life, but he liked it better for it's old brick, cheap Parisian décor and dedication to nostalgia. In his youth he'd been to some kennel joints dripping in diamonds, not a dark corner in sight, but just thinking about them even now left a bad taste in his mouth.

Those places had always made Tony feel like an object. His dates had wanted to show him off. All too eager to be seen with America's most infamous bad kitty on their arm amidst the bubbling champagne and gleaming chains.

While Tony had spotted more than a few kats on collars and leashes, there were plenty of bare throats in the room and the whole vibe was just... different. Warm somehow. It was just in the air he guessed, the air of people who had been coming here for years (in some case decades) who had seen good and bad times together, seen new comers come and go, and weathered all the changes just to come back to this spot. A safe place.

The couple beside them at the bar for instance when they ordered their drinks looked stupidly happy, like propaganda piece 'love is love' stupidly happy. As happy as Tony felt. The woman, a cute young kitten with her brown hair done up in some truly impressive ringlets leaned across the bar to shout at them over the music.

"Usually it's only the old timers out on the floor when Tanner plays the swing stuff. You two can really cut a rug."

"Steve's an old man at heart." Tony answered with a wink and the girl laughed gaily, clearly a bit tipsy. He wondered with mild alarm how old she was. She didn't look old enough to be drinking in a night club but he wasn't going to begrudge her a night out with her beau when there was no telling what her home life was like. She Looked well cared for and her collar was well made but he wasn't rude enough to try and read her tags even though she'd left them on.

"I'm Kitty. And that's not a code name though I wish it was. This is my boyfriend Peter Rasputin, which is also serious. Believe it or not." She gestured to the smitten looking fellow beside her and Tony nodded in greeting. Steve was frowning between the two, likely because Peter looked to be firmly in his twenties and Kitty decidedly less so but Tony really couldn't judge that either given his own colorful past.
"I'm Tony, this is Steve" he extended his hand for both to shake, deciding against code names because he didn't really see a point. His face was recognizable and a picture would say it all anyway. So far he didn't think anyone had recognized either of them and if they had they'd left them alone. That was all Tony could really ask for.

"How long have you two been coming here?" Steve asked and Kitty huffed a noisy breath, sending her bangs flying upward.

"Oh gosh, maybe three years? It's been about as long as we've been together. Since I was what, sixteen?" Kitty looked to Peter and catching his anxious glance in Steve's glowering direction she rolled her eyes and redacted, using air quotes for emphasis. "I mean eighteen. Cause I'm totally twenty-one right now. You're not a Cop are you? You look coply."

Tony muffled a giggle with his hand.

"No, but are you sure you should be out like this if you're underage?" Steve asked as the bar tender slid their drinks toward them. Well Tony's drink and Steve's water because he made the valid point that nobody drank shitty bar beer for the taste and it had no effect on him so water.

"Oh he's really sweet. I like him." Kitty purred turning in her boyfriend's lap to nip his ear playfully. "Watch out Petey-pie I may have just found my next husband."

"Don't you have to have a first husband before you can have a next husband?" Tony heard Peter ask in a thick Russian accent as the volume in the club lowered, the up beat music fading as the DJ started to yammer something at the crowd about slowing it down.

"You never know." Tony quipped with a shrug, polishing off the rest of his drink with a flourish. "They could always pass that bill to legally recognize interspecies unions."

"Love wins 2014!" Kitty cried with a triumphant laugh smacking a kiss against Peter's cheek.

"Don't encourage them to get any crazier," Steve muttered under his breath pulling a grinning Tony back toward the dance floor but before they departed he pinned Peter Rasputin with the kind of penetrating gaze that only Captain America could give, which threatened dishonor on your entire family line and all your cows if you disappointed him and said, "You make sure she gets home safe son. And take it easy on the drinks."

Peter understandably looked ready to wet himself.

"I will... Sir." The kid gulped and Tony was laughing as Steve pulled him out into the crowd of dancers again.

"You get her home safe son." he mimicked as Steve pulled him close to his chest. "Do you hear yourself when you talk, Captain Dad? I bet you're gonna keep looking over my shoulder all night, checking up on her."

Tony knew he would, and rather liked that about him if he was honest. Steve just shrugged and continued moving to the music, which was something crooning and slow that tugged at Tony's memory but for the life of him he couldn't remember the name of. Not with Steve's warm hand on his back and his body pressed against his.

Something about fools rushing in... Appropriate really. Tony felt like a fool. The biggest of fools, staring into the eyes of someone too beautiful to be real, to good to ever be his, and just letting himself slide deeper and deeper, their bodies swaying closer together.
"Shall I stay. Would it be a sin?"

"Tony?" Steve was asking, but Tony could barely hear over the pounding of his heart. "Thanks for coming out with me tonight."

Tony smiled in reply, not quite able to find words to express how he felt. How amazing. How afraid. How hopeful... but the gentle rub of Steve's hand against his back seemed to say he understood.

"Tony, I'd really like to kiss you right now."

They'd kissed before this, but Tony didn't misunderstand the question. Steve was asking if he could kiss Tony with meaning, with declarations and commitment attached. Once more now with purpose. No more wandering eyes, no more side flirtations. A kiss, like a promise. A promise they'd make to each other.

For a moment he was terribly torn, and of all the things that could have come to mind he suddenly thought of that moment in his lab with Luke when he'd felt... good. So good. So sure of himself.

Right now he felt so far from sure, it was like he and surety had never even heard of each other.

"You sure that's what you really want Cap? I'm not easy to love."

He heard the words leave his mouth, but it was as if from a distance. He didn't know what on earth had possessed him to say them, to reject something he so desperately wanted, only that his pulse leapt momentarily and the bitter taste of fear filled his mouth until Steve answered by pulling him flush against his chest. His mouth came down to cover his and put delicious pressure against his whiskers and Tony moaned, leaning into the kiss for everything he was worth, savoring the sweetness and the soft feel of Steve's lips against his.

Eventually, a need for air forced them apart but Steve's mouth hovered over his unwilling to part more than a couple of inches. Tony was just fine with that. He buried his nose against Steve's shirt, inhaling the scent of cotton and all that made Steve, _Steve._

"Yes you are." Steve murmured lowly in answer to something Tony had almost forgotten.

He wasn't going to run away, Tony determined holding tightly to Steve's back. Not this time. To hell with self-doubt. Pity party over. No more demeaning himself and his relationships. He was fucking Ironman and Captain America never quit. If the two of them couldn't make it work then it wouldn't be for holding back.

*~*~*~*

Tony almost floated into his room that night. Dropped off at the elevator doors to the penthouse like a teenager on prom night because Steve Rogers was a perfect idiot and ignored all of Tony's blatant invitations to come upstairs and skip the coffee.

Oh well, that's what he got for dating a man born in the twenties. He probably didn't believe in going to bed until they traded high school rings or something. Or was it marriage? God he hoped it wasn't marriage. They should probably talk about that.

"Did you have a nice night Sir?"
"Hmm?" Tony hummed, caught off guard by the greeting until he came back to the present and smiled.

"Yeah Jay I did. Daddy's in a relationship now so be a peach and mark the date will you? File it under anniversaries... don't let me screw this one up, okay Jay?"

"Of course, Sir. And might I say congratulations." The A.I. answered fondly. "It will please you to know that I have good news as well."

"Oh?"

"Our program singled out two possible matches to the voice samples."

Commitment anxieties completely forgotten Tony's heart leapt with excitement.

"Hit me with it Jay, what have we got?"

"The first appears to be an anomaly," JARVIS said and it was explained a moment later when a video clip appeared on a small halo-screen just above Tony's head. It took him a moment to place what he was seeing but when he did he scoffed openly.

It was the video sample from the single interview the Wakandain king had given after the country had been discovered. The one where he'd basically told the U.N. to fuck off and leave them alone. Although it had been over a decade since then Tony seriously doubted the King of Wakanda had graduated to dressing up in costume and following the Avengers around New York for the hell of it.

"Really JARVIS, I thought you said we were running up to nintey-seven percent accuracy?!"

"We are sir. The video is a match at exactly ninety two percent suggesting that our masked friend is either the king of Wakanda or a relation. However it is unlikely, which is why I referred to it as an anomaly, especially given that our second match is far more likely. Though I'm afraid Sir, that it may come as a bit of an unpleasant surprise."

"Just play it Jay."

Without further prompting JARVIS began to play another clip and Tony took in a sharp breath, a feeling inexplicably close to betrayal trickling through him as he watched Luke Debar signing in with tower security along with his uncle, their first day at the tower.

"Are you sure?" He asked through a tight throat.

"I have run the algorithm against a dozen other stored security images in my database Sir, all of them register as matches with ninety seven percent certainty." JARVIS answered.

Well well well then, Tony thought darkly. This certainly explained that squeaky clean record. Too neat. Too damn tidy. He'd known that. And now that it was all coming together in his head, the clues had been there.

The familiarity. The similar styles of humor. Never seeing one on the same mission that he saw the other. The mouthwatering tech. The only tech he'd ever glimpsed that could so effortlessly rival his own had been stolen out of Wakanda when those mercenaries stumbled upon the country and got more than they'd bargained for.

Luke Debar was a Wakandain spy, which meant two things.
One, Fury owed him a damn explanation because like hell he had a foreign spy on his payroll and didn't even know it.

And two, whatever friendship Tony had thought they were building was nothing but lies and he had no one to blame his stupidity on but himself.

Fool a guy once, shame on you. But fool him twice?

Not this time.

Chapter End Notes

So I decided to leave T'challa's official arrival for next chapter because this one felt complete without it. I'm particularly interested in how you think Steve did. Haha did he take T'challa's advice? And better question, should he take T'challa's advice? The jelly was strong. :P

Next up Tony and Bruce get their bond on and Fury calls the team in with the news that they have royal visitors. Tony's pissed at the Prince of lies, but diplomacy demands he play nice and Tony's a fabulous actor. Usually. He's really pissed okay? New romance is a nice distraction though, especially when you're healing from a medically revolutionary surgery.
Chapter Summary

A picture post for the Gata Verse!

Chapter Notes

A picture post for the Gata verse casted with child actors/models. You can of course continue to imagine them however you like but here are the visual references I use.

Jaime - Of Avengers Pride
Nyota - Of Avengers Pride

Amory - Of Avengers Pride
Unnamed infant.
Finding "professional" pictures of small children gets harder the younger they are and I'm not personally comfortable using baby portraits. So here she is just a bit older. When thinking her character up, I straight up thought of this little girl from We Bought a Zoo.
I tell you openly, you have my heart (so don't hurt me).

Chapter Summary

With the date of the surgery looming, Bruce and Tony get their bond on but Fury has a surprise that shakes up all of their well laid plans.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For the visual people, check out the picture post featuring the kits.

Thank you so much for your continued support on this fic. I still can't believe anyone else besides my derp self loves it as much as I do. I'm sorry I didn't get to your comments this week (it was a really busy one) but I didn't want to miss posting on time.

Enjoy!!!!

TUESDAY

Tony gritted his teeth and shook his head clear of his jumbled tangle of misgivings as Fury finally entered the meeting room. Tony kept his expression level because he’d be damned before he showed Nick how irritated he was with being kept waiting when he’d purposefully arrived late himself to be the one keeping the director waiting.

“You made the front page Stark.” Fury began without preamble, slapping a newspaper down upon the table and sliding it toward Tony’s seat. Tony didn’t bother looking at it, having already met with Pepper about the morning’s headlines but Steve reached across him to pick it up with a curious expression that deepened into a slight frown as he examined the article.

“American Catastrophe- How interspecies unions threaten the nation.” Clint read over his shoulder with a scoff. “The Star needs to hire new writers. I could come up with ten better headlines in my sleep.”

“I don’t know, the part where a close ‘source’ tells them how our liberal government full of PC-brained social justice freaks forced a national icon to be a part of their dangerous social experiment despite his reservations, was kind of interesting.” Tony stared hard at Fury.

“Before you start in Stark you should know that I was against the operation from the start. It was out of my hands.”

“Out of your hands Director?” Steve’s scowl called bullshit. Finished with the paper he tossed it aside, letting it land on the table with a loud slap.

“Yeah, Cap, believe it or not I don’t get much say once the World Security Council gets involved, and believe me they’re involved.” Fury grumbled, coming around the table to take his seat. “They’ve got their eyes on Wakanda. It’s a wild card and they don’t like wild cards. They want to know what they’re dealing with, and for that we need access to the country. All attempts at espionage have failed
“in the past.”

“You’ve not sent me. I presume there’s a reason for that.” Natasha pointed out and Fury nodded.

“No offense Agent Romanov, but when it comes to their tech we’re out classed. Until we know exactly what they’re capable of, I wasn’t going to risk sending you in to a death trap.” He explained with a tired sounding grunt. “And just between you, me and the crows, taking what we want by force isn’t the way to go with these guys. They’re more useful as allies than enemies and I think we have a real shot at that with the Avengers. Your existence intrigued them enough to consider opening the door, but they weren’t going to do that until they’d assessed the situation for themselves without interference. Like I said, my hands were tied.”

“They muzzled you.” Tony let loose a vindictive huff of laughter and Fury glared at him. This was an interesting development. Favorable, in some ways considering his own plans but also dangerous to them. A partnership between the US government and Wakanda put everything Tony planed in jeopardy. It was galling to admit it, but having glimpsed bits and pieces of their technology he wasn’t one hundred percent certain his own would come out the winner in a war with Wakanda.

For now! Yes, okay coming in second was a new and not exactly treasured feeling, but he was no stranger to challenge and honestly, he’d been getting rusty over here anyway with nobody to even come close to giving him competition. They had this in the bag, because his people would have something Wakanda didn’t. They’d have him, and Tony would put his mind and his guts up against anyone.

“King T’Chaka insisted on a private assessment with no one knowledgeable besides myself and Agent Coulson,” Fury answered through gritted teeth and Tony laughed. Perfect. Coulson had known from the gate as well. He might literally have been the last to figure it out. He was over this conversation already. Way over it.

“Awesome. So I know this is the part where you tell me it was for my own good and blah blah blah, but let’s skip directly to the part where I feed you back your balls. Here’s what I want.” Tony leaned forward in his chair, his smile still firmly in place. “I want direct contact with whoever is doing the negations between you and the King. You and the World Security Council are going to pull out all of your little feelers and leave me and my team to handle the negotiations.”

“Ha.” Fury barked a hard laugh. “Now why the hell would I do that Stark?”

“You’ve played it down, but let’s not be trite here Nicky. Let’s review the facts,” Tony began to tick off on his fingers. “We know they’re heavily populated by Alurio and that their ruling family is intermarried with their largest Pride. They hid their entire country for centuries to avoid being conquered by foreign powers and likely enslavement. My father stumbled upon their borders unknowingly in his younger years, and in return for their hospitality he robbed them. And lastly, the rest of you only found out they existed when Klaw acquired some of my dad’s old things and got the idea to retrace his steps and try to steal more of their shit.”

Silence descended when Tony finished but he was fine with that, and the vein ticking at Fury’s temple.

“I think what Tony’s saying is the Avengers are the only reason they’re giving us the time of day Director,” Steve summarized after a long moment and Tony’s grin shifted from something a little less sharp to a little more warm with appreciation.

“I think Cap’s on to something there Nicko. Which is how I know you’re going to give me everything I’m asking for and a pony besides. Am I right, or am I right?”
Tony’s voice dripped with smugness. He knew he had Fury by the balls. What he’d really wanted to do was rip them off and eat them (metaphorically speaking) but Pepper would kill him if he ruined their strategy. Much as he’d like to tell Fury where to go, Tony needed to bide his time.

Wakanda might have the resources to create highly advanced weaponry the world couldn’t yet beat, but they didn’t have Tony Stark, and that was a big chip on the Avengers side of the pile.

It was a familiar problem in business. What needed to happen here was Stark Industries needed to steal a deal right out from under the world powers, and once Tony and Lady Wakanda were in bed together he needed to get her to sing all her secrets.

If the time ever came when the two countries were at odds he’d have already developed ten different ways to make her think twice about trying to take the house in the split.

In short, a shit ton was riding on Tony’s ability to cozy up to Wakanda but lucky for Tony and his future Pride, he’s a first class businessman. He can’t remember when he last showered sometimes but don’t let the bouts of distracted mad genius fool you. He was confident he could out maneuver SHIELD, the US government and the World Security Council combined with a kiss for good luck while he was at it. It was going to cost him a pound of flesh or two, but he was used to that too.

Well he thought the cost would be heavy but today at least proved to be the exception.

Because Fury just sighed and nodded, not putting up any of the fight that Tony had expected, already reaching for the button to the intercom as he said, “Have it your way Stark. Hill!”

“Yes Sir?” the woman’s voice came over the hidden speakers in the room.

“Get Ross on the phone.” Tony tensed, feeling the echoing wariness in the others pressing against him. That had been far too easy.

Fury turned back to them and explained dryly. “Congratulations. After reviewing the report from your assessment, Wakanda is sending an ambassador to begin official negotiations. Their one condition is they want to deal directly with the Avengers Pride.”

Ah. Tony realized now that it’s too late. Fury had needed Tony to take control and had known better than to try and tell him to do it. Clever. Oh well, he couldn’t really be mad at getting exactly what he wanted. Especially when he’d be walking away from this whole thing with his independence.

Tony smiled winsomely at the man and leaned back in his chair.

“Wonderful. Great talk, Nick. I love it when we can get together like this.”

~*~

WEDSNDAy

In a few days the life of Tony Stark former weapons manufacturer, current leader in the global fight for clean energy and Queen of Avengers Pride, would be in the hands of Dr. Bruce Banner, MRA Helen Cho, and of course his own; though for the record It’s not his hands that he’s placing the most faith in.

The Cradle was ready and Bruce and Helen as ready as they’d ever be for the maiden voyage of what amounted to a medically revolutionizing procedure. If it was a success their patented
technology would change the shape of the world. Well, correction. Kats can’t own patents (unless they inherit them the way that Tony did) but corporations can and Pepper has tied the Cradle and their nanobot tech up in so much legal red tape it would take three lifetimes to untangle it, so bygones.

Pepper was anxious, but she was always going to be anxious about Tony going on the table. It didn’t help that the medical professional most familiar with the squishy bits of science had suddenly been dropped from the endeavor upon Tony’s discovery that he wasn’t who he said he was; but Pepper understood why it was important for him to trust the people in his inner circle. There was a small bit of gratification in watching her be as pissed as he was that Fury had pulled a stunt like this. The one-eyed bastard deserved every bit of hell Pepper could throw at him and Potts had a mean punch.

And it was just good not to feel like he was the only one who’d taken the bait for once; because when he’d told the team, far from getting the united experience of shock and betrayal that the situation definitely warranted, Tony had received luke-warm shrugs and expectant nods.

Clint had suspected because despite being, well Clint, he was a highly-trained spy and he did pay attention when things didn’t add up. Also, he’d pointed out that “nobody’s record is that clean unless it’s faked” and he keeps telling Coulson that, but far be it for SHIELD to listen to him.

Thor had some bullshit reason for knowing that involved Tony and scent signatures of all things, that had Tony gritting his teeth (because fuck that) and remembering with humiliation Queen Bastet saying something very similar.

“It is expedient when dealing with the KǪTRÐÝR to learn to recognize scent signatures to avoid diplomatic incidents. They are very territorial creatures especially when courting. Your body could only react to both toms the same way unless they were in fact the same man.”

Tony had wanted to find the linguistic equivalent of a blow torch and scorch those words (and all the innuendo behind them) out of existence, especially when he’d seen the look on Steve’s face.

He wasn’t an asshole about it, but Tony didn’t have to be a mind reader to know Steve didn’t much like the topic of conversation. Who would? Way to start off a relationship Stark. Hashing through the biological evidence of your attraction to someone else is always a winning option for a second date.

It didn’t matter what his sweat glands were doing or whatever the hell it was he’d been building with (not)Luke; because you couldn’t build anything real on lies and that’s what the tom had done. He’d lied to Tony from the beginning so that left them at ground zero. Attraction happened, Tony was a fucking expert on attraction and the doors it could open. He’d learned under fire.

That as it turned out, was the reason behind Natasha’s coldness to the tom. She’d figured him out almost immediately, and Tony wanted to be angry for that, for allowing the ruse to continue but as she’d pointed out, Fury had all but told them Wakanda would be sending someone to evaluate their Pride.

There was too much riding on their negotiations with the country to risk failing that test.

“But it was unnecessary to try and initiate a relationship with you when it could not go anywhere.” She’d admitted to him privately and the fight had leaked out of him.

She didn’t come out and say it but he got the message just the same. She hadn’t wanted him to get played again. And suddenly, all her pushing him toward Steve made sense. She’d told him she preferred big sister over meddling granny. He’d not taken her seriously, but he was beginning to think that he should have.
If being tied together for eternity didn’t make them family nothing was ever going to. And if he were
honest, most of his resentment was rooted in fear. The closest Tony had ever come to real family was
Pepper and Rhodey. Who were great, don’t get him wrong. It wasn’t their fault that the institution of
slavery stood between them. It just kind of put a damper on things.

Natasha was his and he hers. They shared a struggle and now they shared a life together. Tony Stark
could no longer claim he didn’t have family, but that was okay. Fear or no fear, that was exactly
what he’d wanted and before he was set to go under the metaphorical knife the team had gathered
together after dinner to see about making that family a little bit bigger.

It had been kind of morbid, but comforting in its own way, eating together as a team knowing that
afterwards they would all take the elevator down to Bruce’s lab where Helen would hook them up to
the machines that would monitor them while they attempted to form the bond.

As much as Tony wanted to thumb his nose at (not)Luke’s advice he wasn’t going to play around
with Bruce’s life. He and Natasha had bonded under duress and Tony well remembered the agony of
it, and didn’t pretend not to know how close they’d both come to perishing. He still wasn’t
completely sure what had tipped the scales towards survival. So Helen was there along with a
S.H.I.E.L.D. medic because Pepper had insisted and Tony couldn’t deny the need.

The medic wasn’t Luke, because Luke hadn’t come around the tower since the night that Tony had
discovered his identity. Not that Tony would have invited him anyway, but it just proved to Tony
that the tom had known that Tony was going to discover the truth. He could have come clean then,
but he hadn’t. So whatever. Tony knew the score.

A large kitten-bed had been set up in the middle of the lab because the plushy circle cushion would
allow room for both him and Bruce to lay side by side and still be touching. They did not want to
discount that physical closeness had played a hand in Tony and Natasha’s successful bonding. When
the rest of the team had been settled in a loose semi-circle around the bed and the machines Helen
and Dr. Salek had begun hooking them up to the various monitors and forms of life support.

Steve stayed by Tony’s side until they finished with him and moved on to Bruce, his expression as
unreadable as a book in brail but Tony could practically hear the buzz of worry going on in his head.

“Relax,” Tony squeezed his hand. “You can’t frown this sort of thing into submission you know.”

“I can try.” He drawled in response and Tony’s heart picked up speed slightly as Steve leaned down
to press a kiss against his jaw. “And I’m going to be right here for you.”

For a desperate moment Tony allowed his eyes to flutter shut and Steve’s comforting scent to
envelop him as he leaned into his warmth (because he was scared, because he’d like very much to
curl himself up into Steve’s arms and let him glower away anything that tried to touch him) but then
it was time to face the music.

“That’s sweet. Impractical but sweet. Helen and the doc would probably prefer not having to climb
over a snarly overprotective tom-hybrid.” Tony wrinkled his nose, whiskers twitching with distaste.
“We’ve got to come up with a better classification for you Cap. That makes you sound like a science
experiment.”

Steve shrugged as if to say ‘if the shoe fits’ and Tony glowered at him.

“You’re a person Steve.” Tony snapped his fingers excitedly as the metaphorical lightbulb went on.
“A tom-person. I like it.”
“Doesn’t that imply that tom-kats aren’t people though?” Steve questioned with an arched brow and a smile tugging at his mouth and Tony laughed.

“Thought of that, but the alternatives were homo-tom which sounds like an insult and tom-bro, which you know, is an insult to the English language. And tom-guy is just stupid.”

Next to them Helen giggled and Bruce shook his head as Dr. Salek buzzed around his side of the bed, checking wires and connections.

“I like tom-person.” Bruce suggested. “but Tom-guy has a certain amount of pizazz. It’s very you.”

“Yes, but is it Steve? I mean could you say ‘here comes Captain America, everyone’s favorite tom-guy with a straight face?’” Tony countered and Steve rolled his eyes.

“I doubt anybody could say any of that with a straight face besides you.”

“I vote homo-tom.” Clint piped up, over from the observation area and Steve tossed him a very unimpressed stare as beside him Natasha nodded with a very serious frown of concentration on her face that would have convinced even Tony that she was serious if not for their bond ensured bullshit sensors.

“Is he homo because he’s human or is he homo because he -”

“Captain Rogers if you could take your seat please,” an annoyed sounding Dr. Salek interrupted trying to edge past Steve and the captain muttered an apology before squeezing Tony’s hand once more and making his way toward the others in the observation area.

The doctor was next to Bruce again, ready to put the IV line in it looked like, only she was kind of just standing there looking lost.

“The needle isn’t going to bother him is it?” Dr. Salek turned toward Coulson who was there on behalf of SHIELD as well as Bruce’s official handler. The doctor held the needle delicately between two fingers and looked about as ready to poke Bruce with it as she was ready to attempt to dismantle a bomb. Tony rolled his eyes even as Helen quietly reached and took the needle from the nervous woman’s hands and grabbed Bruce’s arm, pushing back his shirt sleeve to search for a vein.

“Dr. Banner has been searching for a cure to his condition for over a decade, Madame.” Cho stated as a matter of fact, but Tony heard the admonishment in her tone.

“Still probably better safe than sorry. Not exactly a good idea for someone I don’t trust to rush at me with something pointy.” Bruce pointed out and the two shared a small smile, Helen squeezing his wrist gently as she finished taping the IV to his wrist.

She and Dr. Salek checked all of their vitals and made sure the monitors were properly working before looking up from her station to nod at Pepper and Coulson.

“I’m ready to proceed now.”

“Great.” Tony clapped his hands, pulling the attention back to the center of the room. “So for the official record and you kids watching at home, what’s about to go down here is called a bond in layman’s terms. In genius, it means Bruce and I are going to establish a permanent psychic link between our brains.”

“Similar links have been confirmed in the study of human twins, and are not uncommon among domesticated Gata across a wide spectrum.” Bruce added to the debriefing. “However, these bonds
lack the depth and strength of what we know of historical Gata-Gata bonds. The data we have collected from the successful bonding of Mr. Stark and Ms. Romanov supports working theory that a full bond will change our cerebral wiring to create a codependent symbiotic system… What we’re calling uh, a marriage of minds.”

“In plain speak, everything our brains can do on their own, following the bond they’ll also be able to do with a partner or partners. In fact the data says polyamory is encouraged.” Tony explained with a waggle of his eyebrows. “Please let the record show, that while the host brain still retains primary control over the host body, this does open up interesting avenues for manipulation and possible mind control. Also note that a natural process of sharing lower brain functions among partnered brains encourages life-long proximity for those bonded. Missing your partners will now literally make it harder for you to live boys and girls, it’s not just a sad song.”

“How will that affect your work as Avengers?” Coulson wanted to know, and Thor echoed his worries, wanting to know how a potential bond could affect the team with his frequent need to return to Asgard.

“Though physical separation across great distances is not recommended indefinitely, it does not appear to be fatal. Examination of Captain Rogers, who shows signs of a successfully established bond with a deceased party, does seem to suggest however that permanent separation from a partner can cause a significant break down in cognitive function.” Helen answered with a sympathetic look in Steve’s direction as inevitably eyes drifted toward him. He just nodded, to show that he was listening but Tony read his discomfort with the scrutiny in the way he held himself.

“The good news is that the degeneration can be successfully stemmed by an outside brain.” Tony swung the focus back around, tapping the side of his head with a falsely bright grin. “We don’t know at this time whether that is something all Gata can do or if it is a trick specific to the Queen brain, and seeing as we’d have to kill someone to collect any more data on it, we’ll just have to wait on that one.”

Nobody laughed but then again Tony hadn’t expected them to. The possibility of death was just a little too close at hand for all of them; but Tony had always found it easier to deal with it in this sort of way and the point had been to pull everybody off the subject of the mess in Steve’s head. He seemed to know it too because he shot Tony a grateful look.

“So… to begin, I think if there’s anything important we want to say to each other…” Bruce scratched the scruff on his chin kind of sheepishly and Tony felt a rush of affection for him.

“Very Armageddon of you Bruce. Kind of a morbid note to start out on though.” Tony teased reaching for his hand and Bruce shrugged.

“I know you’re not exactly in the market for taking his advice, but Luke did warn us that the risks of what we find in each others minds could be the reason the bond doesn’t take.”

“Hey listen.” Tony scooted as far as the wires and tubes would let him until he was curled into Banner’s side, close enough for legs to tangle together if not for the mess of wiring. “There isn’t anything you’re going to throw at me that’s going to make me reject you. Got it? Just relax.”

Tony rubbed the back of Bruce’s hand and tried to steady his own breathing. He kept a firm smile of encouragement on his face as they began.

He started with where he could feel the familiar press of Bruce’s emotions. Like usual he could almost hear the whisper of Banner’s thoughts, muted and muffled as if just behind a door, and he figured it was a good place to begin.
He breathes – in and out – and he reaches.

As he breathes he imagines himself to be sinking inside their stream. He lets their ebb and flow
surround him until Bruce’s thoughts are not just an impression but a steady stream of pictures
surrounding them in brilliant display.

Tony forgets where he ends and Bruce begins.

*~*~*~*~

Just like that they’re small. They’re him (Tony) and they’re curled up with their mother in the soft
kitten bed. She smells like jasmine. She has a locket on a golden chain that they love to play with.
It’s shiny, and the gem in the center catches the light in a distracting way.

“Focus bambino,” Mama says, batting their reaching fingers away from the locket. She is tense
today, her scent sour in their nose.

“Can you show Sir how to solve the puzzle?”

They shrink, curling themselves into a ball against her chest. They don’t like Sir. He barks at them
and sticks them with needles. He asks them to do things that they don’t understand and they get hurt
when they don’t. Sometimes they get hurt even when they do.

“Shh, bambino it’s alright. Just show him how to solve the puzzle and then Mr. Jarvis will take us to
the park. You’d like that wouldn’t you?”

They would. They focus on the spread of brightly colored blocks and the chains that link them.

“Make him hurry Maria, I don’t have all day!” Sir barks over the intercom, but they can’t smell him
so they know he isn’t close.

It’s easier to keep their focus on the blocks for Mama and now that they’re focused, the puzzle is
almost laughably easy.

“All done!” they crow with triumph and Mama nuzzles her nose against their rounded cheek, and
they giggle at the tickle of her whiskers.

“Good boy Anthony! That’s my smart boy.”

She’s shivering, though it isn’t cold in the room.

(We were like toys to them, weren’t we?)

“Think you’re smart, don’t you?” Brian sneers.

They’re still small but they’re someplace different now. Some place that is cold with depressingly
bare walls and a single lamp. The room is just as scarcely decorated as its walls with a twin sized
bed, a lone dresser and an ugly maroon rug.

The only thing that makes it brighter are the pictures taped to the walls, brightly colored childish
portraits of rainbows and suns, stars and universes.

They (Bruce) clutch a book tightly between their hands. The spine creaks like it’s going to crack. It’s
a book on space.
They don’t have a lot of books but once Becca figured out they’d taught themselves how to read, she’d started bringing them home from her work at the local library branch.

They know she steals the books but they don’t mind. As an aide she doesn’t make much and all her wages go to Mr. Banner anyway and he certainly won’t buy them books.

The gifts made them feel good. They know she’s their mother because they can smell it on her. But Mr. Banner doesn’t like it when they call her mama.

“That’s the reason no one will buy you! You’re too damn attached. What’d I warn you about Becca! All that damn money to get you bred and the boy isn’t worth shit!” he is fond of shouting in drunken rages.

They aren’t worth shit. They know that. They never should have forgot.

(I was so stupid, so stupid and selfish letting her risk herself for me like that. I wasn’t worth it.)

(Wrong! That bastard was the one who wasn’t worth shit.)

Sometimes Mr. Banner will have friends over and everybody will be drinking and Becca will be sitting on his lap, lips curled around the mouth of a bottle as she tells the story of how Brian made her seduce some fancy tom. A tom who’d fucked her through her heat and given Mommy a near heart attack when he was caught balls deep in some back-alley trash like her.

Most times though, Brian just drinks alone reeking of cheap booze and muttering under his breath about what a waste it all was. He’d blown through the settlement money he got from the fancy tom’s parents in months and he knows better than to try and pull the same trick twice.

The library catches Becca stealing a book and they sever her contract. Mr. Banner charges into their room that night and grabs her by the hair.

(Look away)

They turn their face toward the wall because they know it’s worse to look. If they catch Mr. Banner’s eye, he might start in on them and Becca will try and get between them. It’ll just be worse for her.

But this fight, this fight already sounds worse than any they can remember.

(Bruce I-)

His ears are full of the thud of knuckles against flesh and the wet slap of skin on skin, the gurgle of strangled breaths.

(No. Don’t look. Please don’t look.)

They look.

When he’s done with her Brian steps over Becca’s body as he advances on them.

“You think you’re gonna be something better than me?” Spittle hits the side of their face.

His eyes are fixed on Becca’s body. Eyes wide open. Not sleeping. Not breathing. He struggles for breath. Struggles to breathe around the balloon of pressure building in his chest. Sick terror and a bone deep hatred filling him up like a noxious gas until he feels like he’ll pop.
His teeth ache and he tastes blood in his mouth. It’s his, he’s bitten his tongue, but he wants it to be Brian’s. He desperately wills himself to lunge forward, to bite, but it’s all just wishful thinking. His limbs are weak with terror. He’s weak.

(No you’re not. Stay with me. We’re in this together.)

(I couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t do anything to help her.)

(Stay with me!)

They shrink into the wall, unable to move they’re so paralyzed with fear. The fear is so strong it’s a sour stench in their nose and there’s absolutely nothing they can do to bank it.

“Can’t even look me in the damn eye. Look at me you fucking pussy!” Mr. Banner roars, his fist crashing into the wall beside their head.

The room fills with the acrid smell of urine.

(I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. Bruce I’m-)

They’re bigger but they wish they were small again. They’re in a stale room full of medical equipment and washed out with fluorescent lights.

Obadiah didn’t let them see the bodies before the funeral, something about not wanting to upset them when they’re delicate. Mrs. Sousa ‘call me Peggy’ insists on taking them to see their mother before she is put the ground.

Howard’s funeral will be the event of the year. Their mother will be buried on a small plot of land in the section of the cemetery set aside for treasured friends, right next to some senator’s trusty wolfhound. It’s better, they suppose than feeding her body to the flames among a pile of nameless others and turning her to ash, as happens with most of their kind. At least the old bastard gave her this one small dignity.

Maria is pale and still on the coroner’s slab, beauty diminished by the marks of a violent death and they feel bile surging up in their throat when they see how her swanlike neck has been mangled.

Crushed likely on impact the coroner explains dispassionately.

“I’m so sorry Anthony.” Mrs Sousa says. She squeezes their shoulder. Her fingers are getting brittle with age but the grip is still strong.

(I’m sorry too. I’m sorry you lost her.)

(I’m not the one who watched their mother murdered.)

(Doesn’t mean I can’t be sorry.)

And it goes like that, from small to big to small again. Running from Brian and running from Howard. Playing in the park with Mama and reading to Becca with pride in the dark as she claps and calls them a regular Einstein.

The neighbors report a ruckus in time to save them, but not Becca.

Sometimes Howard’s tests make them burn inside, make them sick for days and rabid in their mind until nobody but Jarvis dares to get near them.
There are years in the kennel house being bullied by staff and trampled on by larger kits.

There are years of pageant shows and plastic smiles, performing tricks for Howard’s friends and associates because even a failed experiment has some use.

There are stolen books and tools to fuel the fires of their minds and appease their unquenched thirsts for knowledge.

They steal their triumphs, wresting them right from the hands of their captors.

There’s Betty who catches the janitor at her college correcting work left on the chalkboard and makes their heart flutter.

There’s Rhodey, the only one on campus willing to room with the black kat who sued his way into MIT and has the whole school surrounded by protestors.

There’s General Ross who sees what his daughter sees and wants to own it. He buys them from the college and it feels like a dream come true. Instead of mopping the floors, now they sit in a back row earning a certificate.

Ross reminds them from time to time that they are an investment in the future and that he expects a return on that investment. They are property and nothing more. The reminders are painful.

They never tell Betty but they think she guesses.

(She didn’t deserve you.)

(Don’t.)

They’re running a company but there is setback after setback. There is always something or someone in their way. Even their own Handler! Especially their Handler.

Obie puts pressure on them for more deals, more contracts, more weapons. Always more. They meet every deadline because fuck all the people whispering about how they can’t hack it, how they’ll drive the company into the ground. And fuck Stane for ever doubting that they could.

Too long without food and sleep and they end up crashing. From the foot of his hospital bed Obie sighs about the lost production time but he can’t completely hide his pleasure. The new bundle is going to blow anything else on the market away. They’re already itching to get out of bed.

They burry themselves in work. As long as the work is good Ross is happy. They try not to ask for extra or to reach above their station. Betty urges them to push for more. She gets frustrated that they won’t.

There are glittering parties full of chains and leashes, painted lips and diamond studded collars. Everywhere they go there are cameras.

Tuesday nights the kats in their department gather in their apartment because they are the only one’s without a live-in handler. There are three of them in the entire department so they are close. Necessity will do that but Amory is the one they think they would have been close with under any
“Quiet, quiet he’s on!” Amory calls, turning up the volume on the TV as a reporter thrusts a microphone under the nose of the handsome young fel who fills their screen, larger than life somehow. He’s nothing like them, timid mousey creatures that they are. He’s full color, sharp in tooth and tongue, and he’s just so much it’s like you can smell what makes him wild even from your living room.

“Are you blushing already?” Amory cackles, nudging them playfully. He’s shushed harshly by Chris as on screen the reporter throws out questions.

“Mr. Stark, after winning this landmark court case how are you feeling? Do you have anything to say to the people’s fears that allowing kats into doctorate level programs will irreparably damage the integrity of our educational system?”

“Yes I do. It’s Dr. Stark, and they know where to find me if they still have questions.”

(God, I was full of myself.)

(Don’t ever change.)

But they do, they have to. Change is inevitable.

“Just be friendly to him Tony, we need this contract. The stock took a dip after that story they printed with you and that woman from Exon. Now settle down, I know it was my idea to chat her up but I didn’t tell you to let her cuff you to the damn bed post. Then the silly bitch loses the key. I tell you boy you know how to pick em.”

They forget how to sleep unless it’s pressed against a warm body and there are so many bodies in and out of their bed Obie jokes they should install a revolving door.

They invite a houseful of playboy kittens over for the world’s biggest weekend bash as a fuck you.

There’s something about being surrounded by other fels. He (Tony) loves those kittens. They are amazing people. They don’t try to take anything or expect him to fulfill some twisted fantasy.

And why should he be embarrassed? They’re his equals after all. The only difference between him and them is he gets paid for the use of his body.

It is what it is. He knows the currency of his persona, of his body but the true power will always be in the money and he’s bleeding them.

The bastards never fully realize till it’s too late but he’s the most expensive ride any of them will take in this lifetime.

They heave their sour grapes at him through the tabloids but you know what they say. When life throws grapes, crush them and make wine.

(I’m with you. Don’t stay back there. You deserved better.)

(So do you.)

Betty can’t stop Ross from hurting them, and there’s a lot that they just won’t tell her about what goes on between them and her father. It wouldn’t be fair.

Ross is right. He’s just looking out for his daughter and they are selfish for endangering her, selfish
for even looking at her. What kind of a life would she have with them anyway? The life of a
degenerate. Ostracized and shunned. All of her promise and potential wasted. She doesn’t deserve
that (him). She deserves to be happy.

(Don’t you deserve to be happy?)

(I never thought I could be.)

Ross pushes and pushes and nothing impresses. Not even when they become Dr. Banner. They get a
split lip and a whispered threat that all the strings Ross had to pull to keep their head off the chopping
block had better be worth it.

They cut corners and use themselves as a test subject to save time and paperwork and they push
themselves harder than they ever have. They can do this. They can create the perfect soldier. They
can prove to the world and themselves that they aren’t a waste. They can fix what’s wrong inside
and maybe then… maybe then, happiness. Maybe then Betty.

(Oh Bruce.)

The formula is unstable. He knows this, but the army is out of patience. He tries to make Ross
understand but he isn’t strong enough. The lab explodes in a cloud of gamma bright green, and the
pain that splinters through him is agonizing.

The flames are spreading and all he can think about is how they should have listened. How they
never listen. A snarl rips out of his throat and turns into a roar.

Later, when he’s back to himself he learns that Betty was injured in the destruction. Amory is dead.

(We can’t change the past.)

They climb in the back of the jeep. The desert sun blazes above them and all they can think about is
how they can’t wait to get back into the air conditioning and away from the puppy dog looks of
adoration these soldiers are giving them as they gather the courage to ask for a selfie.

“You should ride with me,” Rhodey says and even knowing how it will end, he (Tony) wills them to
smile with arrogance and go on thinking themselves untouchable.

(He’d have died and I wouldn’t have gotten out of that cave.)

(Yes you would have. You’re strong.)

They stagger from the jeep, gunfire and bombs exploding in their ears as they scramble for shelter.
Their heart is hammering in their chest as their nose fills with the scent of blood and death. Smoke
and sand cloud their eyes and a high whine fills their ears as a missile arcs through the air and dives
into the sand not far from them.

They stare at it in horror, recognize their name splashed across the side. It’s the last thing they see.

(Doesn’t matter how strong you are, when there’s no one to come home to.)

(Is that what this is about? Someone to come home to?)

(Hasn’t it always been?)

And then, like tide ebbing away the painful memories give way to something different.
They’re older now, older than they know they are right at this moment, but they’re someplace full of sun and bright colors that somehow makes everything look and feel younger.

One side of the room is made up of one giant wide window and they are high enough to see where the grey-blue of the ocean meets the sky for miles and miles.

It’s beautiful, but not as beautiful as the tinkling sounds of piano drifting lazily through the air as his mate plays, or the light muffled snores coming from the warm body tucked close to their chest.

(This was my dream.)

(Now it’s ours.)

The scent of sleepy kits saturates their skin, strongest coming from the boy in their arms. They can’t see his face entirely from this angle but it doesn’t matter. They recognize themselves in the soft curve of his cheek and the fan of dark eyelashes that rest against them. They can map the imprint they’ve left down to the smallest detail and find the shadow of the boy they used to be. They don’t need their nose to know who this boy is to them or what he means.

This is a dream. They knew it the first time they had it, but it’s a dream so miraculous it’s burned in their mind in perfect detail to be played over and over again in sweet agony.

They nuzzle their cheek against brown hair so dark it’s closer to black and settle their chin between the boy’s furry ears and hold on tight, breathing in the scent that tells him this boy is kin.

This boy is their son. They still can’t believe they get to have any of this, let alone something so terribly precious. They’re still waiting for someone to take it away.

Never. A stab of fury goes through them, that other being inside pushing to the forefront of their mind. Never.

He (Bruce) still worries when this happens, so mindful of the delicate creature in his arms, but in this future (in this dream) he’s not alone with Hulk anymore. The team is together, all of them, and that means even when he can’t find the strength to calm his mind or make his heart slow on his own, the others can help.

They breathe, together, and the Hulk recedes.

“Uncle Bruce,” a boyish voice pulls them from the edge of sleep and they open their eyes to meet the ones of the boy leaning up on his elbows, his orange ears twitching. His blue eyes are still gummy with sleep.

There’s a little girl asleep halfway on top of him, her mass of dark ringlets pushing against the boy’s cheek. He doesn’t seem to mind.

“What is it?” they ask. This is Jaime. He’s not kin the same way the boy in their arms is but that doesn’t mean he isn’t theirs.

“When are my parents coming back?”

They open their mouth to offer some platitude, but fate does them one better because JARVIS announces that Stark and the captain are on their way up. Jaime scrambles up, nudging awake the sleeping girl who yowls at the rude awakening and attempts to scratch him.

“Nyota, no scratching.” They reprimand without much heat because the girl is already curling into a
ball and falling back asleep.

The doors swish open and Tony (not the one here, but the one older, the one who hasn’t happened yet) and Steve walk in, and Jamie leaps up to run toward Steve, throwing his arms around the captain’s waist as he collides with him.

“Hey Buddy,” Steve chuckles and when the child signals for up he complies, lifting the boy effortlessly into his arms. Jaime promptly buries his face against his father’s neck and mumbles.

“I wanna go home. I hate it when you ‘Venger.”

Steve’s worry washes through them as he looks to Tony who offers silent comfort. They can feel other minds doing the same, so that it pulses across the bond they all share. There are more than just six Avengers now.

“Jaime was fine. It’s just hard on the kits when their parents are away for long periods” they try and verbally soothe Steve.

“At least you get a greeting Steve. I guess my being here means nothing.” Tony teases, scratching Jaime between the ears fondly as he glances at them (Bruce and the Tony of now) and asks, “Where’s the little monster?”

Jaime points toward Nyota who has abandoned sleep and is sitting up on the rug, her sleep matted hair softening the frankly murderous expression clouding her little face. She’s not an easy riser.

“Papa?” she asks as Tony kneels before her.

“Sorry kiddo.”

Her face crumples, lower lip jutting out as her eyes begin to water. Tony sighs.

“Yeah baby I know, it sucks. Do you want to come back to the tower with me or stay here with Bruce and Amory?”

Wordlessly she reaches for him and he scoops the girl up into his arms and rises with her, looking between them and Steve.

“We’re going to have to have another family meeting. We can’t keep up this pace. It’s not fair on the kids.”

“I agree.” The soft feminine voice of their mate lilts as she enters the room behind them. They don’t turn to see her. It’s like they’re scared to.

They are.

(I am)

(Don’t be. All of that other stuff? It’s behind us. This, this is the future. You’ve just gotta believe we can get there. I believe we can. How about it Buddy, take a chance with me?)

He doesn’t need to think about it.

(No one I’d rather go with Tony)

They open their eyes.
It was hard on the nerves sitting in the observation area watching as the monitors beeped and flashed, not knowing whether any of the medical babble Miss Cho and Dr. Salek traded back and forth was good or bad as Bruce and Tony layed on the bed in the center of the room in a strange catatonic state.

“He’s gone dark.” Natasha murmured blankly, clutching her hands together tightly. Steve put an arm around her shoulder without thinking, but was glad he did when he felt the way she was shivering almost too finely for the naked eye to catch.

“They’re not in trouble are they?” Clint asked, voice tight with worry but Natasha shook her head. “He’s still there it’s just…. it’s like he’s gone under water.”

They got a scare or two when the heart rate monitors started to blare, sending Helen and Dr. Salek into a flurry of motion as they did what they could to steady both heartbeats.

Steve had gritted his teeth and tried not to think about what they’d do if one or both of them didn’t pull through this. He didn’t think… he didn’t think he’d be able to pick up their pieces, because he wasn’t sure there would be enough of him left and that was, a hard thing to realize about yourself. They were all being held together with tape and glue, and there was just no coming back after a hit like that.

Steve had boxed the fear away and buried it deep in the back of his mind where it couldn’t distract him from watching over his teammates. He got lost in the long agonizingly slow stretch of minutes but knew something was happening when Natasha inhaled sharply, her shoulders going tense under his arm. His eyes flew from her to the bed just in time to watch Tony’s eyes blink open.

Beside him on the bed Dr. Banner also stirred, blinking hazily.

“Oh wow…” Banner gasped, brown eyes sweeping across the room to connect with Natasha who suddenly resembled a deer caught in the headlights of a car.

“Hi.” Bruce’s lips curled into a bashful little smile and Steve felt the tension in her body slowly melt away.

“Hello Bruce.” She returned with a small quirk of lips.

They were connected Steve realized, his own eyes moving back to Tony who was watching the two of them with a fierce sort of pride. Natasha and Bruce were connected with Tony in the middle. That was what Thor had meant, when he’d said the Queen and Consort were at the center of the Pride. He’d meant the literal center.

The tension had formed a lump in Steve’s throat which he swallowed back as Tony’s eyes sought out his, the soothing brought by the touch of their minds washing through Steve like a slow wave, draining the tension from his body head to toe.

Steve swallowed back the lump and steeled himself. First hurdle down. One more to go.
It was hard not to be jealous as Tony, Bruce and Natasha oriented themselves around the new bond. Steve wasn’t the only one who felt that way either. It was impossible for Clint not to feel somewhat left behind as Natasha connected with others on a level that he couldn’t touch, and found a place in the very thing he’d always wanted and she never had.

While Steve would have had to be something less than human not to crave more of the peace he felt when he was with Tony, there was nothing to do about it but wait. They had to tackle one thing at a time. He couldn’t resent Tony taking care of Bruce, and there was his surgery to get through before they could talk about expanding the Pride any further.

And even then, it would be at Tony’s pace. Tony’s decision to make. Steve wouldn’t push for Tony to bond with him and he wouldn’t let the others push either.

He was still having intense nightmares that made it difficult to sleep and to feel completely balanced, but on the whole he felt better than he had since waking up in this century and getting better by the day. Anything he couldn’t work through by reminding himself how blessed he was pretty easily worked out of his system at the gym.

He’d harassed Clint into joining him that afternoon because the archer needed it, and because Steve knew that out of all of them, being left out was hardest on him.

They went through a couple of the simulations that Tony had programed and when Clint still looked like he had a few rounds left in him, Steve took him through his paces.

Tony had created these blunt ended arrows that while certainly not fun to get struck with didn’t break skin. The obstacle course was set up so that Clint had the advantage with many high perches but the disadvantage of a minimal amount of cover. Steve had one of the practice disks that Tony had created because there was just no way he was going to risk injuring one of his teammates using the real thing.

The basic idea was to be the first to take the other out and of all their practice simulations he knew it was Clint’s favorite.

“I just don’t know what he wants me to do. I can’t take back that stupid mission.”

Clint said through the comm, seconds after Steve raised his shield just in time for an arrow to thud against it. Clint had already scored a dozen hits on him. A few more and JARVIS would declare his status critical. Steve wasn’t too upset with the outcome, the course was designed with Clint’s skillset in mind and if their current pace held true the archer would actually shave a minute off his standing win time.

Steve lunged for cover behind a large hedge as Clint continued to vent.

“I mean it happened how it happened. Is he really gonna hold that over my head?”

He could see Clint’s shadow moving on the floor, leaping from post to post overhead. He held still, keeping to cover while he could waiting for the perfect angle.

“He feels how he feels Clint. You could ask him to get over it but it’s not that easy.”

Steve lunged out into the open again and hurling the disk. It struck the top of the post Clint was
standing on, forcing him to abandon it or risk losing his balance.

The tomkat leapt for an adjacent ledge less gracefully than he might have otherwise and Steve grinned, catching his rebounding disk and sending it flying again.

It struck the post just as Clint landed, sending the structure wobbling and the athletic tom scrambling to stick his landing.

But Clint wasn’t called Hawkeye for nothing. Shooting a moving target that moved as fast as Steve, while that target darted between hedges and posts, while he himself struggled for his balance might have been impossible for most sharp shooters, but not for Clint Barton; because Steve only had a second to savor the sweet rush of victory watching the archer fall and his disk begin its return arc, before something whacked against his back with enough force to make him stumble.

“Damn it.” he cursed as he slowed to a stop, already knowing the score even before JARVIS announced the critical blow.

“Mr. Barton, you have successfully incapacitated Captain Rogers, however you have suffered a fatal fall. I must declare the match a draw.”

Of course Clint was fine with his wing-pack but it was against the rules to use it in game, so this match at least was a draw.

“You kiss your mother with that mouth Cap?” a cheery voice called and Steve looked up to find Tony sauntering across the gym, stepping over fallen arrows and smoothly around obstacles and grinned. The room just seemed brighter with him in it.

“No. But I could see my way toward kissing you with it.” Steve answered, and when he was close enough to get ahold of he didn’t waste any time wrapping his arms around the man’s waist. Tony wasn’t a dame but Steve wasn’t such a small guy anymore and Tony just fit really nicely in his arms. He’d be too embarrassed to say so out loud but he liked the way that Tony had to lean up just that slight bit when they kissed.

“Well ho-hum, look who’s so confident. Weren’t you just announced dead? Not sure I’m in to dead guys.” Tony smirked up at him as Steve lowered his mouth

“A kink you haven’t tried Tony? I’m shocked.” Natasha jabbed from the doorway and Tony flipped her the bird as he pushed up into the kiss. Steve chuckled against his mouth.

“You guys come to practice?” Clint asked, landing beside them and disengaging the wing pack.

“No. Came to collect you actually. We’ve got a date with a foreign dignitary remember?” Tony answered once he’d pulled away.

Right, the dinner with the ambassador from Wakanda was scheduled this evening. The headliners had talked of nothing else but the history making event all week. Steve’s smooch with Tony in the park was old news (thankfully) in the wake of the news that foreign royalty from a mysterious and dangerous country would be stepping on American soil.

It had surprised Steve at first to learn that Wakanda was sending their prince, but Mr. Ross had explained that Pride to Pride negotiations were taken very seriously in Wakanda and for the Panther Pride, sending their nations Prince to speak with a foreign Queen was a symbol of great respect. Everette Ross struck Steve as very confident in his knowledge of Wakanda, which was strange. There was some story there.
In front of him Tony sniffed him rather loudly and, wrinkled his nose.

“You both need a shower. I see you broke out the prototype for the F.A.L.C.O.N. program Clint. How’s she handling?”

“A little jerky on the takeoff but the landing felt alright.” Clint shrugged and Tony had that look like he was going to take the wingpack off of Clint and start tinkering right there and then. Steve quickly intervened.

“Do I have to wear a tie?” he asked, even though he already knew damn well because Miss Potts had come around to his room with a very short list of things he was allowed to wear and a list so long of subjects he wasn’t allowed to broach while dining with the Prince that he could have made a dress out of it.

Tony nodded, popping the P on his affirmative yup.

“If you’d feel more comfortable in your uniform you could probably get away with suiting up for the big fancy photo op at the airport, but dinner is a definite black tie affair.”

“Pepper nixed the Shield.” Tony arched his eyebrows in surprise and Steve explained. “This is the first time we’re going to be out together as a couple where they can ask us questions. She said something about the world needing to see you with Steve Rogers and not with Captain America.”

“How does she do it?” Tony mused thoughtfully, ears twitching. “That woman is scary good sometimes.”

“Debar hasn’t tried to contact you since…” Steve began to ask but the sudden shuttering of Tony’s expression made him falter. None of them had heard from Debar or seen his masked alter-ego around town since Tony had discovered his identity. Tony figured the tom had skipped town once he’d realized his cover was about to be blown. Steve hoped it was as simple as that, but in his experience when people put that much effort into an operation it rarely was.

“No, from the sounds of it he fucked off back to Wakanda to give his report. Even if he does come back with Prince T’Challa I think he knows better than to try and initiate contact with me. Can’t say I’m a huge fan of people who infiltrate my home and spy on me without my knowledge.”

Clint visibly tensed, and Tony forced a smile.

“Present company excluded of course. We should get going if we’re going to be fashionably late instead of irritating.”

Steve nodded agreeably, and turned with Tony toward the doors while Clint quipped something about not believing that Tony was giving up an opportunity to be irritating.

The two traded banter as they left the gym and everybody allowed themselves to be entertained by it and weigh in when necessary, silently agreeing to ignore the elephant in the room for the time being.

It wasn’t perfect, but sometimes that was just how life was.

Tony doesn’t handle relationships well. He’s mentioned, that right? There’s no confusion on the fact that he sucks at handling anything past ‘hi, hello and how do you do’, and sometimes he even forgets
that part.

So he’s only been dating Steve Rogers for a week. It has been an excellent week mind you. An A+ week in anyone’s book. He’s been attentive. He knew for sure because he’d only missed JARVIS’ set reminder once due to engineering zone out. The handy alarm is a great reminder to ask himself “Have you spent at least sixty uninterrupted minutes with Steve today?” and if the answer is no, to fix that quick.

It’s not that Tony isn’t eager to spend time with Steve. Because he is. Rogers is unexpectedly a lot of fun to be around (now that they’re not constantly at each other’s throats) and he’s got a secret thrill junkie streak to rival even Tony’s, that comes out to play in the most thrilling (and sometimes titillating) of ways. Be still his beating heart.

Then there’s the fact that Rogers is just sickeningly sweet and in the face of such wholesomeness there’s no helping how Tony just softens. Steve’s the kind of guy who thinks about you just because, and thinks of thoughtful shit to do for you just because he happened to be thinking about you.

Like the fact that eight times out of ten he’s in Tony’s lab before his ‘be a good boyfriend’ alarm even goes off, because he knows that he could coat his magnificent abs in nip and lay himself bare assed on Tony’s bed and Tony would still be Tony.

It might still take a world ending level disaster to get through the wall of numbers and codes surrounding Tony’s brain when he’s in the zone. So Steve doesn’t expect miracles and comes to him instead, sometimes occupying the couch in the corner to handle the heaps of paperwork that comes with Avengering, or to draw in his sketchbook. But usually he coaxes Tony into eating something and coming up for air to indulge in some pedestrian activity. They take lots of walks and though Tony gripes about the cold, and the threat of the paparazzi, they both know he’s enjoying himself.

It reminded him of his childhood in a small way. Which normally Tony wouldn’t call a good thing, except the walks Jarvis used to take him on were some of the sweeter parts of the bittersweet. He does like it. He likes it enough that even though some jerk with a camera recognized them in their (rather ridiculous really) attempts to blend in with the crowds and snapped a picture of Steve plucking his sunglasses off of his face to steal a kiss off his laughing mouth and obviously sold it to the newspapers, Tony can’t regret anything. Not even his poor costume choice. Because it turns out that Steve was right and nobody but Tony Stark and someone trying to hide their face wears expensive aviators in wintertime. Who knew.

So anyway, they spend time together. It’s too early for Tony to have missed any important dates and Steve hasn’t taken him up on any of the numerous invitations he’s offered to screw like rabbits in his extremely comfortable pent-house, so Steve can’t exactly be disappointed with their sex life either.

And still, Tony has managed to potentially fuck up his relationship in record time.

What did he do? Well it’s not what he’s done, it’s what he’s going to do. Or rather, more accurately what he might have the potential to do.

Okay look it’s like this. Tony drank some alien soup once that blew his mind so wide open he saw a glimpse of the future. A future where he was mated to the guy of his literal dreams and they had a kid. Great looking kid. Cute kid. Perfectly symmetrical all American baby gap cute kid, with Steve’s blue eyes and dark hair likely from Tony’s side of the gene pool (not that he’s obsessed over this much) and just… just a really amazing kid. A kid that was the embodiment of everything Tony had never thought he’d get the chance to have. No big deal.

That’s perfect right? There’s a future out there where Tony’s going to build a Pride (a Gata nation!)
and he’s going to do it with Steve at his side with the rest of the Avengers. Yay! Only, get this, the kid he’d thought was Bruce’s in his dream? She isn’t.

He’d seen Bruce’s dream for himself so he knew for a fact that there’s a possible future out there where he and Helen are ridiculously cute together and they have a shy little boy named Amory who could sell ice to eskimos because he’s that fucking precious.

Which means there’s this beautiful little girl with spunk, who wakes up grumpy as a poked grizzly bear, who doesn’t belong to Bruce. A little girl whose father is missing for undetermined reasons who prefers to stay in a tower with Tony when her father is gone, and has a name so evident of Tony’s inner nerd he’s at a damn loss as to how to explain it.

But you know, there’s probably a perfectly logical explanation for this. Numerous ones. The kits in both sets of dreams seemed pretty equally loved by all adults involved, so her appearing to go home with him isn’t actually what is bothering him.

It has to be said right? The girl’s mixed and Tony’s oldest and closest friend is a black male. A guy whose future children Tony has already set aside funds for the sole purpose of spoiling beyond all reason, so mystery solved on the ‘why is future!Tony taking home a girl not Steve’s’ front.

So what’s the problem?

The problem is Tony. The problem is that while future him seems undeniably happy he can’t deny there’s something not quite right about the way that whole scene had played out. He’s seeing it all differently now, as if someone has applied a colored filter and there’s no going back. He has this sneaking suspicion that he can’t shake but that he isn’t going to give voice to. It’s just there. This sense of wrongness. This mystery he could unravel (except he won’t).

Why would he want to unravel the best and brightest of possible futures to find the fatal flaws? Can’t he just… can’t he just be happy for once? Have something good and keep it?

He damn well is.

He’s not going to let his insecurities and his over active brain spoil what is so far a very good thing between him and Steve.

When Steve walked into the living room of the common floor, freshly showered and in his baby blue button down and Pepper approved khakis, Tony had to remind himself again. Steve was a knotted sweater away from looking like some Ivy league Douchebag, but damn if didn’t make it look good and that flicker of relief he could never quite hide whenever his eyes landed on Tony (like he was afraid that in the time they’d been apart, something might have changed) it never got old.

Don’t cheat yourself out of happiness, Stark he reminded himself as he sauntered up to the man.

“You look so wholesome and American right now, I can’t decide if I want to salute you or blow you.”

“Tony.” Pepper reprimanded without even looking up from her StarkPad and Steve’s neck flushed red. But Tony caught that brief flare of his nostrils, the way he took in Tony’s scent and the way his deepened just that little bit with arousal.

“I don’t think even you could finish a blow job before Happy gets here with the car.” Natasha quipped, examining the painted tips of her nails.

“You wanna bet Romanov?” he thought and Bruce groaned.
“He doesn’t even have time for the salute. Happy just pulled the car up and the traffic on FDR is ridiculous right now. Let’s go gang. Clint fix your tie.” Pepper announced like a drill sergeant and like the smart little underlings they knew they were they all complied without complaint. The drive was, well a drive across town during rush hours, during a big deal event so by the time Happy was being waved through the gates of the private entrance at JFK Tony was ready to kill himself. That or strangle Clint who wouldn’t stop griping about Tony’s music choice.

But once they’d pulled up outside the red carpet that had been lain along the private air strip in preparation of the ambassador’s arrival silence descended once more. They were hardly alone on the airstrip. Outside the window almost as far as the eye could see there were a crowd of journalists and the like, all of them held back by security and plenty of red tape so that the official men and women who formed the welcoming party could wait where the stairs would end once the Prince’s aircraft landed.

One face in particular in that sea of brass jumped out to Tony and he clenched his fists, reaching for Bruce’s thoughts to make sure he wasn’t about to go big and green on them. He wasn’t that surprised to find Natasha already there. She’d probably already scoped the crowd and had all their exits mapped out by now.

“I’m okay. I expected him to be on the guest list.” Bruce’s thoughts trickled through their minds as General Ross continued on his way down the carpet.

Someone rapped on the window closest to Pepper and Tony smiled when he looked to see that it was Rhodey, in full uniform and looking very serious about the whole affair as he opened the back door for her.

“Show time gang.” Tony clapped his hands together as the sound of clicking cameras and rumble of voice rushed through the open door in a wave. “No pressure but this is our first ‘official’ act as a Pride so mind your manners or I can’t promise to protect you when Pepper tries to eat you.”

“That goes for you too Tony,” she warned archly before taking Rhodey’s offered hand and exiting the limo. Happy was coming around to the passenger side to open doors and Tony put on his game face.

“It is a proud day for Pride Avengers, Queen Antony.” Thor said just as Happy opened the door beside Tony and more cameras started to go off.

Right then. Show time.

Tony felt pressure around his hand and looked down, startled by the sensation of Steve squeezing his hand. Poor guy looked green in the gills. Somehow that made something relax inside Tony, after all of the two of them he was the one who knew how to navigate this kind of circus.

“No pressure but this is our first ‘official’ act as a Pride so mind your manners or I can’t promise to protect you when Pepper tries to eat you.”

“Don’t worry Cap. Just smile and follow my lead.”

Steve nodded, shoulders bracing as he said, “Alright. Lead the way, Tony.”

You know, for people who are one mutated chromosome away from being kats themselves, human beings are funny creatures. They insist upon the supposed inferiority of those unfortunate souls saddled with the ‘Gata-gene’ and no matter how many exceptions they’re presented against the rule it will always be a surprise to them when one comes along.

Cause there they all are, Senator Stern, General Ross, Nick Fury and a dozen other important so and sos behind them. And they put on professional faces and everybody shakes hands and smiles for
cameras but he can see it in their eyes how hungry they are. How smug. It’s in the way Ross’s eyes track over their bodies, lingering longest on Bruce. He doesn’t see people but tools, and he’s oh so confident that things are going his way. They all are.

The hunger is thick in the air as the sleek personal jet that can only belong to the visiting prince and his envoy finally comes in for its landing. It’s a gorgeous display of sleek metal and quietly humming power that Tony appreciates right down to his bone marrow. She’s not the biggest aircraft Tony has ever seen but he can spot at least four sets of guns artfully tucked against her body and it’s obvious that it’s intentional. Their showing off their firepower so there won’t be any confusion. The whole landing is an artful display of teeth really. Wealth and power rolled into one gleaming package, and on top of that her engine runs so smoothly she’s no louder than a purr.

The big brass, they all want to get close as badly as he does. They all think the Prince of Wakanda is going to step off that plane and that no matter how pro Alurio the guy is, that they can persuade him around to seeing things their way. Man to man so to speak. And why shouldn’t they feel that way? That’s the way the world works and everybody there knows it, including Tony.

So as the stairs were rolled out and everybody waited with baited breath for the doors to open to catch their first sight of Prince T’Challa, Tony was mentally gearing himself up for the fight ahead. It took him by surprise when Ross (Everett K. not dear old Thaddeus) chuckled under his breath and rocked on his heels for a moment as if he couldn’t quite contain his glee.

Feeling Tony’s stare he muttered quietly, “Been waiting for this part” and nodded towards the open doors of the jet.

Not that Tony needed the gesture to know the moment of truth had arrived because there was an audibly collective gasp from the crowd and the kind of stunned silence that usually proceeded some sort of tragic accident. He turned his head to see what had caused the reaction and froze.

So people are stupid. They all swallow their tongues and freeze because even with reports that the Alurio were closely tied to the royal house – heck even with Panther Pride in the damn title – it hadn’t occurred to any of them that Prince T’Challa himself might be Gata.

It hadn’t really occurred to Tony either (he isn’t without his own prejudice) but that wasn’t the reason he froze like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming semi. No, he froze because the handsome tom flanked by two frankly terrifying looking she-toms in sleek black body-con dresses was none other than Luke. Or (not) Luke he should say. Not Luke at all, because apparently, Luke just a lackey spy from Wakanda, was actually Prince T’Challa. Unless they had a completely non-western view of gender in Wakanda.

And maybe they did, but there was absolutely no way to mistaking the way he held himself or the confidence in his stride as he made his way down the stairs toward their welcoming party, completely unfazed by the sudden roar of screamed questions from journalists nor the blinding wave of camera flashes. It wasn’t in the expensive clothes or the fancy bauble around his neck, it was in the man. Prince T’Challa had arrived.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Prince T’Challa tries to bury the hatchet but it's rough going because Tony kinda wants to bury it in his back, but necessity demands he find a level of chill (he struggles). With the surgery arrived Tony needs a lot of help from his friends to keep it all together
and Clint learns a valuable lesson from an unexpected source.
You who'd laugh at meanings and their guarantees, so beautifully (AKA Part 1)

Chapter Summary

In which T’Challa. And then Tony.

Chapter Notes

Hello! I needed to split this chapter into two parts so the second part will be posted on Sunday per the usual schedule. Enjoy the madness. Part one owes its title to, and is brought to you almost entirely by, "I Won't Say I'm In Love"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Wow, did not see that coming.” Clint muttered under his breath and beside him Natasha growled lowly.

“I had my suspicions when I saw the stone.”

Right, that story Luke T’Challa had told them about the Nehe stone that had led Tony to conclude (rather reasonably) that the gem T’Challa wore around his neck was some sort of knock off. I mean why wouldn’t he come to that conclusion when the real Nehe stone had belonged to the first Alurio woman and was supposedly being passed down through her decedents?

And boy didn’t that just put all that fuckery with the flirting and the gifts (courting gifts his ass) into sharp perspective. A prince, a man who also happened to be the direct descendant of a goddess, who could slice a man from head to toe without pause, needed fuck all from Tony. What a joke.

The whole thing about Kat’s liking to play with their food is a stereotype. But the thing about them is, there is an element of truth in every one. And it’s obvious now that whatever else T’Challa had intended to do when he’d infiltrated Tony’s home, he was the sort of tomkat who just couldn’t resist playing with his food before he ate it.

If there’s one thing Tony doesn’t like it’s being played with. The fuckers in the white house and on his Board of Directors might like to think he’s a toy, but that just makes chewing them up and spitting them back out ten times more enjoyable. So was this.

Tony looked the picture of confidence as he waited for the axe to fall, feeling the kind of calm he usually only felt when he suited up in the armor, the confidence of a predator comfortable in his skin. He might not be a prince and he might not be able to trace his ancestor back further than fucking Howard but this was his territory and he was king in it. Or Queen. Pick your poison. He’d seen already just how dangerous he could be even without his armor, and these days he was only getting more dangerous.

“Good thing Fury doesn’t have a nose like ours. You smell positively vicious.” Bruce warned even as a swift rush of approval from Natasha flooded through the bond followed by a simple thought.
“Good.”

“Your Highness, welcome to the United States.” Everette stepped forward as the tom and his entourage reached the welcoming party and greeted them loudly enough so that there was no confusion for the rest of the crowd that the serious faced Gata male standing before them really was the prince they’d all been waiting for.

There could be no doubt in Tony’s mind, nor any of his teammates because this close the tom’s scent was enough to make even the dullest nose twitch. He must have been wearing some sort of scent damper before, because now there was no mistaking the tom before them as anything but the most feral and viral of creatures.

It had Tony’s hindbrain lighting up and coming up with all sorts of stupid thoughts like maybe he should make himself small and bare his throat so that he didn’t come off as a threat.

It was typical tom posturing, trying to warn all the other toms present he was biggest and baddest and not to get in his way when he rolled some ‘lucky’ fel on their back. Tony’s teammates had gone stiff, ears alert and eyes fixed on the prince as he drew closer, the air becoming charged with fight scent. Next to Tony Steve’s whole body was brimming with tension, but outwardly he looked calm and still as a statue as he watched T’Challa’s every move and Tony’s mouth stretched into a toothy smile.

He and his team were going to eat the Prince of Wakanda alive and enjoy every second of it.

T’Challa nodded rather imperiously in acknowledgement to the formal address, eyes moving aloofly past Ross and over the crowd. He completely ignored the flashing cameras and shouted questions from the press. Pepper eyed Tony meaningfully, obviously wondering why he was keeping the prince waiting and Tony just kept smiling winsomely in reply.

Little did she know that Tony was busy introducing himself to a gorgeous lady going by the name of Dagger. Bruce and Natasha must have felt something because Natasha frowned at him and Tony felt a flutter of worry that was distinctly Bruce flavored.

Tony was still trying to use Extremis as little as possible and not to put undue stress on his system that would trigger the virus. The reduction in activity not only ensured that he didn’t break down before they could perform nanobot surgery, it also seemed to have reduced the number of heat surges he was having. But desperate times called for desperate measures and all that.

It no longer hurt initially using his technopathy and Tony was confident he’d be able to crack the jets shields and download every last thing there was to glean from it and any onboard computing systems before the pain started up. Even the highly-advanced security of the prince’s aircraft wasn’t designed to hold up against something like extremis. Not indefinitely.

And it didn’t surprise him a bit when old Thaddeus thought to take advantage of the opening and stepped forward all straight backed and commanding with his hands firmly clasped behind his back.

“On behalf of the United States armed forces I’d like to –”

But whatever Ross would have liked to have done or said, they didn’t get to find out because before he could even get in spitting distance, one of the she-toms with T’Challa prowled smoothly between them.

The gold rings in her ears tinkled as she turned her head to stare intently at the general but otherwise she didn’t even make a sound. Not that anybody needed a translator for the threat in her body language. Yikes, the woman gave off an air so lethal even the humans could feel it. With most of his
brain power focused on talking to the ship Tony kept having to fight back the instinct to lower his eyes and flatten his ears back to show submission.

It was kind of delicious though, watching Ross stop short and take the snub.

T’Challa didn’t let the awkward tension linger. Having spotted Tony and the Avengers in the lineup T’Challa strode toward them, rudely ignoring the established lineup of important figures, with his terrifying bodyguards trailing behind him.

Tony ignored the whispers and stares, reducing some of the brain capacity he was using to sweet talk his way inside The Dagger and reallocating it to the confrontation at hand as T’Challa stopped before him. He was curious he’d admit, to see how the tom thought this whole thing was going to play out. Tony kept silent, simply arching a brow at the tom to signal that it was his move.

The serious line of T’Challa’s mouth twitched, though it was hard to tell if it was toward amusement or irritation.

“Queen Anthony,” T’Challa didn’t shout, but he didn’t need to. His tone demanded to be heard and the crowd naturally acquiesced, falling quiet to catch his every word. “On behalf of myself and the Panther tribe, ruling tribe of the united tribes of Wakanda, I thank you for opening your doors to us today.”

Wordlessly one of the she-toms stepped forward with palms open. Resting in her hands was a little golden chest with intricate designs carved over its gleaming body. Smoothly she flipped the latch, and opened the lid on silent hinges and Tony’s whiskers twitched, feeling the pressure of the crowd as they pressed ever closer to see what the chest contained. For a moment he worried the reporters were going to break the guard ropes but his thoughts were quickly occupied by wonder at the gift itself.

Sitting on a velvet cushion within the chest were a pair of wrist guards. The thin cylinders glinted an enticing gold under the afternoon sun but it was the ruby lines forming delicate braids across their edges that really captivated Tony’s attention. There was a strange energy coming from them, though all his scans came up negative for buried technology. Magic. God Tony hated magic, but even so his fingers itched to examine the deceptively delicate looking pieces of armor.

“I wish to extend this gift to you in thanks. It is an honor I hope we can repay with many years of friendship.”

Tony didn’t know what to say immediately. His thoughts racing as he considered the conundrum before him. He’d not been expecting T’Challa to give him a gift, especially something so obviously priceless. But maybe he should have expected it. He remembered what T’Challa had told them in the kitchen that morning when he’d brought Tony soup. Courting he’d called it. Because buttering up the Queen was standard protocol for getting what you wanted out of them wasn’t it?

Right. Not this time.

“It’s my understanding that friendship requires trust.” Back straight, ears erect and not a stitch of submission in sight, Tony’s smile was pleasant as peach pie for the cameras but his eyes told another story. “Hopefully that’s something we can build between our countries.”

Not likely, Tony thought as he found the bypass codes for The Daggers security shields. A warm rush flooded through him and there was a warning prickle at the back of his mind, like the beginning of a headache but it didn’t matter. He was in. He’d give it a few moments of rest before he began to dig. He wondered how far the ships computer could take him. Maybe even all the way back to
Wakanda. The wonderful thing about computers was networking after all.

Smile positively sunny now he reached for the chest, only for Thor to suddenly appear between them to still his hand. The thunder god was wearing a very stern expression as he plucked the little gold chest from the she-tom’s hands, the object looking even smaller in his large hands as he frowned down at the woman.

Tony and the team looked at him curiously but Thor just moved his glower to Prince T’Challa and said, “Queen Anthony thanks you for your gift. I’m sure you do not mind if it is examined? I have heard the Midgardian tale of the Trojans horse and have become wary of the duplicity your kind is capable of when bestowing seemingly harmless gifts.”

There was a collective gasp from the crowd at this and Tony saw Rhodey slowly close his eyes as if pained. Tony bit back a laugh. He was going to build a monument to Thor, right in the middle of his island. See if he didn’t.

T’Challa and the thunder god shared an intense moment of stare before he nodded magnanimously and answered loudly, likely for the benefit of their tense audience, “Of course. Such caution speaks well of queensgard.”

“Queensgard? Not sure I know what you mean, Thor’s just a very large, very good friend.” Tony winked at the Asgardian Prince who beamed back at him. Gesturing toward Steve at his side, Tony introduced him as team captain before moving on to introduce the others. It was all bullshit for the cameras of course but everybody put up with it.

“And that’s it, just five friends doing their part for mankind, and when our handlers let us off the leash we even manage to get a few things done for gatakind.”

Tony fluttered his eyelashes in Senator Stern’s direction who was leading the nervous titter of laughter from those close enough to hear before turning back to T’Challa with a pointed sniff.

“We’re oh so happy to have you here. I’m sure you’re feeling ripe after such a long flight. So what do you say we get this wagon train on the move?” Tony put a guiding hand against the tom’s muscled back, keeping up with appearances and providing the press with plenty of great photos as he led the tom down the carpet.

Leaning close T’Challa asked lowly, a warm thread of humor in his tone, “Did you just imply that I smell bad?”

“Me, Your Sanctimonious?” Tony answered, keeping his voice just as low and smile bright. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

T’Challa’s face remained impassive but the dash of something peppery in his nose told Tony the tom was irritated. He grinned.

“I see you intend to be childish about this.” he scolded and Tony let his eyes widen.

“Erratic juvenile behavior is my MO. Did no one give you a briefing? I heard there was a whole report drawn up.” Tony blinked innocently at the tom and somewhere behind them Bruce broke out in a suspicious cough.

~*~*~
Steve was not a big fan of fancy dinner parties. He’d not been invited to a lot before waking up from the ice and becoming an Avenger. Just a few fundraisers in the early days of his recruitment (back when they’d needed people to buy war bonds and he and Bucky were a sensation) but even that limited experience had been enough to cure him of any itch he may have had to attend one.

He couldn’t get used to feeling like a clown the brass had trotted out, or some kind of dancing monkey. He’d been awkward and stiff back then too, much to Bucky’s enjoyment. Misery really did love company, because as much as Bucky had hated being trotted out at the end of the Army’s leash things just had a way of feeling better when you weren’t alone in them.

There were quite a few leashes on display that night. Far more than Steve had expected considering who their guest of honor was. He’d thought that the brass would scramble together to try and hide their sins but in a way this made sense too, that they would all show up in their best clothes to show off their prized possessions. They were making a statement of their own, in response to the one that T’Challa had made earlier that afternoon.

The prince had made quite the splash when he’d arrived, and nobody had missed how soundly he’d snubbed everyone save the Avengers and if they’d somehow slept through that he’d made his intentions for his stay on American soil very clear at the press conference that followed.

Wakanda wasn’t impressed with the western powers sniffing at their borders for many reasons, chief of which was the atrocities committed against Gata kind, but the efforts of progressive lawmakers Steve had never even heard of and the resulting creation of the Avengers Pride gave them hope for the future. He’d said it all with grace and the kind of magnetism Steve had come to associate Tony with, a smile fixed on his face the entire time that stole people’s attention away from the underlining threat in his every word and everyone had cheered.

That was what Steve really hated most about politicians, their ability to smile and shake hands with you even as they sharpened their knives. He didn’t trust Prince T’Challa and not just because he’d already lied to them. Nobody else seemed to be able to see it but he could. Wakanda might have come out of hiding for the Avengers but T’Challa wasn’t here for the sake of their Pride. It was Tony he was here for, Tony he’d focused most of his efforts on the last time and everyone had noticed how hard Tony had taken it when he’d discovered the truth about the guy.

“You’re growling Steve. I didn’t know you could do that.”

Steve blinked, startled, glancing down to find Natasha at his elbow and had to quickly avert his eyes again because they’d landed on the wealth of creamy skin she had on display in that low-cut dress. Those equally low hanging sparkly shoulder straps looked pretty, but seemed to him designed to do little more than decorate her arms and bring the eye to the swell of her breasts… which artistly speaking were presented to their best advantage. He could appreciate that. Nothing wrong with it. But it was rude to stare and like some horny kid who’d never seen a dame before his eyes had just sort of gone there.

“It’s your lucky night Cap. They’re on display for a reason so friends get pain free ogles.” Natasha murmured with a slight smirk raising her glass to drink. Though many of the ladies filling the hall were wearing evening gloves she’d chosen few accessories herself, allowing her form hugging dress and various bared appendages to speak for themselves.

For a reason huh?

Steve had noticed when the others had gathered back at the tower to head out that each of his Gata teammates, by some unspoken agreement, seemed to have dressed that night to make some sort of
Natasha usually tucked when she dressed up, but tonight there was no mistaking her for anything but a fel woman. Her sleek red tail hung freely behind her and she was wearing her nails long and sharp, their pointed tips painted a vibrant red to match her hair and stand out against the black of her dress.

Steve had never seen Clint wear a version of the formal jumpsuit so popular for Gata, but tonight he was. The deep v cut down the center of the black and purple silk, displayed his muscled chest and arms and made the collar he wore around his neck seem like a beautiful ornament. They all knew how Tony felt about them, but he was glad the engineer had not let that keep their friend from something that obviously brought him a great deal of pride.

Bruce like Steve was wearing the standard black tuxedo (Gata edition with accommodation for his extra limb in the back) but it hadn’t taken Steve’s observant eyes long to spot that for the first time in all the time they’d known each other Bruce wasn’t wearing any of his SHIELD issued tags- the ones with the tracking chip embedded in them that warned people about the HULK and let them know who to return him to if he was lost somewhere he shouldn’t be (AKA tried to run again).

Tony, just like last time had chosen to forgo wearing one of his signature suits to don a more socially accepted version of evening attire for Gata.

Everywhere you looked there seemed to be bodies on display, every muscular line of a tom’s body served up for wandering eyes, the softer curves of the fels spilling out over plunging necklines and short hems, and every last one of them sporting tags and collars that proclaimed them as somebody else’s property.

And that was of course exactly why Tony had chosen to dress the way he had. It was about letting everyone see. Flaunting what they couldn’t own.

The red studded boots were just all Tony, and the white silk jumper her wore wrapped artfully around his powerful legs. It was cinched at the waist with a mesh band that looked thinner than smoke and did little to hide the olive skin beneath. The long sleeved top was stitched effortlessly to the band and was more sleeves than not, with how much of his chest it left bared to the world. His ordeal with Extremis had seen the arc reactor removed along with all of the evidence that it had ever been there, which filled Steve with an odd pang of wistfulness. Tony must have felt the same way because the only hint of ornament he wore was a necklace of his own making, a long silver chain that ended in a metal disk, fashioned to resemble the missing reactor.

To Steve he resembled one of the pirates of the stories he’d read in his youth, sexy and dangerous and enviably uninhibited. He was mesmerizing. It was hard to look anywhere else.

Still, Natasha had a point. Steve needed to be doing a better job of socializing with his fellow guests instead of obsessively watching his boyfriend hold court at the head of their table.

He glanced once more across the scant feet that separated them to where Tony had been seated across from the Prince, surrounding on all sides by important people from Washington (including General Ross) just to make sure that nothing had changed in his brief moment of distraction before turning sheepishly back toward Natasha.

“Effect of the serum.” He explained his growling with a hopeless shrug and Natasha replied.

“You must be feeling especially protective. Then again we all are.”
“I don’t like the way he looks at Tony.”

She arched a speculative brow at him.

“Because you’re possessive or because you don’t think T’Challa has our best interest in mind?”

“Do any of us know what Prince T’Challa’s interests actually are?” he returned with a dark glance in the prince’s direction before his attention was stolen from the woman across from him, a Mrs. Fujikawa (a wealthy widow who was attending the dinner with her prized kitten) who leaned forward in her chair to interrupt their whispered conversation with a knowing look.

“I hate it when my Rumiko is out of sight too. She’s such a good girl, but she does manage to find trouble.” The old woman smiled tenderly down at the fel sitting on the lowered chair beside her. At least she’d allowed the poor woman a chair. Some of the kats attending the dinner with their masters were forced to sit on cushions beside their masters chairs.

Steve remembered a time when kats hadn’t been allowed to sit at the table at all. He’d spent every last dime of the money he got from helping old Mr. Sanders around his house since his wife had died, on red and blue striped cushion and a matching dish set for Bucky. But it had felt too weird, watching the other boy eat on his knees so they’d just saved it for the rare occasions when his Ma had company or they ate outside the house.

Though some of the kats were waiting to be hand fed, Rumiko was being allowed to eat from a delicate looking china dish with silver lining. Her nails clinked every so often against the sides as she reached to tear another bite of her fish. She was well practiced at eating with her hands without somehow making a complete mess of herself, making the whole thing look elegant. Her almond eyes caught Natasha’s and the two women shared a private look as her owner simpered on.

“Though I have to wonder whose bright idea it was to seat you so far apart. It’s indecent.”

Steve didn’t wonder. He knew that Tony being separated from the rest of his team was just as much of a statement as the collar around Rumiko’s throat. The message was obvious. Don’t think we can’t take away all that we’ve given you.

“Some would say our entire relationship is indecent,” he remarked dryly, curious what Mrs. Fujikawa had made of the news circulating about their relationship.

“People make too much of things that are not their business,” the aging woman scoffed. “Sometimes I think I couldn’t love my sweet Rumiko any more, but who is to say if she weren’t a strapping tom that I wouldn’t find myself carried away by my affection?”

She winked cheekily at Steve with an amused hum, transferring a juicy portion of the steak from her plate to Rumiko’s dish with fork and knife. At formal functions Gata were always served some variant of fish rather than whatever their masters were eating.

“Neko-Yokai are our familiars, Captain Rogers. They are made to walk beside us. They truly long for our care and it is our sacred duty to care for them, body as well as soul. How you care for your little darling’s bodily needs is up to you of course.”

Steve’s stomach churned, his fist tightening around his fork as down the table General Ross drew everyone’s attention toward the head, loudly proclaiming that he couldn’t have said it better himself.

“I think that’s what the liberals forget. I can confidently say that nobody here doubts just how valuable Gata are. We may disagree on methodology but we all want the same thing. Strong, happy healthy Gata.”
Steve gritted his teeth, wanting to call the man out on his bullshit but mindful of the rules Pepper had laid out for them. Ross hadn’t really said anything worth getting upset about and embarrassing the team over.

“Is it part of your methodology to deny them their heritage?” Prince T’Challa pulled all of the eyes at their table to him, and the conversations at the other tables seemed to be dying off as well. No one had actually dared to try serving the visiting royal in a pet dish so he was paused with fork in hand, midway through puncturing another bite of fish off his plate. He sounded pleasantly curious as he continued.

“You call them Gata, as the Greeks did and moments ago Mrs. Fujikawa referred to them as Neko-Yokai. No one east or west refers to them by their true name and that to me seems the methodology of an oppressor.”

“Man has a point.” Tony drawled and Ross smiled through his teeth.

“You’ve got us there Your Highness, there have been a lot of people throughout history who have taken advantage where they shouldn’t have and I don’t doubt there will be a few more. But we learn from the past. We get stronger and we help one another. It’s always been that way, hasn’t it? The African kings had a great partnership with the Alurio.”

Staring poignantly at the Wakandian Prince Ross popped a morsel of steak into his mouth and chewed with a smile, swallowing before finishing.

“It’s still that way in Wakanda isn’t it? You’ve got the kat-gene so I take it the Queen has a sweet touch.”

He was referring to the way fels smelled stronger closer to heat. They weren’t effected by the pheromones the same way tom’s were, not completely, but even a baseline human’s nose picked up on some of the changes—particularly the enticingly sweet edge.

The tension in the room had elevated, the elegantly dressed dinner guests smiling viciously behind their hands and muffling titters and for a moment Steve was back on the streets of Brooklyn outside David’s Barbershop, some slow eyed creep whistling as he and Bucky walked by—

“Damn, but don’t he smell sweet. He yours kid? I’ll pay yas good money to take him off your hands.”

Natasha jabbed him in the ribcage and Steve was back in the banquet hall.

He’d been growling again but in startling contrast Prince T’Challa seemed perfectly unbothered. Steve wondered if he understood that his family had just been insulted. Ross was likely counting on not.

“My mother N’Yami is Queen of the Panther Pride and the head of the Pride Council.” T’Challa laughed at some private joke. “But she is not the queen of Wakanda. That title belongs to my Second-Mother Ramonda. She is a very sweet woman, since you ask.”

“The king has two wives?” Pepper demurred. “That sounds like a handful.”

T’Challa grinned but amazingly it was Tony who answered.

“There are thirteen tribes that make up the nation. That makes thirteen chieftains whose respect the king has to demand. It has been the tradition for the king to take more than one wife. Isn’t that right?” the fel asked, a satisfied smirk on his lips as Prince T’Challa blinked at him, not quite able to hide his
“Yes.” The prince quickly rallied himself together. “His second wife is always chosen from among the thirteen tribes. Sometimes he chooses a third wife if he is unable to sire a male child with the second.”

“Not because women are seen as inferior, but because only a male heir will be able to spawn children with the next Queen of the Panther Pride, that about right?” Tony added and this time T’Challa narrowed his eyes at him suspiciously.

“Yes, the future Queen of the pride is always the one he chooses as his first wife. He or she becomes the next Queen and by their union the rules of First Promise are kept. I am curious as to how you know this.”

Tony shrugged, smiling impishly as he offhandedly replied, “Must have read it online somewhere. Speaking of, how are you handling that crisis on Sokovia, Stern, since General Prokovic was assassinated?”

Steve had no idea what he was talking about but judging by Senator Stern’s venomous glare, Tony had likely hacked somebody’s computer again for information he shouldn’t have.

“That’s classified information Stark, how did you –”

“Yes, yes, shock, anger, bluster. Wash rinse repeat.” Tony interjected sloshing the wine in his glass. His voice sounded a bit slurred to Steve’s ears and he wondered how much he’d had to drink that night.

“Don’t you think it’s curious that right in the middle of historic peace negotiations, the Khrah pull a one eighty and murder him in his bed; or are you just too happy that this means we can keep selling weapons under the table to feed their decade long civil war to care?”

The amusement Steve felt at watching Tony talk circles around the table began to fade as something cold trickled through him. He couldn’t say what caused it exactly. Just a feeling of trepidation. Next to him Natasha had gone very still and was watching Tony very intently.

“What’s wrong?” Steve murmured in her ear, mindful of the closeness of the Fujikawas. She blinked slowly before looking away from the head of the table murmuring out of the side of her mouth, “Elevated body temperature, a decrease in motor functions and oversensitivity. I think Tony’s close to another heat.”

Steve frowned. She was lying to him. Not about her suspicions for Tony’s increasingly odd behavior, but for the reason she’d been alarmed a moment ago. Something had rattled her and it hadn’t been an oncoming heat flash.

Maybe it had been the same thing that had rattled him? Though Steve didn’t know why he’d reacted the way he had to the mention of some foreign leader’s death who he knew nothing about in the first place. Just a bad feeling, but Steve had learned in the war not to hesitate when it came to instinct. A bad feeling was sometimes all that stood between you and a bullet.

What had Tony said the guy’s name was? General Prokovic. It sounded Russian. Maybe it had something to do with Natasha’s past. He didn’t know, and he’d have to figure it out later because purposefully chosen distraction or not, the realization that Tony might be slipping into another heat definitely needed to be handled.
“Are you sure? I thought they stagnated?”

“Yes, when he limited using Extremis, but he’s been busy today.”

Ah. So that was how Tony had known that stuff about Wakanda and the dead general. He was talking to the machines again. Steve didn’t understand technopathy (as Tony gleefully insisted on calling it) only that Tony’s brain seemed to be the ultimate computer and could talk to other computers now. Until he ran across a system more advanced than the human brain, according to him there was virtually no limit to what he could access.

It made Steve uncomfortable to think about Tony in the terms of a machine. He knew Tony liked them, possibly better than actual people, but maybe that was part of the problem. Tony was always running from his feelings and trying to be something more than human. Sure, his brain was amazing and Steve was awed by it on practically a daily basis but it wasn’t his brains that Steve liked best.

Some of the best parts of Tony weren’t in his head at all - his wicked sense of humor, the way he always threatened his bots and bantered with Jarvis. The way he’d built a tower fueled by clean energy and welcomed a bunch of rag tag hard luck cases in and made them family- and one of these days he was going to really hurt himself, and that really bothered Steve because…

“You care about him.” Natasha, who must have taken up mind reading when Steve wasn’t looking filled in. She laughed softly at his glower.

“You’re an easy read Rogers. Don’t take up espionage.”

“And here I had my paperwork all filled out.” He grinned momentarily allowing himself to enjoy her comradery and letting the worry building in his chest to unwind. He’d never thought one day he’d be running missions with a Russian spy at his back, but he was really growing to like their partnership. She was surprisingly grounding.

“How long before we can get Tony out of here, and how long do you think before it really hits?”

“We’ll be moving to the ballroom shortly. I’d give it a half hour or so, a few cocktails. A dance or two so there’s a nice cozy picture of you and Tony dancing on the front page tomorrow that Pepper can turn into gold. I’ll let Pepper know so Happy can be waiting with the car. You alert the others.”

She answered with a considering look in Tony’s direction. “He’s got time.”

Steve hoped so. The idea of Tony going into full blown heat in a room full of his political rivals and their toms was a nightmare.

“When did you start giving the orders?” he teased, even though they both knew he’d already accepted the plan because it was solid.

“When you started thinking with your dick, panting in my ear and growling like a feisty poodle.”

Steve laughed, the startled sound was his first genuine one of the entire evening.

~*~*~

“You need to ease off on the drinks.” Rhodey whispered harshly, keeping a pleasant expression on his face as he guided Tony away from a cluster of dignitaries wanting to know if Captain Rogers planed on collaring him now that they were an item.

Tony had kindly explained to Secretary Walsh from the Defense Department that the contract drawn up for the Pride initiative included an independence clause that stipulated that upon successful
completion of a Pride bond, the Gata so bonded received conditional independence (provided they
maintained a SHIELD designated Handler and continued to fulfil a public service).

No more fucking tags for Bruce and no collar for Tony. Not ever.

Tony might have been a little vehement about that last bit, which might be the reason Rhodey had
pulled him away to berate him about his drinking.

Which totally wasn’t fair because Tony hadn’t actually drunk that much liquor. Not tonight anyway.
But even he could admit it must have been going to his head because said head felt foggy and thick,
and his tongue kept acting like it was covered in tacky glue.

“Can you believe that guy though? What is it with people! I say I have a boyfriend and all they want
to know is if someone if finally going to collar me.” He growled, glaring back at the group.

“Same story different day Stark. What’s with you man?” Rhodey prodded. “You need to keep your
head in the game. Why are you letting that tired old shit get to you?”

Rhodey was right. He’d come here tonight with a purpose and he was losing sight of that purpose.

“Sorry Platypus, you’re right. I just got a little overheated. It’s only a million degrees in here. Jesus
can we get someone to turn on the air?” Tony grouched, fanning himself and grimacing when the
motion made the scents already assaulting his nose seem all the sharper. Too many damn bodies
pressed together in a single room. Too many toms too close. It made him feel skittish (and he hated
feeling skittish).

Rhodey opened his mouth, about to say something when an enticingly rich scent filled Tony’s nose,
his whiskers twitched from the slight air pressure of an incoming presence and his ears twitched
toward the sound of someone clearing their throat just behind him.

Tony already knew who would be there, by the scent, but pretended surprise anyway when he
turned to face the Prince of Wakanda.

“Oh Your Highness, I’m sorry have I been neglecting you? I saw you talking with Representative
Adams and assumed she’d be thrilling you with highly exaggerated tales of her importance for at
least another ten minutes.”

“She likely had another ten minutes left in her,” T’Challa allowed with amusement. Glancing
apologetically in Rhodey’s direction he concluded, “But I was hoping that I might have a word with
you alone.”

“I’m not sure that’s the best idea.” Rhodey objected, leveling a hard look at the other man that Tony
had seen him level at subordinates often enough in the past not to be affected by it one bit.

“Now now Sourpatch, he is our guest.” Tony patted Rhodey affectionately on the chest, making his
medals clink. He really was just an overprotective teddy bear. Little did those poor frightened recruits
he terrified know. “Besides, I see Pepper desperately trying to get your attention.”

He nodded toward the other side of the room and Rhodey obediently followed his gaze to where
Pepper was on her phone, motioning for one (or both of them) to come to her with an altogether too
professional air. Something must be wrong, but she didn’t want people to know it was wrong.

“You gonna be alright?” Rhodey asked and Tony rolled his eyes.

“Big boy here Rhodes. I can handle myself.”
Rhodey motioned with two fingers as he warned, “no more drinks. Watching you Tones. I mean it.”

Before turning to make his way toward Pepper, leaving Tony alone with T’Challa. Which meant it was back in the ring. Game face on.

“I hope you weren’t offended earlier by my friend’s protectiveness. It was thoughtful of you to bring a gift.” He opened with as much sincerity as he could muster, and T’Challa nodded in acknowledgment.

“The red paint in the grooves is made from the dust of a meteor that struck my country. The mineral is known to conduct electro-magnetic energy, which I’m sure Dr. Banner will confirm once he is through examining them. They reminded me of you and thought you might appreciate the extra boost when you are blasting your enemies.” T’Challa grinned cheekily as Tony’s eyebrows raised in surprise.

“As for your friends, they see you are hurt. I understand why they would resent me.”

Tony barked a disbelieving laugh. This guy. This guy had more nerve than anyone Tony had ever met! And he’s been held captive by terrorists for god sake.

“Lets get one thing straight shall we? That little trick you played? I get it. It’s not like we were best friends or some shit. It wasn’t personal and really Highness it’s no skin off my back.”

T’Challa the bastard didn’t look as if he were buying it.

“Trust is essential to a bond Tony. You have so few you can rely on, and so few places to feel safe and I lied my way into your sanctum and into your affection. My reasons for doing so matter little where your heart is concerned but I hope that in explaining my motives, it will help you toward finding your way to trusting me again.”

“Alright.” he grunted in response, swishing his tail as if there were some annoying fly he wanted to swat but the only annoying thing here really was Prince T’Challa and how well he seemed to have Tony’s number. He couldn’t really argue against that. T’Challa hadn’t really harmed him or anyone else in his mission and the mission itself made a lot of logical sense. Yeah maybe he’d toyed with Tony a little bit with all that flirting but Tony was a big boy (he’d literally just told Rhodey that) and had known what he was about when he’d let it continue. Hell, he’d been an active participant up until he’d decided to commit to a relationship with Steve.

The adult thing to do here was at least hear the man out. Fuck but he hated adulthood. Whose crummy idea was that?

“The Alurio are an endangered species Tony. There are only five free Prides left in the entire world.” The prince began slowly. “We may have cloaked ourselves from the eyes of the world but that does not mean we have not watched the outside. We have watched our way of life disappear outside of our walls. As a boy I could not help but think it cowardly, that my forbearers sat in their nest of riches and did nothing while the rest of our kind were decimated. As a man I understand the hard choice that was presented to them. Sometimes it is only possible to save a few.

“Still, it is my hope now that we are strong that we can make a difference in the world, but it is not a popular thought among our elders. A few times we have entertained the notion of revealing ourselves to the world, but each venture has met with some sort of betrayal. First from your father who stole from us, and time and time again with men who saw in us only what they could plunder. Many on my father’s council still think that the rest of the world is too big a threat, and there is a great deal of unrest over the issue. My mother feels as I do, that if there is a chance of helping our brethren then it
is our duty to try. But to avoid civil war my father cannot be seen as recklessly endangering our people. Thus my mother sent me on this mission, to judge not only your government but you Tony. Your character. Your weaknesses and strengths.”

Tony winced, wondering what T’Challa had made of him in his report, but kept silent as the prince pressed on.

“Getting close to you was necessary by any means. It pains me to say that because I know it is the reason you will not believe me when I say that doing so was a pleasure I had not anticipated. The conflict I felt in my purpose for being here is the closest I’ve ever come to regretting the love I bear for my people.”

Tony snorted and looked away but he couldn’t block out the man’s voice as he finished.

“I owe my allegiance to my Queen and my Pride above all things. I could not betray their trust, though it meant continuing to betray yours.”

Loyalty. It wasn’t like Tony couldn’t understand loyalty, and he was still learning about the Alurio but he knew enough to know that loyalty to Queen and Pride was pretty damn not optional, but even so… T’Challa had already said it. None of it changed the fact that Tony had trusted someone who turned out to be lying to him, and even a good reason for it didn’t reassure him that T’Challa was someone who could be trusted in the future. If anything his reasons pointed out all the reasons why he couldn’t be.

His Queen was always going to come first and who was to say what she would order next.

“I get it. Mommy gave you a job and you were just doing it. Really I do. Like I said, not my first rodeo with this sort of thing.” Tony waved a hand, eyeing a server with a tray of cocktails, desperately in need of a drink to cool off. Something to do with himself so he wouldn’t have to look at the tom and wouldn’t blurt out exactly what he heard himself blurt out a moment later.

“But the thing I can’t get out of my head is, at least Clint came clean. You could have told me all this when you knew the jig was up but you didn’t. You just left.”

“I know. And I have no real excuse for that beyond fear.”

“Fear?” he laughed humorlessly at T’Challa in response. “Fear of what?”

“Of impaired judgment.” The tom admitted softly. “Of making a mistake that would come back to harm my people. I am unfamiliar with being unable to trust my own judgment and I can only apologize for any wounds you have suffered as a result.”

Tony swallowed, skin prickling strangely as T’Challa’s eyes bored into him, completely at a loss for words. It was strange and unexpected to hear the tom baldly admit to what sounded like feeling something real for him and to fear on top of that.

What was there to say at this point? Rallying himself Tony swallowed back the bitter retort that wanted to leap off his tongue because (what even was the point, and) he was supposed to be winning the man’s confidence and forming an alliance. Not antagonizing him.

“Relax Prince Ali, no need to take yourself so seriously. I’m a big boy. Nothing’s broken. Like I said, it’s all by gones.”

“I realize that you are angry with me,” T’Challa sighed in response, clearly still not convinced though small smile had appeared again on his too pretty mouth. “I accept your taunting as my due.
But I hope that if you are willing... perhaps you will spare me a dance?”

Tony hummed thoughtfully, pretending to think about it.

“Oh gee, this is so embarrassing but wouldn’t you know, my dance card is already full.” He turned his head pointedly to look back at Steve who was watching them from across the room as if he expected the tom to suddenly go on attack. Tony’s smile softened with fondness as Cap’s eyes met his questioningly and he tossed the blond a reassuring wink. Steve smiled in relief and started to make his way toward them. Heat twisted low in Tony’s belly.

See. Tipsy or not he could totally handle himself.

“You are referring to Captain Rogers courtship.” T’Challa’s low voice drew him back to find dark eyes flecked with amber and gold staring intently at him. The tom’s scent had deepened, bringing a hint of pepper to Tony’s nose.

Displeasure. Interesting.

“Not sure how things are done in your neck of the woods but here in the USofA courting is considered really old fashioned. Steve and I are more of a done deal I’d say.”

“I apologize.” T’Challa returned shortly in reply. “I should have been more precise. I meant you are not bonded and you do not share his scent. Among our kind, that means you are still free to entertain suitors.”

And there it was. Confirmation of what he’d already suspected. T’Challa hadn’t taken seduction off the table as a negotiation tactic. What was it he’d said?

Closeness by any means necessary.

It gave Tony a vicious thrill of pleasure to bare his teeth at the man in an imitation of a smile and bite out a warning, “Maybe I’m not your kind.”

“You are Alurio, Tony.” T’Challa answered, frustratingly undeterred by the show of aggression. “In your blood is the blood of the great Queens and the builders of empires. You never belonged among these swine.”

Damn him, but Tony was tempted to believe he meant it, to read something that wasn’t actually there into the praise – into a gift that could have been any expensive trinket, but was armor instead. Amor fit for a Queen. That strange fluttering in his chest died swiftly though at what the tom said next.

“Be careful of Captain Rogers. He is a good man, but he is not for you.”

Not for you. The words echoed inside his head. Wasn’t that what Tony had been telling himself from the beginning? That someone like Steve just wasn’t for a guy like him.

He stiffened, all good humor fading as his mouth twisted into a snarl, pushing the venomous thoughts away.

“Why, because you are?” he laughed, teeth flashing and T’Challa’s mouth hardened as he spoke firmly and lowly for Tony’s ears only.

“Because Queens are second to no one and they do not relinquish the hearts they take.” A chill went down Tony’s spine. T’Challa’s voice was positively grave now. “Not even in death.”
Barnes. He was talking about Barnes. Tony knew it.

“I’m sorry Ayeba, but it has been that way since the beginning of our people. Since Namer lost his heart to Neithotep and vowed to hold her as queen in his heart upon the stone.” Tony’s widening eyes were drawn to the place where he knew the Nehe stone rested against T’Challa’s chest.

T’Challa seeming to read to the thoughts Tony didn’t voice, nodded slowly.

“My father like his fore-fathers has two wives, but no one can hold his heart like my mother holds it. I have often wondered if my Second-Mother suffers heartache loving someone who cannot hold her in his heart above all others.”

Fuck. Just…fuck that. And fuck him! Tony wanted to say it, but all that came out through his tight throat was a rasped, “What are you saying?”

He already knew what the bastard was saying.

For the first time that evening he didn’t feel strong or confident. He felt like the earth had just opened up under him and he was falling with nothing to catch him. He jerked as if shocked when T’Challa reached for his hand but didn’t pull it away.

“Only that I am sure of one thing.” The tom’s eyes were warm and steady as he held Tony’s hand cupped between his and slowly raised it to his lips in a whisper of a kiss. Not like a lover, but rather strangely like some knight of old, swearing fealty to his liege. “I cannot speak for your Captain. But to stand at your side would be the greatest honor of my life and it is worth a great deal more than I am free to give you. I am hopeful that will change very soon, but I will not insult you by asking you to wait. I hope only that we can be friends again. Your friendship is a dear enough gift for anyone.”

~*~*~

“Excuse me Your Highness, but you don’t mind if I steel Tony away for a dance do you?” Steve asked the wakandian prince with as pleasant a smile as he could muster given the anger simmering just under his skin at the sight of Tony’s hand held in the man’s hands. This close Steve’s serum heightened nose had begun to pick up the scent of heat on Tony’s skin, deep and spicy with that telling edge of sweetness that made his teeth tingle.

What he really wanted to do was rip the man’s arm off for touching but that was probably the pheromones talking. It was a close thing when Tony’s wide wary eyes flew to him, as if it was Steve he was unsure of (Steve who might take advantage of his vulnerability) and seeing that look on his face felt like a punch to the throat.

For his part Prince T’Challa didn’t put up a protest. His nod was gracious as he let Tony’s hand fall and stepped back, but there was something about the way that he looked at Steve that made his hackles rise. He ignored it, pushing thoughts of the tom aside to focus on what he needed to which was taking care of Tony. Gently taking his hand Steve began to tug him toward the center of the room where couples were engaging in dance as the band played something smooth and slow that Steve didn’t recognize.

From the dance floor it would be easy enough to slip out into the hall and then out to the car, but maybe they didn’t even have time for the dance. Tony was uncharacteristically quiet and stiff as Steve pulled him close. He saw again that devastated look Tony had given him when he’d first approached.

“Tony? What’s wrong?” He pleaded as they swayed to the music, prompting lowly so no one would
overhear. “Honey look at me.”

“I’m fine.” the brunette snapped, and Steve could see him shaking himself, realizing that he was convincing himself before he raised his gaze and fixed Steve with a bright smile, finally giving the dance his full attention. “Just feeling kind of sick I guess. Rhodey’s always warning me about the punch.”

“Tony, you’re going into heat.” Steve insisted and at Tony’s shocked jerk he lowered his voice even further, pulling Tony closer by the hand on the small of his back. “Natasha says you’ve been focusing a lot of brain power elsewhere so maybe you didn’t put it together but it’s coming on. I can smell it.”

“Fuck…” Tony breathed out slowly, seeming to come to grips with the truth of what Steve was saying far slower than he normally would.

“Pepper’s got the car waiting and Rhodes went to make sure our exit is clear. Bruce is already waiting in the car to help you back to the tower.”

Steve knew how that sort of thing made Tony feel, but he didn’t want him to be scared. Neither Steve nor the others would let any harm come to him. He didn’t expect any argument so it came as a shock when Tony stiffened again in his arms and shook his head.

“No.”

“No? Tony you can’t stay here.”

“No, of course not. Not what I meant.” Tony replied through gritted teeth. “I meant I don’t want to go back with Bruce.”

That made even less sense. The only two Tony trusted to see him through heat were Bruce and Clint and Tony had noticeably not shared a heat with Clint in a while. Tony ended his confusion a moment later when he squeezed Steve’s hands and looked up at him through the dark fans of his eyelashes.

“I want to go home with you Steve.”

Tony was full on flushed by the time Happy pulled the car into the garage of the tower. Stupid really. You’d think after dealing with these heat flashes for weeks that he’d know the signs by now, but fuck if Tony could tell how he felt about anything anymore.

“We’re here Tony. Can you stand?” he heard Steve ask as a door opened and wonderfully cool air rushed against his skin. He shuddered, closing his eyes for a moment as he took a deep breath he had this. Nothing he hadn’t handled before. So what if he’d never spent a heat with Steve before. They were together. They cared about each other. Why shouldn’t he ride out the flash with him?

Because he’s in love with someone else. Someone you’re not. A voice taunted cruelly in the back of his mind as Steve, Mr. Take Action himself, slid a hand under Tony and lifted him from the car like he weighed next to nothing. He probably didn’t, Tony’s brain supplied sluggishly. Not to Captain America. Which was really hot. Or maybe Tony was just kind of hot all over it was hard to tell what was attraction and what was biology screaming at him to breed.

“Gee whiz Cap, you’re so big and strong.” Tony giggled, burring his nose against the jacket of Steve’s tux, dragging in his soothing scent. “You know I dreamed about this sort of thing when I
was a kid?"

Not his body screaming at him, but Captain America holding him up. Talking about him like he was special and something worthy of being proud of. Being carried off to go on grand adventures like he was James fucking Barnes, the luckiest fel that ever existed because he had hands down the world’s best Master in the world.

“I devoured those stupid comics, the ones that made you out to be a paragon. The perfect man. The guy with human superiority and all the gifts god should have given them instead of the Gata.”

“Those comics were crap.” he heard Steve say from a distance. He sounded distracted and Tony let his head flop back to get a good look at what he was doing. Huh they were inside now. Neato.

“Of course they were crap. You see what they did to Carter?” Tony giggled again. “But Barnes got the worst of it. Gee golly wiz Cap, you’re just the bees knees.”

Captain America and Bucky Barnes, poster duo for Human and Gata codependence. Cap’s Gata side-kick was depicted as the worst sort of lap-kitty, the perfect example of what it meant to be a good boy. He’d wanted to be that once. The good boy someone could love.

“You are a good man Tony.” Steve insisted stubbornly as the elevator doors opened on the familiar walls of the penthouse floor.

Tony frowned.

“Not sure you’re getting the point here Steve. They aren’t the same thing. Sir doesn’t care if I’m a good man or not just-” Tony stifled the words as his body shuddered, the first true waves of heat washing through him and scattering his thoughts. Sir? He hadn’t called Howard Sir since the man had died, but heat addled the senses. Made you regress to a gooey pile of primal instincts. Made it impossible to defend yourself when someone wanted to take advantage.

Steve laid Tony gently on the bed, as if he were made of glass and the fel curled in on himself, shivering as he desperately chased after a conscious stream of thought that wasn’t how badly he wanted Steve to touch him. If he could keep thinking then he was still in control. He could keep himself safe.

He flinched as he felt something settle over his body, relaxing only when he realized that it was a blanket. Steve’s hands smoothed the soft cloth over his shoulders and moved upward to gently slide his fingers into Tony’s sweat curling hair and he felt his body sink into the bed, a quiet purr rumbling in his chest.

For a time they just lay in the center of Tony’s bed, breathing quietly in the middle of his darkened room. The darkness made Tony miss the familiar light of his arc reactor. Eventually Steve ended up curled up along his back, one arm over the mound Tony’s hips made under the blanket. He continued to stroke his scalp but didn’t try to push for anything else. He just let Tony float in the security of being in his lovers arms.

Rain. Tony decided as he took a slow breath in, letting their scents mingle together on his tongue. They smelled like a fresh rain in spring, when it kicks up dust and pollen just before it pours. Just before everything gets washed clean. Cleansing.

His mouth curling into a slow smile Tony turned over, shuffling until he was facing Steve, their knees bumping.

“Is that why you loved him?” he asked. His voice sounded rough and he could feel a bead of sweat
trickling down his face but he was happy to have control of his thoughts back. For the most part anyway. Steve didn’t answer immediately, instead reaching with his thumb and wipe up the trail of sweat with a tender stroke before he finally spoke.

“I told you I hated those comics. They got so many things wrong, but Bucky was a flat out lie. The man I knew was a smart ass who never let me get away with a single thing. A lot like you.”

Steve’s wry smile was a lot fond. A touch sad.

“We’re different.” Tony shook as if Steve had said something to contradict him. “You know that I can’t replace him right? Sure, maybe some things are similar and maybe for a little bit it will seem like enough. I think I’m selfish enough to even let you… but eventually you’re going to get frustrated because I forgot it was your birthday, or I didn’t consult you before I did something I thought was necessary and you’re going to hate that you’re stuck with me. Just me. So what I need…”

Tony’s voice cracked as another stab of heat twisted in his belly and he closed his eyes, riding it out with a shudder. He stayed still until it had passed, panting for breath. He licked dry lips and exhaled slowly before opening his eyes again to meet Steve’s darkened ones. His arousal was thick in the air around him, storm clouds burgeoning in the middle of their rain storm, but Tony wasn’t afraid.

Despite how taught with tension his body was he hadn’t so much as moved an inch, and Tony knew he wouldn’t take until invited to.

“I need to know that you want a future with me. That you know there’s no going back. That you’ll be there with me, fighting for us because we’re us and that’s what you want. Because I’m what you want.” Tony held Steve’s and searched his face for some hint of what he was feeling, and Steve stared back at him, eyes widening slightly as he took in Tony’s words. Tony found himself pleading silently that Steve’s answer wouldn’t be some sort of let down. He didn’t know how he’d take a rejection when he felt like the slightest touch from Steve was going to break him.

“Tony…” Steve’s voice sounded like sandpaper and Tony swallowed but refused to back down now. No running away for either of them. Who gave a fuck what anyone else thought? He and Steve were their own people and if they wanted this- if Steve wanted him- then Tony dared anyone to try and stop them.

“Steve?”

“I didn’t think there really was a future at all for me until you. You gave me back me. You gave me a home.” Steve raised Tony’s hand – there were a lot of people touching his hands today, he thought, and just as quickly he thought of Queen Bastet watching them, telling them that the future was in the hands of the builders, wishing them sure hands. Steve pressed a kiss against his wrist, breath warm and moist against the sensitive skin. Tony bit back a sob as relief and elation flooding through him as Steve whispered urgently, wiping at the tears that were sliding down his cheeks out of nowhere. Crying definitely had not been on the menu. When had he started doing that?

“This isn’t going to be easy, but I know who you are Stark. You’re too stubborn to give up that easily.”

Tony began to smile.

“You’re just as stubborn as I am Rogers.”

“You’re damn right.” Steve smiled back at him and Tony laughed.

Tony Stark has never held a lover in dark or light and heard the words ‘I love you’ but he was
familiar with the idea that there is more than one way to say those three little words. And that right there… that sounded a lot like love to him. So this time, when the clawing want swelled up inside and stabbed him with need, he let it have him, surging forward to grab Steve by the collar of his shirt to demand his mouth. Steve seemed happy to give. Happy to let the heat take them both.

Chapter End Notes

To be continued in Part 2.

Thank you guys SO much for all your comments last week, I was so pleasantly surprised. This is my first time writing anything not strictly Steve/Tony so there’s some nerves involved with setting up their relationship for possible failure without making somebody hateable. Hopefully they come across as bumbling boys just... well bumbling.

Well, thoughts feelings and predictions? You know I love them.

This Sunday: So Tony slept with Steve and it was awesome, but Bruce is worried he might be pregnant and this is slightly less awesome (maybe). And you know, Tony always thought he'd be the one freaking out about an oops baby, but he's got nothing on Steve. Maybe they should talk about that? But, Pepper keeps inviting T'Challa over for playdates because Tony suddenly sucks at diplomacy, and yeah it's irritating how easy he just charms his way back into his friend's good graces, but at least that bet he makes with Clint means Tony gets a chance to kick his ass in the name of protecting team honor. The Avengers (minus Hulk and Thor because fairness or something) against one Black Panther, it's no contest.
No I'm not giving up. I am tough. I am love.

Chapter Summary

In which Steve learns Tony might be prego and goes off like a bomb.

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry this is so late. It's been a rough time. I'm sorry there's no T'challa in this. There was supposed to be a whole other segment but things being the way they are I decided to just post what I have done. The title is taken from Jason Mraz "I won't give up", which is a great song coincidently if you're having a rough patch. At this time, unfortunately, I'm not sure when the next update will be.

Time travel. Tony had never really put much thought into it because worm holes and dimensional rifts are not really his vice of choice and they've already got one Reed Richards (the galaxy can’t really handle a second) but right now he's honestly considering giving it some real thought; because he’d like to hop into a time machine right about now and go back.

Last night is a good option. Last night when Bruce hadn’t been standing in the middle of the room making him think about life altering shit, because even if he had been Tony wouldn’t have had a single brain cell to pay him any mind.

Last night is a familiar sort of hazy that usually makes his skin crawl with unease, the loss of memories to sweat and sensation leaving too many dark areas for old demons to lurk, the sharply detailed flashes that he can remember embarrassingly carnal and a painful reminder of his weaknesses; but last night with Steve was different, and it’s the difference between falling apart and letting go.

Tony’s never been able to just let go like that, to put down the fight and let somebody elses hands take him apart with confidence that he won’t break for good. But last night he did and it was probably glorious if the pleasurable ache left over is anything to go by.

But even so, honestly he’d still prefer to go back just thirty minutes ago, before he’d gotten out of his nice comfortable bed that had smelled like him, Steve, bacon and eggs. Because Steve was the sort of guy who made you breakfast the morning after and didn’t even try to make you eat anything green.

Point of fact, Steve likes to take care of people. Tony knew that before, but it’s the difference between knowing and realizing. Because there’s no reason for Steve to know how he likes his coffee - black with two spoons of demerara sugar (cabinet left of the sink, marked CRACK in Rhody’s handwriting) or that he’s a chewy bacon guy (because why would you dry the life out of bacon people, come on) and that he can’t stand runny egg yolk, unless Steve has cared enough to pay attention.

And look, it’s not like Tony has provided any of his friends with anything like regular eating habits
to make a study of. Which means Rogers has paid close attention for Tony’s sole benefit. BecauseTony is someone he cares about and Steve is a muscily patriotic themed mother hen.

Tony on the other hand is a bit of a train wreck (most days) and this morning was no exception, but if he could go back to just thirty minutes ago - when he’d been choking on his bacon with laughter at the mental image of Liberty Hen, and Steve was getting him back for poking fun with a peculiar but A-Okay form of punishment that involved pinning Tony to the bed and kissing him breathless - he would.

But reality had intruded on their little love nest in the form of their worried teammates who were all up and about, and finding reasons to linger on the common floor in wait for Tony and Steve to emerge from the penthouse. After a while the constant tug of worry in the back of Tony’s mind had become too distracting.

It was kind of weird finding his friends all sitting in the living room on the common floor like a bunch of fretful parents on prom night but alright, kind of endearing as well. But Tony, being Tony couldn’t let it go without at least a little teasing.

“Really guys? It’s Cap. What did you think was going to happen?”

Steve had given him his soon to be patented concerned Liberty Hen look and reminded Tony that he wasn’t infallible and that Tony’s comfort and consent should always be the priority when it came to his heats. Rather proving Tony’s whole point, which he’d smirked at but Bruce was in a serious mood and didn’t seem to be feeling what a fine morning it was the same way Tony was. To be fair, he doubted his friend had been treated to an enthusiastic round of morning sex so Tony would give him that. Poor Bruce.

“We don’t mean to snoop, Tony, or to imply that you can’t take care of yourself,” Bruce had insisted, tapping nervously against the handle of his coffee mug.

“But we all know you don’t sleep with toms.” Clint finished firmly and Bruce winced in the face of Barton’s bluntness, but nodded slowly.

“Nonsense, I’ve slept with you Barton. Kinda insulted over here that you forgot.” Tony had rejoined. Stalled more like, and he didn’t even know why he’d pretended to misunderstand because he knew exactly what they were all getting at.

“You’ve never taken teeth before Kotyonok,” Natasha admonished, effectively ending Tony’s side stepping.

When a tom penetrated a fel there were certain biological factors that had to be in play to result in kits. When Tony’s father and Robert Stone had decided that fifteen-years-old was old enough for Tony to become a baby factory, it had been necessary to know everything he could about breeding and how to prevent it.

Two things are needed. Heat and the built in biological trigger for his body to start ovulating. Now domestic male felines have barbs on their penises that flip the switch, which thank god is not the case in Gata. Instead, there is a small gland at the back of a fel’s neck that normally is only a small swell on the back of the neck, but becomes tender and enflamed during heat.

While mounting, a tom sinks their teeth into it and a signal shoots up to the brain and strait down to the ovaries to start serving up eggs. With any luck over the next couple of days of heat driven continuous coupling, the two will part oh so proud parents to be. The Ovular-Gland is touch sensitive, the more enflamed the more so, but it takes a fare amount of continuous pressure to flip the
switch so when tom’s bite, they bite hard and they hold on for dear life. It’s commonly called latching, and it also happens to be a biological failsafe, because even though heat hormones muddle the brain, as long as you avoid latching a fel can avoid an unwanted pregnancy.

Which is why Breeders came up with mating blocks, where you shackle the fel down on their front in prime mating position. Howard had purchased one after Tony’s third heat had passed with no babies in sight and Ty had bitched to Robert about how Tony wouldn’t take teeth. Which should have been the end of it really, except fifteen-year-old Tony concocted all sorts of unstable potions to jack up his glands and halt his ovaries in their tracks. Because fuck being impregnated against his will. Eventually when even the mating block failed to do the trick Howard learned what Tony had done, and when the doctor reported the significant damage he’d done to his reproductive system and strongly discouraged breeding him he’d finally been forced to give up.

Tony’s taken great pains to never take a tom’s teeth since.

Until last night that is, because he doesn’t need to let his hand drift up to the back of his neck and let his fingers press against the tender skin, or feel the fading imprint that Steve’s teeth had left, Extremis already busy at work healing the bruised and broken skin. He’d felt it already this morning, in the clear light of day. He’d remembered starkly the intense pleasure pain that had shot through his body as Steve bit down, drowning out everything that wasn’t Steve and more.

He should have been upset. He should have been having an epic freak-out. But he wasn’t.

He’d never been able to let-go like that before, and it had felt every bit as amazing as he’d always wondered if it would feel. He simply didn’t want to regret it. He wanted sixty more years of it and two sets of gorgeous blue eyes across from him at the breakfast table, one of them belonging to a stubborn little boy who tried to make a little girl eat sand for teasing him one minute and curled around her like a protective shield the next when their parents were away and unsure whether to return.

So there he was, heart hammering, coming to the awful (wonderful) realization that he might at that very moment be pregnant with Steve’s child, while the man in question had blushed a furious red, and mumbled some apology about getting carried away and not meaning to hurt him – like he thought Natasha and the others were worried because Tony was some sort of virginal milk maid, scared off by a bit of roughness in the sack. And that’s when it had hit them all. Steve had no idea what the so call mating gland was really for.

“Steve you know what the ovular-gland is right?” Bruce asked, a deep frown of concern furrowing his brow and Steve shrugged, stuborning his way through the discomfort of the conversation.

“The O-gland. I’m sure there are better classes on it now than back in my day, but generally everybody knows it… revs things up.” He blushed again, pushing on with forcefulness as if scolding some invisible party. “A lot of people like to focus on that alone, but it’s good for far more important things like, comfort and affection…” Steve trailed off, seeming to become aware of the blank and increasingly incredulous expressions on his teammates faces.

“You mean they taught you what it could be used for, but not what it was for?” Clint summarized slowly, almost dangerously and Steve blinked silently a moment before narrowing his eyes.

Tony was the only one not shocked by this, having been raised in a domestic household largely in the public eye. He’d seen all the “civilized” methods of gentling anxious Gata, all the myriad ways in which they could be violated and subjugated in plain sight. It was obviously all about control, but on paper rubbing the O-gland was toted as a “harmless” way of tapping into a fels pleasure centers and easing the nerves, but for the obvious reason was also considered a very personal privilege between
Gata and their masters. Masters got angry when other people tried to touch their pets so intimately.

“Somebody tell me what’s going on.” Steve demanded, crossing his arms.

“You knocked Tony up. That’s what’s going on.” Clint snapped and Steve paled. “He trusts me and Bruce to keep it together and not use our teeth, but I guess he didn’t know he was sleeping with a rookie.”

Sighing Tony stopped what he was doing on the counter, setting down the pot and the cup of coffee he’d been pouring with a thunk.

“Not helpful Clint. Steve and I are adults, and everything we engaged in last night was consensual. Every last bit. You want a play by play?”

“Uh no… that’s really not needed.” Bruce coughed sheepishly, turning a bit pink in the cheek himself. Tony raised a questioning brow, and Natasha smirked.

“You got a little sloppy with the mental walls last night Stark. Bruce and I could probably give you the play by play. That’s how we know you took teeth.”

Tony really should have been more embarrassed by the thought that he’d given two of his teammates a front row seat into his sex life, but he’s just not the cat for that. So to speak.

“Kinky. Now that you’ve seen the preview do you want to revisit your ‘I don’t sleep with men whose names end in Stark’ policy, Romanov?” He preened, laughing as Natasha laser eyed him.

“You can’t handle me Stark.”

“Guys!” Steve interjected with a frustrated snap. “Can we please focus? What the hell does Clint mean and what does biting you have to do with it?!”

“The Ovular Gland is basically a giant button that turns the baby making machine on. Put enough pressure on it and the stork is ago.” Tony promptly answered, because tempting as it was to follow that little opening Natasha had left him (and it was an opening!) Steve looked like he was on the verge of a stroke. Tony would have laughed at the horrified expression on his face if it weren’t being aimed at him, on the morning after Steve had possibly knocked him up.

Getting that look kinda sucked, but Tony could sympathize with his situation. Getting saddled with Gata genes and not so much as a handbook for your troubles wasn’t an easy road to walk.

“Was last night the first time you’ve gone into a rutt?” he asked gently, lowering his voice despite the fact that everybody present had super hearing and would hear it anyway. “You didn’t seem all that surprised by the urge to sink your teeth into the back of my neck.”

Steve’s cheeks pinked again but Tony didn’t miss the familiar flash of grief in his eyes that answered his question before Steve even opened his mouth.

“After the serum, first time I bit Bucky I drew blood and nearly lost it after. But he said he was alright.” Steve shrugged, a weak smile (a pensive little wisp of a thing) tugging at the side of his mouth that hurt Tony’s heart to see. He returned it, waggling his eyebrows for levities sake, and to show Steve that he was okay talking about Barnes.

Yes, okay Steve’s past lover wasn’t his favorite subject in the world but they could be adults about it. Barnes was a huge part of his past that he’d had next to no time to deal with. There was a lot Steve probably hadn’t dealt with. Tony was no therapist but he was pretty sure talking was supposed to be
“Probably more than alright.” He teased, stepping close and winding his tail playfully around one of Steve’s legs when the blond wrapped his arms around Tony’s waist. “Hurts like a bitch, no word of a lie, but in the best possible way. My first time latching with someone I care about in a long time.”

Ever. But Steve didn’t need his mind blown any more right now.

“Definitely Tony Stark approved.”

In his arms, Tony felt Steve’s body begin to relax as he chuckled, those his hands were clutching tightly to the small of Tony’s back as if he were afraid the fel might try and slip away.

“Tony could you really be…?” he trailed off, eyes flicking down to Tony’s stomach anxiously as if he might have grown inches there in the last couple of seconds. He still looked slightly panicked, but there was an edge of wonderment there now that made Tony’s heart thump hard.

“Before Extremis I would have said no… I’ve not had the healthiest adult life, and when I was a teen I, well I took some drugs that really messed things up.”

He found himself looking away, but could still feel Steve tracking every minute change in his facial expression.

“But Extremis changed a lot,” Steve prodded softly and Tony smiled nervously.

“I’m digitally remastered in high definition. Right Bruce?”

“Right. Tony’s bodily organs are healthier than they probably ever have been, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t reason to worry. Extremis isn’t stable and it wasn’t designed with pregnancy in mind.”

Steve’s hands tightened on Tony’s waist and Tony rolled his eyes. Good job calming things down Bruce.

“But we won’t have to worry about that.” Tony countered, breezily. “Once we get the nanobots installed and I’m all juiced up on BX I’ll be healthy as a horse.”

“Tony, that’s my entire point. You can’t go through an invasive completely experimental procedure like this and not accept that it’ll be putting an already at risk pregnancy at greater risk.” Bruce sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “If there even is a child to consider. We need to test you, and depending on the answer you and Steve need to have a serious talk about how you want to move forward.”

Bruce sounded grave, Clint looked pissed, Thor looked pensive, Natasha looked like she was being very careful not to look like anything, and Steve looked like he might try and throw Tony over his shoulder and run away with him if he didn’t fall down into a dead faint first.

Groaning softly Tony closed his eyes and huffed.

“Hey gang. Can you give us a minute? I think Steve and I need to talk.”

~*~*~*~

The silence in the living room felt deafening without the others there but Steve was glad not to have prying eyes, watching as he paced the length of the living room. He’d have felt the need to put on a
braver face in front of the team and could honestly use a little space to sort himself out.

Tony sat perched on the bar, his tail curved in an S shape behind his back as he silently watched Steve pace back and forth. He didn’t try to poke or prod or instigate conversation and that was very out of character for Tony. It made the guilt burning in Steve’s chest just feel worse.

Fuck.

“I’m sorry.” He gritted out, hand coming up to grab a fistful of hair as he turned about on his heel to face the other man.

“For what?” Tony asked warily, brown eyes guarded and Steve could have cursed out loud.

“For doing this to you. Clint’s right, I had no idea what I was doing and you trusted me. I’m sorry I let you down.”

There. Steve’s shoulders drooped, feeling heavy as he finally said the words aloud. Tony had been through so much, and had given him such a gift of trust and he’d completely and utterly screwed him over.

“It wasn’t your fault.” Tony said, calmly, but Steve knew he was just trying to make the best of things. But when he opened his mouth, Tony’s eyes narrowed and his ears arched dangerously and Steve slowly closed it again.

“Look I’m not gonna claim that I thought it through or that the heat didn’t take us both for a ride,” Tony said, hopping off the bar and striding toward him. “But do me a favor and listen. Don’t try and speak for me. I know what it’s like to feel like you’re going to die without a bite and wonder if you can hold on to that last little bit of fight to keep your neck to the bed. I’ve been there. I know the feeling, so don’t tell me I don’t know the difference between being forced and my own choices.”

Steve shuddered and bit his lip, turning his head away only to feel Tony’s fingers against his jaw nudging it back. His gaze was soft but firm as he looked back at Steve and said, “I wanted you, Rogers and like a perfect idiot I had you. I wanted this.”

Steve gasped as Tony pushed the memories into his mind, flashing pictures filled with warmth and color. The two of them on a sandy beach. The sky an impossibly bright blue above them. Steve’s holding a baby girl with red hair and furry white ears in his arms, and she’s clapping and giggling as Tony chases three older kits through the waves lapping at their feet, kicking up sand and water as they go. The oldest boy shrieks joyfully as Tony grabs him, his coltish legs swinging as they twirl around. And then, piercing blue eyes turn toward Steve, peeking out from dark wet bangs as the boy calls, “Daddy! Daddy help he’s got me!”

~*~

Steve stepped back with a shuddered breath, the vison fading away but Tony swore he could still smell sand and beach and feel the warmth of the sun pressing down on his skin for a few lingering seconds.

“Is that… Tony who…?” Steve didn’t seem able to find the words. He looked pale and strangely horrified as if Tony had shown him something sick and twisted instead of something so beautiful Tony played it over and over again in his mind on loop and welcomed the nights it seeped into his dreams. You know, when he slept. Which if he was pregnant, might have to change. A lot of things would.

But Tony couldn’t concentrate on that because the stricken look on Steve’s face was too much. It
sent a cold creeping chill through Tony because there was no way around a look like that. Steve didn’t want this. He didn’t want them (him and Jaime) and he was so bothered by what Tony had shown him that he could barely even put a full sentence together.

“His name’s Jamie. There’s at least one future where we have a kid so… there’s that,” Tony answered, crossing his arms in a show of nonchalance, voice controlled and even but inside he was at war. On the one hand, there was the rational part of him that realized this was a huge shock to them both and would change their lives drastically. Steve deserved some time to process and figure out just how involved or not involved he wanted to be in the kids life. It wasn’t like Tony couldn’t financially support a child on his own, so baring all the messy emotional shit it was almost like he didn’t even need Steve really. He didn’t. Fuck if he was going to drag the man kicking and screaming into playing father. Hell no. He’d never do that to his kid, not after Howard. If that was how it was going to be, Steve could just go. They were better off without him.

On the other hand, Tony was pissed. And hurt, he admitted as he bit the inside of his cheek letting the pain ground him. That too.

“Tony I’m… I’m sorry.” Tony fully expected it but somehow he just wasn’t braced for it when Steve turned and left him standing there staring after him, his strangled apology still echoing in Tony’s ears.

~*~*~*

When the door opened to Steve’s room he didn’t look up from the sketchbook he held clutched between his hands. He didn’t know how long he’d been in here, slowly flipping through the old pages. Could have been minutes. It felt like hours.

He didn’t look up but he knew it was Natasha even before he felt the prick of her nails against the back of his neck. Her steps were soundless and Jarvis hadn’t announced her because she was good. But maybe too good. She had a very distinctive way of moving that Steve was surprised to find himself tuning to the longer they worked together. Or maybe it was just the proximity coupled with the serum that made it so distinctive to him. Hard to tell.

“The reason you’re in here moping while Tony has been locked in his lab all morning. Is it good?” She asked, and Steve tensed at the slight squeeze of her hand.

He didn’t even care that she was threatening him. Normally he would, but he knew he deserved it. What kind of a person just leaves their partner after learning they might be pregnant? Assholes, that’s who. But it had just been too much at once. The initial shock bleeding away he’d begun to feel the idea out, getting used to it and if he was honest, experiencing a lot of the expected terror at impending fatherhood but not without some excitement too… Having a child with Tony. That was huge. Amazing but so huge.

He could have done alright, just coming to terms with that, but then Tony had shared that memory with him, part of the dream he’d had on Asgard, and there was just no way that Steve could handle it and everything else at once. No way to explain to Tony what seeing that little boy had ripped open inside of him.

But unless he wanted Natasha to make good use of those claws of hers he needed to explain it to someone.

“Did Tony ever show you his dream?” Steve asked and Natasha was still beside him. Steve looked up at her and found pensive green eyes staring back.
“Yes. Bruce and I have both seen it,” She finally answered and Steve nodded. Good less to explain. Wordlessly he offered her the sketchbook.

She stared at it for a long assessing moment, as if she were contemplating the benefits of skewering Steve with her claws there and then, but eventually curiosity won out and she released his neck to take it from him. She stared at the drawing for a long painfully silent period of time. It was the one Steve had drawn at Christmas, of a kit playing in the low branches of the Christmas tree.

Natasha shifted, turning to slowly lower herself onto the bed across from him. He watched her as she flipped through the next few pages, memories from that Christmas long ago and so many more before she finally looked up at him, some calculation flashing through her eyes.

“You didn’t know about Jaime until today,” she said, maybe just to say it out loud. It was clear she didn’t need Steve’s confirmation. There was something very hard about her expression. “This boy is -”

“Bucky.” He confirmed, heart twisting in his chest at the admission.

“There are differences. Jaime clearly bears your imprint.” Natasha stared at him and Steve groaned, dragging a hand down his face, because even as she was trying to talk sense at him some stupid voice in the back of his mind was whispering: Yeah but not Tony’s. And maybe he wasn’t an expert on genetics like Bruce or Tony were, and he knew damn well that kids didn’t always look like both parents, but how do you explain them bearing a strong resemblance to a completely unrelated stranger?

Deciding it was a coincidence felt ridiculously like putting his head in the sand, and more tellingly like some sort of betrayal. Like he was failing Bucky’s memory in some way by rejecting the truth right before his eyes.

“I know. I know it’s impossible. I know I promised Tony we’d move forward together, but… Natasha look at him, tell me you don’t see it? I saw that boy and it was like going back in time, only instead of calling my name he was calling me Daddy.”

“Steve…”

“And then I remembered what Tony said about the bite.” Steve rushed on, desperate to explain and suddenly feeling like he couldn’t have shared this with anyone else (couldn’t bring himself to admit how colossally ignorant he’d been and what he may have lost to anyone but the most pragmatic of critics). “After the serum we – well it was a war and we lived in close quarters with the rest of the Howlies so there weren’t a lot of chances to be together. But we caught a break one night.”

Green eyes watched him, waiting as he told his story. She probably knew where it was going but Natasha just waited and he was grateful for that. Soldiering himself Steve pressed on.

“We thought Bucky’s heats stopped because of all the stress during combat. He’d gone almost three years with nothing, but near the end he started to have flashes. The first time got us in a real pickle, the second time we were better prepared to note the warning signs and managed to find this inn. Things were intense and neither of us did much holding back. It shocked me when I bit him, so hard I broke skin. I was scared something was going wrong with the serum or that I was losing my mind. But Bucky talked me down after. He said he was fine…”

“More than fine, I imagine.” Natasha murmured softly with the barest hint of a smile and some of the nervousness twisting in Steve’s stomach eased.
“That’s what Tony said. It really doesn’t hurt you when…?”

“It hurts.” Natasha confirmed with a smirk but when Steve winced she shook her head slowly. “Not necessarily in a bad way. A surge of endorphins and reproductive hormones is a nice built in Band-Aid. That and some just like it rough.”

She was teasing him, he knew that, but he still felt heat creeping up his neck.

Chuckling to herself Natasha rolled her eyes, murmuring about how easy he was. And Steve was tempted to laugh, to forget his confusion and his pain and just allow himself to dwell in the comfort of her presence and the surprising softness of her scent, like clean cotton and the daisies his mother used to collect from the cast offs at the flowershop; but he needed to say it out loud. Wanted to.

“I lost him, not long after. Three or four weeks, maybe. He was acting stranger than usual, going feral on us… it could have been the war, could have been any number of things. We really did deserve everything he wanted to throw at us. But I can’t stop thinking now, that maybe his moods were driven by the fact that I got him pregnant. And then I got him killed.”

The words, once spoken hung heavy in the air like a thundercloud. But Natasha being Natasha didn’t react to them. She sat and assessed him for a long moment before suddenly announcing, completely nonplussed, “You and Tony really are made for each other.”

“Come again?” Steve gapped, brow furrowing in confusion. Had she not fully grasped what this meant?

“I’ve read the file Rogers. There was nothing you could have done for Barnes. Blaming yourself for something not your fault is not only ridiculously self-important, it’s self destructive. It’s like taking the knife out of your enemy’s hands and stabbing yourself with it. Stupid.”

“Good point,” Steve admitted with a regretful shrug. She was right, and she’d even been fairly gentle about it. He’d seen plenty how Natasha had no patience for stupid.

“I’ve known from the beginning that what Tony saw was a could have been, rather than a picture of what is going to be.” She confessed, and Steve’s eyes widened in surprise as he noted the way her shoulders tensed, the way she began to hold herself too stiffly (as if every effort was focused on keeping still and not curling inward) as she explained, “The little girl you were holding with the red hair, she looks like me. Not just the hair. I knew she was mine the moment I saw her. But it’s not going to happen. Not in this reality.”

She left it like that, like it was final and maybe someone else would have asked her how she was sure or tried to reassure her with some platitude about finding a tom of her own one day but it was so clear to Steve, in her finality, in the wound that she was allowing him to see. And she was letting him see. Steve made no mistake about that. If she hadn’t chosen to let him see this side of her he’d never have known it was there at all because that was how Natasha operated. How she protected herself.

“What happened?” he asked, and this time he was the one who waited.

“In the Red Room, they strip you of all weaknesses. Anything that could prove a distraction or too compromising. The first thing they took was my whiskers. Then they were going to clip my ears and my tail but my Handler, Ivan, he convinced them to leave them intact.”

She said the name with a hitch, like it got caught somewhere between her heart and her throat and Steve wondered sadly who Ivan was. She didn’t leave him wondering long.

“Ivan saved my life against orders and brought me to them for training. He was their best, and he
knew they were greedy to make more like him but they’d not succeeded with other Gata. He offered
to train me himself, and promised them that where the others had failed I wouldn’t. I knew I was
fighting for my life Steve, but in the Red Room that almost seemed normal. I was more afraid they’d
take him away or punish him for my failures. So I made it my mission not to fail.”

“You loved him.” Steve guessed and Natasha nodded, visibly collecting herself. It still amazed Steve
that she felt safe enough or that it was necessary enough that she could be vulnerable this way with
him. It was humbling, and a little terrifying because she was one of the strongest people he’d ever
met. He didn’t want her to be hurt. Not in the past, not now. Not ever. Steve reached between them
to take her hands cupping them gently and she started, staring down at them as if they were
somehow alien, and then up at him as if he was.

“Yes.” Her voice rasped and she swallowed before going on. “I got older. He came back. He was
different but still the same. Under their conditioning, he was still Ivan inside, and that gave me false
hope. Hope that maybe it didn’t matter so much what my body or my hands did, that inside maybe I
was still someone worth saving. They’d sterilized the other girls, but they’d left me alone. They were
afraid I’d stop having heats and they saw the heats as an advantage. I wasn’t careful enough. I got
pregnant, and I knew I couldn’t let them have my child. Ivan and I planned to escape together,
proving just how stupid I was.”

“You were caught?” he guessed.

“He told them.”

Steve’s hands tightened around hers, shock and anger ripping a growl from his throat and Natasha
winced but met his angry stare with a stare of her own, hard and uncompromising.

“It wasn’t his fault. They programed him like he was a machine to remember whatever was
convenient and then replace it with something else as soon as it wasn’t. Sometimes they left him with
no memories at all. He was just a thing to them. We both were, Steve. And when he compromised
me they terminated him and the pregnancy.”

“I’m sorry.” Steve hoped it sounded genuine because he was. But how could he accept how
someone she’d loved could have betrayed her that way, put her through something like that?

“I hope now you have truly left childhood behind you Natalia.”

The unfeeling voice of a woman Steve could only call cold hearted whispered through his mind and
he swallowed thickly, tempted to pull Natasha into his chest and banish that voice and anything else
that wanted to get close to her, but he knew she wouldn’t tolerate it from him or anyone else. So he
just held on to what he could, rubbing his thumbs over her hands to warm them as she blinked away
the betraying moisture in her eyes.

“It angers me that even now I… I failed to protect my mate and my child, and now I won’t ever have
the chance to again. And to feel this monstrous because of it; it’s so antiquated it’s practically
biblical.”

“Hey. Look at me.” She did, green eyes bright but confounded as if she couldn’t quite believe the
words coming out of his mouth as he said, “Those people took something of yours they had no right
to take. They were the monsters not you, and you wouldn’t be human if you didn’t struggle to come
to terms with that kind of loss.”

There were other words he found dancing on the tip of his tongue. For one reason or another he
wanted to remind her of all the ways she was very much not a monster, how being violated in this
way hadn’t changed any of the things that mattered most about the amazing individual she was. But he was sure he’d just make an idiot of himself (Clint would laugh for days if he heard about it) and in any case he kinda figured it wasn’t really the point. The point was she had been changed. Forced to. It was hard to heal from that sort of thing. Still, he hoped she listened. She did consider his words for a long moment, her eyes softening as she leaned toward him.

Steve held still, letting her soft scent tickle in his nose as her lips pressed even softer against his cheek. He hoped he wasn’t turning pink. She withdrew after a moment and stood, her warm fond little smile completely at odds with her words as she replied, “I’m not human Rogers. I’m Gata. Which is why the bitch is dead.”

He frowned but he couldn’t say that he was at all surprised by that admission. She leaned down to stroke one cheek with her hand and kiss his forehead.

“Enough now. Talk to Tony. While you’re in here, you’ve left him alone to deal with this. You get one of these. Pull this again and I might just decide to make a bid of my own for Consort.” He huffed a laugh and she squeezed his shoulder before heading for the door. She paused in the doorway and turned back to look at him for a moment.

“Are you going to tell him?”

Steve shrugged.

“Not much of a choice is there.”

“He’ll overthink it you know. He’ll find a way to twist it around in his head so that he’s failed you, and it can only mean that the Pride is going to fail with him at the helm. Bruce will stop trying to learn Korean and will never get up the courage to ask the Cho’s if he can see her. The future is whatever it will be but if we rob them of hope now, I don’t think we’ll be changing it for the better.”

Steve listened with a slight frown of contemplation. It sounded like she was telling him to lie.

“I get that, but I can’t withhold something like that from him. It’s not right.”

“Doesn’t that depend on what you think right is? We’re the only guard Tony has. Isn’t it right that we help him when we can?”

“Is that how you help people? By lying to them?” he snapped, perhaps harsher than he’d meant. But it upset him, thinking of letting Tony go on believing that one day everything he’d seen would be real when Steve already knew it couldn’t be. It was manipulative and dishonest and certainly no way to treat a friend, let alone a lover.

“The truth is a matter of circumstance, Rogers. It's not all things to all people all the time. And neither am I. “Natasha’s answer was dry and her smirk was knowing, like she’d already counted on him rejecting her advice. She probably had, and it was sad to think that even so, she believed the words she was saying.

“That sounds like a tough way to live.”

“It’s a good way not to die too.” The fel shrugged and flicked her tail, turning to leave again as she tossed back over her shoulder. “Get off your head out of your ass Steve before you hurt yourself.”

The door clicked shut behind her and somehow the room seemed colder for it along with the emptiness. Steve thought about everything she’d said. Maybe she had a point. What was the good in telling Tony about his suspicions. It wouldn’t change anything, except maybe Tony’s confidence in
their future. Steve didn’t want to crush his hopes…but the longer he sat there mulling over it the more certain he became.

If he withheld this information from Tony, it would be like allowing him to put his faith in a lie. Steve didn’t want Tony to believe in them because he’d had some vision that promised they’d make it. He wanted Tony to believe in them because they were *them*, because he trusted Steve to have his back and fight his corner no matter what life threw their way. If that was going to happen Steve had to put his cards on the table.

Decision made, Steve got to his feet.

When he got to the lab he was surprised not to hear loud music pouring from within. That was what Tony usually did when he wanted to drown out the rest of the world. But no, it was quiet and still outside the doors and when he inquired with JARVIS whether Tony was still inside or not the A.I. confirmed that he was.

JARVIS’ tone was notably colder than usual, which Steve took as his just deserts. When he put in his accesses code he almost expected it to be rejected but the doors slid open seamlessly without a sound.

Tony was sitting in a rolling chair behind one of his computer consoles staring up at a holo-screen full of what appeared to be armor specs. His hunched posture and the glassy expression in his eyes made Steve think he wasn’t really paying the work much attention.

“Tony?” Steve called his name to alert him to his presence, just in case he hadn’t heard JARVIS or the door. Sketchbook in hand he began to walk toward him.

“Did a full body scan with Bruce,” the brunette suddenly announced without turning around and Steve paused.

“The energy output from Extremis spikes my core temp…it’s too hot to sustain life. To fertilize even. So we can breathe easy. Bullet dodged.”

Tony said it breezily but Steve knew better. However unready either of them felt about parenthood Tony very much wanted a future with a family. The fact that he wanted it with Steve, whose dad had walked out on him and his mother before he’d ever really known him was a gift that he’d be damn stupid to throw away.

Steve crossed the remaining distance between them and stood just behind Tony’s chair as the fel slowly swiveled to face him, unable to hide the pain this close. His eyes were red, like he might have been crying earlier and Steve growled at himself of all things and pulled the slighter man into a hug. Tony was tense in his arms but he allowed it.

“I’m sorry I walked out on you.” Steve apologized with an aching heart. “I shouldn’t have left you alone with this.”

“It’s fine. Extremis is unstable right? Nothing we didn’t already know. We fix it, I live, I stop frying my own spawn-” Steve flinched but Tony blundered on, “And then we’re back here, with no reason to believe that the next time you get a little friendly with your teeth during heat that it won’t be the start of something. But Steve – ”

Tony pushed and taking the hint Steve stepped back to meet his furious stare.

“There’s not going to be a next time, not if this is how we’re going to operate. If you don’t want to have children fine, that’s a discussion we can have together as a couple. I know you were scared and
“Tony, Tony please, just listen,” Steve reached again to grip Tony’s arms and squeeze gently, interrupting the desperate flow of words and Tony snapped his mouth shut mulishly and turned his head, maybe in an attempt to hide just how upset he was becoming again. “You’re right. Absolutely right. I handled it badly and I’m not proud. The only thing I want you to know is it wasn’t about you. I’d be… Tony I’d be so happy to have kits with you someday. I’d be… so honored.”

Tony snorted in disbelief, like Steve was having some sort of a go at him, his arms still horribly tense beneath Steve’s hands.

“You don’t have to lay it on Cap, I know I’d make a shitty parent.”

“No you wouldn’t. Not with how you’ve taken care of the kats at the shelter, or us here at the tower, or how I’ve seen you be with Harley. You’d certainly do no worse than me.” Steve insisted. “My only example of a father was a drunken lout who couldn’t hold down a job and left my mother to fend for herself and a sick child.”

Tony blinked in surprise and Steve forced himself not to squirm. Not many people knew that about him. Ma had always told Steve his father had died due to an old war injury when she thought he was too young to take the truth; and once he knew, well it wasn’t an easy thing to share with people.

“I never thought I’d get to have a family of my own,” he admitted, gently reaching to tilt Tony’s face back toward his so that he could hopefully see how much he meant what he was saying. “To have one with someone as brave and as good as you are… Tony that’s like a dream.”

Tony bit his lip, emotion welling behind his eyes though they remained stubbornly dry. Steve wanted to smile.

“Then why did you react that way, when I showed you what we could have?”

“Because I want to believe in us too, and I saw something that rocked my faith.” Tony frowned and Steve pressed on gently. “That’s just my point. Last night I chose to have a future with you and if that’s going to work, then Sweetheart our faiths gotta be in each other. Not in dreams or anything else. Don’t you think?”

Tony didn’t answer immediately but Steve could feel the way his body was slowly unwinding beneath his hand as the fel leaned into him, melting against his front with a heavy sigh.

“You’re right.”

Steve closed his eyes in relief and hugged Tony tight.

“But I don’t get it.” Tony muttered warily, craning his neck to look up at Steve with a raised eyebrow. “What about us frolicking on a beach with our child rocked your faith?”

Tony felt so right there in his arms. Soft and sweet smelling with his heart beating against Steve’s chest. He couldn’t help the sudden stab of desperate fear that went through him at the thought of losing him, losing this, over a stupid thing like a glimpse into another reality where Bucky had lived and Tony was some sort of beloved uncle figure. Why risk what they were building over a something that didn’t matter in the long run and would only hurt him?

Steve took a deep breath.
Chapter Summary

When a mission for SHIELD goes bust the team learns some troubling news about Steve's recurring nightmares. Establishing a fragile peace with their Wakandian visitors is as easy as battle royale and getting Steve and T'Challa to stop hissing at each other. Metaphorically. There's been no actual hissing. Yet. But this is Tony's life so give it time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The assassination of the General has caused an uproar. Sokovia is once again embroiled in a brutal civil war between its government and the rival Khrah militia. The prime ministers’ retaliation to the unexpected betrayal was swift but Haser Novak, leader of the Khrah army insists that the General was not killed on his orders. His son believes this to be a conspiracy concocted by the Sokovian government to justify continued aggression against the Khrah, who only seek to represent the true will of the people.

The truth is however, that the people are tired of war. Novak senior knows this, thus he has shocked the world with his willingness to issue another cease fire and meet with the Prime Minister to discuss terms. For this reason, many within the Khrah feel betrayed and have called for his termination. The Sokovian government has taken measures to increase the security surrounding these peace talks.

This is their fatal mistake.

They’ve had a man inside the security firm for going on a decade. Getting the asset inside is as simple as signing off on the new hire paperwork. His name is Nikoli Boyko. He is a former soldier in the Red Army and an only child. Where he was born doesn’t matter, but he has answers for those who ask. What matters is the mission.

Haser Novak must die.

He blends in with the crowd. Just another security officer in a room full of dozens. He’s serious and committed to his work, but he cracks a smile every now and again and makes an inappropriate joke over the radio. When the others think of him they will think friend and their reaction times will be slower. This is ideal.

He doesn’t know where he got the sense of humor he is utilizing for this mission. His childhood seems the most likely place, even though childhood is a dull opaque landscape in his mind. It’s just a long stream of dates and events he can recite by route. He knows where he was born but he can’t picture it. He knows his mother’s name was Ayrene and that she was blond and grey eyed but he can’t picture her either.

But he’ll make a joke and he can almost picture someone else beside him. He can hear their laughter. Someone who is not there but should be. Someone who has been cut away but the hole they’ve left retains their shape.
There is no purpose to these thoughts. He is defective. He will need recalibration.

First the mission.

Someone is watching him.

He lifts his eyes, idly scanning the room and searching faces. A flicker of movement. There. A woman in a white evening gown. She’s already turning back to her date but he can feel where her eyes had been boring into him.

He sniffs, ignoring the cloying scents of perfumes and the distracting underlayer of body odors filling the room to sniff out the truth she won’t be able to hide.

Nothing. She’s good and whoever makes her scent blockers has a deft hand. But he knows what she is.

It’s not that she isn’t skilled, it’s that she is. It’s how she stands so she is always at a defensible point within the room. It’s how she never truly takes her eyes off Novak, not even as she seems to shower attention on her date.

She’s clever and deadly in a way that captivates. He could watch her graceful steps all night. He does, because she is the most dangerous thing in the room besides himself.

She moves like she’s dancing and her red hair spills over her creamy shoulders in a sleek curtain, swishing with every step. He finds himself glaring at the top of her head. She’s wearing a hair piece. He doesn’t know how he knows… only that there’s something wrong about it. She’s got her ears tacked and pinned and those puny pink things on the side of her head are prosthetics.

He can’t know that for sure but somehow he does. Like he knows she isn’t fooled by the face he wears, projected seamlessly with stolen masking technology. She sees through it and knows him for what he is.

He can’t know the color of her eyes from this distance. But somehow, he knows they are green.

He blinks slowly, because his head has started to throb with pain.

There is no purpose to these thoughts. There is only the mission.

She will have to die first.

~*~*~

“JARVIS, is Steve back yet?” Tony wondered aloud. Pale winter morning light was spilling in through the window now and assaulting Tony’s eyes. They’d both had a rough night, waking from nightmares and Tony had wanted Steve to stay in bed, maybe even to talk about it, but Steve had other ideas. Tony had barely managed to pry out of him that his nightmare hadn’t been about Barnes when he’d insisted that he was fine, and despite the early hour he’d abandoned the warmth of their bed for a pair of running shoes in order to literally run away from his problems. Tony snorted darkly at the little joke, casting his eye toward the shower.

“Captain Rogers has not yet returned Sir, however you will be pleased to know that Agents Barton and Romanov have.”
Tony perked up. Blinking away the last vestiges of sleep and reaching unconsciously for Natasha and smiling when her quiet aura flooded his mind. As usual she kept her thoughts carefully to herself, but she could not withhold the essence of herself as her mind reached back for his.

She and Clint had been called away suddenly on a mission for SHIELD, the highly-classified nature of which Tony was party to because Natasha at least, was officially a member of Pride Avengers and as part of a bonded trio, technically she belonged to him and Bruce and Fury had to ask before he borrowed.

“How long do you plan on gloating about that?” She asked dryly, and Tony laughed.

He took a record quick shower anxious to get to the communal kitchen for his coffee and to assure himself with his own two eyes that Natasha really was none the worse for wear from her ordeal. Helen had been monitoring the three of them closely as this was the first time they’d tried separating over long distances. Even though the data suggested there shouldn’t be any immediate complications, none of them had wanted to be caught unaware.

He really wanted to get down there fast but he was delayed by an incoming call from Pepper that JARVIS insisted he wasn’t allowed to ignore.

“Pepper Pott!” He greeted with bright cheer as she appeared on the ceiling of his closet. He didn’t expect her to be bothered by the fact that he was in the middle of getting dressed, she’d seen him in far more intimate states, but when she cleared her throat there was an edge of warning to it that made him actually look at her.

She wasn’t alone in the room he realized, instantly recognizing her office and what sounded like Fury’s voice muttering somewhere off camera.

Snickering, Tony slowed down considerably and took his time selecting a shirt. Pepper of course saw right through him and gave him one of her ‘behave or I’m going to drown you in paperwork’ looks.

“Tony, I’m here with Director Fury and Prince T’Challa,” she began poignantly and Tony’s gut clenched in alarm but he forced himself to continue taking his time and not show any of his discomfort or embarrassment. They were the ones who’d insisted on the urgent early morning call and fuck if he’s going to start playing shy just because the Prince of Lies happens to be watching.

“My condolences.” He muttered just loud enough that he was sure Pepper as well as her guests would catch it and then with aplomb he did what he did best and didn’t give them too much time to think about it. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t able to join you yesterday Your Highness, it’s been a busy week. First that guy with the giant rats in central park and then that public hearing regarding my Gata Rehabilitation project. We have strong federal backing but the assholes on the state board in Massachusetts are playing hard ball. I’m sure you understand.”

Phrased like that the prince had no choice but to be understanding and Tony was just fine with that.

“I’m happy to note that even here in the west, bureaucracy is still the death of reason. I think if I have to sit across from one more general explaining that monogamy and fidelity are not mutually exclusive, I will not be responsible for what I do.” The prince’s dry reply floated through the room and Tony laughed. He was somewhat surprised by his genuine amusement, but not surprised at all that out of everything they could ask a real live Alurian Prince, the public seemed most fascinated by the discovery that the king of Wakanda had two wives and this was not at all uncommon in his culture.
“That’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about Tony,” Pepper interjected pleasantly. Too pleasantly. Which meant she was about to say something Tony really wasn’t going to like, like he had to attend four days of board meetings in Tokyo or something.

“Director Furry thought it would be a nice break from all the public fanfare for T’Challa to spend a day with the Avengers and I happen to agree.”

Ah. There it was.

“You know, that really does sound great only, I’ve got that appointment with Banner and Ms. Cho,” Tony replied, referring to his surgery, which had been postponed due to pregnancy scares and business with SHIELD, the crazy of the week and haggling with the state government of Massachusetts.

“That was rescheduled for the end of the week,” Pepper pointed out sweetly, the traitor. “I put it on your calendar.”

JARVIS who was neither funny nor helpful, brought up Tony’s schedule with the date marked in red.

“So you did.” Tony grumbled swatting the image away.

“So, there’s no reason why today you can’t take a little time to yourself. You’ve been working so hard I’m sure you could use the break as much as Prince T’Challa.”

The woman was evil, but Tony still had a failsafe card up his sleeve.

“I wish I could Pep,” he responded with an air of gravity. “But public safety waits for no kat. Cap’s been making noise about getting the team back on a regular practice schedule and he wasn’t thrilled with our performance when we were two down this week. You know what they say, heroes never rest.”

Pepper, frowning now, opened her mouth to protest and Tony smirked. The smirk slid off his face however when somewhere off camera T’Challa spoke up again.

“If I may? Wakanda is a warrior culture and I’m afraid my Dora Milaje are not used to such a quiet lifestyle. They would likely enjoy the chance to watch your practice.”

You have got to be kidding me, Tony thought, gritting his teeth as Pepper beamed into the camera at him. At least somebody was still having a good morning.

That seemed to be that. Pepper breezily wrapped up the conversation before Tony could come up with any other evasions, his phone chirping with irritated texts all the while reminding him that he was supposed to be wooing Wakanda into an alliance and he was not holding up his end of the bargain. He really wasn’t, if he were honest with himself. He was letting his personal feelings prevent him from doing what he had to do.

That needed to stop, he berated himself. The island was too important and he’d be damned if he lost it because he couldn’t get over a bruised ego.

Dressed and call ended, Tony finally made his way to the kitchen, his mind turning back to checking in on Natasha and breaking the news to the team that their afternoon plans were canceled in favor of team practice. Yay!

When Tony walked in Natasha was the first to look up as usual. She looked deceptively well, but the
devil was in the details. The way she held her mouth was too tight, indicative of discomfort and she was sitting on the counter. Something she normally berated Clint for because of hygiene, and Tony knew that Clint did because it was the only perch in the kitchen (besides under the table itself) with any cover from sniper fire.

“Morning.” Tony greeted everyone (which included Clint, Bruce and Thor) amiably, saying nothing of either his worry or his relief as he crossed the room toward Natasha. Because he rather embarrassingly needed the contact and because her tail twined with Bruce’s told him she’d let him, Tony inserted himself on her unoccupied side and smacked a kiss against her cheek.

“Hi Honey, bad day at work?” He batted his eyelashes at her and she rolled her eyes, but as predicted let the gesture pass without violent retaliation.

“You could say that.” She responded with a small smirk, sinking a hand into his dark hair almost absently, scratching gently at his scalp. Nobody commented on it, but it was obvious to Tony that she needed the contact as much as he and Bruce did.

She and Clint had been gone a total of six days. Besides an annoying itch of discomfort in the back of their minds, Tony and Bruce had found themselves missing her in a strangely tangible way, the ache for her return and the longing in the pit of their stomachs all too physical a sensation. But all and all as far as their lives as Avengers were concerned, nothing that couldn’t be soldiered through so long as nobody got hurt.

The complications had really started when Natasha got herself shot.

Frowning petulantly for her amusement, Tony cast his eyes toward her right side where he knew the wound was, silently asking for permission. Wordlessly she lifted the edge of her shirt, revealing the neatly stitched skin beneath. She’d heal faster than a human might, but a gunshot wound was a gunshot wound. Tony winced at how close the shot had come to puncturing a lung.

“Are you alright?” Steve’s voice asked from the doorway, back from his run. And if the sweat dampening that criminally small t-shirt was anything to go by he must have run all the way to Queens and back. He must have been even more rattled by his nightmare than Tony had thought.

“I’m going to have to say bye to bikini season, but otherwise yes.” Natasha answered with a small shrug, letting her shirt fall back into place and Steve’s shoulders sagged in relief.

Tony eyed the two of them as they made what should have been a completely normal interaction seem strangely intimate. He felt like he’d intruded on something private and when he caught Bruce’s eye and the tom quirked a baffled brow, he knew he wasn’t alone in the feeling.

“Yeah you’d look terrible in ‘em.” Steve said in a way that made it clear this was bullshit, and Natasha just smiled in response. This slow terribly fond expression that Tony couldn’t say he’d ever been on the other end of. Don’t get it wrong. The woman was willing to die for him and they are bonded, so it’s hard for even Tony’s low self-esteem to construe somehow that she’s not fond of him too, if for different reasons and expressed in entirely different ways.

But this is different somehow. It’s friend speaking to friend but there’s also something more running just under it. It’s tom to fel, Tony realized with a start. They were attracted to each other.

That’s… well it’s something.

“You’re the one who looks terrible Steve,” Natasha pointed out with a poignant stare. “You’re still having visions.”
Steve started opening his mouth, and Tony got the feeling that he was going to protest (the big liar) and insist that he was fine, as if he hadn’t woken Tony up in the wee hours with his grunting and thrashing; but Thor, who had straightened in his seat with a frown of concern, interrupted.

“This is most unusual friends. The effects of the broth should not have lasted this long.”

“It’s not all of us,” Bruce pointed out suddenly and when everyone turned to look at him he shrugged. “I didn’t say anything at first because I wasn’t sure if Hulks enhanced immune system played a part in that or not. It’s happened before.”

“I’ve been peachy keen. Natasha’s woken me up a few times but I haven’t seen so much as a mirage or my own since Asgard,” Clint piggy backed and Tony frowned, a thought occurring to him.

“He’s got a point. The nightmares, when I have them, are picked up from you.” He said, eyeing Natasha closely. She was sitting very still Tony noticed, but her returning stare was steady.

“It can’t just be Natasha.” Steve insisted stubbornly, as if he was defending her against the teams scrutiny. “I have them too and we’re not… we’re not as close as you and Clint.”

Tony wanted to ask him how sure he was about that, but he pushed the urge aside. That was for later. They could figure out what to do with Steve’s now glaringly obvious (to Tony at least) crush on Romanov later.

“Besides,” Steve grunted, crossing to the fridge in order to jerk it open. It looked like he did it just to find something for his hands to do. “My dreams don’t even make sense. In most of them I’m not me. Sometimes I’m Bucky but sometimes I’m someone else too… For instance, last night I was the man who shot you.”

Next to Tony Natasha somehow went impossibly stiller as Steve, securing a bottle of orange juice shut the refrigerator door with a snap and stared back at her with an expression riddled with guilt. That was what had been bothering him, Tony realized. Not the dreams where he was forced into Bucky’s shoes to relive some moment of his past, but these far more disturbing ones where he was forced into the shoes of a cold-blooded killer.

“I’ve been dreaming about it every night since it happened. You were at the state dinner. You were wearing white.” Steve went on and Tony felt his stomach drop. They’d all read the mission report Coulson had sent over by now, but Natasha’s attire for the evening had definitely not been an included detail. The only reason Tony even knew that she’d gone to that ill-fated dinner in a white gown was because they were bonded.

Even from across an ocean, he and Bruce had known the exact moment when the bullet had pierced her. For a split moment they’d both been jerked out of their own consciousness to find themselves sharing Natasha’s as she’d curled on a rocky beach at the bottom of a cliff, desperately trying to stem the flow of blood from the gaping wound in her side. It had been over and done in nearly a split second but Tony had nearly lost a finger because jerky movements and heavy power tools don’t mix. After that the discomfort of separation had become intense, the urge to get to their injured packmate refusing to go ignored.

Tony and the rest of the team had been halfway to Sokovia when Coulson finally got them to turn around. He’d been adamant that Natasha and Clint were being extracted, making it clear that their presence in a hot zone was only going to make it hotter.

For Tony’s part, he’d wanted to say fuck it and go get Clint and Natasha home themselves but cooler heads (aka one Steve Rogers) had prevailed. They didn’t want to make things worse when two of
their teammates were in the line of fire, but it was hard to ignore the voice in his head that insisted Natasha needed them.

“The bastard shot right through her and we lost Novak.” Clint grunted, eyeing Steve with unveiled suspicion. “I stayed on his ass when things went to shit but he was relentless. He had it out for her from the drop.”

“I – he knew you were undercover, somehow.” Steve explained with a visible wince, still not looking away from Natasha. “He even knew what color your eyes were. I think he knew because I knew…”

Steve trailed off, swallowing thickly and the room was deadly quiet.

“That’s impossible.” Natasha refuted, her voice flat and cold. She was as closed off as the bond ever allowed her to get. He knew she was upset about something but Tony couldn’t read her thoughts without applying force and she knew damn well he wouldn’t do that to her.

“She’s right Steve.” Bruce murmured, and then clearing his throat he said with firmness. “Visions are one thing, but it sounds to me like you’re describing a tangible psychic connection. Which, unless you have some sort of telepathic mutation we don’t know about, isn’t humanly possible without a bond. Even with the serum this sort of development seems unlikely.”

“But the broth-“ Steve began to refute but Thor shook his head.

“Consuming the Benu provides one with sight. It is believed that after a few generations of consumption that the Kǫtrðýr developed the bonding abilities that were passed down to the Alurio but that was after hundreds of years. I must agree with Banner. Developing such a strong link to a stranger’s mind after only one consumption seems unlikely.”

“See,” Tony murmured, crossing the short distance to put a consoling hand on his shoulder when Steve opened his mouth to protest. His body was entirely too tense but he responded almost instantly to the touch, unconsciously shifting closer to Tony’s body.

“You’re not responsible for what you dream. You weren’t the one who hurt her. The broth, it can show you things happening in your present, right? Well there you go. It sucks being forced to watch I’ll bet but you weren’t responsible.”

Steve looked like he wanted to believe, Tony could see the desperate hope creeping into his gaze, but he was too afraid to.

“But he knew things about her he couldn’t have known Tony. How else did he get that information if not from me?”

Tony was about to say he didn’t know, but that it didn’t matter regardless because as Bruce had already said the chances of Steve developing a psychic connection with a total stranger out of the blue were slim; but Natasha chose that moment to drop a bombshell.

“He knew because we’ve met before.”

Everyone turned and looked at her but if Natasha was at all bothered by the intense scrutiny or the shock rippling across her teammates faces she didn’t show it.

“Most of the intelligence community doesn’t believe he exists, the ones who do call him the Winter Soldier,” she offered in explanation.
“He’s a ghost story Tash.” Clint replied in a sympathetic tone. For the benefit of a very confused
room he explained, “The Winter Soldier is credited with over two dozen assassinations in the last
fifty years. Nobody is that good for that long. This line of work sort of guarantees permanent early
retirement.”

“Unless more than one assassin wears the title.” she rejoined quietly and Tony shivered. There was
something very messed up going on here. He could feel the wrongness of the situation creeping
across his skin, and Natasha’s hurt was an incessant buzz in the back of his consciousness despite the
stubborn wall she was keeping around herself. He realized why a moment later.

“I don’t know about the other forty-nine kills but I saw one of them go down. Fifteen years ago I
was on a mission for the KGB. I was deep undercover as a dancer in the Russian ballet. I’d been
introduced to a Saudi tech magnet who was in the market for a lapkitty. My mission was clear: get
close, steal a couple of high grade missile designs and get out, terminate if necessary. But he was
crafty and not quick to trust, even a favored pet. My handlers doubted my ability to complete the
mission and ordered his assassination. I asked for more time but they warned me to stand down or
The Soldier would terminate me along with the target.

“I was fifteen and over confident. I was sure that if I saved my targets life I’d win his trust and
complete the mission. But The Soldier… he’s relentless. He fights without emotion, he’s super
enhanced even for Gata. He could have killed me that day. Should have, only he recognized me.
We’d met in the Red Room and it was only because he hesitated that I survived the encounter.”

Ivan. Tony knew it without her having to say it. Natasha looked directly at him as if she’d heard the
thought but said nothing. He felt like he needed to sit down. If Ivan had made one of the Winter
Soldiers credited kills fifteen years ago and the assassin who’d shot Natasha two days ago really had
recognized her… that meant Ivan was alive. But how could that be? And how on earth was she
taking this so calmly?!

The fact that she hadn’t said his name to the others seemed a glaring red signal too. Tony was sure
everyone present minus Thor knew about Ivan by now but for some reason she didn’t want them to
know she thought he was alive. Why?

Natasha’s stare bore into him with warning, and more disturbingly, pity.

“Be very sure before you pull on this thread Tony. You might not like where it leads.”

She blinked and turned back to Steve, this time speaking for all to hear.

“You weren’t responsible for that mission going bust Steve. It was always going to.”

Tony was still wondering how any of it was possible. Something was going on here and the pieces
of the puzzle were all right there, he knew it. He had only to figure out their order.

“Have you dreamed about him before? This Winter Soldier?” he asked, expecting it when Steve
slowly nodded with an air of lingering guilt.

“Yes. I think he made the kill on the General.”

And just like that the pieces began to snap together in his mind. That night before Christmas, before
he and Steve had really decided to give things a go, Natasha had dreamed about one of Ivan’s kills.
A General and his family. Tony hadn’t put it together with what was happening in Sokovia because
he’d assumed like Natasha had that anything to do with Ivan had happened long ago in the past.

Tony looked at her and she looked back, nothing close to guilt in her steady expression but he knew
the truth just the same. She’d suspected Ivan had to be alive for a while and had kept it to herself.

“Okay. None of this explains why you and Steve are the only ones still seeing things you shouldn’t be seeing. We can’t just assume this is going to go away anymore.” Tony pressed, because it had to be said.

Tony respected Natasha’s choice to keep Ivan private and not to share with the others that he wasn’t as dead as she’d once thought. It hurt that she hadn’t trusted him enough to share it but, whatever, that was her prerogative. However, he wasn’t going to let it drop completely when this mystery could prove dangerous to her and Steve. That was where the line was.

“It was never about trust.”

She was looking at him with sympathy now. Tony gritted his teeth.

“Isn’t it?”

They needed to understand why drinking the broth had linked her and Steve to a man who on the surface was only connected to one of them. That was the thread they had to pull. Figure out the connection between Ivan and the two of them and Tony knew the whole tangled web would come unweaved.

It was obvious to Tony now that Natasha not only knew that, she was afraid of it.

“Why?”

He asked, but Tony wasn’t at all surprised by the silence he received in return.

“We need to know more about the Gata brain and its psychic gifts,” Bruce agreed and with an apologetic glance in Tony’s direction he finished, “We don’t have the research but we know someone who does.”

Right. Tony sighed.

He supposed that with his packmate and his partner’s mental health on the line it would be beyond petty to let centuries of Alurian medical knowledge go to waste over a little thing like ego.

*~*~*~*

After that mornings revelations Steve was almost happy that Tony had talked the team into a metaphorical corner and they were going to have to spend the afternoon on the practice field. It was probably a good thing anyway, given how long it had been since they’d had an organized practice what with everything.

And of course, there was the fact that physical exercise just helped clear Steve’s head almost better than anything else. Not as well as sex, some mocking voice whispered in the back of his mind, and he blushed thinking of the way Tony’s way too talented tongue liked to move when they kissed and the way his tail liked to curl around Steve’s nearest appendage all soft and insistent.

Well as nice as sleeping with his boyfriend was, it wasn’t a proper coping tactic he reminded himself staunchly as he finished suiting up. He was going to get through his grief eventually by doing exactly as he was doing. Which was openly communicating with his partner and keeping things honest.

Steve glanced over to the other side of the gym where Tony had migrated toward the observation booth in order to entertain their guests while the rest of the team got dressed and stretched. He was
already suited up in the armor, and was currently hovering a foot or so off the ground in order to
converse with those in the booth.

Showing off, Steve recognized with a fond smile.

The smile faded somewhat as the group in the booth laughed at something he’d said. Only it was
more like Prince T’Challa laughed. His intimidating bodyguards didn’t look much like the laughing
type. T’Challa on the other hand… the guy was looking at Tony like he was the brightest thing in the
room, which wasn’t an unfair reaction to someone like Tony granted. But Steve didn’t trust the guy.
He’d lied to everyone once and it was clear to anyone with ears that when it came down to it he was
always going to be Wakanda’s prince first and a friend second.

At least he wasn’t wearing those fancy wrist guards T’Challa had gifted him. Even though Bruce
had examined them backward and forward and could only find indication that the energy conduits
were made of some vibranium rich mineral compound and not made to do anything more dangerous
than amplify energy, Tony really didn’t need another reason to tempt fate by messing around with
Extremis.

He didn’t blame Tony for his fascination with them. The guards along with Extremis would make
sure that he was never defenseless, but having worked with Tony and Helen on the Cradle Steve
thought that T’Challa really should have known better than to hand Tony something that would
tempt him to keep pushing his limits before Extremis was stable.

“You could really get your Gata on and piss around him in a circle Cap. It’s primitive but probably
still effective.”

Steve jerked in surprise as Clint came up and clapped him companionably on the back and stuffed
down the embarrassment he felt at how obvious his thoughts must have been, trying his best for
casual as he went back to what he was doing.

He could feel Natasha smirking at him and almost wished he had a tail to swat her with.

“That would be kind of useless,” he pointed out. “Seeing how Tony doesn’t stay put anywhere
unless it’s his lab and I don’t want to think about what he’d do to anyone who tried to pee in his
space like that.”

“Who wants to pee in my lab?” Tony, who had floated over from the observation booth, asked with
a gleeful smirk. Steve was surprised to see that T’Challa and his guards had climbed down from the
booth and were slowly making their way towards them.

“I wasn’t aware I was housing a tower full of uncivilized heathens who haven’t learned more
hygienic ways to scent mark.” Tony prattled on. “You’re absolutely right Cap. Pee anywhere near
my beautiful creations and my wrath will be quick and merciless.”

Most of the team laughed, and even Natasha cracked a smile but Tony shuddered and shook his
head.

“You all laugh but I’ve dated some toms. Had a guy try and pee on me once, and listen no hate, no
shame, but that’s not my kink.”

“I wouldn’t get too close to our foreign friends over there then. Someone might decide to stake their
claim and don’t take my word for it but the Alurio sound pretty old school to me.”

“Gross, Barton, and remind me never to put you in charge of diplomatic relations.” Tony wrinkled
his nose at the blond tom and Steve laughed as Clint nodded sagely in return muttering something
about his work there being done.

“Speaking of our foreign friends, Prince T’Challa has a proposition for us,” Tony segued with a serious note and they all straightened up silently in wait.

“His Highness and Charlies scariest angels would like to make a fresh start with us and have suggested the time honored tradition of punching it out. We do need their help so, I think we should consider it.”

Steve didn’t like bullies or to bully others, and he didn’t believe in fighting just for the sake of fighting, but he kind of agreed with Thor whose face split into a beaming grin as he exclaimed, “It is sure to be a most excellent sparing match!”

“What happened to diplomacy?” Natasha asked and Tony shrugged.

“It looks like the Alurio are just as big on trials by combat as the KQtrdýr. They seemed rather eager to get their asses handed to them in the name of letting bygones be bygones, so I figured who am I to object.”

“It has its merits. We might never get another chance to see what these guys are capable of.” Steve pointed out and Bruce grinned knowingly but nodded.

“I’ve participated in worse bonding exercises.”

“Well then.” Tony clapped his hands together decisively with a devilish grin in Steve’s direction. “Lead the way Captain.”

The dark cloud that had been hanging over Steve’s head since he’d woken from that terrible nightmare, finally dissipated in the face of Tony’s sparkling vivacious energy and the way it wrapped around them all and called them closer. He wondered if Tony knew the kind of pull he had, or the power he had at his disposal.

Steve didn’t know much about the inner workings of Gata biology but he’s unique in the fact that he’s had the privilege of knowing two feral Queen Fels in his lifetime. There weren’t words for it. Being close to a Queen was enthralling, addicting even. But Tony specifically…. Tony was like holding a Sparkler in hand under a black velvet sky. He was Iron and fire burning in your palm, warm and so beautiful you could almost forget it was dangerous, only you don’t want to. The danger was part of the enchantment.

Tony makes a dark alien future seem wondrous. He’s fireworks.

“And you’re Fourth of July”, a teasing thought trickled through his mind. It reminded him of Natasha and he chuckled under his breath shooting her a glance. Her gaze met his knowingly and her lips tilted in a smirk.

Grinning, Steve reached for his shield calling out, “Avengers! Assemble.”
recent months. They cut a real imposing figure spread out in a wide V with Captain America, living legend, front and center. Tony certainly wouldn’t have wanted to come up against them in a fight.

T’Challa and his three body-gaurds on the other hand had stripped down to their underclothes and were only outfitted in what small manner of weaponry they’d been keeping concealed on their persons. And yet T’Challa seemed at ease, as if Princes were seen in their long-johns every day.

Technically, Tony knew it was an under suit not dissimilar to the one Tony was wearing under his armor but if being a member of the club didn’t come with the right to tease then he didn’t know what would. The three female body guards on the other hand had stripped out of their sleek form hugging dresses straight down to their underwear.

“Not that it’s a bad view or anything,” Tony began, because he could find nothing to complain about no matter where his eyes settled. “But you guys don’t have to do this half naked. We’ve got plenty of training gear.”

“Your western clothing is too restrictive.” One of the she-toms denounced, her spotted tail swishing. “A hunter’s best and often last weapon is their body. But by all means, continue to be ashamed of yours.”

“Oh ho,” Clint crowed with a gleeful grin. “Shots fired.”

“You guys are out numbered. You sure you don’t want to call for backup?” Steve, ever the gentlemen, asked and T’Challa smiled back with his teeth.

“Wakanda has many skilled warriors, but the Dora Milaje are our best. Nakia and her sisters have been training in the art of warfare since the age of five. I think they can handle themselves.”

“Be that as it may, an uneven fight is an uneven fight and that’s not how we do things around here.” Steve insisted. “We’ll give you Thor. Tony, repulsors on their lowest setting and I won’t use the shield to-”

“Don’t worry so much on our account Captain.” T’Challa interjected, a bite creeping into his tone. “And please, don’t hold back because we are your guests. I know I won’t.”

The scent of pepper assaulted Tony’s nose and his whiskers twitched. God the testosterone was so thick in this room he could bottle it up and make money off it. Stupid a la toms. Tony caught Natasha’s eye and rolled his back into his skull. He couldn’t see it but he felt her smile.

“Well then, don’t say we didn’t warn you.” Steve snapped. “JARVIS, battle simulation six.”

“Yes Captain,” Jarvis answered the lights in the gym dimming momentarily as the floor began to shift and the platforms both teams were standing on began to raise.

“The object of simulation six is to take down the flagbearer of the opposing team. The flag bearers must stay on their designated castle mounts but are allowed to defend themselves and perform offensive strikes. All players may use any weapons of their choosing, but drawing blood is strictly prohibited and will result in an immediate loss for your team and termination of the simulation. The floor while cushioned is also metaphorical lava. Any player knocked back to the floor has suffered a violent fiery death and is effectively removed from further combat. Teams please choose your flagbearers.”

The Avengers chose Bruce, as his skillset wasn’t exactly the most useful in a battle game like this and no one wanted a surprise appearance from Hulk, but from the castle mount it was easy for him to shoot a basic issue stun gun and practice keeping a cool head under potentially high stress situations.
Clint seemed surprised when Team Wakanda chose not to utilize Thor as a heavy hitter and chose him as flagbearer but Tony wasn’t.

After that dick measuring contest T’Challa and Steve had treated them all too? No way. Team Wakanda was itching to show their stuff and they didn’t want anyone to say they couldn’t have done it without help.

This was going to be fun.

***

Okay so when Tony said going head to head with T’Challa and his ‘Dora Milaje’ was going to be fun, he may have underestimated how blasted quick they were. Clint and Natasha were fast and slippery, even for Gata but Tony’s arrival advantage allowed him to observe a lot of the battle and the truth of it was the Wakandians were fast. Arguably Steve was faster, the limits of his super-Gata enhancements still largely untested, but whatever slight edge he had in sheer stamina he lost when it came to training. They all forgot sometimes, because Steve was such a quick learner and so doggedly determined in everything he did, that he didn’t have much formal training.

T’Challa and the Dora Milaje clearly did not have that problem. T’challa had said they’d been training since they were small children and Tony wasn’t going to be the first to call the man a liar. Tony’s forte definitely wasn’t hand to hand combat so he was happy to pass up the cocktail blend of martial arts that they were serving up, however Natasha looked (and felt) to be having the time of her life. Even recovering from an injury the woman loved a challenge.

She and Clint had been playing defense while he and Steve handled the offense, trying to inch their way across team Wakanda’s defensive line and avoid all the obstacles between them and the opposing castle mount. But since they’d lost Clint Steve had fallen back to help strengthen their defense while Tony kept Thor dancing while he tried to dodge his hammer. It shouldn’t have surprised anyone as much as it did that T’Challa’s team hunted like big cats, but it was startling in its effectiveness and fascinating to take in. They’d fanned out at first only to rush together to strike a single target from multiple directions at once with effortless cohesion, forcing Steve and the others to come to their comrades aide or risk losing them.

The Avengers were strong and they knew their gifts, but Tony had never been more aware of the alien nature of his genes. But this time the proof came from without and not within. This was the true modern Alurio, as close to the Alurio of old as it was possible to get. The distinction between them and what the world called Gata could not have been more clear, and privately Tony was beginning to understand why the Prince of Wakanda had such a stick up his ass about it.

These were people who had never been tamed. Who had been passing down knowledge and fighting techniques for hundreds of years and took pride in their strengths. They weren’t burdened trying to be human. They were happy and comfortable in their difference and stronger for it.

“Natasha, six o’clock!” Bruce warned as the leopard spotted Dora Milaje that T’Challa had called Nakia landed on the bridge behind her, a gleaming ivory hilt - of what Steve had already discovered for himself (most unfortunately) was some sort of energy blade - clamped between her teeth.

The assassin turned quickly to meet the new threat and dived low to avoid the energy blast from the Nakia’s dagger, coming up from her roll with her widow-bites at the ready; but Nakia was fast, leaping over Natasha to land a few feet behind her once more and whirling just in time to deflect Natasha’s fire with an effortless whirl of her blade like some sort of samurai and pushing and pressing forward with a bright toothy grin.
“I like your style, for a house pet,” Nakia taunted with that fanged grin, and the thing was Tony got the feeling she meant it. There was a glow of admiration in her eyes as Natasha kicked her feet out from under her, forcing the woman to flip and roll to regain her footing.

“I like your bikini.” Natasha returned with a sly smirk as she tackled her back, jabbing the other woman with her widow-bites on her open skin. Nakia jerked and hissed in pain, heaving with an impressive show of strength until they’d both tipped over and were in danger of rolling off the bridge. Natasha abandoned her hold on the woman when she was stung by a bolt from Nakia’s energy blade. A moment later both women were back on their feet and at it again.

The tom didn’t rely solely on the dagger, mainly using it to block the electro-shocks from Natasha’s bites, the bolts of energy crackling and sparking brilliant white light as they met the energy field of the dagger.

Both women relied on their bodies first and foremost, twisting and bending about like ninjas as they lunged and kicked at each other in a frankly terrifying display of teeth and competence that a morally upstanding person (like Steve) definitely wouldn’t call sexy but Tony is not Steve so he has no problem admitting it’s sexy as hell. He’d pay to watch this fight every day if it were an option.

Speaking of shock’s though. Tony’s thoughts were derailed as Thor’s hammer slammed directly into his chest, his distraction allowing Thor an opening to score another hit that sent him flying backwards into a post, his body slamming against the sharper edges of the suit as he tried to orient himself and get back in the air before he fell into the metaphorical lava pit below.

“Ha, do not think just because we are allies Friend Tony that I shall go easy on you.” He heard Thor crow.

“Tony!” He heard Steve cry out over the coms as he righted himself just before he hit the safety netting, firing off a few rupolsor blasts on his way up just to get Thor dancing again.

“You’re heart rate has elevated sir and your core temperature has spiked. Do be careful.” Jarvis warned.

“I’m alright gang,” Tony reassured them both.

“Get your head in the game Stark!” Clint heckled from where he’d camped out in the observation booth with Pepper and Coulson. “We don’t need to be down another player.”

“One, how is your lame ass getting knocked out by my fault and two aren’t you technically dead? Am I being haunted right now?”

“Hey I still took her out. Don’t I get points for –”

“Ironman!” Steve interrupted with a snap. “We need your help on the bridge. Clint cut the chatter.”

Tony dodged another swing from Thor’s hammer and did a one eighty. Cap had leaped to Natasha’s defense on the bridge but they were outnumbered now that T’Challa and the other remaining Dora Milaje had joined the fray. T’Challa was focusing all his energy on Cap, forcing a wider and wider gap between the two while Nakia and the other she-tom ganged up on Natasha.

They were going to lose Tony realized, if they didn’t change their strategy. Not once had any of team Wakanda attempted to go after their flagbearer. They attacked a single target as a group, dividing and scattering only when needed to come back again in full force like a relentless tide. How did the manage such unified silent cohesion? Pack hunting, it clicked suddenly in Tony’s head. The Avengers were a team, but they relied heavily on the individual strengths and skills of each member.
These people, they learned to hunt as a symbiotic group following a strict chain of command. If Tony took out the head, the next in line would just take his place. No, the answer was to weaken the body, and not by utilizing the same methods of attack. The opposite actually. Do the thing they’d never do.

New plan. Flying underneath the bridge Tony quickly eyed the metal support beams that held the entire structure up. He’d designed this course so he knew the general layout of all the platforms and function of all the mechanisms that helped to slide them in place. He wasn’t looking to completely wreck the gym or cause the floor to collapse into the one below, but the safest way possible to destabilize it.

The floor plates it was then.

“Get off the bridge Cap. Head for Bruce.” Tony instructed Steve over the com, as he flew under the bridge in search of just the right bolts. Finding the ones he wanted he ordered JARVIS to take the safety off on his most powerful laser and began to melt away the fastenings on the floor.

He heard Steve grunt in pain as T’Challa caught him on the face with his claws before Steve managed to ram him backward with his Shield, driving the tom over the side of the bridge; for a moment Tony thought it was over but T’Challa nimbly latched onto one of the under beams and swung himself around to begin climbing the sleek metal as easy as a tree.

He paused, spotting Tony, taking in what he was doing. Tony waved with the hand currently not occupied with weakening the bolts holding up the floor.

“What? Tony what are you doing?” Steve asked. Tony didn’t have a visual but he could tell just by the sound of his familiar tread on the planks above that Steve had already turned with the thought of helping Natasha.

“Bringing the floor down Cap, which means that when it drops you can’t be on the bridge. I’m going to need you.”

“You’re what?! Tony, Natasha doesn’t have time to – ”

“Go! This is the move that works Steve,” he heard Natasha interject. She was panting with exertion. Not for the first-time Tony was thankful for how quick witted she was. She’d already calculated the odds and knew what they’d have to do to win. Steve, no slouch in the strategy department himself put it together and Tony heard him inhale sharply.

Tony was keeping one ear cocked on the conversation above and one eye on T’Challa who was literally creeping like a spider as he scaled the underbelly of the bridge, his dark eyes calculating as he watched Tony.

“No!” Above, Steve was still resisting as feet pounded on the planks, the loosened fastening bolts rattling and causing the bridge to moan like an old woman in pain.

“Steve, this is a practice match. There’s a net right below her.” Tony tried, but he should have known that wasn’t going to fly with Steve.

“We practice, Tony, so that we know what to expect on the field! We wouldn’t make that call in reality and we’re not making it in practice either.”

Wrong. Tony thought. Hadn’t he told Steve once that if there was a way to cut the wire he’d find it?

The bridge groaning terribly above his head, Tony eyed his handy worked and judged it ready to
give in thirty seconds, tops, and waved jauntily goodbye to T’Challa as he darted out from under the bridge and flew up and over it, only pausing long enough to snag one very pissed off super soldier along the way as he launched himself off the side of the bridge just before the floor gave way.

“Agent Romanov, Nakia and Onsa, you have all unfortunately fallen into the lave pit. This ends your time on the field. Please make your way to the observation booth for refreshments.” Tony heard JARVIS instructing the fallen. He didn’t know what to make of the strange surge of elation he felt, confirming that T’Challa had found a safe perch and was still in the game. Just excitement for the challenge, he decided. He’d have been disappointed really if the sacrifice with the bridge would have taken them all out.

Steve on the other hand was still being a pissy kitty about it, if you pardon the expression.

“Killing one of our teammates? What the hell kind of call was that! Just because this is practice doesn’t mean you shouldn’t take it seriously Tony!”

“He does know this isn’t a real fight and you’re not actually dead doesn’t he?” Tony heard Clint mutter and rolled his eyes.

“Okay, officially canning this discussion. Let’s just win this thing. Cap I’m going to put you down on the castle bridge.” Tony snapped and Steve, still hanging from Tony’s arms as they sped toward the castle mount grunted.

“As long as you don’t drop the floor out from under me.”

“Actually, that’s my plan for Thor but we’re going to have company and I’m going to need you to cover Bruce, okay?” When Steve didn’t immediately acknowledge, Tony sighed. “Steve if you’re mad about the call we can talk about it, later, right now I gotta know you have my back.”

For an anxious moment Tony thought that Steve was so pissed he wasn’t even going to dignify him with a response, but then he heard Steve sigh over the com, frustrated and fond all at once as he said, “Always.”

*~*~*~*

Steve hit the bridge running, shield in front and his eyes fixed on Bruce at the top of the long metal column that stood for the castle mound.

“Behind you Cap!” Bruce warned and Steve whirled around, expecting to find Prince T’Challa, only across the field on the opposite mount Thor had his hammer raised, and Steve knew what would happen next. He raised his shield just in time to intercept the blinding bolt of lightning that tried to slam into him and grunted as the sheer power behind it forced him back a step.

He was going to have to have another talk with Thor about the meaning behind pulling his punches. Gritting his teeth Steve inched backward, closer to Bruce, keeping his shield up for protection.

“Incoming!” Tony shouted a warning, and Steve looked up and only had just enough time to bring his shield around to avoid being kicked in the chest by the dark clad figure of Prince T’Challa as he dropped off the ceiling beams.
If T'Challa felt any pain from his thinly covered feet smacking against vibranium he didn’t show it. The agile tom rebounded off the surface of the disk and used his momentum to flip backwards and land at a crouch, but not before his leg came around to try and kick Steve’s legs out from under him.

The blow was sharp and painful, the tom-kats claws digging through Steve’s uniform to scratch the vulnerable skin and Steve staggered back. He hadn’t broken skin though so the match was still on.

T’Challa’s dark serious face broke in a small smile that to Steve reeked of smugness. The guy had known just how hard to hit to get his point across. He could have made Steve bleed, but by grace alone he wasn’t.

The tom straightened up once more and Steve took in the long wicked curve of the claws on his hands and feet. Tony and the others couldn’t get their claws to come out that long or that thick, Steve filed away in the back of his mind, but he’d seen T’Challa’s body guards do it as well.

“It requires aggression,” T’Challa announced in a scathing tone, seemingly apropos of nothing. “Retracting them is easy, but arming myself depends on hormones your scientists correctly associated with aggression. That is why you have never seen the like here.”

Steve swallowed. He’d had no real concept before this day how messed up his teammates genetics had to be. The way these Wakandian kats moved, how their whole bodies seemed perfectly formed to make them the ultimate hunters… it was something else.

“Either you’re still pretty pissed about that,” Steve remarked, straightening his stance as he flicked his eyes down purposefully to those gleaming claws once more. “Or you’re just happy to see me.”

Over the com-line he heard Tony snuffle a snort and chuckle. Steve bit his lip to keep from grinning. A dick joke in the middle of a fight. Stark was really rubbing off on him.

T’Challa for his part seemed equally amused, his eyes going strangely soft and just that tad distant that gave Steve the impression they might be thinking of the same person.

“I enjoy you Captain Rogers.” The prince murmured, snapping his focus back to Steve and weirdly, Steve believed him, even though the sharpness in the toms smile let him know he was going to enjoy kicking Steve’s ass far more.

That was okay. Steve was going to enjoy doing the same .

And then without any further warning the tom struck. Damn it. The guy was fast, Steve cursed under his breath as he raised his shield a little too slow to avoid being clipped on the side of the head. It was all instinct after that, T’Challa didn’t give him space to breathe, barely a second to consider before he was darting in for the next strike, all fluid movement and feline grace.

Steve wasn’t a slouch at hand to hand combat. He was fine playing the defensive so long as it gave him time to observe his opponent. T’Challa was better trained and his leaner frame made him objectively faster, but Steve knew he could overpower the tom easily if he could just get a solid grip on him. The problem was T’Challa knew it too. The guy was like water, slipping in and out of range before Steve could so much as get two hands on him, utilizing every last inch of his body like a damn acrobat at times to avoid the blows that would slow him down.

The tom also had no qualms about using the rafters and beams on the bridge to his advantage. When he narrowly dodged a blow just to swing back around and kick Steve square in the back, Steve lost his footing and slammed into the side of the bridge.

“Tony! How’s that drop looking?” he panted into his comm link, gritting his teeth in frustration.
Above him he heard the quiet clinking that meant T’Challa was back in the rafters again, watching and smirking down at him.

“This is harder than it looks Cap!” Tony replied. “You try doing delicate demolition work with a thunder god throwing shit at you. Just keep him occupied for five more minutes!”

Well, if he kept doing what he was doing Steve wouldn’t have five more minutes.

“Are you done holding back yet? Or is this a fair enough fight yet?” T’Challa’s voice floated down from above and Steve looked up to find the kat laying across a beam above his head, long black tail hanging lazily beside him like he was some sleepy jungle cat relaxing in a tree. Arrogant son of a bitch, Steve thought and he grinned. Bucky would have said it to his face but Steve liked actions better than words.

“Fair point,” Steve acknowledged, taking a long look at those rafters and calculated, changing his grip on his shield and let fly. Predictably the tom leaped out of the way of the flying disc but Steve had figured for that. It was incredibly satisfying to watch the shield catch the tom on its rebound and knock him loose from the rafters. Steve already knew how agile the man was and wasn’t one for repeating his mistakes, so that by the time T’Challa had twisted himself into a position to grab the railing on his way down Steve was already there to take him out.

*~*~*~

“That was quite the match,” Coulson noted as Tony and the rest of those just finishing the game filed into the observation booth. The agent was eyeing Prince T’Challa speculatively. “Hopefully getting punched in the face isn’t going to result in an international incident?”

T’Challa despite the bruised eye he was sporting laughed, white teeth flashing.

“No. This was much needed exercise. I for one have never felt better.”

“Nor so happy to lose to a foreign Pride,” Nakia added in a poignant way. She was leaning up against the bar, watching where Natasha was mixing up one of her secret revival smoothies. She refused to tell anyone what was in them exactly but there was nothing like them for giving the old tired system a jolt. Nakia had turned her head to stare at T’Challa, who frowned at her with a distinct air of embarrassment behind it. The she-tom smirked.

Huh, so whatever the Dora Milaje’s function they must be close enough to the prince to form a certain level of familiarity.

“Getting punched by Captain America is practically a national honor,” Clint pointed out slinging an arm over the prince’s shoulders and something about the motion made something tight in Tony’s chest release. Clint hadn’t done that since they’d discovered the man’s identity Tony realized. This was really it, the start of putting the past behind them and moving into the future, whatever it would hold.

“Among the Alurio, when a Queen agrees to spar with you it is the highest of honors, so today must be doubly blessed.” Although T’Challa’s answer was for Clint he was looking at Tony when he said it with this warm glow of satisfaction. With this pride, as if getting his ass handed to him by Tony’s Pride really had made his day.

“A deal is a deal your Highness,” Tony quipped, allowing himself a small smile in return. “The slate is wiped clean and I treated you to a good time. Now you’ve got to tell me what I want to know.”

“So quick to call in your debts when we have only just caught our breath,” T’Challa teased crossing
over to the bar where Pepper had organized a spread for their royal visitor. He grabbed a cube of cheese off a tray and popped it into his mouth chewing and then carefully swallowing before he went on, “But as you said, a deal is a deal. I have a few medical files I’d be happy to share with you that should help enlighten you on uninterrupted Alurian biology and our known capabilities. Over dinner.”

“Oh, so now we’re inviting ourselves to dinner? Can’t give this guy an inch.” Clint chuckled and behind the bar Natasha paused to pin T’Challa with a hard stare. T’Challa hadn’t taken his eyes off Tony. It was a little disconcerting.

“No, that would be extremely rude. I’m inviting Tony to dinner,” the tom answered with a grin, his eyes flicked to Steve who was watching them both now, not quite able to hide his distaste for the idea.

“That is of course if the Captain wouldn’t mind.”

Steve’s mouth tightened and god there it went, the scent of fight thickening in the room. No self-respecting tom liked other toms sniffing around their mate and T’Challa wasn’t exactly being subtle. But to Tony’s surprise Steve just nodded jerkily and said, “I’m sure there’s a lot of business between the Avengers and Wakanda you two still need to talk over. I’m beat so I’m going to hit the showers.”

And then he turned to Tony and looked him up and down in a way that sent a shudder down his spine and a stab of heat through his gut.

“You ought to think about cleaning up too if you’re going out.”

Yes! He really should, Tony completely agreed. He was this close to offering to share that shower with him because he was all about energy conservation but Steve was probably still pissed with him and Pepper would get on his case because he was in the middle of the biggest merger of his life, and really shouldn’t skip off to have shower sex with his boyfriend.

“Save me some hot water,” he said instead, the words rumbling a little in his unexpectedly tight throat and Steve smirked leaning close to whisper in his ear.

“That depends on how quickly you get there doesn’t it?”

Here’s the thing. He says it quietly and then he leaves with a tired wave and Tony’s pretty sure that Pepper and the other baseline human in the room are none-the-wiser, except for the fact that it’s pretty obvious how turned on Tony is right now (so sue him). But Gata ears are better and Steve knows that damn well, so he’s just all but invited Tony to come jump him in the shower in front of T’Challa and their teammates and he knows it’s not entirely all for Tony’s benefit. Tom’s are possessive. It’s a fact.

On the one hand, being in the middle of a tom pissing contest is exasperating but on the other hand Steve apparently isn’t so mad at him that he isn’t willing to initiate jealous shower sex. So, win? Yes definitely win.

The door shut quietly behind Steve and Tony cleared his throat grappling for his scattered thoughts.

“Business dinner. Pepper, darling, pencil that in. Where am I meeting you?”

“I will send Ms. Potts the details.” T’Challa replied evenly and Tony nodded seriously in agreement. Way too seriously, for far longer than the exchange really warranted.

“That seems best. I’m the worst with the details. Without Pepper I’d forget to show up. You know?
Speaking of which there’s this thing I’ve gotta get done if I’m going to be on time.” Tony jerked his
thumb towards the door as he backed toward it. Pepper narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously.
“Should probably throw on a clean shirt while I’m at it, hit the suds real hard, so great practice guys!
Lets do this again, really. Real soon.”

Tony didn’t know if any of them bought it as he slipped out the door but on the list of things he cared
about, people figuring out that he was a sexually active adult didn’t even register.

~*~

He didn’t know what to expect when he stepped into the shower behind Steve. All of his plans fell
away at his first sight of Steve standing beneath the spray, naked back glistening as water and suds
sluiced over his shoulders and down the curve of his spine. Tony must have made some sort of
sound because then Steve turns, and at first all Tony can do is take in the way the muscles bunch as
he twists, but then he drags his gaze up to meet Steve’s and his eyes are the darkest blue Tony has
ever seen them.

Steve just stares at him, lowered eyelashes spiked with moisture making the hunger in them look
sleepy, and Tony’s gut clenches with a stab of want. He takes a step forward and in the space of a
single breath it seems, Steve’s hands are on him and he’s being pulled into that spray and then his
back slaps against cool tile and Steve’s mouth is on his.

There was nothing slow or gentle about it now. He bit at Tony’s lips like they need chastisement and
his tongue invaded Tony’s mouth in a demand for surrender that made Tony’s knees feel week. This
was different from everything else they’ve done before. Steve’s hands were everywhere, dragging
over Tony’s skin like Steve had to touch all of him to be sure nothing had changed, like he was
trying to leave not even an inch of him unmarked in some way. His touch against Tony’s sensitive
skin was almost too rough. He was going to leave bruises Tony realizes but honestly that kind of
made him want it more.

Steve released his mouth with a groan and buried his nose against the side of Tony’s neck, inhaling
deeply while one hand dragged down over Tony’s slick belly. Tony can’t blame him. Right now
Steve smelled great to him. His scent gone all woody and smokey with aggression. This is jealousy
he realizes. Jealousy and possessiveness burning hot amidst all their unfinished arguments. Steve’s
still angry with him and having that anger channeled at him this way is both worrisome and
tantalizing. Steve won’t hurt him. He knows that. Trusts that. But they can find release this way. It’s
better than screaming at each other.

“Easy, Cap, I know it’s been a –

Steve” the breath punched out of Tony’s lungs as Steve took a hold
of his dick, no ceremony about it, just a firm tug and then he’s stroking Tony like there’s a race to get
him off and Tony has to dig his fingers into the man’s shoulders just to stay upright as pleasure jolts
through him.

“Tony?” Steve’s breath is a humid plume against his skin as he leans close, eyes dark as they drink in
what he’s doing to Tony, how he’s just wrecking him.

“Yeah?” Tony panted as Steve leaned down to kiss and suck at his neck, breath coming hard and hot
as he continued to stroke him toward completion.

“I love you.”

It takes Tony’s brain a moment to catch up to the words, and then even longer to process them. To
be fair, it’s extremely hard to think when your super-hot boyfriend has his hand on your dick and is
trying to wring an orgasm out of you like his life depends on it – and it’s that, the desperate, fierce,
way in which this is all proceeding that finally shocks through him like a bracing slap and gives him
the strength to pull back and push back, begging for much needed distance.

“Steve… Steve, stop.”

He does stop but he doesn’t move far. He stays pressed close, his nose an inch away from Tony’s
while they both struggle to breath.

“You don’t have to say it back,” he says, his voice low and rough and unmistakably tinged with hurt
like the thought of Tony not saying it back hurts, but he swallows and keeps going. “I just… I know
this isn’t easy for you, and I know you could be with anyone. I guess I just need you to know I’m
happy you’re with me.”

So that’s what this is. It’s not just jealousy. It’s fear.

Steve’s got water pouring over his face plastering his hair to his head like the world’s saddest puppy,
and it should be ridiculous. Anyone else and the emotional awkwardness of this entire situation
would have had Tony squirming out of his skin, but Tony might be well and truly fucked because
instead his heart just aches and all he wants to do is wrap Steve up in a fluffy towel and never let him
go.

“Steve…” Tony grips him gently, one hand cradling his neck the other buried in the wet silky strands
of his hair. His name is almost lost over the sound of the water pounding down around them but
Steve looks up, a hungry hungry hope tearing over his expression.

“I love you too.”

Tony has loved Captain America since he was a kit. But Steve Rogers? He started falling in love
with Steve on a rooftop, with a starry sky above their heads. He slides the rest of the way naked in a
shower just the way you’re not supposed to because he’s Tony Stark and he’s just classy like that.
Oh well.

Steve looks like a child whose just been told he’s won Christmas for the rest of forever, eyes wide
and sparkling as he asks all breathless, “Really?”

“Really.” Tony chuckles. “Now why don’t you kiss-”

But Steve doesn’t really need to be told.

~*~

Try to remember, the kind of September when life was slow and oh so mellow.

That had to be the tenth time since they’d sat down that T’Challa had sniffed like that, like he’d
cought a wiff of someone’s heinous body odor and couldn’t shake it out of his nose. And considering
that they were dining in the heated rooftop garden of one of New York’s most expensive hotels and
the only ones present at that, Tony had to ask.

“My cologne really not doing it for you?”

Caught red handed T’Challa chuckled, taking a shallow sip from his glass of wine before explaining
himself.

“It is not your cologne. Rather what your cologne can not hide. Captain Rogers feels possessive
towards you. He’s left his mark on you rather potently.”
Tony almost blushed. So enthusiastic shower sex was great and all but contrary to what the magazines printed he didn’t relish the thought of walking around smelling like sex. T’Challa seemed to read his mind though and shook his head.

“It is natural for a tom to mark their partner. It’s a fascinating science. When we are intimate with a fel, the more our brains come into sync, the fels body will respond to ours and produce a matching scent. It is an excellent way for a tom to judge compatibility and to ward off competition. It’s all on the drive I gave you.” He explained, tapping the small disk he’d placed on the table between them at the start of the meal. “I find it particularly calming when a fel I’m interested in wears my scent. It’s less pleasing when that scent changes to match another.”

“Ah. You mean me. Bastet told me when my scent was starting to match yours.” Tony hated to admit that but at this point he didn’t see a point in avoiding the issue. Apparently, his nose wasn’t strong enough to pick up the changes yet but T’Challa’s was. So Bastet had been wrong. The difference in their sensitivity hadn’t started with the introduction of homo sapien DNA but with the genetic tampering done by humans that had resulted in modern Gata. Tony clenched his teeth, swallowing back the rise of an old familiar rage.

“Yes.” T’Challa answered simply. “There are pros and cons to everything, and one of the cons to our biology is there is little hiding chemistry when it’s there. It’s been known to cause more than a few fights between rival suitors. Captain Rogers must have feel his claim on your affections was under threat.”

“Yeah well you did kind of throw this dinner in his face.” Tony reminded and T’Challa chuckled again, nodding graciously in acknowledgement. He could afford to be gracious. He’d arranged for dinner to be catered by Carbone, New York’s finest Italian-American restaurant (which definitely didn’t cater to just anyone) and with the garden surrounded in fairy lights and the music softly drifting over the sound of the tinkling fountain wasn’t enough, the guy looked unfairly delicious over candle light.

It was a little slice of heaven on a cold winters night, and Tony could appreciate how romantic a gesture it was. Business dinner his ass. The cuisine was his favorite (curtesy of his mother, who had never let being sold to a French jewelry merchant make her forget her roots in Sicily) the private setting was just as he secretly preferred (no plastic smiles and carefully crafted masks for the cameras) and the song was a childhood favorite. It was kind of touching that T’Challa had put these things together about him and cared enough to cater to his tastes, until he remembered that the tom only had that knowledge because he’d gotten close under entirely false pretenses.

For the sake of his Pride he’d agreed it was time to move past that, so he could let it go and enjoy a nice night out in pleasant company but there was no getting around the truth. This was a romantic gesture. Full stop.

Try to remember, when life was so tender, when no one wept except the willow.

“Thank you for agreeing to come.” T’Challa murmured, ending the not uncomfortable silence. They both seemed to have a lot on their minds. “And for agreeing on a fresh start. It means a great deal to me.”

Tony shrugged.

“I was harder on you than was probably fair. You have an entire nation that is depending on you, not to mention loyalty to your Pride. Besides,” Tony grinned. “Nothing settles a bruised ego like a good old fashioned fight. Can’t say I wasn’t thrilled when you offered to be my punching bag.”
“It was a well played match,” T’Challa agreed with a laugh.

Try to remember, when life was so tender, when dreams were kept beside your pillow.

“That would not have been an easy call to make were this exercise real.” He continued thoughtfully after a moment. Tony tensed at the return of a subject he’d hoped everyone would just forget, Steve’s face flickering across his mind. He felt a pang of guilt remembering how he’d sent Natasha to her not-literal death.

“But I think in reality you would not do it the same way.” The tom finished quietly.

Tony clenched the stem of his glass and raised it to his mouth to keep from snapping.

So even the guy he’d only just got done making peace with had something to say about it? Was he going to tell Tony he was better than that (when he knew for a fact he wasn’t) and that he’d have dug up some nonexistent moral fiber at the last minute?

“Hate to keep disappointing everybody, but I really would.” Tony tried not to think about the way Steve had backed him against the shower wall, the way his fingers had left bruises, clutching at him with possessive fury. A kind of punishment that while neither unwelcome (nor undeserved) couldn’t help but leave an aftertaste of bitterness. It was a new kind of sex for them. The first time their bodies had come together driven by frustration, fear, and a desperate desire to feel in control again. And even if in the end had been better, more emotionally honest, Tony wasn’t naïve enough to think that good sex and a few declarations of love would solve everything. T’Challa’s invitation to dinner might have distracted Steve this time but sooner or later he was going to remember that Tony was the kind of person who could do terrible things and make terrible choices.

“Sometimes you don’t get to have the high ground. Life doesn’t always let you choose between a right and a wrong thing. Sometimes it’s just one shitty thing. Just one shitty thing you have to do to make sure that somebody is left to carry on the work.” Tony quipped with a false smile. He didn’t need Steve’s disappointed eyes to know why what he’d done was terrible. He got it. That was why he’d been the one to pull the trigger. Steve never would.

“You misunderstand me,” T’Challa replied with a slow shake of his head. “In a real situation like that you would never have let anyone else be on that bridge but yourself. Though it would be a foolish and ultimately selfish move for a Queen to make, that is the nature of who you are.”

Tony opened his mouth instinctively to snap back but no words came out. What was there to say? He was right. It was easy in a simulation to do the math and make the necessary call, but in reality… in reality it would never have been Natasha that Tony sacrificed. She knew that and somehow a man he’d known the shortest amount of time out of anyone knew that. So why didn’t Steve? Did he really think Tony was so callous when it came to ending others lives? Well why not. Tony was the Merchant of Death after all. Steve’s seen the tapes. He’d said so himself.

“It makes the most sense.” Tony replied. “I know the Pride needs a Queen but there are others out there. You can’t tell me that the Warrior Prides didn’t have a way around losing their Queen.”

“Of course. You’ll find in the research I gave you that Fewer Queen Fels are born to the Pride than any other type, but nature is logical.” T’Challa answered with a stiffness that betrayed his displeasure with Tony’s line of thinking.

“Is the get around in there?” Tony asked, “Because I’m in a dangerous line of work and that’s not changing.”
“Wakanda follows a system passed down from the first Alurio. When a queen-fel is old enough, they are
given to the Queen for training in the ranks of the Dora Milaje, the beloved ones. All of the other
beloved ones are toms. They are the best and brightest selected from among the many tribes that
make up Wakanda. They become ambassadors for their tribes as well as the royal family’s fiercest
and most dedicated warriors,” T’Challa began to explain.

“I can believe that.” Tony acknowledged with a wry grin. He’d never thought he’d meet anyone
who was a match for Natasha but Nakia and Onsa had given her a real run for her money. True she
had a healing injury slowing her down, but formidable was formidable.

“Why are they called beloved ones?” he asked.

“Because they are the ambassadors and protectors of the future and thus beloved by all. Queen-Fels
are seventy percent more likely to occur in lines started by other Queen-Fels and as Dora Milaje they
are only free to mate where the Queen wills. Aranged marriages may seem antiquated to your
western sensibilities, but political unions of this sort are a necessary function of maintaining balance
and prosperity among the tribes. Thus when the young toms are selected by the leaders of their tribes,
they go to my mother’s court in the Golden City with the understanding that they carry the hopes of
the future with them.”

And there it was. Tony didn’t have all the pieces to the puzzle but his brain worked quicker than
most and he could do well for himself with just a few pieces. T’Challa was the prince. Not the crown
prince, so he wasn’t going to marry the next Queen, but that didn’t mean he was free to marry just
anyone off the block.

He’d obviously spent years training with the Dora Milaje himself, and it stood to reason that his
mother and father were going to be arranging his union with some political advantage just the same.

So what were they doing here really? When all was said and done.

“No, I get it. You’re right, it seems a little feudal to me,” Tony admitted with a wan smile. “But go
on. I’m tracking.”

“Most of the young queens will be paired off eventually, except of course for the Queen’s heir.
When a new Queen is coronated, before an heir is born, the Queen has a second, whom we call
Tova. It falls to the Tova to see to Pride rule when the Queen is away or indisposed. Should the
Queen die or otherwise become incapable of leading, either without an heir or before that heir is old
enough to rule, then the Tova will ascend the throne.” T’Challa explained.

“Until the heir is old enough?” Tony ventured, just to be completely clear on the subject, but he
wasn’t surprised by the frank stare he received in return.

“No. You must stop thinking of yourself as someone expendable Tony. You are possibly the least
expendable person in the universe just as you are, but as a Queen you are the heart and soul of the
bond that connects us all. And there is nothing temporal or easily set aside about it. To have that
heart taken away is devastating to a Pride.” The tom warned with gravity and Tony swallowed as he
leaned closer across the table, his hand reaching for Tony’s.

“With every babe born, every foreigner taken in, you give a beautiful gift and at the same time you
take a terrible risk. Sometimes being so close to others makes it all the harder to see their deception.
The skilled can hide their motives and learn to exploit the weaknesses you won’t be able to hide.
That is why you must have Queensgard and why your mate must be loyal to you and no other. Your
Consort is your sword as well as your shield. I do not like to think of you holding a sword that is
aimed at you.”
Ah. They were back to this, because apparently, no romantic gesture would be complete without discussing the fact that Tony was well and truly with someone else and doing their very best to undermine that. Now would it? Slowly Tony withdrew his hand from under T’Challa’s.

“I know he’s still in love with Barnes.”

T’Challa blinked in surprise and Tony sighed.

“One, I’m not stupid. I can put two and two together as well as the next guy. Two, he’s honest with me about it. He tells me when he’s missing him, and when… when my hopes and dreams don’t necessarily align with reality, but that’s okay because he cares about me. The past is the past, but right here and now, Steve and I care about each other and we aren’t hiding from the hard shit or holding back. So I call bullshit, on the Steve can’t love Tony because he loved Barnes first train of nonsense.”

“Tony, I don’t say it to hurt you.” T’Challa insisted. “You do not yet understand bonding and its full biological scope. A man can have more than one mate but he has only one Queen. To find himself split between two is a deadly game no one sane would play when the battleground would turn their brain to mush.”

“Except Barnes is dead! So, there is no battleground.” Tony snapped and for some reason T’Challa looked completely taken aback by this.

“Dead?”

“Yes dead. Has been since the forties. But if we discount the years Steve spent frozen, then for about a year in awake time.”

T’Challa appeared to contemplate this information deeply, and Tony didn’t get it. Hadn’t T’Challa been the one to notice Steve was suffering bond loss in the first place?

“I do not know what to say, since you seem pretty certain of this. Perhaps Captain Rogers brain works differently on account of his unique biology,” the tom murmured after a long moment, a pensive frown still furrowing his brow.

“Look, can we get something clear between us?” Tony prompted, pulling the tom’s focus back from the never-ending mysteries of the Super Soldier Serum and T’Challa nodded slowly. “I’m with Steve. I don’t know how this whole courting thing is done in Wakanda but it really doesn’t matter. Steve and I, we’ve chosen to be in a relationship, exclusively with each other, so for the sake of starting fresh and building trust between all of us, I’d appreciate it if you’d respect what I’m telling you and cancel this little competition you’ve got going with him.”

T’Challa didn’t immediately answer. He sat silently opposite Tony, looking for all the world like he wanted to protest but was choosing (rather wisely) to hold his tongue and consider the words coming out of Tony’s mouth. Like Tony was a reasonable adult worth taking seriously. Huh.

“Furthermore,” Tony began again, because he figured he might as well take advantage before T’Challa realized that the title of reasonable adult definitely did not apply to one Tony Stark. “Thank you for warning me about Steve’s bond loss. He might still be suffering if you hadn’t backed up Harley’s data; but that said, stay out of my relationship. Okay?”

T’Challa nodded slowly, not speaking for a long moment before his ears twitched and then drooping slightly he sighed, “Okay.”

Tony blinked at him, startled for a moment.
“Okay. Just like that?”

No protests? No threats? No wheeling and dealing? No sleazy advances to try and show him what he was missing out on? Just okay? T’Challa frowned as if he thought Tony might be slow.

“Does no not mean no in your country?”

Tony, still staring at the tom, abruptly burst out laughing. He must look deranged because T’Challa understandably looked perplexed, even a little uneasy.

“I’m sorry, it’s just that…” Tony struggled to get ahold of himself, unable to stop grinning with mirth. “No it really doesn’t, but it definitely should. Thank you.”

T’Challa seemed to get it now, because his eyes had softened with a mix of familiar anger and sadness.

“Please don’t thank me for respecting your boundaries.”

“Well when you put it like that,” Tony demurred with a small nod. “Then I won’t.”

Silence descended once more, but it was not uncomfortable. Tony resumed eating his Lobster Fra Diavolo and enjoyed the music and the warm glow of candle light.

*Try to remember when life was so tender, when love was an ember about to billow.*

“This is one of my favorite songs,” he admitted with a wistful smile. “My mother used to sing it all the time.”

“I heard you humming it quite frequently in the tower,” T’Challa admitted, a tad bashfully. Tony’s grin turned into a bit of a snicker.

“And you spent time tracking it down just based off the tune? Wow, you’re a complete dork.”

And with the remnants of their earlier discord slipping further and further away, T’Challa laughed.

“You insult me, and here I’ve come ready to offer you a gift that might solve all of your problems.”

“Really, all of my problems? Cause I’ve got a lot of them.”

“Well, perhaps not all,” T’Challa conceded with a chuckle. “Definitely one.”

“Well don’t keep me in suspense.” Tony urged leaning forward, his tail twitching in anticipation. “It’s rude.”

“I’d like to propose a collaboration project with Stark industries. The work you’ve done with nanotechnology is astounding. If you could get Ms. Cho to agree to it, I believe our scientists would jump at the chance to assist as she continues her research in regenerating bio-tissue.”

“It’s an interesting proposition, but this team you’re offering. Helen only works with Gata.” Tony explained flatly. He was intrigued by what T’Challa was proposing, to put it mildly (because, are you kidding! Collaborating with the leading minds in Wakanda might have literally been a wet dream of his) but in the game of negotiation the trick was to lay your groundwork early.

“That’s the promise I made her when I stole her away from her former employer. If you send me humans, American law dictates who receives credit and who receives patents. A full Gata team is non-negotiable.”
“That complicates things. We have plenty of Alurian scientists in Wakanda but I’m not sure how many will agree to come here. Your country is not safe for them and I will not recklessly endanger my people.”

“And I’m not sending Cho to a foreign country I know little about where she would be on her own.” Tony refuted, calculating quickly for a resolution and grinning when the pieces sild beautifully into place. Not just to solve the current problem but a lot of future ones as well.

“So then we need a middle ground. You’re aware of the Gata rehabilitation project I’ve got going on. We’re building a facility on a private island. It will be well protected. What if the research was done there?”

“Has the state government of Massachusetts relented to your terms then?” T’Challa questioned and Tony leaned closer toward him, smiling winsomely.

“No, but they’re going to change their minds when you offer them something they can’t get anywhere else. Vibranium.”

“And why would I do that?” T’Challa asked slowly, cool and measured. Never an easy read this guy. Tony liked that.

“Because, though you framed your proposal like the gift of working with your scientists is gold in itself, it hasn’t escaped my notice that it’s you who wants access to technology my team developed first. Technology they’ll continue developing with or without you.”

Rather dangerously, Tony liked the way T’Challa was looking at him now even more, the tom’s focus intent and heated almost like he was on the edge of fight, only there was no sharp pepper in Tony’s nose, just the beguiling scent notes that came with attraction. Just biology Tony reminded himself. Just a toms way of entreating a fel to come closer. Nothing more to it.

“So those are your terms? A small donation of Vibranium?”

“If you want a slice of the pie yes. Helen’s research is going to change the world and you know what they say, the future waits for no one.” Tony confirmed with a contented smile, biting off a portion of lobster off the tip of his fork with satisfaction. Tony loved winning, he wasn’t going to apologize for it. Who would? Winning was awesome. T’Challa slowly shook his head, chuckling, and the tension dispersed as the tom reached for his glass of wine.

“Well then, here’s to the future.”

Tony raised his glass. He’d definitely drink to that.

Chapter End Notes

I’m so sorry for not getting to your comments in the interim. I treasure each one of them. I felt so bad about not being able to keep to my schedule last chapter that any free time I had was spent getting this portion finally done. Can’t promise when the next will be, only that as long as you’re all here, I’ll keep them coming as best as I can.
This chapter was brought to you by Rihanna's Love On The Brain.
Next up, Tony's surgery chapter! Clint and Tony deal with the past. Steve and T'Challa have a little peace talk of their own. And dare I say it? A wild Bucky (finally) appears.
If you're asking, then I want you to know...

Chapter Summary

It's the eve before Tony's nano-surgery and the commencement of Resilience marks the beginning of a new era for Gata. They say change invites challenge, and the rule appears to be true for the avengers as a brand new kind of villain appears on the scene. Pride Avengers must team up with T'challa and his team to solve the mystery behind the sudden appearance of enhanced Gata soldiers but Tony's first priority as Queen must be to secure the well being of his Pride and that means pulling on threads he's already been warned to leave alone.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A/N: You might have seen already but I've started a companion piece to this story for those who are concerned about the ending and want a few assurances that this isn't all going to end in bloody heartbreak once we get to Civil War. You can find that HERE

-1-

From the jet, the island had looked small. Like a drop of cream in somebody's morning coffee, hardly worth the fuss that was being made over it. Steve had spotted four news choppers already circling the island, their harsh spotlights sweeping over the white tents that had been set up on the beach, a virtual city of them lit up by lanterns and fairy lights. With the long grass and the trees behind them it almost looked like some sort of fairy village, beautiful in its own strange way, but Steve found it hard to appreciate given the anxious twist of nerves that had taken up permanent residence in his belly before they'd even landed the jet.

Looking down at all of those people crawling over the beach like ants, knowing that they were all there to celebrate the beginning of something they couldn't even begin to appreciate, just made Steve want to put them all back on their boats and send them on their way - to trade all the noise for a night alone with the team, with nothing but the gentle sound of the waves and the wind whispering through the trees. All the glitter of the party just felt plastic.

But, according to Tony a victory of the magnitude that Stark Industries had achieved in the launching of the first Gata Reserve could not go uncelebrated. On the contrary, Pepper insisted that every spare second of their time be regulated to a slew of interviews, public appearances, and whatever else she deemed necessary to control the press surrounding the historic event. Steve found it all very exhausting but thankfully he wasn’t called to do much besides staunchly repeat what should have been obvious.

Yes, he volunteered willingly for the Avengers Pride project and he has absolutely no reservations about the potential expansion of the pride that the Resilience Reserve has opened up. It's amazing that the shelter kats and others like them are going to get the chance to live out the rest of their lives
in a peaceful and prosperous environment. Don’t you agree? (With a strong suggestion in tone that anyone who didn’t could just go ahead and find a bridge.)

Yes, he and Tony are in a happy committed relationship, and no, neither of them felt they’d been unfairly pushed together. He likes Tony’s smile the best and that Tony gets his sense of humor. He has all the confidence in the world that he and Tony can lead the Avengers and expand their ranks with carefully vetted individuals, and the Avengers will always gladly put themselves between the public and those who threaten it.

It was exhausting, not because Steve didn't believe those things, but because they needed to be said at all. And the fact that it had to be so often just made him want to punch the next person who asked. Tony thought that was hilarious, but Steve didn't think he realized how close he was to actually doing it.

The party for all that Steve had no real taste for it, did bring with it a few bonuses. It marked the end of the media barrage (at least for awhile) as Tony would be going under for his big surgery the following day and Pepper had cleared Tony's schedule in preparation. That was enough for them all to focus on and then he'd need time to heal, Extremis or no Extremis so Tony was going to disappear from the public eye for a bit and the official story was that he was going away on S.I. business.

Everyone seemed to be having a good time at least. Steve had stepped away from the crush for a moment but he was keeping a careful eye on Tony as the fel schmoozed his way through the guests.

Seeing Tony dressed up was never a hardship, and he was really in his element tonight. Tony’s white suit was striking under the lantern glow and it was hard to miss the flash of red and gold at his wrists, the wristlets Prince T’Challa had gifted him peeking out from the bottom of his cuffs. Steve’s fingers itched. Some possessive part of him wanted to grab Tony by the hand and yank that armor off him, true enough, but a much larger part of him enjoyed the look of them too much. It was hard to tell whether the subtle aura of power they gave off was a part of their construction or a part of Tony himself. Maybe Tony was just a dangerous man. Would Tony let him sketch him in those? Maybe even in just those and nothing else. It would look incredible. That gold up against Tony’s olive skin, those ruby red lines glowing with life, almost enough to distract from the wicked glint in those whisky colored eyes.

“Damn, that’s fifty bucks I couldn’t afford to lose.”

Steve startled out of his thoughts at the sound of the unfamiliar voice. He turned, surprised to find the owner of that voice was a dark skinned kat he didn’t know. He was in the company of Rhodes though, so Steve tried to school his expression towards friendly rather than suspicious.

“What have we met?” he asked, though he already knew they hadn’t. The past week Steve had been introduced to a stream of celebrities, delegates, important military personnel, as well as all their feline companions, but he thought if he’d remember being introduced to this guy if they’d ever met. For one thing, he was military which was pretty rare for Gata. After the failed super soldier program and the accident that had created HULK, the army had pretty much given up on the idea of training Gata for combat.

The guy wearing the smirk wasn’t in uniform but Steve could tell he’d served just by the way he carried himself. That sort of training just never left you, and it was the easiest way to spot another soldier. The guy’s scent blockers were good. Even Steve’s serum sensitive nose couldn’t pick up his designation what with the crowd, but what he could pick up was distinctively sharp, lacking the muddled and slightly sour undertone that came from those who’d been subjected to domestication drugs. It was only noticeable if you knew to look for it.
“Steve, this is Airman Wilson. Wilson, this is Captain Rogers.” Rhodes introduced the stranger at his side with an expression that bordered on exasperated. It wasn’t considered proper for Gata to seek introductions on their own or speak first unless invited to do so by a master but Steve didn’t care. It said something about the guy though and Steve couldn’t help but smile a bit when Wilson extended his hand and didn’t wait before instructing Steve to call him Sam.

“Only if you call me Steve.” Steve answered, taking the offered hand and shaking it firmly. “Sounds like you lost a bet?”

"Yeah, a couple guys at the VA and I had a thing going." Sam laughed, revealing a slight gap between his two front teeth. It gave him kind of a goofy look, but something about him warned Steve he probably took full advantage of how disarming that was.

"They actually put you in a war zone?” Steve asked, glancing between Sam and Rhodes and just as before, the tomkat didn’t wait for Rhodes.

"Yep. I did a few tours of Afghanistan. Para-Rescue."

Steve had read up on the war in Afghanistan, but there had been nothing about furthering the Gata-Soldier project in any of the debriefs he’d been given.

"Voluntarily?” he asked, voice lowering on the edge of a growl. This time when his eyes snapped to Rhodes Wilson stayed silent. It didn’t surprise Steve that the Army hadn’t completely given up the idea of fashioning soldiers out of Gata. He wouldn’t put it past Fury to have redacted the information if they had either.

Rhodes for his part stared steadily back at Steve his expression completely inscrutable as he replied by route, “All service in the United States Armed Forces is still voluntary.”

But Steve had noticed that Sam’s smile had dimmed, his mouth tightening.

"I signed up for this gig Cap. It was way better than the alternative.” The tom revealed, cryptically, and when Steve didn’t prompt him for further explanation he provided it with a knowing smile accompanied by a wistful shrug. "I was rescued from a fight ring in Harlem when I was six years old."

Steve nodded slightly. He wasn’t surprised. His nose had already told him that Sam was feral, and in America the only way that happened (if your father wasn’t Howard Stark) was if some bastard bred you in an underground basement and jabbed you full of ReAgression injections to prepare you for a life of cage fighting. Those kats never lived long, and when they did they were so screwed up in the head from the trauma and the hormone imbalance that there was no saving them. It wasn’t right or fair, but the reality was that nine times out of ten it was better to put them down than to try, and risk people getting hurt.

Even though Sam didn’t look unstable and he didn’t smell it either, Steve knew better than to judge a book by its cover. You didn’t live that kind of life without taking on a few scars.

"People usually get put you down for that,” he remarked, subdued, glad that Sam had been spared that but wondering how it had come to be.

"Yeah well, lucky for me Reverend Wilson saw things differently.” The tom replied, and when he didn’t go on Rhodes filled in.

“Sam’s service with the Airforce was conscripted as part of a rehabilitation effort.”
So that was it. The army couldn’t make them super, but they could make use of the poor souls they’d driven rabid by throwing them at their enemies.

“A lot of us believe very strongly that a lot more can be done to help those liberated from the fight rings. They can still find purpose doing something that matters. They don’t have to die.”

Steve grit his teeth together but said nothing in reply as the Colonel patted Wilson’s shoulder in a companionable way, still holding Steve’s gaze.

“This one here is crazy as they come.”

Some of the tension knotting Steve’s shoulders eased as Wilson barked a laugh. The warmth of it was telling, and the tom’s obvious confidence went a long way toward putting Steve at ease. Sam wasn’t taking offense to being called crazy, and he was obviously comfortable with Rhodes.

“But the son of a bitch is the best man I’ve ever flown with.” Rhodes finished with a firm squeeze of Sam’s shoulder. With a grin he released the slighter man with another small pat and turned with the clear intention to exit. “He’s also a big fan and wouldn’t shut up until I introduced you. Is my work here done?”

Sam laughed again and gave Rhodes a mock salute. “You’re relieved Colonel. Thank you for your assistance today. You’ve served your country with distinction.”

Rhodes departed with a chuckle and a friendly enough nod for Steve and a warning not to listen to anything Wilson said, but not before pointing out that he doubted Steve’s own sanity, what with his willingness to go along with Tony’s particular brand of crazy.

The Colonel was a good man Steve thought, feeling somewhat chastised for his earlier suspicion.

“So, you and Stark are the real deal?” Sam asked after Rhodes had disappeared into the crowd and the silence had stretched between them for a moment too long. Steve tensed at the note of disbelief in his tone.

“That a problem?”

“Not from where I’m standing.” Sam answered easily, confusing Steve. It had sounded like Sam had made a bet with someone that his relationship with Tony couldn’t be real, and if it wasn’t because he and Tony were such an odd pair on paper. But Sam thankfully didn’t leave him wondering for long.

“This whole Pride thing, it means a lot to a lot of people Cap,” Sam admitted unselfconsciously and Steve nodded in agreement. He knew how much Pride Avengers meant to the Gata and as the breeze threatened to loosen the gel in his hair, and Sam turned to look out over the beach and the light dancing off the dark surface of the waves, he could only think how much more this Island was going to mean to them.

It certainly meant more choices. No more choosing between death and fighting somebody else’s wars.

Sam sighed, and turned back to him and said, “But they don’t give us something like this for nothing. There’s always a catch.”

“You thought I was the catch?” The realization dawned on Steve slowly. Sam hadn’t doubted that Steve could go for someone like Tony because of the different way they approached things. Sam thought SHIELD had forced them together because they wanted somebody to control the Pride. Control Tony.
Tony had suggested something like that before, but deep down, Steve hadn’t wanted to believe it.

“I think people need insurance.” Sam explained softly, as if he could sense the turmoil going on inside of Steve. “There was always going to be a control measure, Cap. I’m just glad it’s you. You know I still have your trading cards?”

He was trying to soften the blow, Steve knew that, but it was hard for his smile not to resemble a grimace just the same.

“You gonna ask me to sign em?”

Please don’t, he thought privately. Thankfully Sam didn’t seem inclined to ask, shaking his head with a chuckle as he teased.

“Maybe some other day, but I’mma get real bold in a second and ask you for an introduction to your mate.”

He nodded toward where Tony was still entertaining a rapt crowd of important persons, including Prince T’Challa. They all looked to be laughing at something Tony had said, but Tony wasn’t looking at any of them. Steve started when he realized that Tony’s eyes had sought him through the crowd and he felt his lips stretch into a smile as their gazes met.

‘Miss you’ Tony’s eyes seemed to whisper across the distance, and Steve didn’t want to guess what his face looked like as warmth spread through his chest and slow lazy heat curled in his belly.

"Why bother asking? You don’t seem like the type that gets star struck," Steve pointed out when Tony had turned back to his conversation. Sam snickered.

"I'm standing here talking to Captain America, trying to meet Ironman and you want to talk about star struck? Nah man, I'm just trying to avoid an issue. You were giving off some pretty intense pheromones when I walked up. You're not going to bite my hand off if I go for a shake are you?"

Steve felt himself blush.

"Sorry." he mumbled, remembering what he’d been thinking about before Sam and Rhodes had interrupted. "I'm still getting used to this whole mating thing."

"Don't worry about it.” Sam assured him with an indulgent smile. “With all the ways this could have played out, it's just nice to see so much good coming out of it.”

“Whose coming out?” Steve’s heart might have actually skipped a beat at the sound of Tony’s voice so close so suddenly, the man himself following it a second later as he appeared at Steve’s side. His familiar scent filled Steve’s nose and just like that the tension he’d been holding since Tony had gone off to make the rounds began to melt away.

“Can’t be us. We’re well and truly out there and Clint and Phil are even more ancient news than we are.” Tony prattled and Steve, smiling fondly, gently touched his elbow, as he introduced his new friend.

"Tony, this is Sam."

"Sam Wilson," Sam filled in, reaching to shake Tony's hand.

"Airman Wilson. You served in the F.A.L.C.O.N. unit?” Tony asked, apparently recognizing the name from somewhere. Steve definitely recognized the name FALCON, from when Clint had tested
out that new wingpack Tony was working on. So Tony had been involved in the program that had recruited Sam. Now he felt even worse for how he’d reacted earlier.

Sam was nodding and Steve noted with amusement that his back had straightened unconsciously, his voice strong and filled with pride as he answered.

"Yes Sir. Thank you for everything you did for us. It saved lives."

"I just built the wings Airman, the work was all you." Tony dismissed the praise smoothly, and Wilson seemed surprised by the humbleness of Tony’s reply but Steve wasn’t.

"How long have you been state side?" Tony asked the tom, smoothly filling the uncomfortable silence.

"Fourteen months and still getting used to it."

"Well the rest is deserved.” Tony assured, and then he slid his arm through Steve’s giving it a gentle squeeze. “You don’t mind if I steal this guy do you? Gotta talk to a man about a dog."

“Sure thing.” Sam agreed amiably, his mouth forming into a sly smirk. Steve couldn’t help the slight thrill he felt at the warm weight of Tony’s arm in his, but he was perplexed by it. Thus far Tony had kept their PDA at these formal functions to a minimal.

Tony pulled him away from Sam and the edge of the waves, back toward the tents where most people were still relaxing, chatting over their desert, but some people had gotten up to dance under the glow of the lantern lights.

“You wanna tell me what that was about?” Steve bent to murmur in his ear, mindful of the curious gazes that were following them. He smiled when his lips grazed its fuzzy tip and Tony shivered.

"Wilson seems like a nice guy, but it never hurts to remind people what the score is." The fel murmured in reply. His scent had taken on a slightly possessive edge. Steve blinked in surprise and then barked a laugh.

"He’s a tom? What because he’s got big muscles and fought in a war like a big strong man?” Tony asked drolly, with a severely arched eyebrow and Steve chuckled.

"Okay you got me. I assumed."

"And made an ass out of both of us.” Tony poked him in the arm and Steve knew he wasn’t serious. “Guy is definitely a fel. Probably into you too. I would be."

"That's good to hear." Steve murmured, turning to slide his arms around Tony's waist. They weren’t the only ones dancing to the slow trickling music coming from the band. To Steve’s wonder Nakia and Natasha had taken up a dance, and though the other guests were giving them a wide berth they were impossible not to watch. The she-tom and the fel appeared to be trying to out do each other and the intensity of their private little competition was practically electric in the air. Maybe the most striking thing about it was how wild they both looked. Both of them exhibiting grace and power with every movement they made, sweat glistening off of the columns of their throats, no collars or tags in sight and no apologies for it.

In contrast not far from where they’d stopped, Bruce had asked Miss Cho for a dance, and the two
were talking quietly together as they swayed gently to the music. His throat was bare, hers was adorned by a thin silver chain, a heart shaped tag hanging from the end. It was a thin, delicate little barrier between them, but it might as well have been a wall. But despite it, there was color high on both their cheeks and a strength to their grip where their fingers entwined. It made Steve smile to see.

"How long have Helen and Bruce been a thing?" he leaned down to whisper in Tony’s ear.

"They're a developing thing. Like so many other awesome things.” Tony murmured in reply, smiling up at him.

Steve pulled Tony closer, and swayed with him to the music.

These kinds of parties were never going to be his favorite, but they weren’t all bad.

It was funny in hindsight maybe, that just as he should have that thought the night should take a turn for the worst.

There was a flurry of movement within the crowd and then a low ripple of sound as the tenor of the voices surrounding them rose in confusion. The hair on the back of Steve’s neck rose at the sudden spike in tension and he felt Tony go tense in his arms. Battle ready, he thought fleetingly.

“What’s going on?” Steve voiced aloud and Tony shrugged already reaching within his suit jacket for his phone.

“There was a break in at Oscorp” one of the guests, a man Steve didn’t recognize turned to them. He had his phone in his hand, playing a news clip for the people closest to him. Police were reporting that a pair of masked assailants had broken into Oscorp Tower and injured several security personnel. The group had caused some property damage, injured the police who’d arrived on scene and tangled with a masked man, whom locals had taken to calling the Spiderman. It was kind of alarming watching the grainy security footage of the webbed vigilante as he (or she) traded blows with a slight figure in an unfamiliar silver battle suit. It was similar to Natasha’s skin-tight catsuits leaving nothing to the imagination. Steve could see clearly the assailant’s powerful legs and the toned musculature of their arms, as well as the incriminating tube shape of a covered tail.

The helmets the robbers wore didn’t have pointy ears but they didn’t really need to. They were kats, and they’d taken up weapons against humans.

“This is not good.” Tony muttered under his breath, glancing up to lock eyes with Steve who stared back at him with similar dread.

This changed everything.

“We need to go” Tony commanded, dropping his phone back into his suit pocket in one decisive motion and Steve straightened.

“I’ll grab the others.” He agreed, already turning to do just that.

Tony and the team deserted the celebration quickly, Tony only pausing to pull T’Challa aside and demand that he and his team follow them back to the tower as quickly as they could. Pepper wasn’t
pleased with the turn of events but in this instance her anger wasn’t directed at Tony. She knew better than anyone how this turn of events could spoil their plans. She had damage control to do through the press, and the Avengers had to figure out what was going on at Oscorp and who was behind the sudden appearance of Gata mercenaries.

Before they’d even landed at the tower Tony had JARVIS gathering everything he could find on the incident, every scrap of footage that had been found no matter how grainy or on whose cellphone it had been recorded.

They’d been shifting through that footage for the last half hour. So far what they knew didn’t tell them much but what it did tell them begged a thousand more questions.

“And the reports say nothing was taken?” Steve asked once more, like he thought the answer might have changed and JARVIS reconfirmed that the early reports from the incident indicated that the thieves had not taken anything in their raid.

“I don’t get it. Why go through all this trouble then?” Clint groused.

“Maybe what they took isn’t something Oscorp wants to explain to the public.” Tony thought out loud. “Norman Osborn’s practically been a recluse the last couple years. He’s been working on some super-secret something or another.”

When Steve gave him a questioning look Tony just shrugged.

“Squishy science is not my thing. He backed that bill for tighter regulations against labs using Gata as test subjects, that’s all I cared about at the time. I even helped provide his security.”

Osborn wasn’t as obsessive about security as Tony was but it wasn’t like he just let anyone waltz into his facilities. Most of his security was Stark Tech, a season or so outdated but still better than any of the other shit on the market. It was galling to even admit but the thieves had sliced through Oscorps security programs like butter, using some sort of hack that mimicked as an alpha override.

It had to be a hack, because the only one with access to the alpha override codes was Tony, and in a few cases Pepper.

If that wasn’t baffling enough, there was also their suits. They were simple in design but even on corrupted video feed Tony could tell that they weren’t made of anything cheap or easily procured. For one thing, they seemed adapt at deflecting bullets and they were powered by an energy source that gave off enough power for at least one of them to take flight, in a style not dissimilar to Tony’s own repulsor technology.

It was impossible. It didn’t make any sense, but the evidence was playing out right there in front of all of their eyes. Somebody had managed to successfully create a Gata strike team and somebody (maybe not even the same people) had stolen his technology right out from under him.

“How?” Clint blurted the million-dollar question and Tony clenched his hands on the edge of the empty chair he stood behind, eyes fixated on the holo-screen JARVIS had erected on the common room ceiling.

“I don’t know,” he admitted begrudgingly. “Yet. I’ve got JARVIS looking. If there was a security breach we’ll find it.”

“I’d say the evidence is already pretty compelling,” Coulson pointed out, and Tony glared at him.

“You think I’m not taking this seriously?” he growled. “Do you have any idea the lengths I’ve gone
to in order to protect the suit? Every last piece of the Ironman armor that has ever existed has been accounted for and is stored right here in the tower. Every file, every last document that even covers how it’s cleaned, is so encrypted that JARVIS is adding new layers we speak. The only direct way in is through alpha override. Nobody has that but me, ever, and unless I was abducted sometime in the last twenty-four hours without my knowledge and tortured into giving it away, there’s no way in hell anybody stole it.”

“Is it possible somebody reverse engineered parts of the suit?” Bruce asked, replaying the clip of one of the thieves taking off at a run and springing off the wall to take flight, neatly avoiding becoming entangled in whatever ropey web like substance Spiderman was ejecting.

“In theory, anything is possible. But to reverse engineer my armor based on sight alone, frankly they’d have to be smarter than I am.” Tony denied and the words hung heavy in the silent room. He wondered if they could all hear the fear in his voice the same way he could. He wasn’t afraid of the possibility of running into someone smarter than he was. Tony was arguably only the second smartest person in the known universe (fucking Reed Richards) but only an idiot actually thought they could hold the metaphorical crown forever anyway. That was the way of the future. Sooner or later somebody smarter gets discovered.

That had been Howards problem. He’d never been able to handle the idea of falling behind, not even to his own son. Especially not then.

No, it wasn’t the possibility of being outpaced that made Tony so afraid. It was seeing his deigns in the hands of someone else and knowing the damage they could cause and how they could be used to hurt others. He’d vowed never to let that happen again after Afghanistan.

“Thankfully, for all our sakes, I don’t think that’s the case here Tony.”

Tony blinked, pulled out of his dark thoughts by the sound of Helen’s voice. The fel had moved closer to the center of the screens alongside Bruce and was considering the displays with a focused frown.

“Jarvis enlarge this screen please.” She instructed, pointing to a shaky video of one of the thieves attacking an armed security officer. The video had been taken from the officer’s body cam, and Tony and the others watched silently as the officer fired at the back of one the thieves who was wielding some sort of pistol, only for the second thief to drop down suddenly between them. The officer cursed violently, yelping in surprised fright as the armored kat smacked his gun away and swept his feet out from under him. The officer crashed to the floor, and it was hard to see through the flailing of limbs and violent shaking of the camera but the kat appeared to pounce on him, gripping what appeared to be a small energy blade. A wakandian energy blade.

Tony’s eyes flicked over to where T’Challa was standing with Nakia. It wasn’t just Tony’s technology he’d recognized in the security footage. The prince had remained silent through the debriefing, his expression even now stoic and unreadable, but it was in the eyes really. Those dark eyes with their flecks of color were soaking it all in, missing nothing.

“The flexibility of the coccyx bones combined with the smaller shape of the skull and the wider spread of the pelvic bones are positive indicators that we’re dealing with an adolescent female.” Helen pointed out, as JARVIS replayed the clip at a slower speed. “Her companion is likely a male, a few years further along in development, but both of them are displaying motor movement typical of those with superior muscle and bone elasticity and a lower pain threshold.”

“You’re saying these are children?” T’Challa finally spoke up, a note of curiosity in his tone.
“My observations are imprecise with only these images to go off of, but biology is my expertise.” Helen responded with a flicker of a smile. “If I had to guess I would pin them in late adolescence. A male and a female. They’ve been expertly trained but the way they respond to impact suggests their bodies are more used to recreational sport than active combat.”

“They’re not soldiers.” Steve, who was standing to Tony’s right, declared with certainty. “The boy with the pistol is a great shot, but he hesitates. It’s just a fraction, but it’s the kind of rookie mistake a soldier is trained out of.”

“Yeah, and none of these shots were kill shots.” Clint added to the growing pile of observations. “Steve’s right, the kid’s a sharp shooter but he had multiple chances to kill and he took none of them. That’s gotta be intentional.”

“This is kind of amazing,” Bruce murmured, aloud. He blinked in surprise, seeming to feel the way all eyes turned to stare at him incredulously and shrugged. “From all appearances, we have at least two feral adolescents displaying high levels of reasoning, teamwork, and competency with none of the physical or mental trauma we normally see in Gata who have gone through some sort of ReAgression training.”

Bruce had a point Tony thought, swallowing thickly as he observed the silently playing videos from new perspective. Without the clinical lenses, it was suddenly easier to appreciate how young they were, how they threw themselves into their mission with fervor and how they worked together with familiarity and the kind of ease that only came with intimacy.

These two weren’t the half-crazed results of twisted genetic tampering and they weren’t militant robots trained from birth to be nothing but killers. Under those masks they were likely as healthy and (arguably) sane as anyone standing in this room.

They were doing the impossible, seemingly of their own free will, and despite the threat they posed they were beautiful, just because they existed.

“We are witnessing a marvel.” T’Challa announced, echoing Tony’s thoughts. “These youth are free Alurio. They have been trained in the ancient martial arts, knowledge that has been passed down from warrior to warrior and is now only practiced by the warriors of Wakanda.”

“That blade, it’s Wakandain too isn’t it?” Tony asked tersely, and T’Challa looked to him, hesitating a fraction of a moment before he nodded solemnly.

“I have not seen its particular design before but the technology is the same.”

The bald admission didn’t surprise Tony, but the tense silence that fell over the room was heavy. T’Challa didn’t flinch from Tony’s hard stare, and if he noticed the way the air was thickening with the smell of fight he didn’t let it show.

“Mind explaining how a couple of teenage renegades from your country got their hands on Tony’s technology?” Steve snapped from Tony’s side and the tom’s gaze flickered over to the super soldier with cool regard.

“I won’t argue your classification of renegade, Captain, but you can be sure that they are not from my country.”

“You said they were Alurio.” Steve snapped back.

“And nevertheless, they are not children of Wakanda.” T’Challa replied dismissively, turning his gaze back to Tony. “When Agent Romanov was shot, you knew where to find her even without
being told. You would have been able to follow your bond no matter where she went. Leaving Wakanda is forbidden and a near impossible task to achieve in secret. It is not possible for my mother to have missed two children roaming so far from the pride. Even if they are low born, their absence would have created a ripple that eventually she would notice.”

“You’re assuming she’s not involved and you’re asking us to trust that you’re not involved either when you’ve successfully infiltrated the tower and previously been granted access to Tony’s lab.” Natasha pointed out, echoing the thoughts that were bouncing around in Tony’s skull with a cold expression of her own. “That’s a level of trust only a child would grant.”

“Do you accuse my Prince of lying?” Nakia asked with a dangerous sounding hiss and Tony’s fur practically stood on end in warning. In about two seconds they were going to have an all-out brawl on their hands.

Pushing away from the chair he’d been leaning on Tony stepped smoothly between Natasha and the glowering she-tom, doing his best to pump out those calming pheromones fel’s were supposed to be so good at and forcing levity into his voice.

“I’m wounded Romanov,” he teased, placing one hand gently on Natasha’s shoulder to subtly nudge her back. She stared at him with a baleful expression but shifted as he guided and Tony considered it the best he could ask for all things considered. He turned toward Nakia and T’Challa, gesturing with open palm and not unintentionally bearing his wrist. The effect was somewhat diminished by the wrist guards he wore but he didn’t think the symbolism would be lost on the pair of toms.

“I didn’t ask you here to accuse you. There are a lot of unanswered questions, and we’re going to need to work together to find their answers.”

"We agree. In times of uncertainty it is better to keep your friends close." T’Challa replied evenly and the tension coiled in Tony’s spine slowly eased, and thankfully the sharp scent of fight beginning to dissipate.

"And your enemies closer." Tony added with a toothy smile. The flash of teeth was a symbolism all its own and he doubted it would get lost any more than his blatant use of fel appeasement wiles.

Tony really hoped not. His gut told him there was something more going on here, something bigger than what the surface implied, but he wanted T’Challa to know that if there was evidence out there that Wakanda really was behind his stolen tech, Tony would find it. And when he did, there was going to be blood.

T’Challa inclined his head in a deferring fashion but chose not to reply. Tony had kind of figured he wouldn’t. The prince was a man of few words and seemed to have little need or patience for the kind of swaggering and showboating Tony had come to expect from his peers and had learned to master. A (very) small part of Tony kind of admired that and was envious. What must it be like to truly just not give much of a damn?

Prince T’Challa’s mouth curled slowly into a barely there smile, but Tony caught it. The tom didn’t seem to mind that either, his eyes glinting with challenge and a dark sort of promise. As if he’d like nothing better than to see what Tony was made of and the thought of going toe to toe with Ironman didn’t phase him even a little bit.

He tried to feel nothing but irritation for the smug bastard, but stupidly he could feel the prickling of every hair on the back of his neck as if someone had stood just behind him and breathed against his skin.
Coulson cleared his throat, breaking up the moment.

“Alurio or not, they have to be apprehended” he reminded everyone. “There are already protests organized outside city hall calling for greater restrictions on Gata activities and tougher oversight.”

That just wouldn’t do. Not when Tony was so close to breaking the chains once and for all.

“We should have been called out to deal with them.” Steve snapped into command mode and Tony swore everyone in the room stood up straighter. “I know our jurisdiction is primarily super powered threats but now that we know these people have access to technology like this it’s officially our business.”

“That’s not your call Captain,” Coulson reminded him but with a wry twist of lips he concluded, “But in this instance Director Fury happens to agree. He’s assembling a SHIELD strike team to handle this issue directly. Pride Avengers will consult. The public needs to see you’re willing to be a mitigating force against potential Gata threats.”

“Not It.” Tony quipped raising his hands defensively. Coulson glowered at him.

“I think Steve, Clint or Natasha are better suited. They’re better at getting along with SHIELD.”

“Goody.” Tony replied. “In the meanwhile, we need to figure out what the hell they wanted at Oscorp so badly they were willing to break in. We need to try and anticipate their next move, before the situation gets any messier.”

“The Spiderman might be a good start.” Bruce suggested. “He saw them up close. He could maybe tell us something the security cameras can’t.”

“How do you figure we do that?” Clint asked. “I don’t think he’s listed in the white-pages do you?”

“I might actually be able to help with that.” Tony admitted and when Steve gave him a surprised look he just shrugged. “I’ll explain later. Let’s just say I keep my finger on the superhero pulse.”

“Speaking of pulses, perhaps we should adjourn this meeting for another time.” T’Challa cut in smoothly. “There isn’t much to be done now until either our rebels resurface or we have more information to go on and it grows late. You need your sleep Mr. Stark.”

“He’s right.” Natasha agreed, rising silently from her seat. “Your operation is tomorrow and that’s our priority.”

Tony felt his eyebrows tilt in surprise. Natasha shot him an unimpressed look and he chuckled under his breath. He couldn’t help it. It was still strange. He couldn’t remember another time in his life when he’d been anyone’s number one priority without paying them.

The tender feeling that evoked was short lived, chased by the proverbial dark cloud that was Ivan, the Soldier, the man whose memory Natasha kept so tightly to her breast and whose secrets she still guarded. It felt like a betrayal, because in a way it was. Natasha had given her life to him and not Ivan and to his own growing discomfort Tony was discovering that there was something buried deeply inside of him that was extremely possessive over that fact. She was either his or she wasn’t and if she wasn’t his then she was a threat. A threat that had to be removed.

In the past, Tony might have run with that feeling. He might have hidden behind walls and come up with a thousand and one ways to stay a step ahead and guard his heart while he was at it, but this was not the past. He’d committed himself to one very particular dream of the future, and it wasn’t going to be easy to get by any means but it meant giving as good as he got. Bare neck. Bare wrist.
Bare heart. And not just symbolism this time.

Dangerous, some sixth sense warned. So very dangerous.

Oh well. Good thing danger was practically his middle name.

“It is late. Time for all good superheroes to be in bed.” Tony agreed for the sole purpose of bringing the meeting to its official close. He let the chairs creak and the bodies shift as the room began to disband. Steve made it too the door first, caught in some strange place between restless and lost, as he lingered clearly waiting for Tony. He watched as Natasha grabbed Clint by the elbow to murmur something low in his ear, and then turn and nearly make it to the door before he cleared his throat and announced, “Before either of you wander off to dreamland, Captain, Romanov, I’d like a word privately.”

TBC

Chapter End Notes

I am so sorry for the long delay guys. It's been a crazy couple of weeks for me. This is a two parter because the second part solely focuses on Tony's surgery and is much different in style. I'm polishing it up but I hope to get it out to you quickly. For those still reading this story thank you for your continued support and encouragement. My promise still stands, if you're here than I am here.
All the words is afire (But all we can do is keep breathing)

Chapter Summary

In which Tony's young pride is tested and his first act of leadership is to do the one thing everyone is advising him not to do. Otherwise known as just another day in the life of Tony Stark. Maybe the last day. So maybe not just another day.

Chapter Notes

A/N: I'm putting an extra warning here for potential triggers. We see a bit of Maria in this chapter, and Tony's birth. In this story at least, her becoming pregnant with Tony wasn't entirely voluntary. Because slavery. While nothing sexually non-con happens in this chapter, I recognize that having a child in bondage is a form of non-con itself and I hope you do too. Maria came to a certain decision about the child forced upon her that I tried to make clear here, and I hope you'll respect even as you would a woman's decision not to accept a child in that situation. Either way be kind to yourselves and don't press your triggers. That is all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s no secret that Tony Stark loves a real challenge, even if real challenges are hard to come by when you’re as smart as he is. It’s a lesser known fact that despite what you might think, Tony hates puzzles. He hates not having access to all the facts, and lacking the data to form a complete picture is a surefire way to get under his skin and have him picking apart a problem until he knows every inch of it and finds the solution, and the blasted puzzle is no more. Rhodey calls it dangerously obsessive, but he doesn’t know what it was like for Tony as a kit.

As one of his first and oldest friends Rhodey knows more than just about anybody else what it was like to grow up with Howard Stark for a master, but he doesn’t know the extent of it. Because Tony has never been able to bring himself to fully share it all. It’s a very private pain.

Howard had only ever paid attention to Tony in the beginning when it was to test him. Master Stark would sweep into the nursery where Tony had been born and nursed by his mother (or attended to by Mr. Jarvis when Howard had better uses for her time) and would have some new puzzle for Tony to solve or problem to work out, each one harder than the last and the punishment for failure more severe. And of course, Howard somehow always managed to expect both failure and perfection from Tony.

His first real memory of Howard was when the man had come suddenly into the nursery after Mr. Jarvis alerted him to the fact that Tony had said his first words. Tony had been young, too young really to be uttering a full if somewhat garbled sentence, but he’d been ahead of the crowd even then. He still remembered the glint of anticipation in Howards eyes, the proud tilt to the man’s smirk as Master Stark had swept into the room and loomed over him.
“He’s finally talking? Good, that’s good. I was beginning to worry the boy was an Idiot.” He’d said, kissing Tony’s mother on the cheek and talking past him as if Tony couldn’t possibly understand what was being said. But he had. And he’d understood it just as well when Howard had looked right at him and said, “But you’re not. Are you boy? You’re a Stark, and you’re going to be the greatest weapon this country has ever seen. Come with me now. I want to run some tests in the lab.”

He’d known that he had better not argue and he had better not fail any of Master Starks tests.

But on that score, Tony had been doomed from the beginning because that first round of tests had revealed evidence of Tony’s as yet undesignated secondary gender, his hormone levels singing strongly the tale of an unflowered fel. The end of Howard’s great vision of Tony as some sort of super-tom to act as a replacement for Captain America.

So Tony loves challenges, but unsolved mysteries chafe at him and the mystery behind Ivan, the assassin they call the Winter Soldier, is itchier than most.

Puzzles were Tony's specialty. He hadn't met one yet that he couldn't solve, and he wasn't about to let fear get in the way this time and ruin his perfect score.

Tony could tell that Steve and Natasha were unsettled by his request for them to stay behind. With Steve it was easy. He let Tony see his concern, and the stiff way he held his back was a more private tell for anyone who had spent any great length of time around him to catalogue.

Natasha was a harder read. She was too good to let it show, but she had a weakness now. The careful way she held her emotions in check, effectively erecting a wall of silence between their minds was a tell all of its own. The bond was constant, which meant it was nearly impossible to keep that sort of blankness up twenty-four-seven. The fact that it was there at all told Tony enough.

Enough to get started anyway.

“What’s this about Tony?” Steve asked after the silence in the room had gone on long enough to become awkward.

Rather than answer his question directly Tony looked to Natasha, pinning her with a serious stare.

"Did you know that that what I saw in my vison isn't real? Steve thinks I saw some future where Barnes somehow survived that fall off the train. In other words, some sort of what could have been."

Natasha didn't so much as blink, but to her credit she didn’t let the question hang in the air long.

"Yes." She answered nonplused. “I advised him not to tell you, but I knew he would."

This was news to Tony. It stung, but he tried not to let his surprise show.

"Well, at least you admit it."

Natasha didn't reply, staring at him silently. Expectantly, and Tony bit back the urge to hiss.

"Okay. Here's the thing, screw that. " He snapped with a click of his jaw. His eyes quickly darted to Steve when he shifted slightly, so that he was in front of Natasha, partially blocking the fel from view as if to protect her from Tony's judgment and Tony had to fight not to roll his eyes. The last person who needed that sort of coddling was Natasha, but the fact that she didn't immediately try to remove his balls told Tony quite a lot more on its own.
"It wasn’t the right call, but she was just trying to protect you and that should count for something," Steve pleaded earnestly on her behalf and this time Tony did roll his eyes, anger sparking in the center of his chest and simmering low.

"Oh, was she trying to spare me?" he scoffed. His gums itched and he had the strong urge to bare his teeth at them both but he resisted. He didn’t actually want to fight them. Not really. He wanted so much better for them all, but they had to deal with this first and he wasn’t happy about it. Not one bit.

“Tony can’t handle the truth so we just lie to him? Is that how we protect our friends?"

"Are you handling the truth?" Natasha, rejoined coolly with a knowing stare before asking how many days he’d spent obsessing about it since Steve had told him. "How many days have you spent picking at this even after I warned you not to?"

She sounded so damn smug, so damn superior as she looked down her nose at him and decided he was too weak to handle the truth, and just like that Tony was done.

"Five," he answered readily. "Not because I'm some delicate tea cup who can't handle a little dose of hard truth, but because it's my job. Did you forget who I am?"

The fact that she could be bonded to him, that they could share every memory and see the strongest parts of each other, and she could still think him so small, just went to show that you never really knew a person. The child in him wanted to wail that she of all people should know him better.

All those myths he’d heard as a kit, about how perfect everything had been once upon a time when Gata could bond with one another and live out their days in perfect bliss with their Pride were just wishful thinking if not utter bullshit.

Bonding or no bonding people were still going to be people, and just because she saw him up close and personal didn’t mean Natasha was going to think any better of him than anyone else. Well, Tony couldn’t change who he was and he wasn’t about to start now.

“You’re Tony Stark.” She answered his demand and what Tony heard was, I know who you are, and he grinned viciously in response.

She might have all of his weaknesses catalogued and his patterns memorized, but she wasn’t really getting it.

“I’m your Queen.” He reminded them both with deliberation and Natasha narrowed her eyes at him.

“A monarch can demand whatever they want and punish however they like when they are met with defiance.” She replied, her green eyes cutting. “Is that really how you want to play this?”

“That right there is where you tripped up,” Tony replied, snapping his fingers aggressively. “I’m far from playing Romanov. See, I have a responsibility to you that goes deeper than flesh. I felt that bullet pass right through me when you were shot. Clearly, you don’t understand my job. I bonded to you, and that means everything that happens to you matters to me.”

“And you don’t think you matter to me? Did it occur to you that protecting you matters more to me than just about anything right now? Natasha replied, her eyebrows crawling upward in disbelief as an edge of frustration crept into her tone. Her gaze cut towards Steve meaningfully as she growled, “And it’s not just you Tony, you know it isn’t. It’s everyone.”

“It did, and it’s the only reason we’re having this little talk and I didn’t just crack your mind open and go digging for the truth.” He growled back in answer and he felt the tension drawing tight in the
room, tighter than a bowstring as silence fell heavily between the three of them.

Taking a deep breath and struggling for calm Tony turned, extending a hand toward the floating hologram display still hovering just above their heads and wiping it clear with a swipe of his hand. A few more quick gestures and he had the folders pulled up from the project that had quietly consumed him since that day Steve had come to find him and tell him that all of his hopes for the future were based on a fantasy.

“I respect that this is difficult for you. I respect that diving into your past probably feels like opening Pandora’s box, and I respect that you think keeping silent will protect me and the Pride. But you’re wrong and I can’t let you be wrong.” When Tony spoke again the harshness had left his voice but it was no less firm. This felt like the most important conversation he’d ever had or ever would have.

“Maybe one day you find a mate. Hell, maybe this dance you and Steve are doing leads to something deeper and we’re one big happy poly family. Maybe we have some kits and if you’re lucky you’ll be as tightly bonded with four or five other people as you are to me. But me, I’ll be bonded to fifty other people if we just start with the shelter kats. Do you ever stop and ask yourself what that means?

“A bad call, and they come with tanks and guns; or maybe it’s got nothing to do with us at all and it’s just another fucking alien invasion, and it’s no longer a choice of can I live with myself if I don’t try and stop them dropping a bomb on us, but a matter of can I survive another second of feeling every death like it is my own? Cause I think about that every minute of every day.”

It stayed quiet in the wake of Tony’s words and he felt a small measure of relief. Maybe they were both really listening now.

“I worry and I plan and I do everything I can to keep one step ahead, to keep that from ever happening, but there’s stuff out there I can’t control and maybe next time I won’t beat it. That’s just the vulnerability I have to accept, the open target I have to place on my heart and wear out in public, and that’s terrifying.” Tony admitted, throat tightening with conviction. “But I’m not running away. I’m wearing it. So don’t give me bullshit about trying to protect me. It was never about me. It was about protecting yourself.”

Natasha still didn’t speak and when Tony looked up it was to see that she’d stepped back, her blank face gone very pale.

”Tony,” Steve tried to interject gently. Though he reached for Tony’s arm he was clearly torn between which of them to comfort, and Tony pinned him with a quelling stare.

"Don’t."

And Steve let his arm drop, falling silent, though Tony knew he found it frustrating. Steve wasn’t a sideline type of guy and Tony appreciated that about him, but he needed to handle this his way. When he was sure that Steve wouldn’t try to interfere again he turned back to Natasha.

"This is the last time I’m going to ask.” Tony warned, speaking every word again with deliberation. “When did you know Ivan was alive?”

Tony’s hand stayed raised, posed in wait to tap out the sequence of commands that would open up the files he’d dragged up from the underbelly of SHIELD and all that he’d collected on the Winter Soldier since he’d first realized Steve and Natasha’s inexplicable connection to him and the pieces of the puzzle had begun to rattle inside of his mind. Natasha watched, her eyes fixated on the unassuming holographic file.
For an achingly long moment he waited, wondering if she would offer him the truth or make him tear the choice away from her.

And then, with a small intake of breath, her eyes met his once more with something naked and fearful swimming in them. Her lips parted and she began to speak.

“On Asgard, when I drank the broth I felt something waking up in my head. I told myself everyone must be feeling the same way. My visions that night were vivid. They felt more like memories than dreams. I saw the day they killed him and froze his body in ice. Not through my eyes but his. They skipped around. Time wasn’t linear, but I was still looking through his eyes when they woke him up and even though logic said it had to have been some time before he was killed… his agony was unmistakably keen. The strength of his grief made me wonder.

“When the visions didn’t stop and I began connecting his kills with things happening in the present I knew I hadn’t imagined what I felt that night. When they killed Ivan and took my child from me something in me went out inside me. It convinced me they were telling the truth that he was dead. But drinking that broth fixed whatever they did. The connection is weak but it’s back. When I reach for him I can feel him, and he can feel me too. I don’t think he realizes the significance of that yet but when he does, he’ll use it as a weapon. Because that’s what he is.”

She turned to Steve and Tony watched him tense in surprise, his face cycling through bafflement and apprehension as he took in the agonized twist to her mouth and the pleading in her eyes.

“He’s a killer Steve. The best there is. Whatever he was before is gone.”

“I don’t understand.” Steve responded, face clouded with confusion. His dread was palpable to Tony, and he knew that part of Steve’s quick mind was already putting it together, even if he wasn’t ready to deal with it. “Tony what’s going on?”

Tony swallowed and drew closer to him, reaching for his hands, needing the grounding contact as much as Steve seemed to. It was a testament to Tony’s innately selfish nature that even now, down to the last moment, there was a wild urge that flickered to life within him not to say what he had intended to say, to take Natasha’s advice and let the ticking time bomb that was the Winter Soldier stay in its corner; but he knew better.

Eventually it would blow and he’d never forgive himself if it hurt the Pride in some way he could have avoided with simple honesty. And besides that, Steve had told Tony the truth even when it would have been easier not to. He’d done exactly as Tony had asked, trusted in what they had and Tony’s ability to handle the truth, and Tony would have to be the shittiest person alive to repay his trust with that kind of cowardice.

It really did come down to trust in the end. Trust that their relationship was strong enough to weather the grief Steve would undoubtedly feel and the responsibility to go looking, and trust that whatever he’d had in the past, that he wasn’t just going to forsake what he and Tony were building right now.

“Tony?” Steve gently brushed his fingers against the edge of Tony’s mouth and it was only then that he realized how twisted up with anxiousness his face must look, if the tightness of his facial muscles was anything to go by. Steve’s touch was soothing, and Tony didn’t mind leaning into it as he forced himself to relax.

He could hear Pepper in his head, telling him that he deserved to be happy, but his heart was still beating rabbit like in his chest, and some manic little voice in his head kept whispering ominously that winter was coming, until he had to bite his lip to sop himself from breaking out in giggles like a crazy person.
And then he remembered what T’Challa had told him, that day in the lab, back when things had been simpler, when his hope had been younger but his doubts no less crushing.

He had to stop demeaning the choices of those who loved him, and Steve did love him. That was awesome, and it was all that mattered because he was Ironman, Queen of Pride Avengers, a mother fucking Stark and he was not afraid of winter.

“You and Natasha are both bonded to the Winter Soldier, sometimes known as Ivan.” Tony finally answered and the flummoxed expression that Steve’s face morphed into was almost comical.

“I know Thor thinks a bond is the best explanation for our dreams but Tony, it’s not possible.” Steve insisted, because first comes denial.

“Steve you said it yourself, you were in his head and he felt you there. That’s not a dream, that’s a bond at work.” Tony refuted, and Steve’s eyes widened momentarily as he took that in, working his jaw as he thought it through, but after a moment he was shaking his head again stubbornly, snapping.

“Yeah, but don’t you think I’d remember bonding to a Russian assassin?!”

Tony looked to Natasha and she stared back, resigned.

“This is the part where it starts to hurt.”

“Sorry. It’s gotta be done.”

“I’m sorry too.”

Tony looked back to Steve who was still waiting on an answer, frustration evident as his eyes flickered between Tony and Natasha, unaware of their silent conversation.

“That’s why it has to be someone you knew before. I have a theory about that, and in a second we’ll know if Natasha can confirm it,” Tony murmured, flicking his fingers to reveal the digital folders contents, images and scanned documents and data floating around them in a swirl, JARVIS bringing one file in particular to the forefront and enlarging it, but Steve didn’t even seem to need it. He was already breathing the man’s name in on a strangled sounding breath.

“Bucky?”

Tony had ripped through every government archive he could successfully hack into (which was all of them) in order to get his hands on the record for Private James B Barnes, one of the earliest case studies in Gata ReAgression and a still nationally celebrated success story. The precursor to Project Rebirth and known best to the public as Bucky Barnes, Captain America’s fierce and staunchly loyal lap kitty.

Tony hadn’t seen very many pictures of him growing up, most of the surviving images focused on Steve anyway, and the comic book renderings hadn’t been known for their accuracy. The Bucky Tony remembered from the comics he devoured as a boy had been the typical hyper sexualized human fantasy. He’d been this incredibly slender little twink who looked perpetually trapped at fifteen years old, with whiskers and eyelashes for days who ran around in a red and blue catsuit!

But the Bucky in the photo was nothing like that, and not much like the impossibly beautiful shade that the Benu had dragged out of Steve’s consciousness to torture him either. One look at the old black and white photo of a grinning Private Barnes in army fatigues, with one muscled arm thrown over an alarmingly skinnier version of Steve’s shoulder, had been enough for Tony to see the truth.
Bucky’s ears weren’t the same orange but Tony could see Jaime in him clear as day, and that had just begged all the questions because Natasha’s Ivan was a tom but Barnes was a fel, and either way a dead man couldn’t sire kits in Tony’s bright new future.

So he’d gone over every inch of Barnes’ record and what to him felt like the most important piece of the puzzle had finally come together.

Barnes had the earliest version of the Super-Soldier serum floating in his veins. It hadn’t made him Captain America, but it had made him something. Maybe something enough to survive that fall from the train. Something enough for the soviets to work off of, turning him into the kind of weapon Tony’s father had tried and failed to turn him into.

Well there was an easy way to know for sure, and she was standing right next to him.

“Natasha?” he prompted, but her eyes were fixed up on the picture and Tony wondered if she’d even heard him. She was keeping her emotions tightly guarded, but Tony couldn’t muster up anger over it now. They were alike in that way, each preferring to lick their wounds in private, holding together in solitude and hiding their bleeding wounds from the vultures they knew to fear.

But there was an unmistakable heaviness coming from her end of the bond, pulling at him like a weight tied to the end of a nylon stocking. It occurred to Tony that if Bucky really was somehow her Ivan, this was the first time she was seeing him like this. Not just the clean cut and well cared for but happy and free… Well, as free as a Gata was ever free to be. The Ivan she’d shared with him was a different man. So much so that Tony had failed to recognize him even when he’d glimpsed Steve’s memories of Bucky.

The silence stretched painfully as they waited in anticipation for her answer, Steve’s heavy breathing sounding overly harsh in the stillness until whatever strength of will that allowed him to hold back finally snapped.

“How do we find them?” he snapped, Captain America ready to take on Hydra and all other foes and make them pay. “How do we get him back?”

“I don’t know.”

Steve’s face twisted up in pain and his scent went pungent with grief, and Tony had never wished more that they were bonded so that he could take some of it off of Steve and onto himself but he was
forced to settle for good old-fashioned touch.

“I dug up everything I could about Winter Soldier. Every last bread crumb,” Tony said, taking Steve’s hands again and latching their fingers together. Steve kept looking into his eyes like he was at risk of falling off the edge of the earth if he looked anywhere else and gripped Tony’s hands tight. “We’ll find him. It won’t be easy but we’re going to do it, and if he can be helped we’ll help him.”

“Thank you Tony,” Steve breathed out in a rush, pulling Tony tightly against his chest, but not before Tony missed the way his eyes had clouded with tears he refused to shed and Tony’s chest clenched like a hand had reached in to squeeze his heart. He held Steve tight, tail winding protectively and possessively around his leg like a third arm, as if daring anyone to try and separate them. This close Steve couldn’t hide the way his body was trembling with shock.

Tony turned his head to look at Natasha over Steve’s shoulder, because the promise he’d made was as much for her (and for him) as it was for Steve.

She stared back at him, unresponsive, but Tony could feel the frantic buzzing of her thoughts like a fly flitting just behind his ear. It would be a long time before Natasha was comfortable enough to walk around with her mind opened, naked and defenseless. Truly, Tony understood that she might never be. It just wasn’t who she was.

He could respect that, do his part not to take it personally, but if any part of her wanted to try, Tony wanted her to know he’d be there. Natasha blinked slowly, allowing her eyes to soften as she closed the distance between the three of them, placing her hand between his ears and sinking her fingers into his hair as she pressed her cheek to his, a soft purr rumbling in her chest.

“You’re going to die of stupidity,” she said, almost sadly, but Tony just grinned, because everybody knows in former assassin that just meant I love you.

“I can think of some worse ways to die.” Steve said with a dry laugh, pulling away from their embrace with a purposeful step. Tony could tell by the look on his face alone that the ‘Captain’ was back, and ready to throw everything he had in the hunt for Winter Soldier. He told himself not to give into the feeling of trepidation stirring in his gut.

“Let’s get started.” He looked at Natasha who nodded silently in agreement, but when Tony opened his mouth to call for JARVIS to open a particular file he thought would be a good jumping off point Steve pinned him with a stern stare and shook his head.

“Not you Tony.”

“Excuse me?” Tony blinked at him, a little affronted but Steve didn’t budge.

“We’ll need your help plenty, but you have surgery tomorrow. You need your sleep. Doctors orders.”

“This would be the doctor who is actually a Prince whose credentials were probably made up by some SHIELD intern?” Tony asked incredulously, not because he didn’t think T’Challa was off base but because Steve was the last person he’d expected to side with him. He and T’Challa were barely civil to one another and the reason why wasn’t the sort of thing toms usually found it easy to be reasonable about.

“Maybe not as much as you’d think,” Steve replied with a terse shrug. “You worked with him Tony, and he impressed you. He’d have to really know his stuff to do that, and you were right about what you said before. It doesn’t matter where he got the degrees or what titles he’s got. He’s good and you
trusted him... and I think you should invite him back to help with the surgery.”

“You do?”

Tony tilted his head to consider Steve closely, looking for any hint of uncertainty. Truth be told, the thought had occurred to him before this.

The surgery was so high risk it was straddling the threshold of suicidal, and if Tony had been allowed his way, not even Helen and Bruce would be there, except he literally needed them to do the operation. Bruce had been making noises about getting another “real doctor” on hand, but Tony knew that what they all really wanted was the team they’d had before.

Tony, T’Challa, Helen, and Bruce. They’d all figured this thing out together. Helen was an expert in bio-engineering but T’Challa was better versed in healthy Gata biology. T’Challa was a good balance, he knew that intellectually, but when Tony stepped into the Cradle tomorrow he’d be completely defenseless, his life in their hands, and Tony wasn’t sure if he could bring himself to invest that level of trust in the tom just yet.

Steve seemed to read his mind and closed the minimal distance between them, touching his arm to draw his gaze back up.

“He wants you alive Tony, that’s something I trust. If he’s as good as you say he is then he should be there.”

“It’s not that simple. The surgery it’s... we’ve prepared the best we can, but the reality is, it’s going to get messy.” Tony wrinkled his nose as his brain conjured up all the ways in which it could go horribly wrong. Steve bit back a grin, gaze tracking the twitch of his whiskers and Tony shot him a sour look.

“I’m serious Cap, he’s going to have to touch me, cut me, maybe even get inside my head. It’ll bond us in a way I might not be able to reverse. I think I could work my way toward being cool with that, but are you going to go all protective tom and freak out in the middle of things?”

“Tony’s got a point.” Natasha backed him up. “You’re still new to Gata instincts, and they seem to be pretty strong where mating is concerned.”

“I’ll deal with them.” Steve answered in a clipped tone, command back in full force. “If it’s between your life and some irrational feelings that may spring up, then I don’t see how there’s a contest.”

“You sure?” Tony asked one more time, gripping his sleeve.

Steve smiled softly and pulled him against his chest, pressing an even softer kiss against Tony’s worried brow and murmured once more with finality, “No contest.”

Tony still wasn’t sure. He was still deliberating on it as he left Steve and Natasha to their research and trudged his way to the elevator to have JARVIS take him up to the penthouse.

He knew what he wanted he thought, staring dully at the chrome doors as the lift took him upward. He knew deep down in the fearful dark that he didn’t much want to delve into, but part of him felt incredibly guilty for wanting it as bad as he did. Not to mention doubtful. What if this was just him being soft, same old Tony. So desperate for a little affection he couldn’t even see when someone was stealing from him, or plotting his death, until they were leaning over him ripping his heart out.
Stop it. He berated himself with a groan, rubbing his palm against his eyes in exhaustion. This wasn’t helping. He’d made the decision to trust T’Challa because they needed him, and that was only getting truer by the second. His instincts told him the tom was being as honest as he could afford to be and as long as Tony wasn’t a complete fool about it and let his attraction make him blind to any red flags or hints of possible threat, then he was doing his best.

His best would just have to do. God help them all.

“JARVIS,” Tony called out to the A.I. his decision made. “Get Prince T’Challa on the phone.”

“That won’t be necessary Sir. He is still in the tower.” Jarvis replied, sounding pretty damn close to bashful and Tony frowned.

“He on the air strip? Something wrong with the jet?”

Jarvis didn’t answer, but then again the elevator chimed ever so softly signaling that they’d reached their destination and swished soundlessly open, giving Tony all the answer he needed.

“JARVIS?” Tony asked, deceptively calm as he watched the tom sitting outside the doors to his very private penthouse getting to his feet. “Why is Prince T’Challa sitting outside my door?”

“I wanted to be sure you slept.” T’Challa answered brightly as he approached, not at all concerned apparently that Tony might be angry to find him there. “Jarvis agreed with me that you were not likely to do so given your many worries, and while he forbade me from entering your private chambers his protocols said nothing of public hallways.”

“Would we really call this hallway public?” Tony asked with a baleful stare in the direction of the nearest camera. Jarvis’ eyes weren’t visible to the public of course but Tony knew where every camera was placed by heart.

“If you stretch the imagination Sir, anything is plausible.”

Tony rolled his eyes, but decided he wasn’t too annoyed with his A.I.’s mother hening. At least not this time around. He’d had a hell of a night.

“Well I’m here, heading to bed like a good boy, but unless you were planning on knocking me over the head with a two-by-four I can’t guarantee you any actual sleeping will be done.” Tony grumbled as he walked past T’Challa and JARVIS opened the penthouse doors with a swish. “I don’t sleep well alone.”

Instantly, Tony’s mind flashed to Steve and the way that their bodies cradled one another as they slept, limbs intertwined, but then he remembered that Steve wasn’t coming to bed anytime soon, would likely spend the entire night buried in SHIELD files; and just as quickly something else came to mind. He saw himself getting into bed, and wrapping his arms around T’Challa’s broad chest and seeing what kind of body pillow he’d make.

Probably a very nice one, but Tony shouldn’t be entertaining thoughts like that when he was happy and settled and Steve would be so very far from okay with it.

T’Challa smirked at him but had the tact not to say anything as he followed him through the living room. Tony watched curiously as the tom turned toward the kitchen Tony never used and made a beeline for it.

“I don’t have a two-by-four. Tell me, do you always turn to such violent measures when you can’t sleep?” He asked, fishing through Tony’s cupboards with purposefulness, comfortable, like he got
invited into a billion-dollar penthouse every day. Then again, he was royalty, Tony thought with a snort. Jesus, how had they ever thought this guy was some poor kid from the congo?

“No. Usually I just don’t try. I don’t need much of it.” Tony answered with a shrug, plopping himself down on the couch and swinging his feet up onto the glass top of the coffee table. “What are you doing in my kitchen anyway?”

“Would we really call it yours if you’ve never touched it?” T’Challa questioned thoughtfully.

“If it’s in my tower? I think so” Tony snipped and T’Challa chuckled under his breath.

“To truly own something, one has to do more than buy it” the tom murmured in reply, lifting a sterling silver pot and turning it for Tony to see. “This still has the price sticker on the bottom. Admit it, if I stole every last thing in your cupboards you’d never even know.”

Tony just shrugged. Guy had him there.

“Fine. What are you doing in the kitchen that I bought but don’t truly own, Sensei?”

T’Challa barked a bright laugh and shook his head, and Tony bit back a smile.

“I am making you tea.” T’Challa explained after he’d filled the pot with water and set it on the stove, on top of a high flame. Then he turned and fished out a mug from the cupboard and set it firmly on the counter, reaching in his shirt pocket and fishing out a small cloth bundle. As he unwrapped the shriveled green leaves a familiar smell tickled Tony’s nostrils and he sat up straighter, nose twitching.

“Is that the same stuff you made me the night we met?”

“Yes. It is from a plant native to my country, known for its soothing properties.” Tony watched as he crumbled several of the dried leaves and dropped them into the mug, then reached for the pot and poured the heated water over it without burning himself or spilling a drop.

“It is called ṣiru,” he added absently as he stirred the mixture. Clinking the spoon smartly once or twice on the rim before he turned to Tony with a smile, mug in hand. “But most everyone just calls it pipa tea. That means sunshine in English.”

Tony hummed appreciatively, remembering well the bright soothing warmth that had flooded his body the last time he’d had the stuff. The grassy taste left a lot to be desired but it certainly didn’t disappoint in other areas.

T’Challa strode toward him, gate smooth and confident, gaze landing immediately on Tony’s feet smudging the glass table top and frowned.

“Feet off the table Tony, this is not a barn.” T’Challa leaned over his legs to set the mug on the table near him.

“Pepper, is that you?” Tony gaped at him, feigning shock as he reached for the steaming mug. “I’m so sorry your majesty. When she said she was always watching, I didn’t think she’d stoop to possession. I hope this doesn’t go on the books as an international incident.”

T’Challa sighed and sat down beside him.

“As you are my host I will do as you do,” he said in a long suffering way, raising his long legs and putting his feet up till they rested side by side with Tony’s. Tony sipped his tea, but the mug didn’t do enough to cover his smug grin. Not that he was even trying to hide it.
Spotting it, T’Challa chuckled, shaking his head once more as he muttered, “my mother would yank both our ears if she saw us this way.”

“Good thing she’s not here then,” Tony quipped, but there was no malice in it. It was kind of impossible to feel anything bad with that slow lazy warmth tickling down his throat and flushing through the rest of his body. Sunshine was the perfect name for it he thought with a contended sigh. “But hey, are you saying I’m a bad influence on you?”

“Nakia thinks so. She complains that I do nothing but talk about you.” T’Challa admitted with an easy candor and Tony felt some of that heat moving to his cheeks and mildly resented how relaxed that tea had made him.

“Any actual truth to that flattery?” he drawled, too, well relaxed, to even hold on to the resentment. T’Challa just smiled, watching Tony sip at his tea to be sure that he drank it all.

He drained the cup, smacking his lips and flashing the mouth T’Challa’s way just to appease him before setting it on the table with a clunk. Tony sank back into the couch cushions with a sigh, thinking what an odd turn the night had taken.

From triumph to trouble and more trouble on top, to this. Whatever this was. Well, it was nicer than Tony had expected. He’d expected a long cold night alone with his fears and his dread of the morning.

Was everything in place? He asked himself one more time, going through the endless check-list in his mind. If he died tomorrow, would he leave the others with as much protection as he could give them. Did he buy them enough options? Was there anything he’d overlooked?

“You’ve done all that you can Tony.” T’Challa’s low, rich, voice intruded through the haze of thoughts in Tony’s head. “You need to rest now.”

He blinked his eyes open slowly, not sure when they’d drifted shut, and their eyes met.

This close it was easy to see the flecks of amber and the deep swirls of marron in the tom’s eye. He’d been fascinated by them the night they’d met, Tony remembered. Even in shock he’d noticed how arresting they were, like the stare of a jungle cat.

“I say that out loud?” Tony wondered, brow furrowing speculatively as he realized that T’Challa had answered his thoughts. The tom shook his head minutely.

“You drug all your dates?”

“Only the ones who desperately need sleep and a two-by-four is not handy.”

Tony chuckled sleepily. Fuck it.

“I’d like your help. Tomorrow. If you’re still willing.”

Please. Some part of Tony pleaded. Please what, he wasn’t as sure. Please be willing. Please don’t let him be wrong. Please don’t be like Obie and everyone else he’d trusted.

He wondered if T’Challa had heard those thoughts too, but all thoughts flew from his head as the prince considered him with a penetrating stare and one hand reached to gently grasp his, lifting it gently to his lips. The kiss he brushed against Tony’s knuckles was barely there, but Tony felt it,
deep in the pit of his stomach, fluttering in his chest like a bird taking flight.

He felt himself sliding and didn’t fight it. He let his head fall against the prince’s warm shoulder and frowned when T’Challa squirmed and shifted about, until he realized that the tom was only moving so that Tony could lie more comfortably, his head resting against the soft hollow between chest and shoulder.

Tony breathed deeply and let the days tension drain out of him, sleep rolling over him like tide.

Something soft and firm curled around his tail, and a barely audible purr rumbled through the chest his ear was resting against. Tony didn’t open his eyes, but he smiled.

~*~*~*~

Avengers Tower, Friday Morning 10:00 am.

*Beep Beep Beep Beep*

The machine issued a steady, almost perfunctory beep supposedly in rhythm with Tony’s heart as he lay in the center of the cradle, naked but for his underwear, eyes fluttering sleepily as Helen explained for the cameras recording the event that Tony had been given drugs to dull his senses but due to interference from Extremis they could not safely administer a dose strong enough to keep him fully under.

He didn’t like the thought of Tony being semi-conscious through the ordeal. Steve had been fully conscious when they’d injected him with the super soldier serum; had to be for one reason or another that he barely remembered anymore. He remembered the pain though. That he’d never forget. The feeling of a thousand knives stabbing at him, muscle and bone stretching and snapping and then fusing back together in an electric rush. It was lucky he couldn’t puke, else he’d probably have choked on it.

And now, here Tony was. Strapped into another tin can, about to have another serum infused into his blood and bone, not enough morphine in the world to be helpful.

Those who Tony loved who’d demanded to be present for the proceedings were gathered in the waiting room, separated by a thick wall of glass with a view into the operation room.

The team was there, along with Pepper and Rhody even though the latter two had stepped out to handle something to do with the ongoing crisis following the attack on OSCORP. Jena had tried to get Harley to go back downstairs but the kit had been adamant in his desire to stay in the waiting room with everyone else. The two were curled up on a chair, Jena stroking the kits head gently while his eyes tracked Tony’s every twitch.

Nakia was there, leaning against the wall opposite the door, keeping a steady eye on Prince T’Challa and Coulson was there too, sitting in a seat beside Clint, watching the goings on in the operation room with a laser attention that almost rivaled Steve’s own. Steve hadn’t taken his eyes off of Tony since Bruce had kicked them all out of the room so that he, Helen, and T’Challa could get things properly underway.

Steve had promised to be just on the other side of the glass and Tony had made some joke about using his time better to go and get cheeseburgers, because he was sure to be starving when he came through and Steve had smiled, even though it was hard to find anything really funny.
To him, Tony looked incredibly small in the bed of the big machine, fragile flesh only looking all the softer in the middle of all that gleaming chrome and harsh artificial light.

Fear sent tension tightening up Steve’s back, putting his nerves on edge. The smell of antiseptic burned in his nose. Every beep and click of a machine coming through the speakers rang sharply in his ears.

Some irrational part of him didn’t care that the wires T’Challa was hooking up to Tony served a purpose, only that Tony was in danger, about to be hurt, and that those hands were helping. A nudge here, a gentle stroke there. Those hands were touching what they had no right to touch.

Steve crossed his arms and clenched his teeth harder.

Knock it off. He tried to will himself. Tony was where he needed to be, and T’Challa’s hands were nothing but professional as they methodically inserted needles and tubing expertly into Tony’s giving flesh. Maybe he was looking for it, but it was obvious to him at least that the tom could not completely detach himself from the proceedings as if this were any other operation. It was in his focus, and the unconsciously tender way he and Bruce were handling Tony’s body. It wasn’t just a body to either of them. It was Tony, and they say doctors shouldn’t operate on their loved ones for a reason. Suddenly Steve felt sorry for them and thought he understood a bit more why Tony had been so against having them all here. If things went bad, it was bad enough that Helen and Bruce were going to have to live with it and maybe blame themselves.

“We’re going to begin administering the BX-Serum, which should begin to immediately absorb into the bone.” Bruce’s voice filtered through the speaker. He sounded calm at least. “Extremis will likely attempt to fight this at first. At that point we’ll close the cradle and it will hopefully keep the patient’s body regenerating fast enough that the BX can fuse with his DNA and Extremis accepts it as a part of the host body.”

Bruce didn’t repeat what would happen if it didn’t. If the Cradle couldn’t heal Tony faster than Extremis tore him down, if Extremis never accepted his new alien fused DNA. Nobody needed him too. If it didn’t work Tony would die right there in that room and there wasn’t much anybody could do to stop it.

Steve took a deep breath and leaned forward to grip the metal sill of the observation window and let the breath out slow, fighting the urge he had to break the damn window and grab Tony out of there and run him to safety. It wouldn’t be safe, not really. The nano-bots had bought them time, but without the BX it was just bandages and tape. Bandages that could be ripped off at any moment.

“Do not worry Captain,” Thor’s voice rumbled lowly as he stepped up beside Steve at the window and placed a hand against his shoulder. Natasha and Clint joined them a second behind, Natasha wordlessly slipping her arm in his as if there was nothing to it. Steve didn’t know what it said that he found her closeness so immediately comforting, her scent doing a lot to dull the burn in his nose from the chemicals and the screaming absence of Tony’s. He felt his mouth twist upward, somewhere towards grateful though it felt like a grimace on his face and the line of her own mouth softened in reply.

“Tony is strong, and our friends in there as well as on other worlds will see to it that he is well taken care of.” Thor was saying. Steve looked up curiously, waiting for him to explain. Thor had gotten back from Asgard late that morning, just when they’d all begun to worry that something might have happened to him. Steve knew he wouldn’t have missed this if he could help it.

“I journeyed to Múspell, which delayed me.” Thor explained and Steve’s eyebrows lifted in surprise.
“The Kat-People’s home world?” Clint echoed his surprise and Thor nodded.

“I felt it prudent to seek counsel from Bastet on the chance there was anything else she might be able to tell us.”

“And?” Clint pressed when Thor trailed off and the Asgardian sighed, his brow furrowing pensively.

“She said that we need to trust our bonds, that if they are strong a Queen need not magic or medicine.”

Steve frowned. More riddles. He really didn’t like the Kat Queen. Goddess or no Goddess, it was pretty clear that she didn’t care about the plight of the Gata, who only existed because of choices she’d made.

“So no help from her I guess,” he grumbled.

“She did say her spirit would be with us.” Thor added with a wry tone and Steve huffed a bitter laugh.

“It’s a nice sentiment Thor, but not very helpful.”

“It means more than you know.”

Steve turned slightly to look over at Nakia as the she-tom spoke suddenly. She hadn’t spoken all morning that Steve could remember but then again she and the other Dora Milaje weren’t exactly big chatterers. Steve wondered if that was just part of their natures or part of the job.

The she-tom abandoned her post near the doors where she’d been holding silent vigil and slinked her way towards them, her steps powerful and fluid as she moved. She was dressed down, her hair braided down the center of her skull, her powerful body camouflaged in jeans and a leather jacket that did little to distinguish her from any other New-Yorker, but there was no disguising her from what she was. It was just there, in the way she held herself, in the bright gleam of her sharp teeth and the ripple of muscles working under the smooth dark skin of her throat as she spoke.

“T’Challa wears the Nehe stone. We can be sure that the Panther God is indeed with us.” She said, continuing after a breath. “The people of Wakanda see it as mystical, but those of us closest to the Queen know that the secret to its power lies not in the stone, but in the Queens who have worn it.

“The stone is a psychic amplifier.” She explained, when she was met only with their silence. “An extremely powerful one that feeds on the strength of the one who wears it and weaves it together with the strength of those who have come before. T’Challa is not a Queen, so he can’t utilize it the way his mother can, but his mother is a part of the stone, just as the Queens before her. He wears it so that they can walk with him in this hostile land.”

“You mean she can see him through it?” Coulson asked, surprise and a mild note of unease creeping into his tone. Steve couldn’t help but feel a similar worry. Had the Queen of the Panther Pride been watching them all this time? Plotting and planning without their knowledge?

Nakia shrugged.

“I know only that with the mind much is possible and the Queen’s mind is strongest. But even a Queen has limitations. They must draw their strength through the Pride. The strength of the Old Ones is nothing compared to the strength of the people.” Nakia turned to look back into the operation room, pity laced through her tone as she finished.
“But Tony Stark is Queen of nothing. He nurses a rabble of confused children. Broken misfits who don’t know their hearts well enough to give it, and today he will die. The Queen who barely was.”

Anger jolted through Steve and he took a step toward the woman, but Natasha dug her nails into his arm and it was enough to pull him out of the sudden surge of rage.

“You are a warrior without equal Nakia and you have my respect,” Thor said, slowly and carefully like a diplomat. Nakia’s dark eyes met his, waiting and the Prince of Asgard stretched his lips into a tight smile. “But please, as my Midgardian friends say, shut your trap.”

Steve wasn’t the only one completely shocked by that. Clint barked a laugh, and Natasha’s lips curled upward in a smug smirk.

“Tony’s our friend,” Harley piped up from his chair, scowling at the she-tom. “If he needs our help then we’re gonna help him. Right guys?”

“You said it.” Steve couldn’t help a little smile of his own and at the sight of it Harley relaxed, sitting back in his chair.

Nakia nodded, a slight gesture of deference, but glanced toward where Harley sat with his mother.

“Then I wish you all sure hands. But the boy should not be here. His mind is still developing. He may be damaged by the experience.”

Jena’s eyes widened in alarm as she pulled Harley closer to her, looking wildly towards Coulson and then towards the door speculatively and Steve could see that she wanted nothing more than to leave; but Harley glared balefully at the she-tom.

“I’m staying here.”

Steve opened his mouth to suggest that maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad idea for Jena and the kit to leave until Tony was through the worst of it, but at that moment a strange prickling at the back of his neck captured his attention.

It was followed by a strange low burn, like someone was breathing hotly just behind him. He knew nobody was there, knew that strange sensation was just in his head because he could see the others tensing on either side of him, their eyes darting between each other in confusion and then as if drawn there, flying back to the window and looking into the operation room.

They were pumping the BX-serum into Tony, the sight made all the more disturbing by the bright crimson red color of the serum, making it appear as if blood was flowing out of Tony’s body in all directions.

Bruce was frowning at one of the monitors and Helen, who was watching another, noted with a small betraying hitch in her breath, “Patient’s core temperature just spiked.”

“His pulse is elevating.” T’Challa’s voice was almost lost over the rapid sound of beeping from the heart monitor.

“We need to slow down the serum. Reduce the strain on his body.” Bruce’s fingers began to punch in commands but Helen’s hand darted out to still him, the fel shaking her head adamantly.

“No. Extremis is targeting the BX. We can’t take the risk of the serum being destroyed before the fusion has a chance to take.”
“Dr. Cho is right. Time is not on our side.” T’Challa snapped, moving hastily around the tubes to carefully place his hands upon what bare skin of Tony’s chest was available. “We need to slow his heart and overwhelm the virus. Dr. Banner, up the dosage of the sedative, Dr. Cho, increase the distribution of the serum.”

Steve noticed the way both responded to T’Challa’s commands without argument, like soldiers on a battlefield falling into line, happy to let a commanding officer tell them what to do, how to survive the next frantic minute and the next with a ritual of orders perfectly executed.

He noticed the way Tony’s eyes had opened to stare blankly at the ceiling and he noticed the faint blue glow that was emanating from the stone swinging at the end of the chain T’Challa wore, and the swell of pressure building in the back of his head as that prickling blossomed into hot pain; but he was inexplicably paralyzed, unable to make himself move to do anything about them.

~*~*~

Lightning arced through his veins, hot and quick, burning brightly behind his eyes until he though his eyeballs would burst into flames right there in his sockets.

Tony screamed. At least he thought he did. He couldn’t control his body. There was a weight on him, holding him down even as pain twisted through every muscle until it was stinging bitterly in his teeth.

Above him was a haze. Through it he thought he glimpsed faces, familiar, and then a light, pale and blue, but he couldn’t concentrate on any of them.

He heard voices – Steve, calling his name. Natasha and Clint. Thor. Others. People were singing. The words foreign, carrying the weight of years.

\textit{(Breathe Ayeba. Keep breathing)}

He knew that voice. But Tony couldn’t heed it. He didn’t want to keep breathing when every breath was knives in his lungs.

He kept sinking, the pain piercing deeper and deeper as he sunk lower into the fog. He wasn’t alone in it. There were people there, men and women in strange garb circling around him, their silhouettes just barely visible through the swirling mist. Some of them were covered head to toe in fur, others like him were more humanoid. Some sang and some chanted, the tongues as varied as their appearance.

One of them appeared suddenly beside him, as if she’d always been there even though Tony couldn’t recall her separating from the circle. Her skin was dark, her hair white as pearls, the thicker hair that covered her tail and ears white with the black bangles of a tiger. Her eyes reminded him of someone, dark and lit from within by a swirl of amber and flecks of gold.

She smiled at him.

\textit{You’re dying.}

He was. It was a relief, he could admit. He’d been heavy for so long, but he was feeling lighter and lighter by the moment.

\textit{‘Who are you?’} he asked, but the woman had disappeared, the fog thickening. But Tony had the
Strange certainty that she was still there. They all were. He could hear their chanting and singing, lower than breath but there just the same. And then her voice was back, trickling through his mind like water gliding over rock.

*We were you. We are what you’ll one day be.*

‘Who am I?’

He couldn’t remember. Why was he so heavy? Why couldn’t he stop fighting toward the surface when he just wanted to close his eyes and let the mist swallow him. What was so damnably important that he couldn’t just put it all down?

Didn’t they understand that it hurt?

*Yes. There is pain in everything. Even the good.*

Light leaked through the fog and Tony was suddenly standing in a chamber, warm firelight bouncing off the bricks outside the pavilion, the light leaking through the silk that fluttered between the vine covered columns. The air was thick with incense and the low murmur of voices. The crowd gathered around a woman sitting in a painted chair in the center of the pavilion, holding her down and encouraging her as she grunted and groaned, struggling for breath. The lamps set the sweat that covered her dark skin till it gleamed like polished ebony. Her quivering hands clutched the swell of her pregnant belly as pain shuddered through her and she cried out. Beside her a man murmured unintelligible words of encouragement, and pressed a kiss into the wet strands of her white hair.

And just as quickly the chamber was gone and he was in a nursery room, breeding-nurses surrounding a young fel woman in the throes of labor. There was blood, and the grim faces of the breeders told a story of too much blood lost.

“We’re losing her.” One of the nurses murmurs sadly, as if it is inevitable. “Happens a lot when you breed them young.”

He didn’t have breath to suck in, but Tony felt the sight of her hit him like a car at high speeds.

Maria Stark looked frail there on the center of the bed, dwarfed by the circle of nurses.

Her brow pearled with sweat that kept dripping into the darkened strands of her hair as she trembled and groaned, fighting for each breath and pushing with all her might.

“Push honey, for the baby.” Howard leans over her, stroking her brow with desperate tenderness and her eyes fix on him like a laser, bright and fevered, and quicker than a blink she turns and bites him, teeth sinking deep and drawing blood.

Howard yelps and pulls away from her, shocked by the behavior of his docile kitten who has never shown a hint of aggression, but the doctors exclaim because she’s pushing now with earnest.

A nurse hastily explains that pregnancy changes a fels hormones, makes even the most well domesticated unpredictable at times.

They’re excited now but wary of her teeth as they urge her to push.

It’s not the witness of some mere *happening*, but the unmistakable will of a woman who has decided that she wants the life inside her because it’s hers.

Slaves had few choices, but this one she stole for herself with every clench and push as she fought to
bring her child into the world. Maria Stark laying in the bed, given no choices, and still in the end choosing him.

His name was Anthony Stark.

It wasn’t his time yet.

*You need strength.*

The hospital disappears and he’s a child, walking with Mama and Jarvis in the park.

“And what’s that bird called Anthony?” Mama asks, eyes twinkling fondly down at him. He smiles up at her.

“It’s a Starling.”

*You’re fading.*

He knows. He’s trying, but he’s not strong enough. Not on his own.

*You need strength*, the circle murmured once more, their chanting growing louder.

Tony reached and suddenly the park was gone.

*(Tony. Come on Tony breathe)*

He heard the familiar voice and strength was flooding through him. He was a boy, running through a back alley, desperate to escape the pursuit of the police. He was Clint. He was young and strong and the whole world was his for the taking. There was an older boy, running just slightly ahead. They both carried backpacks, hats jammed low on their heads to cover their ears.

“Quick, up here!” Barney called, leaping onto a fire escape and they followed. They are scrambling across the rooftops, agile and practiced, but slowed by the burdens they carried. Still, it would be harder for the pigs to follow them this way. They’d pulled off more than one robbery just this same way.

He let out an exuberant whoop as he leapt off the edge of a roof onto the sloped roof of the neighboring building, but when part of the roofing crumbled beneath his feet as soon as he landed it drove a surprised breath out of him and he began to slide.

“Clint!” Barney screams his name, drops the bag he carries and reaches desperately for him, but there was no helping it as more and more tiles came loose and he went sliding off the roof edge.

*(Come on Tony. Come on!)*

Tony fell, but the plush mattress of the bed caught him and he rolled, giggling as Clint leaned over him in triumph.

“What was that about not being ticklish Stark?” Clint asked, a purr rumbling happily in his throat and Tony rolled his eyes.

“You’re still going to have to go to the meeting Charlie, you’re my PA.”

“What to take notes?” Clint scoffed. “You don’t care what any of those old windbags are saying anyway. And you don’t read any of the briefings, so why should I waste my time putting them together when we could both be doing something much more fun?”
“You’re a menace.” Tony shivered as Clint pressed his body close, licking a slow tantalizing stripe over the shell of his ear. “I promised Pepper I wouldn’t abuse my position as an authority figure, and I’m pretty sure taking advantage of my young unassuming new assistant was almost exactly why she made me promise that.”

“Maybe I like the way you take advantage.” Clint murmured huskily with a warm chuckle. Tony clutched him tighter, and the tom took a deep breath, dragging in his scent, and groaned lowly as if something had pained him. For a flicker of a moment, his scent darkened with something brittle. Something that struck Tony of guilt.

“Charlie?” Tony questioned, wondering at the sudden change. Had he misread the situation?

“Maybe I just like you.” Clint murmured darkly, and there was something desperate in the way he crushed their mouths together, but when he rolled his hips against Tony’s the heat of arousal drove those worries from his mind.

But then pain splintered through the pleasure, the pain of twisting muscles and cracking bones and his strength was fading, Clint’s voice along with it.

And then

*(Breathe friend)*

Another voice. A flush of new strength and the bedroom disappears, replaced by a wild forest and the sound of pounding hooves. He’s riding on the back of the volstagg Loki has gifted him, his hair whipping wilding behind him as the wind pushes at his face and he hollers into it with exhilaration.

They bound through the trees at breakneck speed, the feet of his mount swift and sure.

“Thor!” Loki calls behind him, a ring of trepidation in his tone. “Slow down you great fool! Before your mount stumbles and you break your damned neck.”

“Slow down?” he laughs into the wind. No. He will do anything but that. There is nothing to fear. There is only the power of the beast between his legs and the wide blue sky above. This is the best name day he’s ever had.

“You jest! Are you afraid brother? Be not afraid, for when your beast tires and I win the race I will tell no one of your humiliation.”

*(Breathe with me, Tony.)*

It went like that. The voices growing louder in his head, closer, and with each new addition his body growing stronger, that light brightening to pierce through the fog.

They come to him in turns, and he follows them, draws strength in the middle of their happiest memories until they tire and another has to take their place.

He performs under bright lights with Natasha and Clint, and rides the roller coaster on Coney Island with Steve.

He and Steve walk with Bucky through the streets of Brooklyn and they dance there in a club, alone in a crowd, eyes only for each other.

He laughs and plays card games with the other kats in the science department along with Bruce, and when they kiss Betty for the first time she blushes pink.
The pain begins to fall off him like rain. He’s aware of it, feels it still, but it does not seem so insurmountable.

Tony could weather it. Every storm passed eventually. This one would too.

Only, it was surging again, growing stronger as the voices of his friends grew quieter and the fog thicker.

(Please Tony)

The light in the fog flickered, growing brighter as a room appeared around him. The den of a country home. Familiar.

He’s a young boy. An aging man sits beside him. His inquisitive eyes are honey colored and they watch him carefully as his small hands attempt to glue the tiny part of the model airplane in place.

“Don’t press hard, or the whole thing might come loose” the old man warns, guiding his hands gently, and his brow furrows in concentration.

“Like this Grandpa?”

‘No’

Tony jerks away, and his chest explodes with pain. The room dims, once more swallowed by fog and he’s falling again, the knives slicing at him and fists beating at his body. He lets it happen. Pulls further away.

Not the boy. He doesn’t want to take from the boy.

But now he can’t breathe and the dark is creeping in. The sensation of falling deepens and the breath freezes in his lungs like ice. He thinks he screams.

(Breathe Ayeba. Breathe with me now.)

He dives, arms stretched and fingers curled like claws and falls right into his father’s arms.

“I am Maru! Destroyer of the seven tribes” he declares with his best roar as father chuckles and swings him back to the ground.

“You are a naughty child, who is supposed to be in school.”

Father has just come from the temple so he is still bare chested, proudly displaying the tattoos that declare him the mate of the Queen of the Panther Pride and King of Wakanda. He was not surprised by the sudden attack but then again, father is a very good hunter, even for a man.

“How did you know I was there?” He questions with a pout and father reaches to tug playfully on his ear.

“You think I don’t know my own child? It is languages today and I would be a poor father if I did not notice, that every time Teacher attempts to teach this one how to speak an any tongue but his own, he finds a way to disappear.”

He makes a face at the mention of the dour schoolmaster who teaches all the young children of court.

“Why must I? All the tribes speak Xhosa just as we do and we never leave Wakanda. What does it matter if I can speak English, or anything else?”
“It matters because you are a prince of Wakanda.”

“But T’Harun will be king one day. Not me,” he reminded father, though he did not know how it was possible to forget. T’Harun never let any of the other children forget.

“And you will be the Panther, just as my brother is. Do you think your uncle is less than I am?” T’Chaka scolded, pausing them right in the middle of the hall with a firm grip on his arm. It was still busy in this section of the palace at this time of day, the holy men trailing up from the temple with the visiting noble men and women from the other tribes.

Lady Ponka gave them both a curious look as she swept past them in the thick furs the Jabari tribe were so known for.

He flushed, embarrassed to be getting a scolding in public but shook his head adamantly in answer. His uncle T’Baru was a brave and mighty hunter and more than that, a very kind and wise man. He thinks the world of his uncle.

“If something were to happen to me before you and your brother are grown, it would fall to your uncle to lead our people. And he would do it well, because he was not a foolish kit who thought that being a mighty Alurio meant he could skip out on his lessons. Have you heard me?”

“Yes father, I’ve heard you.”

He just doesn’t think it will matter when T’Harun is king. That’s all. But he knows better than to say so.

“Good.” He keeps his eyes lowered in shame until he feels his father’s firm arm come around his back and he smiles as he is lifted into his father’s arms and nuzzled soundly as they begin to walk again. He’s going to be the Black Panther one day, as mighty a Hunter as his uncle, but he’s happy that for a few years yet he’s still small enough for his father to carry.

Up ahead a woman emerges from a corridor, her pearl white hair swishing across her bared shoulders, striped ears twitching as her eyes scan the hall.

“I see mother!” he whispers excitedly, pointing, and her ears twitch toward them. The scowl her mouth slips into when she finally sees them makes him shrink back against his father’s chest.

T’Chaka chuckles.

“I see Teacher has already told on you. Don’t worry, my little warrior, I will protect you from the wrath of our Queen.”

His father lowers him to the ground as mother approaches, the crowd parting for her like she is a great ship cutting through water. Father looks at her the way a man should look at his mate he thinks proudly. He looks at her like she is the sun, come to greet them all for the rise of another day.

“Hello, Ayeba,” Father greets her with a smile and a familiar endearment, and for a moment her gaze is soft for him as she returns his kiss, but she’s stern once more when she pulls away and at last speaks.

“The boy must be punished this time. Properly. And no ending punishment early because Shuri bats her eyes at you. They gang up on you and you always fall for it.” Her eyes finally move down to him and they make him hunch his shoulders in shame.

She reads his thoughts easily, as is her right.
“Yes, it is a shame that your father and I cannot trust you to your schooling and must receive endless complaints from your teacher.”

He flinches, the weight of her disappointment in him falling on his shoulders and it’s too much. She’s his Queen, and through her it’s as if the whole Pride is suddenly looking down on him and shaking their heads; but more than that she is his mother, and he does not like to think he has disappointed her.

Tears spring to his eyes and gaze softens. When she touches him, there is only love in the gesture and he can feel her forgiveness wrapping around him just as surely as her arms do, as snug as a Jabari’s furs.

“I only wanted to be with father.” He sniffs into breast and she nuzzles him gently, hands stroking the warm skin of his back.

“My sweet boy, who thinks with so much passion and not enough with caution.” She kisses his cheek and he hugs her tight. She rises with him, and he burrows against her chest, breathing in her wonderful familiar scent.

He can tell that she is serious again, thinking on his punishment as she says, “But you must learn caution if you are to lead our people, and your father is wise. It matters little who wears the crown. You are part of this family and thus the responsibility of leadership will come to you. One way or another.”

It is likely that he won’t be allowed outside to play with the other children for some time, and it upsets him a little bit, but he knows it will only be worse if he whines. He’s been naughty, and the right thing to do is to accept punishment when it comes. He doesn’t want to disappoint his parents anymore anyway. He loves them too much for that.

Walking beside them father chuckles. Leaning close to mother to press a kiss against his brow, tickling the boy’s whiskers.

“And we love you, my son. Unruly as you are.”

He grins widely, breathing in deeply, comforted by the familiar scents of his home and his parents that every breath brings.

And in a room far away, in another time and place, Tony Stark keeps breathing too.

Chapter End Notes

Up next: Tony's survived surgery (still breathing with us) and the Avengers have thrown themselves into navigating their new bonds and solving the mystery behind the mercenaries and Tony's stolen tech. Steve and Natasha are forced to delay their hunt for the Winter Soldier when the trail of the mercenaries leads to SHIELD's home turf in Washington. Back in New York, Tony struggles to juggle his responsibilities at the company, the new build on Resilience, and the welfare of the shelter kats up north who need growing room. Lucky for him he's got Clint and a possibly renegade royal to help out.
In the end you know it's gonna be me.

Chapter Summary

Tony survived surgery! What's a plucky young Queen to do but go out and claim new land and build a glorious new Pride? He's got the land and he's getting the people together. Now all he's gotta do is secure a helpful mate to help him manage it all, but Tony's got like 99 problems and the Winter Soldier is definitely one.

Chapter Notes

I am SO SORRY this took ages. It was meant to include Tony meeting Peter for the first time and the team getting called out to fight the mercenaries again but I didn't want to keep people waiting. If you're still here and wanting more of this story let me know. I am holding to my promise that as long as you're here I will do what I have to in order to finish.

The first time Tony woke after surgery he felt like a train had hit him and when Pepper appeared over him to push his hair back and through a tearful smile ask him how he was doing, he’d answered her by promptly passing out.

The second time he was woken by an increasingly loud and conversation so close to his head it could only have been inside it.

Heart rate is still steady, no reason he shouldn't regain consciousness. Don’t know that. He will... unless I made a mistake. Banner make mistake and killed tinman! Stop it. You don't know that, I did everything I- TINMAN NOT WAKING UP! IT’S YOUR FAULT!!!

Tony frowned, the harsh thoughts and the flood of overwhelming guilt that accompanied them pulling him further and further from the quiet dark until he was blinking his eyes open blearily.

At first he didn't recognize where he was, until he took in the silver gleam of the floor and the thick glass walls (that weren't actually made of glass). He was in what he’d nicknamed the "time out room", otherwise known as the panic room they'd built under the tower that was their best shot at keeping Hulk contained. A bunch of medical equipment had been set up in the corner and around the bed that Tony lay in. He wasn't surprised to find Bruce in the room with him, eyes fixed firmly upon a monitor as he kept a close eye on Tony's vitals, for it was his thoughts that had pulled him from sleep in the first place. His and the other guy's.

"Hey…” Tony forced out tiredly through his dry mouth and Bruce whipped around at the sound of his voice. “Don't be so mean to Banner Big Green. We like him remember?"

“Tony?” Bruce sagged with a grin full of brilliant relief and rushed to his bedside.
“How long was I out?” Tony asked fumbling for the bed rails as he attempted to sit up. The tom immediately rushed to help, placing hands gently upon his back and stomach for support. Tony hated waking up and not having Jarvis there to orient him. What day was it even? Why were Bruce’s thoughts still screaming so loudly in his head and what the hell was he doing down here?

“We were approaching sixty hours.” Bruce answered and Tony blinked in shock. He’d slept for nearly three days?

Seeing his expression Bruce chuckled. Though he fiddled some with the tubes still implanted under Tony’s skin, Tony knew he was only doing it to touch him. Bruce’s need to touch him was almost louder than his thoughts but Tony didn’t mind. He found an answering need swiftly rising up within him until it was as sharp as an ache.

“You had us worried, but T’Challa said it wasn’t abnormal.” Bruce murmured, his hands gently skimming over Tony’s arm, expertly avoiding his tubing and Tony purred at the contact. He was so focused on Bruce he hadn’t even noticed T’Challa approaching in the hall through the clear doors.

The tom was suddenly just there in the doorway, removing some sort of earpiece from one ear.

“It is common for our people to experience short comas after severe injury.” He explained as the doors locked shut behind him, compressing the air in the room once more. “It gives our minds a chance to heal and to focus on healing the body.”

Tony frowned. A three day coma might seem normal to the Alurio but it was wigging him out. Where was Natasha, he wondered, reaching for her. Bruce was here, and that was great but he needed to touch Natasha but – Tony frowned, panic beginning to surge within him once more as he was met with only silence.

"She's fine Tony. You made this room to block telepathy remember?" Bruce tried to soothe him, but Tony found it only marginally easier to breathe.

Right, after that first run in with Magneto and Emma Frost he’d outfitted all the safe rooms in the tower to be able to resist telepathic attacks. That answered why he couldn’t feel Natasha or feel any of the others besides Bruce but it didn’t tell him what the hell was going on.

“Why the hell am I in here?” he rasped out, and Bruce’s mouth tightened, his eyes glancing away as he searched for words.

But it was too late. What had happened while Tony was under the metaphorical knife seemed to leap out of his head, unfolding inside Tony’s brain clear and crisp as a Friday night picture.

Tony could see it all as Bruce remembered it: the lights flashing, the way that he Helen, and T’Challa had scrambled to keep up with the virus (keep it from killing him), the way they’d scrambled to keep him from killing his teammates as they dropped one by one, convulsed in violent seizures.

Tony’s face paled in horror and he jerked away from the memory. Bruce winced, gripping Tony’s hand tightly as if his withdrawal had pained him, but he refused to let go of Tony’s hand looking him square in the eyes he insisted, "It wasn't your fault."

Ha, Tony thought bitterly. He didn’t acknowledge the blatant lie.

"Are they hurt? Are they alright? Where-"

"Everyone is fine," Bruce interjected. "The seizures were minor. They could have done damage if prolonged but you sort of skipped around, always stopping just shy of doing real damage. It's like
you knew."

“I did know… “ Tony murmured bitterly. He had known. Those people in his dream had told him he needed strength or he’d die. So he’d taken it from the others.

“You took what was given freely.”

T’Challa’s smooth voice broke through the fog in his head and Tony blinked up at the tom who had come to stand beside the bed, opposite of Bruce. T’Challa left a good half a foot between them, as if sensing Tony’s skittishness, but his scent still filled Tony’s nose and his fingers curled tightly into the blanket covering his legs.

“You’re just saying that. We both know it isn’t true.”

“I never just say things.” T’Challa refuted him with a severely unimpressed chill to his tone, but his gaze softened and so did his tone as he continued. “It is true, we have the ability to take what we need from others at times and the Queen mind can take more than one can imagine; but that is not what happened here. Your friends offered you their strength because it was theirs to offer. And as Doctor Banner has already stated, you took only what you knew they could bear to lose.”

Tony bit his lip, staying stubbornly silent. Maybe that’s how it was supposed to work but Bruce and T’Challa hadn’t been there. They couldn’t know. Tony had heard their voices, seen their most intimate memories and fed off of their strength. He’d felt them grow weak but it wasn’t like he’d consciously decided to stop except for –

"The kid!" Tony blurted, suddenly remembering the cozy den, and Harley putting together a model airplane with his grandfather. "Harley is he-"

"He’s fine too.” Bruce quickly interjected. “I won’t pretend it wasn’t frightening when he started to go down but it stopped. Tony you stopped. You protected him." Tony all but sobbed in relief, shivering as he clutched the blanket tighter in his hands, twisting the fabric.

"I don't understand. What was all of that?! Was it Extremis?"

"It's you Tony.” Bruce replied softly, laying a hand over Tony’s where it was twisted in the blanket. “Or rather the Queen brain. I’ve had a chance to get further through the files T’Challa gave us. It’s amazing what your brain is capable of. Your psychic ability is off the charts.”

“It always should have been. Considering the amount of experimentation you were subjected to as a child your brains ability to prevent outside attacks and to self-heal was astounding by human standards.” T’Challa added. “But in comparison to healthy Alurio you were nowhere near where you should have been. None of you are.”

"I was riding the short bus?" Tony asked slowly, everything still sinking in. He still couldn’t believe what he’d done, the things he’d seen in that strange place. Which had to be real right? All those people those other Queen’s, they’d really been there.

“Well that's a first," he finished weakly and Bruce huffed a laugh, purring gently at the sight of Tony's smile, wane as it was.

"Yeah. Biologically we're pretty stunted..." the tom said with a sad wry little smile. "But that's changed now. That's why we secluded you. You now have a fully functional Queen brain with none of the training for it. Between that and your technopathy we thought it best to bring you down here.
We didn’t think machines exploding and accidently melting people’s brains was a good way for you to wake up.”

"Good call. But what about you? You shouldn't have risked it," Tony reprimanded but Bruce just shrugged.

"The team wasn’t going to leave you alone, and I figured the risks were lower for me. I belong to you… I think that’s the reason you protected us. You might not agree, but I think something in you knows that. I know you won’t hurt me."

"Well that's humbling." Tony muttered, tears welling in his eyes that he blinked away. "You sure know how to charm a guy Big Green."

Bruce smiled again, tender and almost shy and Tony couldn’t take it anymore, couldn’t stand the thought that he’d hurt Bruce and the others and that Bruce had still trusted him enough to put himself at risk. Just so he wouldn’t wake up alone. Tony reached for his collar, snagging it and pulling him in close, pressing their lips together and shuddering at the warmth that immediately flushed through him.

He could feel Bruce smiling against his lips as he kissed back.

“*I love you Jolly Green. But don’t take risks with your life like that.***

“*Can’t promise that.*” Bruce’s amused thoughts trickled through Tony’s mind. “*That’s just what happens in our line of work. You'd do the same for me Tony.*”

Guy had a point there, Tony thought as he pulled away with a purr, nuzzling Bruce’s cheek once more before finally releasing him. He supposed releasing him was the polite thing to do.

Tony looked at T’Challa, surprised to find that the other tom was smiling easily at them both. Given how snarly he and Steve tended to get around each other Tony hadn’t expected him to take watching Tony mack on another tom so well.

He should probably talk to Steve too, Tony thought absently, let him know that he and Bruce were kissing now. Well they’d always been kissing, and occasionally fucking, but they’d sort of been on hiatus since he and Steve became a capital THING. Would Steve mind if Tony wanted to continue cuddling and kissing Bruce, maybe even sharing the occasional heat again?

"What about you?" Tony turned toward T’Challa, corralling his wayward thoughts. “How come you’re here. Weren’t you scared I would turn your brain to mush? Seems an awfully big risk for a prince to take."

It was an insane risk to take, but T’Challa was still there and what with how loud Bruce’s thoughts were as they tumbled through Tony’s mind, the impenetrable silence coming from T’Challa was almost startling in contrast.

“Have you not wondered why prides form around a Queen?” Prince T’Challa asked with a hint of a smirk, unable to hide his pride as he said, “The Queen brain is the alpha predator and those who would be prey are wise to find a protector. I give my Queen fealty, and she protects me from other Queens who could make a meal of me. So you see Mr. Stark, if you wanted either my mind or my heart, you’d have to go through my mother, and she is a formidable woman.”

Tony didn’t consciously decide to test it. It was just who he was. Almost before the tom was finished speaking Tony had narrowed his focus on T’Challa, attempting to pry open his thoughts.
What happened as a result was hard to put into words. At first Tony only felt resistance like he was pushing uselessly against a wall. Then he felt a strange stinging sensation shoot across his sinuses— not overly painful, but enough to make him back hastily away. He swore he could hear the distant echo of laughter, as if someone floors up had left a television on.

He’d just been slapped on the wrist he realized. Scolded like a schoolboy.

Tony remembered again the Queen who had spoken to him and the memories he’d walked in, of the birthing chamber and T’Challa as a young kit—the magnitude of what that must mean sinking in. He’d taken strength from T’Challa. The Prince of Wakanda, who belonged to the Queen of the Panther Pride! Because she’d let him. She’d been there in Tony’s mind. Aware of him just as he was aware of her.

“Yeah, I think we’ve met.” Tony said with a swallow, unsure how to about the fact that he was in the debt of such a powerful stranger. “Your love life must suck.”

T’Challa’s smirk blossomed into a full-blown grin as the tom laughed, the corners of his eyes crinkling with mirth. Tony heard a purring sound a pleased thrill shoot through his belly, before he realized the sound was coming from him. As soon as he acknowledged the strange feeling, T’Challa’s gaze went just that little bit sharp, his whiskers twitching as his mouth curled into a fuller smile that reeked of smugness.

“On the contrary. Though in my youth I did attempt to sneak around, I have found that if they don’t have the fortitude to stand up to the scrutiny of my Queen generally it’s because they are not worthy.”

Tony glared at him and the tom just continued to grin, full of teeth. On the other side of him Bruce coughed into his arm, but if he thought Tony couldn’t read his amusement loud and clear over the bond he was an idiot.

“But it is your scrutiny we must worry about now.” T’Challa said, neatly switching the subject. “You will have to stay secluded, at least until you can once again form a mental barrier between yourself and the minds of others. Bruce tells me there is a human telepath who may be able to assist you with the changes you have undergone and help you gain the necessary control over your abilities.”

“Yes,” Tony replied, mind already racing ahead. “Professor Charles Xavier.”

“He is a human mutant?”

“Aren’t we all?” Tony shrugged.

T’Challa’s tail twitched in an irritated fashion but chose to say nothing on that topic, commenting instead, “Had you been born in Wakanda you would have been raised at court, where my mother would have taught you everything a Queen needs to know. I regret that I don’t know enough to help you in this area, but I will ask her for all that I can when I return home.”

“You’re leaving?” Tony heard himself ask before he could stop the words and he felt like kicking himself. What was the matter with him anyway? Just out of surgery or not it wasn’t an excuse to be pathetic. Of course the guy was leaving. He was the prince of a foreign nation, only there on a diplomatic mission. Just because he’d risked his life to help save Tony’s, made him tea so good it was practically a narcotic, and laughed at his jokes didn’t mean he was going to move into the tower and offer to braid hair.
T’Challa’s smile had faded and he didn’t look happy as he replied, “I must return for a time. I have obligations that cannot wait, and I must alert my Father to these mercenaries who appear to have stolen our technology.”

Yes. Of course, Tony thought. Resolutely pushing away the part of himself that wanted to droop his ears and start mewling plaintively like a kit who’d lost their favorite toy. He wondered if the mercenaries had struck again while he was out, but feared more that they’d faded away leaving a cold trail behind them.

As soon as he got out of this bed he’d have to make a trip to Queens and speak to the spider-boy, or whatever he was calling himself.

Maybe reading his thoughts because his barriers were still so shitty or maybe T’Challa had just gotten to know him that well, the tom frowned and reached for the hand Bruce wasn’t currently holding and said, “You still need to rest Tony, and no matter how badly you’ll want your pack close while you heal you must protect your mind and theirs by taking things slowly.”

Tony let him take his hand because his head still felt too big and too quiet and even with Bruce there his senses were still screaming that he needed to find his pack. But even now Bruce’s thoughts were completely open to him, kept leaping in and out of his head like a radio with bad reception and Tony was absolutely certain that he could rifle through everything Bruce had up there with barely any effort.

“You could. I can feel you moving around up there.” Bruce murmured in answer, confirming Tony’s suspicion that he wasn’t doing the best job keeping his own thoughts tucked away and wincing at the memory of pain on Bruce’s face when he’d pulled away from him earlier.

Right. The last thing his teammates needed was Tony fumbling around in their heads like some virgin on prom night.

“As eager as you are to see the rest of your team and as eager as they are to see you, you must be patient.” T’Challa advised with an air of regret. “I suspect, with your improved senses and the strengthening of your psychic abilities that many instincts that have previously lain dormant may now choose to wake. As a Queen, you’ll want to protect them by bonding with them, but you must remember you could do them more harm by rushing than waiting.”

Tony was never going to admit it out loud but T’Challa’s warm spicy scent and solid grip on his hand made the anxiety climbing inside him recede. Ugh. Look at him gentling for a tom like the world’s worst ‘happy kitten happy home’ instructional video.

The tom’s mouth tilted towards a smirk and Tony really wanted to jerk his hand away and hiss for good measure, except that would mean exerting energy and effort and giving up the comfort of his touch. So meh.

“Tell me you’ve heard me.” The tom insisted, squeezing his hand.

“Got it doc.” Tony relented with a sigh. “No more parties or spontaneous bonding until I’ve got this psychic thing under control.”

“And no pushing yourself to get out of bed and back to your lab before Helen and Bruce think you are ready. Unless there is another alien invasion, you must certainly not fly your armor. Promise me.” T’Challa gave Tony an insufferably knowing look and Tony could feel his hair raising in irritation and just hoped he didn’t look like a fluffball.
Bruce’s sudden coughing fit wasn’t any more convincing the second time around. T’Challa just smiled at him, all warm and fond like Tony was the most adorable thing since Hello Kitty became a thing.

“Gee daddy, do I gotta?” Tony grumbled and T’Challa’s eyes narrowed on him in a way that made his breath hitch and every muscle in his body freeze like a deer in headlights. The slow heated appraisal he gave Tony just wasn’t decent or right for when Tony was in a backless hospital gown probably looking like death gone cold and reheated; but there it was, that look, all sexy and dangerous just like the man it belonged to.

“I have heard that here in the west, it is not uncommon for lovers to refer to their partners this way. I didn’t think I’d like it, but please, continue changing my mind.”

Tony barked a laugh, cheeks flushing pink and heart picking up pace in his chest. By god was that humiliating. Not because of the joke but because it was him, Tony Stark, master of innuendo, lord of the silver tongue himself, getting carried away by the giddy swoop in his stomach and feverish delight.

“Keep dreaming Honeybunch.” He replied with a grin that looked as giddy as he felt and a faux flutter of his eyelashes.

T’Challa chuckled, shrugging lightly as he answered simply. “I do.”

Bruce coughed again, a real sounding one, and muttered as he shifted uneasily, “Maybe I should leave…”

“Never.” Tony answered glibly, squeezing his hand and T’Challa chuckled once more.

“Yes, I should be the one who goes.” And just as he had that night in Tony’s room Prince T’Challa lifted Tony’s hand to his lips and pressed a kiss against the back of his palm in the strangest most sincere gesture of respect that Tony had ever beheld.

“Sure hands to you Queen Anthony. Until we meet again.”

T’Challa let go of the hand he held and backed away. Tony couldn’t seem to help the way his body seemed to mourn the loss of contact but it and the strange longing he felt as he watched T’Challa exit from the room befuddled him.

Anthony? Nobody had called him Anthony since his parents died. He hated being called Anthony. Anthony was the name of a ruthless roman conqueror. The name of Howard Stark’s greatest creation. The name of a genteel, white collared, pampered kitten vying year after year for best in show.

For years Tony had done nothing but try and burn the memory of that man away. No more Anthony.

But for the first time, hearing his name said that way, Tony thought of the way that his mother used to say it. They way Jarvis would. Like he was something amazing and cherished. Like Anthony and darling would always be one and the same.

*~*~*~ Four Weeks Later ~*~*~*
YOU HAD BETTER EXPLAIN YOURSELF OR YOU’RE GOING TO BE IN FOR A NASTY HEADACHE THE NEXT TIME YOU TRY AND TALK TO MY SHIP.

Tony blinked, the message pushing itself to the forefront of his mind and Tony stiffened. He was using Extremis to access the net, test driving a set of new wireless robotics. The highly encrypted message had seemingly come from nowhere, targeted directly at the towers private servers which both Tony and Jarvis were tapped into.

Cautiously Tony began poking at it, decoding the encryption to find the messages origins. He relaxed when the puzzle unraveled without much resistance, leading back to a very familiar ship and her interface.

T’Challa had finally figured out a foreign system was communicating with his ship. Truthfully Tony was impressed. His mind might function like a computer but it didn’t leave the same trail behind it – at least if Tony was being careful it didn’t. The fact that he’d noticed at all and had been able to trace it back to him was rather astounding.

SO YOU FINALLY FIGURED IT OUT? LET ME GUESS, LUCKY GUESS?

YOU INSULT ME. I HAVE KNOWN FROM THE FIRST DAY. DAGGAR KEEPS AN ENCRYPTED LOG OF ALL COMMUNICATIONS. BUT I COULD NOT BE SURE IT WAS YOU AND YOU ARE HARD TO TRACK THIS WAY. OUR CHIEF ENGINEER IS INSISTING ON PLANTING A VIRUS TO SHOW THE ONE WHO DARES TO HACK A WAKANDIAN VESSEL THE ERROR OF HIS WAYS. I THOUGHT YOU DESERVED A WARNING.

Tony laughed gleefully under his breath.

ALL I HEAR WAS THAT YOU COULDN’T TRACE ME AND HAD TO GUESS.

YOU SHOULD HEAR THE SOUNDS YOUR SERVERS ARE GOING TO MAKE IN A MINUTE WHEN I UNLOAD THE PACK-MAN VIRUS.

Oh damn. That was right. T’Challa had sliced through the tower security like sliced cheese.

FINE. BUT SCORE IS STILL 2-1

I WOULD NEVER TELL A QUEEN HE WAS WRONG

HOW DO YOU SAY BULLSHIT IN WAKANDIAN? I WANT TO MAKE SURE THERE’S NOTHING LOST IN TRANSLATION HERE.

MO NIFE RE

Tony was about to send a response when JARVIS interrupted.

“Sir, I feel I should warn you that those words in the language known as Yoruba do not mean bullshit. And Captain rogers is attempting to cheat.”

Tony whirled around catching Steve mid move.

“You can’t move it there, Steve. That is totally not a move!”
Steve looked up from the game of checkers he was currently attempting to play with the mechanical arm that Tony was test driving and grinned, only semi guilty at being caught.

“There is no kitty corner skipping,” Tony insisted. Across from Steve, one metal finger on the hand of the robotic arm attached to a mannequin (with a Crayola drawn face thanks to Harley) jabbed a finger at the board where Steve had attempted to wiggle out of losing one of his pieces by making an illegal jump.

“And they say Captain America never cheats!”

"I don't see why I can't make a corner jump if we're gonna allow that stupid rule that your king can jump two spaces just because you reached my side of the board twice," Steve grumbled good naturedly, and just that was enough to make Tony smile despite the continuous buzzing of a headache in the back of his head.

Continuing to ignore it, Tony narrowed his eyes on Steve and pictured him moving one of his pieces into a place that allowed Tony to take two of his pieces in a row. Steve made the move – not thoughtlessly like a puppet on a string, but as naturally as if the thought had been his all along.

Grinning, Tony directed the robotic arm to snatch up his vulnerable pieces and whistled innocently. But he was counting on Steve being too observant and too good a tactician not to notice right away what he had done. Just in case, he’d kept his touch inside Steve’s mind light but not so light that he couldn’t sense him moving things around up there.

Sure enough, Steve scowled. A second later a checker was flying across the room to bounce off his shoulder and Tony broke into laughter.

Tony was still getting used to his new abilities and so was the team. The isolation rule had lasted about as long as his teammates could stand not seeing for themselves that he truly was awake, well, and that he’d come through the operation alright.

Natasha was there that very night (or at least what Tony thought was night without windows or clocks to keep track of time) apparently having guilted Bruce into letting her in while Tony napped. But as soon as she was through the doors his head was full of her thoughts and he was waking up, as desperate to see and touch as she was. Tony was as careful as he could be but like Bruce she could definitely feel him banging around up there. If she minded, it wasn’t enough to move and Tony had fallen back asleep with her curled on the bed beside him, her soft purrs rumbling in his ears.

Clint showed up in the early hours of morning, having figured out what Natasha was up to and had generally made a nuisance of himself banging on the doors and refusing to leave until Bruce finally gave up and let him inside. Steve showed up following Pepper and Rhodey that afternoon under the pretense that he couldn’t in good conscience let them go in alone because they were squishier than a super soldier, only to be exasperated to learn that the others had been there earlier and put themselves at risk.

When Thor had shown up with Harley not even pretending like he was there for any other reason but to see Friend Tony, Steve had nearly blown a fuse because Harley was ten, and did Thor have any idea what a risk this was?!

Tony called Steve a worry wart, but asked JARVIS to allow audio between the room and the hall and had talked to Harley through the intercom while the boy had pressed his face up against the (not) glass and drank him in with his eyes.

Teasing aside, Steve had been right to worry. Privately, though he still complained about it
outwardly, Tony was grateful for his sessions with professor Xavier. That first week Charles had stopped by daily to give Tony a crash course in keeping his shit together, but they’d tapered off to every couple of days and now to once weekly.

There may have been an alarming incident the first week when Fury had showed up to yell at him for experimental at home medical procedures, and he’d thought rather vehemently that the man should go jump off a bridge, and to everyone’s astonishment the guy had stopped mid rant and tried to jump out a window. Oops.

So it turns out that Tony has the ability to plant suggestions into people’s minds, so that they can’t tell their desires from his. He can manipulate memories and brain patterns, so that people forget what their kids look like or suffer violent strokes just because he’d like them to. The jury is out on whether that makes him a monster, but according to Xavier there’s like a telepath code that helps them preserve their humanity as well as their sanity.

1. Don’t go poking around in people’s heads unless asked, or in fear of danger. Privacy is nice and a human right and trust me, you DON’T want to know what everyone thinks of you.
2. Don’t erase and or manipulate people’s memories without their say so and even then, take caution. People are who they are because of their experiences, both good and bad. Trauma no matter how painful must be dealt with, not simply erased.
3. Don’t force your will on others. Duh. People are not toys.

Needless to say, Tony was ten times more curious now how the Alurio had been conquered by the Romans and why they had chosen to go into hiding rather than to simply go on a well-deserved killing streak of revenge.

But that was a mystery to solve for another day. Tony had more than enough on his plate hunting down the mercenaries, finalizing the line of smart prosthetic appendages he was working on as the first production to come out of Stark Resilience as well as organizing a fresh R&D team for the fledgling company that could eagerly as well as legally make the transition over to the island base of operations once the build was finished.

Which meant interviewing educated Gata applicants and reviewing their contracts with Pepper and his crack team of lawyers to assess the best way for Stark Industries to buy them. On the other end of the Resilience project, there was an ever-growing list of shelters and owners seeking an easy way to get rid of unwanted pets and strays in a humane fashion, that allowed them to feel better about themselves.

How nice that Snowball and Black Jack would get to spend the rest of their days on a beautiful Gata Reserve.

Tony and Pepper had to go through all of these names too, digging into backgrounds and searching for subterfuge of some sort. Tony didn’t trust Ross not to try and sneak in spies or otherwise try to sabotage their efforts on the island. That and there was a practical reality that they couldn’t take just anyone. At least not at first. It was perhaps a cruel reality, but a reality nonetheless, that to get their community off the ground they needed people with skills and talents to fill all the roles that would open up. They would also have to be relatively healthy and mentally sound. Unfortunately, the reality of the abandoned and abused of the Gata population was they were often neither.

While he was determined that Resilience would always provide shelter to Gata no matter how infirm, they needed others who were strong enough to carry those who weren’t strong enough to carry themselves. Which meant buying a shit ton of Gata away from their owners and trying to keep the others from realizing too quickly that slowly but surely they were losing their best and brightest.
“Did you get what you needed from me?” Steve asked, already rising from his seat and Tony nodded, grin fading. He could tell that Steve was anxious to get back to what he’d been doing before Tony had pulled him away from yet another strategy session in the ongoing search for Bucky Barnes. Truthfully Tony could have tested the prosthetics without him but they could both use the break and Tony was starting to feel his absence.

They were both there in the tower, but lately with everything they had going on, it was like they only really saw each other when they crashed into bed at night. If they made it to bed at night.

“Not nearly. Have dinner with me tonight and we can discuss it.” Tony murmured in answer with a cheeky grin, and Steve smiled back, but there was a distracted air to it.

“Any luck on the Winter Soldier front?” Tony asked, even though JARVIS kept him regularly updated on Steve and Natasha’s efforts in companion to their own. Jarvis was running every CCV and shaky cellphone camera through an algorithm designed to snag anyone who resembled Barnes based off a detailed face map Tony had put together from Natasha’s memory. Meanwhile Tony was slowly but surely picking his way through every computer he could get his mental hands on, running his sound matching program. In his head (hence the near constant background headache). According to the good doctors Bruce and Helen his brain is almost more computer now than he should be humanly comfortable with.

Steve’s not comfortable with it. He gets this look on his face every time he realizes Tony is using Extremis – like he doesn’t quite know who Tony is anymore. As for Tony, he preferred it this way. Less chance of fucking things up the less him he was.

“It’s frustrating. Cint was right about him being a ghost story. All we’ve found so far are threads.” Steve grumbled, his frustration and sadness calling to Tony. It was harder than ever these days to ignore the urge to bond.

Intellectually he knew all the very good reasons they were taking things slow and waiting to be sure before taking such a monumental step. But all Tony’s biology seemed to care about was that he loved the dude and by rights they should be making a home for themselves in every crack and cranny of each others minds. What gives with the hold out?

“We’ll find him Steve. Sooner or later he’s going to surface somewhere, and we’ll be ready.” Tony assured him. Steve mustered a smile in response but it was thin.

“And the nightmares. Have you had any more of them?” Tony prodded gently and the smile turned wan as Steve shrugged and glanced away.

“Hard to have nightmares when you don’t sleep.”

Tony’s heart ached at the admission, stepping closer into Steve’s space and wrapping his arms around his waist.

“Isn’t that my line?” Steve didn’t laugh at the joke but he slid his arms around Tony and breathed deep, taking comfort in his scent as much as he was the physical closeness. He needed this, Tony realized. They both did. It was one thing to know that Gata bonds were intimate, another thing to experience it.

Tony had always prided himself on being a strong independent kitten who didn’t need no flea-bitten tom, but lately… lately he just wasn’t right unless his teammates were close. His need to know where they were at all times was only surpassed by his need to know that they were well. The smell of them safe and happy, enjoying the comfort of his tower and his gifts just did something for him. Honestly
it was better than Nip.

But the itch of not being close enough, of leaving them vulnerably unbonded, was distracting and only growing stronger by the day.

Well, he was a big boy now. A fully functional Queen. Was there any point in waiting? What better way to get Pride Avengers truly off the ground than by bonding with his mate? Tony’s heart started to pound in anticipation as the thought took root.

“Hey so, I’ve got another couple of rounds of interviews this afternoon including the spider kid, but I was serious about dinner. We could both use a night off.”

And I miss you, Tony thought, but he honestly wasn’t trying to put pressure on Steve so he kept the thought to himself. There was so much going on he didn’t blame either one of them for getting lost in the soup. Steve seemed to really focus on him and a slow smile, much more genuine than the last, crept over his face as he leaned close.

“I’d like that. You sure you don’t need me or anyone else from the team there when you interrogate Parker?”

Tony wrinkled his nose.

“I’m trying to keep this from being an interrogation. He’s thirteen Cap. I can’t imagine doing what we do at his age. Kid’s probably scared stiff the government is going to realize he’s enhanced and have him put down. The last thing he needs is to have the Avengers ganging up to interrogate him.”

Steve nodded, accepting the logic even though he still looked concerned.

“Thirteen.” He muttered, still sounding as appalled as the first time he’d realized. “And we still don’t know anything more about his situation or how he got his powers?”

“It’s connected to OSCORP somehow. His sires were scientists, both belonged to OSCORP. When they died in a plane crash Peter was entrusted to his aunt and uncle but OSCORP still holds the right of ownership.”

“The mercenaries were enhanced too,” Steve noted. “And so far they’ve only targeted OSCORP. You think Osborn is trying to create more Gata Soldiers, don’t you?”

“Honestly the man’s a little unhinged so he could be up to anything, but yeah that’s my fear.” Tony admitted.

“That’s how you knew he was Spiderman. You’ve been watching OSCORP.” Steve realized, and Tony nodded.

Truthfully, Tony had JARVIS keeping an eye on the city, watching for anything that might be going bump in the night wherever his competitors were concerned. Spiderman just had a habit of popping up around OSCORP and once Tony’s interest had been piqued, discovering the costumed hero’s identity was as simple as catching the teen creeping into the upstairs window of the little brownstone he lived in with his aunt on a traffic camera.

“I want to help him. Whether or not he can tell us anything more about the mercenaries he fought, if he’s in some kind of trouble I want to help.” Tony explained. “I know Norman Osborn. He’s ruthless. He wouldn’t pay for a kit to go to school unless there was something he expected to get out of it. It doesn’t sit right, leaving a kit at his mercy. Super-powered or not.”
Steve didn’t say anything but there was a look growing in his eyes, one full of warmth and pride that made Tony’s heart flutter.

“Then we’ll help him,” Steve murmured, leaning close. He kissed Tony chastely, over and done far too quickly for Tony’s liking. So Tony grabbed him by the collar and pulled him back in, deepening the kiss.

“Bond with me,” Tony heard himself say. He totally hadn’t planned on saying that, but oh well. He meant it with every last fiber in his body. The feeling of yes finally screaming through him as Steve’s breath hitched and he pulled back in shock, just enough to peer down at Tony with wide blue eyes.

“What?”

“Bond with me, tonight.” Tony repeated, pressing up against his solid warmth. He rubbed his cheek against Steve’s shoulder and purred, loving the way his whole body lit up from the friction. Loving the way Steve smelled, all strong and willing and his. He wanted to get closer. It was taking everything he had not to sink inside Steve’s thoughts and stick to them like honey.

“Okay.” Steve’s voice was oddly quiet within the room, raspy and breathless, but his eyes were drinking him in with amazement. Tony purred louder in satisfaction and pulled Steve’s mouth back to his.

When they’d parted and Steve had pulled himself together enough to depart with a promise to see him later, Tony still couldn’t stop purring. There might even have been an honest to god bounce in his step as he turned back to his work.

“Sir? I feel I must remind you that Prince T’Challa advised that you take bonding slowly.” Jarvis, the world’s biggest mother hen chose that moment to rain on his parade. Tony made a face.

“That was weeks ago. It’s cool now. I’ve got it all under control.”

And Tony totally did. Other than that one slip with Fury he’d not melted any brains or caused any accidents. He’d successfully bonded with Bruce and Natasha even when he’d been psychically stunted so what could the danger be really?

“Be that as it may, Sir, you did promise to take caution. Perhaps it would be prudent to seek professional advice on the matter?”

Jarvis stressed the word ‘promised’ – because he was an engineered spoilt sport – and Tony couldn’t help the uncomfortable guilt he felt, or remembering holding T’Challa’s hand and breathing in his scent while he’d made said promise.

“Fine.” He grunted irritably. He would consult with T’Challa (the only professional on Gata bonds they had) and then make an informed decision on what he wanted to do next; and not because the guy was sexier than catnip and had asked him to, but because Tony was a perfectly well-rounded and well-reasoned adult. That’s why!

BONDING. CAN I DO IT NOW?

Okay, so maybe he had been a touch moved by the big brown eyes and the whole warrior tom schtick and was just a tad resentful. A tad.

T’Challa’s reply when it came was about as short as it was irritating.

YOU COULD ALWAYS DO IT.
I MEAN IS IT SAFE.

IT IS NEVER SAFE. AS FOR CONTROL, YOU ARE THE BEST JUDGE OF THE PROGRESS YOU’VE MADE WITH THE PROFESSOR. YOU UNDERSTAND THE RISKS AND YOU ARE NOT A CHILD WHO WOULD TAKE THESE RISKS LIGHTLY. ASK WHAT IT IS YOU REALLY MEAN TO ASK.

Tony fisted his hands snarling in irritation as he read the message over again. His first instinct was to think the prince was being condescending and calling him a reckless idiot, but his gut told him differently. T’Challa, even back when he was pretending to be a lowly medical aide, had never met Tony with anything but the frank expectation that he was a capable leader and would act accordingly. He wasn’t always gentle with censure when Tony dipped into the sort of behavior Pepper and Rhodey had always coined childish, but in a lot of ways Tony preferred that to the way his two oldest friends tended to coddle him.

Not to get it wrong. He needed that too. He didn’t know what he’d have done if Pepper and Rhodey hadn’t seen him for what he was and made a mutual pact to always put up with him no matter how broken he got. But even good things had their downsides.

It was refreshing that T’Challa didn’t presume Tony needed to ask his permission, or that Tony’s judgment on whether or not he was ready to attempt another bond wasn’t the best; and startling in a way he was not at all used to, having someone slice so cleanly through all of his layers of distraction to get right to the center of what was really bothering him. The man behind the curtain one could say.

IS STEVE READY?

It was galling to admit, but the question was burning at the center of him. That’s what Tony really needed to know. Did he truly see Tony for who he really was, want him for who he really was, and would he be able to put Tony and the Pride first before anything else? Or was Tony going to look inside of him, go reaching for his heart only to find that he truly belonged to Bucky Barnes?

If he did, was Tony strong enough to survive that? Was he strong enough not to lash out and punish Steve for what he couldn’t control, all because he’d rushed in asking for something Steve wasn’t ready to give.

And then of course, the biggest fear of them all. With Bucky alive would Steve ever be ready to give himself to a new Queen?

I CAN NOT SPEAK FOR YOUR CAPTAIN. BUT I MUST REMIND YOU, FOR BOTH YOUR SAKES, THAT IT IS NOT JUST A MATTER OF WHETHER OR NOT THERE IS LOVE BETWEEN THE TWO OF YOU. BEFORE YOU THERE WAS ANOTHER QUEEN AND THAT HAS REAL COMPLICATIONS.

I TOLD YOU ONCE THAT A QUEEN DOES NOT RELINQUISH WHAT IS THEIR’S, NOT EVEN IN DEATH. IF I SHOULD CHOOSE A MATE OUTSIDE OF THE PANTHER PRIDE, MY MOTHER MAY CHOOSE TO RELINQUISH HER HOLD ON ME TO ANOTHER QUEEN. SHE WOULD BE SAD AS ANY MOTHER IS SAD TO LOSE HER CHILD TO THE WORLD, BUT SHE WOULD TAKE COMFORT FROM THE FACT THAT WHETHER SHE IS LIVING OR DEAD I WILL ALWAYS BEAR THE MARKS OF HAVING BEEN HERS. I CAN ALWAYS COME HOME.

IF CAPTAIN ROGERS BELONGS TO BUCKY BARNES THEN YOU MUST ACCEPT THE FACT THAT BARNES MAY NOT CHOOSE TO VOLUNTARILY RELINQUISH HIM TO YOU. YOU MUST BE PREPARED TO TAKE, AND IF YOU LEAVE YOUR ADVERSARY
ALIVE YOU MUST ACCEPT THE FACT THAT YOU LEAVE A DOOR OPEN FOR BETRAYAL.

I HOPE I HAVE ANSWERED YOU WITH SINCERITY, AS ANY FRIEND WOULDN’T. BUT I CAN’T LEAVE YOU WITHOUT ALSO SAYING THIS. IT IS UP TO YOU WHO YOU GIVE YOUR HEART TO, BUT I WISH YOU DID NOT FEEL AS IF YOU HAD TO FIGHT SO HARD FOR WHAT YOU DESERVE TO HAVE FREELY GIVEN.

Tony quietly closed the link between himself and the ship’s computer and turned back to his work, unease churning together with fear and confusion in his stomach.

He worked silently and JARVIS knew him too well to intrude on his thoughts while he stewed on the problem at hand.

That was just bullshit. Right? At least he wanted it to be bullshit.

But T’Challa hadn’t said anything he hadn’t been wondering and putting together in the back of his mind since this whole thing started and he realized that Barnes must still be alive.

He reminded himself that Steve wanted to bond with him. Tony believed that much. He believed that Steve loved the team, and loved him, and wanted to be with him. Steve was as much a part of the team, his team, and Tony wasn’t about to give him up just because of an old bond forged in childhood. Natasha had loved Ivan but she’d still chosen him!

Steve was a big boy. He knew what he wanted. He didn’t have to be tied to Barnes forever just because they’d loved each other once. Why should Tony and the team have to let him go just because he’d met Barnes first, he thought bitterly.

But as swiftly as the thought came, guilt followed it.

Steve loved Bucky too, and wanted to be with him too. What had happened to Barnes wasn’t his fault, and he’d need Steve and all the help he could get if he was ever going to come back from that. That old bond wasn’t just any old bond. It was real love, and Tony couldn’t ask Steve to betray that love and ask not to be betrayed in the same breath.

There was a third option here, one that T’Challa had not mentioned though it was obvious to Tony with everything he now knew about Pride structure. Queens could peacefully coexist. They didn’t have to wage war on each other. Especially if Steve and Natasha would only end up as the battle ground. Bucky could become pride too. He could become part of the family. Neither one of them had to relinquish anything. But for that to work their had to be trust between them. Tony had to be able to trust that Bucky was as much his as the others were, and that he’d never try and take the Pride away from him.

Therein lay the trouble.

Tony doubted the Winter Soldier was in any state to make such promises or that Tony could bring himself to believe them even if he could.

He’d never known Bucky Barnes, but from Steve’s memories of him, Tony thought Barnes might understand what being Pride meant and want that for himself just as badly as Tony did.

He knew what had to be done here. It was probably going to suck.

Tony had to do it for his own sake as much as Steve’s, because Steve was not a battleground. He was Tony’s friend and mate.
If that wasn’t how the Queens of old would have done things, too bad for those guys. Maybe they could have learned a thing or two. After all their empires, save one, are all dust.

His is just getting started.

Tony took a deep breath.

He knew what he had to do.

He had to bring back Bucky Barnes.

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR HONESTY. BUT I THINK FAMILY IS WORTH THE FIGHT.**

**THEN I WISH YOU NOTHING BUT SURE HANDS ANTHONY.**

Tony smiled. He didn’t need T’Challa’s blessing but it was nice somehow still to have it. Tony felt invigorated. Ready.

The Winter Soldier might be a ghost story, but Tony had a fairly good idea now how to get his attention.

As for who the stronger Queen would prove to be. Time would be the truest test, but Tony didn’t believe in going into battle without the utmost confidence in one’s self.

“**JARVIS, appropriate theme music!**” he called out, waiting in anticipation as the A.I. left him in a moment of judgmental silence. And then the tiny sounds of 90’s pop music began to fill the lab and Tony threw back his head and laughed.
Chapter Summary

In which Peter Parker's life changes forever (again) Tony and Steve get their bond on and a wild Bucky appears, demanding to know who the hell he thinks he is.

Chapter Notes

Yay for fast updates. Here is the second part of what was originally last chapter. :) Thank you for your continued encouragement and support with this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Peter Parker had been in the fourth grade his class had taken a school trip to Stark Industries. They’d taken a vote on where to go, even though Mr. Hepburn their science had kept mentioning how great it would be for them to go to Oscorp and see everything they were working on there, Peter didn’t want to go there. Oscorp was pretty cool but Peter had been there a million times and had already seen the best things that Master Osborne was working on. But Peter couldn’t tell any of his classmates about the best stuff anyway and Master Osborne didn’t like reminding people in public that he was friendly with the Parkers.

The Osbornes said it wasn’t proper. Aunt May said it was bullshit.

Anyway, the whole class had just been going along with Mr. Hepburn until Peter had raised his hand and suggested they go to Stark Industries instead. Mr. Hepburn was just afraid of offending Master Norman because he donated so much money to the school so that Peter could go to school there, but everybody knew that Stark Industries built the coolest stuff and nobody could beat them. Not even Master Osborne.

Mr. Hepburn had been annoyed with him for raising his hand, but Mr. Hepburn had always been annoyed with Peter. He rarely called on Peter unless it was to embarrass him with one of the hardest questions and he made Peter sit by himself in a desk near the teacher’s desk so he wouldn’t bother the other kids.

This really annoying kid Eugene Thompson had groaned and complained that Peter only wanted to go to Stark Industries because he was a Kat. Eugene’s dad said that Tony Stark was overrated, took credit for the ideas of others and thought far too highly of himself. That had made Peter really mad and he and Eugene had gotten into a fight about all the things that Mr. Stark had invented that absolutely nobody could take credit for, and their classmates had jumped in too until even Eugene had reluctantly had to admit that Tony Stark was pretty amazing. For a kat.

With the whole class suddenly enthused about getting a chance to see inside Stark Industries Mr. Hepburn had no choice but to promise he’d try and arrange it. He warned them not to get their hopes up. Tony Stark was unreliable, prickly and not known to be a generous man. Not like Master
Osborne. Peter hadn’t cared what he or Eugene said, too excited about the chance to be close to his hero.

He’d barely been able to eat or sleep the days before and Uncle Ben had teased him, asking Peter if he knew what he would say to his crush when he met him. Which had made Peter blush and groan that crushes were gross.

Now, four years later waiting nervously in a non-descript but comfortable meeting room on the 103rd floor of Stark Tower, he honestly wished he’d given it some greater thought. Not that he seriously thought a guy like Mr. Stark would even look at him twice. A fel that amazing would never look Peter’s way even if he wasn’t old enough to be Peter’s dad.

Still, Peter wanted to say something to not come off like a total dweeb, so that when Mr. Stark inevitably realized somebody had made a mistake selecting him for an internship, maybe he would give Peter a chance and wouldn’t send him packing.

“Why didn’t you tell me you’d applied for an internship at Stark Industries?” Peter’s aunt May had asked the night before, after getting off the phone with Tony Stark. The Tony Stark. Peter had been in the middle of repairing the web shooter that had gotten fried when he’d battled those jerks in silver pajamas. He’d thought those electro-shock gun thingies they had were cool up until he got hit with one of them.

When Aunt May had come bursting into his room Peter had to choose between scrambling to hide his web shooters or the giant purpling bruise snaking up his right shoulder.

The sight of the livid bruising on his arm had been enough to distract her for a moment from the fact that apparently Peter had applied for a prestigious internship at Tony Stark’s brand-new tech start up, Stark Resilience without her permission. Long enough to send her on a rant about bullies and following him with a batt to school if the administration wasn’t going to put a stop to things. But not for too long, because most importantly in all of that Peter had applied for an internship at a competing company without Master Osbornes permission.

Here’s the thing. Peter totally hadn’t applied to Tony Stark’s internship program. Not because it wouldn’t be the most amazing thing to ever happen to him, but because he knew Master Osborne would never allow it. He was nice to Peter but Tony Stark was his biggest competitor and Master Osborn had been talking for years about when Peter was old enough to start working at the lab and take over his father’s job. Master Osborne had been so good to pay for his school and Uncle Ben’s funeral expenses, and the leftover mortgage on their house. How could Peter insult him by asking to go work for Mr. Stark?

But trying to explain to Aunt May that he hadn’t while coming up with some reason why the Tony Stark would be calling her personally to congratulate him, kind of flew out the window when she looked at him like she didn’t know whether to shake him or burst into tears. She got that look a lot since Uncle Ben had died.

“I know why you didn’t.” She’d said, fierceness waring with sadness. “Screw Norman Osborne. You let me handle him. I still think that Tony Stark is kind of a jerk. I get he’s up against a lot but a jerk is a jerk and you know how I feel about that; but if this is what you want baby then you should go for it. Don’t let anyone stop you from reaching a dream. Especially not Norman Osborne of all assholes. And don’t say asshole.”

He couldn’t say anything but yes when he’d seen how badly she wanted this for him, especially when he wanted it just as badly for himself.
But with less than twenty-four hours to come up with some way to prove to Mr. Stark that he belonged there, Peter was in a slight but sweaty panic as he sat in the empty meeting room, fumbling nervously with his visitors badge to keep from picking at the expensive couch he was sitting on.

As requested he’d brought his resume, a reference from his teacher (his current science teacher was awesome and a lot nicer than Mr. Hepburn had been) and an example of his work. His web shooters were by far the thing he was most proud of, and he really wanted to show Mr. Stark what he’d done but he knew that was too risky.

Master Osborne had made him swear not to tell anyone about the serum he’d been working on for years, and when one of the test subjects had accidently gotten loose and bitten him he’d warned Peter what would happen if the authorities ever found out he was enhanced. He was a black kat now, and that made him dangerous. They’d put him down, and he couldn’t do that to Aunt May.

He wondered if she was still bothering the receptionist out in the waiting room with a million questions. Probably, he thought with a smile.

His musings were interrupted when the door suddenly opened and just like that, the man who had been Peter’s hero almost his entire life was sweeping into the room with an apology for keeping him waiting that Peter barely heard.

There were so many things happening at once inside of Peter he couldn’t have formed words even if he wanted to. There were his natural nerves and the overwhelming surge of awkwardness and elation that came with having his hero right there; but he’d kind of expected all of that.

What he hadn’t expected was the smell that hit him as soon as Mr. Stark entered the room and the tingle that went up and down all over his body and itched in the back of his skull. It wasn’t bad. It was anything but bad. It was spicy and warm in a way that reminded him of Christmas and hot drinks before bedtime, but metallic and edgy too. Dangerous, like he was in the room with something wild, and it made the hair on his tail stand up.

His whole body perked to attention like they were taking roll call in gym class and his heart pounded just as nervously as if coach was about to single him out, except this time he wanted it. Mr. Stark would be impressed with how strong he was now, Peter was sure of it. And he could tap dance. He was the only boy in school he knew who could. But maybe Tony would be more impressed with how great he was at flips? He cold flip off the walls now! Maybe Tony would smile at him and tell him he wasn’t bad, just because he wasn’t tame. Did Peter smell like that? Peter didn’t think anybody could be bad who smelled like that.

“You are Mr. Parker, aren’t you?”

The sound of Mr. Stark’s slightly amused voice broke through his stupor, and as the man stood there with hand extended waiting, Peter realized what an idiot he was being and leaped to his feet, snatching the offered hand.

“Hi! Yes. Yes, I’m Peter. Peter Parker Mr. Stark. It’s, uh, very nice to meet you.”

“Great why don’t you have a seat Peter. Make yourself comfortable. And call me Tony.” Tony suggested nodding to the seat Peter had abandoned. “Did you bring your work sample?”

“Oh yes Mr- I mean Tony.” Peter scrambled to get the zipper open on his backpack and then carefully remove the robotic arm he’d made with Ned for their Eighth-grade science final that fall.

He handed it carefully over to Tony, nerves jumping in his stomach and watched as the engineer
gave it maybe a second or two of a look before passing it back.


Tony paused, looking at him expectantly. Peter’s head was spinning. Did he like it? Peter couldn’t tell. Tony moved and talked even faster in person than he did on the TV.

“Uh… do you have Thai?” he asked hopefully, thinking of the restaurant he and Aunt May liked.

Without missing a beat Tony called out loudly to someone named Jarvis, asking for an order from someone named Kang.

“Some massaman curry, larb, and the braised soft crab. Double our usual tip if they can get it here in twenty minutes.”

Twenty minutes. Delivery was never that good Peter thought.

He jumped when a disembodied voice confirmed the order and Mr. Stark, that is Tony grinned at him, proudly proclaiming that the voice belonged to his A.I.

“I heard about that!” Peter explained, clutching his portfolio tightly in his excitement. “Is it a real learning system?”

“I am indeed Mr. Parker.” The A.I. JARVIS answered. “Though I don’t know if it is necessarily accurate to assign me a gender, I have found I prefer the designation of he over it.”

“Yeah I get that. Sorry,” Peter apologized, wincing at his blunder. “I hate when people call me it too.”

“It’s quite alright Mr. Parker.” JARVIS answered, and Peter thought he sounded a shade warmer.

“So, you keep up with the science journals I see.” Tony said, drawing Peter’s attention from the ceiling and Peter nodded.

“Yeah. My dad was a scientist. He even got his doctorate after they ruled that exceptional Kat’s could be considered.” Peter felt himself blushing, even as he continued to smile hesitantly at Mr. Stark. Dad had always told him that it was because of Tony Stark that Kat’s had started being admitted into colleges, and had gained access to high level certification programs. He used to read to Peter from Forbes and other journals about all of Tony’s accomplishments. He’d always said, that it was worth putting up with the bullies and the snobs at school because one day Peter could do great things too and help make things even better for other kids.

“I take it he’s not around anymore.” Tony inquired gently.

“He died when I was five.” Peter confirmed with a small shrug.

“He belonged to Norman Osborne, but Osborne gave you over to the care of your aunt and uncle.” Tony stated factually, and Peter blinked in surprise. How had Mr. Stark known that? His wariness must have shown on his face because Tony gave him a very serious look and said. “I look into everyone who comes to work for me Peter. Especially those I intend to work closely with.”

Peter’s eyes widened. Oh wow. He’d expected that as an intern he’d be working on the bottom floor somewhere under some over worked PHD in Research and Design.
“Do we get to work on the suit!” he blurted, and Tony rolled his eyes heavenward.

“Yeah, the President of the United States doesn’t even have clearance to touch my suit, so no. You’ll primarily be working on design theory for medical tech and maybe if you’re savvy enough, some low-grade weaponry for the Avengers team. Stark Resilience as a startup will be a very intimate team of Researches and Developers headed by myself—” Peter’s mouth fell open and Tony hesitated. “I’m a busy man though, so naturally there will be some delegating. You expected that right… you’re not going to cry or something are you?”

“No! No, it’s just that this is so cool. This is… this is –” Peter grappled for words and blinked away the onset of tears he’d just promised Tony weren’t coming – he refused to blubber like a helpless kitten in front of the guy who’d fought off terrorists and aliens. But it was clear now more than ever that a mistake had been made, and Peter just didn’t feel right, not telling him the truth.

“It’s great. It is, it’s just that you’ve got it wrong. Mr. Stark – Tony, I mean. Tony, I never applied for your internship.” He admitted with a forceful swallow. It felt like there was a lead weight in his stomach, dragging his insides to the floor. This was the single suckiest moment of his life.

“I’m not… I’m not smart enough to come work for you. I’m just a kid.”

Tony gave him a long considering look, like he was assessing him for flaws in his code and Peter shrank back into the chair embarrassed and ashamed. Why had he thought he could pull this off? He should have told Aunt May right away somebody had made a mistake.

“I’m only thirteen.” He admitted on a mumble. Maybe there was some other Peter Parker somewhere who had applied. Some college kid who had worked really hard and deserved to be where Peter was sitting. Except… Tony had known about his dad and Aunt May, he thought a moment later, confusion waring with disappointed certainty that somehow there had been a mix up.

“First off.” Tony began slowly but Peter didn’t dare look up, afraid that Tony would see the stupid tears stinging his eyes. “It’s an internship. It’s training wheels. I expect you to make reasonable mistakes. Even the occasional stupid one. Secondly, I know you didn’t apply but I’m really confused where you got the idea you weren’t smart enough.”

“W-what?” Peter’s head jerked up. Tony knew he hadn’t applied. Then how –

“You’re an A student. You’ve been pre-accepted into Midtown Science Academy next year. How smart do you think you have to be?” Tony interrupted his jumbled thoughts and Peter gaped at him. He was beginning to realize that something very weird was going on. Mr. Stark knew too much about him, and had just admitted to inviting Peter here even though he knew he’d never applied.

What did he want? Peter wondered nervously, clenching his fists behind his back pack. He and Master Osborne were rivals. Maybe he was trying to dig up information on the serum.

“Yeah well, that’s mostly because of Mr. Osborne. I’m a kat, my teachers just go easy on me because they’re afraid of losing his money. There’s nothing special about me at all.” Peter lied, setting his jaw stubbornly. Tony snorted, rolling his eyes again and reached inside his suit for his phone.

“Really?” he asked presenting the phone, where Peter noticed with dawning horror a clip of him in the Spiderman costume he’d made taking out a pair of thieves in the subway was playing.

“Cause I kind of figured the whole spider boy thing was pretty special. But I guess I should have realized Norman made that sticky web stuff I found so genius.”
“Master Osborne didn’t make that!”

Peter heard himself spit out the truth before he could stop it. It was like he was just vomiting words. He couldn’t help it. The way Tony was looking at the clip of him fighting those bad guys like he was something amazing and he’d just called his webbing genius. Peter’s ears were standing straight up, dizzy delight rushing through him in a brilliant jolt as Tony smiled at him, but the euphoria was followed by terror at what he’d just admitted.

“I m-mean I don’t think he did. He S-shows me and Harry a lot of his stuff and I’ve never seen…” Peter fumbled to explain but he trailed off meekly when Tony tapped his phone and another clip started to play, this one showing Peter swinging onto the roof of his house and crawling into his bedroom window.

Oh. This was bad. This was very bad.

“Please don’t tell anybody.” Peter pleaded, finally looking up at Tony despite the fear he felt. He had to make him understand. “T-they’ll kill me or take me away, and I can’t do that to my aunt. I’m all she has.”

Tony frowned, leaning down to place a steadying hand on Peter’s shoulder. The warmth of his hand seeped through Peter’s shirt and his strong comforting scent washed over him. Peter suddenly remembered being young and cuddling up with his parents on the rug, surrounded by their scents as he fell asleep to their gentle purrs.

“Hey kid, look at me.” Tony’s soft voice entreated, and Peter looked up, biting back the urge to cry.

“Nothing about you is broken. I would never turn you over to them.” Tony swore with such venom that Peter believed every word, a shiver going down his spine.

“But I need you to tell me the truth. Is Norman making you do this, the whole Spider boy routine?” Tony asked gravely.

“It’s Spiderman!” Peter insisted through the hot sting of tears before shaking his head glumly. “And no. He was there when I got bit by the spider, but he never told anyone.”

“Was he experimenting on you?” Tony demanded, his scent going sharp with danger in Peter’s nose and he hastily shook his head.

“What?! No. I told you it was a spider. It got loose when he was showing me something in the lab and I got bit. That’s all I can tell you, but it wasn’t his fault. Master Osborne wouldn’t hurt me!”

Tony looked skeptical.

“But I bet he doesn’t complain now that he’s got you guarding his labs.”

Peter frowned. Master Osborne had never specifically asked Peter to keep a watch over OSCORP but Peter knew how important the serum Master Osborne was working on was. He said it could change the world. Cure illnesses. Fix it so that Kats weren’t broken anymore. Just like the bite from the test spider had fixed Peter.

“I’ve known the Osbornes a long time.” Tony informed him conversationally, swishing his long beautiful tail lazily behind him. “There probably aren’t a lot of people left that remember your Grandfather Nathan Parker used to work for old Alton Osborne as a driver, or hearing of a scandal involving Alton’s son Amberson cheating on his wife with some woman who nobody ever learned the identity of.”
Peter swallowed, saying nothing. Tony was right. Most people didn’t know that stuff, except for some of the old ladies who had lived on the block forever. Mrs. Krentz still liked to gossip about it sometimes while she knitted on her porch and Peter played with her cats.

“There was plenty of gossip about Amberson Osbornes bastard son once upon a time,” Tony continued. “But nobody ever came forward with any proof and so the story became nothing but rumor and myth, the way these things do. As for the real story, it was probably way more boring than any of the gossip ever gave it credit for. Right Peter?”

Tony’s eyes were boring into him now.

“Alton Osborne didn’t have his son’s bastard drowned in a sack or anything half so wild. He simply did what the wealthy always do with their mistakes and hid it under the rug. That rug being his oldest friend and most loyal employee, Nathan Parker.”

Grandma and Grandpa had been getting on in age, Peter remembered his parents telling him. His uncle Ben, their only child, had almost grown up by then. So people thought it was a little strange for them to take on an infant kit, but nobody had questioned the situation when Nathan had brought home Peter’s father claiming he was a gift for Grandma, who had always wanted more children but struggled after having Ben.

Grandma and Grandpa had loved dad and treated him like a son, no different from uncle Ben. In return the Osbornes had always made sure that the Parkers wanted for nothing. Though the Parkers had insisted on living simple in their little house in Queens, Richard had been given the best tutors and an instant playmate in his half-brother Norman.

Peter had always liked hearing Master Osborne’s old stories about his father.

It was nice to think of his dad and Master Osborne goofing off and getting into trouble just like he and Harry did.

Master Osborne was kinda complicated, but he’d loved Peter’s dad. Enough to give him a real job at OSCORP long before anybody else was doing it. Enough to buy Peter’s mother when Peter’s father fell for her, and to allow them to raise Peter without much interference in their own residence.

He’d paid for Peter to go to school and always showed interest in his progress and never stopped him playing with Harry. He and Aunt May were still always invited for the big New Years charity gala the Osbornes always held, and Peter only had to wear the leash Harry had got him before dinner when everybody was still hung up on making the proper impression.

“Don’t tell anyone.” Peter repeated, because it was clear that Tony knew everything. Had known it all along. “I’ll do whatever you want.”

“I only want to know one thing.”

“What?” Peter asked hesitantly.

“Why do you do it? Spiderman. If Norman Osborne isn’t making you, why put on the suit?”

Peter frowned, taken off guard by the question. He thought about it for a moment and finally tried to explain it the best he could.

“Because bad things keep happening to people… and when you’re strong and you can fight back, and you don’t, then they start to feel like your fault.”
Peter’s uncle Ben had always said everybody had a responsibility to help others when they could. It was scary sometimes. Like when Uncle Ben and Aunt May had taken him to the Stark Expo for an early birthday present and those robots had attacked. He’d been so scared, and he couldn’t find his aunt and uncle anywhere in the chaos and suddenly he was alone, and that robot had been coming for him.

Maybe it thinks I’m Ironman he’d thought, and it had made him feel bolder. He’d realized that the robots couldn’t see how scared he was behind his mask, or smell him. They didn’t know he was just some weak kit, and not just as brave or strong as Ironman.

He’d stood his ground even though that thing could have pulverized him and then the thing was suddenly just a smoking pile of rubble and the real Ironman was there, congratulating Peter for his good work.

That had been the first time. Peter had been doing his best to stand up despite how meek he was ever since, and since the spider bite, things had only gotten easier. The fear couldn’t cripple him anymore.

“Yeah. I can understand that.”

Tony was smiling down at him Peter realized as he looked up at the fel once more. There was something kind of sad in it, Peter thought, but mostly it was the quiet pride he noticed – because the sight of it made something hot and bright swell in his chest like a balloon. Blinking his eyes dry, Peter straightened up and held his head high.

Because Tony understood. He and Peter were alike. He’d just said so!

“I’m gonna be an Avenger someday.” He blurted, cheeks pinkening with embarrassment but he held Tony’s gaze to show him he meant it. It was what he wanted. He’d known he’d wanted to fight by Tony’s side ever since he’d seen that first battle on the television when he’d killed Master Stane in front of the entire world and admitted it later with three life changing words. I am Ironman.

“I’m getting that picture yeah,” Tony replied with an easy smile, and Peter’s face broke out in an elated grin but before he could even ask Tony was shaking his head and stating firmly, “but here’s the thing. You’re thirteen. I’m not going to pretend like I can stop you putting on that suit, but I am going to put training wheels on you, and you’re going to let me because you’re a smart kid who realizes that he’s got a lot to learn, and sometimes it’s okay to take a back seat and let the trained people handle these things.”

“You’re gonna train me to be an Avenger? You really mean it!” Peter stood up, voice ringing shrilly with excitement in the room as he blinked up at Tony in astonishment. He couldn’t believe it. Did Tony really mean it? Was he really going to let Peter be a part of the Pride? Would it be like the stories his parents had always told him? They’d be one big family who protected each other. They’d protect the city too, because it was theirs. They’d hunt down anything that tried to hurt them or the people who lived there and they’d build incredible things until there was no place like their home in the entire world.

Tony laughed, as if he could read all of Peter’s whirlwind thoughts and put a hand on his shoulder again.

“Slow down fierce and mighty hunter. Remember what I said about training wheels. We’ve got to take this one step at a time.”

Tony pinned Peter with a rather serious look and continued, “First things first, you and I need to have a talk about what happened that night at Oscorp. It’s important that the Avengers catch the
thieves before they can hurt anyone. You do know why, don’t you Peter?"

“They were kats. Black kats.” Peter admitted quietly, shoulders slumping. Feral kats, like Peter. Like Tony. Dangerous.

“That doesn’t make them bad Peter.” Tony said, seeming to read his mind again and Peter stared up at him with hope. Did he mean that? Or was he just saying it to make Peter feel better about what had happened to him?

“People do things, sometimes violent things when they feel it’s the right thing. Like the police who protect the city, and the Avengers.” Tony said, and Peter thought, like me.

“But to some people, you and I are just animals. We’re not people enough to make the choice between right and wrong and when it’s necessary to fight to save ourselves or others.”

“I’m not an animal.” Peter responded adamantly, thinking of all the times someone had said he was. Mr. Hepburn. Eugene. That mother in the park who wouldn’t let her kid play with him and Harry because Peter wasn’t wearing a collar.

What if he bites?

“So they try and take our teeth, and when that doesn’t work they put us down.” Tony finished in a grave tone. “I don’t know what those guys were after. Maybe they were bad. Maybe they’re trying to help themselves or somebody else, but either way if the Avengers don’t get a handle on the situation and somebody gets hurt, a lot of Gata are going to suffer. Do you understand?”

Standing at attention once more, Peter nodded. He did understand.

“Yeah, I do. How can I help?”

“Sir, your order has just arrived and is on its way up,” JARVIS interjected in that moment and as if on que, Peter’s stomach rumbled.

“Send it in. And send unreasonably hot aunt up in ten, won’t you Jay? We can’t leave her starving in the lobby.” Tony winked at Peter, and clapped a companionable hand on his shoulder.

“First let’s get you fed. Then we can worry about saving the day.”

~*~*~*~

It was late when Tony made his way up to the penthouse. By rights he should have been exhausted by the time he and Pepper wrapped up the last meeting of the day (a video call with the Forman in charge of the build over on the Island) as it was fifteen after nine in the evening and past decent dinner hour.

But the minute Tony started thinking about the possibility of bonding with Steve his heart started to pound, and he could barely restrain how eager he was. In truth he and Pepper had so much more to do they could have stayed at it all night, but she got tired of Tony’s twitching and longing looks toward the door and finally called it quits.

“It’s good to see you happy for once, but it’s terrible for business. You’re useless to me like this.”
She’d teased before shooing him from the conference room and Tony had happily obliged.

He’d asked JARVIS where to find Steve and had been informed that Steve was waiting for him in the Penthouse with dinner.

From the smell as Tony stepped off the elevator, Steve had made his killer spaghetti. Which he made from actual tomatoes and shit because that’s how Lula somebody had taught him to make it and they didn’t have the canned crap back in his day. Whatever, the point was it was delicious and there was something incredibly nice about getting through with a long day of work and coming upstairs to the smell of a meal and your very own barefooted super soldier.

“Hey Honey, I’m home.” Tony called out from the door as he kicked off his shoes, because he was a master of wit, and Steve stuck his head out from the kitchen and smiled at him.

“Hey Tony,” Steve greeted back, all soft and fond, and whatever appetite Tony had previously held for actual food slipped away as he took in the sight of him.

It had never been clearer to him how much he wanted this. Not specifically Steve barefoot and cooking in his kitchen (he wasn’t a Neanderthal) but everything the moment represented. His cold empty penthouse filled with their scent and the smell of rich tomato sauce. Steve’s shit scattered around and mingling with his, his shoes lost somewhere.

The only thing missing was Natasha, sitting with legs folded in the lazy boy while she pretended to do serious work on her phone, but was actually driving the internet trolls wild decimating their scores in Candy Crush. Clint lazing on the couch watching some trash program with a bowl of fruity pebbles, probably complaining about the fact that JARVIS had stocked pebbles this week instead of fruit loops or some shit. Bruce sitting beside Helen, discussing some new theory and trying not to look smitten. Harley sprawled on the floor with his school books, trying to explain the nature of homework to Thor.

And kits. Tony’s imagination supplied, his gut twisting with longing. Beautiful girls with Natasha’s red hair, and a bunch of wiry little imps with Clint’s energy scratching up his floors and ruining his rugs with their untrimmed nails.

Jaime, he thought, the faceless children taking shape in his mind, becoming the ones he’d seen in his dreams. Jaime with Steve’s blue eyes and stubborn mouth. Nyota, spunky and quick witted, quick to find mischief, bold and brave like her namesake and full of sarcasm and a thirst for adventure. She was so much like T’Challa Tony realized sadly, that ache of longing only deepening within his chest.

Was she his? Tony wondered. In some future where Bucky Barnes had never become the Winter Soldier and T’Challa wasn’t tied to the crown of Wakanda, could that beautiful little girl have been his?

Stay in the moment, he reminded himself. The future will be whatever you make of it. And this right here, this beginning with Steve and the team. It was good too. Just right.

Like a magnet, Tony went to Steve and kissed the man. He had to push up a bit on his toes, but Steve leaned down to meet him, the motion seamless. Steve’s mouth tasted like welcome, and Tony smiled against his lips, heart thudding wildly.

“I don’t think I can eat.” Steve admitted quietly when they parted, staring down at him with wonder and Tony nodded in agreement. He wanted to be bonded with him. Yesterday.

Wordlessly Steve reached over to turn off the stove and Tony took his hand drawing him towards the
bedroom. When they were inside and Steve had closed the door behind them he turned into his arms, and just as before Steve met him as if he’d anticipated the move. They moved in sync, extensions of each other and Tony purred in delight as Steve’s warm mouth moved against his, pouring out his passion.

The scent of him was dizzying but Tony struggled to stay focused, because it was important that he warn Steve before they started. Steve had to know what might happen. Tony moved his head, kissing the side of Steve’s jaw before leaning back, placing a stilling hand on Steve’s chest to put a temporary halt on things.

“What?” Steve asked, blinking kind of sleepily, like he was coming out of a daze. But his eyes were clear once more and intently focused on Tony as he asked, “Tony what’s wrong?”

“You were bonded with Barnes. And now you want to bond with me- ” Tony began and Steve gripped him tighter, pulled him closer and interjected, like Tony was trying to say they should just forget it.

“Tony, I told you. I loved Bucky, and he’ll always be important but that doesn’t make what you and I have less important to me.”

“Shh, I know.” Tony chuckled, shushing Steve’s protests with a pat of his hand. “Thanks for that, but you’ve got to know before we start that it’s not just about us. This whole bonding thing has real physical consequences. Bucky’s a part of you, and he might not be as keen about making room for me as you are. We’re going to go slow and I’m going to be as careful as I can. I just didn’t want it to take you by surprise.”

Steve considered his words for a moment and Tony could tell when it dawned on him, the full implications of his bond with Bucky.

“Both of you are going to be in my head at the same time. You can talk to him.”

“Theoretically so could you. You’re already talking to each other through these dreams you’re having.” Tony pointed out. “Everything Natasha remembers about Ivan points to the fact that they tried to rip that out of him, make him some sort of super-tom, but he’s still connecting with you both. He’s been through a lot of shit, but Barnes is a Queen. We’re hard to break.”

“Yeah, you are.” Steve smiled at him, it was full of pain, but pride and admiration too. Gratefulness. Tony leaned into him, let the taller man wrap his arms around him.

“Look at the timeline. I took Natasha and he started jumping around in your heads. I’m betting good money he’s not going to take it lying down when I try and take you. Which is fine, we need him awake if we’re going to find him… but this is new territory.” Tony warned, bunching his hand in Steve’s shirt. He didn’t want to think about all the things that could go wrong, playing tug-of-war in Steve’s mind but he had to.

“One of us could get hurt.”

“I trust you.” Steve said, and Tony breathed a small sigh of relief. He was still anxious, still so wary of opening the Pandora’s box set before them, but it gave him courage to know that Steve was with him, and trusted him to do his best to help bring them closer and to bring Bucky back.

“Are you ready?” Tony asked, gently placing his hands on either side of Steve’s skull. He was trembling, but his voice was steady, and Steve was staring steadily back at him with so much trust. Tony had the wild urge to run. Abort mission. You’ll only fuck it up. But he couldn’t run. He knew
that. No more running away from his problems.

Steve turned his head, kissing the inside of his palm. It was all the answer either of them needed.

Tony closed his eyes and felt Steve’s mind opening to him. He let himself sink inside.

~*~*~*~

It’s clearer now than it has ever been. Who Steve is. Who Tony is. How they can be one and the same.

They are small and skinny, laying in bed with a terrible fever. A violent cough rattles through their chest and every breath is a struggle.

Ma leans over them, keeping them cool with a wet rag, trying to fight the fever. She doesn’t cry or fret, just urges them to keep breathing and praises them for every breath taken.

“There’s a good boy. My brave beautiful boy.”

Tony watches Sarah Rogers fight to keep her child alive and feels his heart open. He feels himself under her hands and meets her eyes, shivers and coughs under their steady and fierce devotion.

He embraces the pain of the memory, grateful it has become such a part of him. Steve will always love her, and now they will love her together.

They’re still small but different. Still one and the same. They’re in a kitten bed, their body shuddering through painful seizures. Mama is curled up beside them, holding them through the worst of it. Jarvis is standing by with wet rags and a bucket to catch the spittle and sick they occasionally vomit.

“My baby. My baby,” mama wails as she rocks him. “What did Sir give him?”

“I’m not sure. But Anthony is not reacting well...” Jarvis laments, a deep sadness heavy in each word, full of an old bitterness that speaks of self loathing. His hands are gentle as they cradle (their) head.

“Keep his head up, Maria. We don’t want him to choke.”

Steve is there with him, through the needles and the fevers, the sick and the terror. He’s there with Jarvis and Mama and despite the pain, Tony is glad to share this too.

It’s not all pain and misery. As they wrap around each other, tighter and tighter, the good things come. The things that gave them joy and strength.

Walking home from mass with Ma.

Read me another story Jarvis.

Sneaking into a Dodger’s game.

They meet Bucky on a military base. He’s just a dying experiment to those people, but to them he’s just like them. A boy struggling for his next breath.
The kit in the cage stares blearily back at them with hazy blue eyes, filled with sickness and pain and they press their face closer to the glass.

“Don’t worry Bucky. Ma’s gonna fix you up and then nothing bad is ever gonna happen to you again. I promise.”

They meet Tiberius Stone at a pageant show. He stops some bitchy fel from picking on them. Sunset is right, they’re awkward and gangly with none of the beauty and grace of some of the other contestants. They should have practiced harder, but they hate the pageant shows. They’d rather be at home working on one of their inventions. They’re going to mess up and embarrass themselves in front of everybody and then Sir will be pissed.

“Nah, you’ll be fine. Even if you mess up just keep smiling. Cute kitten like you? The judges will eat it up.” Ty assures them with a wink and they blush.

They’re blushing, hot blood stinging their cheeks, and Bucky is cackling at them.

“You do like her! You’re sweet on Linda Jane!”

But Bucky has it all wrong. It’s not Linda Jane and the love note she’s given them that has their heart racing or the blood so hot in their cheeks. It’s rushing home to tell Bucky about it only to find him naked on their bed. It’s summer time and it gets sweltering in the apartment. It’s not the first time Bucky has chosen to forgo clothes those times he’s stuck home alone. But it’s different now. Different in a way that is gonna change their whole life.

Tony laughs. He’s going to tease Steve about this, for the rest of forever.

The kit on the bed stiffens, perking his ears like he’s heard something, and he turns, stares directly through the boy that Steve used to be and right at Tony.

“Who are you?” he asks warily.

The scent of fear fills the room around them and it begins to change, falling quickly away, replaced by darkness and cold. Tony can feel hands, gripping at him, pulling at him as if they mean to strip away his skin until he’s nothing but bone.

“Who are you?!” Bucky demands again, but it’s no longer the voice of a child. Tony recognizes the voice of the man even though he’s only ever heard it in Steve and Natasha’s memories.

Through the dark and the mist Tony can make out a figure. It’s Ivan, or more accurately the one they call Winter soldier. He’s in a sparse room, an apartment of some sort, but his surroundings are dim and Tony can’t spare a glance for them. It’s the wild terrible rage in the man’s eyes that captivates.

It’s the gleam of an animal, cornered and tortured, just before it lashes out.

The whole building shakes. Tony stumbles backward. He can’t find Steve. Steve won’t appear. Tony keeps reaching for him, trying to sink inside his skin and become one again… there’s a moment where he can feel Steve close, thinks they’re almost there, but then Winter Soldier is rising from his chair expression murderous and intent. Before Tony can stop him he’s raising his gun to shoot.

It’s instinct and instinct alone that Tony steps away from Steve, that he’s wholly himself when he takes that bullet and horrible pain slices through him –

In the penthouse, Tony jerks out of Steve’s arms. Icy cold pain ballooning in his head, putting
pressure on all his nerves and he groans, pressing his hands tightly to his skull as if he fears his brains are about to leak out his ears.

“Tony!” he could hear Steve calls his name, and Steve caught him as he began to slump to the floor, legs no longer up to the task of holding him upright.

“Tony, are you alright? Can you speak?” Steve demands, hands gently cradling Tony as the room comes back into focus and slowly the pressure inside Tony’s skull receded.

“I’m alright.” Tony responded after a moment, voice hoarse but gaining strength as he batted at Steve’s gripping hands. “You know I didn’t get around to asking, but I think that was a no on the sharing.”

“Fuck.” He heard Steve groan, and Tony looked up in time to catch a tear falling from his cheek before Steve buried his face against Tony’s chest, gripping him like he was afraid Tony would shatter in his arms.

“You can’t do that again. Tony that was —” Steve sobbed against his chest and Tony wrapped his arms around him, wincing at how weak his limbs felt, but nothing in that moment could have stopped him from comforting Steve in that moment.

“Awful, at the end.” he interjected softly. “But it was beautiful before that. You’re beautiful and I’m honored that you’d let me know you like this.”

Steve shuddered, but he was breathing easier, grip on Tony not so deathly tight.

“You’re the one whose beautiful Tony. I can’t just sit back and let him hurt you.”

“He doesn’t know what he’s doing,” Tony reminded them both. He wasn’t a fucking saint. That shit had hurt, and he was tempted to call for a round two and show Winter Kitty a thing or two about how much he didn’t appreciate being shot at, but that wouldn’t help any of them in the long run.

“We drew him out. I couldn’t see much, but he was there Steve. Now we know a little more what to expect and we’ll be better prepared next time.”

“And the time after that?” Steve asked pointedly. “How many times am I going to have to watch him hurt you until we’re able to find him?”

“As long as it takes to get through to him.” Tony replied. Steve didn’t look happy about that. Tony squeezed his arm tiredly, mustering up a smile. “Hey, he took me by surprise this time. Nobody said I planned on just taking shit lying down. This is me Cap. When have I ever rolled over and cried uncle? Trust me with this. Okay?”

“I trust you.” Steve repeated, just as firmly and decisively as when they’d started, and Tony’s smile warmed into something real.

Of course, that was the moment the Avengers alert system went off.

~*~*~*~*~*~

“Are you alright?”
Fingers snap in front of his face and the soldier jerks.

The strange man who had appeared in the room only moments ago is gone. There’s no body. No splattered brains on the wall. The soldier is still sitting in his chair, rifle in his lap untouched. He hadn’t stood up and shot the intruder.

The twins are staring at him, perplexed but not overly concerned. They are used to his silence and long bouts of staring into space by now.

He should report this. He needs recalibration and the rules he lives by are clear and firmly situated at the forefront of his mind.

He is Ivan the trainer, but he is not always. Sometimes the broken fragments of the past poke at his mind and cause unnecessary disruption.

Who was that man he’d shot? He wondered, just as he wondered about the boy in the bedroom. The one with the blonde hair and the pretty red blush.

He knows that boy. He longs for him. He knows the room and the bed, it’s all familiar, he knows it, but the names won’t materialize inside his mind. These are memories that belong to someone else. Not Ivan. Not the soldier. But him. Whoever he was before he was this.

He’s always known there was a before. That’s the one thing they can’t erase. Not completely. Ivan’s devotion to the empire is singular, but the essence of that other man is too strong to completely wipe away. They’re too special to destroy so that man has to stay. He lingers in the hallways of the soldier’s mind like a ghostly echo. As chained to the fragments of memory as he is alive in them.

“Ivan, is something wrong?” one of his partners repeats. It’s the boy. They’re both fels. Twins. Special just as he is special. Soldiers of the new empire. But they are young and soft. It is his job to train that softness out of them.

He blinks away the sudden vision of red hair and penetrating green eyes.

The ache in his chest is deep.

“We need to get some sleep.” He says tonelessly, rising from his chair. He can’t let their handlers catch on that he is breaking down. He should report it. He knows that. Knows the rules. But he says nothing.

The name of the one who came before Ivan is on the tip of his tongue. Scratching at his mind like an itch. When he remembers the name of the ghost who lives inside of him he wonders what it will change. It’s an insatiable curiosity that he shouldn’t have. He covets it all the more for that.

Wanda looks to her brother with worry. Pietro shrugs before getting up to follow him.

They have a busy day tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Next up. There's a robbery at ViXon Tech and the Avengers go head to head with the mysterious Gata-soldiers and their stolen tech. Peter doesn't know what you mean by training wheels, and Ivan the trainer is being haunted by an annoying hallucination that
insists on being called Tony. How’s a guy supposed to concentrate on a terrorist plot with all that chatter? Peitro is pretty sure their handler is losing his mind but Wanda isn’t sure if he had it in the first place.
I'm ready to go (can't do it alone) I'm ready to climb this mountain inside, impossible heights.

Chapter Summary

The Avengers try and stop a robbery at ViXon but they quickly learn they are out gunned by their enemy's advanced technology. Along comes a spider just in time to save the day complicate things. Tony's determined to unravel the mystery on their hands and to continue their quest to find the Winter Soldier. Well, they find him alright and he's quick with a knife. Who would have guessed.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your continued support on this story. It means the world.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“There are two exits to the building. If the police can hold them till we get there, we can block those exits and reel them in.” Tony informed the team over his comm link. He'd pulled up a building map for ViXon Technologies mega storehouse, and technically one shouldn’t fly and battle strategize at the same time but since Tony had JARVIS to steer the suit and prevent him from crashing into the side of a building or getting sucked into the jet engine he figured he was safe enough multi-tasking.

The gata soldiers were back. It had been weeks with nothing, but six minutes ago someone had tripped the silent distress alarm at ViXon Tech. The local authorities were alerted to the robbery in place and according to the minimal information Coulson was able to gather from them it went downhill quick after that. Lucky for them, six minutes was all the Avengers needed to suit up and make it to Long Island.

“They're moving fast Cap.” Tony warned. He was using another small percentage of brain power to follow where Jarvis had hacked into the buildings security feed.

“Alright, get to your positions. On my word we close ranks and box them in.” Steve instructed, and Tony flew up with a kick of thrusters to zipp through an upstairs window at his designated entry point, blasting his way inside with a grin at the sound of the shattering glass. He did love making an entrance.

It was dark and shadowy in the hallways, the only light available from the emergency reds that had turned on with the alarm. Which was still blaring loud enough to almost drown out the sound of gunfire and shouting coming from the floor below. Tony flew toward the commotion, anxious with every scream that floated up through the floor that they'd be too late to prevent someone from dying.

Clint was going to reach them first Tony realized as he watched through a security camera as the two silver shapes, having downed the rest of the officers, go tearing down a hallway headed toward one of the exits.

“You’ve got a party coming your way Legolas,” he warned, and he heard Clint grunted an
“Just as long as you guys plan on showing up. Hear it’s going to be a rager.”

Tony would have laughed but at that moment Clint and their adversaries collided. The two suited villains rounding the corner at top speed only to skid to a stop when they saw Clint waiting at the end of the hall, bow drawn because he was a dramatic asshole.

“Hi there,” Clint called out to the pair cheerfully. If they gave a response it was too low for Tony to hear but he heard Clint’s chuckle clearly over the comm.

“Oh shit is right. We gonna do this the hard way or the easy way?”

The smaller one (the female if Helen was right) raised a hand in a very familiar stance. Tony didn’t have time to finish crying out a warning as an electro-magnetic pulse shot from her gauntleted palm. Clint was fast though, fast enough to get off a shot before that blast hit him, but their enemy was prepared. The other mercenary jumped in front of his partner and in a shocking burst of red and blue light a shield appeared out of a circular hub on his wrist. Clint’s arrow appeared to incinerate as it attempted to pass through the energy field.

“Clint!” Tony cried, as the tom went flying backwards, pushed by the blast straight into the wall behind him. “Cap, Clint’s been hit!”

Even in his distress Tony had to marvel at the technology. The energy field was circular, about two and a half feet in diameter. The red and blue bands were actually constructed of multiple lasers that were projecting out of small spokes in the hub, that when spun at a high enough velocity created an impenetrable surface. For a moment Tony was reminded of Steve’s shield and he had the wild thought that whoever had designed the thing must have been a fan. Not to mention a genius. It was basically a lightsaber on crack. A lightsheild?

While one corner of Tony’s brain was cataloguing everything he could, the other half was panicking because Clint had just taken a serious wallop and their quarry had turned to escape in another direction.

“Hawkeye, status?!” Steve snapped and when there was no answering reply from Clint who was laying still and unresponsive on the floor he fired off, “Widow, get to Hawkeye and assess the damage. Iron Man do you have eyes?!”

“They’re headed towards the south stairwell, I should make contact in the next thirty seconds.”

“I’m right behind you.” Steve panted in his ear. “Consider them hostile. Don’t wait to engage.”

Good, Tony didn’t plan on waiting. It was always nice when he and Steve were on the same page.

“Better catch up fast Cap. Watch out for the big one. He’s got some sort of plasma shield,” Tony warned as he flew around the last corner. He landed in the center of the hall, repulors at the ready and carefully aimed at the two figures running towards him.

They slowed, just as they had with Clint and this time Tony heard it when the female hissed out in her suit’s modulated voice. “Oh god damn it.”

That’s right Tony thought with a vicious smile.
“Should have gone with the easy way,” he replied, and just as he’d promised he didn’t hesitate in the slightest before he opened fire, repulsors set with enough kick that they wouldn’t be getting up any time soon. They’d hurt Clint after all. Nobody touched what was his.

He aimed for the female, because she was the one with the guns and because the male had already shown his tick. Sure enough, as soon as Tony opened fire at her, her companion jumped in front to deflect his shots – the surface of his shield crackling and warping as the two forms of energy collided. The shield absorbed energy Tony filed away, though he itched to know how.

He had no time to puzzle it out because these kids were fast, and they didn’t waste a single moment.

“I’ve got this. Go.” The kat with the shield shouted, his voice similarly disguised, and the female immediately took flight, boot repulsors nearly soundless (and really damn sexy if Tony were being honest) as she blasted a hole in the floor above and disappearing upward. Her companion kept Tony busy by pulling back his arm and throwing his laser shield thingy at him.

“Jesus Christ,” Tony cursed, barely managing to dodge the thing. The shield sliced cleanly through the wall, leaving behind a charred line and the smell of burning plaster. And Tony got his move on because he’d fought beside Steve long enough to make a lightning quick guess that when a guy threw his shield at an armed opponent it was because he expected it to come back.

Good thing too because a moment later the shield erupted out of the adjacent wall like something out of a horror film, not an inch away from where Tony had been a moment before. Tony was already on the attack. He’d noticed the metallic band on the guy’s right wrist, and the small square plate in the center where a silver hub had once rested. It looked eerily similar in design to a wireless charging dock he was in the middle of developing for the latest Stark Phone.

Tony would bet good money that little square was the base for whatever powered the shield and allowed it to latch to the kid’s wrist. This time he shot a couple bursts of pure energy at the guy, ignoring the slight stinging sensation it left in his palms. The suit filtered out the smell of burned flesh and extremis and the nanobots within his system would see the exit wound healed in under a minute. The pain was already fading.

The kat in the silver suit just barely dodged his fire but he was unable to catch his shield; which rather than spin off into the wall as Tony had anticipated, inexplicably shut off its lasers and receded its spokes back into the hub.

The now deceptively simple looking metal disk continued its spin until it collided and rebounded off the door to the stairwell, and back into the silver clad kat’s hands.

"Tony look out!" Steve's voice burst suddenly within the room and Tony had a split second to process the warning as the kat threw the silver disk back at him like an Olympian frisbee player. He’d just accepted the fact that there was no time to deflect it and braced himself for the hit when he was suddenly yanked from behind and out of the way.

Unfortunately, out of the way also happened to be sprawled inelegantly into a heap on the floor in a tangle of sticky webbing.

Steve took advantage of their enemy’s distraction and threw his own shield, which caught the boy right in the ribs and toppled him over like a bowling pin. He fell with a painful sounding thud and groaned a low curse.

“Stay down son.” Steve warned, catching his returning shield and stepping toward the downed kat.
“I’ve got Clint, he’s alright,” Natasha’s voice came over the comm. “A bump on the head and a fractured rib but it’ll heal up in a day or two.”

“Good. Get him out. We’ll rendezvous at the jet with the one we caught. The other is still at large. Be careful.” Steve answered as Tony glared up at the slight figure crouched on the ceiling not far from where he’d landed.

“Hey.” Spiderman, aka Peter Parker, greeted him with a nervous wave. “I uh… was in the neighborhood, walking, I was totally walking, when I- aaaaah.”

Whatever lame excuse Parker was going to drum up for being there died away in a gurgled yelp of surprise as he let go of the ceiling just a second before the place where he’d been suddenly exploded outward in a shower of plaster and dust.

The unknown female kat dropped through the hole in the floor above and landed in a crouch. Your basic three-point landing. One knee up, fist braced against the floor, one leg extended, tail arched high. For the nano second where the room was just still and everyone’s eyes were settling on the figure that had literally just dropped into their midst in a shower of noise and dust, the loudest thought in Tony’s mind was: not only did these bastards have the gall to steal his technology, this girl had the balls to mimic him to his face and look badass while doing it.

And then of course everything sped up and before anybody could really get their shit together she had leaped into the air and climbed Steve like he was a tree, flipping him over onto his back with athletic gusto that Natasha would have wept tears of pride over, and is making the man roll for his life to avoid the furious lash of her barbed tail.

“I told you to go!” her male companion cried out as he took the chance to get back up. Tony had also had time to get back on his feet and with a kickstart of his boot thruster he was headed straight for the female, who was preoccupied enough with making Steve’s life miserable that this time when he fired at her she wasn’t quick enough to dodge.

“Well that plan sucked. I –” the hit caught her mid rant and even though her suit absorbed a lot of the energy, there was still enough power behind it to send her toppling backward, right into a burst of webbing that tangled around her like fishing net.

“I got him!” Spiderman crowed from atop his new perch.

“Nice. Wrap her up tight kid.” Tony called to Peter as he hoisted the struggling girl into the air.

“Shit!” the male kat cursed, withdrawing something small and tellingly pistol shape from the holster on his belt and firing it at Spiderman. Peter didn’t have time to leap out of the way but thankfully Steve’s shield was there blocking the plasma blasts as it sailed by, but unfortunately doing a great job of slicing through Peter’s webbing too. Their captive crashed to the floor and into her companion’s waiting arms. The kat quickly sliced through the tangle of webbing holding her limbs together with his claws and embraced her like they were lovers sinking on the titanic or something, and a moment later they just disappeared into thin air.

No heat signature on radar, but Tony could still hear the sound of them moving with his keen ears. That was, until something clattered on the floor and a debilitatingly high-pitched screeching filled the air and threatened to make his ears bleed. Peter and Steve hunched over immediately, grabbing their ears and groaning. Tony’s pain was over as soon as JARVIS took the initiative to activate the noise canceling function.

Tony wobbled on his feet as silence descended once more and his head pounded with headache.
Jesus Christ that shit was not fun, and likely to cause Parker some sort of permanent hearing damage if he let it linger on. Steve had the serum, so he’d probably heal up fine from a burst eardrum or too.

His eyes quickly scanned the deceptively empty hall until he spotted the small black device on top of a pile of broken plaster. He marched over and crushed it with his heel. He could tell that had effectively killed the noise when Peter slumped over, releasing his ears with a painful moan and Steve did the same and slowly straightened once more.

“Cap, Iron Man, status report.” Natasha demanded over the comm.

“They’re getting away! Their suits are capable of some sort of stealth mode.” Steve shouted too loudly back, like somebody hard of hearing and Tony made a mental note to tease him about that later. For the time being he was busy searching through the security feeds for any sign of them despite how useless he knew it would be.

“Thor and I are at the exits. They can’t walk through walls.” Natasha growled. Tony wasn’t so sure of that. These guys didn’t just have his technology. They had things he’d only yet contemplated in his dreams. Things that were barely scraps in his notes, and a few ideas that hadn’t even made it outside his brain yet as they were still catalogued as near impossible without the right resources. It was like somewhere in the world he had a smarter, flashier, and vibranium rich twin.

With Howard Stark for a bio daddy that wasn’t exactly out of the realm of possibility either, though what the guy would have been doing all these years while Tony had been kicking ass and taking names he had no idea.

Tony shook off his growing hysteria. He couldn’t let the fear that this guy (or girl) whoever they were was smarter get to him. He had to stop them no matter what, before they hurt people and that was all there was to it. But where would they go and how would they plan to escape with the building surrounded? He didn’t know. He didn’t know enough about his adversary to calculate their next move he realized, and without even questioning it he reached.

ARE YOU THERE?

Some sort of firewall had been put up since he’d last hacked into the ship, but slicing through it was so easy Tony almost wondered if T’Challa were inviting him in. There was a chance that T’Challa might not still be aboard Daggar, but he had a hunch that even if he wasn’t that T’challa would have left something in place to alert him if Tony showed up again where he didn’t belong. It’s what Tony would do.

No BUT I AM AT YOUR DISPOSAL AS ALWAYS.

Tony smiled. It was always nice to be right. Assured now that T’Challa was logged into the ships computer he sent him the footage recorded from the suit.

WE’VE GOT VISITORS. THEY’RE GOOD FIGHTERS. WHAT CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT THEM?

Tony realized of course what he was asking. It was an unavoidable truth that if T’Challa was correct about these child soldiers being trained in the same ancient martial arts as wakandian warriors, that by helping Tony find ways to defeat them he would effectively be providing him with the means to overcome his own defenses.

On the other hand if he refused to help, Tony would only become more suspicious of Wakanda’s involvement in their strange enemies sudden appearance. He was well aware that he was pinning the
tom between a rock and a hard place. He was banking on it.

He wanted to trust T'Challa, he did, but he wasn't stupid enough to put so much faith in the unproven when innocent gata sitting at home just trying to make the most of their lives were the ones who would pay the price for his misplaced faith.

Queen’s gotta do what a Queen’s gotta do sometimes.

THEY APPEAR TO BE TRAINED IN THE MARTIAL ART OF ỌRUNIYAN… AMONG OTHER THINGS. AT THE CORE OF ỌRUNIYAN IS THE BELIEF THAT THE ANIMAL WHO LEAVES THE GROUND FIRST MOVES FROM THE HUNTED TO THE HUNTER.

WHAT THE HELL DOES THAT MEAN?

IT MEANS WE LEARN TO FLY.

"The roof" Tony exclaimed, realization sinking in. "Cap they’ve got an aircraft!"

"You're sure? Steve asked but Tony had already taken flight and headed upward through the hole in the ceiling. Sure enough he found similar holes blasted through the remaining floors all the way up to the the roof.

Outside the facility the night sky was clear and the roof empty of all signs of life besides his own.

Bullshit Tony thought. They were escaping in an aircraft, he knew it. He scanned the sky looking for any sign and cursing the fact that wasn’t light out when he’d have a better chance at it.

There! Tony’s eyes lurched back toward the glowing moon. Just a shimmer. But something had passed by it. He raised a fist and launched two of his smart missiles. Too small to down a ship mid air but enough to cause nasty damage if they struck or make a lot of sparkle if they encountered something else first.

Which one of them did a moment later, exploding in a bright flash and raining down a trail of smoke and debris. He’d got the bastards.

DO NOT CHASE AFTER THEM!

GIVE ME ONE GOOD REASON NOT TO.

YOU WILL NOT WIN AND YOU NEED TO WIN.

Tony blinked, surprised that T’Challa had said nothing of the fact that attacking an invisible adversary when he could not see them to anticipate a counter attack was frankly suicidal and that he’d be left without back up. All true, and equally valid reasons not to go tearing off after his prey, but nevertheless not enough to keep Tony from acting on the need to continue the hunt, to not let them get away and endanger the lives of his people.

He needed to win. That was the only way to protect other gata and protect the future he was trying to give them. And if he was going to win against these guys, he needed to be in his lab, creating tools to defeat them, not losing his head and tearing off on a suicide run.

Tony let his suit peel away from his face, the plates appearing to slide and dissolve back into his skin until his head was free and he could feel the cool night air on his face. He took a deep breath and fought for calm.
Peter swung onto the rooftop a moment later and thirty seconds after that the door to the stairwell was kicked out and Steve appeared shield raised and at the ready. He lowered it slightly when he took in Peter and Tony standing alone.

“They have a ship and it has the same cloaking tech their suits do.” Tony announced as he turned around, mind already focused on finding ways to either disable or combat that for the next go around.

“Should we go after them?” Peter chirped, and Steve frowned at him but it was Tony he addressed.

“I’m glad, but I’m kinda surprised you didn’t.”

“Wasn’t dressed for the date,” Tony quipped through gritted teeth. It burned. It positively galled (it terrified). He ignored the slightly stunned but pleased expression on Steve’s face because that level of awe shucks was just uncalled for. Tony wasn’t that much of a loose cannon.

“We’ll get them Tony. You can outsmart them.” Steve said, stepping up to his side. His voice was firm but gentle, with a kind of knowing in his eyes that would have sent Tony into a panic attack months ago. As it was it still made his stomach twist uncomfortably even as his heart beat faster in his chest and his kitten knees got all wobbly once they’d decided he didn’t need to stand anymore when there was a big strong tom who could carry him around. Christ.

Tony made a face, whiskers twitching with distaste. And because Steve was an asshole Tony heard his thoughts loud and clear when he smiled, thinking about how cute Tony could be.

Tony turned toward the four-foot eleven inch problem on his hands, and if his tail swatted Steve in the ass with the motion it was purely by accident.

Don’t fetishize me. At least not while we’re working and I can’t do anything about it. It’s rude.

He heard Steve chuckle behind him, felt the warmth of his mirth bubbling over the link already so much stronger between their minds. Someday soon they’d be fully bonded Tony thought with eager anticipation, but right now he had to somehow keep a thirteen-year-old kit who refused to stay down from getting himself killed.

“You. Small pint. What are you doing here?”

“Uh- I told you I was… walking…” Tony waved the kit to silence and Peter tapered off.

“Okay, number one rule of Pride Avengers is we don’t lie to each other. Try again.”

The boy’s shoulders drooped in his hoody. Kid was running around in a fucking red and blue hoody for god’s sake.

“I’ve fought those guys before Tony. They’re tough. You needed my help.” Peter insisted, straightening up in defiance once more. “I saved your life back there!”

“Wow, that’s overstating things a bit don’t you think?” Tony shot back, insulted by the very idea that he’d been so outclassed by his opponent that he’d needed rescuing from a literal child.

Steve put a hand on Tony’s chest and shot him a look.

“You helped us in a tight spot son, and we’re grateful, but the Avengers are a team. If you really want to be a part of it, the first rule of teamwork is listening to your teammates.” He scolded in that ‘Captain America disapproves’ tone that could wilt flowers. “Tony asked you to stay on the bench.
Having an untrained wild card appear on the field disrupts the entire team. You could have caused more harm by showing up than you realize.”

“Oh.” Peter wilted like the poor flowers of Tony’s imagination. “I just… I didn’t want you to get hurt.”

Oh god. Tony groaned, rolling his eyes heavenward. He was catching feelings again. If he wasn’t careful he’d find himself buying the kid clothes and decorating a room for him within the tower. Harley would get jealous. Maybe he should schedule a ‘just because we’ve decided to adopt a spiderbaby doesn’t mean mom and dad love you any less’ talk for their future.

~*~*~

Two Days Later

Tony carried his steaming cup of coffee back to the table where a full report and the small silver disk SHIELD had found amidst the rubble at ViXon waited.

THEY FINISHED THE DAMAGE REPORT AT VIXON.

Tony alerted T’Challa as he sat down to finish reading through the file that shield had sent Steve. The best part of Steve being in charge of the strike team tasked with apprehending the thieves at large and Tony only being pulled in as a consultant was that he didn’t have to be out there on the streets of the city, following nowhere leads and pointlessly interrogating terrified kats and their owners about their activities or the possibility of their neighbors hiding black kats.

Senseless, dirty work that could get people like Peter (whose only crime was that he was that he was undomesticated) killed. While Steve and Natasha were out there in the field, trying to mitigate the damage and keep the search team honest Tony could focus on doing what he did best, which was stripping the problem down to its basics and solving it.

Using Prince T’Challa as a sounding board just made sense given that he was the only authority on Wakanda’s technology and its people that Tony had. Thus far he had proved himself to be trustworthy and had put a decent amount of faith in Tony that he would honor the bargains they had made and would not use any of his knew knowledge to harm Wakanda. A history changing, and unprecedented alliance was forming right under everyone’s noses and it was happening across the net in what basically amounted to texts. Tony’s life was weird.

I’M IN A MEETING TONY.

Tony found his mouth tilting upward in amusement. It was Early morning in New York and even though nobody knew it’s exact location Tony was a hundred percent certain there was at least a seven-hour time difference between them. A fact he often forgot when some new idea or thought struck him and he sent a message to the ship.

WHICH ONLY FURTHER CONFIRMS THAT WHATEVER DEVICES YOU GUYS USE FOR COMMUNICATION ARE TAPPEND INTO A PRIVATE NET. UNLESS YOU ALWAYS HOLD MEETINGS ON YOUR PASSANGER JET? AT LEAST MY MESSAGES ARE BEING FORWARDED TO YOU IN REAL TIME AND THERE’S NO LAG. I’M GUESSING YOU GUYS ARE PAST DIAL-UP?

ONLY A LITTLE. WHAT WERE THE THIEVES AFTER?
COLLARS. VIXON JUST CAME OUT WITH A NEW LINE OF SMART COLLARS WITH SHOCK FUNCTION AND REMOTE-CONTROL CAPABILITY THEY DEVELOPED FOR USE BY LOCAL ANIMAL CONTROL. A COUPLE BOXES OF THEM ARE THE ONLY THINGS UNACOUNTED FOR.

WHY WOULD THEY WANT THESE BARBARIC THINGS?

Tony had wondered much the same and had a few theories. 

IT’S POSSIBLE THEY WANT TO DISECT THEM, USE THE TECHNOLOGY INSIDE SOMEHOW TO DISABLE OR OVERRIDE THE SHOCK FUNCTIONS. IF THEY OR THEIR MASTERS ARE IN THE FLESH TRADE THEY COULD ROUND UP A LOT OF PRIZED GATA THAT WAY. BUT I DON’T THINK THEY HAVE MASTERS. I THINK WHOEVER THEY ARE AND WHOEVER THEY’RE WITH, THAT THEY ARE ALL FREE AGENTS. THEY WOULD NEED COLARS TO GO UNNOTICED HERE IN THE US.

WHAT MAKES YOU SO SURE THEY ARE FREE AGENTS?

That was harder for Tony to put into words and provide proofs for. It was just a feeling he had, having seen them in action. But instinct no matter how valuable was not evidence.

THEY HAVE A DEADLY ARSENEL, BUT THEY DON’T KILL. THEY APPARENTLY HACKED THE MOST ADVANCED A.I. IN THE KNOWN WORLD TO GET AT MY TECH, AND WHO KNOWS WHAT TO GET AT YOURS. BUT TWICE NOW THEY HAVE BEEN FOILED BY LOW TECH SECURITY MEASURES. THE FIRST BECAUSE THEY FAILED TO REALIZE THAT OSCORP UTILIZES SOME STARK BIO RECOGNITION SOFTWARE IN RESTRICTED AREAS, AND THIS TIME AROUND BECAUSE THEY DID NOT REALIZE THE SECURITY CAMERAS AT VIXON WERE HOOKED UP TO A SEPARATE POWER GRID WHEN THEY SHUT THE POWER DOWN.

TO ME THAT SAYS THEY HAVEN’T TAKEN THE TIME TO PROPERLY STUDY THEIR TARGET BEFORE PUTTING A PLAN INTO ACTION.

EXACTLY. THEY’RE SMART BUT IMPATIANT, AND RECKLESS ENOUGH TO GO OFF HALF-BAKED AND THAT’S COMPLETELY AT ODDS WITH THE TECHNOLOGY THEY HAVE AT THEIR DISPOSAL. THEIR ARSENAL IS THE PRODUCT OF SOMEONE EXPERIENCED AND METHODICAL, LEAVING NO STONES UNTURNED. WHOEVER THIS UNKNOWN THIRD IS, HE ISN’T COMING UP WITH THEIR BATTLE STRATEGY.

WE HAVE LONG STUDIED THE USES OF VIBRANIUM IN MANIPULATING ENERGY. THERE IS AN ENGINEER HERE WHO RECENTLY DEVELOPED A TECHNOLOGY FOR A NEW FIREARM. IT WAS JUST APPROVED TO GO INTO PRODUCTION. THE SHIELD AND GUN USED BY THE MALE USES THE SAME TECHNOLOGY, ONLY IT IS NOT IN ITS INFANCY. IT WAS MADE BY SOMEONE WHO HAS HAD MUCH TIME FOR TRIAL AND ERROR IN WHICH TO MAKE IMPROVEMENTS.

THE FEMALE’S SUIT APPEARS TO BE MADE OF A UNIQUELY FLEXIBLE VIBRANIUM ALLOY WE HAVE NEVER USED IN WAKANDA. IT IS OUTFITTED WITH
AN ADVANCED VERSION OF YOUR OWN TECHNOLOGY IN A CLEAR IMITATION OF YOUR ARMOR. YOU MAY AS WELL CALL HER IRON WOMAN.

Tony filed the information away, certain now that his hunches were correct.

I COULD GET BEHIND AN IRON WOMAN, SOUNDS SEXY. IT WOULD BE SEXIER IF SHE WEREN’T RUNNING AROUND WITH MY TECH.

DIDN’T HELEN SAY THAT THE FEMALE WAS STILL AN ADOLESCENT? YOU ARE A SWINE.

Tony’s smile turned into a full-blown grin as he chuckled, finishing the last page of the report.

JEALOUS? I WAS UNDER THE IMPRESSION YOU WOULDN’T MIND A TRIP OUTSIDE THE CRADLE.

IT IS SWEET THAT YOU THINK I NEED YOUR HELP LEAVING THE CRADLE, BUT I AM HAPPY TO PLAY THE PART ANYTIME YOU FEEL LIKE GIVING IT A TRY.

Tony laughed out loud. Of course that was the moment Steve and Natasha walked into the kitchen. Natasha arched an eyebrow in question at him. Steve just smiled in greeting and Tony could scent a hint of arousal on him to go with the aura of fondness bleeding off his thoughts at finding Tony looking bright eyed with color in his cheeks laughing apparently at nothing.

“How’s T’Challa?” she asked, a smirk twisting her lips. Tony took a prim swallow of coffee from his cup and flicked his tail.

“Is he still communicating with you?” Steve asked neutrally. Way too neutrally to be anything but bullshit. The whiff of pepper Tony caught in his nose told Tony everything he needed to about how Steve felt about that notion.

“Yes. He’s been a big help while I’ve been deconstructing their tech. we’re working purely off visuals so it’s a slow process.” Tony said, tapping the top of the silver disk that contained the energy shield.

“And he’s got no idea how to get that thing open?” Steve asked, sounding skeptical. The disk was completely smooth on all sides, the thin circles where its spokes presumably protruded were so seamless they were barely discernable on the edges. There were no buttons screws or hatches to present any clues on how to get it open to examine its inner workings and since it was indeed made with vibranium all attempts to crack it open had failed miserably.

They were luckier than Steve realized that they had Prince T’Challa as a resource.

“Actually, see these slight indents here,” Tony asked, picking up the thick but still surprisingly light disk and rubbing the area. “It’s part of a bio security system they use in Wakanda.”

“Meaning what, it only unlocks for the right set of prints?” Steve asked.

“Worse, brain waves. Their technology developed from a philosophy that a warrior should have a distinct connection with his weapon.” Tony answered with a grin. “Kind of like a Jedi with his lightsaber.”

“You described the shield that way too.” Natasha pointed out. “You said it was essentially a ring of short plasma swords that spun to create an impenetrable surface. A light shield. You also promised to make me a knife.”
“Because it is and that would be awesome.” Tony replied with a shrug, not quite seeing what her point was.

“Tony’s a fan of that movie. We know. Why is that important?”

Steve vocalized Tony’s unspoken thoughts and the engineer nodded in agreement quipping, “Although it’s redundant and not technically correct, I agree with Clint that saber-knife is still a cooler name.”

“It’s odd that they’ve stolen your designs and they have your taste in movies.” Natasha explained slowly, completely ignoring the tangent.

“Everything about this situation is odd.” Tony grumbled in reply, drumming his fingers restlessly against the table. His focus was on strengthening their security but that was hard to do when he still had, no idea how they broke in in the first place.

“Any luck questioning ViXon employees?” he asked, and Steve replied.

“Not any more than we had with questioning the folks at Oscorp. Nobody has heard or seen anything to make them think that somebody within the company is illegally breeding black kats.”

Tony frowned.

“I’m digging under the ground while Steve distracts above,” Natasha assured him, and though she didn’t move at all Tony felt the memory of the way she liked to sink her hands in his hair and scratch his scalp like the touch of a ghost and smiled.

“Good, Norman Osborne isn’t making radioactive spiders for fun.” Tony drained what was left of the coffee in his mug and set it down with a clunk, closing one door of conversation before he looked back at them both and opened another.

“Are you both ready?”

Natasha got stiller and Steve’s shoulders tensed, but he nodded, glancing to Natasha for confirmation. The fel woman just swished her tail, as if the morning were like any other, and they weren’t about to embark on a quest to draw out a deadly assassin.

They went down to the lab where Bruce was waiting. It was great and all, having a brain that could make swiss cheese out of others from across the globe but the implications of that were too grand for any scientist to allow it to go untested.

As further part of their personal research into Gata biology and documenting their continued development, Tony was developing a Bi-neurally Augmented Retro-Framing device or BARF. A machine that with a little help from a Queen could tap into memory and change the way those memories were experienced. It also acted as a handy way to record memory in real time, which was what they needed right now in their hunt for the Winter Soldier.

With the three of them strapped up to BARF Tony could do his thing without having to worry so much about taking in details of their changing surroundings. When it came to Barnes, the emotions from Steve and Natasha ran too deep to take chances on missing details that could help them find him all the sooner.

“Remember Tony, your connection to Steve and Natasha is metaphysical. By opening your mind to them you’re also opening it to Barnes,” Bruce explained, attaching the last of the connecting wires to Tony’s right temple. The other two had been outfitted first.
“He can hurt me. I know Brucie.”

“I’m serious Tony. He could give you brain damage with enough effort.” Bruce insisted with a growl rumbling in his throat, fingers digging harshly against Tony’s skin for a moment.

Tony touched his wrist and made a soft sound in the back of his throat, his scent going sweet in appeasement without much thought as he offered the tom an apologetic smile and murmured, “I know Bruce.”

“We’ll keep an eye on him.” Natasha said, and Bruce looked over at her, meeting her serious gaze and the tom slowly nodded.

“Right. Good luck, all of you.”

~*~*~

It’s trickier to sink below the surface this time. There are three of them, and his bond with Natasha is so much stronger. Clear like a well beaten path. When the lab fades into darkness all around them and slowly but surely the dark recedes to reveal a thick forest it feels natural. They are Natasha and they are small again, a child still.

Their nightgown hangs off their bony shoulders, but then again it always did. Their mistress fed them scraps from the table but sometimes she withheld. A dancer’s lines must be long and lean she always said, and kittens had a propensity for plushy figures.

The bottom is in tatters and stained black halfway up the thigh with mud and soot. It had been a pretty hand-me-down once, but now it is a dull grey that reminds them of the fire that took away their home. The smell of smoke still lingers on it, thick in their nose whenever they breathe.

The soldier has made a fire and says it is time to sleep but they don’t like fire.

He looks to them and barks, “Don’t be afraid Natalia.”

His harsh tone makes tears well up in their eyes and (she) feels disgust for the pathetic thing they used to be. So fragile.

It might be spring, but the nights are still cold. There is no time for weakness. The soldier stomps toward them on heavy boots and they mewl in terror as he grabs their arm.

His face is shadowed in the firelight, partially hidden by the thick coat he wears and the long hair that swings freely around his face. He drags them close and manhandles them until they are laying on the ground and crushed close to his chest. His sent surrounds them, thick and headier than the smoke, and their heart taps wildly in their chest going from terror to something else.

His broad back hides their view of the flames and they feel inexplicably safe. They know there is no arms so dangerous as these ones, but that also makes them the safest. Their eyes droop with exhaustion.

“Don’t be afraid Natalia,” Ivan murmurs into their ear and (he) yearns, chest raw like someone who has been whipped. Mistress sometimes gives them lashes when they miss steps.

(Steve don’t!)

(Sh) e thinks but (he) can’t help the way (he) feels at the sight of the soldier, the familiar feel of his arms, and the shock of his scent. It’s so foreign from what (he) remembers.
The soldier stiffens. Sniffing harshly in the still night like a bloodhound on the search and they pause, terrified of what comes next.

There’s no warning. One-minute Ivan is holding them intending on sleep, just as (she) remembers and the next he has reached for one of the knives hidden in his boot and has rolled on top of them in the dirt.

Before he can bring that knife down on their throat, Tony shoves the other two under and the forest around them warps liquid and hazy until it rights itself and the hot heat of sand is beneath Tony and the sun beats harshly down upon the soldier’s head.

The soldier blinks in shock, but he is only distracted by the changing scenery and Tony’s sudden appearance for a moment because he shifts in a way that foretells a split throat and Tony brings his arms up, crossing his wrists and the sound of that knife striking metal sings through the air.

The air crackles around them and the ruby red lines on the golden armlets glow florescent before a wave pushes the soldier back, sending him sprawling in the dirt. He stares up at Tony who has rolled and gotten onto his feet, palms up and ready to fire, barely noticing the world shifting and warping around them like a television on the fritz.

The desert. The forest. A street in Brooklyn. A table in a sparse kitchen, with a strange woman washing a dish at the sink.

“Who are you?” the soldier rasps with terror in his eyes but Tony doesn’t lower his guard or his hands. The soldier is an animal cornered but his teeth will still bite and his claws still rake. The woman washing at the sink doesn’t turn. They don’t exist to her.

Tony allows his lips to spread into a smile.

“It’s Stark, Tony Stark. Nice digs you got here Buckaroo. Where are we, Russia? The Ukraine?”

Unfortunately, the soldier is not inclined to answer. Tony realizes too late that the question was distraction. He misses any tell that might have been there before the soldier twists, out of the line of fire as electricity pushed from Tony’s hands strikes the place where he had once rested. He’s on his feet inhumanly fast, and is bearing down on Tony a second later with two knives in hand.

The ground is shaking as the room continues to warp in and out. Tony brings his hands up, heart racing as he deflects the rapid slashes of the soldier’s knives. Steve and Natasha are there, under his skin, and he’s never more thankful for that as Natasha provides him with the skill he needs to block each strike with the armlets he wears, and Steve’s strength courses through his arms and keeps them steady as each forceful blow sends pain traveling up them and into his teeth.

“Where’s Natalia?!” The soldier screams, raw and angry. He has warped now, civilian clothes gone and replaced by a one-armed combat suit that does nothing to hide the fact that one of his arms is made entirely of metal. Tony doesn’t think he realizes he’s not that man from the forest so long ago in Natasha’s memory. At least not anymore.

“What have you done with her!”

The soldier slashes angrily and the room around them shakes all the harder. But it’s clearer now, Tony realizes with elation. Light seeping into the corners as it gets somehow realer and realer around them. Tony can feel the soldier now, his thoughts insistently frantic but ungraspable. Like the buzz of an insect he couldn’t find to swat.

So close now.
“I took her while you were napping. That’s not a problem is it?” Tony answers with a sharp toothed smile.

*(Tony don’t!)* Steve warns, but it has the effect Tony wants. The soldier stills for the fraction of a second, eyes wide and white with rage, before the ground beneath them heaves and he lunges at Tony with a garbled scream of agonized rage.

Tony is unprepared for the way that the soldier comes for him with brute strength and furious strength, reining blow after furious blow down upon him that he can barely keep up. He stumbles backward, fighting to keep up, but he’s being battered like a ram and he knows it.

But the room solidifies around them and fills with the sounds of outside. The woman at the sink pauses with a dish in hand and lets it clatter to the floor where it shatters. She turns slowly and tilts her head, staring at them both in morbid fascination like someone who has wandered into the room in the middle of a movie where the heroine is being chased by a psychotic killer. She can see them. Tony is sure of it.

He’s also distracted by her and that’s a mistake because the solider’s fist slams against his skull and then a knife is tearing into his gut and his head explodes with pain.

~*~

In Tony’s lab in Stark Tower an alarm shrieks and Tony Stark jerks in his chair, gasping for breath. In the chairs on either side of him Steve and Natasha are also jerking out of catatonic states, limbs shaking and heads swimming as they fumble at their restraints.

“Tony!” Tony could hear Steve calling his name and then Bruce was there, louder in his ear and more frantic, as he wrenched his restraints free and yanked BARF’s cables away.

“Tony! Can you hear me?” he demanded and Tony could feel how close he was to hulking out in his panic and forced himself to think past his screaming headache and answer.

“I hear you Big Green. I’m good. We’re all good I swear.”

There was a crash and they both turned to find that Steve’s chair had toppled and the man himself was marching purposefully around it to get to Tony.

“Hey Steve, your ex-boyfriend is a dick.”

“You goaded him! What the hell were you thinking?!?” Steve accused, and Tony didn’t argue the point, too busy noticing that Steve had completely broken through the restraints on his chair, the metal bands still clamped around one wrist. There were angry red circles where the other bands had once rested. All Tony could think about was soothing the pain he must be in, but Tony’s head was throbbing so harshly it was all he could do to keep his barriers up.

“That I needed the quickest way to get inside his head. I did it didn’t I? I got inside his head,” he answered sluggishly as Natasha laid her fingers against his temple, as if she could still feel the pain throbbing there, even though Tony was pointedly shielding them all from it.

“It was efficient.” Tony thought that was all that she’d say on the matter, but then he moved her eyes from Steve back to him and there was a bite of censure to her tone as she finished, “But then you took your eyes off him. Don’t do that again.”

Natasha’s warning was accompanied with a dark sense of threat – the threat of losses not yet felt, and tears not yet shed – and there was nothing for Tony to do but swallow and nod his head.
If he got hurt and forced Natasha to grieve for him in any way he was certain she’d follow him to the afterlife just to kill him a second time.

Chapter End Notes

Next up, a door has opened in the soldier's mind and this annoying asshole Tony keeps walking through it. Ivan is supposed to kill Nick Fury and launch Project Oversight, but Tony keeps bringing up shit that doesn't matter like hot dogs. Wanda says there's a man inside his head, camped out like those martians Bucky used to read about in books he used to read. Who the hell is Bucky anyway?
Pretend that you want it (Don't react).

Chapter Summary

In which it's spring and Tony is a busy kitten. The world still sucks. The winter soldier is still at large and Tony's soulmate might be a twenty-year-old MIT student who goes by Princess.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

March Part I

“How much for the plums?”

The old woman who sells from the produce cart outside the one stop mart turns her head toward him, her brown face wrinkling in wary suspicion at the sight of him – a strong looking man in worn clothing that covers him from head to toe. His metal arm is hidden beneath his tightly zipped jacket, his tail strapped unforgivingly tight to his side isn’t noticeable beneath the thick fabric of his trousers and the hat he wears hides his clipped ears.

He has no whiskers, so if the woman doesn’t sell to him it’s not because she has any sort of prejudice against kats with jobs and money of their own to spend. It’ll be because he’s an intimidating stranger and a scowling one at that.

Wanda says he needs to smile more.

The soldier and his charges have been stationed in Washington D.C for six months but it is not his first time in this nation’s capital. He knows that the way a jingle gets caught in other people’s heads. The nagging sense of familiarity is just up there, erupting at odd moments, like when he turns a street corner thinking to himself that he should water the kits and realizes he’s headed for a storefront he didn’t know existed to be so sure of his direction.

The old woman tells him the price for the plums in English, and then mutters in Spanish that he is a scary looking brute who shouldn’t sneak up on an old woman.

Ivan narrows his eyes at her and grunts in perfect Spanish that she is a cheat and she'll charge him fairly if she knows what’s good for her, as a hand slides around his waist and Wanda’s familiar scent fills his nose. It’s spicy like nutmeg with a hint of sweet plums at the edges.

“You’ll have to forgive our brother. He was just released from a mental institution.” She apologizes to the old woman without a hint of humor on her face and the old woman gapes in shock.

Pietro appears on Ivan’s other side, riffling through the wallet Ivan had held in his hand only a second before for the correct amount of bills, grinning like the cocky kit he is. Of the two Pietro’s scent is sweeter. It’s sugar plums and the wind in your nose after fresh snowfall.

The old woman excepts the money Pietro shoves at her without a word and doesn’t protest as the fel grabs a bag of plums for Ivan as well as a mango for himself. The trio departs with a wave from Pietro and a small secretive smile from Wanda as a growl rumbles in the soldier’s chest.
Ivan will have to give Pietro low marks for his continued misbehavior, but it won’t matter. With abilities like theirs, the twins would have to be serious fuck ups to be deemed failures and terminated like the others. Of all the kats to come out of the program at castle black, Ivan found the twins by far the most interesting. It’s why they are still alive.

The way they remember it, they were living in Sokovia, running small time cons and thieving for the man who ran the heat den they’d called home since their home and all of their family had been blown away during the last outbreak of civil war.

The soldier had been on a mission involving a delegate with a taste for fels in heat, and Pietro had picked the wrong thick-headed bodyguard to try and pick pocket.

He’d broken the kid’s wrist and was going in for the kill, but then his sister had been there swinging a chair at his head in her red lingerie.

Devotion, even unto death. Ivan sees it in her eyes every time she and Pietro look at each other. It’s useful for the empire. That’s what the twins say he told Strucker and the others when he brought them in. Ivan wouldn’t know. His memories don’t open up that far.

There are times when the soldier wakes up completely blank, little more than a set of directives. Those times he is quickly prepped for a mission, which he completes and then he goes back to sleep, no time for anything so pointless as dwelling on scents that called to him or something like a favorite fruit.

But some missions require more personal touch. Longer stints of wakefulness, and as such the soldier requires different directives.

Those are the times when he gets to be Ivan.

He has a name and a history that fits like a glove but feels no less bought for the perfect fit. He remembers things like his training, and all the other assets he’s been asked to train who have come and gone after him. Some into a slim folder of success stories, but most to their graves.

“You did not sleep well.” Wanda comments as the three walk quickly back towards the apartment they are renting. This mission requires becoming natives of this city and aliases that will not be questioned if they should come under SHIELD scrutiny. Director Fury is not a man who takes security lightly, but he is out of his depth. He doesn’t know the enemy was already in his home before he bought it.

“Has your friend been keeping you up?” Pietro asks, worry evident despite the smirk that attempts to hide it. Someone somewhere is digging inside Ivan’s mind, and his name is Tony Stark. He’s been running around up there for weeks, and hiding his presence from Wanda would have been impossible so the soldier doesn’t bother to try.

Still, Ivan chooses not to answer. Giving nothing more away than he has to, he feigns that he is ignoring them both. He’s not. He’d never be that careless. They are his partners on this mission and his protegees, but he doesn’t trust them. It’s not a slight. Ivan doesn’t trust anyone. It’s not in his directions.

They feel like family, but that is just outdated instructions talking.

Wanda released a small aggravated sigh, but there is a gleam of fondness in her eyes as chastising nails dig into his jacket where her arm is still wrapped around his waist.

“Is it so hard to believe that we are worried about you? We would not turn you over to them.”
Them being Strucker and the others, but it’s not just them. She means all humans. Wanda may have chosen this fate but she is still a kat. She knows that the choice was just an illusion.

She and Pietro are not the first he has personally picked for training. Strucker has always been clear about lines, about who the master is. Ivan is just a shirt he gets to wear when it is convenient for his masters. The soldier is an asset. Nothing more and nothing less, and it is efficient that they work with his nature and not against.

The soldier is a kat, and as such he has biological instincts that can’t be completely suppressed. They know this by trial and error. Before they realized that a sex change came with unwanted complications that threatened the mental stability of their subjects, they thought his being a fel, the female of his species, was a weakness that needed to be eradicated.

He’s a tom now. A buck. A bull (Frankenstein’s creature). But some of those old instincts are too deeply ingrained to go away. He doesn’t get heats, but he gets attached to things. Certain scents. Certain people. They get under his skin like an itch, and he gets caught in a loop of intense urges to possess and protect, all of it culminating around the insane idea that anyone and anything could ever truly be his, when he is nothing and nobody. His broken body doesn’t understand that. The urge to protect his pride, his children, is enough to bring on extreme episodes of mania and violence.

He’s a dog with a bone, and his masters have learned it is better to use that than to fight it.

“Worry less about me,” he finally grunts, even though it has been minutes since she spoke. “You two have to be ready for tomorrow.”

It is not either Wanda or Pietro’s first mission, but it is by far the most important objective they have ever been given. Their performance on the field this time around will determine their usefulness to the empire. Their failure will result in termination. The thought brings a tightness to his chest, a dark coiling feeling of dread.

Ivan has lost others… they let him keep those memories, if not always their associations. He has felt the torment of watching what belongs to him slowly bleed out in his arms. He knows the dull unrelenting ache of missing, that is touching a person’s mind and knowing them in their entirety only to have their screams follow him as every cell in his body freezes and he is swallowed by silence.

Sometimes, when he has been Ivan for too long, when the memories have grown out of the ash in his head like green shoots and he has discovered books, and foods, and songs that feel like old friends whose names he can’t remember, he starts to remember her.

He knows that she smelled like the forests they’d camped in, warm wood and sweet chamomile laced with the bite of winters cold. He knows her eyes were green and her hair red as a sailor’s sunset; and he knows that she was his last and final warning.

He doesn’t need to know if Natalia was truly real to feel the pain of her loss. The message imprinted itself in his bones.

He won’t lose Wanda and Pietro like he lost the others. They will not be terminated. Ivan would kill before–

Ivan grits his teeth, tension prickling his spine along with the start of nausea.

He is thinking of turning on his handlers and that is against his directives. He needs to be recalibrated.

Ivan resolutely pushes the insistent thoughts away. They are just preprogramed commands. They
aren’t him. If he follows that directive this time, he’s just going to go blank again and they may decide to give the twins to another handler. He can’t let that happen. He has to see that they graduate the program successfully. They are his after all.

Focus. He needs to focus.

Ivan shoves his trembling flesh hand into his pocket and quickens his step.

Wanda.

She is not as quick or as efficient as some the soldier has taught in the past, but she is focused and driven. She is like a cat who sinks her nails in and does not let go once she has a hold and that is good.

Pietro is certainly quick, but he lacks Wanda’s discipline and keen eye for observation. Sometimes this is good too.

They are the only surviving test subjects to come out of Castle Black. They have both successfully been crossed with mutant genes, but Wanda has powers of the mind that go beyond anyone’s ability to fathom. Her potential is devastating. The world should be very afraid.

She and her brother are like him, weapons created for the empire, but they are different too. They came willingly, so they were allowed to keep all their memories. Their memories of terror and loss are what fuel them through the pain of rebirth and the rigors of training.

The man the soldier was before this was not so willing. A blind fool, unable to see the might of the empire, and so he had to be crushed and stripped of everything.

But there is still apparently stuff in his head to be dragged up, and the man who has been haunting his dreams and thoughts for weeks seems determined to drag them up.

It’s not so bad during the night hours but when he’s sucked into some strange walking dream in daylight hours it’s a problem. They are in a middle of a mission, and if he loses Wanda and Pietro over this, he’s going to track down Tony Stark.

Fuck his directives.

~*~*~

Transcript for Good Morning Manhattan, airdate March 3rd 2014

Williams: Welcome back. For those of you just joining us at home, we’ve been talking to Dr. Simon Trask of Stand Up Humanity. Just joining us on the couch are Tony Stark and Captain Rogers, co leaders of the Avengers combat unit and-

Rogers: [Interrupts] I think the word you’re searching for is Pride.

Williams: I’m sorry?

Stark: The point Steve is trying to make Shelly is that the Avengers are a Pride first. I mean that’s why we’re doing this right? The team is a family, and it’s very important for us to focus on that identity rather than think of ourselves as some sort of army.

Trask: But you’d both agree, Captain Rogers, that that’s exactly what the government designed your team to be?
Rogers: Excuse me Dr…. [pause] Trask? I’m not sure what you’ve heard but The Avengers are a voluntary critical response unit.

Stark: None of us signed on to be Uncle Sam’s private army. Especially not me. You can take that promise to the bank.

[laughter from audience]

Trask: oh, let’s not be coy Tony. We all know General Ross would love to soup up a hundred more kats and send you all out to do his dirty work. He’s pushed for it for years, and the public has been the one to suffer each time some supposedly rehabilitated kat with a fresh set of claws shakes the leash.

Stark: I gotta tell you I don’t like what you’re suggesting Dr. Trask.

Trask: I’m suggesting that kats are dangerous. Too dangerous to keep as pets. We don’t operate under the assumption that we can fully domesticate wild animals. I’m suggesting only that we ask ourselves why we ever assumed we could domesticate gata. [light applause from audience] Your team has proven themselves to be efficient killers, and we call you heroes now, but could anyone stop you if you decided not to be so friendly or so helpful? You Tony, operate a weaponized suit that has been described as a weapon of mass destruction, and ten armed officers were seriously injured in the raid on ViXon by what we’ve recently learned are adolescents.

[Stark smiles]

Stark: It’s funny. You used the term wild animals. I’ll admit Zoology isn’t what I got my PHD in so forgive me if this seems like an over simplification, but how many turkeys have you met in the wild who knew how to put on a suit. I mean besides General Ross.

[Break for laughter]

Stark: The insurgents who robbed Oscorp and then ViXon were highly trained operatives who showed quite clearly that they were capable of reason and more to the point, mercy. They chose not to kill, even though it would have been easy to do.

Trask: Are you saying they are some sort of good guys? That people shouldn’t be afraid there are highly trained feral kats running around?

Stark: I’m saying that hunting them down like they are animals is the wrong. Was I not clear? I have the Iron Man armor. I’ve only ever used the armor to defend myself and innocent people. I’ve spent the last two decades of my life devoted to protecting people, and fighting for the civil rights of myself and others like me- so that the next time you have to shoot some kit full of bullets cause your drugs backfired or your experiment made him go rabid, maybe you’ll rethink who the animal is in this situation.

[Pause for unintelligible murmur from crowd]

Trask: Tony, there’s no need to get emotional.

Rogers: I’m sorry have you two met?

Trask: No, Captain, I can’t say we’ve had the pleasure before this.

Rogers: So why do you call me Captain, but you keep calling him Tony like you’ve known him for
years.

**Trask:** I meant no disrespect to Mister Stark-

**Rogers:** [Interrupts] it’s Dr. Stark. I think if he has earned the title a couple times over, the least you could do is use it.

[Break for applause. The host Miss Williams leans toward the couple]

**Williams:** [to Stark] He’s a protective one isn’t he? It must be nice having Captain America for a mate. There are a lot of jealous kittens out there I’m sure.

**Stark:** I had to rent a swimming pool just to have a place to stash all the hate mail. [He winks, and the audience laughs nervously] No, in all honesty it’s been wonderful, and people have responded to our relationship very positively. And I don’t like to think of myself as dating Captain America because yikes that sounds like red, white, and blue balls doesn’t it? [Stronger laughter from audience] As for Steve, I like being with him. He’s amazing. Annoyingly so at times, but what’s a guy gonna do?

**Rogers:** I think it gives people hope, to see that we can find common ground. We’re different sure. He’s got a tail and whiskers, and he’s a blanket hog. [Laughter from audience] I can’t walk in his shoes and he can’t walk in mine, but every day I get to watch him be the amazing guy he is – smart, selfless and brave – and I couldn’t be prouder that he wants me to share his life and wants to share mine.

**Stark:** You see what I mean about this guy? How’s a person supposed to run a company, a Pride, and still have time for all the sex they need to have?

**Rogers:** Tony stop.

**Stark:** Why bother? You’re still going to love me just the same whether I do or don’t.

**Rogers:** yeah, that’s probably true.

[Stark kisses Rogers on the cheek and the audience applauds]

**Williams:** Well there you have it Simon. It looks like for at least some lucky kittens, beauty really does tame the beast. After this break we’ll be joined by Dr. Lauren Vassals, author of “So you’re not alone in the universe”. She’s here to weigh in on the hottest topic of the year. Should our knowledge of extra-terrestrials change the federal stance on inter-species relationships? Find out when we come back.

~*~*~

It was thirty minutes past three pm and Tony was forty-five minutes late for his first interview of the afternoon. That normally wouldn’t bother him except it was another applicant for the Stark Resilient internship and he really was trying to make the point to the men and women who applied that they were valuable and necessary components of the future. Nothing said ‘you matter’ like keeping a person waiting over an hour. Jesus Christ.

Well, it couldn’t be helped. Between being up all night in the lab, a morning full of meetings, and that disastrous appearance on Good Morning Manhattan, and now the crisis going on with the construction company over on the island, it was a miracle Tony wasn’t running later.
“Tony. Jarvis is refusing to tell me where you are.” Steve’s voice filled his head, momentarily distracting him from talking to Pepper who was calling from Japan where it was roughly six in the morning the next day.

“That’s because I’m busy.” Tony thought back with a snap as Pepper’s tired voice filled his ear.

“The company is refusing to resume labor unless we can guarantee that the project isn’t going to be shut down.”

“But I bet Dyson is billing us for every hour his men are just sitting around picking their asses on my land.” He scoffed in reply. “This is about money Pep. He thinks he can take advantage of the situation and squeeze more money out of me.”

“You wanted the biggest construction firm in the city and Dyson is it.” Pepper reminded him as Steve’s thoughts returned over the bond, irritated and insistent.

“No. You’re angry. I know you’re mad about the interview and I don’t understand what I did to piss you off.”

It was the hurt that Tony could feel tugging at him over their developing bond that made Tony snap. He knew that had happened on Shelly Williams couch that morning wasn’t Steve’s fault. Steve hadn’t really done anything besides come to Tony’s defense and he couldn’t be blamed that the world was so damn backward. Unfortunately, that realization did nothing to make Tony less angry about it, and guilt on top of everything just tended to make him snappish.

Of course Steve didn’t understand why he was so pissed off. Why would he? He wasn’t the one constantly denied humanity and reduced to a dangerous animal. He wasn’t the one who had to simper and bat his eyelashes on cue to appease the masses when the question at hand was whether or not he and everyone like him should be caged like tigers in a zoo.

The stab of pain Tony felt, remembering Trask and that insulting exchange during the interview, was inevitable. No matter how often he told himself he should be used to that kind of fuckery, he never really could.

“Maybe that’s a good thing.” Bruce’s gentle thoughts wrapped around him and Tony closed his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath.

“Whatever squabble you and Steve are having, settle it.” Natasha demanded as Tony opened his eyes. “I can’t focus with you two pining for each other. I don’t think you realize how loud it is.”

That was enough to make Tony crack a smile. Natasha really was all heart sometimes.

“We’ll talk later.” Tony promised Steve. “We all just need space to focus on our work.”

“Tonight?” Steve pressed, and Tony would have been irritated if he didn’t know himself. It wasn’t exactly a secret that he liked avoiding emotional shit.

“Tonight.” He agreed just as Pepper, wondering at his silence called his name.

“Tony? Are you still there?”

"Yes! You know what, screw Dyson construction. If he's expecting me to come begging on hands and knees and pay for the pleasure he can kiss my ass. I'll even present for him.” Tony snapped in
response. Though the technician with the SI identification badge that Tony couldn’t bother to read looked up to stare at him with alarm as he passed, Pepper didn't react to his flare of temper or the crude picture he painted. She was far too used to it by now. Her tone was insufferably patient as she reminded him that Dyson was one of their oldest contracts and there was nobody better equipped to take on the size of their project.

"He might be a cheap bastard but he's a necessary evil" she finished.

"Don't count on it. I’m sick of being pushed around by this guy Pep. We’ve put up with it long enough." Tony insisted. He knew he was in part, still chaffing from that interview and all he’d read up on Trask and the new legislation the conservative parties he backed were pushing for. But Tony couldn’t change the world overnight, at least not in this area. What he could do, was show William Dyson he wasn’t going to be taken advantage of.

"You're the boss Tony." Pepper relented with a sigh, hearing the determination in his voice. “Just don't do anything rash until I get back from Tokyo."

"Will you have a shiny new trade deal for me?"

"Not if you annoy me by pissing off Dyson Construction before we have a viable replacement."

"Yes, mommy dearest." Tony promised with a smirk he knew she’d pick up in his tone even over the phone. Tony slowed his walk as he reached the meeting room where (not) Pepper had directed him his three o’clock appointment was waiting. “Now wish me luck. I’m going in to interview another applicant."

"And only 45 minutes late. Give the guy a medal." Pepper chuckled. "I think you'll like this one. She scored extremely high on the aptitude test and is a student at your Alma Mater."

"Who did her entry interview?" he asked, pausing with hand on the door handle.

"Bambi. She likes her too. Says she reminds her of you."

Tony grinned.

"I find that hard to believe. I'm a one of a kind darling."

"Thank god for that." Pepper muttered into his ear. “Go easy on her, Tony. Your personality is a lot to get used to for anyone, let alone a domesticated kat."

“I'll be gentle,” Tony promised as he opened the door with a flourish. “Bye bye Pep in my step.”

As Tony strode into the room his eyes naturally went first to the table surrounded by chairs in the center of the room, only to find them empty. Movement drew his eyes to the long windows where the young woman standing by the windows looking out over the city with her back to the door had turned to watch him approach.

“M-mr. Stark?” she asked, timid and wavering as if her own eyes couldn’t be trusted.

He couldn’t explain what it was about her that held his attention the way she did. On first sight she was just your average kat. Her clothing was interview appropriate but clearly off the rack even though she wore it well. She was slender, but not as thin as was stylish for models and kats right now.

She had the distinct look of the well fed and well cared for about her, and a surprising amount of
muscle on her bones. She’d have lost points for that at the pageants, but regained a few with the sleek black fur on her tail and ears, uniform in color and even darker than the thick nest of curls on her head that she’d barely managed to tame into a ponytail.

But if Tony knew the pageant crowd it was those big sad eyes that would have won her the ribbons. A deep brown, almost black near the outer rims but closer to the pupil they revealed hidden splashes of burgundy and flecks of feline green; they were the eyes of a lost child, carrying a familiar weight – the weight of too many loved ones gone, and too many dreams come to nothing – framed by a spread of thick inky black lashes.

Tony had never met anyone with eyes like that besides T’Challa and his companions. He’d almost wondered if it was a trait that had been bred out of gata outside of Wakanda.

Strangely, he was never more glad to have been wrong. Maybe it was the eyes, but at the first sight of her something inside Tony he had never even known was missing clicked into place. Mine. He thought, swelling with pride at the sight of how beautiful she was, as if he’d had some sort of personal hand in it for fucks sake. Somehow, he just knew he’d find a kindred spirit in this girl. It was similar to the pull he’d felt with Harley and Peter but more intense. The way corgis and mastiffs were both dogs.

“Tony?” Bruce’s thoughts brushed his gently, soft with concern. He could feel Steve and Natasha there too, attentive and curious. “You’re glowing.”

“Sorry. Bonding instincts. They’re strong with this one.” Tony explained quickly, mentally shaking himself out of his stupor.

“It’s not another tom is it? Steve’s starting to growl.” Natasha teased, and Tony felt a quick flash of embarrassment over their bond that belied Steve’s immediate response.

“I am not!”

Smiling to himself Tony hushed them all and did his best to put them on mute and give the young woman standing in front of him all of his attention.

“Princess Nichols. Do you prefer Ms. Nichols or Princess?” he asked, mentally riffling through the file on her as he offered his hand to shake. The girl flinched as if hearing her name come out of his mouth hurt her in some inexplicable fashion and Tony thought for one terrifying moment that she might burst into tears. But the emotion, whatever it had been, was gone in a blink of her eyes and then it was like she took on another persona entirely.

“All the tension that had been in her body a moment ago melted away, replaced by such a confident mask that if the memory wasn’t burned into his brain he’d be tempted to think he’d imagined the way she’d looked so vulnerable when he’d first walked in.

“Princess.” She answered with an exaggerated pout. “It’s what everyone calls me. I hate it but I’m afraid if you tried to call me anything else I wouldn’t know you were talking to me.”

“Fair enough. If it makes you feel better that’s not the worst name I’ve had to say with a straight face this week.”

Princess arched her brows in an expectant expression and Tony grinned.

“I interviewed a Mr. Wiggelwums two days ago.”

“You did not, you big liar!” Princess shrieked indignantly, face lighting up as she cackled with...
“Scouts honor.” Tony swore with a chuckle, placing one hand on his chest which was rumbling in a barely discernable purr. He liked that he’d made her laugh. God he needed to get a grip. Bonding instincts or not he still had to put her through the same test as everyone else. Her background checks must have checked out to make it to this point but Ross was not without resources or the means to pressure some family into pressuring their kat into a spy gig.

“So, Princess. You’re twenty. Currently the property of Casey and Mapp architectural firm of Savannah Georgia. A student at MIT.” Tony switched tracks swiftly but kept his expression friendly. Princess sobered, folding her hands neatly in front of her and giving no sign that the sudden serious turn of the conversation bothered her in the least. “What are you studying?”

It was all there in her file of course but subterfuge wasn’t the strong suit of domesticated kats, so if there were any holes in her story he was confident he could sniff it out. Though come to think of it, there wasn’t much scent to speak of coming off the girl. There was enough for him to be able to tell that she was a fel, but she was wearing some sort of scent dampener that made her scent seem very faint. About as noticeable as catching a whiff of someone baking three floors up.

“I am majoring in architecture. My masters want me to work for the firm when I graduate...” Princess answered, trailing off to bite her lip for a moment before she continued. “But I’m far more interested in Neuroscience. I’m unofficially double majoring in it because I don’t think my masters would approve.”

“What is it about the human brain you find so interesting?” Tony asked, but the young woman was already waving away his question before he even finished.

“I’m interested in our brains.” She insisted. “Gata. They’re so resilient. My uncle, he was experimented on. The humans nearly broke him.”

Princess paused and Tony waited, listening raptly. Though it was more common in rural areas where people had lots of land to keep whole families of kats, he didn’t comment on the unique privilege she’d had to know relatives when too many didn’t even know their sires. The way she spoke about her uncle was filled with a magnitude of such love and bitter heartache, the only fitting response seemed to be stillness.

“When I was little he’d have these episodes.” She went on, a slight distance in her eyes even though her tone stayed slow and measured. “My cousins and I would get scared, but the adults would help calm him, and when it was safe my cousins and I would all sleep curled up in the big bed with him. He said just having us there was healing. When I got old enough to start studying the way our brains work, I realized he wasn’t just making us feel useful, and I knew then, I wanted to understand how to help other Gata the way my family helped him.”

“Is he better now?” Tony asked, thinking forlornly of their search for another wounded man whose mind and body had been put at the mercy of the worst humans had to offer.

“Right now?” Princess asked, a hint of dark humor tilting her mouth upward. “No. I doubt it. My family is broken now. That’s why I’m here. I have to fix things.”

She said it with such conviction Tony believed her, and that despite her deceptively youthful appearance, he was looking at someone far older than the twenty years her record granted her.
Tony was starting to understand why this girl called to him so strongly. It was same calling to same. They carried the same burdens and it also seemed that it had somehow, or another fallen on both their shoulders to be the fixers. When he looked in her eyes this time around, he saw the iron in her core and it was Tony’s nature to want to shape.

She was already so beautiful to him in all of her raw potential, but one day this woman was going to change the world. He was sure of it and all he wanted was a front row seat.

“Final question. The contractor you’re paying ridiculous amounts of money to build your city on an island in the middle of winter, suddenly stops for reasons you both know are bullshit, in the hopes of squeezing more money out of you. What do you do?” Tony asked.

Princess stood up straighter, sharp teeth flashing in a grin as she flicked her tail behind her, swatting at the imagined annoyance.

“That’s easy. Find the pictures of those fels he likes to keep in the penthouse his wife doesn’t know about and when his stock crashes, buy it up.”

Yes.

Tony’s mouth spread into a wide grin.

“Good answer.”

~*~*~*~

The kit enters the corner store, and Mr. Allen looks up as the bell above the door jingles and smiles at him, but the kit’s eyes immediately go to the kat who is perched upon Mr. Allen’s counter. He is out of place, not just because Mr. Allen only has one kat, a tom named Marilyn, but because this kat has pedigree written all over him. He doesn’t belong in a little corner store in Brooklyn.

The kit can’t smell him because- well truth is, he doesn’t know why. That’s wrong too. Everything else about the store is right. Mr. Allen’s smiling face, the shelves full of canned goods now that nobody can afford the fresher stuff. He can smell Mr. Allen’s sweat, Mrs. Finnegan’s dog that even her heavy perfume can’t hide from his nose, and even the fresh bread that Marilyn bakes every morning, but he can’t smell the fancy looking kat with the funny beard who waves at him and smirks like he knows something nobody else does.

It’s wrong, but he can’t focus on that. It’s like he’s on a track and there’s no getting off it. He’s an actor in a play, bound by contract to perform what has already been scripted. He has to do what he came to the store to do.

The kit has been to this corner store what feels like a million times, but (he) knows that’s wrong. He doesn’t know this place, or this kit, or why (he’s) wearing his skin. But it feels good. The kit is young in a way that is felt in the bones, unburdened by years of training and the weight of hands that have taken life again and again and again.

The tag around his neck is heavy though, a bronze circle with his name and his registration number engraved. It’s there so that if he gets into any trouble or gets picked up by Animal Control they’ll know who he is and who he belongs to.
For once, the kit doesn't plan on getting into any trouble. He's just going to the corner store. He knows he's only foolin himself though as he goes through the aisles, picking out groceries and placing them into the basket he's brought.

He's shopped here a million times with his boy, but people don't send their kats on errands without a letter of permission. Kats aint supposed to have money of their own, though he's heard some rich knobs give their pets allowances.

The kit has no note to show the grocer, cause his boy didn't send him on this errand. He and his Ma are too proud to complain about how empty the pantry is and his boy is still angry about how they had to get the money.

The kit is thirteen years old, and he has just flowered. It's what they call it when kittens start heating every three months. His very first heat had been miserable. Painful and frightening as his body had called for the mate he didn't have without mercy.

The kit flushes, remembering how his boy had lain beside him on the bed, wiping the sweat from his body with a wash cloth while the kit had whimpered and mewedled for a touch they both knew was criminal.

Some people did it, they both knew that, but Ma would have had kits if she'd caught them touching each other. It's wrong, they say, for humans to take advantage of kats in heat. Only deviants do that.

It still happens all the time. Whose gonna believe a kitten anyway if they go telling tales about the master?

It wouldn't be that, between him and his boy, he thinks viciously. It would be love, but the kit knows better than to suggest that anywhere anybody might hear. He doesn't want to hurt his boy. No not ever.

Still, it was miserable going through heat alone and the world was full of masters who would pay good money to stud out their toms. This time around, when his heat had been coming on and Marilyn had gotten a good whiff of him, it hadn't surprised him a bit when Mr. Allen came knocking on their door offering a stud price. It wasn't as much as some fancy kitten with a pedigree would probably pull in, but it was more money than they'd seen in a while.

Wasn't no use in any of them going hungry when offering the kit out for his heat could bring enough mint for a month of groceries.

His boy hadn't liked it, and neither had Ma, but the kit had insisted. Ma had let the kit keep the money. Said it was his, like giving it to him would make them all feel less dirty about what had happened.

He'd do it again. Marilyn was ages older than him, pushing forty to his thirteen, but she was kind. Talked him through the whole thing and even cuddled him after.

Finished with his shopping, the kit makes his way back toward the counter and ignores the strange kat watching him intently from atop to counter to ask Mr. Allen to pull a couple of jugs of milk out of the icebox.

"We don't get a lot of folks coming in for the wet stuff much anymore, you're a lucky kitten." Mr. Allen says. The milk's not just for him. It's so Ma can bake without using the powdered stuff, but the kit can admit his mouth waters at the sight of the jugs that old Mr. Allen places in his crate.

"I've put in some of that canned fruit you like. For you and your boy," Mr. Allen says with a low
murmur, even though the kit hasn't asked for any. He winks with one kind brown eye and says, "My
Marilyn really enjoyed your get together. You're a good boy."

The kit blushes, eyes flying furtively to the kat who doesn’t belong, who has arched one neat
eyebrow and gone stiff. It’s not polite to talk about a kat's heat but everybody knows what Mr. Allen
means by 'get together'. Mrs. Finnegan, who is still looking at the bread case gives him a slow eyed
look, considering.

"You know, a good boy like you Bucky could make a lot of people happy? There’s a lot of wealthy
folks out there who would pay well for their toms to have a little company, even in times like these" Mr. Allen says, conversationally. As if they aren't talking the kit having sex with strangers.

"You'll be wanting to have kits soon, yeah? Now that your heats on. Not every kitten has got the
right temperament for it, don’t matter what they say, but you, you'd make a great mother. And they’d
fetch a bundle for your boy and his Ma."

The kit feels a surge of temper, the urge to hiss welling up in his throat at the distasteful thought. It’s
not that he wouldn’t want to. Someday maybe. It’s that he wouldn’t want to just to give them away.

"Thank you, Mr. Allen," he mumbles through his teeth because a response is expected, and Mr.
Allen is a master. The kit curls the free hand not holding the basket into a fist his side, jutting out his
middle finger where no one can see.

Not wishing to test it, the kit quickly moves to point toward the magazine rack where the latest issue
of one of his favorite publications sits on display.

"Can I get a copy of Space Odyssey please, for my boy?" he chirps, all innocence, twinkling eyes,
and fluttering eyelashes. Kat’s can read now, so he probably didn’t need to tell Mr. Allen the book
was for his boy, but people get funny when they know you’ve had some schooling. It’s safer all
around if everybody thinks you’re just some dumb kitten.

The strange kat perched on the counter laughs and the kit jerks, reminded again of his presence. He
frowns. The feeling of jarring wrongness tickles at the back of his mind again. Makes the tiny store
and everything beyond it seem somehow less real, as if he is staring through a fun house mirror at a
reflection of reality but can't get his hands on the real thing.

Because it’s not real (he) knows that.

The store is fading away like a photograph exposed to light too soon, leaving him and the
strange kat, who hops off the counter with a sigh and strolls towards him.

“Well that was a depressing memory. Gotta say Bucky, I liked that time we went and got hot dogs
on Coney Island better.”

The soldier blinks. The change is instant, but he’s used to it now. Used to how one skin falls away to
reveal his true self, familiar weight of his cybernetic limb returning along with the feeling of
tired tired tired in his bones. He’s not used to the ache it leaves behind. Like that bright-eyed kit is
truer than the man who had worn him like a mask.

He must be dreaming again.

Tony (and he remembers now that he is himself, that is the kats name) just stands there with hands in
pockets, relaxed and confident as if this game they play in the soldier’s head is normal.

“Who the hell is Bucky?” he grousches.
Tony looks surprised and delighted to hear him speak. In these dreams Tony talks a lot. The soldier never bothers. He knows only that if he’s stuck inside his head, speaking to phantoms, that somewhere out there he might not be paying attention and that is deadly.

Waking himself up is as simple as killing the specter.

But nothing about this feels simple, and that man… that Mr. Allen… he’d called him Bucky too. He wants to know who that kit is, and why Tony keeps forcing him to walk inside his skin like this. The fact that Tony is the one in control here is undeniable.

The world around them shifts at his whim and only gets unsteady when the soldier distracts him with a fight.

“He’s you. Who is it that you think you are?” Tony asks, cocking his head. His tone is patient and expectant, almost parental. The soldier is tempted to shoot him and just be done with it, but it’s more important to figure out why this keeps happening. Whatever Tony wants, the soldier needs to figure it out first and find a way to eject him for good before it jeopardizes the mission.

“Asset 32X.” The soldier sneers in answer, feeling an inexplicable swell of vicious satisfaction as Tony blinks and the space around the warbles.

A thick voice in heavily accented English fills his head and Tony flinches, hands raising defensively, but there is no visible threat. They’re in a lab now, a dark dingy space without windows full of pale blue light. The soldier knows this place, but he can tell by the way that Tony’s eyes flick about quickly, taking in the strange machinery and the operation bed that the soldier is now strapped to in a millisecond sweep, that he does not.

This is the beginning. The Furnace. His maker is always here in this room even though the soldier serves new masters. The soldier always returns here, at the start of every mission. It is part of his genesis.

“Can you hear me Asset 32X?” his maker’s voice reverberates through the room and Tony flinches.

Zola leans over the soldier where he is strapped in the bed, sweat from the sweltering heat in the room dripping down his brow and his round glasses glinting in the strange blue light.

“Yes,” the soldier replies in perfect obedience. Zola smiles.

“Ivan,” a new voice calls, a woman’s.

The soldier wakes.

Or rather, he blinks and he’s back in the surveillance van with Wanda and Pietro. Pietro is in the back, fishing through his bag where he has stashed provisions for their long stake out, muttering something about how boring SHIELD agents are, presumably unconcerned with the soldier’s lack of response.

In the passenger seat Wanda stares at him, intent and knowing.

“You were gone again.” She murmurs quietly, mindful of the communication equipment that could be recording them for their masters. The soldier is glad for her discretion. She and Pietro have such potential. Killing them when he’s working so hard to keep them would be a waste.

Wanda’s lip quirks upward in a hint of a smile. She says nothing about the threat he knows she can read in his thoughts.
“Tony Stark is dangerous.” She says instead.

The soldier says nothing. She has stated the obvious, which means there is either more coming or she is wasting his time.

“But you are not as powerless as you think you are.”

The soldier's ears twitch in interest as he examines her words.

She’s right, he realizes slowly. Tony had been unprepared for the furnace. Even just that small glimpse of the soldier’s birth had been a shock to him. Which meant that someone else must have brought them to that place. That memory.

He remembers his frustration with Tony’s prodding, his smug attempt to hear the soldier admit that he suspects Bucky is his zero. The ash he rose from at his rebirth. He’d spat out his real name, and the room had changed.

The soldier had brought them there.

His masters have never lied to him about his past. Why should they bother?

He started out as Zero. A nothing. A nobody whose name is as unimportant as his designation, but nevertheless was the foundation of all that made asset number thirty-two - sequence X, a success.

Zero was an unwilling participant in a reconditioning program to make soldiers for the empire, the coming one that has slept unnoticed inside civilization for centuries. The new order. Zero’s belief in their mission was not necessary, the way a maggot’s understanding of cleanliness is not necessary before the cleansing.

He is better now for being wiped clean. But his superior genetics while desirable, also posed many complications. His mind is a glorious tool that even their greatest scientist could not completely conquer.

How do you subdue the strongest mind in the world? You don’t.

It subdues itself.

Self-imprisonment is the strongest kind there is.

In the beginning Zero had fought, but in the end, despite all of his promises to the contrary, he chose the fire of the furnace.

Though he doesn’t know why he would have chosen that, the soldier has never questioned this history. The proof is in the words whenever he hears them spoken.

They are his contract. His reminder. His self-made shackles. After the fact he never remembers the words themselves, just the feeling of his mind turning on him. Until now.

Furnace.

The soldier mouths the word silently, marveling when its meaning and the memories attached to it don’t float away. It’s his now. He doesn’t know what knowing it changes, but it tastes like power in his mouth.
Don't worry, Steve and Tony will have their talk next chapter and we'll be hearing from T'Challa again. He's not about to let Tony forget what he looks like. In case you couldn't tell, we are moving into the Winter Soldier arc so we'll be hearing a lot more from Bucky and his kits partners. And Clint's pretty sick of the back burner. The only way he and Tony are going to resolve their issues is if they talk right? Clint would just like the record to show he hates emotional shit as much as Stark does and this is probably going to suck.
So I'm just a boy all lost and coy, at the curtains of the waterfall.

Chapter Summary

Things are finally going good for Tony Stark. He's not dying, he's got his island, and thanks to a plucky young intern he's two steps closer to establishing a free country for Gata. While Tony sets the board, Clint waits for the inevitable, Steve struggles to figure out the rules of the game, and it all just feels like the pause before the storm.

Chapter Notes

For those still reading this. I hope you enjoy. Posting in honor of seeing Black Panther tomorrow. I'm having a ton of T'Challa feelings right now and hoping to do some further world building this weekend for the upcoming visit to Wakanda in future chapters.

March Part II

Steve was beginning to wonder if Tony truly trusted him and it was enough to put a scowl on his face as he ran. It was New York so he wasn’t completely alone even at this early hour, but the streets were mostly quiet allowing him plenty of time to brood.

“What do you think happens after the war Stevie?” Bucky asks into the quiet. *His ears twitch, tickling the tip of Steve’s nose.* “Every time somebody asks that all I can think is, who cares. Nothin changes. Not for me.”

He was having trouble shaking last night’s dream. They were more memory than dream and they were coming almost nightly now that Tony had gotten inside Bucky’s head. Steve wasn’t a scientist or a psychic expert so he couldn’t really explain how he knew, but whatever had kept Bucky’s mind quiet all these years was peeling away, slowly but steadily. It wasn’t a surprise anymore to close his eyes at night and find himself pulled into some memory – impossible to tell whether the dream started with him or with Bucky. Steve always let them play out the way he remembered. He’d seen what happened when Tony woke the Winter Soldier too many times to risk Bucky realizing the dream wasn’t normal.

Natasha wasn’t having them anymore because she didn’t want to. And because she and Tony were bonded it meant she didn’t have to surrender her mind to Bucky’s pull. Not with Tony guarding it. Steve understood why it made Natasha more comfortable to give the dreams up. The idea of having someone like the Winter Soldier walking around in her head unbidden was probably the only thing dangerous enough in the world to terrify a woman like Natasha. And Steve understood perfectly well he should be scared too of giving himself over every time he closed his eyes, but he just couldn’t be.

He knew that reliving their old memories was the only time when Bucky got to be Bucky. When his days weren’t about the tortures he’d glimpsed in Natasha’s memories. He didn’t care how dangerous it was, he wasn’t going to take that away – not when it could be the key to bringing Bucky back!
“Things will get better Buck. You’ll see. We can make our own change. We’ll get a house. Somewhere it can be Just you and me,” Steve answers nudging the edge of one brown ear and inhaling deep. Bucky smells good. He always smells good. But lately –

Steve grit his teeth, increasing his speed marginally just to push his muscles and take his mind off what an idiot he’d been. How blind could one guy be? All those times he and the other Commandos would go on about their dreams for after the war when Bucky was right there, not free to do any of the things that they could do. How could he sit there and talk about things getting better with any kind of certainty, when he’d barely understood what was happening right under his nose.

No wonder Bucky had never told him about the baby. No wonder Tony still didn’t trust him. Steve didn’t trust himself either. That was the problem.

His much-improved relationship with Tony showed itself best on the battlefield, where they couldn’t have been more in sync with one another. Steve would never have expected it, but it was the one place where Tony seemed happy to let somebody else take the reins. He was still Tony, he still teased and ran his mouth whenever the mood struck, but Steve could tell now when Tony was just yanking his chain to yank it and when he was truly trying to undermine his control as team leader. He’d seen plenty of that in the beginning and the contrast to now couldn’t have been plainer.

When it worked it worked beautifully, the two of them seeming to share the same mind. Tony anticipating his commands before he gave them, appearing right where he needed him as if by magic. That symmetry reflected itself in the rest of the team, until they almost resembled the way T’Challa and his body guards had moved together. Like one animal.

It felt so easy and natural, the way they worked together as Ironman and Captain America, the admiration and respect Tony allowed himself to be vulnerable enough to show in that context was humbling, because it meant that Tony believed in him. And when he really started to pick that apart in his head it all got jumbled around with the instincts he was still getting used to from the serum.

Tony collected people until they were his. He saw them as his children. His most precious possessions. Steve fundamentally didn’t believe in people owning other people and yet it was nice seeing Tony so happy with the tower filling with kats for his internship, and the way the shelter kats came alive whenever he was around. It looked right and it felt right, and it sounded right when Tony’s contented purrs were rumbling in his ear drums and messing up Steve’s head. So the fact that Tony would look at him and think, that’s the guy I trust to win the fight and bring you all home in one piece, it kind of made Steve go a little crazy in the head.

He both loved and hated how amazing it made him feel. Loved the trust and the love he and Tony could share by exchanging something so precious between their hands, and hated how out of control he felt over his own body whenever his chest would swell and his fingers ache like the only thing to do now was grow claws and go slaughter all of Tony’s enemies.

He didn’t like feeling like he was a slave to his biology, and he liked it even less that he couldn’t untangle whether he was so upset with Tony’s behavior after that interview because Tony was being unreasonable, or because the tom part of his brain did not like to realize that his mate still struggled to trust him outside of the battlefield. Well and the bedroom. They did not have many problems there either.

And then, just to make matters even more complicated, there was a part of Steve that resented the way his body responded to Tony, and felt nothing but guilt over letting the man into his heart. How could he love Tony, and raise his shield to protect what was Tony’s, when he’d had Bucky and possibly a baby, only to lose them both?
If Steve were honest, which he was trying very hard to be, his feelings about Tony confused him. He was certain he loved him. He was just not certain the man he was and the man Tony needed to lead his Pride was the same guy. Because Steve Rogers was just some kid from Brooklyn, still trying to glue his heart back together after losing his first love, and trying to wrap his head around losing the family he’d always wanted before he ever knew it was his to protect. He just wanted to love Tony in the present and make a home for themselves in the tower that they could bring Bucky home to. Was that so terrible?

Maybe not. Except he had the sneaking suspicion that Tony didn’t really want that.

Tony wanted a king. A king for a kingdom, and somehow Steve had to be ready for that.

He pushed himself harder.

~*~*~

Green and yellow eyes watched Tony from behind a fan of long thick dark lashes, a smirk tilting the lips of the tom they belonged to. The toms scent was strong and itched heavily in Tony’s nose. It was cologne, probably something named ‘wild’ with a panther on the bottle, trying to mimic the fresh and powerful scent of a feral kat and mask the bitter scent notes that always accompanied the domesticated.

Tony had always found the domestication drugs repugnant, but he’d never found the scents of other Gata as grating as he found it now. He’d been used to it before the team (everyone smelled that way besides him) but now it was like he couldn’t stand it. Not after surrounding himself with a team of ferals, and certainly not after experiencing firsthand what Andre Dyson’s probably ridiculously expensive cologne was trying to imitate.

There he sat, curled at his mistress’s feet all gleaming muscle and ‘fuck me eyes’ probably thinking Tony’s whiskers were twitching and his knees liquefying, because he just couldn’t wait to roll over for such a big strong beautiful tom – when in reality all Tony could feel was an increasingly dark disgust.

Tony had met a true Allurian Prince for fucks sake. Andre Dyson was a house pet. Steve Rogers had more teeth, and Cap wasn’t even Gata.

But Andre continued to smirk, oblivious to the fact that Tony was only paying attention to him at all because he was still negotiating with his mistress and insulting her favorite lap kitty wouldn’t do him any favors.

Tony rarely conducted business from his office in Stark Tower, mostly because he preferred his workshop and if anyone came to Stark Tower it wasn’t his perfectly decorated office they wanted to see.

But sometimes, having home turf advantage was worth its weight in gold and certain people in the business world needed the reminder that his high-rise view and power statement furnishings provided. Pepper had a deft hand at that sort of thing, and she’d spent a ridiculous amount of her money to assure that anyone who walked into his office would know that Tony Stark was the kat in charge, emphasis on the kat.

Sonia Dyson might live the life of a pampered society wife but she was way more than just the wife of the CEO of one of the world’s biggest construction firms. She was old money, and shrewder than a miser when it came to keeping money in the family. She played a game that Tony knew well, and she played it better than anyone else he knew.
She was sitting primly on Tony’s expensive white couch, her soft peach suit perfectly matched with the manicured nails on the hand that was scratching between Andre’s ears.

“You know, I’d always hoped you and Andre would take a liking to each other. With his build and your beautiful coloring Tony, you’d have made such beautiful kits.” Sonia murmured thoughtfully, as if she’d read the track of his thoughts. There was a hint of dry amusement around her tone as she finished, “But you’d have made a terrible mother. You’re too possessive. I’d sooner try and snatch a pair of cubs from a mother bear than try and separate you from your kits.”

Tony smiled with his teeth.

“Possessive. Ruthless. Unpredictable. I’ve a long list of flaws. And I’m not the only one who has ever been called that. Right Sonia?”

“Quite.” Sonia answered succinctly, nodding her head slightly, the light coming in through the window casting a halo around her pale blonde hair.

“I must say. Releasing that video was ruthless, even for you Stark. I’m rather curious to know who was behind it.”

Tony arched an eyebrow and scoffed.

“Is it really so hard to believe after the way your husband yanked my chain that I’d have any qualms about showing the world that he has a taste for underage girls?”

“Sex kittens.” Sonia amended with a sniff and a dismissive wave of her hand. “I’m sure that none of them were innocents.”

Tony’s face went tight resisting the urge to hiss. Sonia smirked, as if she could tell she’d affected him.

“And yet, people find something about watching your husband hump a fifteen-year-old distasteful. Imagine that.” He replied, reaching for his drink. Then he added, like it was an afterthought, “Which I’m sure you do, constantly, what with the company stock in the shit hole and all the public embarrassment.”

Andre’s eyes followed Tony’s movement’s closely, clearly latching onto the flash of gold on his wrist where his suit sleeves had ridden up and his armlets peeked out.

Tony had started wearing them during his sessions with Xavier and his attempts to break into the mind of the Winter Soldier. Just as T’Challa had promised, they helped focus his energy and amplified his natural psychic abilities. It was truly armor fit for a Queen and Tony wasn’t above admitting he loved the shit out of them. At least to himself.

Pepper said it made a threatening statement, wearing Wakandian armor in public, but Tony had grown used to their weight against his skin, and they’d saved his ass more than once when going hand to hand with Barnes.

Plus, Tony was a-okay with coming off threatening. They may not have caught on yet but people were certainly going to. He was done hiding his teeth.

“Coincidentally, you’re right. This time around it wasn’t my idea to go digging for Harvey’s dirty secrets.” Tony revealed before calling out. “Bring Miss Nichols in J.”

The door of the office swished open right on cue and Princess stepped inside. She was dressed in the
same black skirt and jacket she reported for duty in most days, her intern badge a sleek silver bar pinned to her breast. Her hair was the only thing not perfectly polished about her – a wild riot of curls that would have put Merida to shame, that she’d unsuccessfully tried to strangle into a bun.

Pepper would have given her the infamous Pepper eye of disapproval but Tony kind of liked it. And the fact that she’d jerked her hands down as soon as the doors had opened, giving away the fact that she’d nearly been caught messing with it.

The little glare she shot him told him before her thoughts did that he was right.

“A *little* warning next time would be great!”

Natasha was suspicious of the fact that he’d bonded so quickly with the intern, but weirdly (even to himself) Tony just couldn’t find it in himself to feel the same. He couldn’t explain it. He just knew on some instinctual level that she was meant to be his.

It wasn’t a full bond yet for the obvious reason that Tony had to consciously open a full bond and neither she nor he was ready for that level of commitment, but whereas it had taken Tony months to begin feeling the thoughts and emotions of his teammates and the urge to open up their minds and bond with them fully – it seemed that within days of the interns moving into the tower he could feel Princess wherever she was and found himself gravitating naturally towards her thoughts.

Andre perked up as she entered, his tail twitching on the floor and Tony tensed, a growl building in the back of his throat. He couldn’t help the surge of protectiveness he felt. Princess was an intelligent young woman, but she was still an impressionably young fel from a very sheltered background. Andre was a pampered pedigree tom who knew his mommy would pay his way out of any unsavory incidents his tom-kating caused.

Domesticated fels were timid little creatures terrified of saying no to their betters, and toms would be toms and all that.

“You wanted to see me Mr. Stark?”

Impressively Princess ignored the only human in the room as well as the intimidating lump of muscle staring hungrily at her in favor of greeting Tony with cool unflappable professionalism that would have brought tears of pride to Pepper’s eyes. Tony relaxed a little bit, but kept a close watch on Andre out of the corner of his eye.

“Miss Nichols. This is Sonia Dyson.” Tony introduced the two women with a slight wave of his hand. “Sonia wanted to know who was behind her husband’s unfortunate tumble in the stock market.”

Princess turned her unusual eyes on Sonia with coldness, not quite able to hide the fury behind her gaze as the woman’s inquisitive grey eyes regarded her curiously in return.

“What an exquisite creature.” Sonia turned to murmur at Tony after a moment. “Those eyes are magnificent. Andre has always stood out, having that bit of yellow in his, but I’ve never seen eyes as feline as hers.”

Tony had, but now was not the time to think about Prince T’Challa.

“You don’t know the right kats.” Princess replied primly, drawing the woman’s attention. Some people would have been affronted at a kat addressing a human before they’d been directly asked to speak, but Sonia just blinked at the girl, emotions concealed behind a mask smooth as glass.
“It’s a genetic trait more commonly found in African Gata, who are closer to true Alurio.” Tony explained. “I don’t imagine you run into many black kats at the country club.”

Sonia hummed lowly in thought, a hint of malice in her smile as she shrugged her dainty shoulders and replied, “on the contrary. Negro kats are a very popular breed this year. They are the closest to true Alurio as you said.”

For a moment Tony thought the low hiss that filled the air was escaping from his mouth but no, he realized with shock as his eyes flew to Princess. It was coming from her.

Her courage was extraordinary, Tony thought not for the first time. It would have been a big deal for any kid in their twenties to face off with a woman like Sonia, but for a domesticated kat who had to fight against a lifetime of conditioning and damaged fight or flight responses to boot, Tony was daily in awe of her. And not just her. It was all of the interns in their different ways. Peter and Harley, Mika and Kamala. Young men and women who had defied all odds to pursue their dreams and succeed where the world told them they had no business.

“Is this lady always this much of a bitch?”

Princess stared directly at him, her vengeful energy pushing against Tony’s mind like a prowling lion and Tony barked a sudden laugh that made Sonia start in her seat.

“Language.” He admonished with a wink, and set his drink down.

Princess rolled her eyes.

“You sound like Steve. I don’t know if you know this, but a person can’t share thoughts with you without being exposed to bad words Tony.”

“Lies and slander.”

“I’ll bet you a million dollars right now that when you and Steve have a kit, his first word is going to be shit and Steve is gonna be pissed at you for like months.”

“Don’t take that bet.” Natasha warned and Tony bit back a smile.

“Complete waste of a million dollars.” Bruce agreed, and Tony shrugged. He was good for it. Sonia was staring at him, clearly perplexed but trying hard not to show it.

“Sorry. It’s crowded up here these days,” Tony apologized, tapping the side of his skull. It was touch and go with people how they felt about Gata bonds once they saw them in action. The general rule seemed to be a certain kind of disquiet at knowing that Tony was holding silent conversations with his teammates. Tony knew for a fact it bothered the hell out of Fury. Nobody liked to think the inmates were plotting.

“But you’re not here to talk about the new mental traffic we’ve all got going on around here or how pretty my intern is Sonia.” He segued, all business now. With an easy smile he gestured to Princess. “Would you do the honors?”

“Happily, Mr. Stark.” Princess answered with a nod and turning to Sonia again with an annoyed flick of her tail she launched in on their rehearsed pitch. “Right about now you want to be as far away from your husbands tattered image as possible and more importantly, to take control. An opportunity to seize controlling interest in the company has never before been available to you. But now it could be.”
Sonia listened carefully, nodding slightly as the girl went along. Her body language remained casual, as if she had not decided how invested she was in the conversation yet.

"Tony would have to sell me all those stocks he bought." She pointed out nonchalantly. Tony wasn’t fooled by it though because her next question told all.

“Are you about to offer me a deal?”

"I'm about to offer you the throne. So to speak. What Daddy didn't think you had the unfortunately literal balls to run, I'm prepared to hand you." Tony answered taking another sip of his whisky. A purr of satisfaction rumbled in his throat as the smooth liquor went down. He did love a good whisky. That and having a business rival dangling right where he wanted them.

"My parents always told me it was rude to play with your food." Princess thought at him with amusement and Tony smirked. Thinking back, "but it squirms so nice for me."

Sonia for her part was looking at Tony with a cool calculating gleam was in her eyes as she reached down to continue stroking Andre.

"I suppose you want a public apology?" She asked, moving swiftly from consideration into negotiation.

"The most public." Tony affirmed cheerfully. “I want you to sing your shock and dismay from the rooftops."

"Naturally. Anything else?" Sonia asked.

"Naturally," Tony mimicked her prissy tone. "You're going to make a sizeable donation to the Resilience Rehabilitation Center. You're also going to complete construction for me at a discount that could get you elected for sainthood – so I guess you could say you're actually going to pay me, to build my Island - and in the very public speech you're going to make, about how fervently you believe in change and cleaning out the trash in the company dear old daddy built, you're going to announce your endorsement of Judge Powell in the senate race.”

Sonia’s pale eyebrows arched. Tony fully understood why. In the fight for gata rights two lines of thinking had emerged. Those who wanted Gata to be recognized as fully equal to humans and fully integrated into society. And those who wanted to recognize Gata autonomy, along with their right to live peaceably somewhere else, but naturally not their equality with humans.

“The separationist? You do surprise me Tony. I’d have thought you’d be all for Together and Equal.” Sonia mused.

“With all due respect, Mistress, it will be generations before we are truly equals in the eyes of humans.” Princess said with a hint of bite in her tone. Her smile was full of teeth as she finished with a shrug. “Tony’s not that patient.”

Tony nodded, relaxing back into his chair, content to let her take the reins of getting the contracts signed. He really could not have put it better himself.

One week later

~*~*~*~
Yowler User CircusAct909 just posted: [Image] Wrecking ball bitches! I came, I saw, I conquered. Your hammer can’t keep up!

Your post has just been liked by Yowler User Sweetiepiexoxo! Send her a purr in thanks!

ThorsonofOdin just commented on your post: Your Midgardian humor is so simple and enjoyable.

You just got a wiggle from PeteyPie! Send him a Wiggle!

You just got a purr from yowler user cloe_kitten! Send her a purr in thanks!

You just got flicked by yowler user Tony Stark ® Do you want to send her a hiss?

Yowler User Lake_FromMedical just posted a picture to your wall! Send him a response!

At the sound of the familiar chime from his phone Clint fished the device out of his pocket and smiled down at the latest alert. He scrolled through the usual responses from fans and lonely kittens fantasizing about snagging an Avenger for a mate, and had to smile at those who were bold enough to claim outright they were just looking for a stud. The grin widened when he saw that the team had seen the pictures he’d posted of himself with the guys from the construction crew, but it damn near cracked his face when he saw that T’Challa had responded. The other toms Yowler profile had been silent since his identity had been discovered and Clint hadn’t expected him to go back to using it.

Yowler might have been the only social media platform designed for kats, but it was still monitored by the government, and now that everyone on the team knew that “Luke from medical” was actually T’Challa Prince of Wakanda, what would have been the point in continuing to use it?

Clint was going to be impressed till the day he died how thorough SHIELD had been in setting up the guy’s cover. All the way down to a fake Yowler account full of family and friends. But then again, when the target was the Avengers - which included two top spies, and two of the worlds smartest brains - thoroughness was required. Sure, not every kat was fortunate enough to have a Yowler account, but the kind of kat with the backing to become a medical aid would definitely be online with the rest, and if he wasn’t, well it would spark interest and whatever story James Bond kept spinning, the whole spy game was about being quickly forgotten.

T'Challa had responded with a photo of himself with an eyebrow raised. Dressed for a night out and holding a cocktail in one hand he looked just like the snobbish peddys (rich bitch kats with a pedigree) that were so popular on TV. Clint chuckled and thumbed out a reply as outside his windshield New York and the tower was coming back into view.

You just replied to Luke_FromMedical: You stole that look from Cookie! Have you binged on more Empire without me?!

Luke_FromMedical just replied: She is an admirable fel and my will was weak. Besides, I wasn’t the one who took a trip in the middle of the season.

Tony Stark ® just commented on Luke_FromMedical’s response: That’s rich coming from you. Didn’t you fuck off to OZ?

Luke_FromMedical just sent Tony Stark ® a purr!

Luke_FromMedical: If I did not know better Anthony, I might think my absence was being felt.
Clint arched an eyebrow. Anthony? What the shit was that about? Clint had gotten used to the way those two flirted with each other like it was in their mission debriefing, but Tony hadn’t let anyone call him by his full name since… well ever, that Clint could recall. Which was why Clint was watching his phone like it might burst into flames, fully expecting that Tony was about to start hissing and blowing up T’Challa’s profile with scratches.

If Natasha were present she’d have hit him over the head for Yowling while flying, but Clint had flown out to the Island alone to oversee the changes in the construction company and smooth the way for the new CEO so he was alone in the quinjet. Thank fuck, because he wasn’t about to miss Tony’s reaction for the world.

Tony Stark ® just flicked Luke_FromMedical: You know what they say about assumptions!

Luke_FromMedical: Thy name is Tony Stark?

Tony Stark ® : I’ve got a finger just for you whenever you want it. Are you always this clever or does it take a couple Tequila Sunrises?

But Tony just sort of… let it go. He didn’t remark on it at all, as if he hadn’t built an entire trademark on being just Tony and nothing else. Clint’s brow furrowed in contemplation as the two traded messages back and forth, seeming to forget they were on Clint’s wall on a completely public domain until:

WidowBites just commented on Luke_FromMedical’s reply: Lets end this. I can provide Tony’s dick size if you’re willing to be candid about yours.

Clint cackled out loud because he loved that woman. The console of the jet made a beeping noise of its own and Clint put his phone back in his breast pocket and flicked on the jets communicator.

“Unidentified vessel, you are approaching a no-fly zone. Please identify.” A familiar voice filled the cockpit, its confident professionalism ruined by the thread of excitement the kid could barely contain.

“Stark’s got the interns in the control room today?” Clint asked as the Tower landing pad grew larger in his view. On the other end of the line Parker paused and a voice in the background that sounded a lot like Harley chirped, “Hey Clint!”

Parker, completely dropping his mask of professionalism responded eagerly, “Yep! Well half of us. The other guys are doing their teaching rotation up at the shelter. Normally Jarvis controls the towers defense systems but they want us to learn how everything works so that we can be better engineers and teach others if we have to.”

Not to mention, run the show if ever Jarvis should become compromised Clint thought, but he didn’t want to alarm the kits so he just shrugged and said, “Neato. I can still see at least a dozen missiles aimed at me from up here. Mind clearing me for landing?”

“Disengage defense shields and all weapons Station Three.” Harley chirped, clearly talking to someone else in the room. A dry but amused sounding female voice replied.

“Aren’t you guys forgetting something?” There was a pause, while presumably Harley thought about it. Parker got there first.

“Oh yeah! Mr Barton, we’re going to need your landing code.”

“Landing code, really? Guys it’s me!” Clint whined, buying himself time as he wracked his brains for the code JARVIS had given him when he’d set out. That was the great thing about having Jarvis
running the tower and access to all their ships, not having to remember shit like landing codes.

“Just because you sound like Clint Barton doesn’t mean you are Clint Barton,” the unfamiliar female chimed in a worldly way, but there was something about her tone that made Clint think she was yanking his tail. He kind of liked it. Having the Stark Resilient interns crawling all over the tower the past few weeks was taking some getting used to. A nice bunch, but most of them were used to living and working in very restrictive settings and seem terrified of stepping even a hair out of line. It was like having a tower full of Bruce’s scuttling about and fidgeting in their lab coats.

“Would anyone who wasn’t me come in like this?” Clint asked, flipping a few switches on the console so that the search beams on the quinjet flared on dramatically and the air strip was pumped full of loud music.

“Tell Tony I’m home. I don’t want to be locked out of the workshop for six hours like last time.”

“Aye aye, Mr. Barton!” Harley chirped and Clint shook his head.

Going to the Island and seeing how their future was coming along had been great, but there was nothing in the world like coming home.

The pull he felt towards the tower (and Tony in the tower) was a tangible thing now, but he tried not to let it scare him, or to wonder too long why Tony hadn’t broached the subject of bonding yet. He and Steve were still working on it, and once this whole mess with the Winter Soldier was figured out, he told himself then Tony would do it. He couldn’t possibly have any reason not to. Right?

~*~*~

A knock tried to intrude upon his thoughts and Tony grimaced, flicking his hand to tell whatever intern (and there were dozens of them crawling all over the tower now) had gotten the wrong idea that now was a good time to bother him, to go away. Sure, he might look like he was doing nothing standing at the windows in the kitchen, but in actuality he was concentrating very fiercely on the little device in his hand.

The Light Shield was the only known link besides OSCORP that they had to the mercenaries and Tony was determined to crack it open and learn its secrets. It was highly advanced touch technology, which meant that by just holding it in his hand Tony could interact with its operating system. But whatever intelligence was running things inside the device was complicated and well defended, possibly even more so than JARVIS, and Tony had yet to hack through its defensive systems.

He was certain it would only respond to the right combination of thought and touch, but he was hoping by closely examining what functioned within the chip when a negative response was triggered, he could figure out the code that would trigger a false positive.

A stream of binary code flowed across Tony’s vision, Extremis lighting his eyes the eerie vibrant blue that gave Pepper the heebie-jeebies and usually sent the interns scuttling away in fear. He fondled the little metal disk, analyzing the numbers over and over as he tried to access the technology inside only to be firmly rebuffed.

Tony jerked as something knocked against his elbow and an amused feminine voice said, “I’ve been sent to tell you that Clint’s back from the island.”

Tony blinked, the smell of coffee making his nose and whiskers twitch, and looked down at the cup that had appeared under his nose and then up at the young woman who was holding it out to him.
Princess wiggled the cup invitingly, sloshing its contents and Tony arched a brow at her asking, “who told you how I take my coffee?”

Because Tony’s eager nose could smell it was right. Black, two dollops of the good cream and no sugar.

“Observation. And after you ignored poor Mika for thirty whole minutes when you forgot you asked to see her yesterday morning, I thought I’d try a different approach.” The pretty young fel answered with a lazy swish of her tail. Tony took the cup from her because much as he didn’t like being handed things from strangers, Princess had felt like his from the first and that hadn’t mellowed over the weeks. It helped that she was also all the things he liked. Whip smart, sarcastic, opinionated and not willing to take any of his shit.

“You should apologize to Mika by the way. She sniffled all night, cause she thinks you’re going to give her back to her old masters.”

Tony flinched, irritated at himself and irritated at the silly woman for thinking he’d do something like that. He was used to just being himself and knowing that Pepper and the others could handle it, but things were different now. He was building a Pride and he’d brought these people to live in his tower and work in his new company so that they could be a part of that. He knew better than anyone how timid and sensitive to rebuke domesticated kats could be.

“She’s the one who likes pillows right? Have somebody put together an apology basket. While you’re at it, pencil in a conversation between you and me where I remind you that I’m your boss.”

Princess made a show of tapping away at her tablet and Tony snorted, taking a long sip of his coffee. His nose had been right, it was made perfectly, but he’d come to expect nothing else from Princess.

“You know my Papa used to say that a leader who can’t apologize is a leader no one can respect.”

“Is this the same Papa who used to tell you not to play with your food?” Tony teased, “he sounds like a drag.”

“He wasn’t.” Princess snapped suddenly, the playful mood disappearing between them at the brittle edge to her tone. Tony felt like a heel. It was too easy to forget. Even though Princess had a photo ready mask of confidence, she was carrying around a tremendous amount of grief for the family she’d lost. Most especially for her papa. She had a way of breathing around the word, papa, that suddenly made Tony doubt her twenty years of age. She seemed like just a girl to him sometimes, a child playing at Atlas with the world on her shoulders.

“He was the best man who ever lived Tony. The best.” She insisted, clutching her tablet tightly for a moment before she seemed to realize how intense she was being and forced herself to relax with a deep breath.

Tony never wondered very long why he liked her as intensely as he did.

“He also told me that you are the kind of person who hides how sensitive he really is. Or at least it seemed like it, you know. From the TV?” She amended when Tony arched a brow at her in question. “Never mind, the point is that’s pretty stupid Tony. The things that make you weak in the eyes of your enemies are the very things that make you such a great leader.” She admonished, looking up from her tablet with an adorably stern expression that struck Tony as familiar.

“Your Papa said all that about me?” Tony asked, ten shades weirded out by the thought and ten humbled. He knew he’d done some good things for Gata over the years, but he also knew it wasn’t
nearly enough and that plenty of kats looked down on him for rocking the boat. Bad kitty. So Tony
never took it for granted that for a few, he was a hero and a role model.

Princess shrugged under his incredulous look, a little smile tugging at her mouth and brightening her
sad eyes.

“He was a big fan of yours.”

That made Tony smile.

“I’m sorry I never got to meet him then” he replied sincerely and Princess bit back a chuckle.

“What?” he asked, but Princess just shook her head and waved the question away.

“Not important. What are you working on?”

Tony glanced down at the device still clutched in his free hand, deliberating for a moment if he
should show her before he showed the other interns. He had plans for Stark Resilient’s first line of
defensive weapons, and he had this little baby right here in his hands to thank for them. But those
projects were months down the pipeline and without being able to get thing open he reasoned it
wouldn’t be giving her too much of a leg up above her peers.

Alright so he had a favorite. It happened.

"It doesn’t look like much but it’s a plasma weapon, which is pretty astounding all on its own right?"
Tony said, eagerly extending the small silver disk. “But the real wonder of this bad boy is the highly
advanced thought recognition software that is running it-"

The disk hummed in his hand at the sudden movement, the technology inside coming to life and
Princess’ eyes went wide. Tony faltered mid-sentence as she leaped back in fright, putting as much
distance between herself and the weapon as she could without outright leaping over the table.

The humming inside the little disc died out and it was still once more, going cool in his hand. Tony
shoved his curiosity over the shields strange behavior to the back of his mind, in favor of soothing
the panicked young fel he’d scared half to death.

“Whoa, easy! It’s not going to explode if you touch it.” Tony assured her with a frown of concern
when she didn’t make any attempt to close the distance she’d put between them. “It’s never done that
before, granted, but I wouldn’t have it out of the lab if I weren’t sure it was safe.”

His nose twitched, picking up on her stress scent despite the scent dampers she wore. Her anxiety
was buzzing at his senses like an angry bee. He winced, guilty, because Princess was in general far
less skittish than any of the other interns. It was too easy to forget sometimes that she wasn’t
undamaged.

“I’m sorry I scared you. I don’t like people thrusting things at me either. That was stupid.” He
apologized, slowly lowering the object, sure to broadcast loudly his intentions.

"It’s alright. You just, took me by surprise...where did you get that?” She asked tentatively, lifting
her eyes to his and Tony shook his head.

"That's less important for you guys to worry about. Avengers business. But there's a lot we could
learn from this and a lot of ways we could develop superior weaponry out of Stark Resilient. "

Tony waited tensely for her reaction. It was the first time he’d dared to drop that word outside of his
own mind or a private conversation with Pepper. But for reasons he could not explain and didn’t want to bother trying, her opinion mattered to him. She didn’t disappoint him. Her ears twitched toward him as her spine straightened, fear and uncertainty dropping away as she focused all of her attention on him and the words he’d just spoken.

“I thought Stark industries didn’t make weapons anymore?”

Tony took a deep breath and let it out slow.

"Do you want to know the real reason I stopped making weapons? It's because I realized that people only had one interest in dropping bigger and badder bombs on their neighbor just because they could, and the guys who sell them only care about the profit. Not so much about the hands they’re putting them in. I won’t be a part of that system again. But the world is the world. And we have to give our army what they need to protect our home."

Princess nodded slowly, thinking over the words. But because she was sharp, Tony wasn't surprised at all when she asked, "You don't trust General Ross, you wouldn’t sell him weapons. Whose army are we supporting?"

"Did I say army?" Tony feigned surprise. "I meant security officers. The island will need them. We can't have flesh sharks and rival tech company’s buzzing around trying to steal either our tech or vulnerable citizens can we."

He fully expected her to put together the larger picture his words implied and once again she did not disappoint him. Rather than any of the shock or worry that he’d expected her eyes widened with delighted surprise, her mouth curling into an anticipatory grin.

But just then Clint swept into the kitchen with Natasha not far behind, bringing a swell of chatter with him, and Tony tabled the conversation for later with a wink.

"How did it go?" he asked Clint.

"Dyson's crew finally has their act together. There was some bitching about a kat being put in charge but Bill kept a cool head. " Clint reported with an easy smile, making a beeline for the fridge. "He's good people. How on earth did you manage to buy him away from Harper and Jung?"

"Jung owed me a couple of favors so I called them in. He thinks he got the better end of the deal." Tony replied, taking the opportunity while the tom's back was turned to scrutinize him closely, searching for any signs of injury.

Clint continued to dig around in the refrigerator, oblivious, shrugging his muscled shoulders loosely and muttering, “His loss. Bill really knows what he’s doing. The place looks great Tony."

"You did a full security check? The last thing we need is to find a surprise later."

"Yes Mom.” Clint said muffled, straightening up with a box full of leftover pizza in hand and a cold slice between his teeth.

“The sites secure.” Natasha assured him, a knowing smile somewhere in the gleam of her green eyes. “Once you get Jarvis installed up there we’ll have twenty-four-hour surveillance.”

"Great." Tony nodded, some of the tension easing from his neck. He didn’t trust Ross not to try and sabotage things. He was going to try, some way, and Sonia Dyson would love a way to take him down a peg or two hundred. Two hundred confirmed residents so far. Two hundred lives that would depend solely upon him for protection.
Well not solely, Tony amended. Forcing himself to do as T’Challa had advised, and start thinking like a Queen. Tony looked to Clint (healthy, whole, safe but still too far away) and listened to him banter with Natasha, and thought they’d also have the Avengers; and they were going to grow. He’d make sure of it.

“Sir,” JARVIS’ voice interrupted his contemplation. Tony perked his ears. “There is an event unfolding in Washington.”

Almost as soon as he said it, the Avengers alert system began to blare.
I was choking on the ground, feeling my brain up in the clouds.

Chapter Summary

In which the Avengers answer a distress call to Washington and everything is not at all what it appears to be on the surface. But this is Tony's life we're talking about so what else is new.

Chapter Notes

I am so sorry for how long this has taken. It has been sitting in pieces on my computer. I intended it to be longer and cover the actual confrontation between the Avengers and Bucky's crew but things are super busy right now it would just take me twice as long to get it out there and I was at a good stopping point. Thank you for your patience.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The mission was a simple one. Text book. Or at least it would have been, if Ivan hadn’t started it off his game. His head is still cracked, but so long as their handlers stayed in the dark about that he didn’t see it as much of a problem. He was getting stronger, finding it easier to keep Stark from rooting around in his thoughts at will. He couldn’t push the man out completely. Somehow some way, Stark had created a bridge between them and Ivan got the notion that if he wanted the man gone completely he’d have to burn it down – and he didn’t think that was going to be a bloodless process for either one of them.

That confrontation would come someday, he was sure of it, but it was not today. Today Ivan and the twins had a mission and it was imperative they not fail it. Lucky for all involved, that this particular mission wasn’t all that high stakes. They were set to kidnap an unguarded woman from a public mall. She wasn’t anybody special and wasn’t in any known danger so she’d never see it coming.

He didn’t know why Hydra wanted her and he hadn’t asked when the phone call had come in. That wasn’t his place. It was dangerous enough that the questions were dancing around on his tongue.

He’d taken Wanda and Pietro there the day before and they’d cased it for hours, noting every exit and every potential escape route in case things went to shit.

So far things were going exactly to plan. The mall was full with weekend shoppers. Nobody was paying any attention to Bucky and his companions as they window shopped and loitered around the Apple store.

“You seem calmer this morning.” Wanda noted, leaning over till their shoulders knocked.

“Why wouldn’t he be calm?” Pietro appeared on his right, a costume headband with a fuzzy pair of cat ears attached. The price tag was still attached. “It’s a simple snatch and grab. We could do this in our sleep.”
Ivan scowled and snatched the ears off his head, careful not to disturb the hair hiding his real ears. Wanda smirked.

“I’m talking about Stark.”

Pietro’s eyes went slightly round, and he looked to Ivan. Waiting.

“I’m fine.” He grunted to the unspoken question in the young fels eyes.

“And I am the King of Sokovia.” Pietro rolled his eyes. “You’re not fine, and when Pierce and the others notice they will terminate you.” Or worse went unsaid.

“You could save your own skin. Report on me.” Ivan pointed out the obvious.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Wanda scoffed beside him, her mouth curling in a small grin as she added, “We did not go to the Black Castle to serve the new order, but to survive it. And we are going to survive it.”

“All three of us.” Pietro nodded in firm agreement.

Another man might have been touched. As it was, Ivan could only feel the irritation of clashing directions within him. The wrongness of their words grating against a feeling of rightness so deeply imbedded it required excavation of a sort.

Furnace.

Turning the word over in his head helped to calm the pounding of his heart. Helped center his thoughts so that he could see better the paths in front of him, including the one he knew was forbidden, the one that winded deep down into the dark heart of who and what he was.

But that was a journey for later. The three of them were going to survive, and that meant for a little while longer at least the only thing he had to follow was orders.

“She’s walking into the bookstore.” He announced nodding to where their target was walking into a store across the mall. “Get into your positions.”

Tony could not concentrate. The particulars of the situation in Washington was unfolding in real time on time the haloscreen of the jet. JARVIS was valiantly trying to debrief the team before they dropped down over Diamond Row, the premier shopping complex of the nation’s capital, but Tony kept finding his attention pulled away from the moment by an increasingly loud sense of urgency that had nothing to do with protecting innocents from what sounded like a quickly escalating terrorist attack and everything to do with Bucky Barnes.

JARVIS had tapped into security cameras in the mall, as well as the footage being shot out of a news chopper that was circling the crisis area – so the whole team was tense as they analyzed what was happening and quickly developed a strategy for dealing with the situation. It took him a moment to realize that the feeling of panic and distress nibbling away at his concentration and pulling at his heart strings wasn’t coming from one of them, but through the bridge he’d built between his mind and that of the Winter Soldier.

Along with the heavy sense of distress, he kept getting flashes of images seeped in intense thoughts
and emotions; a startling change from the last few weeks. Since Barnes had seemingly figured out that Tony wasn’t the only one with power when they linked up, it had become harder for Tony to get inside his head. The soldier’s mental barriers were stronger, his defenses sharper, and Barnes was quick to lash out (violently) the minute he suspected Tony was trying to get past them. It had slowed down the progress of their search, but Tony might have kept pushing anyway if not for Natasha and Steve’s obvious worry, and well, everything else he had going on.

Jesus Barnes was a wreck. Tony kept getting sucked into his orbit, captivated by the memories and thoughts that were leaking out of the soldier’s head, his frantic mind singing some sort of siren song that demanded soothing, reordering that Tony found it nearly impossible to resist.

YOU MUST FOCUS, AYEBA. IT IS IN YOUR NATURE TO FIX WHAT IS BROKEN, BUT THE WINTER SOLDIER IS DANGEROUS AND MUST NOT BE UNDERESTIMATED.

The text flashing through his brain should not have been as soothing as it was, but Tony grabbed ahold of it like a life line, burying himself within the endless number stream that was two systems communicating across a binary highway, and breathed a sigh of relief when it drowned out the sudden rush of stimuli.

WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT?

SOMETHING HAS DISTRUBED HIS BALANCE.

YOU SAYING THERE’S BEEN A DISTURBANCE IN THE FORCE?

MORE OR LESS. WHEN IN PERIL, QUEENS CALL THEIR OWN TO THEIR AID. YOU ARE CALLED BECAUSE YOU ARE IN HIS HEAD, WHERE I HAVE ADVISED YOU IT IS DANGEROUS TO BE. THAT, AND YOU STAND BETWEEN HIM AND THE ONLY OTHER TWO WHO WOULD HEAR SUCH A CALL.

GOT IT. I’VE GOT HELP ME ‘OBI-WAN KENOBI YOU’RE MY ONLY HOPE’ PLAYING ON LOOP UP HERE.

WHILE IT THRILLS ME THAT YOU HAVE NOT LOST YOUR SENSE OF HUMOR, IT WOULD DO BETTER FOR MY HEART IF YOU LISTENED VERY CAREFULLY TO WHAT I SAY, AND STAY AWAY FROM THAT MAN. YOU MUST FOCUS ON THE TASK AT HAND. THE SOLDIER MAY BE A TRAP.

Tony grimaced. He did not doubt that Barnes didn’t have much practice with shields and bonds, but T’Challa had a point. Somebody out there had knowledge of the Alurio that they shouldn’t have, and they’d already used it to create soldiers. He couldn’t discount the fact that the mercenaries might be connected in some way to the KGB.

They were definitely back, and there were more of them this time. For reasons unknown they’d changed their MO and were openly attacking the public, or so the police reports coming out of the crisis area all reported.

Personally, Tony didn’t want to believe it (it would only mean bad bad things, for other kats if it were true) but either way, figuring out their motives and how to stop them was them was of absolute importance right now and had to come before finding Barnes.

“Do we know what their target is?” Steve was asking, and there was a crackle on Coulson’s end of the radio before the agent’s voice filled the jet speakers.
“Negative. They first appeared in Macey’s, looked to be a standard robbery. Then they split off to target a Barnes and Nobles.”

Tony frowned. What were these guys doing? Robbing a Macey’s for some quick cash, okay, but a bookstore? It didn’t make sense. None of it did.

“The store has been surrounded and we’re trying to keep things contained since there are hostages involved.”

Damn. Tony thought with dread, gut clenching. The fallout from this was going to be – no, no time for that. First things firsts. Take these guys down. Then he and Pepper could come up with a strategy for damage control.

“J, give us the footage from the stores again.” Tony instructed and the A.I. immediately complied, the grainy security footage recorded at the onset of the event beginning to play again on the large screen. It’s all normal at first. Shoppers going about their business, enjoying a little weekend shopping until suddenly a kat in silver armor jumps up onto a jewelry counter and begins shooting randomly into the air, presumably shouting for everybody to get down by the way people start diving for the floor. He’ accompanied by two others, both noticeably shorter and as Tony carefully watched their movements he thought to himself, younger. They were kids, and they weren’t shooting as randomly as he first thought.

They shot at mannequins, tables, chairs, windows, anything that wasn’t actually moving. They waved their arms around and made a horrendous mess as they demanded money and jewels from the jewel case, but there was a disturbing lack of urgency to all of it. They didn’t want to just get in get out, they wanted to be seen. It wasn’t about the money, it was about the show. Up until suddenly one of them goes charging toward the Barnes and Nobel and everything drastically changes. The kid lands in front of two young women who back hastily away. The camera angles are bad here, a shelf full of books blocking the view as the kid stalks the two women, but he’s mostly in frame when he fires a strange electric blue energy wave out of his hands like some sort of wizard.

The question is why? Why did they go on the attack?

Using Extremis he rewound the footage, watched it again, playing it slower.

There. Tony blinked, gaze focusing on his teammates once more as he pointed to the now frozen image of the two girls walking, just before the kat lands in front of them. The two women are walking arm and arm, heads bent close together. It’s only when the footage is zoomed in and paused that someone might catch the strange glazed expression on the human woman’s face, or the faint reddish light around the second woman’s fingers as they tickle her companions ear.

“Do you have any idea how creepy it is when you do that?” Tony heard Clint mutter under his breath and Natasha shushed him.

“JARVIS! Run a facial recognition.” Tony barked and a moment later the A.I. chimed back with an answer.

“The woman on the right is a 99.9 percent match for McKenzie Walsh. Twenty-one-year old resident of Virginia. The feline on her left does not match with any registered identity within the prespecified margins, Sir.”

“Walsh. Any relation to supreme court justice Walsh?” Natasha asked, eyes narrowing on the frozen image.
“His daughter,” Tony confirmed. “And it doesn’t look like she was leaving that store under her own
steam.”

“So, the unsub was trying to help.” Bruce marveled aloud. Steve was already pinging Coulson on his
comm unit, trying to get word to the policemen down below that an abduction was under way and
that the gata mercenaries were not hostile, but Tony doubted he’d have much luck getting through.
They had been in the middle of a ridiculously showy robbery before they decided to try and play
hero.

“They’re all morons.” Natasha muttered darkly, only Bruce and Tony were party to the waves of
protectiveness underlining each word, but it was an unspoken feeling he suspected they all shared.

Caps eyes met his for a brief moment and Tony saw the same grim understanding reflected back at
him. Somehow, the Avengers had to stop whoever was trying to abduct Justice Walsh’s daughter,
and apprehend those teenagers before SHIELD or the police could. They’d be scapegoats in the
governments hands, and Tony shuddered to think what SHIELD would do with them and their tech.

~*~*~

“Ivan! Ivan what do we do?!” Someone close to him hisses, the edge of panic making his voice
shrill. They’ve been separated from Wanda, forced back into a corner by an unknown threat in a
strange silver battle suit, and Pietro never took it well when he couldn’t watch his sisters back.

He has to get them out of here in one piece, preferably with the mission completed, but if it comes to
it Ivan will abandon the mission in a heartbeat to protect them both. Protect the children. He’s done it
before. He remembers that now.

Remembers the furnace.

“Do you know what the key to making the perfect soldier is?” The man with the spectacles leans
over him, thickly accented voice low but full of glee as he stares down at the soldier strapped to the
bed like he is a treasure, dug up from deep dark sea – like in the books he and his boy like to read.
Only he has no boy –

The soldier is a shattered mirror. His mind nothing but jagged parts held together by grace, the
slightest shift in gravity would be his undoing. He needs recalibrating. This is a fact. A fact he
knows. But he resists. He walks up to the mirror and he observes.

He reaches out, puts a hand to the surface. Traces web like cracks and tries to see past them to get a
decent look at his own reflection. Who would he see if the mirror were whole?

“Ivan!”

Furnace! Furnace! He thinks, desperate for control but his brain just buzzes louder, the world around
him morphing and changing into -

Knobby knees and pokey elbows – hair that flops in front of his eyes no matter how many times Ma
runs a comb through it. Newspapers in his shoes. Bright blue eyes full of summer wonder and lips
that taste like the soft drippy ice-cream they sometimes get at Coney Island, if he isn’t still in a funk
about where the money came from. Boney fingers with the grip of a titan grasping his in the dark.
Fervent whispers.

“I wish I could kiss you in public. Let everybody know you’re mine. Then nobody else would get to
kiss you either… unless you really wanted them to. You don’t. Do you?”
He doesn’t. But admitting that is too much. Too painful. It costs more than his boy seems to realize. He shrugs instead. Easy. He’s well practiced at soothing his boy when it comes to this. The harshness of his life. He’s not a Good Boy – a kat so wrapped up in the creature comforts of being Masters favorite that he’d betray his own mother for a scratch between the ears - he’s too mouthy for that (too feral) but he wants to make his boy feel better about things regardless, because his suffering is real too and the kit would do anything to protect his boy. Besides. There’s nothing the boy can do, and he makes the kit happy just by being exactly as he is.

It’s enough of a gift.

He’s luckier than most.

He’s –

“Ivan!”

Broken. Needs to focus on the mission before the wrong people catch on. He and his charges are on this mission ‘solo’ but that doesn’t mean there aren’t other eyes around. Hydra has eyes everywhere, and if they catch on to the fact that Ivan has a screw loose in his head and his thoughts are spinning out of joint like an over worked machine, then they will take him out of the field. They’ll wipe him, and he’ll lose the man slowly coming together in the mirror. Worse. He’ll lose Wanda and Pietro, just like he lost her -

“Hey soldier.”

She watches him from the bed, lashes lowered and resembling rust against her cheeks. The lines of her body are long and graceful, and the way she has artfully draped herself across the bed somehow both seductive and the most defensible position for the child she carries. They taught her well, and she’s not above showing off for an appreciative audience. He closes the door behind himself and lowers his hood. She lets her mask crack like dried out clay, a girlish gleam appearing in the twinkle of green eyes. It is their gift to each other. Allowing each other to know how happy they are in each other’s sight.

Protect the child.

It’s more than a command. It’s a creed. An instinct buried so deeply he can feel it in his bones. It is the one directive that carries with it the undeniable ring of truth when all else is stripped away. He must protect the child.

He can’t lose any more he –

He sniffs deeply, but all he smells is the staleness of the room and them. Himself, his mate and the child that grows inside her like a secret.

“Do you have a present for me?” She asks, sitting up with the grace of the dancer she’ll always be.

Her mind reaches for his like arms, open and welcoming, and he lets her wrap herself around every corner of his thoughts – content to sink inside her warmth this way, just as readily as he’d sink into her body when they –

“Whoa. Getting kind of hot in here Buckaroo.”

A voice intrudes. Fills up his head, real as if Pietro had leaned over and shouted in his ear, only that’s not Pietro’s voice drowning out the storm in his head. His head’s a mess and his guard his down, allowing Tony to sneak back in –
“Sneak? You practically threw the door open for me and rang the dinner bell. Do you have any idea how much stress you’re projecting right now? Not to be an asshole, but I’ve kinda got an Avengers situation to focus on, so whatever this freak out is, I don’t have time – “

No time.


“We’re out of time I’m afraid.” The man with the glasses says. “It has been suggested that the only mind powerful enough to overcome yours is another like your own. It would be such a pity to destroy such a rare and beautiful creature as you are. You and I simply have to find a way to work together.”

He runs dry fingers over the captive man’s sweat soaked forehead.

“Do you know what the key is to making the perfect soldier? You have to have his heart.”

The man strapped to the operation bed grimaces as the other leans close, and the captive turns his head as far as the restraints will allow and uses all the strength he has left to spit. There’s nothing in the world that could make him give his loyalty to Hydra.

Zola chuckles dryly. Calmly wipes away the bloody saliva staining his collar, far too unruffled to mean anything good for the man he holds captive. Wordlessly Zola moves away from the bed and goes to the control station, presses a button and calls for someone over the intercom. Minutes pass. He can’t tell how many. And then there is a knock on the door and Zola moves out of view. He hears the door shut and senses movement as Zola turns to come back and the soldier tenses, wondering what new torture he is about to be subjected to; but his body goes rigid and still when Zola comes back around the bed.

He’s not alone. He’s with -

FURNACE!

He doesn’t know why, but it finally works. The chaos quiets, the fractured memories fading and Tony’s voice cutting off abruptly and his head finally going all the way quiet. Ivan blinks the haze from his mind and refocuses on his surroundings just in time to read the armored kat’s body language and predict it when he shoots some sort of energy blast from his gauntlets.

Ivan pushed Pietro out of the way and dove for the nearest shield he could find – a store mannequin propped up on a short platform – and cursed as the thing exploded into flaming pieces. He has only a second to wonder what kind of technology he’s up against when something caught him hard in the ribs and drove him off his feet like a charging bull.

God damn it!

He kept his eyes open, fought through the pain in order to get back on his feet as quickly as possible, so he saw it when the thin metal disc that had knocked him off his feet rebounded and made its way back to the hand of his attacker, who held it up to defend himself from the shots Ivan rained down on him as if he’d anticipated his every move.

The bullets pinged off the shield, doing nothing at all to scratch either the blue rings or the strange star painted in its center.

Chapter End Notes
Next up, Tony and the team tangle with three stray kats with very bad attitudes. Steve, want's to keep one, but he'll have to catch him first.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!